The Fall of the Damsel in Distress and the Rise of the Modern Heroines: An Archetypal-Gynocriticist Study of Select Contemporary Epic Fantasy Novels

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Abstract

Aim/Purpose: This study examines the evolving representation of female heroines in contemporary epic fantasy, addressing the long-standing marginalization of women in the genre. While earlier works often confined women to roles such as the "damsel in distress" or passive companions, recent novels have begun to subvert these tropes by presenting heroines who are complex, empowered, and central to the narrative. Using Elaine Showalter's gynocriticism and Carl Jung's archetypal criticism, this paper investigates how female protagonists in Samantha Shannon's (2019) *The Priory of the Orange Tree* (2019), Leigh Bardugo's (2012) *Shadow and Bone*, and Alexandra Bracken's (2021) *Lore* reflect newly emerging constructs of womanhood. In doing so, it identifies shared traits and interprets the cultural and literary implications of these portrayals within the 21st-century epic fantasy tradition.

Introduction/Background: Historically, women have been confined to domestic roles and excluded from education and public life, their subordination reinforced by social norms and even Darwinian ideology (Beck, 2016; Bergman, 2002; Sultana, 2011). Literature mirrored this hierarchy: classical and early epic fantasy privileged male heroes, reducing women to damsels or supporting figures (Wolford, 2011). Recent feminist writers, however, have subverted these tropes, introducing heroines who lead, fight, and redefine power—paralleling the increasing prominence of women in contemporary literature (Thomas-Corr, 2021). By analyzing how these more recent works construct female protagonists, this study highlights the paradigmatic shift from male-centered heroism to empowered female archetypes, positioning itself as a pioneering contribution at the intersection of feminist criticism and fantasy studies.

Methodology: This study employed a **descriptive-qualitative design**, which is well-suited for interpreting rather than measuring literary texts. It explored how female protagonists in selected 21st-century epic fantasy novels shift from the "damsel in distress" archetype to empowered heroines. Following Flick (2014), qualitative inquiry in literature enables the reconstruction of meaning and recognition of cultural patterns.

Corpus and Scope: The primary texts were three contemporary epic fantasy novels by women: *The Priory of the Orange Tree* by Samantha Shannon (2019), *Shadow and Bone* by Leigh Bardugo (2012), and *Lore* by Alexandra Bracken (2021). Selection criteria included: (1) women authors active in the 21st century, (2) English-language epic fantasy, and (3) central female protagonists. The scope was limited to heroines in these novels.

Data Collection: The authors surveyed and selected novels based on specific criteria, conducted close readings to extract passages that highlighted heroines' traits, roles, and struggles, noted instances where portrayals aligned with or challenged archetypes, and analyzed the findings through gynocriticism and archetypal criticism.

Data Analysis: The analysis identified central heroines and their archetypal roles, compared similarities and differences across texts, and interpreted the findings through feminist discourse, highlighting the evolving role of heroines in epic fantasy.

Findings: These include Archetypal Subversion, where characters such as Ead (Huntress/Sage) and Lore (Huntress) resist traditional constructions of passive femininity by embodying both physical prowess and intellectual authority. Similarly, Sabran IX (Queen) and Alina Starkov (Maiden → Unwilling Hero) dramatize the conflict between socially prescribed roles and the pursuit of individual self-actualization. Philosophical Resonance shows that the heroines engage with deeper philosophical paradigms. Socratic ideals of wisdom and self-examination inform the trajectories of Ead and Athena. At the same time, essentialist notions of predetermined destiny surface in Sabran and Alina—though both characters ultimately contest and negotiate these constraints. Narrative Agency shows that in contrast to classical damsels confined to reactive roles, these heroines serve as narrative catalysts. Through deliberate choice, rebellion, and leadership, they propel their stories forward, embodying feminist redefinitions of agency in 21st-century epic fantasy.

Contribution/Impact on Society: This study underscores how contemporary epic fantasy serves as a transformative space for reimagining gender roles, positioning heroines not as passive figures but as agents of autonomy, resilience, and leadership. Beyond literature, such representations foster reader empowerment, encourage critical conversations on gender equality, and enrich cultural perceptions of women in leadership and heroism. Importantly, these insights hold value for curriculum reform, inviting educators to reframe literary study around inclusive narratives that better reflect the diversity and dynamism of contemporary society.

Recommendations:
1. For Authors and Publishers: Expand the spectrum of female archetypes beyond the "warrior woman," incorporating intersectional identities (race, class, sexuality, disability) to reflect broader lived realities.
2. For Educators: Incorporate feminist fantasy into curricula alongside male-centered epics to empower readers and foster dialogue on equity, diversity, and identity.
3. For Scholars: Examine epic fantasy heroines through intersectional lenses—feminist, postcolonial, and queer—to reveal how power and identity are negotiated.

Research Limitation: Focus on three novels limits generalizability; broader genre surveys are needed. Gynocriticism and Jungian archetypes may overlook postmodern or non-Western feminist frameworks. Examining post-2010 works excludes earlier feminist fantasy pioneers.

Future Research:
1. Conduct cross-cultural studies comparing female constructs in Western and non-Western epic fantasies, revealing how cultural contexts shape the roles of heroines.
2. Explore historical trajectories, tracing continuities and ruptures between classical heroines and their modern re-imaginings.
3. Undertake reception-based analyses of how diverse readerships interpret, relate to, or resist empowered heroines in fantasy.
4. Examine philosophical frameworks (Socratic, Essentialist, Existentialist) to assess how female characters embody or disrupt dominant worldviews.
5. Extend Showalter's notion of the "female phase" by mapping its development across contemporary fantasy, especially works authored by women and other marginalized voices.

Keywords: *Women, gender studies, women's status, empowerment, leadership*

Introduction

Throughout history, women have been perceived as inferior to men. This statement is supported by Beck (2016), who contends that before the Industrial Revolution, women were assigned traditional duties like sewing and mending clothes, as well as frequently contributing to running the farm's business and raising children. Various feminist perspectives have also dissected this systemic oppression, attributing it to factors ranging from unjust discrimination to male control over women's sexual and reproductive abilities (Jaggar, 1988).

Darwinian ideology further exacerbated the perception of female inferiority by positing that men faced substantially more selective pressures than females, particularly in the areas of warfare, food, mate competition, and attire (Bergman, 2002). This belief system reinforced the notion that women lacked mental fortitude and were incapable of thinking for themselves, making a woman's dominant social function that of a housewife (Sekścińska et al., 2016). Despite these historical constraints, the status of women has gradually evolved, spurred by social changes and movements advocating for gender equality. Today, women exercise greater autonomy and choice than in previous centuries.

Fantasy has a history of giving women character roles that are stereotypical of their gender (Wolford, 2011). In numerous fictional literary genres, women often assume the role of the damsel in distress. Otherwise, they will most likely play a supporting role. Seldom are women shown as powerful individuals; instead, they are frequently depicted as images of female virtue and beauty. However, contemporary authors, particularly those writing from feminist perspectives, have begun to challenge these conventions by centering their narratives on strong, complex female characters, such as Karen Francisco's (2010) *Naermyth*, K. S. Villoso's (2019) *The Wolf of Oren-Yaro*, and Elisa A. Bonnin's (2022) *Dauntless*.

Considering these developments, this research paper embarked on a gynocritical investigation of modern heroines in epic fantasy literature, focusing on selected works, namely, Samantha Shannon's (2019) *The Priory of the Orange Tree*, Leigh Bardugo's (2012) *Shadow and Bone*, and Alexandra Bracken's (2021) *Lore*. By integrating the theoretical frameworks of Elaine Showalter's (1979) Gynocriticism and Carl Jung's Archetypal Criticism, this study aims to shed light on the paradigmatic shift from male-centered hero archetypes to the emergence of female heroines in contemporary epic fantasy literature.

This paper positions itself as a pioneering contribution to the study of epic fantasy and aims to guide future investigations. By blending Gynocriticism's focus on women's experiences and Archetypal Criticism's exploration of universal symbols and motifs, this research offers a nuanced understanding of the evolving portrayal of heroines in epic fantasy literature. Through this interdisciplinary approach, this study seeks to illuminate uncharted paths for future scholars interested in interrogating gender dynamics within the realm of epic fantasy literature.

Literature Review
Women, Heroines, and Gynocriticism
The representation of women in literature has long been a focal point of feminist criticism. Eyvazi et al. (2017), drawing on Showalter's gynocriticism, emphasized how female literary production can be understood across three stages: the feminine, the feminist, and the female. Their study of Iranian women's novels illustrates how women writers articulate oppression while also carving out new subjectivities within patriarchal contexts. Similar approaches in Western contexts have also demonstrated the ways female authors engage with questions of dependence, resistance, and redefinition of women's roles.

Showalter's gynocriticism has been foundational in re-centering women's voices in literary criticism, moving away from male-dominated paradigms. Studies of women's writing across diverse traditions (Putri, 2014; Cabeliza, 2016; Mallick, 2019; Hartanto & Roifa, 2020) converge on the insight that women writers often foreground embodied experience, cultural marginalization, and strategies of resistance. This body of research informs the present study's focus on heroines in contemporary epic fantasy as figures who negotiate and challenge patriarchal archetypes.

Female Representation in Fantasy and Popular Culture
The epic fantasy genre has historically been dominated by male heroes and narratives (Bernardez, 2020). However, feminist scholars note a growing subversion of these conventions. Bernardez (2020) argued that *The Priory of the Orange Tree* reconfigures the epic narrative by situating women at the center of both heroic and mythic roles. Similarly, Schanoes (2014) situated revisionist fantasy within the broader feminist project of rewriting myths and fairy tales to destabilize gendered stereotypes,

while Fabrizi (2016) highlighted the philosophical richness of fantasy in confronting questions of morality, justice, and social identity—issues now increasingly embodied in female protagonists.

Parallel developments in popular culture have further illustrated this shift. Brown (2015) charted how female action heroines have evolved beyond the trope of weaponized sexuality into figures of direct physical power. Hentges (2018) and Wright (2016) emphasized how *The Hunger Games* and similar Young Adult dystopias redefined mainstream expectations of heroines as independent agents of change. Madrid (2016) likewise pointed to comic book heroines who challenge reductive stereotypes, while Streiff and Dundes (2017) read *Frozen's* Elsa as emblematic of a heroine whose autonomy disrupts traditional romance-centered narratives.

Archetypes, Philosophy, and Female Agency

Beyond representation, scholars have interrogated the archetypal and philosophical dimensions of heroines. Talairach-Vielmas (2016) demonstrated how Victorian sensational fiction and fairy tales negotiated femininity through the interplay of fantasy and realism, while Nouri and Mohammadi (2015) foreground Angela Carter's feminist rewritings as critiques of patriarchal constraints. These works underscore the extent to which archetypes can be reimagined as sites of resistance.

Traditional philosophy also provides a lens for considering heroines' moral and existential trajectories. Studies on Socratic and existential thought (Futter, 2013; Sahin, 2018; Shanahan, 2018; Smith, 2016; Zervas, 2018) highlight themes of wisdom, authenticity, and the pursuit of truth. While not directly situated in fantasy literature, such frameworks are useful in examining heroines whose journeys embody philosophical inquiry into selfhood, agency, and ethical action.

Gaps and Implications for Contemporary Epic Fantasy

Existing scholarship demonstrates a robust interest in women's writing, feminist retellings, and the evolution of female representation in literature and popular culture. However, a clear research gap remains regarding the specific development of female heroines in epic fantasy literature, particularly in the 21st century and in works authored by women. While the studies of Carter, Collins, Rowling, and Shannon have addressed aspects of this transformation, little sustained attention has been given to tracing how heroines shift from the "damsel in distress" archetype to empowered figures of agency and leadership across contemporary epic fantasy.

The present study seeks to contribute to this discourse by analyzing the heroines of *The Priory of the Orange Tree*, *Shadow and Bone*, and *Lore* through gynocritical and archetypal frameworks. In doing so, it highlights the ways modern epic fantasy negotiates gendered traditions, reconfigures archetypes, and reflects broader cultural shifts in the understanding of female agency.

Methodology

This study employs a descriptive-qualitative design, appropriate for examining literary texts where the goal is not measurement but interpretation. The design enables an exploration of how female protagonists in selected 21st-century epic fantasy novels transition from the conventional "*damsel in distress*" archetype to modern representations of empowered heroines. Following Flick (2014), qualitative inquiry in literary studies allows for the reconstruction of meanings from within the texts and the recognition of emerging patterns and cultural implications.

Corpus and Scope

The primary texts analyzed are three contemporary epic fantasy novels authored by women: *The Priory of the Orange Tree* (2019) by Samantha Shannon, *Shadow and Bone* (2012) by Leigh Bardugo, and *Lore* (2021) by Alexandra Bracken. These novels were selected using the following criteria:
1. Authorship: written by women authors who are active in the 21st century.
2. Genre: epic fantasy novels published in English.
3. Characterization: featuring female protagonists as central figures.

The scope of the study was limited to the representation of heroines in these three novels. Other works by the authors or within the broader fantasy genre were excluded.

Data Collection Procedures
The study followed a systematic process:
1. Text Selection: A survey of contemporary epic fantasy novels was conducted to identify works meeting the inclusion criteria.
2. Close Reading: The selected novels were read carefully to extract relevant passages concerning the heroines' characterization, roles, and struggles.
3. Textual Analysis: Descriptive notes were made on instances where the heroines' traits aligned with or challenged classical archetypes.
4. Theoretical Application: The textual evidence was examined through the dual lens of gynocriticism and archetypal criticism.

Data Analysis
Analysis proceeded in three stages:
1. Identification: Determining the central female protagonists in each novel and situating them within archetypal categories.
2. Comparison: Examining similarities and differences across the heroines' representations in relation to female experience and traditional philosophy.
3. Interpretation: Relating the findings to broader feminist discourse and contemporary literary production, highlighting implications for the evolving role of heroines in 21st-century epic fantasy.

Theoretical Framework
This study examines contemporary epic fantasy novels through the lenses of Elaine Showalter's Gynocriticism (1979) and Carl Jung's Archetypal Criticism. The framework synthesizes these approaches to explore how female characters in epic fantasy transcend traditional gender roles and embody diverse heroic archetypes.

Elaine Showalter's concept of Gynocriticism emphasizes the significance of discussing women's writers from female viewpoints (Putri, 2014). Initially introduced in Showalter's (1979) *Towards a Feminist Poetics*, Gynocriticism investigates the historical, thematic, and structural elements of women's writing, aiming to understand literary works by female authors within their unique context of female subjectivity and experience (Mambrol, 2016; Plate, 2016; Putri, 2014).

Chandra (2022) claimed that according to Showalter, Gynocriticism encompasses three phases of female literary development: 1) Feminine Phase (1840—1880) where early female authors, such as Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, wrote in a male-dominated literary world where their works were often marginalized; 2) Feminist Phase (1880—1920) where women's writing began to assert independence from male influences, representing a burgeoning feminist identity; and 3) Female Phase (1920—present) which emphasizes an inward exploration of authentic female selfhood, celebrating women's unique experiences and contributions to literature without needing to compare them to male norms. Therefore, this study applies Gynocriticism to contemporary epic fantasy novels to analyze how female characters embody and challenge traditional gender roles, emphasizing their roles as producers of textual meaning rather than as subjects of patriarchal critique (Barad, 2013).

In addition to that, Carl Jung's Archetypal Criticism offers a complementary perspective, focusing on universal patterns and symbols in literature that emerge from the collective unconscious (Delahoyde, n.d.; Vogler, 2007). Jung's framework includes archetypes specific to women and heroes, which serve as foundational structures for character analysis; please see Table 1 for details.

Table 1 *Archetypes Specific to Women and Heroes*

Archetypes of Women	Archetypes of Heroes
1. Lover: Embodies intimacy, creativity, and enchantment.	**1. Willing Hero:** Boldly embraces adventure without reservations.
2. Huntress: Represents autonomy and a warrior spirit.	**2. Unwilling Hero:** Hesitant and requires external motivation.
3. Maiden: Symbolizes insight, imagination, and potential for growth.	**3. Anti-Hero:** Sympathetic but morally ambiguous, often challenging societal norms.
4. Sage: Reflects wisdom, achievement, and discernment.	**4. Rebel/Tragic Hero:** Flawed and ultimately overcome by personal demons.
5. Mother: Connects to nurturing, creativity, and relational warmth.	**5. Group-Oriented Hero:** Begins as part of a group but undergoes a transformative solo journey.
6. Mystic: Represents freedom, tranquility, and mystery.	**6. Loner Hero:** Starts and ends in solitude, often engaging with a group temporarily.
7. Queen: Symbolizes leadership, confidence, and prosperity.	**7. Catalyst Hero:** Influences change in others without undergoing significant personal transformation.

This research utilizes Jung's archetypes to explore the evolution of female characters in epic fantasy, particularly how they navigate the hero's journey and embody diverse heroic qualities. Jungian analysis helps identify the transformative paths female characters undertake, highlighting their agency, resilience, and quest for self-discovery.

In addition to Gynocriticism and Archetypal Criticism, the study also incorporates traditional philosophical frameworks to deepen the analysis of female characters' belief systems, moral orientations, and existential inquiries (Pop, 2014). Philosophical paradigms such as Socratic thought, essentialism, and existentialism provide a broader intellectual context, enabling a more refined understanding of characters' actions, choices, and development. By integrating these philosophical perspectives, the research aims to reveal how contemporary epic fantasy novels reflect and engage with foundational philosophical ideas, enhancing the comprehension of female protagonists' moral landscapes and guiding principles.

Statement of the Problem

In traditional epic fantasy literature, female characters have often been confined to the role of the *damsel in distress*, serving primarily as passive figures dependent on male heroes. However, recent works of contemporary fantasy, particularly those authored by women, depict heroines who challenge and subvert this archetype. Despite the growing visibility of such heroines, there remains limited scholarly inquiry into how these female characters are constructed, how they embody archetypes, and what their representations imply for contemporary understandings of gender in fantasy literature. This study addresses this gap by examining the portrayal of heroines in Samantha Shannon's *The Priory of the Orange Tree* (2019), Leigh Bardugo's *Shadow and Bone* (2012), and Alexandra Bracken's *Lore* (2021).

Research Objectives

The following objectives guided the study:
1. To analyze the representation of female protagonists in the selected epic fantasy novels using gynocriticism and archetypal criticism.
2. To identify the shared characteristics of the heroines in terms of female representation and experience.
3. To interpret the cultural and literary implications of these heroines' portrayals in the context of 21st-century epic fantasy.

Research Questions
Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:
1. What characteristics are commonly shared by the heroines in the selected epic fantasy novels in terms of female representation and/or experience?
2. What are the implications of these shared characteristics for the 21st century and the development of the contemporary epic fantasy genre?

Results and Discussion
Similarities of Epic Fantasy Heroines in Terms of: Female Representation and/or Experience
In examining the evolving representation of female heroines in 21st-century epic fantasy literature, it becomes evident that these characters have transcended the traditional "damsel in distress" trope. This section examines the representation and experiences of the heroines in the three analyzed books by categorizing them into Jungian archetypes.

Analysis of Ead Duryan in Samantha Shannon's* The Priory of the Orange Tree *(2019)
*Women Archetype/s***.** Ead Duryan exemplifies the **huntress and sage archetypes**. The huntress, according to Creedon (1994), is characterized by her physical abilities and independence, which Ead displays throughout the novel. Her mission to protect Queen Sabran IX and determine the queen's lineage showcases her combat prowess and strategic thinking.

However, Ead was already aware that her loyalty was to The Mother, Cleolind, on whom her ideas and beliefs were based. This reinforces her sage archetype as it emphasizes her wisdom and ability to separate personal emotions from her duties. This is illustrated in the following lines: *"All I do, I do for the Mother. To glorify her name.*" (Shannon, 2019, p. 511). Despite her love for Sabran, Ead prioritizes her responsibilities to The Priory, demonstrating her commitment to her principles.

Hero Archetype/s. Ead's character aligns with the archetypes of the anti-hero, catalyst hero, loner hero, and group-oriented hero. Bernárdez (2020) argues that Ead's upbringing in a matriarchal society renders her role as a hero natural rather than gender specific. Her values and beliefs, which differ from the Western Inysh, position her as an anti-hero or outlaw. Ead's solitary journey to protect the queen and her covert religious adherence illustrate her as a loner hero. Her catalytic influence is seen in her impact on others, such as Loth, Meg, and Sabran IX.

Analysis of Tané in Samantha Shannon's* The Priory of the Orange Tree *(2019)
Women Archetype/s. Tané embodies the **huntress archetype** through her rigorous training and warrior spirit. Initially constrained by societal norms and guilt, Tané eventually pursues independence and bravery. Her character description is similar to that in Pagador and Moyano's (2023) study, which found that while women's conventional characteristics retained their relevance in the 21st century, their representation had evolved due to preceding modifications. As mentioned, this claim was related to Tané's characterization because she, in one instance, had let others forge her path. This was evidenced in the following lines found in the book: *"Tané stood and bowed, and the soldiers took her back to the palanquin. She had thought she would beg or weep or ask forgiveness, but in the end, she felt nothing."* (Shannon, 2019, p. 335)
Meanwhile, her relationship with Nayimathun represents the **mother archetype**, as she cares deeply for her dragon and strives to protect it. Tané's nurturing instinct extends beyond her dragon to those she loves, aligning with the mother archetype's emphasis on caring and creating a safe environment.

Hero Archetype/s. Tané is characterized as a willing and active hero, accepting the dangers of being a dragon rider and fighting against the Nameless One. Tané shows boldness and dedication to adventure as she forges ahead and takes charge of her surroundings. In addition, Tané exhibits characteristics of the group-oriented hero archetype because, at first, she belongs to the dragon riders and follows their hierarchy. However, as the plot develops, Tané separates from the party of dragon

riders she had been with and embarks on a solo adventure with her dragon, Nayimathun. She eventually rejoins them after the Nameless One had been finally vanquished. Her excursion pushes her beyond her comfort zone and challenges her, thus emphasizing her adventure alone in the wilderness. Her confidence and competence in her abilities further underscore her as a modern representation of female heroism.

Analysis of Sabran IX in Samantha Shanno's The Priory of the Orange Tree *(2019)*

Women Archetype/s. Sabran IX embodies the **queen archetype**, symbolizing leadership, initiative, and management of her life and kingdom. Despite societal pressures to produce an heir, Sabran's true desires conflict with her role, highlighting her struggle with control. Her reluctance to embrace motherhood and desire for power reflect her character's complexity. A skilled negotiator and strategic thinker, Sabran exemplifies leadership and confidence, fitting the queen's archetype attributes.

Hero Archetype/s. Sabran IX, the reigning queen of Inys, is a quintessential representation of the unwilling hero. Her journey throughout the novel exemplifies her evolution from a figure burdened by duty and fear to a leader who embraces her role with newfound strength and purpose. Initially, Sabran's primary concern revolves around her obligation to produce an heir, which is essential for the survival of her lineage and the perceived protection of her realm. However, as the narrative progresses, Sabran's character highlights her transformation into a decisive and authoritative leader, capable of facing her fears and making strategic decisions for the greater good of her kingdom.

Therefore, Sabran's unwilling heroism is underscored by her heroism through governance, diplomacy, and a resolve to maintain peace and stability within her realm. This aligns with the archetypal "reluctant hero" described by Jung, where the hero is drawn into action due to circumstances beyond one's control, rather than by choice.

Analysis of Alina Starkov in Leigh Bardugo's Shadow and Bone *(2012)*

Women Archetype/s. Alina Starkov begins the story as a representative of the **maiden archetype**. This archetype, as noted by Faines (2021), typically represents a young, helpless woman who must be saved, often by a man. Alina fits this archetype initially due to her key characteristics.

Alina is described as a typical and unremarkable mapmaker in the First Army. She lacks self-assurance and feels inferior to her more accomplished and stronger peers, such as her friend Mal. In fact, in addition to this, Alina is captured early in the story by enemy forces (the Fjerdans) and is almost killed. Her survival depends entirely on the intervention of her knights and the Darkling, who, unbeknownst to her, is also her captor and manipulator. Her need for rescue reinforces the notion that she needs saving. As a result, Alina's reliance on the Darkling and her emotional struggles reflect the typical traits of the maiden archetype. She is made to wear a necklace that binds her to the Darkling's commands, symbolizing her physical and emotional captivity. This aligns with Nouri and Mohammadi's (2015) observations of female characters who are dehumanized and portrayed as damsels struggling with love and desire.

Hero Archetype/s. Despite beginning as a damsel in distress, Alina evolves into an unwilling hero, showcasing significant character growth and resilience. Alina's transformation begins when she recognizes the Darkling's deception and manipulative control over her abilities. She starts to fight against his influence and seeks to reclaim her autonomy. She refuses to let her need for rescue be the only thing that defines her, so she decides to fight.

As the story progresses, Alina gains courage and independence, particularly when she decides to act to save her friend Mal. Her willingness to confront danger and fight for those she loves marks her transition into the **hero archetype**. This transformation aligns with the description of the unwilling hero, who gains courage when the stakes are high (Vogler, 2007). Alina's eventual ability to free herself from the Darkling's control and assert her own power demonstrates her evolution from a helpless maiden to an empowered hero. This mirrors the journey of other female characters in literature who overcome societal constraints and personal fears, as highlighted by Mallick's (2019) study on women's

liberation and Jamalpour's (2017) findings on the defiance of societal norms by female characters in *Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle*.

Analysis of Lore in Alexandra Bracken's Lore (2021)

Women Archetype/s. Lore Perseous, a descendant of Perseus, reflects the traits of the huntress archetype. Faines (2021) described the huntress as a fierce and independent woman who loves autonomy and independence. Lore exemplifies this archetype, as she is fiercely independent and has been training in combat and survival techniques from a young age to equip herself for a life of her own. This is evident when she abandons her family and embarks on a risky voyage, relying exclusively on her own resources. Her decision to move into the city by herself further shows her stubborn independence despite the potential perils. This aligns with the **huntress archetype's** ideal representation of independence and autonomy, as Carl Jung described.

Furthermore, Lore's physical strength and battle prowess are prominent throughout the novel. She demonstrates her combat skills by taking on both human and supernatural foes, which solidifies her reputation as a protector—a role that is taken on by many huntresses. Her willingness to fight to protect those she loves underscores her role as a confident, strong individual.

Lore attempts to flee the society to which she belongs, evading her true desires due to the outdated beliefs and practices within the culture of the Agon. Lore also values personal responsibility and freedom, which ties back to the huntress archetype. She believes in owning up to one's actions and accepting the consequences, even if it means making difficult choices.

Hero Archetype/s. Despite her natural propensity for hunting, Lore consistently seeks to leave the Agon world. Her reluctance and desire to avoid the quest align with the **unwilling hero archetype**, characterized by hesitation and the need for external motivation or prodding to embark on an adventure (Faines, 2021).

Lore's development is influenced by external forces, particularly Castor and Athena. Castor's reentry into her life and Athena's persistent prodding push Lore to confront her true nature and responsibilities. This external influence catalyzes her transition from a reluctant participant to an active agent in her destiny. As the novel progresses, Lore gradually accepts her role and responsibilities, ultimately participating in her own destiny. Her evolution from a reluctant to a determined hero is marked by her willingness to make risky choices and face the consequences for the sake of her autonomy and the protection of those she loves.

Analysis of Athena in Alexandra Bracken's Lore (2021)

Women Archetype/s. Athena, the second central heroine, aligns with the female **sage archetype**. Jung (1959) defined the sage as someone who represents knowledge and wisdom, and Faines (2021) described the sage as an entry point to accomplishment, wisdom, and the ability to separate thoughts and feelings. Athena embodies these traits throughout the novel because she showcases her wisdom and vast knowledge as an immortal entity. She serves as a mentor figure to Lore, offering guidance and knowledge to help her navigate these challenges. As an example of her old existence, Athena shares an ancient tale with Lore—drawing upon her vast knowledge to unravel mysteries and questions—when Lore accuses Athena of punishment that she inflicted on Arachne, particularly to Medusa.

Athena's strategic thinking and problem-solving abilities further reinforce her sage archetype. She meticulously plans her actions and manipulates situations to achieve her goals. Her ability to analyze situations and devise effective strategies is evident in her careful manipulation and guidance of Lore. Moreover, Athena values reason over emotion, consistent with the sage archetype's emphasis on objectivity and rationality. She demonstrates emotional control and advises others to do the same, stressing the importance of logical thinking in difficult situations.

Hero Archetype/s. Athena's actions and motivations align her with the **willing hero archetype**, as she is driven by her own goals and is willing to do whatever it takes to achieve them. Her proactive pursuit of her objectives and her willingness to manipulate circumstances to her advantage reflect the characteristics of a willing hero.

In addition, Athena's willingness to push circumstances and decisions in the novel for her own ends highlights her focus on the future she desires. Her actions demonstrate commitment to her plans, making her a willing hero who actively shapes her own destiny.

To visually depict and organize the researcher's observations regarding the similar characteristics exhibited by the heroines in the three selected epic fantasy novels, tables are provided. Table 2 serves as a comprehensive representation of the individual findings of the characters' archetypes of women, allowing for a clear and concise overview of the female archetypes among the central heroines.

Table 2 *Carl Jung's Archetypes of Women*

Characters	Archetypes of Women
Ead	Huntress and Sage
Tané	Huntress and Mother
Sabran IX	Queen
Alina	Maiden
Lore	Huntress
Athena	Sage

On the other hand, Table 3 provides a valuable visual aid that enhances the understanding of the similar characteristics that emerge from the research, fostering a deeper comprehension of the heroines' archetypal roles and the overarching narratives of the epic fantasy novels under scrutiny.

Table 3 *Similar Characteristics of the Heroines using Carl Jung's Archetypes of Women*

Huntress	Sage
Ead	Ead
Tané	Athena
Lore	

In the context of the three selected epic fantasy novels under study, half of the central characters, namely, Ead, Tané, and Lore, were classified as falling under the huntress archetype. The huntress archetype represents strong, independent female warriors who exude confidence and possess a sense of autonomy. In harmony with the characteristics commonly associated with the huntress archetype, these heroines represented remarkable combat skills, unwavering determination, and a fierce sense of personal agency.

After conducting this analysis, the researchers concluded that these heroines were indeed rising as they were able to transcend various societal limitations and discriminations presented in the study by embodying two different archetypes that describe and portray a woman as strong and powerful.

Meanwhile, Table 4 serves as a visual representation that delineates the individual hero archetypes of the female characters under study, providing a structured and accessible overview of the various heroine archetypes in the study.

Table 4 *Carl Jung's Archetypes of Heroines*

Characters	Archetypes of Women
Ead	Anti-hero, Catalyst, Loner, and Group-Oriented
Tané	Willing and Active and Group-Oriented
Sabran IX	Unwilling
Alina	Unwilling
Lore	Unwilling
Athena	Willing and Active

Whereas Table 5 functions as a comprehensive guide that offers a visual taxonomy of similar heroic personas portrayed by the female protagonists, contributing to an easier understanding of the representations of female heroism within the analyzed novels.

Table 5 *Similar Characteristics of the Heroines using Carl Jung's Archetypes*

Willing and Active	Unwilling	Group-Oriented
Tané	Sabran	Ead
Athena	Alina	Tané
	Lore	

As seen in the tables provided above, by using Carl Jung's archetypes of women and heroes, the researchers were able to deduce that these heroines already stood out as powerful heroes. The female characters all epitomized striking and compelling characteristics and archetypes by being able to transcend and overcome the expected and stereotyped roles of women in an epic narrative. Showalter's search for female representation and/or experience was thus achieved in these contemporary epic fantasy novels because every central heroine was successful in challenging traditional portrayals imposed on them by society in classic epic stories. Most importantly, the female writers of these epic fantasy novels were also able to achieve the "female" phase of gynocriticism, as they successfully characterized a woman outside the patriarchal mentality. Moreover, the exploration and search for their representation were provided by the central heroines throughout the novels as they struggled to overcome social perceptions of femininity through encountering the many difficulties and challenges that they experienced. Nevertheless, this concept of female representation and/or experience was achieved because they were able to prove that women could be heroines as well.

In summary, these contemporary heroines were indeed proven to be powerful and rising, as none of them fell under Jung's other archetypes that could have described them as damsels in distress. By featuring powerful woman archetypes like the sage and the huntress in epic fantasy narratives, women were empowered to become rising heroines by subverting traditional gender roles and embracing qualities typically associated with heroes. These archetypes empowered female characters and provided a platform for them to shatter stereotypes, asserting that women can be strong, independent, and capable of transcending societal limitations— characteristics which were previously only associated with male heroes.

Implications of the Heroine's Similarities in 21ˢᵗ Century and Epic Fantasy

The analysis of the heroines' similar characteristics in contemporary epic fantasy novels indicates a significant shift towards more diverse and empowered female characters. This trend reflects broader societal transformations as women pursue representation and equality. These heroines defy traditional gender stereotypes and societal expectations, thereby highlighting a move towards portraying strong, independent, and multifaceted heroines in 21st-century epic fantasy.

These heroines' archetypal traits emphasize different aspects of femininity. For example, the huntress archetype symbolizes physical prowess and independence, while the unwilling hero archetype represents inner strength and perseverance. These varied archetypes showcase the complexity and diversity of women's experiences, which are often underrepresented in literature. However, as Brown (2015) noted, colloquial adjectives used to describe female desirability often portray sexually appealing women as dangerous, revealing how femininity is frequently framed as a threat. In contrast, contemporary epic fantasy reclaims these traits as sources of strength. This shift encourages readers to question gender stereotypes and advocate for equality and empowerment in real life.

Cooper and Short's (2012) research showed that women, historically hidden, are now tangible, multidimensional, and unquestionably present. This visibility reflects a change in the representation of female characters from classical epics to contemporary epic fantasies. The central heroines' similar

characteristics demonstrate that, although women have historically been underrepresented in epic fantasy, they now embody specific viewpoints, lived experiences, and narrative agency. As Măcineanu (2015) noted, while female characters are scarce in number, they possess a powerful presence and often shape the course of the story.

The heroines' manifestation of Socratic philosophical thoughts and teachings indicates intellectual and philosophical depth, challenging the assumption that female characters exist primarily for aesthetic purposes or as romantic interests. Gibson (2022) notes that women in the 18th and 19th centuries created heroines with conventions and stereotypes different from those in narratives about male heroes. This newer representation and empowerment reflected a shift towards diverse and inclusive narratives, featuring strong, intellectually deep, and capable women as central characters. These stories offer representation for historically marginalized or underrepresented readers.

Meanwhile, Ali (2014) showed how evolving storytelling and genre conventions facilitate debates and modifications surrounding gender issues. This evolution allows the embodiment of powerful heroines in the fantasy genre to be widely reflected. Traditional tropes and archetypes are being reimagined and expanded to create more complex and nuanced female characters, enriching the narrative landscape. This evolution reflects a larger cultural and societal shift, recognizing gender equality and the need for diverse narratives. These characters shape and reflect changing attitudes towards gender roles and expectations, challenging the notion that women are passive players in their own stories, and reinforcing that they can be active agents of change.

In conclusion, the similar characteristics of the heroines in 21st-century epic fantasy novels represent a transition towards more diverse and empowered heroines. These modern heroines contrast with traditional portrayals as damsels in distress and embody rising and powerful characters. Considering Carl Jung's archetypes, which were long associated with male heroes, their evolution in today's female heroines suggests a broader entrance to female experiences and gender equality. These heroines challenge gender roles and stereotypes, offering empowering role models and showcasing a better representation of women by exhibiting different archetypes and philosophies.

Conclusions

Based on the study's findings, the heroines in the selected contemporary epic fantasy novels demonstrate a decisive challenge to entrenched gender roles and stereotypes that have long constrained women in literature. These characters do not merely resist traditional archetypes; they embody new forms of agency by drawing on diverse archetypal roles and philosophical frameworks, thereby offering readers models of empowerment and intellectual depth.

The enduring appeal and popularity of contemporary epic fantasy may be traced to its capacity to construct immersive worlds, develop complex characters, and engage with universal themes. Within these imaginative spaces, inclusion of themes such as female experience, morality, and diversity fosters moments of reflection and personal connection, enabling readers to recognize themselves in the narratives and to reconsider dominant cultural assumptions.

By foregrounding empowered heroines, contemporary epic fantasy contributes to the broader cultural movement toward gender equality and inclusivity. These works expand the spectrum of literary representation, generating narratives that are more reflective of varied perspectives and lived realities. Ultimately, the application of gynocriticism and archetypal criticism underscores the significance of studying how female characters shape narrative trajectories, disrupt patriarchal conventions, and participate in the ongoing redefinition of women's roles in literature.

Recommendations

In light of the findings and conclusions derived from this study, several recommendations are advanced to strengthen the discourse on female representation in epic fantasy and to extend its cultural, pedagogical, and scholarly implications.

First, authors and publishers are encouraged to continue creating and promoting literature that foregrounds diverse, multidimensional, and empowered female characters. The positive representation of women in epic fantasy not only reconfigures long-standing literary traditions but also resonates with contemporary struggles for gender equity. By broadening the scope of female archetypes beyond the reductive "damsel in distress," writers and publishers can actively contribute to reshaping the imaginative landscapes available to readers. This move ensures that women are portrayed as agents of knowledge, leadership, and transformation—qualities that challenge both literary and cultural conventions.

Second, scholars and researchers should sustain and expand critical engagement with contemporary epic fantasy. This study demonstrates that the application of Gynocriticism and Archetypal Criticism yields meaningful insights into female representation; however, further inquiry is needed to investigate a wider corpus of texts, across diverse cultural and geographical contexts. Comparative analyses could illuminate how representations of female heroines vary across different traditions and how these portrayals engage with broader philosophical, political, and social currents. Such studies would enrich the field of literary criticism and underscore the dynamic role of epic fantasy in negotiating questions of identity, gender, and power.

Third, educators and curriculum developers are strongly advised to integrate novels featuring strong and complex female protagonists into course syllabi, reading lists, and classroom discussions. Doing so not only provides students with empowering role models, but also diversifies the literary canon to include perspectives historically marginalized in both literature and education. These texts serve as effective platforms for teaching critical thinking, feminist perspectives, and the evolving functions of literature in reflecting and shaping society. Incorporating such works into secondary and tertiary curricula also equips students with the analytical tools to question stereotypes, recognize systems of oppression, and appreciate inclusivity in narrative form.

Fourth, further research and analysis is recommended to explore the broader implications of female characterization in epic fantasy, particularly regarding its influence on readers' perceptions and societal attitudes. Studies that combine literary criticism with reader-response theory, psychology, or cultural studies could reveal how contemporary audiences internalize or resist the archetypal representations of heroines. Investigating this relationship between text and reader would shed light on the transformative potential of literature as both a mirror and a catalyst for social change.

Finally, critical inquiry into narrative representation and cultural impact should remain a priority within literary studies. The depiction of empowered heroines is not simply a matter of genre evolution; it is also a matter of cultural responsibility. By highlighting the importance of inclusivity and representation in literature, future research can reinforce the value of diverse narratives in shaping more equitable societies. In this regard, the study of epic fantasy heroines may serve as a microcosm for examining the intersections of gender, power, and imagination in the 21st century.

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