



Neil Gaiman's Reinvention of the Female Protagonists in his Fictional Universe

Chandan Kumar Chhedaiya, Research Scholar, School of Studies in Literature and Languages
Pt. Ravishankar Shukla University, Raipur, Chhattisgarh, INDIA
Savita Singh, Ph.D., Department of English
Govt NPG College of Science, Raipur, Chhattisgarh, INDIA

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Authors

Chandan Kumar Chhedaiya, Research Scholar
Savita Singh, Ph.D.

E-mail : d99chandan@gmail.com

shodhsamagam1@gmail.com

Received on : 21/09/2025
Revised on : 21/11/2025
Accepted on : 30/11/2025
Overall Similarity : 01% on 22/11/2025



Plagiarism Checker X - Report

Originality Assessment

1%

Overall Similarity

Date: Nov 22, 2025 (02:12 PM)
Matches: 30 / 2693 words
Sources: 1

Remarks: Low similarity detected, consider making necessary changes if needed.

Verify Report:
Scan this QR Code



ABSTRACT

The present paper explores the heroines of Neil Gaiman in *Stardust* (1999), *American Gods* (2001), *Coraline* (2002), *The Graveyard Book* (2008), and *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* (2013) through the lens of postmodern intertextuality and cultural hybridity. Gaiman deconstructs and reconstructs traditional myths and fairy tales of femininity through the postmodern lens of intertextuality and cultural hybridity. This research examines the heroines through postmodern theories of intertextuality and cultural hybridity, as developed by Julia Kristeva, Mikhail Bakhtin, Homi K. Bhabha, and Linda Hutcheon. The heroines of Gaiman Yvaine, Laura Moon, Coraline, Liza Hempstock, and Lettie Hempstock are not monolithic but complex and hybrid entities. They are reinvented from the collision and fusion of ancient myths, folk tales, literary classics, and contemporary anxieties.

KEY WORDS

Feminism, Intertextuality, Cultural Hybridity, Neil Gaiman.

Feminism is a social, political, and intellectual movement that seeks to acquire equal rights for women. Postmodern feminism deals with the ideas of feminism through postmodern approaches. These approaches deconstruct the traditional female roles and reconstruct the new female figures through applying new theories. The nature of feminism is always suspicious to the established structures for women. Elaine Showalter, an American Feminist, divides literary tradition of feminism into three phases. She

says in *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) about the last phase, “Feminine, Feminist, and Female...and the Female phase as 1920 to the present, but entering a new stage of self-awareness...” (13). Judith Butler says in *Gender Trouble* (1990) that gender is performed and reinforced through daily actions. “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expression’ that are said to be its results” (25).

Postmodern intertextuality is a concept that shapes the meaning of a text through other texts. It is not just a reference; it is a more profound connection of texts such as myths, fairy tales, novels, poems, and other forms of expression. It creates an immense network of cultural meaning. Julia Kristeva was the first to introduce the term, intertextuality. Gaiman’s universe is a palimpsest where older stories are visible under new narratives. He reinvents his characters from their original context and places them in a space of possibilities, creating new meaning.

Cultural hybridity is a concept from postcolonial theory, where a new culture is formed by blending different cultural traditions, beliefs, and identities. Mikhail Bakhtin was the first theorist to bring the hybrid concept of modernism. Homi K. Bhabha popularized this concept of cultural hybridity “Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities” (112) in his post-colonial theoretical book, *The Location of Culture* (1994). Gaiman sets his characters and stories of gods, monsters, and humans mostly in America and England, spanning different eras and beliefs.

Yvaine is the heroine of *Stardust* by Neil Gaiman. The novel is directly connected with the Victorian fairy tale tradition. George MacDonald and William Morris are famous Victorian authors. George MacDonald’s *Phantastes: A Faerie Romance for Men and Women* (1858), *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), and William Morris’s *The Well at the End of the World* (1896) present a Victorian fairy tale tradition in which female characters are passive, virtuous, and ethereal, a prize to be won by the questing hero. The heroines of the Victorian age in these writers are generally defined by their relationship with the heroes.

Even though *Stardust* is set in the traditional Victorian Era, Yvaine is presented as a postmodern subversion. Yvaine is introduced after following Tristran Thorn’s quest for a fallen star, who begins her journey as a fallen star from the sky. Initially, she is angry, injured, and sarcastic upon meeting her. She has only one desire, to return to the sky. When Tristran Thorn chains her with a silver chain, she resists in fury. This reaction demonstrates Gaiman’s subversion of the traditional heroines.

The stars are depicted as distant, eternal, and unattainable, yet beautiful, objects in the romantic and literary tradition. Romantic poet John Keats, in his poem “Bright Star” (1820) says, “Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art!” John Donne’s poem, *Song: “Go and Catch a Falling Star”* (1633) is the best example. Gaiman literalizes and humanizes the physical nature of a star. He presents his star as a young female with a broken leg. Yvaine is tired, in pain, and frustrated for falling to the earth. Yvaine says to Tristran, “‘Because,’ she told him, her voice taut, ‘now that you have saved my life, you are, by the law of my people, responsible for me, and I for you. Where you go, I must also go’” (136). By giving the star, a human body, a voice, feelings, and emotions, Gaiman criticizes the romantic tendency to dehumanize the female figures for admiration. He transforms Yvaine from the fairy tale tradition into a tangible, suffering, and ultimately a stronger individual.

Yvaine’s strength and uniqueness come from her hybrid nature. She belongs to two different worlds and that gives her a dual identity. As a celestial origin, Yvaine is an ancient and magical star of light. She possesses enormous star power. She glows when she is happy, and her heart can give immortality. These abilities connect her to a cosmic world beyond human understanding. After landing on Earth as a human, she experiences every aspect of mortal life, including pain, anger, happiness, love, weariness, and companionship.

The hybrid nature of a celestial being and a mortal being makes her a powerful heroine. Her celestial nature endows her with resilience and a clear perspective; her mortal experiences assist in her courage,

loyalty, and compassion. She helps and saves the life of Tristan, which is an act of mortal love, not celestial logic. After the death of Tristan, as a mortal being, Yvaine continues to live due to her hybrid star-mortal nature. She does not return to the sky, nor does she live a short life as Tristan's wife. She becomes the Queen of Stormhold, a kingdom that connects the human and fairy worlds. Her hybrid being makes her a queen of love, loss, and hardship.

Laura Moon, the heroine of *American Gods*, is the faithless wife of the protagonist Shadow Moon. The concept of a faithless wife in female figures such as Guinevere in *Arthurian Legend* (12th century), Helen of Troy in Greek mythology, and Anna Karenina's literary realism in *Anna Karenina* (1878) by Leo Tolstoy serve as a catalyst for male action followed by tragedy. These female figures are either punished or function as passive symbols for desire. Laura's affair with Shadow's best friend, Robbie, is not the central plot; instead, it is an incident that happens before the novel begins. Her cheating does not arise from passion, unlike Anna Karenina or Helen, but it is because she is bored of her loneliness as Shadow, her husband is in jail.

The rescue narrative, often referred to as "damsel in distress," requires a passive heroine to be saved by an active hero. Laura is dead after an accident, and she needs her husband's belief to live again. Shadow offers life to Laura by giving her a magical gold coin. She continues to live after death, but more like a zombie. She saves her husband's life on numerous occasions. She kills Mr. World and Mr. Stone and helps her husband to stop the conflict between the old and new gods. At the end, she sacrifices her chance of living again and gives Shadow the distraction he needs.

Traditionally, zombies are mindless, decaying hordes with no clear sense of self, just consumers, who fear death. Figures from Haitian folklore and modern horror cinema, like George A. Romero's zombie movies, are traditional zombies. Laura is more alive than a zombie as she retains her memory, personality, and intelligence. She examines the world and gods with greater clarity after becoming a zombie, a quality that the living characters lack. "Laura was thirsty. Sometimes living people burned steadily in her mind like candles and sometimes they flamed like torches. It made them easy to avoid, and it made them easy, on occasion, to find" (532). Laura's actions of destruction and killing are controlled and purposeful. She does not follow her husband unthinkingly; instead, she uses her mind, her reason and determination. Shadow uses his zombie wife as a vehicle to explore the themes of loyalty, love beyond death, and the nature of existence.

Laura's power and uniqueness come from her hybrid nature. Her hybrid state, existing between life and death, grants her unique abilities and insights. She cannot be killed easily and feels no pain, no fear, and has no biological needs. These characteristics enable her to take risks that surpass those of a living human. She is unburdened by the emotion and physical sensations of life. She sees the world with simplicity. The gods function according to rules of belief and narrative, but Laura operates according to the rules of the dead. She cheats on her husband without guilt, and as a zombie, she kills without any hesitation. Laura Moon is a heroine because of her flaws. By hybridizing the faithless wife with a zombie, Gaiman gives his readers the ultimate anti-heroine.

Coraline Jones is an eleven-years-old girl in the novel, *Coraline*. Neil Gaiman presents his young protagonist subverting her personality from the heroine's passive old tradition to an active new tradition. She is not only a girl in a strange world, but she is also an active leader. Alice in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) by Lewis Carroll is the most influential forerunner. Both heroines, Coraline and Alice, are young, bored girls who discover a portal that leads to a fantastical version of their reality. Alice's curiosity is passive when she falls, wanders, and reacts. Coraline's curiosity is an active tool for exploring things from the start. She rescues her parents and the souls of other children. In Wonderland, Alice faces chaotic consequences after consuming food and drink. In the Other World, Coraline is offered a feast, but she refuses it. Coraline is more critical and conscious, "You're just a bad copy she made of the crazy old man upstairs" (143) and understands the nature of the magical world.

Charles Perrault's *Bluebeard* (1697) is a very famous French folktale, where a young new bride is forbidden from opening one special door in her husband's castle. In the classic folktale, she is mentioned as the wife or the young woman. She disobeys her husband and opens the door. Beyond the door, she finds the corpses of her husband's previous wives. She is nearly killed in her act, but she is saved by her brothers. In Gaiman's reinvention, Coraline too opens the forbidden door and gets entangled in a trap, but she rescues not only herself but also her parents and other children trapped there.

Coraline's entire journey explores hybrid spaces from the beginning to the end. Her ability to navigate and overcome the obstacles of her journey defines her aura as an active heroine. The Pink Palace and the Other World, where Coraline spends most of her time, are both hybrid spaces. She encounters a diverse environment in The Pink Palace and the horror of the Other Mother in the Other World. Both places offer her a unique blend of hybrid experiences. Coraline herself is a hybrid heroine. She easily gets bored and frustrated, but in a critical situation, she is a strategic thinker, courageous, and morally rich. The best example of her hybrid personality is the game that she plays with the Other Mother. She chooses a children's game to defeat the antagonist.

Scarlett Perkins is the crucial and fascinating protagonist in *The Graveyard Book*. She is the only living friend of the male protagonist, Bod, among the supernatural guardians of the graveyard. She collides with, and fights and faces consequences between the mundane and the magical. She represents realistic, contemporary, and children's fiction set in the graveyard's Gothic and folkloric environment. From Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) to Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911), the childhood friend is a co-conspirator who plays a crucial part in the adventure and is profoundly affected by it. When Scarlett returns as a teenager, she becomes the bridge between Bod and the living world. Gaiman shows that the magical world is not only adventurous, but also terrifying and traumatic.

When Scarlett faces the antagonist, the Jacks of All Trades, her experiences are life-scarring events. She unknowingly sets the stage for Jack's encounter with Bod. Gaiman subverts the traditional concept of a true magical friend into a psychological thriller and a traumatic narrative. Scarlett says to Bod after defeating Jack, "Scarlett took a step away from him. She said, 'You aren't a person. People don't behave like you. You're as bad as he was. You're a monster'" (268). At the end, her memory of the tragic events in the graveyard is wiped out by Silas, the guardian of Bod. "Bod said, 'Silas. You *can't*. You can't make her forget me.' 'It will be safest that way,' said Silas, simply. 'For her, if not for all of us' (268). She returns to the everyday world with her authentic identity.

Scarlett's hybrid consciousness of the living and the dead worlds is for a short time. She is a visitor of the graveyard who lives in the living world. Hybridity of knowledge gives strength to the other characters, but she faces trauma and tragedy. The experience of both worlds does not empower; instead, it damages her. She is a passive heroine with a fractured self. She presents an essential truth that some forms of hybridity are too dangerous for a mortal to sustain. It is difficult to overcome the adverse effects on the mind. She is one of Gaiman's most realistic and tragic heroines.

Lettie Hempstock is the eleven-year-old heroine in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*. She is an ancient and cosmic entity, one of the most powerful heroines in Neil Gaiman's works. The character is inspired by Robert Graves's *The White Goddess* (1948). In Celtic myth, a goddess is a personification of the land. Lettie claims a pond as her ocean. She protects every place that she claims as her own. Cinderella, in the folk tale collection of the Brothers Grimm's *Fairy Tales* (1812), is a magical helper who guides the protagonist and remains unaffected by it. Lettie inverts this trope and becomes the ultimate victim by helping the passive protagonist. The protagonist is a narrator who recalls a traumatic childhood memory in which Lettie demonstrates her heroism and ultimate sacrifice.

Lettie's strength and tragedy are entirely rooted in her hybrid nature. She appears as the child-ancient hybrid, "But Lettie was just a girl, even if she was a big girl, even if she was eleven, even if she had been eleven for a very long time"(61). When she shares her ancient knowledge and experience, they are her lived experiences. She is not a child, but a hybrid, conscious, ancient entity choosing to live like one. Lettie stays between the normal and the magical worlds, protecting reality from supernatural beings. An example of the fusion of human and non-human entities, Lettie is a purely divine heroine.

CONCLUSION

Gaiman's heroines are not defined by purity, romance, or passive endurances; instead, they are agents of change, beings of the threshold, and products of cultural conversation. Gaiman reinvents his heroines as active and powerful ambiguous figures. The heroines belong to myths, folk tales, literary classics, contemporary consciousness, and anxieties. Gaiman's fictional universe subverts the passive roles, traditionally assigned to heroines, empowering them to create their own destinies.

REFERENCES

1. Bhabha, Homi K. (1994) *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London and New York.
2. Butler, Judith (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, London and New York.
3. Gaiman, Neil (2014) *American Gods*, Headline Publishing Group, London.
4. Gaiman, Neil (2016) *Coraline*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London.
5. Gaiman, Neil (2013) *Stardust*, Headline Publishing Group, London.
6. Gaiman, Neil (2016) *The Graveyard Book*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London.
7. Gaiman, Neil (2014) *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, Headline Publishing Group, London.
8. Showalter, Elaine (1997) *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey.
