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# A Return to The Sacred Circle

Katie Ness experiences the powerful energy of women's circles

**W**alking barefoot up the warm steps as the crickets sing in the Balinese air and hibiscus flowers bloom all around a lush jungle, I come upon a bamboo yoga shala guarded by a stone Ganesh statue. The airy space is enveloped in red veils hanging from the ceiling and rose petals scattered across the floor like a ruby river that tickles my feet. This place feels like a loving secret; a womb-space that holds mysteries akin to the wisdom of the Pythia and mysticism of the Eleusinian initiations.

A woman greets me with a mantra dedicated to my name, offers me a flower and anoints me with amber oil before guiding me to sit in a circle of women exalted by an altar dedicated to Durga, the Hindu mother goddess of courage, protection and divine shakti power.

The entire experience seemed like a remembering of what once was, that perhaps my ancestors practiced long ago and which I was tuning into, a time of honouring the creative power of womanhood, a time when the divine feminine walked the earth.

'Devi is Sanskrit for "She who shines", it is another word for "Goddess", explains Sharada, creatrix of the Be Woman Project. 'Let's discover how Devi is not separate from us – that you and I, and all women, are also Devi'.

## The Need for Women's Circles

Women's circles are nothing new. They've been facilitated for centuries around the world but in recent years, circles have grown in popularity in the

**'Know  
Woman  
Be  
Woman  
All  
Women  
Nature  
Nurture  
Me'**

THE BE WOMAN PROJECT

West. There is a resurgence of circles that are invoking the ancient ways, going back to the time of ceremonies, red tents and temples.

A space between modern circles and the witches' coven is emerging. Women's wellbeing is being fused with a primordial spirituality, steeped in a pagan texture – weaving ancestral wisdom reminiscent of ritual and sanctity and combined with mental health, holistic wellbeing and the scientific knowledge of womanhood.

It's something completely new to the contemporary rat race, but it is also of antiquity. This is the rise of the priestess path and goddess gatherings.

Women in the Western world may have claimed more rights and freedom than our previous ancestors, yet centuries of social conditioning have influenced our conscious minds in regards to our roles in the world. Women to this day are still paid less than their male counterparts. Trans women and women of minority groups are fighting for solidarity; the medical system still lacks support or knowledge of women's bodies; girls are still not allowed an education in parts of the world; globally, women are undervalued by their own partners in the home. We are still being habitually suppressed, and this is deeply insidious and ingrained in us all. We find a subtle imbalance and lack of respect for the feminine in all aspects of life, from childbirth to raising children, in our working environments, in our relationships and even towards each other.

Sisterhood has been broken apart. We no longer support each other through cycles of life. We have become competitors, fighting to be validated by the patriarchal illusions of what it is to be Woman.

## The Goddess Archetype

However long ago, ancient scriptures tell stories of a matriarchal period often portrayed in the image of goddess, mother earth – the symbol of power to create, to nurture and to represent sacred worth and beauty.

We discover Enheduanna, the earliest known high priestess and poet, revered by society as a respected teacher of the divine feminine. Nefertari and her priestesses ruled over ancient Egypt, and Mary Magdalene led teachings of unconditional love alongside Jesus.

Since the rise of masculine deities and patriarchal religions taking over – the sacredness of womanhood has been missing for centuries – femininity is now split between roles of ‘wife’ or ‘whore’ and both are in service to the God-man. She no longer stands by his side as his equal, but hovers between two paradoxical concepts: the good girl and the bad girl.

And this has trickled into the unconsciousness of our global psyches. Our identity is reflected in what we do, what we believe and how we behave as a collective. The stories told of Gods ruling over Goddesses has become woven into the fabric of our own society, which teaches that girls and women are inferior to boys and men.

Goddess archetypes that once embodied multifaceted attributes were condemned as demons and women in leadership roles now outcast as prostitutes and witches. Herbal medicine and spirituality came to be a forbidden craft, sacred sensuality became scandalous, and independence became disobedience. Lilith, who was once Adam’s equal, is now the fallen woman; the jealous demon who ate the children of the obedient Eve.

Aphrodite, who was once a mother goddess (the Greek counterpart to Isis), is now turned into Goddess of sex and primal lust. Mary Magdalene becomes the faceless harlot saved by Jesus yet the truth is that she was a wealthy, high class woman who supported Jesus’s mission and even authored her own gospel.

## Red Tents

Goddess gatherings offer women a haven that deepens the sisterhood connection to the great life force in and around ourselves. Our bodies are a temple – an abode for life, a cradle for divine spark to manifest. Our minds are jewels, full of intuitive knowledge passed down from grandmother to mother to daughter. As we worship that feral divinity within all of us roaming in our blood, we praise and rise up as the sacred feminine in all that is.

Red Tents were conceived for menstruating women not because they were seen as unclean, but because it was a sacred time of rest with your tribe’s women as menstrual blood was collected and



**“When one woman finds her voice, she guides others to find theirs”**



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✦ **Photography: Jean Manuel Photography**

offered back to Mother Earth, sanctifying the soil with life-giving nutrients to make the crops grow, which in turn brought a constant flux of sustenance to the community.

Red Tents offer knowledge of our bodies that is not taught in schools, or even sometimes by our own mothers. There is a great forgetting instilled in our psyches: the importance of supporting each other during this sensitive time, how to honour that restorative and quiet moment for respite, because the body uses a lot of energy. How to cherish and understand our cycle, when we ovulate, the mechanics of how the womb self-cleanses, and so on.

Women are now recognising that in order to heal the mind and body, we need the spirit. The key is in the collective bond between women, and in incorporating something soulful and grounded in Mother Earth that awakens the shakti force, like phoenix flames rising from the ashes.

### **The Be Woman Project**

Many modern circles feel generic and heavily saturated with psychotherapeutic mental health activities, or otherwise become juvenile and fanciful. Organisations like the Be Woman Project utilise ancient philosophies, ceremonies and teachings of seeing ourselves as Devi and remind us that this light is all around us.

Giving an offering, a prayer, flower, mantra, ritual and ceremony to a woman's rite of passage or to collective stories of pain and joy-honours and validates each woman's sacred story, turning it into the heroine's journey that resonate with mythological tales of goddesses overcoming trials and tribulations.

## **“A space between modern circles and the witches' coven is emerging”**

We discover that my story is your story. We are one and the same. We are all Devi. We are all shining stars in the sky: that is Devi. We are all flowers dancing in the soil: that is Devi.

What we think, we become. If we inhabit the space with love, the actions we take will reflect that love. Understanding who we are in relation to our past – both ancestral and in ancient rituals that cherished goddesses – we will ultimately break the societal curse that has bound women for centuries. We will set our daughters free to roam the earth as shining lights, embodying the divine spark of Devi.

The resurgence of Red Tents and goddess gatherings remind women of their primordial divinity. This is the missing piece of the puzzle. Generic women's circles and wellbeing groups are lacking in connecting to the soul and to spirit. Adding the soulful value of being a woman makes the whole experience feel holy and uplifting.

Temple-like circles offer teachings of reverence for ourselves. When I offer up my dress to the altar of Lakshmi, I am reminded of my sacred beauty and self worth. When I offer up my poetry, art, singing, belly dancing for Sarasvati, I am reminded of my own sacred creativity and self knowledge. When I offer up my pain to Kali, I am reminded that my pain is a blessing in disguise and holds so much wisdom. When I offer up my blood, I am reminded of my own earthly, life-giving magic that is the same as Gaia's.

All that is woman is creative, compassionate, caring, curvaceous, cyclical and circular. It is our nature to be circular and so we sit together, forming a sisterhood circle to consecrate, cherish and cultivate healthier relationships with ourselves and others. We see the goddess in each other's eyes.

Devi circles create a sacred environment that feels magical and encourages sisterhood bonding. It is a ripple effect: the light in the individual honours the light in another. When one woman finds her voice, she guides others to find theirs. When women in a circle honour each other as a version of the goddess, a collective awakening happens. We all want to feel like a goddess. Devi circles nurture women's natural magic, this magic that was lost or broken down.

Sacred circles are making a comeback, and that is a wonderful thing. Each woman should be reminded of their divine feminine radiance. All negativity falls away. In a room full of self-shining, joyful women, at home in their bodies, only peace, love and light resides. ●