

Myth as Mirror: The Doppelgänger Motif and Mythological Archetypes in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*

¹ Ms. Bhuvana Udhaya Kumar, ² Dr Sulagna Mohanty

¹Assistant Professor, Department of English and Foreign Languages, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur, Chennai, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of English and Foreign Languages, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur, Chennai, India

Email – ¹ bhuvanam@srmist.edu.in, ² sulagna2008@gmail.com

Abstract: *Githa Hariharan's The Thousand Faces of Night (1992) uses myth to explore women's identity in patriarchal India, yet its narrative complexity demands a fresh lens. This paper argues that Hariharan constructs protagonist Devi as a doppelgänger of mythological figures such as Gandhari, Amba and Damayanti. It reflects Devi's fragmented self and employs the motif to navigate the tension between destiny and agency. Drawing on psychoanalytic and structuralist frameworks, the study analyses Devi's journey through three doubles. Gandhari's passivity evokes Freud's uncanny in her alienating marriage. Amba's rebellion is framed as Jung's shadow archetype in her defiant affair. Damayanti's choice is connected with Propp's narrative functions in her autonomous return to Madras. By integrating these mythic parallels, Devi unifies her identity, unlike Sita and Mayamma, who lack such doubles and remain static. Existing scholarship emphasises the novel's feminist and mythological themes but overlooks the doppelgänger motif as a psychological and structural device. This paper fills this gap and reveals how Hariharan reimagines myth to critique patriarchal fate and empowers Devi to redefine her role. By illuminating Devi's transformative arc, this study highlights Hariharan's innovative storytelling and suggests a new perspective on myth as a mirror for selfhood.*

Keywords: Doppelgänger, Myth, Agency, Uncanny, Archetypes.

1. Introduction :

Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992), a landmark in Indian English literature, weaves a powerful narrative around women's struggles in a patriarchal society. The novel follows Devi, a young woman who navigates an arranged marriage alongside her mother Sita and the family retainer Mayamma. Each of them grapples with societal expectations. The rich use of Indian mythology, particularly stories from the *Mahabharata* and other traditional tales, sets the fiction apart and shapes the characters' inner lives. These mythical figures like Gandhari, Amba and Damayanti are not mere decorations. They are active forces in the narrative that offer mirrors to Devi's complex journey. By blending myth with reality, Hariharan explores how women "confront tradition and seek selfhood" (Sinha 130). It makes the novel a compelling study of identity and resistance. This paper focuses on Devi's relationship with these mythic figures and proposes a fresh lens to understand her character and the novel's deeper structure.

This paper argues that Hariharan constructs Devi as a doppelgänger of mythological women such as Gandhari, Amba, and Damayanti to reflect her fragmented identity. It uses the unsettling effect of these doubles to explore the tension between destiny and personal agency. In literature, a doppelgänger is a mirror-like figure who feels both familiar and strange and reveals hidden aspects of the self. For Devi, Gandhari's passivity echoes her early submission to marriage. Amba's defiance parallels her rebellion. Damayanti's choice foreshadows her eventual independence. This doubling creates an uncanny effect where Devi sees parts of herself in these myths, yet feels alienated by their fated roles. By tracing these parallels, the paper shows how Hariharan uses myth to depict Devi's struggle to unify her fractured self and contrasts her with Sita and Mayamma, who lack such mythic mirrors. This approach reveals the novel's unique way of blending psychology and storytelling to question whether women are bound by fate or can shape their own paths.

2. Theoretical Framework: The Doppelgänger and Myth

To analyse this doppelgänger motif, the paper employs two complementary frameworks: psychoanalytic and structuralist theories. Psychoanalysis draws on Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny (Freud 1955). Freud's concept of the uncanny provides a foundation for understanding Devi's mythic doubles as unsettling reflections of herself. In his 1919 essay, Freud describes the uncanny as a feeling of unease when something familiar becomes strangely alien. A doppelgänger, or double, epitomises this sensation: it resembles the self yet feels foreign, exposing hidden fears or desires (Freud 1955). It helps explain why Devi's mythic doubles feel both familiar and disturbing. They reflect her repressed fears and desires. Complementing Freud, Carl Jung's theory of archetypes offers a way to view these myths as universal patterns of human experience (Jung 1968). In Jung's view, archetypes are timeless images or roles like the victim, rebel or hero stored in the collective unconscious, a shared reservoir of human memory (Jung 1968). Myths, as expressions of archetypes, resonate across cultures because they reflect fundamental aspects of the self. On the structural side, Vladimir Propp's morphology of myth, outlined in his 1928 study of folktales, helps analyse how Hariharan adapts mythic roles to shape the novel's narrative (Propp 1968). Propp identifies recurring functions in stories, such as the hero's departure, struggle, and victory, which follow a predictable sequence (Propp 1968). In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Hariharan organises Devi's arc like a mythic tale: she departs from her mother's home (Gandhari's passivity), faces trials in her marriage (Amba's rebellion), and achieves resolution by choosing her path (Damayanti's agency).

This reading is new because, while scholars have studied the novel's use of myth and feminism, none have framed Devi's mythic parallels as a doppelgänger motif. Previous research, such as studies on the novel's feminist themes or mythological revisions, often focuses on how myths empower women or critique tradition. By contrast, this paper sees the myths as uncanny doubles that both trap and liberate Devi. It suggests a deeper look at her inner conflict and the novel's narrative design. This perspective adds a fresh layer to the existing scholarship and emphasises the psychological and structural complexity of Hariharan's work. By situating Devi's doppelgänger-like journey in this context, this paper shows how Hariharan reimagines traditional stories to empower women. It contributes to a broader feminist dialogue.

3. Discussion :

3.1 Gandhari's Shadow: Devi's Uncanny Passivity

In Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*, the mythological figure of Gandhari, drawn from the Mahabharata, serves as the first doppelgänger for protagonist Devi. It reflects her initial submission to patriarchal expectations. Devi confirms:

Gandhari was not just another wilful, proud woman,' said my grandmother, summing up. She embraced her destiny- a blind husband- with a self-sacrifice worthy of her royal blood (Hariharan 30).

Gandhari, known for blindfolding herself to share her blind husband Dhritarashtra's fate, embodies a self-imposed passivity that resonates with Devi's early acceptance of an arranged marriage. Hariharan constructs Gandhari as an uncanny double for Devi to underline her alienation and suppressed identity. She writes:

Alone, alone in the house with Mayamma and Baba's orphaned books, I read a page he had not read to me. I read about a kritya, a ferocious woman who haunts and destroys the house in which women are insulted. She burns with anger, she spits fire. She sets the world ablaze like Kali shouting in hunger. Each age has its kritya. In the age of Kali, I read, each household shelters a kritya (Hariharan 69).

By tracing this mirroring in the novel's opening, where childhood stories introduce mythic parallels, and contrasting Devi with Sita and Mayamma, who lack such mythic doubles, this section reveals how Gandhari's shadow underscores Devi's struggle against a fated role and sets the stage for her later rebellion.

Gandhari's myth is one of sacrifice and constraint, a narrative Devi encounters through her grandmother's storytelling. In the Mahabharata, Gandhari marries Dhritarashtra, the blind king of Hastinapura and chooses to blindfold herself. She vows to experience the world as he does. This act, often framed as devotion, limits her agency, binding her to her husband's fate and the tragic destiny of their sons, the Kauravas. For Devi, Gandhari's story, recounted early in the novel, becomes a mirror during her own entry into marriage with Mahesh, a pragmatic engineer chosen by her family. Like Gandhari, Devi initially submits to societal norms, setting aside her American education and ambitions to become a dutiful wife. Hariharan writes: Devi wants an equal share in her matrimonial relationship but Mahesh never recognises her individuality and doesn't give her independent space. His authoritarian behaviour haunts Devi." Hariharan reinterprets traditional myths to reflect the dilemma of Devi. (Kausalya & Suganya 268). Devi's acceptance of Mahesh's proposal echoes Gandhari's self-blinding as Devi metaphorically blinds herself to her own desires. This mirroring is evident when Devi reflects on her new role. Hariharan points out: "A marriage cannot be forced into suddenly being there, it must grow gradually, like a delicate but promising sapling. What about us? What kind of a life

will we make together?" (Hariharan 49). Devi signals her compliance with a life she did not anticipate. Gandhari's passivity thus becomes a familiar template for Devi, shaping her early identity within the confines of tradition.

Freud's concept of the uncanny illuminates the unease Devi experiences as Gandhari's double (Freud 1955). It reveals the tension between familiarity and alienation in her married life. Hariharan's words echo the pain of Devi: "I have no husband or lover, only this blissful anonymity in the darkness..." (Hariharan 128). Freud defines the uncanny as the eerie sensation when something known, such as a childhood story, becomes disturbingly strange. It is often tied to repressed emotions resurfacing (Freud 1955).

In the novel, for Devi, Gandhari's tale is familiar from her grandmother's voice, a comforting link to her past. Yet, as she inhabits Mahesh's grand Bangalore new home on Jacaranda Road, described as a "palace of silence" (Hariharan 42). This is parallel to how Gandhari feels alien and expresses her suppressed discontent. Devi says: "The sacrificial knife, marriage, hung a few inches above my neck for years, and I see now that I had learnt to love, to covet my tormentor" (Hariharan 54). The home, with its sterile luxury and Mahesh's controlling presence, mirrors Gandhari's palace, where her blindfold confined her to a husband's world. Devi's alienation is uncanny because Gandhari's passivity, once a distant story, now reflects her own life, stirring fears of losing herself. For instance, when Mahesh dismisses her wish to work, saying, "There is so much for you to do at home. Mayamma is getting old, she needs help. If you need to get out of the house, why not join Tara's painting classes?" (Hariharan 56). Devi feels a jolt of recognition, as if Gandhari's surrender is her own. Freud suggests the uncanny arises when the repressed returns and Devi's discomfort signals her buried desire for autonomy, making Gandhari an unsettling double who both traps and warns her.

The novel's opening, centred on Devi's childhood and her grandmother's mythic tales, establishes this doppelgänger motif, grounding Gandhari's role in Devi's psyche. From the first pages, Hariharan immerses readers in Devi's memories of Madras, where her grandmother's stories of heroines like Gandhari. These tales are not mere entertainment but formative narratives that shape Devi's understanding of womanhood. Gandhari's story, with its emphasis on loyalty, lingers as Devi grows and resurfaces when she agrees to marry Mahesh. Devi recollects:

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 decoded. A comparison had to be made, an illustration discovered, and a moral drawn out weaving myths (Hariharan 27).

These stories suggest a spell-like influence as if Gandhari's archetype is embedded in Devi's mind. This early exposure makes the doubling uncanny later, as Devi recognises Gandhari's passivity in herself not as a choice but as an inherited script. By framing the novel with these stories, Hariharan signals that myths are active forces, setting up Gandhari as Devi's first mirror, one she must confront to reclaim her agency.

Gandhari's role as Devi's uncanny double thus marks the first stage of her journey, exposing the peril of inherited passivity. By mirroring Devi's submission in marriage, Gandhari evokes the uncanny through the clash of familiar myth and alien reality, stirring Devi's latent rebellion. The novel's opening plants this doubling, using childhood stories to weave Gandhari into Devi's identity, while Sita and Mayamma's lack of mythic parallels underscores Devi's potential for change. As the next sections will show, Devi's shift to Amba's defiance and Damayanti's choice builds on this foundation, tracing her path from fragmentation to agency through her evolving mythic doubles.

3.2 Amba's Fire: Devi's Rebellious Double

In Hariharan's novel, the mythological figure of Amba, a defiant woman from the Mahabharata emerges as Devi's second doppelgänger. It symbolizes her rebellious phase as her marriage to Mahesh unravels. Unlike Gandhari's passivity, which mirrored Devi's initial submission, Amba's story of vengeance and transformation reflects Devi's growing defiance, marked by her affair with Gopal and her rejection of patriarchal control. Hariharan constructs Amba as an archetypal double for Devi. This argument uses Carl Jung's concept of the shadow to illuminate her unleashed anger and desire for freedom (Jung 1968). Amba's fire fuels Devi's quest for selfhood and distinguishes her journey from those trapped in conformity.

Amba's myth, recounted to Devi in her childhood, is one of betrayal and fierce resistance, making her a powerful mirror for Devi's rebellious turn. In the Mahabharata, Amba is abducted by Bhishma for his brother's marriage, but is rejected. It leaves her shamed and vengeful. Swearing to destroy Bhishma, she undergoes ascetic penance and is reborn as Shikhandi, a warrior who aids in his downfall. This narrative of rage and transformation resonates with Devi's life as her marriage stifles her identity. Disillusioned by Mahesh's domineering attitude, his insistence asking that she "need not work. The husband asks: "And what will you do when the baby comes?" (Hariharan 65). Devi begins to resist and is attracted to Gopal, who is a soulful singer. He contrasts with Mahesh's rigidity and it sparks an affair. This is a bold act of defiance against her prescribed role as a dutiful wife. This rebellion culminates in her decision to leave Mahesh and echoes Amba's refusal to accept her fate. Devi's inner turmoil is captured when she muses: "My grandmother fed me fantasies, my father a secretive love. My mother sought me out with hope, and when disappointed, pushed me

forward in the direction she chose (Hariharan 136). It signals her alignment with Amba's fiery spirit. As a double, Amba reflects Devi's awakening agency urging her to challenge the constraints that Gandhari's passivity once reinforced.

Jung's concept of the shadow archetype deepens our understanding of Amba as Devi's rebellious double, particularly through her vivid dreams, which unleash suppressed desires (Jung 1968). In Jungian psychology, the shadow represents the hidden, often darker aspects of the self, emotions like anger or rebellion that society deems unacceptable (Jung 1968). For Devi, raised to be compliant, Amba embodies this shadow, her vengeance a mirror for the rage Devi represses in her marriage. Devi affirms:

In my waking hours I am still no conqueror. My petty fears, and that accursed desire to please which I learnt too well in girlhood, blur the bold strokes, black and white, of revenge. I write elaborate scenarios in my mind for the last act—humiliating Mahesh, saying all the things we have left unsaid. I do something bloody, final, a mark of protest worthy of the heroines I grew up with (Hariharan 95).

Jung argues that confronting the shadow is essential for individuation, the process of becoming whole (Jung 1968). Amba, as Devi's shadow double, thus propels her toward selfhood and marks a shift from Gandhari's submission to a bolder, if unstable, identity. Devi embraces this shadow, defying Mahesh's control.

3.3 Damayanti's Choice: Devi's Unified Self

In Hariharan's discussed text, the mythological figure of Damayanti, from the Mahabharata's Nala-Damayanti tale, serves as Devi's final doppelgänger. It symbolizes her autonomous choice to return to Madras and reclaim her identity. Unlike Gandhari's passivity or Amba's rebellion, Damayanti's story of deliberate choice within constraints mirrors Devi's decision to leave her failed marriage and forge her own path. Devi remembers the words of her grandmother:

You too will live like a princess,' she would say fondly to me between her kisses, and I listened, rapt, my seven-year-old mind thrilling at the splendours that awaited me (Hariharan 20).

Hariharan hypothesizes Damayanti as a double to reflect Devi's unified self. Vladimir Propp's narrative functions can be used to frame this resolution as a mythic triumph (Propp, 1968). By examining the fading of the uncanny as Devi integrates her mythic doubles, mirrored in the novel's serene close, and contrasting her with Sita's veena and Mayamma's silence as static foils, this section reveals how Damayanti's archetype completes Devi's journey from fragmentation to agency.

Damayanti's myth, one of love and agency, resonates deeply with Devi's final act of finding her selfhood. In the Mahabharata, Damayanti, a princess, selects Nala as her husband in a swayamvara. It is a ceremony that allows her to choose among suitors and demonstrate agency despite societal pressures. After Nala falls into ruin, she endures trials but remains steadfast, ultimately reuniting with him through her resolve. Devi, inspired by this tale from her grandmother's stories, mirrors Damayanti when she rejects her stifling marriage to Mahesh and returns to Madras to live with her mother, Sita. This choice, made after her rebellious affair with Gopal, marks a shift from defiance to purpose. Unlike her earlier submission or reckless rebellion, Devi's decision is deliberate; Hariharan writes:

when she boarded the train to Madras alone. She had felt bold and carefree when she left Mahesh's house, a little like a heroine. But she felt like a fugitive now, though she was, for the first time, no longer on the run (Hariharan 138).

Her return to Madras, a city tied to her childhood and self-discovery, parallels Damayanti's reclaiming of her life with Nala. By aligning with Damayanti, Devi embraces autonomy, not as a rejection of tradition but as a redefinition of her place within it and solidifies her identity.

Vladimir Propp's morphology of myth identifies recurring narrative functions like the hero's choice or victory (Propp, 1968). Here, it frames Devi's return as the novel's resolution and completes its mythic structure. In Propp's schema, a hero faces trials, makes a pivotal choice, and achieves a new state, often restoring balance (Propp, 1968). Devi's arc follows this pattern. Her trials, such as her marriage and affair, culminate in her choice to leave Mahesh. Propp's function of the 'hero's choice' is evident when Devi boards the train to Madras. Hariharan writes:

The train sped past the countryside, and the landscape outside was dry, brown and unchanging. She looked shifty, she thought, as she eyed the other passengers in the compartment. But after an initial look of mild curiosity, no one spoke to her, or even stared, and she sat huddled on the upper berth, undisturbed (Hariharan 138).

This act resolves the narrative's tension, shifting from the chaos of Amba's rebellion to a purposeful conclusion. The novel's structure, described as an 'arch' with marriage as its pivot, supports this, as the closing chapters mirror the opening's introspective tone but replace uncertainty with clarity. Devi's alignment with Damayanti fulfils Propp's victory function (Propp, 1968), as she gains not a husband but selfhood and marks her as a mythic hero who redefines success on her own terms.

The uncanny, which haunted Devi's earlier doubles, fades as she integrates Gandhari, Amba, and Damayanti, a process mirrored in the novel's tranquil close. Freud's uncanny arose when Devi saw herself in Gandhari's passivity or Amba's rage, their familiarity made alien by her repressed desires. With Damayanti, this unease dissipates, as Devi embraces choice without conflict. Her recognition of Damayanti's agency feels affirming, not unsettling, is represented

4. Conclusion

This paper has argued that Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* uses the doppelgänger motif to illuminate Devi's journey from fragmentation to agency, with Gandhari, Amba, and Damayanti as mythic mirrors reflecting her evolving self. Hariharan's innovative use of myth critiques patriarchal destiny, reimagining traditional stories to empower women. Unlike the Mahabharata's heroines, often bound by fate, Devi's doubles enable her to question and reshape her role, challenging the notion that women must submit or suffer. By framing myths as doppelgängers, Hariharan suggests that women can reinterpret narratives to claim agency, a strategy relevant to postcolonial and feminist discourses. Future research could explore the doppelgänger motif in Hariharan's other works which also reworks myth, to trace her evolving use of narrative doubles. Alternatively, comparing Devi's arc with characters in contemporary Indian novels could reveal how mythic revisionism persists in addressing women's agency. By illuminating Devi's journey, this paper affirms Hariharan's lasting contribution, showing how myths, when reimagined, can light the path from destiny to selfhood.

References :

1. Chandramani. "Masked Women and Myths in 'The Thousand Faces of Night.'" *Litinfinitive Journal*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2020, pp. 01–10.
2. Devi, K. Ragini. "Thwarted Dreams of Women in Their Constant Life: The Thousand Faces of Night." *Journal of Literature, Culture and Media Studies*, vol. 2, no. 4, 2011.
3. Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited by James Strachey, vol. 17, Hogarth Press, 1955, pp. 217–56.
4. Gloria, K. Nevedha Liz, and S. Garret Raja Immanuel. "Incredulity towards Metanarrative Simulations: Residual, Emergent and Dominant Stereotypes in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*." *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR)*, vol. 6, no. 6, June 2019, pp. 11–12.
5. Hariharan, Githa. *The Thousand Faces of Night*. Penguin Books India, 1992.
6. Jung, Carl G. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Translated by R. F. C. Hull, 2nd ed., Princeton UP, 1968.
7. Kowsalya, S., and S. N. Suganya. "Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*: A Reworking of Myth and Folklore on Contemporary Lines." *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR)*, vol. 6, no. 6, June 2019, pp. 267-268, JETIR.
8. Propp, Vladimir. *Morphology of the Folktale*. Translated by Laurence Scott, 2nd ed., U of Texas P, 1968.