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2026**RESEARCH ARTICLE****LILITH: THE FIRST FEMINIST OF THE WESTERN WORLD****Dr. A. B. Sai Prasad***Retired Professor of Hindi, Pachaiyappa's College, Chennai.**Email: dr.saiprasadanantapur@gmail.com**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2026.13217>***ABSTRACT****Article history:**

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Among the numerous female figures that have emerged from the religious imagination of the ancient Near East, none has undergone a more remarkable transformation than Lilith. Lilith, a symbol of devastation, seduction, and child mortality that was once vilified, as a potent representation of female autonomy and defiance against patriarchal dominance, is reinterpreted by Modern feminist discourse. Although the canonical Hebrew Bible makes only a single reference to Lilith (Isa. 34.14), Jewish folklore, Midrashic traditions, and the *Alphabet of Ben Sira* present her as Adam's first wife, created from the same earth as Adam and therefore his equal. This article recounts the history of Lilith as she developed from an obscure mythological figure to a popular feminist *icon*. The research delves into the long-lasting influence of Lilith on Jewish feminist movements, contemporary feminist thought, visual arts, and literature, as exemplified by the founding of the influential Jewish feminist magazine Lilith in 1976. It argues that Lilith's transformation from a stigmatised legendary figure to a respected icon of female autonomy mirrors the altering attitudes of Western civilisation to gender, power and identity.

Keywords: *Lilith, Adam, Eve, Genesis, Alphabet of Ben Sira, Midrash, Feminism, Patriarchy, Judith Plaskow, Barbara Black Koltuv.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

John Milton (1608–1674), in his epic *Paradise Lost* (Book IV), writes:

“Whence true authority in men; though both (line 295)

“Not equal, as their sex not equal seem'd” (line 296)

“Hee for God only, Shee for God in Him” (Line 299).

Few female figures in world mythology have experienced as dramatic a transformation as Lilith. For nearly two millennia, she remained largely absent from mainstream religious discourse, remembered primarily as a dangerous demon associated with seduction, infertility, and the death of infants. In recent decades, however, Lilith has been rediscovered and reinterpreted by literary critics, historians, theologians, and feminist scholars as one of the earliest symbols of female independence. Today, she occupies a prominent place in discussions of gender equality, women's autonomy, and feminist theology.

While Eve's narrative is established in the canonical text of *Genesis*, Lilith is predominantly associated with Jewish folklore, Midrashic literature, and the medieval *Alphabet of Ben Sira*. Lilith is referenced only once in the Hebrew Bible (Isaiah 34:14). However, later Jewish legends assert that she was Adam's first wife, created from the same soil and having equal dignity as Adam. Her insistence on equality and her rejection of subordination have rendered her one of the most controversial figures in the annals of Western culture.

The story of Lilith has also been of great interest to scholars, as it appears to address the supposed discrepancy between the two creation accounts in

Genesis. As Christopher L. C. E. Whitcombe (Whitcombe) states, the biblical text includes "two separate accounts of creation," a quality that caused Jewish exegetes to develop interpretative traditions to justify the presence of a woman before Eve. Lilith, writes Barbara Black Koltuv, "was born in the discrepancy between those two myths" (Koltuv, 2000). These non-canonical readings gained traction for subsequent Jewish folklore and finally found their way into modern literary and feminist understandings of Lilith.

Lilith, who was depicted in the Hebrew Bible as a vague figure, has developed into a well-known icon of modern feminism, highlighting the complex interrelationships among mythology, religion, literature, and social change. This study illustrates how Lilith has emerged as a persistent emblem of women's struggle for equality, dignity, and self-determination in the Western context.

2. Lilith And The Dual Creation Narratives:

The apparent discrepancy between these two narratives prompted subsequent Jewish scholars to question whether the lady described in Genesis 1 was identical to Eve, who is solely featured in the second version. Rather than accept male domination, she pronounced the ineffable name of God (YHWH) and fled the Garden of Eden. Later medieval tradition cast her as a demon, but recent feminist scholarship has restored her as a woman who would not give up her dignity or equality. She is often cited as one of the earliest literary expressions of resistance against patriarchal authority.

A considerable segment of Lilith's contemporary rehabilitation is ascribed to authors and scholars who



contested centuries of adverse representation: Barbara Black Koltuv analysed Lilith's psychological and symbolic importance; Siegmund Hurwitz investigated her role in Jewish mystical traditions; Raphael Patai traced Lilith's development in Hebrew mythology; and Judith Plaskow redefined Lilith from a fearsome demon into an emblem of women's equality and spiritual emancipation through her innovative feminist reinterpretation, literature, theatre, popular culture, and feminist theology.

Lilith has influenced painters, poets, and novelists like Hugo van der Goes, Michelangelo, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Browning, and others. Their artistic and literary representations have gradually evolved Lilith into an enduring symbol of female identity, sexual autonomy, and resistance against patriarchal dominance.

Lilith is a unique piece of work that occupies the space between feminist scholarship, Jewish mythology, and biblical exegesis. Her reference in the Hebrew Bible (Isa. 34:14) is singular and contentious. Her story, on the other hand, comes from later Jewish interpretations that tried to make sense of what people saw as problems in the creation stories in *Genesis*. *Genesis*, as noted by Christopher L. C. E. Whitcombe, contains "two distinct accounts of creation," leading Jewish interpreters to harmonise the textual discrepancies via Midrashic interpretation (Whitcombe).

The primordial creation narrative states, "So God created humankind in His image; in the image of God, He created them; male and female, He created them" (Gen. 1.27). God grants equal rewards to both man and woman, commanding them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen. 1.28).

However, the second account presents a distinct sequence. God forms Adam from the earth's dust (Gen. 2.7) and thereafter declares, "It is not good for man to be alone; I will create a companion for him" (Gen. 2.18).

Barbara Black Koltuv succinctly encapsulates this interpretative tradition: "The Old Testament contains two narratives regarding the creation of woman." 'Lilith originated from the convergence of two myths' (Koltuv). This concept, however, absent from the biblical canon, emerged as one of the most impactful interpretations in later Jewish mythology. This constituted the foundation of the Lilith tradition.

The earliest comprehensive narrative of Lilith appears in the medieval *Alphabet of Ben-Sira*, typically dated to the ninth or tenth century CE. The text characterises Lilith as Adam's initial spouse, rather than Eve. While Eve is formed from Adam's rib, Lilith is fashioned from the same earth as Adam. She demands equality based on her shared origin. The narrative asserts that she will not endure subservience in her relationship with Adam, as they were both formed simultaneously and from the same essence. Their dispute ends in sexual intercourse, during which Adam insists that Lilith assume a submissive role. Lilith refutes, asserting that parity in creation necessitates parity in matrimony. Her assertion is encapsulated in a memorable phrase in the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*: "We are equal because we were both formed from the earth."

A considerable amount of scholarly attention has been directed to the Hebrew term *ezer kenegdo* ("a helper corresponding to him") in *Genesis* 2:18. Contemporary Hebrew scholars predominantly agree that the term *ezer* does not imply inferiority or



servitude but rather signifies a partner or an indispensable aide. The term is employed numerous times in the Old Testament to describe God as the helper of Israel, rendering an interpretation of the word as denoting subordination infeasible. In the Lilith myth, the unwillingness to bow to Adam signifies not merely an act of individual defiance but also a call for the acknowledgment of creation's inherent equality.

Unable to resolve their conflict, Lilith utters the ineffable name of God (*YHWH*) and departs from the Garden of Eden. Her departure represents one of the first narratives in Western religious tradition wherein a woman autonomously opts to exit a relationship characterised by inequality. Subsequent medieval Jewish literature transformed this act of disobedience into proof of a demonic essence. Whitcombe asserts that Lilith was perceived as "evil" due to her refusal to submit to male authority; her autonomy was regarded as a direct challenge to the patriarchal structure (Whitcombe).

The *Alphabet of Ben Sira* further elucidates Adam's complaints to God on Lilith's departure. God dispatched three angels, Senoy, Sansenoy, and Semangelof, to attempt to persuade Mary to return. She refused, and the narrative increasingly associated her with demons, the demise of infants, and nocturnal entities. These iconic transformations progressively replaced the earlier depiction of Lilith as Adam's equal, establishing the demonic legacy that would prevail in Jewish and subsequently Christian thought for generations.

Numerous traditions, as noted by Raphael Patai, attest to the integration of ancient Mesopotamian demonology into medieval Jewish mythology. The

Alphabet of Ben Sira is not the first document evidencing belief in female nocturnal spirits. Protective amulets and writings from the ancient Near East indicate that these beliefs predate the development of the *alphabet*. Over time, these ancient concepts were integrated into biblical readings, resulting in Lilith's complex and frequently contradictory nature.

In contrast, the Christian tradition predominantly overlooked the Lilith tale. Since the canonical Scriptures provide no specific account of Adam's first wife, Christian theology has predominantly centred on Eve as the first woman. Lilith predominantly persisted in Jewish folklore, mystical literature, and popular legend until her remarkable revival in modern literature and feminist theology during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The significance of the Lilith tradition lies not in its historical accuracy but in its interpretative implications. The narrative, whether myth, Midrash, or medieval folklore, addresses enduring themes of equality, authority, sexuality, and the relationships between men and women. These issues enabled contemporary feminist researchers to reclaim Lilith as a powerful symbol of female autonomy and defiance against patriarchal oppression. This transformation from demon to feminist icon underscores the continual reinterpretation of myths as historical and cultural contexts evolve.

3. LILITH'S REVOLT AGAINST PATRIARCHY: FROM MYTH TO FEMINIST ICON

The enduring appeal of Lilith lies not in the historical authenticity of her story but in the symbolic power of her rebellion. Unlike Eve, whose narrative in Christian



tradition has frequently been interpreted as one of obedience followed by transgression, Lilith represents an altogether different paradigm. She refuses submission from the very beginning. Her protest is neither accidental nor emotional; it is grounded in the conviction that equality in creation necessarily implies equality in human relationships. According to the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, Lilith insists that she and Adam were both created from the same earth and therefore neither possesses authority over the other. Her refusal to occupy an inferior position during sexual intercourse becomes the first recorded assertion of bodily autonomy in Jewish legendary tradition.

From a feminist perspective, Lilith's departure from the Garden of Eden constitutes a radical rejection of patriarchal domination. Rather than accept a subordinate role, she pronounces the ineffable name of God (YHWH) and leaves Eden of her own free will. Although medieval Jewish tradition regarded this act as evidence of rebellion against the divine order, modern feminist scholarship interprets it as an affirmation of personal dignity and selfhood. Lilith chooses exile over submission, autonomy over dependence, and freedom over enforced obedience.

Lilith's decision inevitably recalls one of the most celebrated declarations in English literature. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton's Satan proclaims, "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven" (1.263). Although there is no historical evidence that Milton consciously modelled Satan upon the Lilith tradition, both figures reject imposed authority and willingly embrace exile rather than surrender their independence. The comparison is therefore thematic rather than genealogical. Each chooses freedom despite its

consequences, making Lilith's departure from Eden one of the earliest literary representations of resistance to hierarchical power.

A comparable act of defiance appears in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Nora Helmer's decision to leave her husband and children at the conclusion of the play has long been regarded as one of the defining moments in modern feminist literature. The symbolic force of the closing door reverberated throughout nineteenth-century Europe, challenging conventional assumptions about marriage, domesticity, and female obedience. Although no direct influence can be established between the Lilith legend and Ibsen's drama, both narratives dramatize a woman's refusal to sacrifice her individuality to preserve patriarchal authority. Lilith leaves Eden; Nora leaves the doll's house. Each rejects a relationship founded upon inequality.

For centuries, however, Lilith's voice remained largely suppressed. Medieval Jewish folklore increasingly represented her as a demon responsible for infant mortality, nocturnal emissions, and seduction. The fear surrounding female independence gradually displaced the earlier image of Lilith as Adam's equal. As Christopher L. C. E. Whitcombe observes, Lilith became "evil" because she existed beyond male control (Whitcombe). Her demonization reflects not merely theological speculation but also broader cultural anxieties concerning female sexuality and autonomy.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed a remarkable reassessment of Lilith's character. Writers, artists, and scholars began to recover the forgotten dimensions of the legend and reinterpret her as a symbol of liberation rather than



transgression. Barbara Black Koltuv's *The Book of Lilith* represents a significant milestone in this process. Rather than portraying Lilith as a supernatural monster, Koltuv interprets her as an archetypal expression of the feminine psyche. She famously describes Lilith as "a force, a power, a quality, a renegade, a free spirit," emphasizing her refusal to be confined by social or psychological conventions (Koltuv). Through such interpretations, Lilith gradually ceased to represent evil and instead came to embody the quest for self-realization.

The most influential feminist reinterpretation of Lilith is undoubtedly that of Judith Plaskow. In her celebrated essay "The Coming of Lilith," later incorporated into *The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism, and Sexual Ethics*, Plaskow reconstructs the relationship between Lilith and Eve through feminist Midrash. Rather than portraying them as rivals, she imagines their friendship as the beginning of female solidarity against patriarchal exclusion. Eve, traditionally understood as the obedient wife, becomes a participant in Lilith's vision of equality. Through this imaginative retelling, Plaskow transforms one of Judaism's most feared female figures into an icon of liberation, dialogue, and communal resistance. Her work marks a decisive turning point in feminist theology, demonstrating that ancient myths can be reinterpreted to challenge rather than reinforce systems of oppression.

Raphael Patai, Siegmund Hurwitz, and other scholars likewise contributed to Lilith's rehabilitation by examining her place within Jewish mythology and mysticism. Their studies demonstrated that the Lilith tradition cannot be reduced to a simple narrative of demonic evil but instead reflects centuries of

evolving religious imagination. Modern literary criticism increasingly regards Lilith as a cultural symbol whose significance shifts with the concerns of successive generations. Her story illustrates how myths survive precisely because they remain open to reinterpretation.

The revival of Lilith also found expression in literature, painting, music, and popular culture. Hugo van der Goes, Michelangelo, and John Collier each produced memorable visual representations of Lilith, emphasizing her beauty, mystery, and independence. Dante Gabriel Rossetti explored her seductive power in "Body's Beauty" and "Eden Bower," while Robert Browning revived her legend in "Adam, Lilith and Eve." George MacDonald's *Lilith*, James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and Nikki Marmery's recent novel *Lilith* all testify to the continuing fascination exerted by Adam's first wife upon the literary imagination. Across these diverse works, Lilith ceases to function merely as a supernatural being and instead emerges as a complex cultural metaphor for freedom, sexuality, identity, and resistance.

The rediscovery of Lilith reached beyond academic scholarship into contemporary feminist movements. The establishment of *Lilith* magazine in 1976, inspired by Jewish feminism, symbolized the acceptance of Lilith as a representative of women's equality and intellectual freedom. Feminist writers increasingly invoked her name to challenge patriarchal interpretations of Scripture and to affirm women's right to autonomy, education, and leadership. What had once been a figure of fear became an emblem of empowerment.



The cultural rehabilitation of Lilith is evident not only in literature and feminist theology, but also in modern social activity. The name *Lilith*, once largely avoided because of its association with demonology, has increasingly been embraced by parents in several Western countries, reflecting changing attitudes toward female identity, autonomy, and empowerment. Similarly, the push for gender-inclusive terminology has influenced Christian marriage liturgy, with the traditional phrase “man and wife” being replaced in many churches with the more egalitarian phrase “husband and wife.” Although these changes are a product of wider gender equality movements, they also reflect the broader cultural acceptance of the ideals that Lilith has come to symbolize in contemporary feminist discourse.

4. CONCLUSION

Lilith's remarkable journey from an obscure figure in Jewish folklore to one of the most influential symbols of modern feminism demonstrates the dynamic relationship between myth, religion, literature, and cultural history. Although the Hebrew Bible contains only a single and enigmatic reference to Lilith (Isa. 34.14), later Jewish traditions, particularly the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, transformed her into Adam's first wife and presented her as a woman who refused to surrender her equality. Whether understood as myth, Midrash, or medieval legend, the Lilith narrative has continued to invite reinterpretation because it addresses enduring questions concerning authority, gender, sexuality, and human dignity.

For many centuries, patriarchal religious traditions interpreted Lilith's independence as

rebellion and consequently demonized her. Her refusal to submit to Adam became the basis for portraying her as a dangerous supernatural being associated with chaos, seduction, and death. Modern scholarship, however, has challenged this inherited perception.

The influence of this reinterpretation extends well beyond theology. Lilith has become an enduring presence in literature, painting, music, psychology, and feminist thought. From Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Robert Browning to George MacDonald, James Joyce, C. S. Lewis, and Nikki Marmery, successive generations of writers have rediscovered Lilith and reshaped her according to the intellectual concerns of their own age. Likewise, artists such as Hugo van der Goes, Michelangelo, and John Collier transformed her into one of the most recognizable female figures in Western art. These literary and artistic representations reveal that Lilith is no longer confined to religious mythology; she has become a powerful cultural metaphor for freedom, equality, and the assertion of female identity.

The comparison between Lilith, Milton's Satan, and Ibsen's Nora Helmer further demonstrates that acts of resistance against oppressive authority occupy a significant place in the Western literary imagination. Although direct lines of influence cannot always be established, these figures collectively embody the desire for dignity, selfhood, and moral agency. Lilith's departure from Eden, Satan's rejection of heavenly hierarchy, and Nora's departure from the domestic sphere each dramatize the human struggle for freedom against structures of domination. Within feminist literary criticism, Lilith therefore functions not merely as a mythological



character but as a recurring archetype of female resistance.

The transformation of Lilith from a feared demon into an icon of feminist consciousness illustrates how myths continually acquire new meanings in response to changing historical circumstances. Her story reminds us that literary and religious traditions are not static but remain open to reinterpretation by successive generations of readers. The rehabilitation of Lilith by modern feminist theologians and literary critics demonstrates the capacity of ancient narratives to challenge contemporary assumptions concerning gender, power, and identity.

This study, therefore, argues that Lilith deserves recognition not simply as a legendary figure associated with Adam's first wife but as one of the most significant symbolic representations of women's autonomy in Western intellectual history. Her enduring relevance lies in her refusal to accept inequality and in her continuing ability to inspire discussions on justice, equality, and human dignity. From the margins of Jewish folklore to the centre of feminist discourse, Lilith has undergone one of the most remarkable transformations in the history of Western literature. Her evolution affirms that myths survive not because they remain unchanged but because every age discovers within them new meanings and new possibilities.

Novelist Nikki Marmery astutely notes, "There must be equality, not domination. Harmony, not hierarchy. Compassion, not violence. Women must be cherished as we cherish this world that sustains us." These words encapsulate the enduring significance of Lilith's legacy as a symbol of equality, dignity, and justice.

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