FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN THE FICTION OF
SUNITI NAMJOSHI

ABSTRACT
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Abstract

Even after acquiring an important status in literature and writing, women writers still face problems in getting due recognition. Critics and literary world have paid more attention to many women writers, but ignored others who too are prolific, competent and worthy of success. Due to one or the other factor they have been marginalized and thus lag behind and do not attain significant position in literature. Most of these are now beginning to realize their potential, and will go further in directions as yet unimagined. They also have committed themselves to fictionalizing women's causes with a view to ameliorate their position and release them from the state of traditional servitude. The present thesis studies the work of one such writer Suniti Namjoshi who too has favourably responded to the changing social, political, sexual and psychological realities of subalterns and the marginalized and has questioned their position in the androcentric patriarchal domain.

Suniti Namjoshi is best known as a fabulist and her work encompasses issues such as gender, sexual orientation, unequal power distribution, cultural identity, human and animal rights. She takes into consideration the construction of gender identities in an androcentric society and also explores the position of lesbians on the margins of the compulsory heterosexual order. Her writings reflect the multiple attributes of a post-modern, radical-lesbian feminist encapsulated in Eco-feminist and the Third World feminist aspects. She is the first Indian woman diasporic writer who is known as the out of the closet lesbian. She is of the view that one's sexuality is one's own personal choice and that compulsory heteronormativity is an oppressed social construction that leads to the subordination of women. She is also a re-visionist myth maker whose corpus is marked with, fantasy, inter-textuality and allusions, and is counted among prolific feminist fairy tale writers and fabulists, and carries a noticeable resemblance to Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood in terms of subject matter and creativity. Her canvas is quite broad and encompasses the tales from Panchatantra and Jataka, Arabian Nights, Grimm Brothers, Hans Anderson as well as Hindu and Christian mythologies. She applies animal fantasy and builds utopian/dystopian worlds and science fictions.

Being a diasporic writer she weaves her work with nostalgia and autobiographical elements. She suffers from displacement and alienation for being a woman of colour, a lesbian and a Hindu in the male-dominated, heterosexual,
Christian and Western World. Her work reflects the experiences that she herself had undergone during her life and provides her writings with a self-referential stroke. Her Indianness is apparent in her collection in which she uses Western myths and legends alongside Indian and Eastern mythologies and anecdotes. Like Atwood and Carter, Namjoshi uses gothic elements along with magic and miracles in order to mesmerize and enchant the readers. She is a non-conformist who not only defies societal norms but also regulations and standards of literary genre.

Her distortion of the original myths and the fairy tales and the revisioning and rewriting them, is a means to question the conventional male biases about women. Her collection, *Feminist Fables* (1981) encompasses the large variety of experiences of the subordinated and the marginalized, and fictionalizes their cause with a view to upgrade their position and release them from traditional enslavement. She has analyzed the effects of women’s oppression at multiple levels such as reproduction, education, employment, self determination, political voice, body image, working to make it clear how these are part of a larger system of oppression. By constructing mythical characters, Namjoshi deconstructs the notion of conventional gendering and emphasizes the irrelevance of human particularities. She also points out that identities are not fixed. They are ‘fluid’ and can be transformed into the desired shape. The process of change is painful yet essential. A new path has to be forged outside patriarchal discourse. The new identity is not a limited one as it is ‘fluid’. Bhadravati, the Brahmini lesbian cow, appears like a goddess to Suniti—the protagonist in *The Conversations of Cow* (1985). She is the cow of a thousand faces who knows the art of transmutation. Her attributes symbolize that identity is constitutive of as well as by the persona.

Namjoshi’s concern is the actual process of marginalization and ‘othering’ through which the dominant cultures perpetuate patriarchal ideologies. In *The Blue Donkey Fables* (1988), she criticizes the institutions which have created fixed notions about identities and female bodies. She dismantles binaries of good and evil, heroism and cowardice, wisdom and foolishness, truth and lies, angels and saints etc. Being the propagator of ecofeminism which takes the issues of women along with nature and animals’ rights, Namjoshi projects the fictional animals as dignified beings who unlike the real animals have self respect and resist humiliation. She shows her concern for ordinary animals such as cats, monkeys, donkeys, piglets, rabbits, frogs etc. who have been marginalized not only in the real world but also in literature. Suniti
Namjoshi's fiction attempts to establish an alternative universe through the use of the fantasy mode. She resorts to fantasy not to escape from reality but to reconstruct it. Through the use of animal imagery, Namjoshi discusses the problems of the Third World women writers, animals' rights, power hierarchy and sexual orientation. She disrupts mainstream notions of gender, race, nationality and sexual preference.

In *The Mothers of Maya Diip* (1989), Namjoshi applies different radical feminist's theories and puts the idea that discarding male domination would liberate the world from oppression. Procreation has been made suppressive by men. She wants to free women from biological maternity so as to free maternity from male domination. The inner world of Namjoshi's narrative accommodates multiple lesbian perspectives. Female desire is discussed openly and unabashedly. She redeems the dignity of women and presents them as satisfied happy beings who celebrate their own sex and femininity. She also insists upon to create a new discourse of maternity that can generate societal association to provide women a new identity where they do not feel the necessity to decide between a career and motherhood.

Namjoshi fundamentally questions the appropriacy of the tales told to children. Fairy tales and fables heard in childhood shape the notion of right and wrong and influence one's adult roles. In *Saint Suniti and the Dragon* (1993) she not only questions the notions of evil and good but also propagates feminine solidarity and attempts to find solutions to the dilemmas of contemporary existence. Through her collection *The Solidarity Fables*, Namjoshi questions sexual politics and challenges the patriarchal constructs. She is against forceful adoption of heterosexuality, but she does not propagate lesbianism, as the choice of one's own sex is purely a personal issue. She inspires marginalized groups to struggle for identity and autonomy.

Male writers developed their own culture of writing in which the role of women was marginalized and excluded. Her work *Building Babel* (1996) is suggestive of the process of the development of a new culture of writing that is gynocentric in nature. She also deals with the writer, art of writing, reader and readership and emphasizes the use of web to make reading and writing interesting and convenient. *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth* (2000), continues with the aspect of power hierarchy, identity crisis and sexual orientation in an androcentric society. Her use of fantasy fills the gap between the huge divisions such as the East and the West, rich and the poor, lesbian and straight etc.
Apart from being a poet, a fabulist and a novelist, Suniti Namjoshi has experimented with Children’s Literature as well. As a feminist, she is dissatisfied with the dominant male discourse of traditional fairy tales, the sexist social values and institutions it supports. Namjoshi’s fairy tales aim at a just society that can be gleaned from the redirectional socialization process. Her tales provide equal status to both young boys and girls without discriminating. She emphasizes equal participation of children in every sphere of life. Like other fairy tale writers she provides equal opportunities. All the tales of Aditi Adventures I - Unlikely Friends, attempt to explore the psyche of children of the contemporary modern world. While providing amusement to children, the tales establish respect and affinity with creatures other than the Anglo-Saxon heterosexual male. They break down stereotypes, boundaries and categories, and challenge the stringency of norms applied to society by patriarchy.

As children are the primary audience of fairy tales, these tales play an important role in early socialization. Feminist fairy tale writers try to change our outlook and defy our perception with regard to literature and society. Saints, Angels, Monsters, Dragons, Witches, all have been perceived with fixed identities. Fairy tales are considered therapies for children as they open up unexplored spheres. A characteristic feature of fairy tale is to sort out existential quandary or quest for identity. This enables children to deal with crises and predicaments. Children are thus able to master psychological problems.

Aditi Adventures II - The Unexpected Monsters is concerned with legendary characters of Europe, recast by the writer to dismantle biases associated with them. The tales act as directories to liberate children from ego disturbances with the use of fantasy that has the power to make the unfamiliar familiar. They also serve as guides for parents to deal with the difficulties of taming and raising children in an appropriate manner.

Aditi Adventures III - Heroes make children aware of the prevailing disparities and train them to counter the sinister forces of society. Her use of binaries and paradoxes such as magic/realism, rationalism/sentimentalism along with the advancement in science and technology is a means to elevate the Third World nations such as India. As modern tales they are enriched with the use of hi-tech gadgets and cultivate rationality along with the vital fairy tales contents such as, fantasy, miracles and magic in order to deal with the problems of the real world.