



## Mythical Heroes Versus Superheroes of New Generation: A Study of Mythical Traits in the Superheroes from the Avengers Comics

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### ABSTRACT:

Superheroes are characters infused with supernatural powers. What differentiates a superhero from a hero is the possession of extra-ordinary or supernatural power that goes beyond the capacity of common individuals. The play of superpowers, as an inseparable phenomenon in superhero comics, brings a unique dimension to the adventures of superheroes. As a result of globalization, the world has become more complex, and stories change form and content to keep up with their complexity. There has been an increasing tendency to replace such mythical heroes with superheroes. The manifestation of superpowers and deliverance of justice in modern superheroes turn one's imagination towards myth. As an adventure of superheroes, the Avengers comics from the Marvel Comics Company is not an exception. The Avenger comics as an outcome of the western concept creates a rendezvous for various types of superheroes. The supernatural power, acquired by these modern superheroes through technology, differs from the magical and divine power of the mythical heroes. Placing the adventure of the Avengers in light of mythical paradigm, this paper attempts to establish a close connection between the Avengers and the mythical heroes from the Grand narratives.

**Key Words:** Adventure, Cultural Adaptation, Myth, Trait, Superhero, Superpower

A hero (masculine or feminine) is a person or main character of a literary work who, in the face of danger, combats adversity through feats of ingenuity, [bravery](#) or strength. The heroes are the protagonists from any narrative. The word *hero* comes from the Greek word *hero* (that means literally "protector" or "defender"). The goal of a hero is to save mankind and deliver justice to mankind. A hero is someone through whom certain values are reflected to society, and thus serves as a 'man of value' in a society. Superheroes, however, are characters infused with supernatural powers. What differentiates a superhero from a hero is the possession of extraordinary or supernatural power that goes beyond the capacity of common individuals. This supernatural power, acquired by these modern superheroes through technology, differs from the magical and divine power of the mythical heroes. An individual emerges as a superhero when technology reconcile with an individual's body. Manipulation of technology helps to unify an individual's body with extraordinary power, thereby granting the individual concerned a super-status.

The pioneers of superheroes are comics series. Comics first appeared in America in the 1800's, based on visual and daily language use, without displaying too much concern for giving detailed information about their heroes. From the 1960's onwards, there were two major companies, Marvel Comics and Detective Comics (DC), which started the production of superhero comics. With the passing time Marvel Comics have evolved and gained popularity, and the Avenger comics becomes an inextricable part of it. In this complex network of the globalised world, thousands of super-heroes have been created by various comic productions. The Avenger comics as an outcome of the western concept creates a rendezvous for various types of superheroes—that includes mythical heroes as well. As compared to superheroes, mythical heroes are basically protagonists found in the Grand Narratives. The common trait that may be found in these superheroes and mythical heroes is the manifestation of supernatural powers, whether it is granted by a divine boon or by manipulation of technology. Ronald Barthes in his book *Mythologies* mentions myth is a system of communication, a message that signifies the way of culture and the production of meaning to the world around it. According to Barthes, "everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse" (107). That is, the myths are not restricted to text for Barthes, so anything visual or musical can be myth as well. He reminds us that myth is not an object, a concept or an idea, but a way of making sense. Myths based on social consciousness also provide a bridge between the inner worlds of humankind and outer world. Mythological fiction reflects the way societies perceive reality, while at the same time mythological symbols have an important place in the production of social reality. Since social consciousness is embodied in social practices, therefore, mythology is intertwined with these practices. The recurrent mythical and archetypal patterns in these superheroes are present in the manifestation of super power and deliverance of justice. According to Mullen Leslie, in contemporary culture, myths have adapted themselves so successfully to the cultural actors of societies that we no longer perceive them as being mythical in nature: "The myths of a modern culture conform to suit the character of the culture, and are often so well disguised that we do not even think of them as 'myths.' Every culture has myths, however – they merely take on an acceptable shape, changing and adapting to suit a culture's tastes and standards" (48).

The play of superpowers, as an inseparable phenomenon in superhero comics, brings a unique dimension to the adventures of superheroes. Here the term *super* denotes the state that goes beyond the natural. The possession of supernatural ability or power in protagonists as well as antagonists in superhero comics instates a mysterious phenomenon that surpasses the capacity of common individuals. An individual's possession of this supernatural ability or

power that seems to be magical in nature in mythology has been replaced in this scientific era by fantasy. Indicating this shift of magical power towards the fantastic mode of power, Sanderson expresses, “The myths of the past depicted a world in which magic was real, but in the twentieth century people try to come to grips with the monumental changes that the advances of science are making in their lives. Hence, science fiction has largely supplanted magic as the mode of the fantastic” (8). In fact, superpowers in superhero comics, as a source of extra-ordinary strength (Coogan 95), differentiate superheroes and supervillains from common individuals and thus functions as “the ability to transcend the physical limits of the mortal world” (120). Even Coogan believes this manifestation of superpowers in superhero comics in various forms, such as flight against gravity, super-speed, unusual acrobatic performances etc., violates the very fundamental law of physics. (120)

As a result of globalization, the world has become more complex and stories change form and content to keep up with their complexity. There has been an increasing tendency to replace such mythical heroes with superheroes. It may be said that the cultural adaptation (an anthropological term) of mythical heroes to suit the needs of present day world brings the concept of superheroes as an integral part of the culture of contemporary societies. In his book, Joseph Campbell explains the concept of “monomyth” (28) that places all heroes from the past to the present on a common ground, despite external differences in them: “Borrowing the term *monomyth*, a word he identifies as one coined by James Joyce, he puts forth the ancient idea—that the mysterious energy for inspirations, revelations, and actions in heroic stories worldwide is also universally found in human beings” (Estes xxv). This universal pattern is also observed in the words of Campbell: “Whether the hero be ridiculous or sublime, Greek or barbarian, gentile or Jew, his journey varies little in essential plan. . . . nevertheless, there will be found astonishingly little variation in the morphology of the adventure, the character roles involved, the victories gained” (35). The concept of the mythic hero archetype was first developed by Lord Raglan in his 1936 book, *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama*. It is a set of 22 common traits that he said were shared by many heroes in various cultures, myths and religions throughout history and around the world. Raglan argues that the higher the score of these traits, the more likely the figure is mythical. He asserts that “all traditional narratives are myths, that is to say, that they are connected with ritual. . . .” (144). To study the mythical essence within traditional hero figures, he puts forward this notion: “The first is that all, or some, of the heroes were real persons whose stories were altered to make them conform to a ritual pattern; the second is that all, or some, of them were real persons in whose lives ritual played a predominant part; and the third is that they were all purely mythical. (190)

The mythical traits found in the Avengers comics can be categorised under three aspects. Firstly, like mythical heroes, the superheroes from the Avengers comics are subject to the notion of adventure. Under the concept of “monomyth” proposed by Joseph Campbell, the Avengers superhero team starts its journey as various superheroes join hands together. The journey of the Avengers team commences as five superheroes—Thor, Iron Man, Hulk, Ant Man and Wasp—materialised the birth of the Avengers team. The formation of the team takes place to fight against the threat or menace to humanity that cannot be handled by a single superhero. Moreover, the Avengers team’s struggle against the great scale menace reminds us of the great scale adversary encountered by mythical protagonists. Comics auteurs’ depiction of the Avengers team’s great scale battle against mighty supervillains generates a kind of mythical vibes in the adventure of the Avengers. Secondly, the mythical essence of the superheroes from the Avengers team is reinforced by their physical appearance as well as the possession of super power. For instance, Hulk may be compared to Minotaur due to his monster like appearance. Iron Man is seen to possess the characteristic features of Greek god Hephaestus. Like Greek god Hephaestus, he is a master craftsman who is adept in building body armour made of iron. His iron body suit and his close association with iron as well as craftsmanship evoke the image of Greek god Hephaestus to us. The next common trait between superheroes and mythical heroes is the possession of similar types of physical strength and stature. Hawk-eye can be the semblance of Greek god Artemis, or Arjuna or Karna from the Mahabharata because all of them are adept in wielding their bows. Archery as a method of warfare was used widely in mythical narratives. Quick Silver’s speed-run resonate with that of Greek god Hermes who is the messenger god of Greek mythology. Another similar physical trait found in both of these characters is their winged-foot. Similarly, Dr. Hank Pym’s giant size stature resembles the image of Greek giant Atlas, whose giant sized body allows him to hold the earth on his shoulder. Like Atlas, Dr. Hank Pym’s ability to grow into a giant sized monster also allows him to execute and sustain heavy physical labours—such as lifting, throwing, tossing, and so on—and burden which are not possible for other superheroes. Like their male counter-parts, Scarlet Witch, Wasp, She-Hulk, and Black Widow from the Avengers comics can also be compared to mythical goddesses as they possess similar physical stature and prowess due to the inheritance of superpower. Wasp’s team management skill at the time of crisis and battles has remained unparalleled in the adventure of the Avengers; her wisdom and leadership quality in the Avengers team makes us think of the innate traits possessed by Greek goddess Athena. Thirdly, unlike other superhero comics, the adventure of the Avengers establishes a close connection between myth and the present world, and makes us think about the role played by myth in enforcing its values. This is why we witness the characters from Norse mythology such as Thor, Loki, Enchantress, Executioner, and others, who become part of the adventure of the Avengers. The adventure of the Avengers not only borrows the characters of the Norse mythology but also opens the realms of the Greek mythology. Hercules, Ares, Helios are the few names which appear in the Avengers comics on a frequent basis. Especially Thor from the Norse mythology and Hercules from the Greek mythology emerge as a leading figure in the Avengers team. Due to incorporation of the heroes from various mythologies, the adventure of the Avengers not only receives a mythical treatment but also generates a mythical ambience for us as the adventure of the Avengers moves forward.

The manifestation of superpowers and deliverance of justice in modern superheroes turn one’s imagination towards myth. In his book *Marvel Universe* (1996), Peter Sanderson overtly acknowledges that the play of superheroes in the fictional universe of Marvel Comics “constitute a modern-day mythology” (8). Terence R. Wandtke in his book *Meaning of Superhero Comic Books* (2012) identifies these modern superheroes of comics “as the best representative of modern mythology” (7). Like Sanderson and Wandtke, various critics and scholars believe that modern superheroes of comics stem out of mythical heroes of ancient texts. In their article, Hafci and Asliturk demonstrate an intimate resemblance of modern superheroes of comics with heroes and gods of Greek mythology by stating that these modern superheroes of comics mirror mythical heroes and gods of Greek mythology in terms of their appearances as well as projections. They write this: “Myths that are called as ‘hero myth’ differentiate from human beings with their supernatural powers. At the same time, these heroes seem to be adapted to the culture they are in, in terms of their social and sociological situation and their emotions” (500).

Hulk's inhuman strength, Hawkeye's archery, Flash's swiftness—resonating as archetypal patterns of mythical discourses—evoke metaphorical images of mythical heroes. Comparing Superman's image to Greek deities, quoting William Slater Brown's words, Neil Harris in his essay "Who Owns Our Myth?" states, "Superman was, [Slater Brown] wrote, 'handsome as Apollo, strong as Hercules, chivalrous as Launcelot, Swift as Hermes...A Hero God...a protective deity' fulfilling popular desires for a more primitive religion" (245). Considering Roland Barthes' statement mentioned earlier, it will not be wrong to say that these modern superheroes, having laid their profound impact on this era of scientific technology, have created indeed a discourse in this post-modern era through emulation of heroes from Grand Narratives.

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