

Re-Presentation of Scottish Myths, Legends, and History in Popular Culture: A Study of Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander*

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to analyze the effective use of Scottish history, myths and legends in the popular fiction Outlander by Diana Gabaldon. Outlander has been variously analyzed as a novel of liminality from the perspectives of gender, fantasy and empowerment. However, this paper analyses the novel as a work of popular culture which creatively juxtaposes the historical past with the present. Diana Gabaldon's judicious usage of the elements taken from the past along with science fiction concepts like time travel to enliven the narrative is the focus of the study of the paper undertaken. Popular culture means various forms of art that appeal to a vast majority of the audience intended to amuse and entertain. In the ancient past, myths were the popular medium which was intended to both entertain and instruct the people who strongly believed in them. The exotic quality of Scotland in general and of the Highlands in particular owes much to the romanticization of its past and its geography in its myths which is now carried forward by the popular fiction in the form that is suitable to the present day readers. During her research on the Scottish Highlands, Diana Gabaldon learnt that the 'Stone Circles' were believed to have astronomical links and are supposed to make loud roaring or buzzing noises. She makes use of these stone circles as an entry point to the past. The protagonist is an intelligent woman named Claire from the twentieth century, who enters the historical past and relives there along with the mythical druids and fairy creatures that are supposed to inhabit the highlands. The narrative thus tries to make sense of the past through the medium of popular culture which re-presents the Scottish myths, legends and history in a new light in order to make it relevant to the present times.*

Keywords: Cultural Studies, Legends and History, Popular Culture, Scottish Myths

Author's Statement: I hereby declare that the research paper titled *Re-Presentation of Scottish Myths, Legends, and History in Popular Culture: A study of Diana Gabaldon's Outlander* is an original work based upon my sole research and has not been the basis for any other publication.

The word 'Culture' is a key and diverse term which by itself conveys the complexities of human history. According to Peter Brooker, 'Culture' is defined as "intellectual and artistic works or practices which in their very forms and meanings define human society as socially constructed rather than natural" (56). Culture, in the writings of Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis is deployed as a liberal or radical traditionalist ideology.

The late 1950s to 1970s saw the development of Cultural Studies by the British Marxist academics. It has since been adapted and transformed by scholars pertaining to various disciplines around the world. As an interdisciplinary field, Cultural Studies assesses the political dynamics of contemporary culture, including that of popular culture and their historical basis. Lawrence Grossberg defines,

Cultural Studies to be concerned with describing and intervening in the ways cultural practices are produced within, inserted into, and operate in the everyday life of human beings and social formations, so as to reproduce, struggle against, and perhaps transform the existing structures of power (8).

It showcases how our everyday life hinges on culture.

The Welsh socialist, writer, novelist and critic, Raymond Williams was highly influential in the study of New Left and in a broader sense culture. His work has laid the foundations for the field of Cultural

Studies. Williams believed that ‘culture’ is something that cannot be separated from life as it is lived and experienced every day. According to Stuart Hall, for Williams the objective of cultural studies “is to bring forward the distinctive and unique, often peculiar, experiences of a social group and to recreate and understand what it is that constitutes the identity of that experience” (32).

We owe the word “myth” to the ancient Greeks. Descended from the idea of speech itself, myth had been by the fifth century BCE, come to mean a story, a narrative of events. Myths were used in ancient times to explain natural phenomena and other unexplainable events or religious beliefs. The suggestion of a myth being a tall tale, something fictitious rather than a statement of fact, was pushed further by Plato, who was concerned to distinguish between those things we can accept as being true and those we cannot. Myths are viewed as symbols, allegories, and theories (Cotterell, 6).

Myths are also fantastical, but they are not inherently irrational parts of the soul. "In general, Plato uses myth to inculcate in his less philosophical readers noble beliefs and/ or teach them various philosophical matters that may be too difficult for them to follow if expounded in a blunt, philosophical discourse" (Partenie). In regards to Plato’s myths, Charles Khan argues that between Plato’s “otherworldly vision” and the “values of Greek society in the fifth and fourth centuries BC” was a “radical discrepancy”. This discrepancy, claims Khan, “is one explanation for Plato’s use of myth: myth provides the necessary literary distancing that permits Plato to articulate his out-of-place vision of meaning and truth”.

Myths act as a means of persuasion. According to Plato non-philosophers are reluctant to ground their lives on logic and arguments. They have to be persuaded. One means of persuasion is myth. Myth inculcates beliefs. It is efficient in making the less philosophically inclined, as well as children believe in noble things (Plato, 377).

In the present times, however, this persuasive role of myth is being replaced by that of popular culture as it is equated with “mass culture”. According to John Storey, there is a political dimension to popular culture. Storey claims that popular culture emerged from the urbanization of the industrial revolution. Barry Brummett in his book *Rhetorical Dimensions of Popular Culture*, explains that,

Popular culture involves the aspects of social life most actively involved in by the public. Popular culture is determined by the interactions between people in their everyday activities such as their style of clothing, their use of slang, greetings and their cuisine are all examples of popular culture (5).

One source of popular culture stems from adaptations based on traditional folklore. This original layer of cultural conventions persists today in the form of literature, jokes, urban legends, and myths. There is a widespread engagement of folkloric elements of popular culture met with the commercial element. Popular culture is also influenced by professional entities that provide the public with information. These sources include the news media, scientific and scholarly publications, and ‘expert’ opinion from people considered an authority in their field. A seemingly contradictory source of popular culture is individualism. Urban culture has not only provided a common ground for the masses, but it has also inspired ideals of individualistic aspirations. An individual may choose to participate in all that is ‘popular’ for popularity’s sake, or they may choose a course of action off the beaten track. At times, these ‘pathfinders’ affect popular culture by their individuality (Delaney).

The Scots are an ancient race dating back to the fifth century. Theirs is a race saturated in traditions, culture, and superstitions. The name Scotland derives from Latin *Scotia*, land of the Scots, a Celtic people from Ireland who settled on the west coast of Great Britain about the fifth century CE. The name Caledonia has often been applied to Scotland, especially in poetry. It is derived from Caledonii, the Roman name of a tribe in the northern part of what is now Scotland (Macleod). Scotland has a literary heritage dating back to the early Middle Ages. Scotland being a land steeped in myths, superstitions, and legends has made sure that these myths, superstitions, and legends have been incorporated into their

literature as well. Scottish mythology is mainly tied to various aspects of nature. Myths were used in ancient times to explain natural phenomena and other unexplainable events or religious beliefs. Myths are viewed as symbols, allegories, and theories. The belief in the supernatural and occult have been fostered in the minds of the Scottish people for centuries and they prevail in this modern age. Scotland's vast landscapes have inspired many tales filled with folklore, myths, and supernatural events. One of the most famous legends of the Celts is the Arthurian legend. It is believed to have been passed down through Celtic speech in Scots Gaelic songs like "Am Bron Binn" which translate to "The Sweet Sorrow" (MacLeod).

The Hebrides islands and the Scottish Highlands are a source of many Scottish folklore and myths. The Hebridean myths and legends consist of tales about water spirits, merpeople, waster monsters, werewolves, will-o-the-wisp, and sithichean (ie) fairies. The Scottish Highlands, a mountainous region encompassing the northwest of Scotland is also a famous source of legends and myths and is vastly used in Scottish literature. The highlands are the source of one of Scotland's most famous myths known as the myth of the Loch Ness monster, a sea monster believed to be residing in the caves of the Loch Ness. Hence, the name Loch Ness monster is in short, 'Nessie'.

Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander* provides scope to study the elements of Scottish myths used to recreate the cultural past of Scotland. Previously, the novel has been analysed as a novel of liminality, as well as a novel of fantasy and empowerment from a feministic point of view. The novel has also been examined as a novel of romance and heroism. This research attempts to study Gabaldon's *Outlander* as a work of popular culture by analysing Gabaldon's use of myths, legends, and history to authenticate fiction from a popular culture point of view.

The *Outlander* series focuses on the adventures of twentieth-century nurse Claire Randall, who time travels to eighteenth-century Scotland and finds adventure and romance with the dashing James Fraser. Set in Scotland, France, the West Indies, England, and North America, the novels merge multiple genres, featuring elements of historical fiction, romance, mystery, adventure, and science fiction/fantasy. Gabaldon's first book deal was for an *Outlander* trilogy but with the success that the first and the second book saw, Gabaldon stated that she has decided to publish a total of ten books under the *Outlander* series (DianaGabaldon.com).

The novel is comprehensive in its use of myths, legends and historical events all surrounding the land of Scotland. But what makes this novel appeal to popular culture is the author's use of science fiction and fantasy. The novel opens with the *Day of Dead* also known by the Celts as "Samhain" approaching. Samhain or *All Saints' Day* is a Celtic feast celebrated on the eve of November 1st on *All Hallows* night which marks the transition from autumn to winter. It was believed that on this night the souls of the departed would revisit their old homes in order to warm themselves by the fire. This is seen later in the book when Frank comes in contact with Jamie's Ghost who was found looking up at Claire's window.

"The ancient feasts", he explained, "Hogmanay, that's New Year's, Midsummer Day, Beltane and All Hallows'. Druids, Beaker Folk, early Picts, everybody kept the sun feasts and the fire feasts, so far as we know. Anyway, ghosts are freed on the holy days, and can wander about at will, to do harm or good as they please (Gabaldon,12)

The otherworld of Celtic myth is an invisible realm of gods, spirits, fairies, and giants, and it takes many forms. The divide between the visible and invisible worlds is not clearly defined in Celtic myths. An instance of this belief is seen in *Outlander* when Claire finds a baby wrapped up in a blanket and left at the bottom of a tree. The baby was freezing and almost dead when Claire picked it up, determined to save the child but she was stopped by Geillis who said to her "That baby is no human child, it's a changeling." (Gabaldon, ,343). A Changeling was believed to be a fairy who was left in place of a human baby. The Scots would often leave a child who was dying or deformed in the forests believing that their

dying child would be taken to live with the fairies. But Claire, not knowing the myths surrounding changelings refused to listen to Geillis. Geillis then told Jamie who was looking for Claire where she was. Jamie tried to calm Claire and get her to leave the child where it is and go home but Claire retorted saying; “Don’t tell me you believe in fairies and changelings and all that” (343). Jamie then explained the people’s belief to Claire saying;

It's not about what I believe. These people, they've never been more than a day's walk from the place where they were born. They know no more of the world than what Father Bain tells them to cook on a Sunday. The parents of that child might come for him in a bit and think it's the changeling that died and think of their own child, healthy and well living forever with the fairies (343).

The exotic quality of Scotland in general and of the Highlands in particular owed much to the romanticization of its past and its geography. Popular culture developed and maintained its knowledge of myths, legends, and folktales, relying on very widespread networks by means of which such contents could be conveyed thanks to texts that were spoken, recited or indeed sung. However, what is *spooky*, or indeed *fey*, appears to have played an interesting role in the history of Scots and Scottish English, beyond the huge success of Gothic novels in Pre-Romantic times and later, even to this day (Dossena).

Gabaldon in her research on the Scottish Highlands learnt that the stone circles were believed to have astronomical powers and to make loud roaring or buzzing noises. Due to the believed astronomical quality of the stones and the myth surrounding Samhain, Gabaldon decided to use the stone circle at Craigh na Dun as her main element of popular culture by adding the twist of time travel to the novel and making the protagonist a time traveller who has the special ability to be a time traveller. She makes use of these stone circles as an entry point to the past. It was believed that on Samhain the stones held mystical powers that helped certain people pierce the veil of time. “The Circles at Craigh na Dun marks a place on Earth where the powers of nature come together- for certain people on certain days, it allows them to pierce the veil of time” (Gabaldon, 26).

While Craigh na Dun is a fictional place, there do exist many stone circles across the United Kingdom. Stone Circles are generally associated with Druids. The Druids were the priests or ministers of religion among the ancient Celts. They regarded the sun and fire as divine beings which are seen in the novel when Claire and Frank come across a ritual ceremony of the druid at dawn. They did not have images to represent the object of their worship, nor did they meet in temples or buildings for their sacred rites. They performed their rituals at the stone circles where they would offer sacrifices to the God “Be’al” to ward off diseases and for victories in wars. The Celts believed that there were divine forces at work in all aspects of nature and they perceived the sun as the most important natural phenomenon. Not only did they see it as the source of life and a promoter of fertility but also as a healing force and comfort for the dead (Cotterell, 80).

Apart from the elements of mythology and legends, what makes *Outlander* more appealing to popular culture is its female-centric narrative. The novel is filled with strong female representation. The most important female representative is Claire Randall/Fraser, the protagonist. Claire grew up digging at archaeological sites with her uncle, something that was deemed not suitable for a sophisticated young lady. Claire is a strong, intelligent, and passionate woman with a mind of her own which often lands her in trouble, all because she simply demands the respect that she deserves. Other strong women representatives are Geillis Duncan and Laoghaire, one forced to marry a man much older than her and the other in love with a man who would never love her back. Geillis is deemed a witch for her knowledge in medicine and for murdering her husband and Laoghaire frames Claire as a witch to exact revenge on her for marrying Jamie, the man she loved. The women took matters into their own hands changing the course of their lives and constructing their own destinies. The druids also play a role in the narrative where the author showcases how women like the druids held the power to communicate directly with the

Gods and intercede for people praying for health and victories. Through all this, we see that it is the women's perspective that guides the narrative.

Gabaldon juxtaposes the past with the present in the novel through her protagonist Claire. The distance between the past and the present offers plenty of room for social commentary. For example, the element of sexism stands out in starker relief, even as it remains invisible to the people of the past. Even though the eighteenth century was on the brink of enlightenment, people in the Scottish Highlands still believed in demonic forces and possession even among the highly educated. Scotland did not have many options for medical treatments nor did the people have advanced knowledge about medicine in general as did the people of the twentieth century. Claire goes from being a modern-day nurse to an eighteenth century healer as she makes use of her twentieth century medical knowledge and abilities to adapt to eighteenth century medical issues. Claire is plagued by the name "*La Dame Blanche*" in translation "the White Woman" because she knew too much about medicine which was believed to be the domain of the witches in those times. All these, forces Claire to be extremely cautious in her abilities as a healer as she was not forced to think twice before performing any kind of medical assistance. Claire's visit to the past helps her to understand the importance of the developments in the field of medicine.

Gabaldon redefines gender roles as she depicts women's forwardness in expressing their feelings and emotions. While Claire, an independent, self-confident woman is seen as outspoken and opinionated, the women of the past are more demure in contrast to the present day counterparts.

Even though the novel is considered a fantasy, Gabaldon ensured that it was historically accurate. One of the major historical events that take place in the novel is the Battle of Culloden which took place in 1746, Scotland. The Battle of Culloden was a pivotal moment in the novel and history. The Jacobite rebellion was indeed led by Bonnie Prince Charlie. Apart from the fictional characters except for one (Fraser), the outcome was accurate, the Jacobites lost the battle and the Scottish clans were greatly affected. Much like in the novel Prince Charlie was never heard from again once he fled Scotland. Though all the Jacobite soldiers were fictional; Jamie Fraser was the only historically accurate character. Jamie's character was loosely based on a real-life Jacobite soldier who survived the battle of Culloden. He wasn't likely named Jamie but they did however share the same surname, Fraser.

The Battle of Prestonpans was another historically accurate event that takes place in the novel. The Jacobites succeeded in the Battle of Prestonpans, unlike in the tragic battle of Culloden. The Jacobites had the upper hand because of their strategic move of sneaking up on the enemy through the bog in the early hours of the morning. This was an accurate portrayal of how the Jacobites won the battle. The entire narration of how the battle took place was an astonishingly realistic portrayal of the real-life historical event.

Women in the eighteenth century were objectified by men and treated not even as second-class citizens. One such incident in the novel portraying this historical accuracy is when Claire was given the choice of marrying Jamie to protect her from the British Jack Randall. "You are safe. You have my name and my family, my clan, and if necessary, the protection of my body as well. The man will not lay hands on ye again, while I live" (Gabaldon, 273). In the eighteenth century it was the law that if a British woman married a Scotsman she was legally a Scot by marriage and hence safe from any British laws. Another such incident takes place early on in Jamie and Claire's marriage when Claire disobeys one of Jamie's orders, he feels that it was his "duty" as her husband to admonish her.

Gabaldon stays true to the historical Scottish feasts that were celebrated in ancient times. One such feast is Samhain which is seen at the beginning of the novel. Gabaldon also mentions the Beltane fires which were bonfires held in the Central Highlands.

Beltane fires were formerly kindled with great ceremony on the first of May, and the traces of human

sacrifices at them were particularly clear and unequivocal. Like other public worships of the Druids, the Beltane feast seems to have been performed on hills or eminences. And, according to tradition, such was the manner of celebrating this festival in the Highlands within the last hundred years (Fraser, 617)

The novel also mentions the Midsummer fires. In Scotland, there was very little trace of the midsummer fires but during the season in the highlands of Perthshire “Cowherds used to go round their folds thrice in the direction of the sun with lighted torches. This act they believed would “purify the flocks and herds and to keep them from falling sick.” (Fraser, 631). Gabaldon also makes mention of Halloween, the feast of all saints which was also a kind of harvest festival followed by the Scottish Christians.

In Scotland, when the last corn was cut after Halloween, the female figure made out of it was sometimes called the ‘Carlin’ or ‘Carline’, that is, the old woman. But, if cut before Halloween, it was called the maiden, if cut after sunset, it was called the witch, being supposed to bring bad luck. Among the Highlanders of Scotland, the last corn cut at harvest is known either as the old wife (Cailleach) or as the maiden; on the whole the former name seems to prevail in the western and the latter in the central and eastern districts (Fraser, 403).

The novel also portrays an essence of subversion which is seen in Gabaldon’s portrayal of her male and female characters. There is a power shift as the stereotypical gender roles are subverted.

Though the novel showcases stereotypes about dashing, hyper masculine warriors, it also subverts them in a fascinating light. The novel though set in a time where male dominance and violence against women was at their peak, it portrays a surprising and complex representation of the male sexuality. When Claire asks him, “Does it bother you that I’m not a virgin?” (Gabaldon, 255). Jamie hesitates at first and then answers “well no, so long as it does not bother you that I am” (255). Gabaldon thus constructs her characters where the woman is the one who holds all the experiences in matters regarding the heart. Subversion occurs when Jamie is sexually assaulted by Black Jack Randall. In exchange for Claire’s freedom and safety, Jamie is forced to undergo the torment and humiliation at the hands of a man he hated with every fiber of his being. Myths normally foregrounds male-centred narrative but Gabaldon focuses on female mythological characters in the novel. She subverts the damsel in distress situation. It is Claire who rescues Jamie from the clutches of Black Jack by playing to their belief of her being a witch and revealing to him his exact date and location of death.

In conclusion, this paper showcases Gabaldon’s *Outlander* as a work of popular culture that creatively juxtaposes the historical past with the present. Diana Gabaldon’s judicious usage of the elements taken from the past along with science fiction concepts like time travel enlivens the narrative. The adaptation of the novel into a televised series has catapulted the novel to further popularity. The narrative thus tries to make sense of the past through the medium of popular culture which re-presents the Scottish myths, legends, and history in a new light in order to make it relevant to the present times. The widespread engagement of mythical and historical elements by popular culture has met with commercial success. The success proves the wider reach of the original layer of cultural convention which still persists in the form of popular culture. There is further scope for future research from the focal point of revisionism, and gender studies as the series of novels explores complex avenues of human experience.

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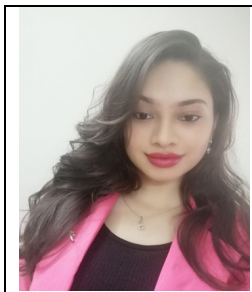
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