

Epic Archetypes and Female Agency in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*

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Article History: Received: 12/07/2025; Accepted: 16/08/2025; Published: 28/08/2025

Abstract: The study examines Githa Hariharan's debut novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) which explores the intertextual correlation between classical Indian epics and the framework of contemporary female self - discovery. Hariharan employs the epic elements of The Mahabharata and The Ramayana, they traditionally provide moral structure for “Ideal” womanhood — which is symbolized by figures like *Sita*, *Gandhari*, and *Amba*. She linked here mythic archetypes to emphasize the psychological and social entanglement of the modern Indian woman.

In this paper, it has been explored how the novel reclaims ancient myths to destabilize the patriarchal assumptions. The study further indicates that Hariharan does not simply reproduce these legends but also utilize them as a counter-narrative. The work highlights the discrepancy between the idealized domestic sphere and the systematic oppression experienced within it. Instead of following the old script of ‘suffering in silence’, the protagonist Devi finds her power by choosing her own path over societal expectations of sacrifice. Ultimately, Hariharan uses her literary references as a feminist weapon, turning old myths once used to keep women in their place - into a blueprint for defiance.

Keywords: *Intertextual, correlation, contemporary, archetypes, self-discovery, psychological.*

Cite this article: Kumari, P. & Ojha, U. S. (2025). Epic Archetypes and Female Agency in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*. *MRS Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Studies*, 2(8), 44-46.

Introduction

In the novel, we get in touch with three important female figures Sita, Devi, and Mayamma. They all express an archetype that is hardly their own ambitions; instead these identities are strictly mediated through relational patterns: – the self-denied wife, the bereaved mother, or the virtuous daughter. Hariharan expresses these elements through the mythological symbol of sacrifice through these mythic characters. Sita in the Ramayana represents a mythical woman or the archetype of the pativrata (the husband - devoted wife). She embodies unwavering purity and sanctity, proving her virtue as a symbol of “silent pillar of strength” and courage, through submitting herself in a trial by fire (Agnipariksha).

Gandhari in The Mahabharata is the archetype of the: “Blind-Devotee”. By choosing to blindfold herself, by tying a piece of cloth over her eyes without forgoing all vocal expression, she signifies the total abnegation of her own sensory experience and identity in favour of marital solidarity. She is choosing to see the world through her husband's eyes. This sacrifice shows a symbol of her strength and societal expectations she embodies.

Amba in The Mahabharata, a mythical archetype figure of “Revenge” represents the woman who must change her very nature

(and gender) to seek justice in man's world. Her story represents the symbol of resistance against the patriarchal boundaries. Her story expresses the autonomy and choice for herself which turned out in a tale of revenge and empowerment.

How these Archetypes limit women's desire and feelings:–

These figures are great examples of the ideal womanhood which has been collected by Hariharan from the mythological epics. It shows the patriarchal structure of the society and the condition of womanhood who sacrifice their feelings, emotions in fact their whole life without uttering a single word for their marital unity. Their brevity of soul expresses the limitations of desire, passion, feelings, fascinations of all the willingness to achieve in their life. The characters of the novel represent the diverse, yet often similarly stuck, faces of womanhood, where they are seeking to define themselves beyond all types of patriarchal control. The entire tale may be summed up in the following lines:

“It is a *Mahabharata* of feminism in which women fight their wars and become victims to their own ambitions, humanity, arrogance and submission”. (Khan 135)

Hariharan presents the three women characters Devi, her mother Sita, and their servant Mayamma whose struggle as woman

against tradition and expectations of a patriarchal society create the whole fabric of the novel. Sita who is similar to the character of Gandhari, leaves her passion, desire, and feeling for a musical career to become an ideal daughter-in-law. Sita Devi's mother stopped playing from the day when her husband roared at her. She was also scolded by her father-in-law for playing veena and not fulfilling her household duties as they needed. He said,

"Put that veena away, Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law?" (TFN P 130)

She stretched her intense feeling in herself in an unbearable silence. In a state of uncontrollable emotions, she pulled out the strings of veena. She replied to her father-in-law as, "yes I am a wife, a daughter-in-law". (TFN P 30) Damodar Rao asserts that "in the extended Hindu family, a bride's position is primarily that of a daughter-in-law and not that of a wife. The in-laws and other family members view the newly-arrived bride with suspicion even as she grapples with the new situation and tries hard to come to terms with herself in the changing environment. (Rao 161) Indian women have been surrounded by such a conservative thought where they feel a lack of individuality, and identity for themselves. The protagonist Devi learnt the complexities of female identity and how it is controlled by the societal expectations of life. Sita was trained in the patriarchal norms, to follow three words since her childhood.

"Order, reason, progress". (TFN P 26)

By sacrificing all her passion, she remained fully devoted to the respect and honour of the family. It shows the epic archetype which reclaims the past in the 20th -century as a model of suppressed anger-filled womanhood. Here woman is meant for domestic perfection and not for her own requirements. It shows the total destruction of the female creativity and her progress.

Moving towards the third character Mayamma, her tragic story is told by grandmother in the perspective of a female sacrifice. Her endurance is the symbol of the ultimate pain and brutality of her physical reality. She represents how these myths affect women's life in a bloody hell and bound by the traditions and the traps of society expectations. These stories deconstruct in a glorification of sacrifice rather in a support of female agency.

Hariharan re-imagines the storytelling through the mythological perspective which explores the limitations of women's progress, power dynamics between men and women. It focuses on the act of patriarchy authority which stops the steps of her inner consciousness. Her narrative techniques interrogate women's strength, her respect, skill, happiness and struggles which have been suppressed in herself with her tears. By utilising the character's grandmother's tales that compels Devi to think about those stories which have been told by her:

My grandmother's stories were no ordinary bedtime stories. She chose each for a particular occasion, a story in reply to each of my childish questions. She had an answer for every question. But her answers were not simple: they had to be decided. A comparison had to be made an illustration discovered, and a moral drawn out". (TFN P 27)

As a result, Devi decides to sense all the past silences of her life and wants to destroy all darkness from her life as a dutiful wife and indulgence of the narcissistic voyage as a "Night". She just wanted to be free from the entrapment of her mother and the cluster of the immense miserable character which she was playing

since her beginning of married life. Devi presents herself as a rebellion against the ancestral maps of her grandmother's stories, by proving that modern agency tends to reject the ancient, restrictive scripts. Being a modern woman, she refuses the social structure of the male-centered society. She gradually dismantles the idea that a woman's home is the home of her husband.

Her transformative move towards her self-discovery, when her inner soul compels to think about the thousand faces of a woman's night, reclaims her right to own her identity, and thereby leaves the "thousand faces behind to find her own face". She decides in herself that she is not going to be a part of this sacrificial journey like her mother who succumbed to the patriarchal pressure by losing her identity, all desires and self-respect. Unlike traditional female archetypes, she rejected the martyrdom of her ancestors in favor of an authentic, self-authored identity. She shifts herself towards an intellectual approach where she finds the stories not as sacred truths, but as cages. In her marital life challenging the hegemony of domestic silence, she refuses to stay in a "stony heartless and militant stillness like her mother, Sita. She has already experienced the persisting loneliness of her mother and her maid servant which has adversely contributed to her mental and physical collapse.

Devi realized in her own marital life where she denied being a devoted or 'Pativrata' wife by choosing a "divine patience" which indicates that she is just a tool for domestic oppression. In the *Thousand Faces of Night* "it is the stifling presence of the mother as a social figure in a patriarchal set up that makes the protagonist question herself". (Ravi 80) She prefers her self-preservation over the patriarchal society where she can feel freedom and take a sigh of relief. She doesn't wish to accept traditional bonds where most stories end up with a wedding. Her transformed story begins when she leaves the men behind. She walked out from a relationship with a wife who gave her individual identity and she took it as: "Her first real journey". (TFN P 117)

Seen from theoretical perspectives, Githa Hariharan's "The Thousand Faces of Night" truthfully reflects the theory of intertextuality. The narrative examines how there is an interesting scope for dialogue between the mythical past or the epic archetypes of Sita, Gandhari, and Amba on one hand and modern characters on the other. While subverting these myths, she brings out a parallel picture of contemporary women navigating their identity. Hariharan challenges the traditional "Grand Narratives" for their portrayal of historically limited female agency. Through the struggle of three women Devi, Sita, and Mayamma of three successive generations, the novelist has projected the humiliations faced by women and their strong efforts to see themselves creating space for themselves. The 'text within the text' structure beautifully unfolds stories by highlighting mythological heroines in the context of contemporary experience.

Metaphorically, the novel shows circular features in the text with layers of meaning especially pertaining to different points in time. Through what is often called "Palimpsestic process of reclamation", the traditional narratives are restructured in favour of a new one ie. contemporary perspective of a woman's journey towards self-discovery.

In the final analysis, the narrative establishes a profound correlation between the intertextual tapestry where the ancient folklore are not merely reinterpreted but they are reshaped to suit the contemporary socio-cultural realities in a highly globalised

world. The author has addressed these mythological elements to provide her characters a mirror of the past. However, the protagonists use the vast mythological canvas of the past as a vehicle to alter their identity through the theory of transformation. The author does not simply figure out the traditional elements, she rather identifies it as an archetype to improve upon it.

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