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The Queen Archetype: Between Power and Villainy

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Bhumika Bisht[1]

UG Student, Department of English, School of Liberal Education

Vivek Kumar[2]

Professor, Department of English, School of Liberal Education

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Abstract: This paper explores the queen archetype as a deeply embedded and evolving symbol of female power, authority, and contradiction across literature, mythology, and contemporary storytelling. From ancient myths and classical fairy tales to modern novels and speculative fiction, queens have occupied a central yet unstable position in cultural narratives—simultaneously exalted and demonized, revered and feared. Traditionally, they are depicted either as nurturing matriarchs upholding moral order or as cruel, jealous antagonists who threaten familial and societal harmony. These archetypes—particularly the wicked stepmother in fairy tales like *Snow White* or the jealous rival in *Sleeping Beauty*—have long functioned as cautionary figures that reinforce gender norms and warn against the dangers of unchecked female autonomy.

Drawing on a range of interdisciplinary theories, this paper analyzes the queen archetype through the lenses of feminist thought, psychoanalysis, and postcolonial theory. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity is crucial for understanding the performative contradictions of female authority, wherein queens must balance the demands of femininity with the assertion of leadership in male-dominated systems. Marie-Louise von Franz's Jungian interpretations of fairy tale queens provide insight into the symbolic unconscious fears and desires projected onto female rulers, while Marina Warner's cultural histories trace how fairy tales encode deep societal ambivalence toward powerful women. Additionally, the foundational work of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* reveals how literature has historically vilified assertive women to preserve patriarchal hierarchies, a theme echoed in many portrayals of queens as dangerously ambitious or emotionally unstable.

This paper contends that the queen, far from being a static or monolithic figure, functions as a cultural mirror reflecting broader anxieties about gender, power, and change. Her character often embodies the intersection of personal identity and public expectation, making her a rich site for examining how women in literature challenge, conform to, or subvert dominant ideologies. In modern narratives, queens frequently serve as allegorical figures for resistance, justice, and resilience—whether resisting colonial oppression like Rani

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Lakshmibai in *Queen of Fire*, reclaiming narrative voice like Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions*, or confronting generational trauma like Queen Nehanda in *Children of Blood and Bone*.

Keywords: *Queen archetype, feminist theory, fairy tales, power and gender, villainy, postcolonial literature, female leadership, myth and storytelling.*

Introduction: Once upon a time, in stories passed down through generations, queens reigned not only over kingdoms but also over the moral, symbolic, and emotional landscapes of literature. These queens were never one-dimensional; they embodied dignity, cruelty, compassion, and ruthlessness all at once. Traditionally, they oscillated between the poles of ideal femininity and destructive power, rendered either as nurturing sovereigns or jealous stepmothers. Marina Warner captures this complexity by describing queens as "symbols of female authority whose presence often disturbs the story's moral order" (Warner 210). Whether presiding over enchanted realms in fairy tales or ruling historical empires, queens have consistently been used to express both societal awe of and discomfort with female authority. Their presence in narrative spaces is rarely neutral—they are either the embodiment of all that is right and noble, or the instigator of conflict, ambition, and emotional excess.

In classical fairy tales such as "Snow White" and "Sleeping Beauty", the queen often appears as a foil to the innocent heroine. In *Snow White*, the queen's obsessive desire to remain the fairest in the land culminates in her plotting the murder of her stepdaughter. Her descent into villainy is marked by a refusal to age gracefully, as she tries to dominate not only her kingdom but the realm of beauty—a domain traditionally associated with youthful, passive femininity. As Maria Tatar notes, this tale reflects societal anxieties around female aging, beauty, and maternal rivalry (Tatar 99). The queen's actions are driven by a fear of replacement and obsolescence, positioning her in direct conflict with the idealized image of young, docile womanhood. The archetype of the "evil queen" thus crystallizes fears around powerful women who step beyond nurturing roles and assert themselves as competitors or sovereign agents.

Feminist scholars have unpacked the queen's narrative function within these traditional tales, exposing the ideological underpinnings of her villainy. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, argue that the queen often embodies patriarchal fears of female autonomy and power, becoming the scapegoat for anxieties about women who challenge gender norms (Gilbert and Gubar 36). Her villainy is exaggerated precisely because she refuses to be passive, maternal, or subservient. By asserting control over her body, voice, and destiny, the queen violates the traditional script for female characters, especially in patriarchal narrative structures where obedience and silence are prized virtues in women. Thus, the queen's downfall is not simply a moral tale—it is a political one, reinforcing the boundaries of acceptable femininity.

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Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity further illuminates the queen's cultural position. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler posits that gender is not a fixed identity but a set of repeated actions shaped by cultural norms (Butler 190). The queen, as a public figure who performs femininity and authority simultaneously, represents a rupture in conventional gender scripts. Her regal persona—authoritative, strategic, commanding—is in direct tension with traditional femininity, which is associated with modesty, emotional openness, and domesticity. This dual performance renders her both captivating and threatening. When a queen acts with decisiveness or aggression, she is often branded as unnatural or monstrous, a reaction that underscores society's discomfort with women who wield power visibly and unapologetically.

Mythology also contributes significantly to the construction of the queen archetype. Figures such as Hera in Greek mythology or Durga in Hinduism possess immense power and divine status. Yet their stories are often laced with attributes of jealousy, wrath, or excessive control, reinforcing the idea that female authority is inherently volatile or morally ambiguous. Hera, despite being the queen of Olympus, is repeatedly depicted as the jealous wife, her rage often directed at Zeus's lovers and their offspring. Meanwhile, Durga—despite being a symbol of divine protection and feminine energy (*shakti*)—must prove her worth through violent conquest, embodying both nurturing and destruction. Marie-Louise von Franz, drawing on Jungian psychology, interprets such figures as projections of the collective unconscious, embodying both the revered and feared aspects of the maternal archetype (von Franz 88). Queens, in this light, symbolize the deep ambivalence cultures hold toward female power: it is simultaneously divine and dangerous.

In literature shaped by colonial and postcolonial histories, the queen archetype takes on additional meanings. It becomes entangled not just with gender and power, but with national identity, cultural memory, and resistance. Postcolonial literature and reinterpretations of mythology further complicate and enrich the queen archetype. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* reclaims the narrative of Draupadi from the Mahabharata, presenting her not as a passive victim of fate but as a woman grappling with destiny, love, and power. Draupadi's voice, long silenced or moralized in traditional versions, is given emotional and political depth. Divakaruni's Draupadi resists the silencing imposed by patriarcal myth, instead asserting her voice and agency (Divakaruni 112). In doing so, she becomes a queen who is not only politically conscious but also emotionally aware, driven by memory, passion, and an acute sense of justice.

Devika Rangachari's *Queen of Fire* reimagines Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi, presenting her as a multi-faceted historical figure negotiating gender roles, colonial resistance, and personal grief. Rather than a romanticized heroine, Lakshmibai is portrayed as a politically astute and morally complex leader, defying British colonial narratives and male-dominated historiography (Rangachari 143). Her identity as both a mother and a military leader challenges dichotomies between private and public womanhood, suggesting

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that feminine strength need not be singular or static. Rangachari's portrayal allows Lakshmibai to be strategic, vulnerable, proud, and compassionate—reclaiming her as a national figure who is not stripped of interiority or complexity.

Western literature also reconfigures the queen archetype in contemporary dystopias and fantasies. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* introduces Serena Joy, who, though not a queen in title, embodies many aspects of queenly power in a dystopian patriarchy. Her complicity in the regime, combined with her limited freedom, paints a nuanced picture of female authority under constraint (Atwood 45). Serena Joy is both victim and perpetrator, upholding the very system that oppresses her, revealing how internalized patriarchy can distort female power. Her discomfort, envy, and rigidity speak to the limitations placed on women even when they appear to occupy high social roles.

Similarly, Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* portrays Queen Nehanda as both antagonist and victim, her decisions shaped by past traumas and fears of losing control (Adeyemi 287). Nehanda's descent into tyranny is not one-dimensional; it is rooted in historical pain, grief, and the fear of political instability. She mirrors many real-world leaders whose authoritarianism is entangled with a genuine desire to protect their people. Adeyemi uses the queen figure not to simplify questions of right and wrong but to explore how trauma, ideology, and legacy shape female rule in fantastical and cultural spaces alike.

These literary examples indicate that the queen archetype is no longer confined to binary moral roles. Instead, contemporary writers use queens to interrogate broader questions of gender, leadership, trauma, and resistance. In reimagining queens, authors push beyond simplistic categorizations of good and evil, feminine and masculine, passive and active. The queen becomes a site of contestation and reflection—a figure who must constantly negotiate expectations placed upon her by family, society, history, and self. As Devdutt Pattanaik explains in *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, women in Indian epics, including queens, often face moral scrutiny not for their actions but for their deviation from dharma or expected social roles (Pattanaik 89). The failure to embody the ideal woman—self-sacrificing, silent, submissive—is read as a moral failing, regardless of context or intention.

Through this evolving portrayal, queens come to represent not just individuals in power, but larger cultural questions about justice, legitimacy, morality, and transformation. Their struggles and decisions highlight the tension between personal identity and public role, between what is expected and what is possible. In reclaiming the queen as a subject rather than a symbol, contemporary literature challenges long-standing gender ideologies and opens space for more nuanced understandings of power, femininity, and leadership.

Literature Review: The queen archetype has been the subject of significant scholarly attention across feminist theory, psychoanalysis, mythology, and literary criticism. Scholars have long noted that queens in literature are rarely neutral characters; instead, they serve as complex embodiments of power, motherhood, ambition, and societal anxiety. Often

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portrayed as either the virtuous, nurturing matriarch or the cruel, jealous stepmother, the queen reflects the cultural ambivalence toward powerful women who do not conform to normative gender roles. This dichotomy is especially evident in classical fairy tales, where queens are used to enforce or challenge social expectations surrounding beauty, aging, motherhood, and authority. As Maria Tatar explains, tales like "Snow White" encode cultural anxieties around female aging and rivalry, particularly between women across generations (Tatar 99). In feminist readings, the queen's villainy is frequently interpreted not as a result of inherent evil but as a manifestation of patriarchal fears—she becomes a scapegoat for anxieties around female autonomy and desire.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, argue that such portrayals function to repress female creativity and independence by coding assertive women as threats to patriarchal order (Gilbert and Gubar 36). Psychoanalytic theorists, including Marie-Louise von Franz, have expanded on this by framing the queen as a Jungian archetype, one who carries the symbolic weight of the Great Mother—capable of both creation and destruction (von Franz 88). This duality makes her a powerful narrative device through which cultures work out their collective fears around female agency, sexuality, and control. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity adds yet another layer, suggesting that the queen disrupts expected performances of femininity through her public assertion of power, often resulting in her being vilified or punished (Butler 190).

In mythological contexts, queens like Hera, Durga, or Sita become symbolic battlegrounds for divine femininity, national identity, and moral duty. These figures are revered and feared, venerated for their strength yet frequently constrained by expectations of obedience, loyalty, or sacrifice. Marina Warner describes queens as "symbols of female authority whose presence often disturbs the story's moral order," highlighting how even their power is narrated with caution and ambiguity (Warner 210). In modern literature, the queen archetype is often reimagined to reflect contemporary concerns. Works by authors such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Devika Rangachari reconstruct queens not as flat icons but as dynamic characters grappling with political, emotional, and ethical complexities. Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* presents Draupadi as a woman who asserts her agency within a deeply patriarchal epic, while Rangachari's *Queen of Fire* portrays Rani Lakshmibai as a morally complex and politically aware leader confronting colonial domination and personal loss (Divakaruni 112; Rangachari 143).

Through such portrayals, the queen figure becomes a lens for exploring how women exercise power, resist oppression, and navigate spaces historically denied to them. Even speculative and dystopian works continue to draw on this archetype: Margaret Atwood's Serena Joy, though not a queen in title, demonstrates the contradictions of female power within a patriarchal system (Atwood 45), while Tomi Adeyemi's Queen Nehanda is depicted as a deeply flawed ruler shaped by fear and trauma (Adeyemi 287). Devdutt Pattanaik similarly notes that in Indian mythology, queens and women in general face moral scrutiny not necessarily for immoral actions but for deviating from their expected dharma or role in

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the social order (Pattanaik 89).

This evolution of the queen archetype—from mythic mother to medieval monarch to modern anti-heroine—reveals shifting cultural narratives about gender and authority. No longer confined to the simplistic binary of good versus evil, the queen now occupies a space of ambiguity and transformation. Contemporary scholarship continues to examine how this figure operates within literature and culture, reflecting deeper ideological tensions and offering alternative models of female strength and leadership.

Feminist and Psychoanalytic Foundations: Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* offers a foundational feminist framework for understanding literary queens. They argue that powerful women in literature are often portrayed as monstrous or mad to maintain patriarchal order. According to them, the queen becomes a symbolic threat, embodying autonomy that must be contained or punished (Gilbert and Gubar 36). Maria Tatar similarly examines fairy tales and notes that the queen— especially the stepmother— is frequently used to explore maternal rivalry and aging, reflecting fears around women who no longer fit youthful, nurturing ideals (Tatar 99).

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* brings another dimension to this discussion by proposing that gender is performative, not inherent. A queen's public performance of femininity and power destabilizes normative gender roles, making her a figure of both fascination and discomfort (Butler 190). From a Jungian psychological perspective, Marie-Louise von Franz interprets queen figures as projections of the collective unconscious, representing the dual aspects of the feminine— nurturing and destructive (von Franz 88).

Mythology and Cultural Interpretations: In mythological traditions, queens and goddesses like Hera, Durga, and Sita wield divine or semi-divine power, but their stories are often tempered by moral ambiguity or scrutiny. Devdutt Pattanaik, in *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, notes how epic heroines are judged more for their alignment with *dharma* than their actions, reinforcing restrictive gender norms (Pattanaik 89). These portrayals underscore a cultural discomfort with female agency, particularly when it exceeds familial or domestic boundaries.

These mythological queens and goddesses often serve as symbolic figures through which societies articulate their values, fears, and contradictions. Hera, for instance, is portrayed in Greek mythology as both a powerful queen of the gods and a figure consumed by jealousy and vengeance—qualities that reflect patriarchal anxieties about women's authority in marriage and politics. Similarly, Durga in Hindu mythology is venerated as a fierce warrior goddess who slays demons, yet her worship often coexists with expectations of female submissiveness in daily life. This duality, as Marie-Louise von Franz argues, emerges from the collective unconscious, where female figures embody both protective and destructive energies (von Franz 88). Myth thus becomes a site where cultural tensions around female power are negotiated: queens may be divine, but their narratives are framed in ways

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that simultaneously elevate and constrain their autonomy.

These stories, passed down through generations, subtly condition audiences to admire powerful women only within sanctioned moral and social limits.

Reimagining the Queen in Contemporary Literature: Contemporary writers have responded to these traditional representations by reimagining the queen archetype as a space for resistance and reinterpretation. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* retells the Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective, positioning her as a politically aware and emotionally complex queen who resists patriarchal silencing (Divakaruni 112). Devika Rangachari's *Queen of Fire* similarly disrupts colonial and patriarchal narratives by presenting Rani Lakshmibai as a leader driven by political vision, personal loss, and moral conviction (Rangachari 143).

Western authors also contribute to this evolving archetype. In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Serena Joy functions as a queen-like figure within a dystopian patriarchy. Though complicit in oppressive structures, she remains constrained by them, illustrating the paradox of female power in patriarchal systems (Atwood 45). Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* adds an Afro-fantasy dimension to this discourse, depicting Queen Nehanda as a ruler whose antagonism is deeply rooted in trauma and fear of societal collapse (Adeyemi 287).

Conclusion: In conclusion, the portrayal of queens and goddesses in mythological traditions reflects a profound ambivalence toward female authority. Characters such as Hera, Durga, and Sita are revered for their strength, divinity, and leadership, yet their stories are frequently framed within restrictive moral paradigms that emphasize obedience, sacrifice, and loyalty to male figures or societal norms. These depictions reveal how mythology has historically been used to both elevate and regulate women's roles, allowing female figures to possess extraordinary power but only within the bounds of patriarchal acceptability. As Devdutt Pattanaik argues, women in epics are judged less by their intentions and more by their adherence to dharma, reinforcing the idea that female virtue lies in conformity rather than autonomy. Likewise, Marie-Louise von Franz's psychoanalytic reading illustrates how mythological queens channel both nurturing and threatening energies, embodying the psychological tension between admiration and fear of female agency.

By situating queens within divine or semi-divine frameworks, these myths simultaneously dehumanize and idealize them, creating archetypes that are impossible to challenge or fully emulate. The result is a cultural narrative in which women's power is acknowledged but tightly circumscribed. These stories, while ancient, continue to influence contemporary representations of women in literature, media, and even politics. The mythical queen, therefore, is not just a relic of religious or cultural lore, but a persistent symbol of how societies grapple with the complexities of gender, authority, and morality. Understanding these portrayals allows for a deeper critique of the narratives we inherit and the roles we

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continue to assign to powerful women across time.

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