

Lilith: A Woman's Tale of Surfacing

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Abstract: The object of this paper is to present the theme of surfacing in Sara Maitland's short story, "Lilith." The quest for self-revelation that Lilith has undertaken is an eternal one, while the journey of Cain is ephemeral and comes to an end with his death, which relieves him of his sense of sin and guilt.

Keywords: Feminism, feminine, Jewish and Babylonian myths.

"Myths often have some serious underlying purpose beyond that of telling a story" – Diane Purkiss

The object of this paper is to present the theme of surfacing in Sara Maitland's short story, "Lilith." Most of Maitland's short stories fall under the genre of mythic feminism, where she rewrites popular myths with the sole aim of exploring the feminist vein in them. In "Women's Rewriting of Myths", Diane Purkiss discusses the problematic approach of feminist authors who, by

... rewriting the myth—changing the narrative, changing the position of the speaker, changing the spaces available for identification—are held to be at once making a dramatic break with the myths as told by the fathers, and also to be recovering the dark, secret, always unconscious truths which the fathers have struggled to repress. (444)

Generally, feminists are of the opinion that there are three major phases in a woman's life – Scooting, Succumbing, and Surfacing. Women pass through either of these phases or all of them in succession. Scooting is the phase where woman flees either out of fear or hatred from the ideals of men. But not every woman succeeds in this attempt. Dorothy Dinnerstein rightly points out, "The prevailing symbiosis between men and women is something more than a product of societal coercion" (234). In other words, women cannot evade men for long, for men, through the exertion of patriarchal authority, manage to force women either into willing or unwilling subjugation. Women therefore are forced to encounter the succumbing phase. According to most women, subservience is predestined, but when it becomes intolerable, a few begin to discover methods of extricating themselves from the yoke of subordination and oppression. The desire to acquit oneself from the norms of an androcentric society is the first symptom of the surfacing of a woman's personality. Radical feminists affirm that surfacing is the phase of rejuvenation or rebirth in a woman's life. There are two types of women. The obsequious woman knows that she has succumbed to man either willingly or unwillingly and yet makes no attempt to break free from those shackles that have bound her to the male-centred society. This could be probably out of fear or her unwillingness to change. The second type of woman, unlike her docile counterparts, is bold enough to emerge free

from the androcentric society. During this process, the static self in her slowly vanishes and the genesis of a dynamic self takes place. Sara Maitland's short story "Lilith" is the story of a woman who threatens to shake the very foundations of male-centred faith and discover a new self.

Lilith, in Hebrew mythology is described as the first wife of Adam. Her name means 'night monster' and is derived from the name of the Babylonian female demon Lilit whose male counterpart is Lilu. Some myths say that she is the wife of the serpent Samael, who tempted Eve into transgression. Lilith did not like to live as the subservient wife of Adam and hence went to the deserts, desiring solitude and freedom. Three angels tried to force her to return, but in vain. She is also described as a vampire child-killer like her classical counterpart Lamia. The evil threatened by her against children was said to be counteracted by wearing an amulet, which bore the name of the three angels. The Bible, however, does not make any direct reference to Lilith. But it does make a mention of the night monster in the Book of Isaiah. "Wild animals will roam there, and demons will call to each other. The night monster will come there looking for a place to rest" (Isaiah 34:14). "Lilith" is a story that describes the meeting of Cain and Lilith and of how Cain perceives the dynamic feminine in Lilith. In fact, a similar meeting of Cain and Lilith is described in *The Book of Nod* compiled by Aristotle de Laurent et al. Unlike Maitland's feminist reworking, the book justifies the existence of vampires and considers Cain the founder of *vampirehood*. Maitland's short story is compelling in its language and theme, and is indeed an interpreter's Paradise.

There are three levels of contrast in the story. The first is between man and woman, the second level of contrast is between woman and woman, and the third is between God and woman. The first level of contrast is between Adam and his son Cain on one hand, and Lilith on the other. Cain, for having murdered his brother Abel, is exiled and is forced to seek fortune in an alien land. At the same time, God puts a mark on him and says that the person who kills him would suffer sevenfold times the effect of the sin. Cain goes to the land of Nod where he marries and gets a son called Enoch. The similarity that Lilith and Cain share is that both are outcasts. But while Cain is cast away by God, Lilith prefers to remain alone. She chooses her future, unlike Cain who is obsequious to God and has no other choice other than succumbing to his will. Lilith is individualistic in every way. She chooses her way of living and does not allow even God to decide on her behalf. For instance, when God asks her to help him in the perpetuation of the human race, she spurns his offer. Lilith's vision of life is clear and therefore she is lucid and spontaneous in her conversation with Cain. The latter's thoughts are blurred and unclear and hence, he stammers while talking to her. Lilith's words have the force of a prophetess, when she foretells the future of womankind, which, unlike Eve, will set out on a quest for eternal freedom.

One day her daughters will realize that they cannot find their Name that way and they will come to me. It will be hard for them...But in the end their need for a name will be enormous and they will learn courage from that need and will come out into the desert and will live alone and will complete the search. (Lilith 79)

In other words, the quest for self-revelation that Lilith has undertaken is an eternal one, while the journey of Cain is ephemeral and comes to an end with his death, which relieves him of his sense of sin and guilt. Cain does not experience any sense of pleasure in his journey, for, every time he sets out on a venture, he is pervaded by a sense of guilt that is part of his punishment. Lilith's quest has nothing to do with God and is characterised by an overwhelming sense of hope. Hence, she is never tired of journeying further, while Cain feels fatigued every now and then in the course of journeying. Adam is also a weak character like his son. He tries to prove himself big only to those animals whom he rules over and to Eve whom God created in Adam's image. He is frightened of God and submits to his will, except in the case of the Fall, when he succumbs to the words of Eve. What is most interesting to note about Adam and Lilith is that both were created by God at the same time unlike the case of Adam and Eve. But, while Adam always looks at God and gets frightened, Lilith looks at herself and recognises the God in her. As a result, she becomes narcissistic and refuses to shift her attention to Adam, who is ignorant of his potential and calibre. Her dynamic personality creates a feeling of inferiority in Adam. "In reality, when women...develop ...as strong independent individuals...they threaten relationships in which the other person will not tolerate a self-directed woman" (Miller 24). Lilith, on knowing that she cannot suppress her 'Animus' or male characteristics, which would subsequently cause Adam a lot of inconvenience, flies out of Eden by naming the Name, which even the angels would not dare to do. She emphatically states, "I am not going to make myself less in order to help another person escape from themselves" (Lilith 80).

There is a lot to observe in Lilith and Eve. Eve, unlike Lilith, is not created by God along with Adam, but fashioned out of Adam's rib. Hence, she is an image of an image, for Adam is nothing but an image of God. Apparently, she is subject to more fear and subservience than Adam and this makes it easier for him to dominate her as her lord and master. Eve is a totally dependent woman, who is bound to Adam and his progeny as a wife, mother, and the like. Lilith, on the other hand, frees herself from such bonds and craves for nothing but an identity of her own – not as a mother, wife or even the daughter of God, but only as Lilith. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese points out, "Feminism has, from its inception, wrestled with the problem of female identity and subjectivity within a dominant culture or discourse largely defined by men" (159). That is why Lilith considers Eve on par with other inferior forms like animals and birds, for they were named by Adam and do not possess an identity of their own.

Eve is the first to transgress because she is created from the rib of a mortal, unlike Lilith who is created by God directly along with Adam. Lilith is one who has transcended the knowledge of good and evil, for she is infested with the power of God and, according to her, even the joys of Eden are trivial and restricting. According to God and his angels, Lilith also transgresses by daring to choose for herself and for naming the Name. At the same time, she cannot be considered a sinner for she does not associate with any evil force, as per Jewish and Babylonian myths. Her act of sucking her children's life-blood is again not a sin, for God allows her to commit the deed, in return for concealing the secret that Lilith was created along with Adam. Even the aloe tree, under which Lilith sits, is a tree with toothed leaves and fits well with Lilith who has huge teeth to suck the blood of her children. The other perspective that the story offers is that the children of Lilith symbolise liberty, for they are born of an independent mother. Lilith needs sustenance in the form of liberty to nourish herself and continue her quest and therefore feeds on her children. Lilith's children are born without any pain, but with some effort, for liberty is something, which should be attained with effort. Eve, on the other hand, is involved in the Fall and is cursed with labour pains during childbirth. Viewed at a symbolic level, Eve and her daughters have to endure the pain, which is the outcome of sin. The process of childbirth represents a complete rejuvenation of their inner being where they gain redemption from the sin. While some myths claim that the children of Lilith are ass-hunched, Maitland describes her children as being born "...with the light of Eden in their eyes" (Lilith 83).

Lilith, in many ways, reminds one of the goddess Artemis in Maitland's short story, "The Lady Artemis." She is "Uncaring – neither good nor evil, neither secret nor open, neither gentle nor fierce. Indifferent. She does not care" (The Lady Artemis 118). Perhaps Maitland tries to emphasise that Eve, for being docile and submissive, is extolled as the mother of mankind, while Lilith, for being independent and for haunting deserts and other lonely places, is described as a night phantom or an evil spirit. Even Cirlot observes that Lilith symbolises the terrible mother, while Eve represents the loving mother (188). There is also a contrast presented between the desert that is barren, and Lilith, who is fertile and gives birth to a hundred children everyday. This is to show the creative power of woman as set against barrenness. But, the desert has also produced prophets like Moses and Lilith is her own way a prophetess who foretells the future of women. God, in this short story, is seen not only as the Omnipresent Force that created the universe, but also as a male God. It is interesting to note that initially Jehovah or Yahweh, the wrathful God of the Old Testament was worshipped as second to the Canaanite goddess Inanna (also called Ashar, Asherah, and Ashtoreth), who is also known as the Divine Mother or the Queen of Heaven. There is also an allusion to this goddess in the Book of Jeremiah.

We will do everything that we said we would. We will offer sacrifices to our goddess, the Queen of Heaven, and we will pour out wine offerings to her, just as we and our ancestors, our king and our leaders, used to do in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. Then we had plenty of food, we were prosperous, and had no troubles. (Jeremiah 44: 17)

Angered by this, Jehovah punishes them to be consumed by the sword and by famine. This, in short, proves that Jehovah gained a lot of worshippers by coercion and thereby forced his worshippers to stoop offering prayers and sacrifices to the Queen of Heaven. This may be one of the reasons for which Jehovah creates Eve, for unlike Lilith, she will be under his control forever. Regarding the Fall, two things are of prime importance – the Tree of Knowledge and the serpent who tempts Eve. Sanday is of the view that the tree symbolises the goddess Asherah whose places of worship “were marked by trees and whose image was frequently carved form a trunk like form” (223). The union of good and evil in the tree is like the union of the qualities of the two goddesses Asherah and her cruel, wanton daughter Anath. The serpent is generally considered a phallic symbol and in the Book of Genesis, after eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, Adam and Eve enjoy a coital relationship. This again may be related to the various sexual rites related to the goddess Asherah. In other words, Jehovah prevents Adam and Eve from following the practices related to the worship of the goddess, for in such rites, woman was always given the upper hand. When Jehovah comes to know that Adam and Eve have tasted the fruit of the tree, he realizes that woman might gain an upper hand over man in due course of time. So, he curses woman to remain the subordinate of man forever. “...thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee” (Genesis 3:16).

Lilith does not know the meaning of shame since she is not involved in the Fall. She is depicted as having transcended the concept of family and sexual love. That is why she tells Cain, “I will not be touched... That is why I am alone, why I destroy my children daily. I need them for food. I won't have them with me, needing me, deflecting me...” (Lilith 82). Lilith knows that her quest is going to be a long one. Yet, she does not waver in the least. She chooses her own path to attain her goal and is the shaper of her own destiny. “I am going to seek myself, and learn myself until I can call my own name and recreate myself, be myself, for myself alone, as I generate my children...I will go to God...but I will go freely when I have found myself beyond the limits of even his knowledge” (Lilith 83). According to her, even Christ is not perfect as he wishes to lower himself for the sake of man, and to Lilith, that is definitely not acceptable. Lilith dominates the story from the beginning and even God pales into insignificance when compared to her iron will and her strong sense of individuality. But in spite of being assertive, individualistic and determined, she is still innocent. Unlike Adam and Eve and their progeny, she does not conceal her ideas. Even her dreams don't remain concealed

and they assume different forms as they emanate from her. Lilith is a clear mirror who reflects a true image of the dynamic feminine, unlike the other characters in the story who act more as a foil to her. Judith Plaskow is right in stating “Lilith is not a demon; rather she is a woman named a demon by a tradition that does not know what to do with strong women” (qtd. in Kvam et al 426). The conclusion has been aptly designed by Maitland. It deals with the death of Cain in the bosom of his family. Cain's death proves to be a benison to him for he is freed from his curse finally. Apart from the fact that he dies happily for being united with his family, he dies with a sense of bliss for having discovered the equality of male and female and their likeness to God.

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