Chapter-5

Suniti Namjoshi’s Poems: Striking a Different Note

As illustrated through the earlier chapters the poems written by contemporary Indian women poets express their deep dissatisfaction with the given world and order of things, and their realization of the need for a transformational change which leaves them perplexed and baffled. In fact, they seem to believe that there is no precise and final answer to the dilemmas of life. As a result, their restless and persistent mind that questions, probes and covets starts articulating the inner conflict. Loneliness and insecurity, social realities and life’s sorrows and the crisis of identity have become the central themes of their poetry.

The same frustration and dissatisfaction can be seen in the poetry of Suniti Namjoshi. She strikes a different note from other contemporary poets taken up for study, as her schizophrenic identity results not only from the attempt to resolve her tensions as a woman or a feminist writer, but also as a lesbian and a diasporic writer. In an interview with Christine Croyden, Namjoshi expresses how her mother disapproves of her freedom, “She has never been particularly happy about that I’m a writer, or, a lesbian feminist. She sees these as notoriety, tarnishing the good name of the family” (Croyden 1).

Suniti Namjoshi comes out openly and boldly as a lesbian and considers her defiance of social norms as a counter-attack on gender
exploitation. By virtue of her lack of sexual ties with man and of her freedom from conventional heterosexual commitments, especially marriage, a lesbian is always placed sociologically in a situation of great freedom. Lesbian theorists argue that by rejecting stereotypes about women, these women can think radically and profoundly about the possibility of social change with reference to gender arrangements.

In the early 1970s the concept “woman identified woman” was an important lesbian slogan. According to lesbian theorists a lesbian was a woman who believed in the primacy of women. “‘Lesbian’ was a source of an alternative model of female identity, not simply a choice of sexual activity (Radicallesbianisms, 1973)” (Quoted in Humm 164). Luce Irigaray argues that “lesbian” necessarily opposes the constructions imposed by heterosexuality and represents an alternative sexual discourse. Monique Wittig ends “The Straight Mind” with this sentence: “Lesbians are not women” (32) because the sign “woman” carries with it too many constructions and associations. According to him, “it is oppression that creates sex and not the contrary” (Wittig 6). Thus, he observes:

Lesbianism is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is not a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically. For what
makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man, a relation that we have previously called servitude, a relation which implies personal and physical obligation as well as economic obligation... a relation which lesbians escape by refusing to become or to stay heterosexual. (Quoted in Calhoun)

For Freud the question of lesbian desire is particularly problematic. According to him:

... the maturing of feminine eroticism requires change from the clitorid stage to the vaginal stage, a change symmetrical with that which transfers to the father the love the little girl has felt for her mother. (De Beauvoir 426)

However, various causes may check this developmental process; the woman may not become resigned to her “castrated” state, hiding from herself the absence of the penis and remaining fixed on her mother, for whom she is ever seeking substitute.

In Adler’s view, this arrest of development is not an accident, passively suffered:

... it is desired by the subject who, through the will to power, deliberately rejects her mutilation and seeks to identify herself with the male while refusing his domination... Homosexuality can be for woman a
mode of flight from her situation or a way of accepting it. (De Beauvoir 426)

Queer theory which is grounded in gender and sexuality is helpful in understanding any abnormality and deviation from normal sexual behavior. This theory gives rise to a debate whether sexual orientation is natural or essential to a person, or if sexuality is mere a social construction and subject to change. David Halperin has said, “Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (Judith Butler 3).

Given Freud’s problematic views on feminine sexuality, it may seem surprising that some feminist queer theorists turn to Freud for a theory of lesbian sexuality. Freud’s “notion of disavowal suggests that sexuality and psychic life are not just the result of the repression of internal drive force but also the result of negotiating external reality and social pressures” (Oliver 1). This view denies the fact that there is any normal or natural sexuality. Sexuality, however, is formed as a result of interplay between internal and external, between body and cultures, and between fantasy and reality. Once we allow that a combination of forces produce sexuality, we can imagine multitudes of possible sexualities; and concepts of normal sexuality or natural sexuality become suspicious disciplinary techniques used to serve very specific social power structures, like patriarchy.
According to Teresa de Lauretis, a queer theorist, when culture cannot provide a positive female body image for the girl as she develops into a woman, she finds fetish substitutes in order to compensate for the missing desirable female body. Kelly Oliver explains it in the following words:

When she is made to feel bad about her body, when she is told that she is not feminine, that her body is not desirable or lovable, when the dominant culture both tells girls that they are not feminine enough and that to be feminine is bad, then they have difficulty finding a positive female body-image with which to fortify their own egos and self-esteem as women. (Oliver 2)

The consequence is that women have to find alternative ways to value their bodies as women.

Against Freudian theory, then, de Lauretis argues the lesbian, unlike the heterosexual man, is not trying to find a substitute mother or a substitute for the maternal phallus, as Freud suggests. Rather, she is trying to find a desirable and lovable female body-image. She describes masculinity in lesbians not as penis envy but rather as an embrace of one of the few symbols of desire for women available in our culture.

Judith Butler, another queer theorist, argues that sex (male, female) is seen to cause gender (masculine, feminine) which is seen
to cause desire (towards the other gender). This is seen as a kind of continuum. Her approach – inspired by Foucault—is basically to smash the supposed links between these, so that gender and desire are flexible, free-floating and not caused by other stable factors. She says:

There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender . . . identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions”, that are said to be its results. (25)

On the whole, lesbianism is considered as a revolt as a lesbian woman defines herself in terms of a woman only and rejects the male definition of as how she should feel, love, look and live. It puts woman on the forefront while society declares the male supremacy. It threatens male supremacy at its core. The lesbian “rejects male sexual/political domination; she defies his world, his social organization, his ideology, and his definition of her as inferior” (Bunch 83).

Thus, lesbianism is a political commitment as well. It is political because relationships between men and women are essentially political: they involve power and dominance. Since a lesbian actively rejects that relationship and chooses woman, she defies the established political system. Jill Johnston writes:

. . . (t)he word lesbian has expanded so much through political definition that it should no longer refer
exclusively to a woman simply in sexual relation to another woman . . . The word is now a generic term signifying activism and resistance and the envisioned goal of a woman committed state. (Quoted in Eisenstein 48)

Suniti Namjoshi feels so oppressed by this male-dominated socio-cultural system that reduces a woman to the status of the “Other”, that “she considers compulsory heterosexuality as a repressive social structure that systematically subordinates women” (Vijayasree 26). A true woman who lives beneath the façade of male-derived identity has no value of her own as her entire value is derived from his and is worthless. She is a woman who is invisible, pathetic, inauthentic and unreal. She can define herself only through a man.

Heterosexual society offers women a few privileges as compensation if they give up their freedom: for example, mothers are ‘honored,’ wives or lovers are socially accepted and given some economic and emotional security, a woman gets physical protection on the street when she stays with her man, et cetera. The privileges give heterosexual women a personal and political stake in maintaining the status quo. (Bunch 85)
On the other hand, the lesbian threatens the ideology of male supremacy by destroying the lie about female inferiority, weakness, passivity, and by denying women’s “innate” need for men. While discussing their lived experience as lesbians, Suniti Namjoshi and Gillian Hanscombe in the “Introduction” of their Flesh and Paper write, “. . . a lesbian woman does not inhabit the worlds that make sense to heterosexual men.” They do not consider “male heterosexual literary tradition” as “universal” and say:

For us, love is not the same; sex is not the same; parenting is not the same; work is not the same; safety is not the same; respect is not the same; trust is not the same. Only death might, perhaps, be the same.

(Namjoshi, Flesh 3)

Heterosexuality is thus a system of male ownership of a woman, participation in which is compulsory for man and especially for woman. A woman’s heterosexual orientation perpetuates social, economic, emotional, and sexual dependence on and accessibility to man. To Namjoshi, being a lesbian means ending identification with heterosexuality. It means ending the personal stake in the male world so that she joins women individually and collectively, to end their oppression.

Julia Kristeva clearly takes heterosexuality to be prerequisite to kinship and to culture. Consequently, she identifies lesbian
experience as the psychotic alternative, a self-loss to the acceptance of paternally sanctioned laws. She projects lesbian as “Other” to culture, and characterizes lesbian speech as the psychotic “whirl of words”. This positions her within the orbit of paternal-heterosexual privilege.

In claiming that lesbianism designates loss of self, Kristeva appears to be delivering a psychoanalytic truth about the repression necessary for individuation. . . . In other words, Kristeva prefers to explain lesbian experience as a regressive libidinal state prior to acculturation itself, rather than to take up the challenge that lesbianism offers to her restricted view of paternally sanctioned cultural laws. (Butler 118)

Though the lesbian movement is supported by a number of critics, an attempt has always been made to cripple it as the heterosexual women who are in majority snub the lesbians and their social perspectives. Male society, too, defines lesbianism as a sexual act only. The male-centered society has invented lesbianism as a label to throw at any woman who dares to be man’s equal, who dares to challenge his prerogative and who dares to assert the primacy of her own needs. Similar is the situation with Suniti Namjoshi. A few critics like A. N. Dwivedi and Monika Varma accuse her poetry as mere “literary doodles” (Varma 3). Instead of understanding her
position in the patriarchal society and the reason of her abhorrence for heterosexual love, Monika Varma denounces her poetry for the “absurdities like Beauty and the Beast or Aphrodisiac” and asks her “to be more careful” (6). A. N. Dwivedi while discussing her poetry states:

Namjoshi comes out as a pitiable poet in the long run, lisping in foreign tongue and alien numbers and breathing the Western air and showing unnecessary compassion for her motherland. . . . If one were to accept her version of love, as indicated in ‘Beauty and the Beast,’ the whole human relationship between man and woman would flounder on the rocks of ruin. (214)

Kanwar Dinesh Singh at times seems to be denouncing Namjoshi’s “utterly nauseating and repulsive satire” (79) but then he supports her also by saying that her “inner self is disconcerting and conflict-ridden” because of the “painful surroundings” (80). Regarding her lesbian sensibility, he comments, “She finds some kind of recompense in lesbian gamut against the betrayal shown by her male companion/lover” (81). Rashmi Bajaj, too, seems to be justifying her lesbianism by pronouncing that she is “so much disgusted with the merely physical in love that she talks nowhere of love but always of sex in a satirical vein” (51).
Patriarchy, on the whole, has created a fear of the label of “lesbian” among women. This results in discontentment and frustration which further leads to schizophrenic identity as it is in the case of the poet. Thus, lesbianism has its own clinical associations:

... as we deepen and broaden the range of what we define as lesbian existence, as we delineate a lesbian continuum, we begin to discover the erotic in female terms as that which is ... omnipresent in ‘the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic,’ and in the sharing of work; as the empowering joy which ‘makes us less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial.’ (Rich 27)

Anup Beniwal while discussing Namjoshi’s bizarre behaviour and her schizophrenic identity supports her by saying that it is because of her “tentative exploration towards the direction of self-definition” (78).

Lesbianism is much more than a matter of an individual’s sexual preference. It “is much more than the defining term for the sex of your bed partner.” It is a “total life commitment to a life with women” and “an entire system of world view and life living” (Quoted in Koedt 2). The “woman-identified-woman” i.e. the lesbian commits herself to other women for political, emotional, physical and
economic support. Women are important to her and she is important to herself.

According to Adrienne Rich, the “social relations of the sexes are disordered and extremely problematic, if not disabling, for women, all seek paths towards change” (24). Lesbian existence is the breaking of social taboos and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is an attack on the male right to the access to women.

Suniti Namjoshi’s innermost feelings and proclivities can also be observed as a lesbian-feminist writer. Her search for identity “as an Indian living and writing in a predominantly White world, as a woman working in a largely male academia, as a Hindu in an all-Christian world” (Vijayasree 52) takes her to lesbianism. A lesbian is someone who has withdrawn herself from the conventional definitions of femininity. She has “refused to buy into the limitations and restrictions placed upon her by the social expectations of acting like a ‘true woman’” (Eisenstein 51).

Namjoshi’s The Jackass and the Lady spells out her position as a lesbian writer. In this she creates the Jackass, the poetic persona, who is soon joined by many other beasts. She makes this choice because in this male-dominating society she can find only birds and beasts with whom she can identify herself, thus, rejecting all gender stereotyping. She convincingly argues: “. . . in a humanist universe, which has been male-centered historically, women are ‘the other’,
together with the birds and the beasts and the rest of creation”
(Namjoshi, India 28).

Suniti Namjoshi and Gillian Hanscombe in Flesh and Paper
express their feelings as friends, poets, lesbians and lovers. In
“Narrative Distance” this sentiment can be seen:

Climb up here on this ready-made mountain,
sit beside me, and watch the two women
walking on the beach, observe their relation,
mood and emotion, each connected to each. (1-4)

Namjoshi discards the traditional sex roles and heterosexuality
as they confirm the subordination of a woman. In heterosexuality
every woman is simply defined by and is the property of men with a
right to her body, her services and her children. It is a system which
supports male domination, instead of love and support from a male.
Lesbianism, on the other hand, seems to be providing a sense of
relief:

And if the sun
is too strong, should burn too much, will you
walk with me to where the light is more calm
and be in me where the seas heave and are
serene and heave again and are themselves?

(“Well, then let slip the masks” 18-22)
Lesbianism, on the other hand, celebrates the relation of one woman with another. As lesbian poet Caroline Halliday while describing lesbian eroticism states: “The lesbian erotic poem is not only about connections and explorations. It is also about celebration, about breaking taboos, naming what *is* and what *is ours*” (Quoted in Vijayasree 59). The same lesbian stance can be seen in Suniti Namjoshi’s poetry. In her *Flesh and Paper* the two voices (i.e. of Suniti Namjoshi and Gillian Hanscombe) “shape a universe in which the lesbian consciousness is central. What is unusual in the sequence is the sense of equality and partnership, so that traditional barriers between speaker and listener, poet and audience, dissolve” (Namjoshi, *Flesh*). Both the women are leading a carefree life:

One of them laughs, the other smiles; they appear uninhibited, careless, carefree;

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

They are digging in the sand,

Then they stop, consult one another, then proceed.

And now they are walking hand in hand;

They are picking up pebbles, sea shells, seaweed.

(“Narrative Distance” 5-6, 9-12)

She seems to consider that by rejecting heterosexuality a woman can decline secondary, derivative, or second-best to men
positions. Her eve prefers to be coupled with the snake rather than remain chained to Adam and bear the badge of a fallen woman:

   Eve
   in her turn
   encircled the snake, pressing her body
to him.

Curious coupling, brown snake and Eve,
caught in a twist
of the blind green coil being Adam
and evil and Eve.

("Her Form in Clear Water" 3-10)

She was so much disappointed with the heterosexuality that she prefers to be united with animals rather than a man. It is not that heterosexual women are evil or do not care about women. It is because the very essence, definition and nature of heterosexuality give importance to men first. Her Circe symbolizes liberation from heterosexual norms and forges possibilities of alternative sexualities.

   Circe,
   all animals adore you,
you are all things to each
in the tutelary garden, at the continuous feast,

("Homage to Circe" 27-30)
Namjoshi is an impulsive woman who wishes to act according to her inner compulsions. She wants to be a more complete and free human being than her society would permit. It is lesbianism which gives her freedom from all restrictions. She with Gillian Hanscombe feels liberated to act according to her own free will:

We can

—I/you can—press dreams and theories, bellies, breasts, hair, hips, lips; and words; all plaited now, until tomorrow.

(“Because of India” 12-15)

Suniti Namjoshi, on the whole, is not able to accept the limitations and oppressions imposed on her by the society—the subordinate, domesticated, submissive female role. It is lesbianism only which seems to give her contentment:

Ebb is easier than flow;
to then fro. She motioned and she motioned back.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . .

What drew them went unsaid;
and they were faithful and content.

(“I invent the movie” 23-26, 30-32)
However, the decision to be a lesbian is very difficult for a woman as most women resist a direct relationship with other women. To confront other women directly means to encounter, as in a mirror, the reality of one’s own true self.

Women resist relating on all levels to other women who will reflect their own oppression, their own secondary status, their own self-hate. For to confront other woman is finally to confront one’s self—the self we have gone to such lengths to avoid. And in that mirror we know we cannot really respect and love that which we have been made to be. (Eisenstein 52)

Namjoshi’s “I Give her the Rose” is an early example of Namjoshi’s lesbian eroticism. The poet in the poem uses nature imagery of a rose. She seems to convey that lesbian sexuality is natural unlike the heterosexuality which is culturally conditioned:

I give her the rose with unfurled petals.

She smiles

and crosses her legs.

I give her the shell with the swollen lip.

She laughs. I bite

and nuzzle her breasts.

I tell her, “Feed me on flowers

with wide open mouths,”
and slowly,

she pulls down my head. (1-10)

The poem is an expression of the poet’s courageous defiance—
defiance of all norms. It celebrates the freedom of lesbian erotic
feeling, and affirms lesbian relationships actual, physical and sexual.
The same sensation can be seen in her “Well, then let slip the masks”
in which the poet with her partner Gillian Hanscombe expresses her
lesbian desires:

The curve of your breast is like the curve
of a wave: look, held, caught, each instant
caught, the wave tipping over and we in our bower,
the two of us sheltered, my hands on your thighs,
your body, your back, my mouth on your mouth
and in the hollows of your jaws and your head
nuzzling my breasts. (7-13)

In the same poem she goes on expressing her sexual desires with an
unusual boldness and audacity and her schizophrenic behaviour as
seen in her earlier poetry is put back by her significant confidence:

Will you
take to the sea, my darling? Will you let me caress you?
The tips of your feet, your legs, your sex?
Will you let my tongue caress you? Will you
lie in my arms? Will you rest?
But this sensation of a woman’s passion for another woman is met with resistance everywhere in society. A lesbian may think that she is free since she escapes the personal oppression of an individual male/female relationship. But to the society she is still a woman. This society hates women who love women, and so, a lesbian, who escapes male-dominance in her private home, receives it doubly at the hands of male society.

Lesbianism is not only the denial of patriarchy or an act of resistance as it has always been perceived. But it is more than this. It has of course included isolation, self-hatred, breakdown, alcoholism, suicide and intrawoman violence; we romanticize at our peril what it means to love and act against the grain, and under heavy penalties; and lesbian existence has been lived without access to any knowledge of a tradition, continuity, a social underpinning. (Rich 26)

The same is the case with Suniti Namjoshi. Though she is a lesbian, yet the oppression as a woman which she is facing under patriarchy has not ended. Her schizophrenic existence ensures that she is not leading a life according to her own free will as it is ideally supposed in case of lesbians.
Her poetry is a revelation of her rueful, unfortunate state as a poet who is silently singing the sad song of her life. The poetry is full of cynicism and disgust in the matter of love and sex as it can be seen in the following lines in her “Beauty and the Beast”. The poet comments on the contemporary sexual norms and stresses that:

. . . the complex mind
Sees infidelity only as a symptom
Of passion. (13-15)

The poem shows a deep sense of horror and disgust in the matter of love and sex.

Her attitude towards God is no better. The poem “Rationale” brings out in unmistakable terms “her spit and venom at the whole creation of God . . . she is out to find faults not only with the creation, but also with the creator” (Dwivedi 234):

Perhaps creation is purely accidental?

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
My God is rock-faced. He does not move.
Perhaps if you pushed, He’d topple over. (18, 23-24)

It is the patriarchal society as a whole which makes a woman so horribly pessimistic and bitingly ironical in her outlook upon life. The poet, too, has become gloomy as an outcome of the same society. She usually resorts to “a dry, ironic, and cynical tone” (Iyenger 684):

It’s a quality of the gods
To see a creature with its back broken
And be unmoved,

The gods are unafraid,
And the gods are unbroken,
And cannot love and cannot grieve.

(“It’s a Quality of the Gods” 1-3, 6-8)

She portrays God as cruel and sadistic.

Suniti Namjoshi’s schizophrenic tendencies also emanate from her diasporic experience. Diasporic situation involves relocation not in terms of geography alone. Robin Cohen tentatively describes diasporas as communities of people living together in one country who “acknowledge that the old country—a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore—always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions.” Cohen continues that “a member’s adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background” (ix). The significant aspect of diaspora can be seen in socio-culture and psychological re-location.

Individuals as well as group of people belonging to particular nation-communities in diasporic situations oscillate between two identities, two culture value
systems and even two mind-sets—one belonging to the nation and the community they are migrating from and the other the nation and the community they are migrating into. (Narang vi)

The writings of a diasporic writer shift from one land to another i.e. native to the adopted one. Their works are full of memory and imaginary homelands as it is evident in the poetry of Suniti Namjoshi:

My aging beauty,
God forbid
That I hurt you.
You are a young man
With green eyes.
You are all the people I have loved.
You are beautiful, geographically,
And I love you.

(“My Aging Country” 14-21)

A diasporic person lives two lives at once. He lives in two cultures simultaneously. As Avtar Brah puts it, distinct diaspora communities are created out of the “confluence of narratives” of different journeys from the “old country” to the new which create the sense of a shared history (183).
However, this particular mode of existence is not free from problems. Too often diasporas have been ghettoized and excluded from feeling they belong to the “new country”, and suffered their cultural practices to be mocked and discriminated against. And the psychological movements of such a person from one state of mind to another cause dilemma, nostalgia, sense of displacement and loss, thus giving them a somewhat schizophrenic identity.

Diasporic writing raises questions regarding the definitions of “home” and “nation”. Schizophrenia and/or nostalgia are often the preoccupations of these writers as they seek to locate themselves in new cultures. (Trivedi 57)

In More Poems Suniti Namjoshi describes the loss of self-identity one experiences as a foreigner in an alien land. Throughout the volume the theme of dislocation and diasporic living dominates. This fear of living in an alien and unfamiliar land amidst strangers can be seen in her poem “How to be a Foreigner”:

First,

You take off your clothes,
Your titles and name
And put on a robe,
Sterile and clean,
With neat black letters
Marking the strangers.

Then,

You walk down the street,

Alone in fancy dress. (1-10)

In her poems “The old Country Says” and “My Aging Country” a feeling of nostalgia can be seen. The poet is not satisfied with the predicament of her diasporic existence. Migrations, i.e. movements across borders – geographical or otherwise – can be willful or forced.

Such migrations have resulted in building up a diasporic community who share a common sense of rootlessness, pain and agony of homelessness, experience the anxiety and turmoil in a new land and the nostalgia for their homeland. (Sharma xv)

A mood of ambivalence marks Namjoshi’s poetry. Her regret with the present state of affairs can be seen in her poem “My Aging Country”. Her bewilderment can be seen in the very opening lines:

How shall I take you,

Having no handle? (1-2)

C. Vijayasree asserts, “As an expatriate who is cut off from her aging country, she knows she wields no power” (39). However, her love for her home is also clearly identifiable:

You are beautiful,

In a blue sea.
And I love you. (4-5, 7)

The concept of home often performs an important function in our lives. It can act as a valuable means of orientation by giving us a sense of our place in the world. It tells us where we originated from and where we belong:

As an idea it (home) stands for shelter, stability, security and comfort. To be ‘at home’ is to occupy a location where we are welcome, where we can be with people very much like ourselves. (McLeod 210)

But this idea of home as an ambivalent location in Namjoshi’s poetry shows that her identity is not fixed but stays in transition and is destined to end up in one place or another, either returning to its roots or disappearing through partial assimilation in a hermeneutic “fusion”. She seems to be caught between a nativist traditionalism and a postcolonial metropolitan assimilations, i.e. the migrant culture of the “in-between” according to Homi Bhaba.

New diasporas have relocated the Self there and the Other here, and consequently borders and boundaries have been confounded. And the flow has become at once homogenizing and heterogenizing. (Dirlik 352)

The imaginary home brings fragmentation, discontinuity and displacement for the migrants. At the same time living in diaspora
which connotes living in forced or voluntary exile leads to severe identity confusion and problems. It further leads to identification with and alienation from old and new cultures and homelands. In *Shame*, Salman Rushdie says:

All migrants leave their pasts behind although some try to pack it into bundles and boxes—but on the journey something seeps out of the treasured mementoes and old photographs, until even their owners fail to recognize them, because it is the fate of migrants to be stripped of history, to stand naked among the scorn of strangers upon whom they see the rich clothing, the brocades of continuity and the eyebrows of belonging. (Quoted in Mandal 42)

Speaking of Indian migrants, Rushdie writes:

. . . our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind. (10)

The same experience recurs in Namjoshi’s poem “The Elsewhere Fish”. Loss and longing are very poignantly expressed here. The poet is unable to bridge the gap between the country she left behind and
the country of adoption. And to live in the world unperceived, it appears to her like “burning precious fuel”. And she says:

It seems to me,
That I, in my element of blue,
And you in your foreign country,
Are being cheated unawares. (20-23)

Migrants may well live in new places, but they can be considered not to belong there and disqualified from thinking of the new land as their home. “Instead, their home is seen to exist elsewhere, back across the border” (McLeod 212). The same is the situation with Suniti Namjoshi:

I would need wings, seven league boots
And a clock of invisibility
To come to you.

(“The Elsewhere Fish” 1-3)

Namjoshi in her poems also expresses the predicament of a country which has lost its people:

The old country says
My young people are all out,
Voyaging through strange lands.

(“The Old Country says” 1-3)

The country asks its people who have left it “Have I not brought them up well?” (“The Old Country Says” 7). For her “the two
countries become the two countries of mind, of belonging or not belonging, of being left out and being involved” (Jain 116).

The past which she had spent in her country fills her with a feeling of nostalgia. In her little poem “Letter” this sentiment can be observed. Her feeling to communicate across the temporal and spatial distance has been asserted in this poem. The poet says:

And I open my mind thus and thus
And say, ‘if it should please you,
Come and spend little time with me.’ (14-16)

Sometimes everything appears hollow and worthless to Suniti Namjoshi and she gets perplexed and baffled by the contradictions that mark human existence:

Life is an exercise in living
I’m sick and needn’t say
Anything that makes sense at all.

(“Sick in a Strange Country” 17-19)

Loneliness, isolation and marginalization are also seen in her poem “When I Cry”:

When I cry my tears trickle into brine
You never saw me cry.
That was sea-water the wind carried off. (1-3)

The people of the diasporic groups remain in conflictual situation—now looking back, now the gaze fixed straight ahead. They
want to practice their own culture and value system and remain
reluctant to imbibe new-ones. As a result they remain disappointed
and alienated in their new situation. Sometime extreme states of
conflict emerge and turn these individuals into “cultural
schizophrenics” and they become “victims of maladjustment, haunted
by as it were Hamlet’s dilemma— to be or not to be” (Narang xiii).

The poetry of Suniti Namjoshi belongs to the in-between space.
Her poetry like any other diasporic writer is a revelation of her inner
uncertainties, clashes and dilemmas. She doesn’t seem to be happy
with the situation she has been put in by the circumstances. She is
residing in America but her dissatisfaction with the materialism of
America is clearly visible in her poems:

I asked the New York Bird whether he’d prefer
To be a parrot, but the New York Bird said,
‘I was planned and made by American man.
Parrots are purely accidental.’

(“New York Bird” 12-15)

The poet’s discontentment with America’s capacity to commodify
everything is noticeable. Her fragmented psyche and alienated
existence in a foreign land cause discontentment with the situation.
She expresses her deep disapproval with the system. So much so that
she ends her poem “New York Bird” in the following manner:

In accordance with my duty
I caught the New York Bird and opened
His heart to learn what made him tick.
Now we have a factory for New York Birds
Though two inch beaks are no longer worn. (17-21)

In her poem “Alwin Ailey”, she has brought out the racial violence prevalent in America. Negroes and whites danced together a ballet dance in which White devils kicked the Negro ladies out. The poet says:

If everyone was taught
To be a ballet dancer,
Life would be so graceful
And cruel. (5-8)

Violence, alienation, racial prejudice and discrimination prevalent in America make the poet’s “eye floods with tears” (“A Problem” 1). Her despair is:

Can a body hurt a body?

(“A Problem” 2)

Jaswant Guzder and Meenakshi Krishna in “Mind the Gap: Diaspora Issues of Indian Women in Psychotherapy” express “Diaspora women, with origins in Hindu Indian culture spaces, are seeking psychotherapy to address mental health and personal identity issues within the North American context” (121).
Though, on one hand, Namjoshi’s poems are filled with nostalgia for her motherland and discontentment with the materialism of the foreign land, but at the same time India of her poetry becomes “the India of poverty and pettiness, of old age and lost luster” (Dwivedi 219).

You lie there,

Smiling, lazy, wicked,

Unashamed of yourself,

Lazy in a blue sea.

You really don’t think

You might smarten yourself.

(“My Aging Country” 8-13)

Thus, most often Suniti Namjoshi’s poetry becomes an expression of her lesbian desires and diasporic experiences. Namjoshi is the first Indian woman writer to have openly declared her sexual preference as a lesbian and “has since held that kind of sexual life one chooses to lead is a purely personal matter, where an individual’s autonomy should neither be checked nor curtailed” (Vijayasree 26). She doesn’t want to give up in this man-made society and as a result her poetry reveals the schizophrenic battle within her divided self.
Works Cited


Mandal, Somdatta. “The ‘Desh-Pradesh’ Syndrom: Texts and Contexts of Diasporic Indian Writing in English.” *Contemporary*


