

Aspects of Lilith: A Case Study from A South India Village  
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Introduction

God created Lilith, Adam's first wife, from the same earth as Adam. Perhaps their creation from the same substance gave them an equality which Adam was unable to accept. Lilith took control of her own sexuality, refused to submit to Adam, and ran from Eden. So God punished Lilith and created another wife for Adam from Adam's ribs. Lilith can be seen as the image of evil, of prohibited, incestuous, aggressive, destructive and oedipal wishes. Lilith's insistence on control threatened patriarchy. Eve also transgressed God's boundaries when she persuaded Adam to eat the apple of knowledge, with the result that God expelled both Adam and Eve from Eden. Perhaps in patriarchy a woman's assertiveness without male sanction results in her becoming an object of discrimination.

My data collection method has been primarily participant

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observation in the South India state, Karnataka. The research site is a small village approximately 200 miles northwest of the state capital, Bangalore. The village, which I call Totagadde (a pseudonym), is a multi-caste village with a population of eight hundred to a thousand. Havik Brahmins comprise the social, economic, political, and religious elite in the village.

There I lived with a Havik Brahmin family who lived next door to the woman I will call Kusuma. The houses are close together so that one overheard quarrels, raised voices, and even general conversations in the neighbors' houses and backyards. The Havik dialect of Kannada was the language which I used with the Havik Brahmins. Non-Brahmins who spoke other dialects of Kannada were not privy to the Havik dialect. I interviewed neighbors and relatives with structured as well as open-ended questionnaires.

I elicited information informally as a participant-observer. Kusuma gave oral permission for me to write about her, with the understanding that I use her initials or a pseudonym. My acquaintance with her began in 1964 and ended with her suicide in 1994.

Havik Brahmin society in South India is emphatically patriarchal, and Hindu tradition has reinforced that status. The restrictions Havik Brahmin culture placed on women until the

1980s predisposed them to passivity and dependency. The eldest man of the household made most decisions for the household. He and his son together gave permission for his son's wife to visit her parents. The men bought the groceries and chose the clothing for all members of the household. They would tell the household women what to cook. These men told me women were fortunate because they need never make a decision. By the late 1980s Havik Brahmin women joked among themselves that men took the credit for household accomplishments, whereas women received the blame for poor decisions. At this time women married after a minimum of a high-school education, in contrast to their mothers who most likely had a third-grade education, and their grandmothers who had no formal education. In the 1960's some women considered one woman to be presumptuous because she divided the newspaper in half so that she and her husband could read it at the same time. That was the era when the allegorical Lilith reigned.

By the 1990's men praised wifely assertiveness. One father even arranged a marriage for a younger daughter before his older daughter. The groom planned to settle in the United States. The father thought the assertive younger daughter would cope better in the United States than her older sister, whom he

regarded as passive. In the 1990's older men registered their disapproval of a new bride who vociferously expressed distress when her first year of marriage failed to meet her romantic and partnership expectations. They reflected their anger and threatened feelings when they labeled her a *yakSi*, "she-demon."

Fortunately the bride's father and her husband remained supportive of her and sought psychiatric treatment for her distress (which met the DSM-IV criteria for a major depressive episode). The rapidity and fervor with which some men demonized an unhappy bride suggest that aspects of Lillith survive in Totagadde.

In general, in the 1990's brides who experienced a major depressive episode received psychiatric care, which included mainly medication. While I was in Totagadde, I was available to listen to their accounts of distress. However, in the 1960's demon(*pishaci*)possession provided a cultural explanation for a bride's presumed depression. Although Havik culture demonized these women who had difficulty adjusting to marriage, the demonization led to increased attention, more frequent and extended visits to the bride's parental home, and a decreased work load. To my knowledge the woman in the 1990's case was the first bride to express publicly disappointment about the sexual

and partnership aspects of her marriage. In the 1990's young men praised the woman who is the subject of this case study for her ingenuity, but in the 1960's women criticized her for taking legal control of the family land. These same women thought her husband would have wasted the land. A woman's preventing family disaster in the 1960's by publicly assuming control destroyed her husband's respect.

Folk tales provide socialization to cultural values. In 1964 and 1965, I noted the importance of these tales as entertainment. Grandmothers told tales until their grandchildren fell asleep at night. Although I gathered these tales as a linguistic genre, they also served as role models - as ideal behavior in the case of the devoted wife's serving her husband and as woman's nature in humorous tales of foolish women. As if to justify her assertive nature, Kusuma's focus varied from that of other women. Kusuma told her children a different set of tales -- of religious women who achieved at personal sacrifice and determination -- rather than tales that poked fun at women's stupidity or of miracles accomplished by women's devotion to their in-laws and husbands.

In contrast to Havik Brahmin men, Havik Brahmin women remained

in the background. Traditionally, these women were socialized to passivity. Their behavior both within and outside of the home reflected this. Within the home women started the day by worshipping their husband as their personal god. Upon awakening, a wife folded her hands in reverence and touched her husband's feet. This symbolized her recognition of his god-like status. Eating from his plate after he had eaten and consuming the food he had left as his *prasa:d*, "gift," to her further emphasized a husband's god-like status in relationship to his wife. The ideal Havik woman supported her husband in every way. She never openly differed with him, always obeyed him, and even sat with her head below his. When she held an opinion different from his, she either maintained a judicious silence or spoke to the wall. If he erred, she took the blame; if he triumphed, the credit for the accomplishment was his.

The following from *The Laws of Manu* reflect the sanctioned dependence of women.

Men must make their women dependent day and night,...

Her father guards her in childhood, her husband guards her in youth, and her sons guard her in old age. A woman is not fit for independence.

Totagadde Havik Brahmins accepted this as appropriate behavior.

There was no occasion when a woman need state an opinion. I remember my frustration when I was in Totagadde initially asking a woman about linguistic forms. She asked her husband what was correct. Havik men justified this position by stating that by nature Havik women were fearful and unable to outgrow their dependence. A prepubertal girl, however, had more freedom than an adult woman. Early marriages served as a means of channeling normal sexuality in a culturally accepted way. A father's duty was to give his daughter in marriage before she reached menarche. In the past an unmarried woman who achieved menarche was supposedly abandoned in the forest.

Kusuma illustrates the ambivalence felt by a woman who has followed a paradigm counter to cultural values. I believe this disparity was significant in her development of anxiety. For women *The Laws of Manu* mandated dependency on males. Kusuma openly scorned the behavior that *The Laws of Manu* mandated but also wished that her husband had better qualities so that she could have been traditional. Kusuma, at age 37, chose a radically different path, which resulted in anxiety. In accordance with the culture Kusuma married before puberty. The descent from a favored and indulged daughter to an obedient wife and daughter-in-law was a shock which involved separation loss,

status loss, and depression. Her sister-in-law taught her household skills and comforted her after her husband's beatings.

She attributed arthritis that developed in the last ten years of her life to her husband's beatings.

Kusuma's family was affluent. She felt her every wish – except for her father's death -- was granted during childhood. She remembered the close relationship she had with her mother and older brother. Kusuma graduated from primary school (the maximum education available at that time). Her older brother arranged her marriage when she was twelve years old to a man thirteen years her senior. Although she spent the next two years (until menarche) at her mother's house, she regarded her marriage as her first instance of psychological harm. Even before she resided with her husband, she cried whenever she thought of the impending separation from her mother.

After menarche, Kusuma resided in her husband's household, which consisted of her husband, his brother, and his brother's wife. She described herself as ignorant. "I was a girl who only knew how to play house." Her husband beat her; his brother's wife comforted her. Kusuma's sister-in-law taught Kusuma to do housework and to cook. Kusuma detested cooking, so her sister-in-law prepared the meals. Kusuma was grateful for this

sister-in-law's companionship. In her early married life Kusuma described herself as depressed, a state that she attributed to the birth of four daughters before her two sons and to her husband's abusive treatment. She reported feelings of hopelessness and unhappiness which she hid from her mother and brother. Her sister-in-law did the housework when Kusuma was too depressed to work.

Kusuma's husband gambled -- an activity prohibited by caste rules. He beat her when he lost in gambling as well as when she displeased him. Her sister-in-law was her confidante in this -- not her mother nor brother. She never criticized her brother for this marriage. "He gave me a good marriage, and so he is not at fault." Kusuma explained that the wedding ceremony and feast were elaborate. Moreover, before the marriage her brother had no idea of her husband's character. She never told her mother and brother of her difficulties. "I did not want to bother them. Moreover, any help they gave me would have been regarded as interference. My older brother did his best in choosing my husband." Although she reported that she obeyed her husband's every request, she believed that she never pleased him. She went through the motions of ritual respect, but in my presence she spoke scornfully about him. At the start of her

marriage she regarded him as her personal god. By the time she took over the land, her sarcasm gave any positive comments about him the opposite meaning. In talking with me she never made positive comments about her husband.

When Kusuma was 37, she overheard her husband's plan to sell their land for gambling debts. Other villagers reported that he had already sold some of the land. Realizing that the loss of land would compromise her and her children's future, she developed a plan to gain control of the land. Kusuma reported:

I did what I had to without anybody's help. I went to court. I went to town at a time when women did not venture out alone. I never would have achieved anything if I had sat around crying or saying I cannot do anything. I learned. Some days my figures were off. But I learned to keep accounts. Just as some days I put too much salt in the food; the next day I would put less salt in the food. So I learned.

Both in the nearby town and in the district headquarters, Kusuma consulted lawyers who helped her without charge. None of them were of her caste, i.e., Havik Brahmin. Avoiding caste members was one way to prevent male caste members from taking away the

authority she was determined to maintain. Kusuma ostensibly went to consult with her older brother when in reality she did everything herself. Although Kusuma claimed a close relationship with her brother, she thought his help would lead to the charge that he was the instigator for taking her husband's land. During the period when she sued her husband for legal guardianship of the land, she reported that her older brother advised her. However, later Kusuma denied that she had confided in him and that he had helped her. She reported that she received no material help nor advice from him in this venture. At another time she indicated that her brother might have taken her husband's side.

Her response to winning the court case was to develop anxiety and fear. Her husband had mismanaged the land, so profits were minimal. Neighbors sympathized with her husband for Kusuma's publicly revealing his faults. She acknowledged moral support from her husband's older brother's family, her maternal uncle's children, and the two non-Brahmin lawyers. Basically, however, she was on her own in managing the land and in raising her children. After the court case, her husband left town to return for every ritual event concerning their children. He never divorced Kusuma. When he came, Kusuma refused to speak with

him. Kusuma enjoyed the cultural benefits of marriage, while she had a *de facto* divorce. Her married state was an important part of her self-concept.

Recurrent dreams that she would lose the land and that her sons would become ill and die began when she won control over the land, which included the portion allotted to her husband. She dreamed of her death -- a dream which frightened her. At times she dreamed of how prosperous the land would become. At other times she dreamed of losing the land because of poor management.

After an argument with her adult son about land management, she dreamed that the land had been ruined because needed work had remained undone.

Kusuma was the first woman to manage land. Haviks regarded this as a man's job. Male relatives and respected elders managed land for widows. However, later some of these widows learned that relatives and elders had helped themselves to the widow's land. Profligate men at this time lost their land, and their families had to leave Totagadde. Through ignorance one could also have financial disaster. At times of crop failure the entire village had experienced famine. All of Kusuma's dreams related to the most important aspects of her maintaining her

family. One daughter died at age twelve after a day's illness. One son developed the croup. She attributes his survival to assistance from a religious healer.

Kusuma, who felt she had insufficient education, sent her four younger children through college. She consulted with her daughters about their marriages. Her sons arranged their own marriages. She had as much pride in her agricultural success as in her children's success. Kusuma experienced difficulty in the mother-in-law role. Although her older son chose his own bride, Kusuma disliked her name. So she, not her son, insisted on renaming her daughter-in-law. At her daughter-in-law's arrival Kusuma turned over all of the housework, barn work, and cooking to her.

When women married before puberty, husbands listened to their mothers. When women married at older ages, their husbands listened to their wives rather than to their mothers. As if in competition for her son, Kusuma criticized her daughter-in-law's work and even fought to name her grandson. Kusuma's insistence on a different name from the one her son and daughter-in-law had chosen resulted in formal arbitration. Her daughter-in-law reported that her husband listened to his mother

rather than to her. Before Kusuma's suicide, she and her daughter-in-law cooked separately. Indeed, when Kusuma invited me to lunch, the daughter-in-law insisted that I eat her cooking as well. Not even in my presence was there a truce between the two. Kusuma indicated that what her daughter-in-law had cooked was delicious, but the daughter-in-law served me, and not her mother-in-law, the food she cooked. After Kusuma's death, the daughter-in-law denied any conflict with Kusuma.

Even after Kusuma achieved financial success, she continued to worry and to express her anxiety somatically. She had headaches, abdominal distress, indigestion, acid stomach, and stomach pain that medication did not alleviate. The doctors referred her to a psychiatrist, whom she refused to see. She stated that her problem with anxiety began when she won the court case. She described her anxiety as *tele keTho:ydu*, "my head went bad," and *tele bisi*, "hot head, anxiety." When her position became secure, she complained about flashbacks of the insecure times. After she had a grandson, Kusuma openly told her family that she had accomplished her life's tasks and wanted to die. Mondays she visited the temple -- not to propitiate for her husband's long life, but for her own death.

A source of comfort was her religious devotion. Meditation and reading alleviated her distress. Kusuma believed those who endured adversity were more religious than those with good fortune. Kusuma was the only woman in the village to follow the Monday Vow, a practice she began after winning the court case. She also was the only woman in Totagadde to perform *puja*, the daily family worship ceremony. She extended her religious practices into areas regarded as the male domain. Many Totagadde residents have told me that women would acquire misfortune and sin (*pa:pa*) should they venture into the masculine realm. When I questioned her about this, she responded that she enjoyed worship and her son did not like to perform worship. In essence, she avoided my question with a rationalization. One other post-menopausal woman celebrated *puja* in the 1980's. Unlike Kusuma, she forbade my photographing her in worship. Although I was told that women are not allowed to perform the daily worship for their families, an orthodox elderly woman stated that a post-menopausal woman may perform this worship. Over the past ten years, other post-menopausal women perform the daily worship ceremony.

The community initially accepted Kusuma's accomplishments with

ambivalence. In the process of managing her land, she earned respect. She was the first (and only) woman to become a member of the caste *panchayat*, a council that consists of a representative from each household. With the exception of Kusuma, the representative has always been male. Other households without an adult male had no representation on the caste council, which decides such issues as taxation for joint projects, questions brought by members of other casts, and punishment of deviants. Kusuma participated during the period when her older son was a minor.

Kusuma showed her contempt for her husband by leaving a room when he entered, by referring to him as *nam mane heggaDe:ru*, “head of household,” instead of the more usual *avaru*, “he, plural of respect.” She avoided conversations with him. When he moved back to Totagadde after his older son’s marriage, he resided on the second floor. All the other household members had their bedrooms on the first floor. There was community sympathy for him but no respect because of his gambling, wife abuse, and failure to provide for his family.

In discussing women's situation, Kusuma commented:

They have no options. I got a husband who beat me. I had

four daughters before any sons. I had a miserable life. My husband gambled. When I got control of the land, my head went bad (*tele keTT ho:ydu*). Since then I have never slept well. I constantly worry about my children. Now that only my younger son is unmarried I worry less. My work is almost done.

Kusuma went on to insist that these were happier times and she had no cause to worry. However, she could not escape her thoughts of the difficult times. She felt that only death would free her. She had become tired of propitiating Ishwar for her death. In 1994 she spent about three months at a holistic health treatment facility. Within a week of her return, she committed suicide. Her last words to me in 1994 was that she had finally decided to seek psychiatric help.

This case illustrates a woman who exhibited some of Lillith's characteristics. She rebelled against her duty to obey her husband and to remain figuratively and literally under her husband. She chose separation over submission. The folk tales she told her children of women and female deities who followed alternative pathways provided her with solace and a rationale for her religious and economic activities. These provided her

with an intrapsychic justification for her decisions.

During the earlier period of her life Kusuma accepted traditional cultural values. She obeyed her husband, suffered his abuse and gambling, performed her household duties, and raised their children. She never ventured outside of the household. At the time that she took on the land management role, she ignored those who might have dissuaded her, including her brother. Rationalizing that he would have been criticized for helping her, she really believed he would have opposed her.

I also propose that she was in competition with him. If he had helped her to secure the land, he might have arranged for someone to manage the land. Kusuma wanted to fill this role. A likely interpretation was her desire for achievement in a world severely limiting women's opportunities. She had sufficient ego strength to believe in her own potential. As a guardian for her sons, she took the opportunity to test her own talents.

Kusuma was bitter about her husband's faithlessness and incompetence. She committed suicide at the time to pass the land management to her older son. Her daughter-in-law regarded Kusuma as devouring. However, Kusuma was the one with anxiety, which developed when she assumed a role culturally banned to

women. When she remained in an appropriate feminine role, she experienced depression. When she asserted herself, she developed anxiety and experienced criticism as a female who took over a male role. Although she developed more autonomy than most women in her cohort, she experienced anxiety with her autonomy.

With her older son's marriage and the introduction of his wife into the household she focused on teaching him to manage the land. Initially he listened to his mother, but later he listened to his wife. The loss of power that came with her son's achieving adulthood is a culturally accepted precipitant for depression among the elderly.

Her change from the culturally prescribed dependency for women to competence represented a personal maturation as well as a source of anxiety. Taught to regard her husband as her personal god and never to disagree with him, she expressed disgust at her husband's activities and lack of motivation. She challenged the society's appropriate behavior for a woman. At a time when most women expressed no initiative, she chose to use hers. The conflict between value systems contributed to her anxiety. Aggressive and dominant when passivity was the ideal behavior

for women, she paved an assertive road for her daughters and other women. If she had failed, she might have been doubly censured--for the failure as well as for her challenge to the appropriate wifely role.

The ambivalence of her relationship with her brother - never criticizing him, claiming a close relationship to him, his rare visits, assigning him no blame for her unsuccessful marriage, reporting he would be criticized for helping her obtain control of the land at one time, and yet believing he would come to the aid of her husband -- showed her need to maintain the positive ideal of sibling relationships at the same time that she competed with him. Life events that precipitated the necessity to challenge cultural rules (*dharma*) created conflicts between ideal behavior and reality. The challenge to the cultural perception of ideal behavior was so threatening as to precipitate an anxiety disorder. This conflict, I believe, was an underlying mechanism for her anxiety. The challenge to the cultural rules decreased her social support and made failure more dangerous. Culture shaped her development both as a traditional and as a deviant woman. The case of Kusuma illustrates the importance of achievement and family. The Lilith myth suggests

psychopathology resulting from cultural passivity and the demonization of women.

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