

# Norse Mythology in Popular Culture: A Study of the Thor Trilogy in the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

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*Abstract* Man's interest in mythology since time immemorial has been manifested in arts in various forms throughout the ages. Norse Mythology is the collected myths of Germanic people who lived in the Scandinavian region and spoke Norse mythology roughly between the period of 800 and 1300AD. Norse mythology had been adapted to popular culture quite often in the past. The paper aims at understanding the adaptation of Norse mythology into one of the biggest and popular movie franchises in Hollywood that is the marvel cinematic universe a superhero movie franchise based on comic books. It details on how comic creators and movie makers deviated from actual mythology to fit Thor and his celestial world into a superhero universe, thereby catering to popular culture.

**Keywords:** Norse mythology, Marvel Cinematic Universe, Thor, comics, popular culture, Stan Lee, Loki, Asgard.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Norse religion, more or less, refers to the various religious traditions that were followed and practised by the people who inhabited the Scandinavian region during the medieval times, before Christianity was introduced. There was not an organized religion. All available information regarding their religion was obtained from literary works like *Prose Edda* and archaeological findings. Norse religion is closely related to their mythology. Deities were either localized or agrarian, the former being spirits supposedly residing in objects or places. These deities were worshipped by religious leaders and people made offerings to them. Agrarian deities were important because Norse people heavily depended on agriculture for their livelihood. They worshipped several deities who were divided into two groups called the Aesir and the Vanir, the most popular among them being Odin and Thor. They were fearsome gods who engaged in bloody battles. Norse mythology had found its ways into arts, literature and movies quite often in the past but it was received universally with its adaptation into Marvel movies which are based on Marvel's comics. The Marvel Cinematic Universe is an American movie franchise that makes interconnected superhero movies based on the characters featured in Marvel comics.

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The franchise was successfully established with the release of *Iron Man* in 2008. Its enormous success was followed by 21 movies to date. In addition to movies, they also experimented with short films, cartoons, video games and television series streaming on platforms like Netflix, Hulu and the soon-to-be-launched Disney+. In the decades between the launch of the comics and the release of an ambitious superhero cross-over movie in 2019, Marvel has emerged as a giant figure in popular culture. They're a huge force dominating the lives of people around the globe, particularly the youth and children. Thor first appeared in Marvel comics in August 1962 and was created by Stan Lee, Larry Lieber and Jack Kirby.

## II. OBJECTIVES

This paper tries to identify how Norse mythology has been effectively adapted into popular culture, especially by the Marvel Cinematic Universe based on comic books. Also, a comparison between the original source and its present state of being is sought after, particularly with special reference to how the relationships between characters have been changed to suit modern audience and how archaic names have been moulded conveniently as would suit the modern tongues.

## III. HYPOTHESIS

Marvel Cinematic Universe successfully adapted certain characters and aspects of Norse mythology into modern pop culture by making necessary alterations to characters, storyline and setting.

## IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Popular culture studies are the study of pop culture from a critical perspective. It was developed from the work of the Frankfurt School. Popular culture studies helped break down the barriers between what they supposedly called high and low culture which resulted in the general public's increased interest in pop culture which included varied media like the internet, comic books etc. Popular culture studies as we know it today was founded in the late 70s and 80s. Figures like Umberto Eco and Roland Barthes were monumental in the evolution of this discipline.

The origin of myth criticism can be traced back to Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957).

## V. ANALYSIS AND MAJOR FINDINGS

Thor is one of Marvel's most popular heroes, being one of MCU's "big three" along with Iron Man and Captain America. Stan Lee wanted his new hero to possess superhuman strengths which is why chose a god and since people were already familiar with Greek and Roman gods, he decided to delve into Norse mythology



and their deities. Talking about Thor's evolution in the Marvel comics Stan Lee said: "Besides, I pictured Norse gods looking like Vikings of old, with the flowing beards, horned helmets and battle clubs" (1) With this image in mind, the script writing was entrusted with Lee's brother Larry and pencilling was assigned to Jack Kirby who was quite familiar and fascinated with Norse legends. In an interview he said: "I know Thor legends very well, but I wanted to modernize them. I felt that might be a new thing for comics, taking the old legends and modernizing them" (2) The character was received well by the general public and Thor became an original, founding member of Marvel's superhero teams called "the Avengers". The character was first played in live action by Eric Allan Kramer in 1998 in a television movie called 'The Incredible Hulk Returns'. In the initial stages of the development of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) in the early 2000s, Thor was decided upon to be one of the headlining heroes of the franchise. The first ever MCU movie Iron Man was released worldwide in 2008. The first movie of the Thor trilogy named after the superhero came out in 2011. The film was directed by Kenneth Branagh and the title character was played by Australian actor Chris Hemsworth. The plot of the movie revolves around Thor's banishment from Asgard which resulted in his coming to earth or Midgard as the Asgardians call our planet, and his loss of powers and his mighty hammer Mjolnir. How much has the movies deviated from the myth to fit Thor into their superhero universe? To begin with, they retained the most popular/major deities like Odin, Thor, Frigg, Loki, Hel (Hela in the movie), Heimdall and their respective powers while making slight changes to their names and crucial changes in the relationships between these gods. Odin is the supreme God and father to Thor who is the god of thunder. Frigg, whose name is Frigga in the films, is Odin's spouse. Loki's mythical trickster quality has been highlighted throughout the movies and is crucial to the plot of the films. According to Norse mythology Loki is the son of giants Helblinde and Byleistrof Jotunheimr. In the MCU, however, Loki is the son of Laufey, an entirely frictional character and is adopted by Odin following a battle. Thus Thor and Loki grew up as brothers. Drama unfurls from the moment when Loki realizes that he is adopted and it follows in a series of events of Loki scheming to ascend the throne by keeping Thor out of his way. In the myth, Thor and Loki share a complex relationship. This complicated love hate relationship between the brothers is at the forefront of the entire interlinked movie franchise. Since its fiction, writers and comic creators used imagination to their advantage to create a dramatic story line that works on the general audience. Odin is portrayed as an incompetent father, whose parenting has severe consequences on the relationship between Thor and Loki, which causes a chain of chaotic events that has bigger consequences on both Midgardian and Asgardian lives. Odin's consistent showering of favours on Thor while turning a blind eye on Loki creates tension in their otherwise warm relationship. In short, they presented their family as one dealing with issues similar to those shared by mortals thereby making their existence more believable and their stories relatable. Thor's friends Fandral, Volstagg, Hogun, are all frictional characters and are not affiliated to Norse myths in any way. However Lady Sif is a goddess associated with the earth in Norse mythology and is wife to Thor. But in the MCU she is

goddess of war and Thor's associate. Hela, the goddess of death (Hel in myth), makes her appearance as the antagonist in the third installation in the trilogy. She is presented as Odin's first born whom he had banished to hell. However she is Loki's daughter in the myth. Heimdall is the all-seeing guardian of Asgard in both movies and myths. Another important character that deserves to be mentioned is Valkyrie. According to Norse myths, Valkyrie are a group of female warriors who choose who dies in a battle and who survives. When Thor: Ragnarok opens only one Valkyrie is found to be alive while the rest died in a fierce battle against Hela, the goddess of death. However, the surviving Valkyrie's name is not mentioned although we know her character is based on Norse mythological figure Brynhildr who appears in some Eddic poems. Thor's ultimate weapon is his powerful hammer called Mjolnir. In Norse myths Mjolnir is depicted as the most powerful weapon in all realms, made by the dwarves of Svartalfheim. In the movies, it is made from the heart of a dying star by the dwarves of Nidavellir. While it was used in religion rituals and as a weapon in the myths, in movies and comics it helps Thor to channel his power, summon thunder and transports him to wherever he desires, it could be wielded only by Thor. "Whosoever holds this hammer, if he be worthy, shall possess the power of Thor" - Odin (Marvel comics). The astonishingly powerful hammer is destroyed by Hela in 'Thor: Ragnarok' (2017) following which he travels to Nidavellir to get another powerful weapon made called Stormbreaker which is entirely of a fictional nature. The entire story is fabricated and is in no way related to the events as told in the myths. After Thor is banished from Asgard and sent to earth, he mingles with human beings or Midgardians as the gods call them. Stripped off his powers and immortality he tries to blend in with the mere mortals. He also falls in love with an astrophysicist called Jane Foster who helps him in finding his Mjolnir. People love to see the impossible happen on screen, and the idea of a mighty god falling in love with a young woman is always enamouring; it is a concept that never grows old. Romance between humans and nonhumans has been explored in movies from the beginning: 'Beauty and the Beast', 'Splash', 'Ex-Machina' to name a few. What makes Thor more appealing to the crowd is his team-up with Marvel's leading superheroes like Iron Man, Captain America, The Hulk, Black Widow etc., thereby becoming an inevitable member of the group of "earth's mightiest heroes" who are known by the name of Avengers. Thor fights modern-day Midgardian and other worldly antagonists along with the Avengers. Outside the trilogy Thor and Loki features in the commercially successful superhero cross over moves titled Avengers and hence taking an even further step away from mythology. In 'Thor' and 'Thor: The Dark World' the Asgardians speak in a very formal English to make it seem archaic. Interestingly, in the third part of the trilogy we see them let go of that kind of language and even find a flustered, swearing, Loki much to the delight of the audience. 'Thor: Ragnarok' deserves special mention because it entirely deconstructed Norse mythology and created something new out of it while linking the trilogy to the greater and primal part of the cinematic universe. What they basically did was a historic revisionism of the

myths. The title 'Ragnarok' refer to "a series of events including a great battle, foretold to lead to the death of a number of great figures, natural disasters and the submersion of the world in the water" in Norse mythology. The movie ends in the event of Ragnarok and the destruction of Asgard. However, the remaining of the film moves as far away from the myths as possible including crossing paths with fellow Avenger, Hulk. MCU's Thor sports long blonde hair and cleanshaven face in the first two movies. Had they done justice to mythology, Thor would have had red hair and thick beard.

## VI. CONCLUSION

While modernising the plot, characters and setting, Marvel managed to keep the essence of the Norse mythology intact. The comics did not follow accurate Norse myths and the movies followed suit. Marvel did not want to adopt their history as such, that is, they refrained from retelling the myths over again. They wanted to tell fresh, unique stories with the backing and flavour of the myths. However, even when the gods speak a modern language the audience does not identify them as anything but other worldly and their interactions with the human world is made to look believable and remotely possible. We find elements and characters of Norse mythology outside of the Marvel Cinematic Universe often but thanks to MCU, Thor, Loki, and other Asgardians are household names today. And Thor is nothing short of a popular icon.

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