

# Cultural clash: The unique blend between the old and the new in Neil Gaiman's american gods

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## ABSTRACT

Neil Gaiman's American Gods novels are being discussed in this paper in order to derive the conclusion of the culture clashes. It analyzes, by employing various sociological frameworks, the specific cultural clash of between the old gods, brought about by the immigrants, and the new gods who are the manifestations of modern societal obsessions like media, technology, and globalization.

The culture clashes are presented from the old mythologies point of view in the American society. This tension is embodied by the central conflict in the novel, where the old gods of ancient myth are struggling for relevance in a world that has become obsessed with new gods representing modern concepts like media, technology, and consumerism. The central conflict revolves around the old gods, representing traditional societal beliefs, and the new gods who symbolize the cultural shift in modern America.

The discussion is continued to understand the variation between the modern and ancient concept of the mythological novels. This paper, hence, sheds light on that conflict, serving as a metaphor for the ongoing struggle between tradition and modernity in American society, and highlighting themes like identity, belief, and adaptation. The challenges faced by the old gods also resonate with the experience of the immigrants, characterized by cultural displacement and identity crisis. Ultimately, the research posits that individuals and groups experiencing cultural clashes navigate a complex process of compromise and negotiation of their cultural identity to adapt and integrate within their new environment.

**Keywords:** Cultural conflict, cultural displacement, identity negotiation, modernity, tradition

## INTRODUCTION

Cultural clashes refer to the disagreements or conflicts that arise from the interactions between different cultures. This phenomenon manifests itself on both individual and communal levels, shaping the course of human history for centuries. These clashes trigger wars and societal upheavals; however, they also play a role in the formation of new communities and cultural exchange. Where migration and cross-cultural interactions increase, cultural clash has become a prevalent phenomenon, and its effects range from individuals' personal alienation to a large scale of issues like racism and religious intolerance (Dzikrina & Munjid, 2018, p. 139).

*American Gods* follows Shadow Moon, an ex-convict whose life unravels when his wife, Laura, dies in a car accident while cheating on him with his best friend. Shortly after her death, Shadow is approached by the enigmatic Mr. Wednesday, who offers him a job as a bodyguard and assistant. Shadow learns that Wednesday is an incarnation of the Norse god Odin, and the two embark on a road trip across America to rally old gods—ancient deities brought to the New World by immigrants—to prepare for a looming war against the “new gods.” These new gods represent modern societal forces such as technology, media, and globalization. The novel delves into the struggles of the old gods, who have been diminished in power as belief in them has waned, and examines the nature of belief, identity, and cultural memory. As Shadow travels with Wednesday, he encounters a host of mythological figures, including Anansi, Czernobog, and Easter. Meanwhile, Shadow has visions and dreams that hint at his deeper connection to the gods. Shadow, at the end of the narrative, prevents a battle of happening when he learns that Wednesday is, with the help of his ally Loki, leading the conflict to diminish the new gods and regain power ultimately. The novel ends with a note of hope and renewal as Shadow learns the truth of his heritage and decides to forge his own path of personal freedom and life that is untethered to the schemes of gods.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* has attracted significant scholarly attention, prompting researchers to examine various aspects of the novel. For instance, Hill (2005) delves into the narrative and seeks answers to the fundamental questions: what does it mean to be American? and "how does an outsider views the American culture?" Hill argues that the novel creates a "polarization" within American culture by dividing it into two distinct periods: the past and the present. He concludes that the "outsider's perspective" portrayed in the narrative highlights the "constantly changing nature" of American culture, suggesting a critical perception of present-day America as being less great compared to the past (p. 25).

In another study, Firman (2010) explores the ideal position of the genre of fantasy in facilitating discussions of social issues such as invisibility and liminality. She contends that the specific characteristics of this genre employed by Gaiman serve to offer us a "a unique view of an alternate life" (p. 22). On the other hand, Rață (2015) investigates the extensive "intertextual references" that are presented in *American Gods* as a very well-known aspect of the novel (p. 103). She examines the role and importance of these references in creating the American identity and its "cultural representation" within Gaiman's work. Her analysis focuses on the types, functions, and effects of employed intertextuality. Rață concludes that "Gaiman created a rich intertextual web of references" which shapes a "complex image of America and its identity." She adds that Gaiman's portrayal of America is a "pastiche of discordant individual voices," representing diverse "cultures, values, and nationalities," each with its own "idiosyncrasies." This combination serves as a representation of modern America as a "multicultural, polyethnic country" with its unique set of "strengths and weaknesses," ultimately characterized by its "incredibly complex and rich in its diversity" (p. 111).

Furthermore, Thompson (2015) investigates Gaiman's portrayal of "the female gender" in *American Gods*. She examines how does the novel question the prevailing "gender myths" within American society. Thompson argues that *American Gods* challenges common gender roles and expectations, presenting female characters with traits that defy conventional societal expectations by shining over the "rampant sexism, misogyny, and traditionally patriarchal gender roles" that are thrust into their life (p. 31).

In this paper the conflict that arises between the old and the new gods will be investigated as the milestone reason for the issue identity crises. It will shed light on how the two parties are conflicting over the power and authority, leaving the folk struggle with forming an identity and reconciling with the updated new social environment.

## ARGUMENT

### THE CULTURAL DISPLACEMENT OF TRADITIONALITY

*American Gods* tells of the story of a man named Shadow Moon, a recently released convict, who starts to work as a bodyguard for a mysterious man named Wednesday, who happens to be the old god in the name of Norse god. Wednesday feels very much annoyed that the old gods, the embodiment of tradition, are no longer worshipped in modern times as people devote themselves worshipping new gods, or the different faces of modernity, such as cities, technology, and media. Hence, Norse god calls the old gods to action, such as Czernobog, the god of darkness and Easter, the German goddess of rebirth and fertility, convincing them that they should fight their enemies like Mr. Town and Media:

"Do you recognize me, Shadow?" Wednesday asked, sitting tall atop his wolf. One of his eyes gleamed sharply, while the other remained dull. A heavy cloak with a deep hood draped over him, casting his face in shadow. "I promised to reveal my names to you," he continued. "They call me Glad-of-War, Grim, Raider, and Third. I am the One-Eyed, the Highest, the True-Guesser. I am Grimnir, the Hooded One, the All-Father, and the Wand-Bearer. My names are as countless as the winds, my titles as numerous as the ways one can meet their end. My ravens, Thought and Memory, are Huginn and Muninn. My wolves, Freki and Geri, stand at my side. And my steed is none other than the gallows."

This declaration speech asserts Wednesday's authority and inspires the old gods to unite under his leadership for the forthcoming conflict.

Along with the modern social upheavals, norms and traditions began to decay, resulting in displacement of culture. Individuals, consequently, suffered disruption and loss of a cultural identity due to their being forced to adapt to a new cultural environment that differs significantly from their own. To understand cultural displacement, it's essential to consider the very concept of "culture." As defined by Matsumoto and Juang (2003), culture encompasses the "set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, but different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next" (p. 27). This definition emphasizes the shared elements that bind a group together, while also giving acknowledgment to the individual variations that exist within it. Cultural displacement occurs for various reasons such as globalization, migration, and colonization. When individuals or groups are forced to adapt to a new cultural environment that clashes with their own established values and traditions, they experience a sense of loss, isolation, and marginalization. This can be manifested in various ways, such as difficulties in communication and adaptation to new customs and traditions, as well as a disconnection from their heritage. This struggle is mostly felt by the old gods, who, with the emergence of the new gods, are left "unmourned and unremembered" (Gaiman, 2001, p. 47).

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Cultural displacement occurs when individuals or groups are “separated from their native culture” due to factors like migration (Bammer, 1994, p. xi). This separation, often experienced by Wednesday and other ancient gods in the novel, can lead to disorientation and a sense of loss as they navigate a new cultural environment. M. Keith Booker (2010) points out that Gaiman “metaphorically dramatizes some of the central conflicts in American culture. *American Gods* weaves a central theme around the experience of cultural displacement that occurs due to the clash and battle between “the old gods of mythology and the new gods of modern commerce and technology (representing such contemporary powers as the Internet, the media, credit cards, and cheap plastic)” (p. x). Wednesday is regarded as the leader of the old gods in their war against the new gods. He clarifies the notion of the emerging of the new gods to a group of listeners:

By now, you have surely noticed that new gods are emerging in America, feeding on the ever-growing threads of belief. They are the deities of credit cards and highways, of the Internet and telephones, of radio waves, hospitals, and television screens. These are the gods of plastic, pagers, and neon lights—arrogant beings, swollen with self-importance, reveling in their own modernity. (Gaiman, 2001, pp. 107-108).

Odin responds, warning that they know of our existence. They fear us, despise us, and would erase us if given the chance. "You deceive yourselves if you think otherwise," he declares. "The time has come for us to unite. The time has come to act." (Gaiman, 2001, p. 108). The old gods are so afraid of the new gods, thinking that their coming will destroy their deep-rooted existence in the land. Shadow affirms that and says:

The land stretched wide and endless. In time, our people left us behind, remembering us only as relics of the old world forgotten beings that had not crossed into the new with them. Our true followers either faded away or ceased to believe, leaving us lost, afraid, and displaced, surviving only on the smallest fragments of worship we could gather. We did what we had to in order to endure. That is how we have lived—on the fringes, in the shadows, where no one paid us much attention. The truth is, whether we admit it or not, our influence has all but vanished. (Gaiman, 2001, p. 107).’

Evans (2016) in his “Folklore, intertextuality, and the Folkloresque in the works of Neil Gaiman” explains that in fact:

The supposed moral divide between the old and new gods is an illusion; in reality, they are not so different. Oral tradition and electronic media are not in conflict—they are merely different ways of preserving stories and passing down traditions. Both the old and new gods require sacrifice. Figures like Czernobog and Wednesday demand blood offerings, sometimes even human lives. Meanwhile, the modern gods exact their own forms of tribute, proving that the nature of worship has changed, but the cost of devotion remains the same. (p. 72).

Evans’s explanation is somehow acceptable. The god of television, in the form of Lucy Ricardo, for example affirms that, in a conversation with Shadow, and says:

“Who are you?” asked Shadow.

“Okay,” she said. “Good question. I’m the idiot box. I’m the TV. I’m the all-seeing eye and the world of the cathode ray. I’m the boob tube. I’m the little shrine the family gathers to adore.”

“You’re the television? Or someone in the television?”

“The TV’s the altar. I’m what people are sacrificing to.”

“What do they sacrifice?” asked Shadow. “Their time, mostly,” said Lucy. “Sometimes each other” (Gaiman, 2001, p. 136).

The novel’s most appealing aspect is the idea that old gods live among Americans, hiding in plain sight, and suffering from a displacement as they fail to adapt to modern waves while their tradition is long since faded. This theme echoes the concept of diaspora, a term defined by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2000) as “the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions.” (p. 66). This definition aptly captures the essence of the characters’ spiritual and metaphorical journeys in the novel. This notion is evident as the old gods suffer a loss of a spiritual bond with the community, they have devotedly served due to the emergence of the new gods who causes the old ones to lose the worshipping and appreciation. The narrator affirms and says that “these are the gods who have passed out of memory. Even their names are lost. The people who worshiped them are as forgotten as their gods. Their totems are long since broken and cast down. Their last priests died without passing on their secrets” (Gaiman, 2001, p. 46-47).

Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* illuminates the struggles of its characters to explore a significant theme: the challenges faced by immigrants in the face of cultural clash. By examining incidents of cultural clashes in the novel, the idea of these clashes and conflicts are but a reflection of the experiences of real-life immigrants becomes evident and very clear. Thus, within the narrative, various characters, both human and divine, undergo displacement, identity crisis, and conflicting experiences common to many immigrants who adapt to a new cultural environment.

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## THE IDENTITY CRISIS AMID THE BATTLE

The clash of cultures forces characters to grapple with questions of identity. As they navigate the tension between their original cultural values and the ones that emerged recently, they struggle to reconcile these conflicting elements within themselves. Shadow, for instance, experiences an identity crisis as he tries to understand his role and purpose in this new reality. He questions his past, his connection to the gods, and his place within the evolving American landscape. He suffers an internal struggle with his past action, the narrator says:

Shadow felt as if every flaw, every failure, and every weakness within him was being exposed, examined, and judged. It was as though he were being dissected—his very essence laid bare for scrutiny. People often bury their worst memories beneath layers of justification, masking them with comforting lies or allowing them to be lost in the haze of forgetfulness. But in that moment, Shadow had no such refuge. Every misstep, every regret, every shameful act he had ever committed surged toward him like an unforgiving storm. He stood utterly defenseless, as vulnerable as a body laid out on a coroner's table, with no way to shield himself from the weight of his past. (Gaiman, 2001, p. 376-377).

Also, Shadow navigates multiple cultural spheres and, consequently, experiences a feeling of having multiple identities. As he meets an array of gods along the narrative, Shadow is forced to confront his own doubts and rediscover his sense of self. Also, he is obliged to learn more about his identity, such as believing that Wednesday is his father, “in order to truly come to life rather than passively floating through his life” (Sathyakala & Harishkumar, 2024, p. 2). Thus, and as Shadow embodies the bridge between old and new gods and men, the novel serves as a comment on complexities of belief and its impact on personal identity. Additionally, the immigrant's experience also often involves identity crisis as individuals navigate the complexities of adapting to a new society. They may face resistance, discrimination, and challenges in reconciling their cultural identity with the dominant culture. This identity crisis led to a state of questioning one's own self-worth. Wednesday, as he used to be the most powerful god, evidently experiences a kind of struggle for the worth of himself. His current situation with the emergence of new gods places him in doubts of whether it's “a good thing to be a god” or not. This notion “indicates that the old gods are feeling a loss of purpose. Long ago, people believed them because people needed them, but the situation has turned to be them needing the people” (Dzikrina & Munjid, 2018, p.146). The following conversation between Wednesday and Shadow clarifies our discussion:

"I'm nothing but a relic of the past. Who the hell cares about me?"

Shadow's voice was quiet but firm. "You're a god."

Wednesday's eyes flicked up, sharp and searching, as if he wanted to argue. But then, just as quickly, his shoulders sagged. He glanced down at the menu, exhaling. "So?"

"Being a god—that's something," Shadow insisted.

Wednesday tilted his head, his expression unreadable. "Is it?"

This time, it was Shadow who had no answer, looking away instead. (Gaiman, 2001, p. 280-281).

While globalization inevitably leads to the erosion of certain cultural identities and traditions, it also creates opportunities for deeper appreciation and understanding of diverse cultures. In this context, being "American" is not about a fixed identity but rather a conscious choice to embrace cultural differences. As Donna Haraway famously argues, identity should be shaped by affinity—shared connections and alliances—rather than rigid categorizations. (Haraway, 2011, p. 458).

## THE ONGOING CONFLICT OF CULTURAL CLASH

The underlying tension between tradition and modernity, symbolized by the clash between established systems of belief and the rise of new cultural forces, leads ultimately to conflict. This sense of “being a part—and not being a part—of more than one society or culture” can lead to internal conflict as individuals struggle to “reconcile their whole identity” (Dzikrina & Munjid, 2018, p. 142). Furthermore, this internal conflict aligns with the concept of “double consciousness” proposed by Dubois & Edward (2007). This concept describes the experience of living with two conflicting identities that cannot be fully merged. Dubois & Edward further adds that “It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others ... One ever feels his two-ness; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in a dark body” (p. xiii). Shadow mostly experiences this issue of the double consciousness as he is caught between two worlds: the physical, mundane world of the living, and the mythical, spiritual realm of the gods: “I can believe things that are true and I can believe things that aren't true and I can believe things where nobody knows if they're true or not” (Gaiman, 2001, p.307). This quote affirms Shadow's capacity at hold conflicting beliefs, a trait that reflects his internal struggle between his human experience and the divine revelations he encounters.

Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* utilizes gods as symbolic representations of the American systems of beliefs and societal attitudes. The old gods, embodying traditional beliefs and customs, represent a bygone era of religious faith and communal living.

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Conversely, the new gods symbolize the rise of modernity and secularism, fueled by technological advancements and a shifting cultural landscape. The novel portrays these contrasting forces as locked in conflict, mirroring the clash between traditional and modern values within contemporary American society. The original stories of old gods highlight their emergence in faith-based communal societies, contrasting sharply with the individualistic, technology-driven world they inhabit now. Early American settlers showcase unwavering faith and reliance on rituals to appease their deities. However, the narrative suggests a gradual erosion of these traditions in the face of rapid societal changes over the past few decades, particularly following World War II. This technological and cultural shift paves the way for the new gods' ascendancy, symbolizing the evolving nature of American culture and the ongoing struggle between tradition and modernity.

Beyond individual struggles, the novel portrays broader societal conflicts arising from cultural clashes by applying the sociological conflict theory, focusing on ethnic conflicts as outlined by Oberschall (2010). The theory suggests that "in multiethnic societies, the root cause of ethnic conflict is a threatening change in the prevailing ethnic hierarchy of dominance and subordination" (p. 180). In the context of the novel, the "different ethnic groups" can be viewed as the old gods representing traditional beliefs and the new gods symbolizing modernity. The conflict between these groups stems from a perceived "threatened change in the prevailing ethnic hierarchy." The old gods see their dominance challenged by the rise of the new, leading to a struggle for cultural influence and power. The novel, hence, challenges us to consider the experiences of displacement and identity negotiation faced by individuals and communities, while also highlighting the broader societal tensions arising from conflicting cultural values and power dynamics.

*American Gods* reflects a crucial reality of contemporary American society: the shifting landscape of religion and belief. America's religious landscape is changing, religiosity is on the decline, with individuals embracing alternative spiritualities or moving away from organized religion altogether. This trend is particularly evident among the younger generation. The novel portrays this reality as a central conflict. The decline in traditional religious practices, such as reduced church attendance and fewer religious affiliations, reflects a weakened system of beliefs. This, in turn, results in a decline in the old gods' power and influence, things that accounted for as their traditional faith and rituals. The replacement of these fading beliefs is manifested in the new gods who, unlike the old gods, are born from diverse cultures, and who are the products of contemporary American society: media, technology, and economic systems. They represent the shifting focus of human trust and reliance, moving from "abstract" concepts like deities to "concrete" realities like technology and science. The novel's underlying tension arises from the clash of these opposing cultural forces: tradition and modernity, religiosity and secularism. This clash presents a challenge, as reconciling these opposing ideals within the same society appears inherently difficult.

By exploring these interconnected themes of displacement, identity crisis, and conflict, *American Gods* sheds light on the universal human experience of grappling with cultural change. The novel serves as a powerful reminder of the challenges faced by individuals navigating a world of shifting cultural landscapes, particularly for those who undergo the complex and often daunting journey of immigration.

## CONCLUSION

This paper involves a detailed discussion about the Neil Gaiman novels from the culture clashes point of view. Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* tells a fascinating story about the clash of different cultures. In the content of them, and in their novels the context is mythological. The novel uses mythological figures to represent different beliefs and attitudes, highlighting the conflict between tradition and modern life in America. It shows how the characters' backgrounds and experiences shape their identities and how they see the world. The characters struggle with feeling displaced, as their old beliefs are challenged and they face an identity crisis. This mirrors the challenges immigrants face when they move to new cultures. The book encourages readers to think critically about our modern society and how we deal with cultural interactions. It makes us reflect on how individuals and communities handle the balance between the old and the new in a constantly changing world. Through its characters' journeys, *American Gods* explores themes of displacement, identity, and the conflicts that arise in a diverse society.

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