Chapter Two
“Identity is Fluid”
A Study of Feminist Fables, The Conversations of Cow and The Blue Donkey Fables
Feminist Fables

Power, whether political, social or economic has the ability to get hold of and rule over not only individuals but entire communities. Power, if equally distributed, can build an equitable universe. However its misuse can cause destruction and decay. Feminist discourse takes into consideration the question of unequal power distribution among the sexes, races, classes and genders leading to suppression and oppression of the marginalized. Males have domination over their female counterparts, whites over blacks, rich over poor, heterosexuals over homosexuals, and man over the environment.

With the issue of equality as its primary concern Feminist Fables (FF) also includes other centres of power such as race, class and gender. Feminist Fables discusses feminism in its broadest sense and questions the unequal distribution and imbalance of power prevailing among different social groups. Suniti Namjoshi, in an interview with C.Vijayasree, comments:

In Feminist Fables I wasn’t so much concerned with making feminist statements as with using the form to understand the imbalance of power and to question it... And it’s worth considering that feminism in its broadest sense questions the roles the powerful assign to themselves in relation to relatively powerless. (Vijayasree 178-79)

The original title of this collection was ‘The Monkey and the Crocodiles’. Sheba Feminist Publishers brought out the book in 1981 and changed the title to Feminist Fables. Namjoshi in her book The Fabulous Feminist (2012) argues that often the word ‘feminist’ has a narrow connotation ‘of being firmly feminist’, and a casual reader may mistakenly think that it is only associated with the cause of women. Namjoshi is of the view that the existing title has a disadvantage as she says, ‘the fable form should make it clear that they question what happens to anyone whenever there’s an imbalance of power’. (2)

In Feminist Fables Namjoshi encompasses a 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. Her technique of presenting ideas through rewriting fairy tales, fables, Classical Greek and Indian mythology, and inter textual references enriched with allusions invokes the child
within the adult. Fairy tales, fables and short stories in her work are highly philosophical, enriched with lofty and elevated ideas. Vijayasree points out:

Namjoshi makes clever use of Anderson's tales, Panchatantra stories, Aesop's fables and other texts as intertexts to deconstruct the patriarchal world order surely enconced in these seemingly innocent stories on which generations of children are raised. Even nursery rhymes and songs are re-viewed here from a feminist perspective...

(75-76)

These stories no longer remain merely a source of entertainment, where the reader can lose himself/herself in their spell-binding effect. Instead they provide a discourse about redeeming the subjugated and marginalized.

All hundred Feminist Fables are narratives about how women have been marginalized and rejected. Preference for a male child, female infanticide, unequal education opportunities, suppression of women's ambitions, feeding young girls on patriarchal dreams of marriage, compulsory heterosexuality etc. form major discussions. Oppression by husbands and their families, prohibition of economic independence, compulsion of child bearing and child rearing, rape, molestation and homophobia occur all through the volume.

Namjoshi's fables range from ancient to modern, such as 'Troglydote' (FF 63), 'The Giantess' (FF 29) and 'Amazon' (FF 110); from tribes and villages to big cities and metropolitans; from the third world, such as 'Sheherezade' (FF 4), 'From the Panchatantra' (FF 1) to the first world, such as 'The Derbyshire Fish' (FF 84), 'Liberation' (FF 76); from house wives to working women, 'Heart' (FF 93), 'Plankton' (FF 112) and 'Experts' (FF 90); from ancient to modern; from poor to elite, such as 'The Debt' (FF 56) and 'The Dower' (FF 88); from passive and submissive to active and powerful women as, 'The Princess' (FF 5) and 'Broadcast Live' (FF 58), from heterosexuals to homosexuals and so on. She has a broad canvas of feminism that is not confined to one particular place or time. She breaks all the boundaries and gains a universal voice.

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. 'Local History' (FF 50) and 'The Dower' (FF 88), deal with the coming of misfortunes due to a female child; 'From the Panchatantra' (FF 1), takes into account the desire of a
Brahmin for a son; 'Of Spiders' (FF 57), deals with the disapproval of the abilities of a female child; female characters in 'The Lesson' (FF 8), 'Thorn Rose' (FF 10), 'The Little Prince' (FF 15), 'Bird Woman' (FF 16), 'The Gods' (FF 35), are rendered voiceless when they dared to speak against the conventions of society. They were asked to hold their tongues and clip their wings when they desired to fly high.

Through old fairy tales, girls are fed on dreams of Prince Charming. They have been allowed to be the princesses and queens but not to rule. The girl in 'The Lesson' (FF 8), was asked to hold her tongue when she desired to be an emperor; the little princess in 'Thorn Rose' (FF 10), was defeated and punished when she challenged her brother to combat; the Snow Maiden in 'Blood' (FF 33), ate snow to maintain her beauty as she had been waiting for Prince Charming to come and marry her; Rapunzel in 'Rescued' (FF 87), dreamt of a prince who would rescue her and then marry her. Anne Susan Koshi comments on Namjoshi's use of language. In her book *The Short Fiction of Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood and Suniti Namjoshi: A Study in Feminism and Fairy Tales* (2010), Koshi argues that she has ... "adopted a distinct moral language, one that emphasizes concern for others, responsibility, care and obligation", (223) as she has written many fables from patriarchal viewpoint. But apart from conventional stereotypical girls, Namjoshi also gives the accounts of taboo breakers who rejected the old notion of marriage. Their language is rebellious and their attitudes are challenging. They chose their partners on the basis of their own preference. The little princess in 'Svayamvara' (FF 105), decided to marry a man who could beat her in whistling; the princess in 'Perseus and Andromeda' (FF 47), preferred to go with the dragon rather than the prince who was incompetent and incapable of saving her life; Atlanta in 'The Runner' (FF 7), tried to escape marriage as she was the fastest runner in Attica and no one could beat her. On one hand there are weak and weeping women who submit and surrender themselves to patriarchy, while on the other we see those who have the ability to stand against male hegemony and take their own decisions and celebrate their womanhood. The Snow Maiden in 'Blood' (FF 33), cried a good deal when her husband doubted her chastity; the girl in 'Misfit' (FF 69), was a misfit in the patriarchal atmosphere of Heaven, and gave in to despair and isolation. The other fables like 'Dragon Slayers' (FF 75), 'Logic' (FF 71), 'Broadcast Live' (FF 58), 'The Snake and the Mongoose' (FF 37), 'The Woman Who Lived on the Beach' (FF 114), 'Jack Three's Luck' (FF 101), 'And Then What Happened?' (FF 118), portray liberated women who have free will, raise their voice,
go beyond the conventions of society, and reject the idea of being dutiful and obedient.

Patriarchy questioned the intelligence of women. Rousseau in his work *Emile*, subtitled ‘Of Education’, has discriminated between the type of education provided to men and women. For him women are sensitive, lack intelligence and hence cannot survive in the public sphere. Their job is child bearing and child rearing, looking after the home and hearth and to be modest and chaste. Thus they should be educated accordingly. He associates men with rationality and prudence and considers them as capable and active beings. Hence their education must suit their capabilities.

In *Feminist Fables*, Namjoshi rejects this bias and tries to redeem the dignity of women. ‘Owl’ (FF129), ‘The Doll’ (FF 108), ‘For Adrienne Rich’ (FF 70), ‘The Mouse and the Lion’ (FF 97), all these fables present women as rational beings. Other fables like, ‘Anthropoi’ (FF 9), highlight the abilities of women challenged by patriarchy, “it is only after the domestication of women, the civilization of men advanced apace” (FF 9). She attempts to uplift the status of women by inverting the conservative gender roles and presenting the brave male literary characters as inferior and weak to their female counterparts. ‘In the Forest’ (FF 95), the distorted version of the fairy tale ‘Hansel and Gretel’, depicts the character of Gretel as stronger than her brother’s, “Gretel takes charge. She is braver and wiser.” In ‘The Three Bears’ (FF 39), Goldilocks has all the qualities of a girl, “Goldilocks cries...He makes such a sweet and good little girl”. Namjoshi also uses the inversion of situations. In ‘The Little Prince’ (FF 15), the step mother brought up her daughter without curbing her spirit, and her step son like a woman, “shy, docile and gentle”, as she wanted the girl to reign alone. The little princess of the ‘Thorn Rose’ (FF 10), is not ‘lady-like and wore men’s clothes’. She challenged her brother to a fight. Namjoshi uses the techniques of inversion and role reversal to convey that sex differentiation is just biological, and we behave the way we are trained. She adheres to the views of Simone de Beauvoir, “one is not born but rather becomes a woman”. Goldilocks and the little prince are born male, but their upbringing makes them conventionally feminine. It also illustrates that sex and gender are distinct from each other. Gender is the result of social institutions and is a learned behavior, whereas sex is a biological category. Anne Fausto Sterling argues:

Feminists argued that although men’s and women’s bodies serve different reproductive functions, few other sex differences come with
the territory, unchangeable by life’s vicissitudes. If girls couldn’t learn math as easily, the problem wasn’t built into their brains. The difficulty resulted from gender norms—different expectations and opportunities for boys and girls. Having a penis, rather than a vagina is a sex difference. Boys’ performing better than girls in math exams is a gender difference. (McHugh 49)

Suniti Namjoshi being a post-independence and a post-modern Anglo-Indian writer experiments boldly not only with theme but also incorporates tabooed subject matters in her work. She simultaneously takes up several cultural, social and political issues. Her characters evoke a constant discussion on social values and symbolize life and growth as well as decay and death. As a true feminist, she gives voice to the voiceless and makes visible the invisible. People who have been marginalized worldwide and remained mute find their identity in these fables. Her works reverberate with feelings for the suppressed, oppressed and distressed and take into account the lives of women who have been disregarded and unnoticed.

In her later fables we come across women who are victims of male abuse. They are bullied, made slaves, beaten, molested and raped. ‘No Frog in Her Right Mind’ (FF 54), ‘The Monkey and the Crocodiles’ (FF 26), ‘The Crocodile’ (FF 44), ‘The Oyster Child’ (FF 78), ‘Further Adventures of the One Eyed Monkey’ (FF 79), ‘Complaint’ (FF 85), ‘The Amazon’ (FF 110), ‘Philomel’ (FF 102), ‘The Fabulous Beast’ (FF 22), ‘Sheherezade’ (FF 42), portray men as the suppressors and women as the suppressed.

An androcentric society considers women either as moral beings, or so weak that they must be subjected to the superior control of men. In her post-marital life a woman is treated by her husband like a slave, who wants her to act according to his own desire. If she fails to behave accordingly, she is punished. ‘A Room of One’s Own’ (FF 64), ‘And Then What Happened?’ (FF 118), ‘The Fisherman’s Wife’ (FF 55), and ‘The Milk White Mare’ (FF 25) deal with different aspects of the issue. Women are not even allowed to chose their profession. They are abused, looked upon with disgust, and are considered a curse in fables such as, ‘The Ugly One’ (FF14), ‘Legend’ (FF 31), and ‘Of Mermaids’ (FF 32). The protagonists are ridiculed for being the prostitutes.

Women’s efforts at home have been ignored by the patriarchy. Roberts E. Dorothy illustrates that “women’s labour in the homes was compensated by the
ideological rewards of motherhood, rather than by economic enumeration or the opportunity for self-determination.” (10) Namjoshi discards this patriarchal bias and criticizes women who give up their lives in the service of their families and yet have no security. The woman in ‘Heart’ (FF 93), is a conventional mother who works the entire day for the family’s comfort, but has no economic security after her husband’s death. ‘The Giantess’ (FF 29), who revolted against the stereotypical role of a mother in a male dominated society, represents the views of Namjoshi herself. Her decision to retire after the family grew up represents the breaking of shackles.

Suniti Namjoshi is a radical lesbian feminist. She critiques heterosexuality as it leads to dominance and is the structural oppression of LGBT (lesbian, gay bisexual and transgendered) people. Social institutions discriminate against gays and lesbians. Social practices continue to permit sarcasm and harassment at the expense of LGBT people. In her book Lesbian Ethics (1989) Sarah Hoagland, a US feminist says:

Heterosexualism is men dominating and de-skilling women in any number of forms; from outright attack to paternalistic care, and women devaluing (of necessity) female bonding as well as finding inherent conflicts between commitment and autonomy, and consequently valuing ethics of dependence. Heterosexualism is a way of living (which actual practitioners exhibit to a greater or lesser degree) that normalizes the dominance of one person in a relationship and the subordination of another. As a result it undermines female agency. (McHugh 60-61)

Favouring the slogan, ‘woman identified woman’, Namjoshi argues that the category of lesbians unlike the category of straight women is free of dominance and violence as norms of behaviour are a part of the androcentric system. Straight women compromise with the assumption that heterosexual behaviour is the norm, biologically, socially and culturally, and that what is reckoned as sex, is penile-vaginal penetration, and that gays and lesbians cannot have real sex. In order to obtain the attention and love of men, and to marry and secure a bright future women try to retain their beauty by doing absurd things. Mary Wollstonecraft in her book A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1992) illustrates that it is a societal construct that:

women are told from their infancy, and taught by the examples of their mothers that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed
cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, everything else is needless, for at least twenty years of their lives. (21)

The last statement makes it clear that in patriarchy, only 'beauty' can provide a bright and secure future to women. In radical feminism beauty has no place. It is an attribute desired by patriarchy. Many of Namjoshi's stories also deal with these two contradictory elements i.e. beauty and ugliness.

Principles of beauty change across different cultures and times. There may be material penalties for not being beautiful and material gains for being beautiful. Clarke points out that, "many a contemporary women has lost front-desk job, or failed to get one, if she was too old, or too fat, or disabled, or just funny looking." Namjoshi is of the view that women, themselves are responsible for such conditions prevailing in male dominated society. She uses satire as a weapon to mock and make fun of those who follow certain patriarchal notions. Namjoshi suggests that if women do not pursue wrong ideas they can acquire the strength to earn their own living without which independence is not possible. This can only be achieved through education. Snow Maiden in 'Blood' (FF 33), eats snow to retain her beauty; the dwarf in 'Patience' (FF 60), 'trudged' through the forest to find answers for her dwarfism; the child in 'The Confessions of a Short Person' (FF 20), eats a lot of spinach to grow tall; the toad in 'Jewel' (FF 51), cries endlessly because she thought she was ugly.

Feminist Fables is didactic in purpose and sends out the message that women must come forward, raise their voices, grab their due from men and outdo men in order to achieve liberation and empowerment. They must recognize their secret powers by overthrowing long imposed restriction of patriarchy over them. Beauty and ugliness are part of the patriarchal ideology. De Clarke points out:

In patriarchy, smallness is feminine, cleanliness is feminine, a high voice is feminine, helplessness and cowardice, and correspondingly dependency and admiration for others are feminine... While women are expected to be beautiful, women's genitals are said to be ugly and unclean. Birth is said to be ugly, pregnant women are ugly, vaginal order (even when perfectly healthy) is ugly. The functional parts of a mature woman's body, sexual and reproductive both, are called as ugly as any other sign of her maturity.
If all the obscure and hidden features of a woman’s body are ugly, then how could patriarchy expect them to be beautiful? Sometimes, the ugly, disabled and deformed humanity defects are rejected by society both sexually and socially. This category of people gets frustrated and finds solace in the company of those who accept them as they are. In Namjoshi we see lesbians longing and desiring social space where nobody can question and demand explanations and issue rejections. As a couple of the same gender; one partner is womanly, while the other possesses masculine qualities. Namjoshi’s unconventional women also possess certain masculine traits. A dissertation submitted to the University of Southern California entitled, ‘Ugly Dykes’ by Yetta Howard, claims, “Dykes are equated with a lesbian masculinity that is specifically working class…” Howard further gives the meaning of another category, that is, a ‘bull dyke’ as a “female homosexual who behaves in an extremely masculine fashion, resembling a working class male.” These women disregard all the intimate patriarchal biases surrounding women. The dykes often hide their identity as they have the fear of being disapproved by the society. The ugly creature in ‘The Ugly One’ (FF 14), the beast in ‘A Moral Tale’ (FF 21), woman in ‘A Quiet Life’ (FF 48), the brutish hairy woman in ‘Trogloidyte’ (FF 63), women in ‘The Badge Wearing Dyke’ (FF 11), all became the victims of social biases.

Namjoshi explores the role of a man in the life of a woman. She questions the security conventionally associated with a heterosexual relationship. ‘Her Mother’s daughter’ (FF 99), deals with a girl who wants to change things by not being dependent on men. She does not want her father to rule and dominate their life, and ends her argument by saying, “… women only exist in relation to men and that men are primary?” Her mother is submissive and fears change as it is dangerous. Vijayasree talks about the mother-daughter relationship suggested by Namjoshi:

It is the appropriation of woman into her husband’s patriarchal family that effects a separation between mother and daughter. Unlike the heterosexual daughter, the lesbian daughter retains or reclaims the mother-daughter bond, paying no homage to male domination ownership of her body. (85)

The elder lizard in ‘The Saurian Chronicles’ (FF 17), conveys that men are the root of the sufferings of women, and if women will start depending on themselves economically, socially and sexually all their miseries will be removed. The heterosexual relation is purely economic, while female-female relationship proved to
be surprisingly beyond sexual coherence. According to Namjoshi, this relationship is
unexpectedly dipped in unspeakable pleasure. She says that the relationship of a man
with a woman is that of master and slave. Men want to trap women and get their
possession, extract maximum pleasure and make them act according to their own
desire. The frog in ‘No Frog in her Right Mind’ (FF54), has been imprisoned by the
prince and is treated like a slave. “When he dines at table, she is tied to his cup. He
takes her to his room and puts her in a jar.”

Women have no identity of their own. They are treated as the objects of sex by
the patriarchy. The Caliph in ‘Sheherezade’ (FF 42), tries to extract maximum
pleasure from the princess and the other women of the palace. The woman in ‘The
Milk White Mare’ (FF 25) has been rejected by her husband and family as she was
unchaste; but becomes the object of dispute when she transforms into a beautiful mare
through some magical powers. Her transactions with the Caliph expose that the life of
a woman is a puzzle. It gains significance only when she is identified with a man. The
farmer in ‘The Sow’ (FF 116), loves the sow yet he slaughters her.

Lesbianism is a result of alienation and dissatisfaction with institutions such
as patriarchy and capitalism. Through her fables the writer tries to denaturalize
heterosexuality and also conveys that men are not the essential components in the life
of a woman. She places emphasis on women’s love for one another, and attempts to
build a world away from patriarchy. Elsa Gidlow, a lesbian poet writes:

The lesbian personality manifests itself in independence of spirit, in
willingness to take responsibility for oneself, to think for oneself, not
to take ‘authorities’ and their diction on trust. It usually includes erotic
attraction to women, although we know, there have been many women
of lesbian personality who never had sexual relations with one another.
What is strongly a part of the lesbian personality is loyalty and love of
other woman. (Tandon 55)

Lesbians defy heteronormativity, and the regimes of what is normal. Everything goes
against their will. They are disapproved and rejected everywhere. They are unhappy
people, going through trials and tribulations. They are the victims of double jeopardy,
oppressed not only for being women but also for being lesbians.

Favouring the homosexual aspect, Namjoshi wants a woman to listen to her
heart and not to go according to the societal norms. The dyke in ‘The Wicked Witch’
(FF 40), is indifferent to the conventions of society and says, “I feel what I feel, what
difference does it make other people say they think I feel?’ The woman in ‘The Moon Shone On’ (FF 45), is very passionate about her love for another woman and expresses it like a conventional lover. Sheherazade refuses the love of the Caliph and turns to her younger sister Dinarzade in ‘For Adreinne Rich’ (FF 70), as she does not want to be a slave of patriarchy. In ‘The Sculptor’ (FF 49), the sculptor tries to carve a man out of stone but each time it turns out to be a woman.

The writer goes deep into the psyche of a lesbian and reveals her inner fears and hesitations of getting exposed and rejected. On the one hand there are out-of-the closet lesbians, on the other there are women who are hesitant of expressing their sexuality. The lesbian in ‘A Quiet Life’ (FF 48), prefers to hide her identity and disguises herself as a fake woman as she is scared of being ridiculed. The women in ‘The Friends’ (FF 81), are unable to express their love for fear of the world. The writer has explored the historical background and a wide range of lesbian experiences. “The Cave fell in, the tribe disappeared”, in ‘Trogloyte’ (FF 63), depicts the practice of removing all the records and evidences of lesbian existence. Even the literary characters, Viola and Olivia of a canonical text of Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night have been projected through the reversal of situation in the fable ‘I See What You Are’ (FF 92). Olivia and Viola genuinely fall in love and develop an intimate relationship. The bird in ‘The Babbling Bird’ (FF 111), breathlessly complains about the miseries of being a lesbian. Namjoshi is a rebel who not only ridicules patriarchy but also religion. She mocks at gods and satirizes the norms of Nature constructed by them.

Mary Daly, a white US feminist theologian in her earliest texts The Church and the Second Sex (1968) and Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation (1973), initiates an existentialist perspective, “women’s subordination and oppression is directly a result of misogyny in Christianity.” It is God who initiated the existence of man with a man-woman heterosexual relationship, that still prevails and has thus, became the natural and socio-cultural norm. (Hugh 24–25) Connecting this theory to religion in general, Namjoshi attacks gods and goddesses. Lord Vishnu in ‘From the Panchatantra’ (FF 1) and ‘Further Adventures of One-Eyed Monkey’ (FF 79), and the goddess in ‘The Grace of the Goddess’ (FF65) have not been able to provide justice to women. ‘Ostriches’ (FF 44), makes it clear that the law of Nature makes female animals follow their males and enjoy heterosexuality. ‘Exegesis’ (FF53), criticizes the Bible saying that reproduction is only possible after intercourse and that a woman is barren without a man as earth could not stand alone without the
“light giving sun... Man is at the centre. There are no human women”. The same patriarchy prevails in heaven in ‘Misfit’ (FF 69).

Namjoshi’s feminism, like Chandra Talpade Mohanti, is a borderless feminism. These borders are not geographical, but take into account all experiences of women across countries, races, classes or castes. Many of her fables deal with the issues of multiple marginalizations. ‘Happy Ending’ (FF 12), ‘The Female Swan’ (FF18), ‘The Fox and The Stork’ (FF 73), ‘Red Fox and White Swan’ (FF 126), deal with racism. Men are better than women, heterosexuals have better social status, and whites have privileges over blacks. The comparison does not end here, it goes on with intrasexual discrimination where white lesbians are considered of higher value than the women of colour. Only the rich white males are safe of this curse in the whole world. The women of the Third World demanded their children as well as men be liberated, as their liberation is possible only when they will be relieved of economic crises and poverty. The women in ‘Next Time Around’ (FF59) and ‘The Grace of the Goddess’ (FF 65), desire the entire human race to be free of all crises and evils.

Fables such as ‘Milk White Mare’ and ‘The Sow’ have animal names symbolizing women. Female domestic animals are used as slaves, tied up and tamed by men. Other animals remind us of conventional gendering as lion is male and mouse is female, monkey a female and crocodile a male, and babbling bird, mermaid and swan are females. There are other fables which discard this norm and present women as bold and powerful, for instance, snake is male and mongoose is female in ‘Snake and the Mongoose’ (FF 37). Some titles are ironical as ‘The Lesson’ (FF 8) is a lesson according to patriarchy, ‘A Moral Tale’ (FF 21), again is a moral propagated by the patriarchy, ‘The Fisherman’s Wife’ (FF 55), is subtitled as ‘The Foolish Feminist’. Other titles are abuses used for women as ‘Whore Bitch Slut Sow’ (FF 23), ‘The Giantess’ (FF29).

Namjoshi’s corpus is marked with the intermingling of different feminist thoughts. In Feminist Fables we find an aspect of eco- feminism. Nancy Arden Mc Hugh in her book Feminist Philosophies A- Z (2007) gives reference of a French Feminist philosopher Francoise d’ Eaubonne, who argues that the environmental balance and the end of patriarchy are interconnected. According to her the increase in population and the balance of Nature is the outcome of patriarchal disfunctioning. (32- 33)
Some ecofeminists are of the view that women have a stronger physical, emotional and spiritual connection to nature and thus are most suited to ‘ethical interactions’ with the environment. Mc Hugh refers to another philosopher, Karen Warren, who says, “there are important connections between the unjustified dominations of women, people of colour, children, and the poor and the unjustified domination of nature.” (32- 33) Daphne in ‘The Nymph’ (FF 4), transforms into green laurel; in ‘Exegesis’ (FF53), the earth is feminine and the sun symbolizes a male.

Being a radical lesbian feminist, Namjoshi wants to convey that gender oppression is the root cause of other forms of oppressions that function at all levels in a male dominated society, and that institutionalized heterosexuality is the root of patriarchy’s control of women. Thus a new political, economic and social foundation is needed to end the patriarchy’s oppression of women. The writer attempts to do so through her fables and fairy tales, as they are imaginative and are woven around a world of fantasy, while in the real world discrimination is a continuous process. So after taking all these issues and organizing them according to her own desires, she finds solace and satisfaction. But this does not mean that in doing so she tries to escape from the situation. 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.

*The Conversations of Cow*

*The Conversations of Cow* (CC), Namjoshi’s novella published in 1985, is dedicated to Christine Donald, a feminist friend. Bhadravati, the Brahmini lesbian cow, appears like a goddess to Suniti the protagonist. Named after the author, Suniti is concerned about the position of lesbians in a male- centred society. The powerful heterosexual hierarchy relegated such minorities to the margins. Impressed by the cow’s divinity, Suniti implores her to answer her questions, ‘What about our identities? Aren’t we being false to ourselves?’

*The Conversations of Cow*, like most of Namjoshi’s writing, takes into account the idea of liberation of women, particularly lesbians, and questions the gender stereotyping. It also deals with the aspect of race and quest for identity. Namjoshi uses the technique of self-reference as the protagonist is named after her. Suniti- the protagonist and Namjoshi – the writer are the mirror images of each other.
as, both of them are Hindu- Brahmin, women, Indian and lesbians. The first person narration provides the novella with an autobiographical note.

Suniti, a Hindu Brahmin from India meets Bhadravati, a Brahmin cow in Canada where both of them are immigrants. Guided by her Indian cultural heritage Suniti respects the cow and invites her to be her companion. Suniti finds comfort in the shared Indian identity. Conversations with Bhadravati help Suniti to resolve her instability, confusions and fragmentation.

Asian immigrants and other people of colour become the victims of racial discrimination in the West. Namjoshi’s experience of pain for being ridiculed on the question of race depicts Bhadravati and Suniti as sufferers. The Hereford Cows consider them inferior and mock their Eastern origins:

‘So, you’re both from India,’ says Lou-Ann. ‘That’s really great.’

‘Why is it great?’

‘Why, well, it just is, you know. You must tell us all about.’

‘It’s very nice,’ I say with deliberate inanity, which I think I intend to be slightly insulting, but they don’t notice. (CC 19)

Their names sound unusual and difficult to pronounce, so they shorten their names to ‘Sue’ and ‘Baddy’. The refusal of Suniti to use the nickname indicates her unwillingness to adjust and to distort her identity:

‘I’m Suniti,’ I say.

‘Su? What?’

I tell them again. They get it wrong.

‘Well, we’ll just call you Sue for short, just as we do Baddy here.’ Her real name is Bhadravati. I look at Cow, who looks away. Later she says to me, ‘Well, you have to adjust.’

But right then and there I say distinctly, ‘No, you will not call me Sue for short.’ (CC 18)

Suniti experiences alienation as the cows ignore her and talk only to Canadian Cows:

‘I had a curious dream too,’ I put in nervously. ‘About a Glyptodon... an extinct mammal... an early ancestor...

‘What did you eat?’ Baddy asks. No one is listening to me, even I am not listening. We are all waiting for Sybbie’s answer. (CC 21)

Feminism attempts to disrupt the patriarchal domination by erasing the boundaries between the centre and the margin. Through the agency of Indian and
Canadian Cows, Namjoshi highlights the internal contradictions within feminism. The changing social, cultural and sexual contexts make the feminine identity extremely flexible. Bhadravati tells Suniti “Identity is fluid.” Suniti goes through mental trauma as she is confused and uncertain about her own identity. She wants to define her self. Sometimes she desires her companion, Bhadravati to become a woman, and at other times to be her original self. She imagines herself periodically to be a poodle, a bear, a sheep and ever a lover. Rather than prescribe to her patriarchy determined role, she mutates and transforms as per need and circumstance. Spindleshank’s quest is the replica of Suniti’s quest for identity.

She was large and reasonably good-looking, but she was hollow inside. There was a blackness inside her, an incessant craving. She decided that it would be her mission in life to assuage that darkness, to become substantial. (CC 80)

The shared goal of reinscribing the norms that have so far governed their existence bind the two in partnership. Namjoshi treats identity as flexible that can be changed or traversed at will. Rosi Braidotti defines it as ‘infinitely deconstructable figurations’, and compares it to ‘nomadic consciousness’, which is not permanent and only ‘makes those necessarily situated connections’ that are essential for survival. (Braidotti 33)

Bhadravati- the Cow of thousand faces, knows the art of transmutation. In the novella, we see her transforming into multiple beings in order to please Suniti. She is not only her partner but also acts as a guide and helps her in her mission. She mutates from lesbian cow into a woman and then into a man. Her attributes symbolize that identity is constitutive of as well as by the persona. This is why, she is the cow of a ‘thousand faces’ and a ‘thousand manifestations’. Change is essential for evolution. Namjoshi does not moralize or malign her characters. She provides them with individual and spatial freedom.

Hinduism inculcates the doctrine of reincarnation that says that identities are created on the basis of what one did in his/ her last life. In the introduction of her work Building Babel, Namjoshi writes:

... but if you think about it from a Hindu perspective, a person doesn’t go to heaven as the same person either- or get born as the same person. Who you are is just who you happen to be this time around. This notion vastly reduces the importance attached to identity. (BB xv)
Namjoshi's remythologizing is possible because of the symbolic nature of paganism. She plays with 'the notion of identity and the arbitrary attributes attached to it'. (BB xv) The familiar myths are presented on different terms. The renegotiations challenge androcentric rationality. Bhadravati is not a goddess who is a 'mother', but a goddess who loves other women. In lesbianism, motherhood is not welcomed as mothers are the agents of patriarchy and are at a higher risk of marginalization. Thus the agent of oppression metamorphoses into the agent of liberation. Suniti, on the other hand is a transgressor as she eats meat and discards the religious norms.

Historically gender is a societal construct and a product of nurturing that is dependent on the upbringing of an individual. Judith Butler says that it is based on 'performance'. She suggests:

Gender is not performed in the sense of something that is donned every morning. Gender is not intentional in that willful sense. Gender is something that is put on a body by the materiality of its existence. One performs gender as society expects that repetitious, ritualized performance. (Mc Hugh 94-95)

For Namjoshi, gender is a social product that is based on subjective construction, not on objective experience. She tries to deconstruct the idea of gender stereotyping. In a patriarchal society there are certain traits that are associated with masculinity e.g. brute strength, domination and rationality. If these traits are acquired by women, they are considered aberrations. In Conversations of Cow, Cowslip gives an account of two classes of humans i.e. A and B associated with men and women respectively:

Class A people don't wear lipstick, Class B people do. Class A people spread themselves out. Class B people apologize for so much as occupying space. Class A people stand like blocks. Class B people look unbalanced. Class A people never smile. Class B people smile placatingly twice in a minute and seldom require any provocation. (CC 24)

Through this classification, Namjoshi presents the social biases of gender construction that she wishes to displace. She acts like a Separatist and weaves a gynocentric world where no man is allowed to enter. All the characters presented in the novella are women who are out-of- the closet lesbians. The writer depicts lesbian sub- culture and tries to bring into light their ways and manners of living, and also deals with their dilemmas. She describes how they long to love; to live like couples; earn and spend
together; to romance and woo their love; celebrate equal rights; and how they desire to be approved by society.

The novella presents the two contradictory worlds i.e. the homosexual and heterosexual. In patriarchy, heterosexuality prevails. Men and women marry, bear children and carry out the ‘logical pattern’ of life. But for lesbians the situation is quite complex. Their lives are not taken seriously and they are unsure about the patterns of their existence. When Suniti and Bhadravati fall in love, the former proposes but the latter refuses as two women can not be married:

“Ought we not to settle down and have children?”

Bhadravati answers, “It’s- it’s arbitrary, my dear. Well, who would we be?” (CC 90)

As Bhadravati knows the art of mutation, she offers Suniti manhood. When Suniti refuses, she changes herself into a man- Bud, so that they can follow the conservative mode of life. Namjoshi, critical of heterosexual institutions presents heterosexual relationship between Suniti and Bud as an example of male domination. She criticizes those women who even after being lesbians follow heteronormativity.

‘Bud’, the title of the fourth chapter is the inversion of the idea associated to the sensitivity of women, and is also indicative of Namjoshi’s attempt to deconstruct gender biases. Bud the Martian is patriarchal. He treats Suniti like an object. He dominates her and wants her to act like a ‘robot’. But Suniti rejects him, and he has to leave. By refusing to position herself thus, she transcends cultural boundaries.

Namjoshi dismantles the idea of projecting women as innocent, subordinate and victimized. The position reversal from Baddy to Bud privileges Bhadravati with a first-hand experience of being a Martian. Suniti, subverted to the lower role, can acknowledge and subsequently challenge Bud’s oppressive and exclusionary strategies.

She discards both man/ woman and masculine/ feminine boundaries. “Suniti refuses to be torn between the binaries, and looks for a free and neutral zone where the tyranny of gender does not operate”. (Vijayasree 105) Her form of resistance is radical. She displaces the old order with a new one. She goes on to define the utility and significance of transformation. She revives the myth that men are aliens who belong to Mars and have come to rule the inhabitants of the earth i.e. women.
'They rope you in.'
'Rope you in?'
'Yes, in accordance with their mission'.
'And what's that?'
'The domestication of the species of planet earth.' (CC 95)

Namjoshi has woven the plot of the novella with the use of fantasy and imagination. Bhadravati is the mistress of supernatural powers who could transform, appear and disappear. She is friend, guide and instructor to Suniti. Her conversations provide Suniti with wisdom and insight.

Namjoshi applies animal imagery. The symbolism of the 'cow' and its depiction as a superior being signifies the idea of human rights and power-balance. The lesbian cows to whom Bhadravati introduces Suniti are well-read and owners of land. They are independent as well as self-sufficient. Suniti’s defense of Bhadravati at the pizza place when the manager asks her to throw the cow out illustrates the writer’s concern for human rights. “The cow is the citizen of planet earth. If you throw us out, I shall complain about you to the Human Rights Commission”. (CC 23)

Namjoshi is of the opinion that money and wealth play dominant roles in deciding different power positions. Bhadravati’s claim, “Money is power. Money transforms…”, and “Super Cow today has an independent income”, (CC 34) convey that the most privileged cow is ‘super’ as she earns independently. It also illustrates that for the emancipated cow it is necessary to be economically independent.

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’. It retains the scope for further reconfigurations and reinscriptions. The new woman who emerges is ‘wholly engaging’ and prepared ‘to write down all this.’ (CC 125)

Savita Goel calls it a ‘Utopian tale’ i.e. the representation of perfect imaginary places. In literature, ‘the utopia’ is considered the tale of superior level than the mere depiction of any world of fantasy. M. H. Abrams points out:

The Utopia can be distinguished from literary representations of imaginary places which, either because they are inordinately superior
to the present world or manifest exaggerated versions of some of its unsavory aspects, serve primarily as vehicles for satire on contemporary human life and society;.. (328)

The magical transformations of Bhadravati, the personified Canadian Cows, the love story of Suniti and a cow, the enchanting greenlands of Canada, appear mesmerizing yet bizarre.

**The Blue Donkey Fables**

*The Blue Donkey Fables* (BF- 1988), almost seventy in number, explore the lives of women through the reworking of well-known myths, fables and fairy tales. The text deals with the sharpening of her skills in genres, such as sonnets and heroic couplets, claims Namjoshi in *The Fabulous Feminist*. (88) The fables take into account philosophical and lofty notions about the emancipation of the subalterns and the marginalized. Problems of Third World women writers, animals’ rights, power hierarchy, identity, sexual orientation and gender stereotyping are dealt with. Some fables promote poets and poetry. The fables define patriarchal structures and express the author’s disapproval of the same structures being reproduced in feminist hierarchies.

Namjoshi’s concern is the actual process of marginalization and ‘othering’ through which the dominant cultures perpetuate patriarchal ideologies. In *The Blue Donkey Fables*, she criticizes the institutions which have created fixed notions about identities and female bodies. She deconstructs the stereotypical ideas about gender, societal constructs and culture. She dismantles binaries of good and evil, heroism and cowardice, wisdom and foolishness, truth and lies, angels and saints etc.

The fascinating world, in which the Blue Donkey lives, has animals with human consciousness. Through the use of animal imagery, the author discusses subjects, like race and gender discrimination in an ironic manner. She uses wit and humour to lighten the subject. Vijayasee, in her work *The Artful Transgressor* points out:

Play has been traditionally associated with children and looked upon as a child’s imitation of the adult ways of living. By an extension of the same logic, considering women’s writing as play might equate it with women’s effort at imitating male ways of living, and implicate women
in patriarchy... But this playfulness is a sign of maturity and not of naivete. Patriarchy no longer can create insecurity in them since they have learnt to play about with the myths and mores of patriarchy.

(Vijayasree 118)

The title of the book *The Blue Donkey* is an emblem for the Third World women and the fables are named after her because she is the central character of many of the fables. ‘Donkey’, an ordinary animal, conventionally is associated with foolishness, is elevated and presented as intelligent and wise. The blue complexion of the donkey associates her to the people of colour and signifies the racial aspect of the text. In the very first fable, we see the supremacy of the dominant culture as the Blue Donkey is asked either to move to some other place or change her identity. She “must be of the purest and silkiest white” or “to be a non-descriptive grey”. (BF 1) The writer tries not only to redeem the dignity of people of colour, but also of the ordinary animals such as a donkey and presents her as the ideal for all. In her middle years the Blue Donkey acquires fame and attracts tourists. The townsfolk feel proud of her as she provides a source of income for them. ‘The Sinner’ (BF 36), again deals with the same aspect and is a wish fulfillment of the writer as a grey donkey (symbolizing the whites), tries to befriend the Blue Donkey and apologizes for her rude behaviour. “The donkey at her feet refused to budge. ‘I have been snotty and snobbish and often thought to myself that I despise blue donkeys and would never go near one or have one for a friend’”.

People of colour have often become the victim of ridicule and are made fun of by the whites. After providing the Donkey a higher position, the writer tries to uplift the status of the coloured race. She depicts her as the wisest of all creatures, whether she is in the company of her followers or other animals. Different creatures come to seek her advice and also to listen to her stories of chivalry and heroism. The fables such as, ‘The Jacana’s Tale’ (BF 26-27), ‘The Disciple’ (BF 28-29), ‘The Three Piglets’ (BF 30-31), ‘The Sinner’ (BF 36), ‘The Vulgar Streak’ (BF 37-38), ‘Doubled and Redoubled’ (BF 81-82), ‘Transit Gloria’ (BF 85-86), all deal with the same theme. The tiger in the fable ‘The Disciple’, comes to her to gain wisdom, “I don’t want to learn tigrish things. It’s you I admire and I’ve come to you for Blue Donkey wisdom.” The three piglets in the fable ‘The Three Piglets’, come to seek Blue Donkey’s advice in opting their profession. She also teaches a lesson to the blue jay in ‘The Vulgar Streak’, when she boasts of her supremacy. In ‘Doubled and
Redoubled’, she proves to be wiser than Magpie when the latter spreads the news about her being capable of performing magic and turning straw into gold.

Namjoshi shows contempt for the entire human race as they harm each other. They are jealous and manipulate truths and weave lies as per need. In ‘Last Word’ (BF 5), Blue Donkey tries to suggest different reasons for her retirement, but the people indifferent to the truth, create their own reasons. “She found that in spite of all her efforts her friends heard what they wished to hear.” ‘Dazzler’ (BF 54), is a satire on the Rat Race, i.e. a situation where one does not want the other to occupy space out of competition and jealousy. The sunbird and the duck fight to occupy space in the sun.

The duck lost her temper. With a great flapping of wings she rushed at the sunbird. The sunbird dodged. The duck chased her. At last when the duck was certain that the sunbird had gone, she settled down again to sun herself. Three seconds later she heard the sunbird saying, ‘I told you it was fun. Now I’ll chase you and you dodge’. (BF 54)

Namjoshi likes to befriend wild animals such as lions rather than human beings for she wants to play safe and does not want to be harmed by the latter as they are more violent:

...And though the real people
Hadn’t yet harmed me,
I thought that they would
given the chance.

‘Control your emotions’
The grown-ups had said.
‘If any insult you,
Avert your head’.
But the message got muddled.
I cowered from the crowd, and fed
lions instead. (BF 7)

Ecofeminists argue that human beings treat non human creatures and nature as the Other. Namjoshi is not only unhappy with contemporary human ways, but also with their indifference and methods of treating nature. Val Plumwood, an ecofeminist argues, “...viewing humans and nature as separate and opposed and clinging to Cartesian rationality has lead to a distancing of humans from nature and a ruthless
treatment of nature as Other.” (Mc Hugh 91) Thus the writer defends animals and proves that they are better than human beings. ‘Explanation’ (BF 6-7), is a satire on the entire human race and explains that why she chose to write about plants and animals and not about people. She points out that the flora-fauna, and human beings are beyond comparison as the former are honest and uncomplaining:

Why do you write about plants and animals?
Why not people?
Because
no daffodil shrieks to be plucked,
no lily rages, ‘Admire my bower.’
...they make no work, to which she says,
‘that is not true’. (BF 6)

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. She is critical of poets who talk about exotic creatures like nightingale and rose, and ignore others and consider them as non literary. ‘Poem Against Poets’ (BF 22), takes up the same aspect:

“I fall upon the thorns of life
I weep, I bleed,
but to what purpose?
There was once a poet
who thought she was a nightingale,
and another
who thought she was a rose-
charming perhaps...
... and Philomel wails
in the woods again.
But there are the other
More ordinary animals.
They are not literary
They own their pain. (BF 22)

Human beings consider themselves superior than animals and thus try to lash them and want them to act according to their desires. The mistress in ‘Prodigal Pudding’ (BF 18), wants to impose her will upon her cat. Rabbits in ‘Gracious Living’ (BF 73),
have been living on farmers’ mercy. She also defends cats in the fable ‘Cornered’ (BF 8), and justifies her deeds.

In Blue Donkey we not only see her concern about the issues of human rights but animals’ rights as well. ‘The Creation: Plan B’ (BF 21), depicts animal desire i.e. of Parrot and Tortoise to create a human free world as they feel that the latter are the sole cause of their suffering. ‘If Somehow I might...’ (BF 56), is the writer’s wish to see humans in their reversed form, i.e. in the form of apes (animals), as animals are free of worldly desires and evils:

I might have the vision
To see humans in their simple reversion
To animals, neither bitter, brutal, nor conscious
of being anything other than themselves, ungracious
in nothing, and unaware of the need
... and I, having no reason to fear distress,
Might find occasion to feel blessed and bless.

Here, Namjoshi uses the Darwinian theory of evolution, based on the concept that human beings have evolved from apes. She is of the opinion that human beings are corrupting the world, while animals are ignorant beings, “...and how being ignorant birds and unaware/ they live at ease in their native air”, (BF 64). Their world is placid, docile and simple, while our world is complex, wild and full of discomforts. She claims that human beings chase the race for power hierarchy and try to suppress others, thus, it is unworthy for them to live in animal kingdom. The fables ‘It’s not that the ...’ (BF 64), and ‘The beasts came up to me...’ (BF 80) deal with the same theme.

As far as human world is concerned, the writer is both a misogynist and misandric. She hates both men and women (straight), in heterosexual institutions, and only approves of lesbians. She criticizes heteronormativity and mocks at man-woman relationship, where man is the master and woman is the slave. Judith Levine, in My Enemy, My Love: Man Hating and Ambivalence in Women’s Lives, points out:

Hatred to man is an emotional problem insofar as it creates pain and hostility between men and women. But it is not an individual neurosis... Hatred to man is a cultural problem... a cultural phenomenon... (Misandria)
Namjoshi is a lesbian feminist, and lesbians can fall in misandria as a result of the ‘dialectic reaffirmation of their identity’ (Misandria). In a man-woman relationship, a woman's identity diminishes to a void as she is subordinated by man. The fable ‘Turf’ (BF 32), is indicative of man’s supremacy and power hierarchy. The mistress, her cat and the frog were happy beings till the mistress was not divorced by the master. As soon as her husband leaves her, both the mistress and the cat are driven out, while the frog rejoices as now she does not have the fear of being eaten by the cat. The queen in ‘Loner’ (BF 52), makes friends with a deer and escapes into the forest rather than to live with the king. She rejects patriarchy for she is not happy with the heteronormative ways of life and thus, identifies herself with beasts for culturally, they too are considered as ‘other’. The author claims in *The Jackass and the Lady*:

> It’s apparent to many women that in a humanist universe, which has been male-centred historically, women are “the other”, together with the birds and the beasts and the rest of creation. And identification with the rest of creation, possibly with the whole of it, would only be logical. (29)

‘On that island’ (BF 61), is her hatred for all men and those women who serve them and subordinate them. She expresses her anger and resentment against the patriarchal society after reducing men to the position of pigs:

> On that island where all men turned into pigs
> -there was no exception, the hero dreamt- ...
> ... I confess I was charmed, forgot my dislike
> of men behaving like pigs, and of women
> who catered to them. (BF 61)

Her ‘tiger’ fables also deal with the same issue as ‘tigers’ symbolize men. In the fable, ‘Among Tigers’ (BF 70), the author talks about different ways of marginalization of a woman in a patriarchal set-up:

> From their point of view I exist, of course,
> but am hardly central, a fact of sorts’
> and of no consequence to their magnificence...
> ...I fully understand the Tigrish Cause
> and keep my distance from those massive jaws.

Another fable ‘What the One-eyed Monkey Said to the Tigers’ (BF 71), also deals with the same theme.
In an androcentric society, wealth and power are considered to be the legacy of men. Gods too do not cater to the needs of women and provide privileges only to men. Namjoshi criticizes gods and says that patriarchy not only prevails in society but among gods as well. In the fable ‘The Fortunate One’ (BF 75-76), gods are not concerned about providing power and wealth to the queen. They just bless her with all the attributes that subordinate her to men, such as the role of a mother, a woman and a queen and test her for her duties and drudgeries.

Namjoshi claims that it is only in a woman-woman relationship that a woman is safe from being marginalized. Many of her fables deal with lesbian eroticism and lesbians romanticizing love. According to her, a woman can associate with another woman and thus, share her identity, as said in the fable, ‘The Lion Skin’ (BF 33), “you be me, and I’ll be you”. She talks about the interchangeable nature of identities that removes all the differences between the two women, and also recapitulates her concept of ‘identity fluidity’ and its flexibility. Her other fable, ‘Triptych’ (BF 96), also deals with the same theme.

Apart from the fluidity of identity, Blue Donkey Fables also deals with the aspect of identity crisis and quest for identity. The writer takes up the images of monstrous, heroic and godly figures of classical myths, such as Athene, Arachne, Medusa, Perseus etc. to break up the myths about gender identity and gender stereotypes which present the frightening consequences of conformity to patriarchal norms. Athene in ‘Olive Branch’ (BF 46-47), suffers from identity crisis as her manners were masculine. She is motherless and has no female friend, and is called her ‘father’s daughter’. She has been on men’s side as the world has been dominated by them. But due to the need of the hour, she desires to change her identity. She tells her owl:

It’s all a matter of identity and gender. To you it doesn’t matter. You’re only an owl. But the modern women are turning against me. They say I’m really on the side of the man’... ‘Oh you silly bird! Don’t you understand that the times have changed and that in accordance with the times I have to change my image? (BF 46-47)

Identities of objects vary from person to person. The construction and the deconstruction of identity is a subjective experience, as the value of the golden coin is different both for the Magpie and the woman in ‘Magpie’ (BF 55). She is unaware about its value and is just charmed by its ‘glints and glitters’, while the woman knows
its commercial value and thus wants to possess it. The fable ‘Bride’ (BF 57), says that
cwomen should possess feminine qualities. The young prince rejects the best girls,
...“these women have excelled,’ he said to his father, ‘but they seem to be lacking in
womanly qualities.’ ‘Well of course,’ said his father. ‘I have weeded these out. You
can now choose from those who did not compete.’ ‘Apotheosis’ (BF 3), discusses the
deconstruction of identity. The Blue Donkey is put in a stable after acquiring fame,
and becomes the object of tourist attraction. But their plea for a snippet of her fur
makes her lose her identity:

And when the tourists pleaded for a snippet of her rare fur, she allowed
them to snip and chop as they wished. Soon she began to look scruffy.
The townsfolk worried. They shut down the stable and begged her to
grow her fur quickly. The Blue Donkey obliged, and then they
discovered that her fur had turned a beautiful grey. (BF 3)
The pressure on Blue Donkey caused her hair to turn grey and she lost her position as
the prime tourist attraction.

‘Doubled and Redoubled’(BF 81- 82), deals with the identity construction.
The Blue Donkey is able to create a situation by which other animals are able to
believe her and the Magpie to be saints, when they are not. She tells the Magpie,
“Oh, I don’t know. Two miracles in the course of a day, two saints where at first
there were none’…

_The Blue Donkey Fables_ apparently have the characters indulging in
absurdities. But these absurdities disguise meaningful notions. Namjoshi’s self-
referential fable ‘Serious Danger (BF 83- 84), deals with Suniti’s dream of identity
transformation. She first masks herself with a tiger’s skin and then switches over to a
donkey’s skin after being dissatisfied with tigrish customs. Fed up with being a
woman in the so called ‘normal world’ she experiments with animal identities.

Identities are constructed out of multiplicitous effects and perceptions of
tradition, modernity and globalization. Identities become complex when they are
related to sexuality. Lesbians suffer from the crisis of gender identity. They are
women biologically, but their manners and their sexual choices are masculine. They
suffer from the dilemma about their own existence. ‘Ordinary Women’ (BF 92- 93),
deals with lesbians yearning for identity. The woman is confused as she could not
behave like ordinary women and aspires to be a knight, but is not able to fulfill her
desire due to her lack of height. Moreover, she is charmed by women and men do not interest her:

I was courteous, I was tough, but not tall enough. I sat among the women and watched the knights.
I lounged among the knights and watched the women. At last somebody said, ‘This really won’t do’.
So we all got up.
We mixed and we mingled, we shared a common cause.
Half way through it all I fell in love.

‘There is no wooer and no one is wooed’,... (BF 92)

The last line indicates the mashing up of identities, and there is dilemma about who should be wooed and by whom. And their confusion is ended when they say, “And at last I understood.” Right,” I said. ‘You are a lady, and I am a lesbian.” (BF 93)

In many of her fables, Namjoshi tries to deconstruct the stereotypical notions about identities and ideologies. Her ‘Angel Poems’ (BF 13- 14), ‘The Saint and the Robin’ (BF 16- 17), ‘The Hermit in her wisdom...’ (BF 74), deconstruct the notion about the supremacy of angels and saints:

‘Acquit yourself of a superior wisdom, love whom you can, O you silly saint.
There’s nothing to it’ (BF 16)

The writer actually mocks at conventional archetypes such as saints and angels. Saints are obsessed with the idea of their supremacy and try to impart morals to Robin who is an ordinary bird. But Robin proves to be wiser than the saint. ‘Ivory Apes’ (BF 78- 79), points out that evil and good are subjective experience. The three monkeys are unable to differentiate between good and evil and live in an illusory world. We see the inversion of the concept of good and evil as they consider good as what evil is in the ‘normal’ world and vice- versa. ‘Transit Gloria’ (BF 85- 86), and ‘Thunder and Lightening’ (BF 102) dismantle the idea of heroism. Shanti- the grandmother of Blue Donkey does not possess the stereotypical qualities of a hero, but due to her intelligence Blue Donkey considers her heroic.
The fables act as a tribute to poets and writers that comments on poetic exercise, poetic practice, poetic content, readers, publishers and publications. Fables, such as, 'Poetic Practice' (BF 11-12), 'Lesson Number Three' (BF 39-40), deal with practicing the art of poetry. Other fables, like 'Interpose an island' (BF 23), takes up the idea of poetic imagination, the kind of art that a poet possesses which has the potential to construct or deconstruct things and ideas. "Interpose an island in salty seas?/ As though we were gods and could create/ real places?" (BF 23) A poet also has the capability to convert a woman, into a goddess. 'Cythera' (BF 45), says:

...but I thought

to myself I would make poem

out of this, of how I sat on a beach

and gossiped with a goddess...

In 'The Return of the Giantess' (BF 48), none of the creations of the universe had the ability to hold the giantess, except for the poetic imagination:

...to receive her, neither grass, nor sky,
nor the pounding sea could hold her in,
and I held her close and we had our fill.

Being a poet requires a lot of hard work. One has to burn the midnight oil in order to write poetry. It is a painful experience when one does not get the opportunity to get one's work recognized. Writing from the margins is a major problem in feminism, and Blue Donkey Fables deals with the hardships and difficulties that the Third World women writers face during their career. Namjoshi deals with women writers' fear of not gaining due recognition and being marginalized. The author takes up the issue of Third World women writers in particular. Third World women writers not only suffer from the inability to create as they do not have their 'foremothers' to serve as models, but also from the insecurity of not being able to publish and acquire readers.

One-eyed Monkey in 'The One-eyed Monkey Goes into Print' (BF 9-10), needs crocodiles' help to get her work published as it has been rejected by publishers for lacking in human interest. With great difficulty a publisher agrees, but has a problem with her title. The original title, 'Leanings of a One-eyed Monkey' is first replaced by 'Life and Leanings of a One-eyed Blank', so as to hide the identity of the Monkey. But the title is again objected to as it is ambiguous. The book finally achieves only a moderate success under the title, 'The Amorous Adventures of a One-
eyed Minx’. Blue Donkey in ‘Dusty Distance’ (BF 24- 25), too faces difficulty of writing from the margins, and lack of readership. Thus, the Donkey has to leave her poetic practice and settle for a part-time job for half a carrot.

Readership is quite important for a writer as it is readers’ response that makes a writer’s work successful. Today the role of the reader is more important than that of the writer. In the fable, ‘Dear Reader’ (BF 51), Namjoshi makes use of the Readers’ Response Theory and says that the meaning of the text is now decided by the readers. The poet addresses readers:

If your sun had been the colour of milky chalk
or had presented a more muted show?

What can I say? Perhaps I’d have shouted, ‘Yellow!

Bright yellow! And you’d have refused to say it was so. (BF 51)

She criticises poets for being dishonest as they have the license to create myths and lies. ‘The Three Piglets’ (BF 30), deals with poetic manipulation, while ‘If You Know What I Mean’ (BF 49- 50), is a satire on writers who write in praise of the rulers so as to achieve their favour. They lie and exaggerate in order to flatter them. The jackal praises the lioness, “O Lady, she ventured, ‘when the sun goes down your burnished fur gives light to lesser creatures who inhabit the night?” ‘Craft’ (BF 69), blames poets for being dishonest, “She was merely engaged in doing profitably what she has always done: making up myths, creating as it were, a suitable self, fabricating, as you’ve heard, the necessary lies.” ‘In the Garden’ (BF 87- 88), criticizes contemporary poetry. ‘Stilted Poem’ (BF 89), again is a satire on romantic poetry in which the poet lies with the use of figurative speech, such as metaphors and similes:

...- that your eyes

Were like mirrors-

That they changed- swirled-

were a dream

Of drowning-...

She criticizes poets and writers for being dishonest, fabricating and creating myths. This also seems to be the criticism of her own self as she too is a fabulist who is perfect in fantasizing and myth making. She mocks poets for working so hard and being proud as they too have faced death like a layman. She adheres to Shakespeare’s idea of death in his sonnets. ‘To Be a Poet’ (BF 98), talks about the inevitability of death. The writer points out the fact that however the poets may be distinct but their
doom is same as that of a common man. Death reduces all the differences. Death is supreme.

*The Blue Donkey Fables* capture the spirit of her earlier works but also serve to further her feminist quest. Her radical views are imparted through recast of familiar identities. The work satirizes the patriarchal tendency to grade everything unfamiliar as negative. The author in her rewrites, inverts the conventional concepts of decency, respectability, patriotism, trust, true love etc. The politics of power structures and invented identities is dealt with in a thought-provoking manner. The compact format of the fable provides her with the perfect medium for communicating the implicit sensitivities without sermonizing.

Suniti Namjoshi’s fiction attempts to establish an alternative universe through the use of the fantasy mode. Namjoshi resorts to fantasy not to escape from reality but to reconstruct it. She reworks ancient and canonical myths and fables in order to define the new, feminist lesbian identity. In the process, she discovers untold stories and also creates new ones. The author, herself, is frequently the protagonist in her works. In this role her concern is to explore the motives behind and the consequences of categorizing and labeling individual, races and communities as negative. She disrupts mainstream notions of gender, race, nationality and sexual preference.
Works- Cited


