



# Archetypal Study of Female Identity in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*

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**Abstract**— Archetypal theory, rooted in Carl Jung's psychology and extended by Northrop Frye's literary criticism, examines universal figures and narrative patterns that recur across literature. When applied to women's writing, archetypal criticism reveals how female characters are framed within cultural scripts such as the mother, the daughter, the goddess, and the seeker. Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* both engage deeply with these archetypes, portraying women who seek autonomy while being constrained by patriarchal structures. This paper applies archetypal theory to these novels to explore how their female protagonists both inherit and resist symbolic roles, showing how archetypes function as both oppressive patterns and sites of re-visioning.



**Keywords**— Archetype, Patterns, Narration, Literary criticism, Feminist Archetype, Seeker Archetype, Great Mother Archetype, Indian Women's Writing

## I. INTRODUCTION

Archetypal criticism explores recurring images, motifs, and character types that reflect humanity's collective unconscious. Jung defines archetypes as "primordial images" that shape cultural imagination (Jung 3). Northrop Frye builds on this idea, identifying archetypal structures in literature such as the hero's journey, the trickster, or the Great Mother (Frye 134). However, feminist theorists have critiqued archetypes of women as limiting, pointing out how they often enforce patriarchal ideals of femininity (Beauvoir; Gilbert and Gubar). Both Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* portray women negotiating inherited archetypal roles while attempting to assert individuality. The application of archetypal theory to these novels illuminates how figures like the seeker, the mother, the goddess, and the storyteller recur and are reshaped in Indian women's narratives.

## II. THE SEEKER ARCHETYPE AND THE INCOMPLETE QUEST

In *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati yearns for education and selfhood. As she declares, "She wanted to study, to do something with her life, not be caught in the circle of household duties" (Kapur 15). Her refusal of early marriage—"Why should she marry now, when her books had just begun to open new worlds for her?" (Kapur 23)—reflects the seeker's archetypal rejection of conformity in favor of self-discovery. Yet her pursuit of autonomy leads her into a relationship with Professor Harish. What begins as rebellion against domestic confinement turns into another form of bondage, for "her education, her ideals, everything had been bartered for a love that chained her more than tradition ever had" (Kapur 142).

Devi in *The Thousand Faces of Night* and Virmati in *Difficult Daughters* both represent the seeker archetype. Virmati defies her mother's expectations and yearns for independence and education. Devi also longs for independence and wonders about the purpose of her arranged marriage. Similarly, in *The Thousand Faces of*

*Night*, Devi too emerges as a seeker shaped by myth and memory. She recalls, "All the stories my grandmother told me came back, but now they seemed to bind me more than free me" (Hariharan 34). Like Virmati, Devi resists being reduced to a submissive wife, confessing, "I could not be the docile wife, waiting for scraps of affection" (Hariharan 67). Their experiences are similar to the romance hero's pursuit of self-actualization. However, both women's quests are left unfinished, in contrast to male heroes who succeed. Devi is caught between tradition and independence, while Virmati is estranged in a loveless marriage to Professor Harish. Their tales reinterpret the seeker archetype by demonstrating how female quests are thwarted by patriarchal norms.

### III. THE GREAT MOTHER ARCHETYPE IN RESTRICTIVE FORMS

Jung's idea of the Great Mother archetype has both caring and devouring parts. In these novels, the maternal figures predominantly exhibit its restrictive aspect. Kasturi insists on duty and obedience in *Difficult Daughters*, which goes against Virmati's dreams. She represents what Adrienne Rich calls "the institution of motherhood" instead of the experience of mothering (Rich 13). She becomes the cultural transmitter of patriarchy. In the same way, Sita in *The Thousand Faces of Night*—whose name comes from the mythological figure of chastity and obedience—stands for endurance and conformity. These mothers perpetuate patriarchal norms, confining their daughters to inherited roles. In this context, the maternal archetype transforms into a locus of repression rather than nurturing.

### IV. MYTHIC GODDESSES AND ARCHETYPAL REPETITION

Hariharan's novel makes direct references to goddesses and epic archetypes. Devi's life is told through the stories of Draupadi, Gandhari, Amba, Sita, and Kali. These characters are examples of the suffering wife, the dutiful mother, the avenger, and the ascetic. Their stories serve as cultural narratives that imply Devi's destiny. But Hariharan also shows how these myths can be told again: the grandmother's oral storytelling changes them from stories of submission to stories of resistance. Kapur's novel, on the other hand, doesn't use mythic goddesses directly. Instead, it uses archetypes of wife, daughter, and widow that come from history and family. The novels collectively illustrate the influence of archetypes on women's lives through both mythology and lived experiences.

### V. THE STORYTELLER ARCHETYPE: RECLAIMING NARRATIVE POWER

In both novels, narration itself becomes archetypal. Ida in *Difficult Daughters* reconstructs her mother's narrative, assuming the role of the remembrancer or archivist. In the same way, Devi's grandmother is a trickster-narrator who uses stories to pass on memories and give new meaning to cultural myths. Gilbert and Gubar contend that storytelling empowers women to resist oppression by reclaiming linguistic and narrative authority (Gilbert and Gubar 51). Through these narrators, both texts suggest that archetypes are not fixed but can be reshaped through retelling. The act of storytelling becomes an archetypal form of resistance, enabling women to re-vision inherited roles.

### VI. CONCLUSION

The application of archetypal theory to *Difficult Daughters* and *The Thousand Faces of Night* reveals how Indian women's fiction engages with symbolic patterns of female identity. Virmati and Devi embody the seeker archetype, yet their incomplete quests expose the constraints of patriarchy. The maternal figures represent restrictive forms of the Great Mother archetype, while mythic goddesses in Hariharan's text reveal the persistence of cultural scripts that bind women to submission or suffering. Yet, both novels disrupt these patterns through the storyteller archetype, suggesting that re-narration offers possibilities for transformation. Archetypes, therefore, function as both constraints and openings—symbols of continuity but also of resistance. Kapur and Hariharan use archetypes not merely to reproduce cultural memory but to interrogate and reimagine it, contributing to a feminist revision of symbolic roles in literature.

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