



The Art Of Story Telling In Feministic Perspective: A Study Of Bilkees L Latif's 'Forgotten'

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ABSTRACT

The art of storytelling is as old as the time of evolved human species from the ruins of extinct ones. Story encapsulates a life time or a moment of life in a narrative web of thoughts and impressions. Storytelling inspires generations of people to think and ponder over the issues related to existence and essence. It is one of the most suitable medium through which thoughts and philosophies can easily be conveyed. Many related genres like exemplums, anecdotes, parables carry an iota of story in them to get their purpose fulfilled. When it comes to feministic thought, Indian feminism carries a different identity and modality than the western feministic thought in its relation to society and gender disparities where women are given identities which are not actually suitable for them. Indian feministic thought is a rich and evolving intellectual tradition that reflects the complex social, cultural, and historical realities of the country. Rooted in both indigenous philosophies and global feminist movements, Indian feminism addresses issues unique to the subcontinent—such as caste, class, religion, colonial history, and rural-urban disparities—while also advocating universal principles of gender equality, justice, and dignity. Indian feminism not just limited to psycho feminism or socio feminism but it incorporates various premises on which society stands itself. In order to understand the scenario in which Indian women exist, one needs to understand entire fabric of socio political and economic structure, otherwise, the understanding remains to a limited sphere of narrowed biased vision. Among the multitude of Indian women thinkers, Bilkees L Latif stands apart when it comes to understand the community in which she was born. She represents the society in which women have been given little freedom to express and their identities are entwined with the identities of men counterparts. She resurfaces the women who defined their own times and carved out a niche in annals of power realms. She finds her interest in understanding the challenges those women who faced in totally male dominated spheres of politics and administration.

Key terms: Indian Feminism, Power structures, Gender roles, Identities, Male politics, Conformity.

Interlocution:

The earliest foundations of Indian feministic thought can be traced back to ancient texts and social reforms. While ancient Indian scriptures often placed women in subordinate positions, they also celebrated strong female figures like Gargi, Maitreyi, Draupadi, and Kannagi, who questioned patriarchal norms. However, centuries of feudal and patriarchal structures limited women's rights, leading to social evils such as child marriage, sati, purdah, and denial of education. The modern feminist awakening began during the 19th-century social reform movements under leaders like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotirao Phule, and Savitribai Phule. These reformers campaigned against gender oppression, emphasized women's education, and created conditions for women to participate in public life.

The nationalist movement further shaped Indian feminism. Women played active roles as freedom fighters, leaders, and intellectuals, redefining their position in society. Figures such as Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Kasturba Gandhi, and Aruna Asaf Ali demonstrated that women could contribute equally to nation-building. However, nationalist feminism often expected women to balance political participation with traditional roles, creating a tension that later feminists would question.

Post-independence feministic thought in India developed through several waves. The first wave focused on legal reforms, resulting in laws addressing marriage, inheritance, dowry, and property rights. The second wave, beginning in the 1970s, emerged from widespread social concerns, including dowry deaths, custodial violence, workplace discrimination, and the status of rural women. The publication of the "Towards Equality" report (1974) marked a turning point, revealing the deep-rooted inequalities that persisted despite constitutional guarantees.

Contemporary Indian feminist thought is diverse and intersectional. It recognizes that Indian women do not constitute a single homogeneous group; their experiences vary according to caste, religion, region, sexuality, disability, and economic background. Dalit feminism, for instance, highlights the triple oppression of caste, class, and gender. Muslim feminist voices challenge both patriarchal interpretations of religion and communal stereotypes. Tribal and rural women's movements emphasize land rights, education, and protection from exploitation.

Indian feministic thought also expands beyond academic theory. Women's movements have been deeply rooted in grassroots activism—from the Chipko Movement led by women protecting forests, to campaigns against sexual violence such as the Nirbhaya movement. Feminism in India has increasingly challenged social norms through literature, cinema, social media, and public discourse. Writers like Kamala Das, Mahasweta Devi, Ismat Chughtai, and contemporary voices such as Arundhati Roy and Meena Kandasamy contribute powerful critiques of patriarchal structures.

Indian feministic thought is not a single ideology but a dynamic spectrum of ideas and movements shaped by India's cultural diversity and social realities. It continues to grow by questioning inequality, promoting women's rights, and imagining a society where gender justice and human dignity are accessible to all.

Bilkees Latif : A Woman of acumen and Power of expression :

Bilkees I. Latif was an Indian feministic scholar who developed a unique identity for her works through her relentless contribution to the field of education and scholarship. She is a social activist, writer, and artist whose life bridged privilege and service. She was born into Muslim family, not totally orthodox but who nourishes modern thoughts of women empowerment. Bilkees could bloom into a scholar extempore initially through the support of her family members. She received university education at various levels she is woman of humility and compassion the qualities which she imbibed from her parentage.

After marrying Air Chief Marshal Idris Hasan Latif, she dedicated herself to social welfare, most notably through her founding of the 'Society for Human and Environmental' Development (SHED)' She worked tirelessly in Dharavi, Mumbai Her commitment earned her the Padma Shri in 2009 for her outstanding contribution to society. Latif was also a prolific author. Among her works are *Essential Andhra Cookbook*, a richly detailed guide to Andhra cuisine that intertwines recipes with social customs. Her autobiography, *The Fragrance of Forgotten Years*, reflects on her early life, while *Forgotten* recovers the stories of six remarkable women from Indian history. Her talent as a biographer is clearly visible in her work *The Ladder of His Life* which is a biography of her husband who himself was a distinctive figure in his contemporary society. Bilkees L Latif died on 27 October 2017, her life is fulfilled when she left a considerably extensive work for the posterity to deal with.

Forgotten: A Glimpse into the lives of remarkable women.

Forgotten is a collection of the life stories of women whose names are lost in the amidst of time. The collection was published by Penguin Books in 2010. It is the collection of different personality who were involved in very vital activities related to power struggle in patriarchal immediate atmosphere. The collection carries the historical events in the lives of Donna Juliana, Rudrama Devi, Hayat Bakshi Begum, Mahlaqa Chanda, Chand Bibi and Rahim Bi. These lives stand apart from the milieu of people when it comes to creating history and in creating unique identities. Women too can create history, not just like men but in a more profound and meaningful way. The personalities enlisted above come from different cultural contexts and different time periods in the history but they made their times remarkable by their undeniable contribution in making the time run for the benefit of larger section of the people of their times and the times to come.

Donna Juliana: The Lady Who Crowned a Mughal Emperor

Juliana is a woman who was a tutor to Prince Muhammad Shah who was an heir to Mughal throne after Aurangzeb. She comes from Malabar to Delhi under painful circumstances in which life and future are just expectations but not guaranteed ones. She plays a key role making the court understand the importance of humility and religious tolerance. She was a non-Islamic woman in the Islam dominated court of Mughal.. She was not under purdah custom but she made her identity unique through her power of understanding things and executing the responsibilities in a perfect manner. She achieved her fame by earning the respect of the court and royal family and she has been given the privilege of crowning the prince himself as future king of the Mughal Empire. Bilkees L Latif explains geo-political situation in which it is very hard for woman thrive and prosper, she also explains amenities Mughals have provided for their subjects and their religious restrictions.

Rudrama Devi: A warrior uncompromised:

Rudrama Devi, according to Bilkees, is a woman of valor and unflinching bravery. She fought alongside their male counterparts to withstand the onslaughts of muslim invaders who looted their life and property. She spear headed the campaign for fighting back to secure a place for her people under Kakatiya empire. Even though she was facing gender discrimination from the society in which gender roles are strictly defined, she stood for her people who believed in her leadership. She sacrificed her comforts and her life for the sake of protecting her subjects from invasion and religious mayhem. She built wells and ponds to eradicate famine in her empire, She laid canals to irrigate lands to grow crops twice a year. She was a woman of culture and modern thought. She established a strong army to protect villages from the ruthless muslim invaders. Rudrama Devi, one of the few women rulers in Indian history, administered the Kakatiya kingdom with remarkable strength and vision. She adopted the title “Rudradeva Maharaja” to assert her authority and ensured efficient governance through a strong network of loyal nobles and military commanders. Her administration focused on strengthening fortifications, improving irrigation systems, and promoting agriculture to enhance economic stability. She encouraged trade and maintained peace through diplomatic relations with neighboring kingdoms. Rudrama Devi also paid special attention to law and order, ensuring justice and protection for her subjects. Her rule remains a symbol of capable and progressive leadership.

Hayat Bakshi Begum: The Mother and Administrator:

Hayat Begum Bakshi was woman who played multiple roles in looking after the prince Abudlla and court administration. She was present in the court when total area was dominated by muslims and no administrative powers were being entrusted to non-muslims. At that time talent was secondary to religion, loyalty was secondary to religious identity, administrative capability was not so important than the religious lineage. But for Hayat, more than religion the safety and happiness of her people are important, she bade goodbye to the age old religious customs in political administration. For her, religion should not hamper individual freedom and social change. She earned opposition from many quarters of her contemporary society. She appointed Akkananna, and Madanna as chief advisors and ministers in her royal administration. They both were nonn/muslims and this appointment earned stark disapproval from the so called religious mullas, yet she stands for people but not for the appeasement of a few religious bigots.

Chand Bibi: A Caring Warrior Princess

Chand Bibi, also known as Chand Sultana, was one of the most courageous and skilled women leaders in Indian medieval history. Born into the royal family of Ahmadnagar in the 16th century, she became renowned for her intelligence, diplomatic abilities, and remarkable military leadership. As the regent of both Bijapur and later Ahmadnagar, Chand Bibi played a crucial role in safeguarding the Deccan kingdoms during a period of intense political turmoil. Her most celebrated achievement was the defence of Ahmadnagar Fort in 1595, when the Mughal Empire under Emperor Akbar attempted to annex the region.

Despite limited resources and internal conflicts among the nobles, Chand Bibi displayed exceptional bravery. She personally led the defense, inspired her soldiers, and negotiated strategically to protect the fort. Her calm judgment and courage in the face of overwhelming odds earned her great respect among contemporaries and later historians.

Chand Bibi was also known for her administrative skills, promoting peace, stability, and justice within her territories. Although she faced betrayal from factions within the court, her legacy as a fearless warrior-queen remains undiminished. Chand Bibi stands today as a symbol of resilience, leadership, and the strength of women in Indian history. She worked for the fusion of hindu and muslim cultures. Bilkees shows the life of Chandn Bibi as an important figure who tries to bring in the harmony and unity between hindus and muslims but male muslim dominated society hardly accepts her humane approach.

Rahim Bi: The Story of the Brahmin Ayah

“When I was young and beautiful there were many who wanted me, but not one who cared enough for me as a person. I tried living with men several times, yet I remained alone, I even bore a child, yet today I have neither child nor man, neither parent nor companion” ---these are the words came out of a woman who was desperate for companionship which is truly based on human sympathy and companionship but not just on sexual mongering. She was alone and her live is filled with painful experiences. She is the person who faced wrath of painful existence. she was married to a man who was seems to be elder than her own father, her husband died when she was just twelve years old, from then onwards she remained a widow. She had to live on her earnings as a coolie, not body was there tro look after her. She came under the shed and care of a moulvi who named her Rahim Bi as she could not utter her name Radha Bai as her weakness and debility devastated her. Radha Bai stands on her own feet, she never complained about her condition, she worked out her life through many difficulties and stood as a figure who epitomizes spirit of challenge and survival.

Conclusion:

The woman is not born weak, but has been constantly and continuously made to be weak and dependent. What her strengths and unique features are there to make her a privileged human being, those very qualities are represented as hindrances for life and religious faith. Religious persecutions, gender bias, suppression, subjugation cannot curtail ever growing spirit of woman's identities. Bilkees L Lateef showcased the lives many women who come from distinctive backgrounds who fought back the oppression levied by the patriarchal societies of their contemporary time. It proves that physical subjugation shall not lead to mental acceptance of suppression. They even challenge patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts and emphasizes that Islam, at its core, upholds women's rights to education, autonomy, and participation in public life. Feminists highlight influential women from early Islamic history and argue for re-reading the Qur'an through a progressive, inclusive lens. They also work to address contemporary issues such as legal rights, representation, and cultural restrictions. Ultimately, feminism strives to harmonize faith and feminism, empowering women while preserving spiritual identity.