

# Revisiting the New Woman in Indian Mythology

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## ABSTRACT

The trend of introducing the New Woman in the novels started in India from the time when India got independence. These women characters were termed as the New Woman because they opposed the traditionally patriarchal mentality, orthodox concepts and values. She differed from the conventional ideal woman who was meek, submissive, oppressed and surrendered before the patriarchy. But the question that arises is whether no such woman ever existed before twentieth century? Is the New Woman a product of modern world? The answer is in negative. It is true that the term and the concept came to its existence in the modern time but traces of the characteristics that the New Woman possess can be found in our mythologies that narrates the stories of incidents that happened in ancient times. This paper focuses on two such female characters from Indian mythology who were bold, fierce, brave and assertive. They had a broad outlook even in the ancient period. They were ready to oppose and resist the traditional norms whenever necessary. The two female characters discussed in this paper are Urmila from Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* and Paanchali from Chitra Banerjee's *The Palace of Illusions*. Both these characters have been portrayed as a woman who is strong, bold, fierce and assertive, having an independent existence. They are capable of taking their own decisions and also ready to face the consequences of those decisions. They stood for what they thought was right and resisted what according to them was wrong. The way both the characters have been portrayed, they surely can serve as role models for today's feminists. Thus it may not be wrong to refer Kavita's Urmila and Chitra's Paanchali as the forerunners of the New Woman.

**Keywords :** New Woman, Mythology, Urmila, Paanchali, Strong, Assertive

## I. INTRODUCTION

India, being a patriarchal country, has always given its women a secondary status in the society. Indian women have remained subjugated since ages. Even our literatures have portrayed the Indian women as someone who is suffering, silenced, oppressed and tortured under patriarchal pressure. Social, cultural, economical and traditional factors of our society have become the reason for subjugation of women. Women have been victims of various discriminations and abuse. Even in our mythologies, only those women are considered ideal who were submissive, obedient and faithful, followed their husband's orders blindly and worshipped their husbands as God. These women were described as if they have no existence apart from

that of their husband. With time, in the post colonial era, the portrayal of women in Indian English fiction underwent a revolutionary transilience. The ideal woman was replaced by the 'new woman'. Who were these new women and what was so radical about them? The women who started resisting traditions, orthodox concepts and values and opposed against subjugation, oppression of women and the prevailing patriarchal setup were termed as the 'New Women'. She was the woman who had started to step out of the four walls of her house to assert her right and who no longer recoiled from taking the initiatives. She was bold, strong, independent and assertive. She was neither afraid to put forth her point of view nor was she petrified to take a stand against what she thought was wrong and injustice not just for her but also for others.

But were these women just a product of modern era? It is true that the term and the concept came to its existence in the modern time but traces of the characteristics that the New Woman possessed can be found in our mythologies. This paper analyses two such female characters from our epics who were bold, fierce, brave and assertive. They had a broad outlook even in the ancient period.

The first character is Urmila from Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister*. Urmila, the most neglected and overlooked character in the epic, has been presented in her full potency in this novel. She has been given a dominant feminist voice. She questioned patriarchy that subdued women. She carried out all her responsibilities but simultaneously took a strong stand against the injustice done to her and her sisters by their husbands and in-laws. She was capable of taking her own decisions and stand by the consequences of her actions. She took the decision to marry Lakshman even after knowing that she would always be the second one on his priority list as the first place has been reserved for his elder brother Ram. It was Urmila's intelligence that saved Lakshman from the fury and outrage of Rishi Parshuram during Sita's swayamvar. After their marriage, when they arrived at Ayodhya and Queen Kaikeyi insulted Sita for being an orphan and pressurised Ram to remarry, it was Urmila who revolted against this tyranny. She felt devastated when Sita and Lakshman, the two persons whom she loved the most, left with Ram for his fourteen years of exile without thinking about her. But instead of just sitting and crying, she geared herself to take up all her responsibilities of the royal household and the state affairs. It was she who helped the family in coping with the death of King Dasrath. Not only this but she unmasked the evil intentions of Manthara and helped Shatrughan in managing the palace and the state affairs. When Bharat decided to do penance as a hermit till Ram returned back to Ayodhya, she revolted against his decision. She wanted to save Mandvi from experiencing the same

fate that she was enduring. She didn't felt petrified to face the great saints of their court who condemned her for revolting against the dharma and preached her about the dharma of a king for his kingdom, that of a brother for his brother and that of a son for his father. She asked them about the dharma of a husband for his wife and that of a son for his mother. She made it clear to them that she is not going to tolerate the shabby and miserable status expected to be accepted by the women. When she heard that Sita underwent a trial of fire to prove her chastity, she was enraged thinking how Ram could allow that to happen. She thought how the same Ram who should for Ahalya was unable to save his own wife from humiliation by allowing her to give such a test. Such is the portrayal of Urmila in the novel- a strong, courageous, broad-minded, advanced, dutiful and assertive woman- perfect example to be a forbearer of the feminist movement that came centuries later.

The second character is the well-known Paanchali from Chitra Banerjee's *The Palace of Illusions*. She portrayed Paanchali as a powerful, strong and bold woman, an equal to the men around her, instead of being submissive and docile. Born out of vengeance, she emerged from the holy fire along with her brother Dhri as Paanchal's king Drupad's daughter. She was rebellious and defiant by nature and had an individual and independent character. She was not interested to learn the feminine activities that a princess should indulge in according to her father. Rather she was inclined to learn things that were supposed to be taught to the men to become a king like learning war skills and political lessons. To save her brother Dhri, she questioned Karna, the man she loved secretly, of his birth and caste, for which she had to face a lot of humiliation later in the Kuru court. She had to marry the five Pandavas and faced a lot of difficulties and humiliation because of that. During that time, the women from royal families remained away from public view, the girls were married off as soon as they reach the age of puberty and women were just

considered as a property and a means of pleasure. But she always knew that she was made for more than this, her life would be different and she shall strive to make it different. When she was humiliated by Duryodhan, Karna and Dushasan, she questioned the dharma of a husband and asked the courtroom how one can stake his wife in a game of gambling. Her questions silenced the flag bearers of dharma of kuru dynasty and reminded them of their moral failures. She states that she has an individual identity and is not a property of Pandavas when she thought, "I'm a queen, daughter of Drupad and sister of Dhristadyamna. Mistress of the greatest palace on earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins or summoned to court like a dancing girl." (Divakaruni, 190). It was her curse and her vow for revenge that shook the foundations of the Kuru clan and led to destruction of the one hundred Kaurava brothers. She spent a long part of her life in forest with Pandavas, which was not easy for a princess like her but she was strong enough to face all these obstacles in her life and emerged as a remarkable figure in the history of Aryavrats.

Both Urmila and Paanchali started a fight against age old patriarchy long before the theories of feminism came into existence. They were capable of taking decisions for themselves and strong enough to face the repercussions of these decisions. They stood for what they thought was right and revolted against what they felt was wrong. Today's modern women can surely look back to them as role models in ancient period. Thus it would be fair to term them the new women from mythologies, the forerunners of the new woman culture that emerged later.

## II. REFERENCES

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