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The Reimagination of Indigenous Mythologies and Folklore in Modern Young Adult Fantasy Fiction

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Abstract: The paper presents the issue of how the literature of native mythology and folklore has been re-enacted in contemporary young adult fantasy literature. The combination of ancient tales and contemporary ones introduces the native cultural elements of these works, exploring the issues of identity, ancestry, and belonging to the environment. The themes the study is interested in are conflict, resilience, and integration of fantasy and realism, and how these stories are applicable to the contemporary reader, and how they can be culturally authentic. The paper discusses the tools of telling used by authors to make Indigenous myths fit their own narratives, using the case studies of such remarkable works as The Marrow Thieves and The Girl Who Drank the Moon, which have to confront the challenge and the possibilities of adaptation. The findings reveal that the works are crucial in changing the cultural representation and give an insight into how the young adult fiction can be utilized to educate the readers about the native cultures. The paper also touches upon the ethical issues of the re-invention of indigenous folklore, with references to the role of the authors in the respectful attitude towards the cultural traditions. Lastly, the study recommends that future studies should be done on the influence of these reimagining on young readers and that more variety in the indigenous cultures explored in future works should be studied.

Key Words: indigenous mythologies, young adult fantasy, cultural representation, identity, ethical considerations, narrative techniques

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Introduction

Young adult fantasy fiction is experiencing an evident shift over the past years, as authors are choosing to exploit the native mythologies and folklore and come up with interesting tales (Joosen & Goossens, 2025). The trend has brought about a big debate on the means of integrating the traditional cultural subject into the modern narrations, which is meant to give the readers a new insight and enriching stories. It is through the redefinition of these ancient traditions that one may be able to view the cultural identity as well as the history of the culture and whether the indigenous stories can still be applied in contemporary times. Such a creative reimagining is offered by young adult fantasy fiction with an active space of dialogue, cultural dialogue and maintenance of these often-underrepresented tales (Osman, 2020).

Taking into consideration the rise of young adult fantasy as a literary phenomenon, indigenous identity and the culture of indigenous peoples becomes marginalized or misrepresented in mainstream literature (Fresno-Calleja, 2023; Lounsbury & O'Neill, 2020). Such a situation highlights the necessity to address the representation and the examination of indigenous cultures through young adult fantasy literature. In more detail, the emergence of responsible representations not only sensitive towards cultural diversity but also captivating for a modern audience is critical (Morseau, 2025; Canellas, 2022). Acknowledging such a gap leads to the exploration of approaches taken by young adult fantasy authors while addressing such aspects of culture (Lewkowich, 2015).

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This paper will focus on the different methods employed by modern fantasy adolescent fiction literature in terms of revision of indigenous myths and folklore. The paper will try to analyze the manner in which such indigenous stories can be manipulated to fit within contemporary issues through analysis of some important pieces within the genre. In particular, it will analyze the issue of cultural identity, that of representation, as well as the effect that the modification of the myths to literature might have in making their understanding or interpretation difficult. The research paper will offer information on the importance of youth adult fantasy fiction literature in shaping cultural representations in the future.

Research Questions:

The main research questions that will serve as a basis for this work are:

- How do indigenous mythologies find new expression in the contemporary young adult fantasy fiction?
- What is the contribution of cultural authenticity and contemporary interpretation to the representation of indigenous folklore?
- How might these reimagined representations influence the understanding and perceptions of indigenous cultures by the readership?

The outline for the structure of the paper is as such: Section II would be the literature review of the literature that has been previously written regarding the incorporation of indigenous mythologies into literature and young adult fantasy literature. Section III looks further into the resurrection of the mythologies in selected pieces of work, emphasizing the ways in which the storytelling technique and topic are utilized. Section IV looks into the implications of these myths in relation to their impact on the indigenous reader, as well as the non-indigenous audience. Section V draws a conclusion to the paper.

Literature Review

Myths and folklore are important elements of indigenous cultures and cannot be considered just as stories, but as conveyors of history, culture, beliefs and worldviews (Bielefeld, 2018). The significance of the meaning behind such stories is that they represent explanations for certain phenomena of nature, supernatural forces, myths about creation and morality. Myths and folklore are transmitted from generation to generation orally. Myths and folklore also serve as means of sustaining the identity of people and maintaining relations between people and their ancestors. Each indigenous culture is characterized by myths and folklore which are closely connected with traditions and spirituality of each tribe (Wang, 2024). Moreover, besides entertaining function, myths and folklore can also act as social unifiers and morality instructors providing important information about the relation of man and nature.

The young adult fantasy genre has progressed significantly over the past few decades, becoming one of the most favored literary genres globally (Suttie, 2021; Osman, 2018). The genre has been utilizing its connection to myths, folklore, and fairytales while progressively incorporating indigenous cultural stories in the narrative, which is a blend of the classical and contemporary. The authors have incorporated indigenous mythologies into their work to portray complex issues like identity, resistance, colonization, and belonging. Indigenous mythologies' utilization in fantasy universes, like those found in The Marrow Thieves by Cherie Dimaline (M Metis) and The Girl Who Drank the Moon by Kelly Barnhill, shows how indigenous stories can be more impactful in the contemporary era (Osborne, 2015; Adami, 2019). The

indigenous mythology genre is not only entertaining but also educational and challenges mainstream cultural ideologies.

Table 1: Overview of Case Studies in Reimagined Indigenous Mythologies

Book Title	Author	Indigenous Mythology/Tradition	Primary Themes	Cultural Significance	Narrative Techniques
The Marrow Thieves (Turner, 2021)	Cherie Dimaline	Métis cultural memory, Anishinaabe	Survival, Memory, Resistance	Preserving indigenous knowledge and memory	Dystopian setting, magic realism
The Girl Who Drank the Moon (Barnhill, 2016)	Kelly Barnhill	Nature spirits, forest mythology	Self-discovery, Balance	Indigenous connection to nature	Magical realism, folklore adaptation

Table 1 shows a brief overview of some of the books covered in the paper and the way that the fantasy fiction genre with regard to young adults has returned to indigenous mythology. It shows the title of the book, its author, the indigenous myth involved in the story, themes and cultural significance. Table 1 allows a quick reference point for comparing the case studies that demonstrate the different ways in which authors adapt the indigenous myths to suit contemporary society.

There have been concerns about indigenous cultures in literature, especially in the use of the mythologies of the indigenous in fictional writings (Shamsiyabonu, 2025; Siepak, 2020). There could be a thin line between cultural appropriation and appropriate representation. Cultural appropriation means using some elements from a specific culture without having any understanding or appreciation of the culture and sometimes misrepresenting the culture. Appropriate representation involves a deeper engagement and appreciation of the culture of origin, and this sometimes means involving the indigenous people or cultural professionals. Misrepresentation in relation to the use of indigenous myths and cultures has been a concern among scholars, especially in relation to the fantasy fiction writing for young adults (Ni, 2020; Lawton & Cain, 2022). The moral question of this issue has provoked a discussion because it is possible to be ethical in the expression of indigenous mythologies but not to spread harmful stereotypes or awaken the historical inequalities (Ng, 2019).

The cultural meaning of such representations and the strengths and struggles of indigenous people have been covered in previous research of the intersection of indigenous mythologies and modern fantasy, especially in young adult fantasy. Nevertheless, a lot of literature dwells on either scholarly investigations into indigenous storytelling or the fantasy genre in general, frequently overlooking the particularities of the young adult subgenre. This gap is what this paper intends to address by assessing how indigenous mythologies are reinterpreted in young adult fantasy which is defined by the techniques of the narrative, the themes, and their cultural implications.

The Reimagination of Indigenous Mythologies in Young Adult Fantasy Fiction

Analysis of Themes and Narrative Techniques

The fantasy fiction writers of today, young adults, now re-tell native mythology by adding fantasy and realism into their cultural myth in order to make their story attractive to the modern readers and still preserve the values of the past. The elements through which these authors tend to introduce the indigenous worldviews in their stories are usually magical realism, fantasy beasts, and mythological beings. The main

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themes include identity, heritage, clash and belonging which are developed extensively as characters seek a course of action between their relation to their cultural heritage in the face of the current challenges. Fantasy and realistic battles can be combined, which means that the ancient native motifs, including the resilience, survival, and culture maintenance, can be discussed. Such myths re-created are powerful tools of disputing the opposition between convention and change and such myths allow the readers to understand the complexities of existing as a cultural identity in such a rapidly evolving world.

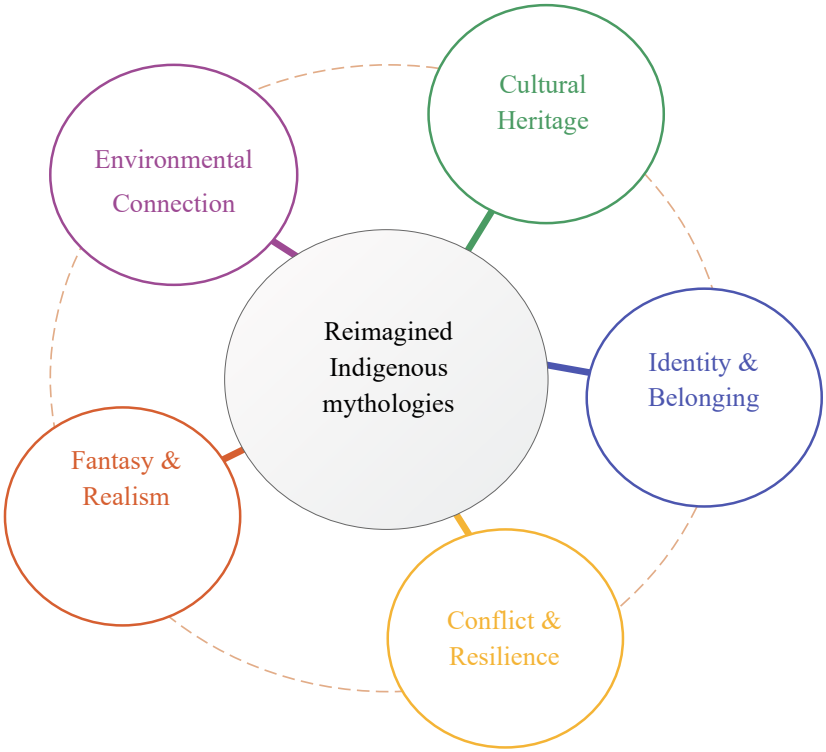

Figure 1: Thematic Diagram of Reimagined Indigenous Mythologies

Figure 1 shows the main theme of the Reimagined Indigenous Mythologies, encircled by five prominent thematic nodes. The circles around each are crucial features of the manner in which indigenous mythologies are played out in contemporary fiction. They are: Cultural Heritage, Identity & Belonging, Conflict and Resilience, Fantasy, and Realism, and Environmental Connection. A color-coded design, a bright color, plays on the main idea and the theme of interdependence between cultural traditions, individuality, and the reinterpretation of native stories today. The figure is a graphic outline of the main problems examined in the paper that unify tradition and modernity in re-invented mythological narratives.

Case Studies

Case Study 1: The Marrow Thieves by Cherie Dimaline

Dimaline in The Marrow Thieves utilizes dystopian fantasy to repeat indigenous mythologies and it observe a world where the presence of indigenous people is related to their relation with the ancient memory. Its plot is based on the hunt of a group of Indigenous people because of possessing bone marrow which can eliminate climate change. Dimaline in this story talks about the concept of memory, the continuation of a culture and the role of myth in the becoming person. Even the importance of the land and the continuum between the spiritual world can be seen in the trip of the characters when the traditional story is combined with the speculative ones to create the story of resistance and hope (Barnhill, 2016).

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Case Study 2: The Girl Who Drank the Moon by Kelly Barnhill

The Girl Who Drank the Moon by Barnhill, too, echoes the elements of indigenous mythology, in particular, its portrayal of nature as something divine and the forest as a soul. It narrates the story of a young girl called Luna who grew up in a fantasy land where everything revolves around magic, and her journey in search of her identity. By adopting the use of the magical land, Barnhill manages to align indigenous worldview through the concept of balance, discovery of self, and interconnectedness. The mysterious living thing that is the forest symbolizes the connection between man and nature, which is a core issue among indigenous communities. Through this narrative, Barnhill reconstructs the role of mythology as a tool for transformation to both characters and readers.

Authorial Intent and Reception

That it is necessary to bring the myths of indigenous people into the modern literary world is what forces these writers to guarantee that their culture thrives. They do this so as to provide indigenous youth with a narrative, which is a part of their history and addresses modern issues, such as environmental degradation and cultural preservation. The authors of such works tend to rely on their own belonging to their native culture and seek cultural experts to make their images true to the reality. Mostly these adaptations have been warmly welcomed by critics and readers applauding the authors due to their sensitivity in portraying the indigenous cultures. However, criticisms have been made over potential misrepresentation or oversimplification, especially in regards to the proportions of fantasy and cultural accuracy. Despite these criticisms, the growing popularity of indigenous voices within young adult fantasy fiction tells of the importance of such re-told mythologies in the evolution of cultural stories to the next generations.

Impact of Reimagining Indigenous Mythologies on Contemporary Culture

Cultural Impact

The reinterpretation of the indigenous mythologies in fiction translates to a reconstitution of the sense of indigenous cultures and past to the audience. Such reimagining has the potential to break stereotypes and misconceptions by incorporating indigenous stories into the contemporary discourse and creating a more realistic and detailed image of indigenous people. These stories allow the reader, especially the younger generations, to relate with the native cultural values, traditions and worldview in a way that would be relatable and current. The historical and present-day struggles that the indigenous people have been facing can also be enriched with the following mythologies; colonization, erasing their culture, and destroying the environment. Such stories are cross-cultural and thus they are easy to communicate with other cultures, thus increase empathy and respect towards other cultures. Their spreading of these re-invented myths is to preserve the indigenous culture and the assurance of its further appropriation in the world cultural dialogue.

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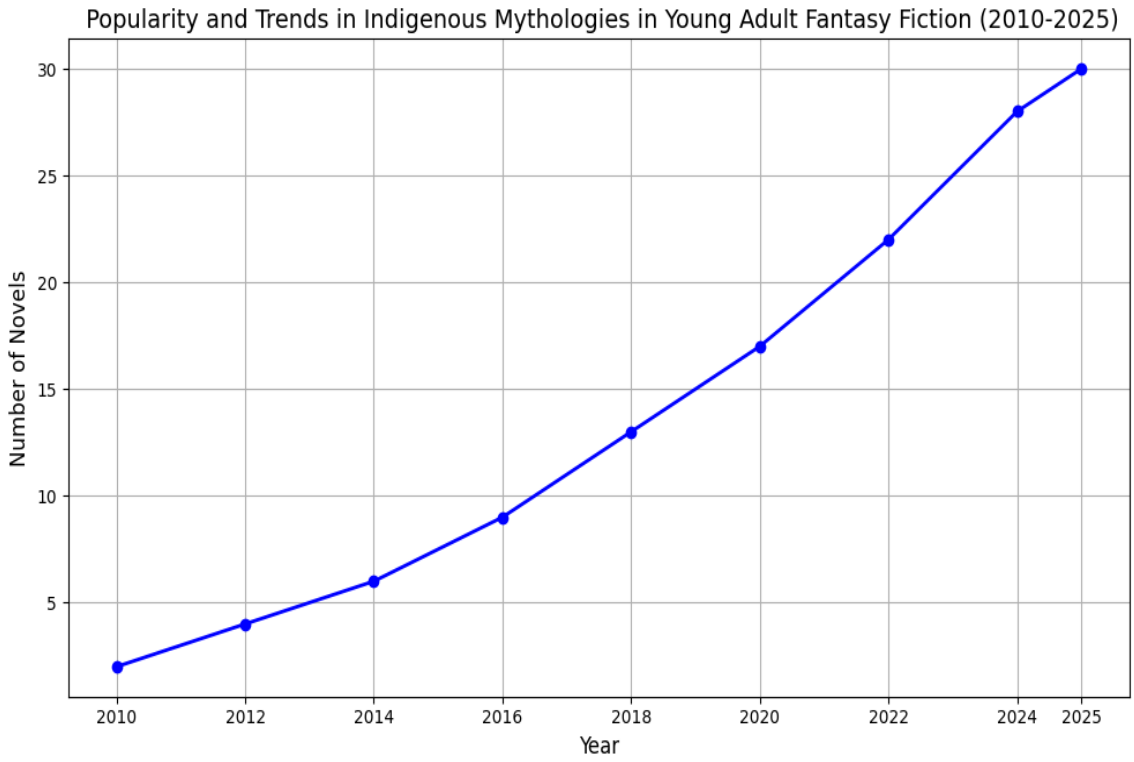

Figure 2: Popularity and Trends in Indigenous Mythologies in Young Adult Fantasy Fiction (2010-2025)

Figure 2 illustrates the pattern of the number of young adult fantasy novels utilizing indigenous mythologies in 2010-2025. It cites the growing trend towards the representation of indigenous peoples in contemporary fiction, and the number of novels exploring the indigenous cultural narratives, themes, and traditions has been steadily growing over the years.

Educational Significance

The fantasy fiction in young adults plays a significant role in educating the young readers on the indigenous culture and myths. Through the use of traditional stories in entertaining and accessible stories, authors expose the younger generations to the indigenous world views, religious beliefs, and practices. This is achieved by creating relatable entries through the use of characters who find their identity and their heritage and render these cultures relatable to the reader. Moreover, such reimaginings may also arouse interest and encourage the investigation of the indigenous history, art, and values. It is important to note that young adult fiction can shift the readers attitude towards the indigenous people and dismantle the stereotypes, as well as broadening their mind. These works are a blend of fantasy and classic indigenous knowledge and can be regarded as an amusement tool as well as the educational tool because they encourage respect towards indigenous cultures and encourage a re-evaluation of contemporary issues, such as environmental sustainability, land rights, and social justice.

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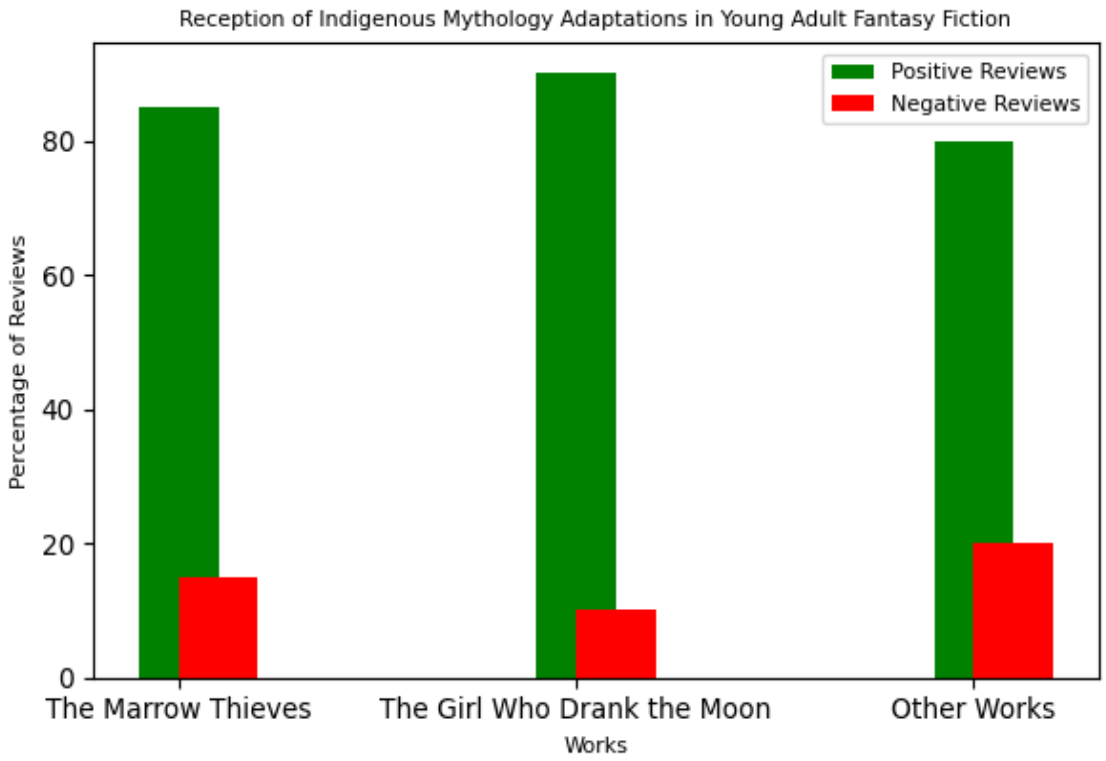

Figure 3: Reception of Indigenous Mythology Adaptations in Young Adult Fantasy Fiction

Figure 3 shows the way in which the process of adaptation of indigenous mythology is received in the young adult fantasy fiction and such works as The Marrow Thieves and The Girl Who Drank the Moon are considered specifically. The graph is a comparison between the negative and positive reviews, which shows that these works were mostly well received, with the percentage of positive reviews being high. This trend can be observed in the Other Works group of books which receive rather less favorable treatment.

Ethical Considerations

The retelling of indigenous folklore in contemporary literature requires great ethical understanding, especially in matters of cultural awareness and the author's responsibility in presenting the stories accurately and respectfully. While retellings provide opportunities for cultural exchange, they also have the potential to result in cultural appropriation, where indigenous myths are distorted or misrepresented. The writers must exercise caution against distorting the traditional tales through overzealous creativity, but should avoid simplifying or changing the indigenous myths in ways that damage their cultural significance. A consultation with cultural professionals and communication with people of indigenous communities are also essential steps that should be taken to ensure that the authenticity is preserved and that no harm occurs. The authors should also remember the potential impact it may have on the indigenous readers who may view this as an act of approval or robbery of their culture. Through creativity and ethical responsibility, the authors will be able to help positively present the indigenous cultures in modern literature and ensure that they are portrayed in a positive and respectful way.

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Table 2: Ethical Considerations in the Representation of Indigenous Cultures

Ethical Concern	Description	Suggested Practices
Cultural Appropriation	Use of indigenous cultural elements without permission or understanding, leading to distortion or misrepresentation.	Engage with indigenous communities, seek consultation, and ensure accurate representation.
Respect for Sacred Traditions	Depicting sacred stories, symbols, or rituals in a trivializing or inappropriate way.	Respect the sacred nature of traditions and avoid commercializing or sensationalizing sacred elements.
Avoiding Stereotypes	Indigenous characters and cultures are being portrayed through harmful or simplistic stereotypes.	Focus on multidimensional, authentic characters that reflect the diversity and complexity of indigenous cultures.

Table 2 gives the key ethical concerns of reconsidering indigenous folklore in contemporary fiction. It brings into the limelight such issues as respect of sacred tradition, cultural appropriation and anti-stereotyping. The table also gives suggested practices that may be embraced by the authors to ensure that they represent it in a respectful and authentic way and these practices include the requirement of engaging with the native population, consulting with the cultural experts, as well as being culturally sensitive. It can be used as a guideline to help authors cope with the challenges of portraying indigenous cultures in a way that is respectful of their importance and does not cause harm.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how modern young adult fantasy fiction can be a useful way of re-telling indigenous mythologies and folklore. By means of the integration of the traditional cultural narratives, as well as the modern themes, not only the indigenous stories are revived by such works, but the indigenous stories made more acceptable by the general audience. The salient themes of identity, heritage, conflict and environmental relationship in these re-defined myths, and the eminent role that the authors play in redefining these myths to meet the challenges of the society today are the major discoveries. The increased popularity of the indigenous representation in fantasy fiction shows the shift in the attitude towards the indigenous cultures and to the mainstream literature. Future studies can be aimed at using a more diverse set of indigenous cultures and their effects on the development of young readers in the context of their interpretations of cultural identity and compassion. Lastly, the fact that the indigenous tales are incorporated in the updated stories highlights the importance of cultural heritage preservation and versatility of stories to ensure that such voices are not disregarded or ignored in the modern discourse.

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