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# The Reimagined, Feminist Approach to Indian Epics: A Critical Study of How Feminists Are Challenging an Age-Old Standpoint of Sacred Epics with text in focus as Karna's Wife

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## ABSTRACT

*For millennia, societal norms remained unchallenged, but a seismic shift began to unfold a couple of centuries ago, triggered by court disputes, kitchen sparks, defiant opinions, and literary mentions. This revolution, led by the feminist ideology, has subtly reshaped our lives, challenging entrenched beliefs and fostering a continuous transformation. This paper delves into the profound influence of feminism, a political ideology striving for gender equality, particularly in literature, and its role in questioning stereotypes, promoting societal change, and providing a voice for both women and men. Literature has been a powerful force in this feminist movement, offering a platform for diverse voices and perspectives. Works like Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own" and Jean Sassoon's "Love in a Torn Land" have created figural spaces and empowered women to defy norms. Feminist non-fiction, exemplified by Joanna Russ's "How to Suppress Women's Writing" and Maya Angelou's "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," bluntly confronts political insecurities and suppressed ambitions, challenging societal norms in the process.*

*The feminist movement, evolving across centuries, has witnessed significant transformations. This paper explores the changing face of feminism, from early suffrage movements to demands for equal representation and contemporary redefinitions by authors like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in "We Should All Be Feminists." Adichie challenges the negative connotations associated with the term "feminist" and advocates for a broader societal shift to achieve true equality. Furthermore, this research examines the role of poetry in communicating feminist ideas, with works like Nikita Gill's "Fierce Fairy tales" questioning traditional narratives and advocating for a gender-neutral upbringing. The paper underscores how literature, through poetry and prose, is not merely a reflection but an active participant in shaping societal perceptions, challenging ingrained gender biases, and contributing to a more equitable future.*

**Keywords:** *Feminism, Literature, Gender Equality, Evolution, Societal Transformation.*

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

For millions of years, mankind has lived with a notion that wasn't challenged until recently; as recently as a couple of hundred years ago. It began with a small strife in a court, a small spark in the kitchen, as a defiant opinion of a young girl or as a mention in a literary work.

Before the world knew, a revolution had begun; a revolution which most of us from this generation back today, by defying notions of the past in every trivial way possible, in every passing moment of life, without realizing the minor, but not insignificant changes that have taken place between two timelines, and how obliged we must all feel to be a part of a generation which is brave enough to challenge; to change; to question.

Feminism is the political ideology which has given us the power to do so as women, and men. To question the false ideologies, reinvent them and create a world based on equality. It includes a range of cultural movements, political reformations and various other ideologies with a single purpose – equality of sexes in every sphere of life, be it economic, cultural or political. Feminism, contrary to many false beliefs, is not about women, as a gender being superior to the other gender – men, but the fact that there has been inequality in the opportunities given to both sexes, and it aims to question and reform this very system of “opportunities” and question the stereotypes we have created through generations and to crush them every day, in a hope that we create a society in the coming years where the atrocities faced by women today and before our times, would be a dystopian thought of a bygone totalitarian world.

A major harbinger of this thought and a noble herald in integrating it with the common mind-set has been literature. The feminist movement did not just promote reforms on the political front, but gave women a voice through powerful works in the sub – fields of poetry, fiction and non – fiction, which promoted unforgettable female characters, presented a vision of the society from a perspective which had been ignored for centuries due to the ignorance by a supposedly superior gender and reinvented classic tales. Some thought – provoking works went beyond just a female character defying norms and suggested men who defied these norms and joined the struggle, standing shoulder to shoulder with women, empowering them to be equals.

Whether it was *A Room of One's Own*<sup>2</sup> by Virginia Woolf, written in an attempt to promote figural space for women in literature, which was seen as a space dominated by men; or Jean Sassoon's numerous works in non – fiction, in collaboration with women from Middle East like

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<sup>2</sup> Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. London: Published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth Press, 1931. Print.

Love in a Torn Land<sup>3</sup> which defines the struggles of a woman caught in the Kurdish War initiated by Saddam Hussein, women have always found a voice in literature, a power they had always seemed to exercise but was foreshadowed by stereotypes and a gender which stood dominated not only in literature but in every sphere of life.

Feminist non-fiction has helped women to voice out their living standards, political insecurities and shunned ambitions in various systems of governance in the bluntest way possible, sometimes, even sarcastically blunted ways like in *How to Suppress Women's Writing*<sup>4</sup> by Joanna Russ, where she describes brusquely how a woman's writing even in 1980s was foreshadowed and prevented from being published, which she has written in the form of an irreverent guidebook. In another example, there is Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*<sup>5</sup> in the form of an autobiography. The writer and poet described her early years in the United States of America, while presenting a coming-of-age story that narrates strength and how a robust, strong-minded character can shun any kind of racism. It is a highly influential work and has marked its rightful place in African – American history, inspiring a new age of writers and influencing generations beyond her time.

Feminism has gone through constant reformations in every sphere. What was defined as feminism in the 1900s is not the feminism of the 20th Century, neither is the same relevant for the 21st Century. As we moved ahead, just voting rights were not enough because the lawmakers were still ignoring the pleas of women, so we demanded equal representation. Step – by – step, we attempted to take everything that has been ignored for our gender and demanded an equal share. Not a larger piece, but an equal, rightful piece of a pie that our female ancestors never tasted. A significant and notable work in the struggle of redefining and reenergizing the movement has been *We Should All Be Feminists*<sup>6</sup> by the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie which aimed to define feminism in the 21st Century. It's an all-powerful essay, adapted from a TEDx Talk the author delivered in London which amassed five million views on YouTube. She questioned the tag of insult given to “feminist” as a term and stressed that the term must be embraced by women, and men. It shunned the idea that only women needed to change for feminism to be a successful movement, but demanded that society as a whole is required to go under a massive change to revitalize the mind-set which has been created over centuries.

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<sup>3</sup> Sasson, Jean. And Al - Askari, Joanna., 2007. *Love in A Torn Land: Joanna Of Kurdistan: The True Story of A Freedom Fighter's Escape From Iraqi Vengeance*. 2nd ed. Wiley. Print

<sup>4</sup> Russ, Joanna. *How to Suppress Women's Writing*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983. Print.

<sup>5</sup> Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. VIRAGO Press LTD, 2019. Print.

<sup>6</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda N. *We Should All Be Feminists*, London; Fourth Estate, 2017. Print.

In addition, the movement has whole – heartedly embraced poetry as a medium through which female poets have communicated feminist ideas to the general public audience. A popular theme through these poetries is a changed perception of what we grew up learning and listening to. Of the stories of damsels in distress and knights in shining armour and the helpless Snow White, left in rags without her father and of the Sleeping Beauty cursed to be saved by a man. A notable work in the area is *Fierce Fairy tales: & Other Stories to Stir Your Soul*<sup>7</sup> by Nikita Gill, which has reinvented the fairy tales we have read through generations, questioning ideas we adapted as laws of nature. A very minor glimpse of that is seen in one of the poems in the book – *Difficult Damsels* – as an ending note, “There are princesses made of valour and poison alike and they are here to hold your court as Queens”, which questioned the very idea of why did a Queen live happily ever after with a King? Why did she need someone to rule for her, while the King needed a hundred wives only as a consort, a trophy of sorts? Such figures which have drilled the concept of a woman being lesser than a man when it comes to rule may play a very insignificant part in today’s time, but in many homes around the world, the stories of Princesses waiting for their Princes is still the first text that the child is made to read. Feminism in Literature has gone beyond that very tagline awarded to women in the very first instance of a child’s life and in the 21st Century, it has aimed to create a more gender-neutral upbringing and targeted the grass root level of the problem.

## II. THE THREE WAVES OF FEMINISM

Feminist History as a whole has been divided into three major waves<sup>8</sup>, each hosting its own set of landmarks for the movement. The first wave, which stirred in the 19th and early 20th century, was primarily concerned with women’s right to vote, especially in the United Kingdom where the Industrial Revolution, colonization and the onset of World War I was creating massive concerns<sup>9</sup>. The second wave, at its height in the 1960s and 1970s, referred to the movements led by women in most first world countries for the liberation of women and equality in legal and social rights. The third wave, beginning in the 1990s is what we are a part of today. It is more of a continuation and a reaction to keep up the second wave while posing better reforms and demanding equality in every sphere. The three waves are further elucidated below:

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<sup>7</sup> Gill, Nikita. *Fierce Fairytales: Poems & Stories to Stir Your Soul*. New York; Hachette Books Pvt. Ltd. 2018. Print.

<sup>8</sup> Offen, Karen (1988). "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach". *Signs*. **14** (1): 119–157. doi:10.1086/494494. S2CID 144146547

<sup>9</sup> Boxer, Marilyn J. (1982-01-01). "First wave' feminism in nineteenth-century France: Class, family and religion". *Women's Studies International Forum*. **5** (6): 551–559. doi:10.1016/0277-5395(82)90096-6. ISSN 0277-5395

### **(A) The First Wave**

The First – Wave of feminism began with women demanding promotion of equal contract and property rights in Europe and US in the mid-19th Century<sup>10</sup>. It also questioned the practice of married women being owned by their partners and the transfer of property to the latter after marriage. However, by the late 19th Century, it shifted entirely to women in the US demanding equal rights<sup>11</sup>, followed by waves of equal voting rights throughout Europe by early 20th Century. Feminism activism focused their writings, their protests and their artistic work on equality in democracy for all sexes when it came to voting their representatives. The wave succeeded and simultaneously ended after the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution in 1919 which granted the much-debated women voting rights<sup>12</sup>.

### **(B) The Second Wave**

The Second – Wave began in 1960s-1980s and aimed to focus on issues of equality and discrimination against women in everyday life. The second-wave slogan was, “The Personal is Political,” and identified women’s cultural and political disparities as indistinguishably linked and stimulated women to understand how their personal lives reflected sexist power structures. Betty Friedan was a key player when it came to this thought in second-wave feminism.

Her book, *The Feminine Mystique*<sup>13</sup> criticized the very idea that women could find fulfilment in their lifecycle only through successful childbearing, homemaking and pleasing their husband to their best capacity. According to Friedan’s New York Times obituary<sup>14</sup>, her book “ignited the contemporary women’s movement in 1963 and as a result permanently transformed the social fabric of the United States and countries around the world” and “is widely regarded as one of the most influential nonfiction books of the 20th century.”<sup>15</sup> Friedan conjectures that women are victims of a false belief system that they need to find their identity through their husband and children. This has caused women to lose their independent identities due to their very own family.

### **(C) The Third Wave**

Third-wave feminism began in the early 1990s, as a response to the failed efforts of the

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<sup>10</sup> Hewitt, Nancy A. (2010). *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*. Rutgers University Press. pp. 1–12. ISBN 978-0-8135-4724-4. JSTOR j.ctt1bmzp2r

<sup>11</sup> Dicker, Rory Cooke. (2008) *A History of U.S. Feminisms*. Berkeley: Seal Press. ISBN 1-58005-234-7

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

<sup>13</sup> Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013. Print

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/05/world/americas/05iht-obits.html>

<sup>15</sup> Wilson, Joan Hoff; Defeis, Elizabeth F (1978). "Role of American Women: An Historical Overview". *India International Centre Quarterly*. **5** (3): 163–173. ISSN 0376-9771. JSTOR 23001287

initiatives taken in the previous wave. It criticized the initiatives taken as a feministic movement for the upper – middle class women, dominantly from the white classes, who seemingly always had a greater voice than women from lower classes, of oppressed ethnicity. This ideology seeks to test the characterizations of femininity that grew out of the philosophies of the second-wave. The third-wave sees women's lives as intersectional, signifying how race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion and nationality are all momentous factors when it comes to deliberating feminism in today's time of globalization. It examines issues related to women's lives on an international basis and shuns the thought that it is concentrated to only European high classes or the US<sup>16</sup>. This is the present state of the movement.

### **III. TEXT-IN-FOCUS: KARNA'S WIFE**

Feminism in the Third – Wave has also taken an initiative which was highly disregarded before, especially in the Indian Subcontinent, primarily because of the general perception of a woman and the backwardness of the society when it came to catching up with the initiatives of the first and second wave, but also due to the negative influence of the British Raj which consistently interpreted the Epics and Mythologies of India's rich culture in the most ruthless way possible. History, as a field, was exploited by the British in the Indian Sub-Continent but what is also lesser known is that the Epics were interpreted according to what the British felt they understood of heritage and according to what their travellers from that time had construed, with utter disregard for the heritage which had taken millions of years in making. It is only recently that texts of these Epics have been found from each and every region, interpreted according to their heritage and background, keeping in mind the diversity that India has always boasted of.

This gave way to contemporary writers like Amish Tripathi in his Ramachandra Series books like *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*<sup>17</sup> to initiate a literature of a different realm altogether, of interpretations of the Godly figures we had only ever known in a certain way. But way before the fiction side of it evolved, Feminists around the world began to analyze the bigger role of women and the ignorance of the same in previous years, especially when it came to rewriting history with all the evidence modern archaeology was coming up with. Women began to question whether the role played by affluent women of the past was justified to be ignored and foreshadowed by men. Why were Prophets dominantly men if everyone is seemingly equal in the eyes of God, of every major religion? Such questions developed in Europe and found their way in India.

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<sup>16</sup> Hewitt, Nancy A. (2010). *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*. Rutgers University Press. pp. 1–12.

<sup>17</sup> Tripathi, Amish. *Sita - Warrior of Mithila*. Westland Publications. 2017. Print

Revitalizing the very perception of an Epic as old as time is something which is as revolutionary as it seems, however, it is also a task which has been taken up by award – winning novelists like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her novel *The Palace of Illusions*<sup>18</sup>, which is a re – telling of the Mahabharata from the perspective of a character which seemingly should have been central to the story, but wasn't – Draupadi, or Panchaali as she was referred to in historical texts. The author changed the very outlook of an Epic that is read to every child in the country, in various ways, which is also read by adults and elderly alike. It is an ever-present text in the households, but no one before this generation talked of the atrocities the women faced in the text, as if they never existed. No one created a Goddess around a woman who endured everything for her five husbands, went through each and every atrocity with her head held high and even refrained from cursing the husband who sold her dignity off in a game of poker. No one talked of the woman who was born to be a warrior of a Queen but chose to follow her husband to be a Brahmin's wife, even though it was an illusion. She followed Arjun and his brothers to the shack they lived in at that time, made it her home and even endured her mother – in – law's wish of her being wife to not just Arjun but to all his other brothers too.

But Draupadi is not the only woman whose role has been heavily ignored in history. From the same genre comes another book – *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*<sup>19</sup> by Kavita Kané.

The Title of this splendid work reads as *Karna's Wife*, the first Chapter reads as *Karna and the second as Her Father's Daughter*, but Urvi is anything but those titles as an individual. Princess Urvi is described as a valiant warrior and Kshatriya in her own right. A character who should have been central to the story, being an active link between the two sides – Pandavas and Kauravas since the beginning – she is described to be her own person in every right.

The story of Urvi unfolds in the most different way than how any other characters from that era should have unfolded. She is a Princess who has been trained with Pandavas, but that is not what sets her apart. What differentiates her from every other character is her ability to stand for herself and question norms, which may have put her character in a negative side in those days, but today, show her willingness to be a class apart than the rest.

Urvi, in many versions of Mahabharata is first introduced during a showdown of power between the Kauravas and Pandavas which takes place in an arena, in front of the Pitamaha. This is usually seen as the scene where it is decided which of the two sects of brother's gets to claim the throne on the basis of their strength, however, what is foreshadowed is that Karna's life and

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<sup>18</sup> Divakaruni, Chitra B. *The Palace of Illusions: A Novel*. Solon, Ohio: Playaway Digital Audio, 2009. Sound recording

<sup>19</sup> Kané, Kavita. *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications India, 2013. Print



storyline changes in this very scene. He is introduced as Duryodhan's brother – in – arms and dearest friend, but denied to compete with Arjun in archery over the claims of him being a sutaputa – not a pure blood Kshatriya and a charioteer's son, but when in reality he is Arjun's elder brother, shunned as an infant in order to avoid embarrassment for his un-married teenage mother. Urvi, Princess of Pukeya, a kingdom which had close alliance for generations with Bhishma Pitamah's kingdom, defies her first very norm as a Princess by falling in love with the outcast at this very moment. What she also unknowingly initiates is a severed alliance with Pandavas, whose mother, Kunti always dreamt of Urvi being married to Arjun.

Urvi, in her conquest to gain approval of her parents challenges every norm in the most apt way possible, questioning the very right of the society to entail her to love someone. Throughout the storyline, she endures every challenge that is posed to her, while remaining true to her own dignity till the very end of the narrative. What is different about her perspective is almost as shocking as ever – she questions the Pandavas and the double standards of the society.

Her marital life revolves around negativity and talks of morality but Urvi, goes the length to question men who denied her husband the right to the best archer, which he had numerous ways to showcase. But no, she doesn't end her criticism here, she goes beyond this realm and criticizes the women who question her dignity in marrying her husband, she questions Druapadi's right to embarrass her husband at her swayammvar and the mind-set of those who challenge her. Urvi, as an adult, changes her very perception of the men she grew up playing with – the Pandavas, but she is, at the same time, vocal of her opinions on Karna's relationship with Duryodhan, whom she feels is using him, which he ends up doing. She is a character who is well taught, well learnt and is nothing like Karna's first wife, who is of his own cast, listens to him without criticism and does only household work. Urvi, is in sharp contrast with Karna's first wife – Vrushali, but she is not a person without flaws. She hates herself for getting jealous, she defends the Pandavas as a child when she doesn't understand politics and she walks away from the Pandavas when they are at war.

As a child, there is a scene which is beautiful described from her earlier life where she wills to never be constricted to only a battlefield as a kshatriya princess, but also wills to learn household chores. Throughout the narrative, she is a warrior and a wife and a Queen. She is skilled in both the worlds and choses to enhance her skill at every point. But what is foreshadowed in the narrative is a character which emerges as her strength – her father. When her mother questions her decision to marry a sutaputa, it is refreshing to see a character rise to her defense, someone who would usually not be involved in such matters to support their daughter. The King of Pukeya – King Vahusha.

Vahusha is the most surprising character in the entire narrative. He is what we would call today as a supporter of Feminism and an active inspiration for men to be supportive of the same. As his only daughter aims to marry the man she loves, despite his background, he stands in support of her. Though hesitant at first, he becomes ready to give up on the alliance for her sake and does everything to support her in front of her mother. He is also a scholar, who aims to give the best education to his daughter through experience, but doesn't deny her the right to choose her own path. He is her true strength and endures every challenge with her.

The story of Urvi and Karna is a must read for this generation as it poses two characters who have been wronged in their narrative for centuries. It is also commendable to note how outcasts of two kinds had the strength to defy norms in such a way in that time period and how an unsung warrior and his outcasted queen had the power over their own dignity without being oppressed by the shackles of the society.

It is a story of love, of defiance and of strength which a woman finds in herself for the sake of herself and her husband, while upholding the very nature of her being a separate entity than her family.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

Through the ages, these are Epics which have not only been sung and taught to us, but are also a reflection of the society of yesterday and the norms which had been initiated then, and are in some capacity still held sacred. However, there is much more than what is presented on the face value of it and that is a fact which has not been acknowledged until recently with the help of such works of Fiction. Whether it is the ignored character of Ram's elder sister,

Shanta, a major player in the yagna which led to his birth by giving up her royal status to marry a Brahmin she never fell in love with, or the story of Urmila, Laxman's wife who lived alone in a palace for fourteen years, awaiting him and requesting Gods to give his share of sleep to her, so that he could perform his dharma to protect his brother; these are characters which have sacrificed themselves for various reasons throughout the text.

The Valmiki Ramayana, just like Mahabharata in its truest sense is nothing but a mere statement of facts of that world, of that era. It does not exaggerate the characters and most of it is left to the interpretation of the reader and historian. But what is the outcome when Historians and popular culture ignores the feminist side of the story? History gets re – written. If Laxman and Arjun are Godly because of following their dharma to the forest and battlefield then why are Urmila and Urvi ignored as their strength beyond this struggle in popular cultures and re – telling.

Feminism has taken a drastic step, somehow, by realizing that the root cause of the gender imbalance does not lie in everyday perceptions that men, and some women hold. But the fact that it is a mind-set which is instilled to each and every person in the most minor way possible. The mere fact that colours are gender coordinated – blue for male, pink for female – since the birth of a child and that Epics read to them late night narrate tales of Kings, as Godly as nature and Women as a second gender and that the Fairy tales they envision are also flawed and play a major part in enforcing this view. Feminism needs to clarify this very vision of mankind.

As women, you can be valiant warriors without being questioned, and yet be good at ten different things. You are not multi – taskers or a superior class which should be expected to do everything, you are an equal to every other person on earth, made of the same genes and an equal player in every field. You are our own person in every right as that of a man. You are an equal shareholder of every accomplishment of not mankind – but of humankind.

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