

## Gender and Post-Colonial Fabulation

by  
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Suniti Namjoshi: *The Artful Transgressor*  
by C. Vijayasree  
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This is an extremely fascinating and engrossing critical work that attempts a fresh reading of a major writer of Indian origin, currently settled abroad. C. Vijayasree, Professor of English and Post-Colonial Literature at Osmania University Hyderabad has undertaken the difficult and timely task of placing Suniti Namjoshi in the larger context of feminism, post-colonialism and diasporic writing. Her aim is to consider Namjoshi's works in relation to narrative technique, formal experimentation, revisionist myth-making, sexual politics, and diasporic experience. For this purpose, she brings in the question of myths, fables and fabulation as modes of perception and alternative cannon-making. The fictional works are treated primarily as stories of struggle that deal with relations of power.

Suniti Namjoshi began writing in the late sixties. As Vijayasree points out, her work is enigmatic and elusive. It is rich in allusions and is not amenable to easy generalizations. Indeed, Namjoshi's chequered and unconventional career seems to parallel in significant ways the nature of her quest in life and literature.

Born to a Chitpavan Brahmin family of Pune, (her mother and grand mother were early influences), Namjoshi joined the coveted Indian Administrative Service (IAS), and after a study leave, to pursue a Masters in Public Administration at the University of Missouri in the U.S., resigned from the service in 1969 to do a Ph.D in English Literature at McGill University, Canada. Her doctoral dissertation was on "Ezra Pound and Reality: The Mataphysics of the Cantos." This artistic examination of "reality," we

shall see, would be a recurring feature in all her writings.

Namjoshi taught courses in Literature at Scarborough College, Toronto University for the next 15 years. During 1978-1979 she was in London and Cambridge. It was during this period that she came across feminism and gay liberation movements. In 1988, she resigned from her job and moved to Devon, UK where she currently lives. These facts of her personal history are important. They are ably and appropriately brought in by Vijayasree in relation to her creative works.

The early poems of Suniti Namjoshi, brought out by Writers' Workshop, Calcutta, dealt with a variety of themes. Some of these bring in her Hindu heritage, others articulate tender feelings of love and contentment.

With a close and perceptive reading of this book of poetry, Vijayasree argues that these poems reveal a masterly economy with words. She contends that in these collections such as *Early Poems* (1967), and *Cyclones in Pakistan* (1971), the poet is neither "serious" nor "other-worldly" but in different ways, she tends to show an irreverent play with the traditional and the sacred.

It is with *More Poems* that the theme of dislocation and diasporic living began to manifest in Namjoshi. The new poems speak powerfully of expatriates' fear of living in an alien land. Rich in intertextual cadence, many of these are in the Bloomean sense about other poems. For instance, in the poem "It 's a quality of the gods" there is an ironic reversal of Portia's speech in *The Merchant of Venice*.

It must, however, be said that all the

poems are not successful. As Vijayasree herself concedes, a number of them regrettably dwindle into mere prose. The poem entitled "The Contemporary" serves as a typical example of such fare, and it is not the only one of its kind.

According to Vijayasree, the collection *The Jackass and the Lady* (1980) and *The Authentic Lie* (1982) are Namjoshi's "conversion" poems. The first was written between 1972-1976 and published in 1980. During this period, the poet was a full time teacher at the University of Toronto and was greatly preoccupied with the identity question: what it meant to be a Hindu, a woman, and an Indian in the Western society? She was quick to see a parallel between her then marginal status and the animal world. She explains this rationale in her anthology *Because of India* (p. 53).

A radical shift in Namjoshi came in the eighties. *Feminist Fables* (1981) with ninety-nine stories and *From the Bed Side Book of Nightmares* (1984) mark her ideological position as a radical feminist. The treatment of women here avoids the binary stereotypes in myth making as the "wicked seductress" or "impassive angel". Similarly, the tale "From the Panchatantra" exposes caste as well as gender hierarchy. "The Badge worn Dyke and her two maiden aunts" speaks of gay liberation and lesbian solidarity. Likewise, the Perseus and Andromeda myths is turned upside down. In Namjoshi's rendering, Andromeda turns into a monster leaving the prince in the lurch. Equally brilliant is the reworking of the story "The emperor's new clothes" which invokes a stern advice from the mother to her daughter "Don't be silly

darling, only little boys grow up to be emperors".

In her analysis of these stories, Vijayasree argues that fables are "performative utterances fundamentally moralistic" and that Namjoshi in her feminist fables, attempts to revise the fragmented and distorted plots inherited from the past. She lends new meanings to such tales from a female perspective. As a logical corollary, in *The Conversations of Cow* (1985) Namjoshi occupies "a position of multiple marginalities: gender, sexual preference, race and nationality".

The search for alternative sexuality and the fabular mode takes Namjoshi to greater heights. In "The Mothers of Mayadiip", she creates an all women distopia that parallels a Huxlean island, with a somewhat different geographical setting. It is an island located somewhere off the west coast of India, a lesbian Island cut off from the heterosexual world outside. Here Namjoshi presents multiple worlds and as many as four models of human society. In all these, however, there is a tragic return to the old repressive structures of heterosexual relationships.

It is not accidental that the protagonists in such tales are writers. Writing significantly becomes, as feminists tell us, both the means and metaphor for the creation of the lesbian self.

There are logical extension of such attempts. *The Blue Donkey Fables* (1988) and *Saint Suniti and the Dragon* (1993) written in 1986-1987 at the request of the Women's Press "invest animals with narratorial authority". There is "inclusion of texts within texts, in curious ways and a carnivalesque accumulation of inter texts ranging from *The Bible* to classical mythology, the lives of saints, fairy tales, fables and beast tales from various traditions." Most stories here underline the need for female bonding in terms of equality and mutual understanding. They focus on internal dissonance and recrimination and stress on the need for

female solidarity.

*Building Babel*, one of Namjoshi's latest works, becomes "The Reader's Text". In this book she offers no resolutions but creates, "communicative and interactive text".

Thus, Vijayasree sees Suniti Namjoshi essentially as an allegorical fabulator who "plays with patriarchal norms, hegemonic structures, familial and sexual codes as well as literary and generic conventions". She argues that the poet-novelist's work recurringly displays ambivalence in sexual modes and promotes an active quest in plural possibilities in life and literature. Her texts move "beyond endings and eschew closures;" they represent an anti-canonical counter discourse, and thus "mark a major breakthrough in feminist, post-colonial writing."

*The Artful Transgressor* also brings in an analysis of her latest work *Goja* (2000) in the post-script chapter. Complete with a brief and apt preface by the series editor, Jasbir Jain, the book brings in, at the end, a very interesting interview with Namjoshi along with a helpful bibliography and index.

*Suniti Namjoshi: The Artful Transgressor* is a well researched, intelligent, balanced, sympathetic, and in the main, persuasive account of Suniti Namjoshi as a feminist of the fabular mode. Vijayasree's central claim that this writer of the Indian diaspora is "an artful transgressor" who subjects fables, myths, gender issues and sexual preference to close scrutiny is a convincing thesis that is borne out by the study. However, her unqualified admiration (and endorsement) of Namjoshi's sexual preferences as morally superior, and Namjoshi's own firm views on alternative sexuality seriously undermine the other claim of the study that the novelist offers basically a "readerly" text that is benignly open ended.

The claim that heterosexuality is a patriarchal imposition, and only homosexuality/lesbianism is true to nature, it seems to me, is an opinionated view,

polar opposite of patriarchy. It is not borne out by either history, biology or cultural practice. What would be generally acceptable, I believe, is a liberal view point that sees sexuality as a matter of individual preference alone.

Similarly, I believe, the book would have gained by maintaining a little more of critical distance from Namjoshi. Are there internal tensions, inconsistencies and contradictions in the novelist? Surely there must be, as she wrestled with different world views and ideological practices. Vijayasree is largely silent regarding such aspects.

I also think the book would have gained by having a more detailed discussion of the theme of diaspora, especially when Suniti Namjoshi is being packaged and sold under "writers of the Indian diaspora" series with her name eclipsing the sub-title of the book on the cover.

Likewise, I feel that Vijayasree is being less than fair in her understanding of the nature and role of the fabular mode. Is it true, for instance, that all traditional fables have a conservative agenda? Quite the contrary! The best of the fables of the East and West, including the stories of the *Panchatantra* offer profound and often unsettling commentaries on the human situation. The greatest of them radically reverse our conventional modes of perception of life and art. Can they be regarded as conservative simply because they do not become proto-feminist texts or work out contemporary post-colonial transgressions of the Namjoshi kind? Surely this is an unfair way of judging the past in the light of the present (welcome) developments.

These lapses, however, are minor. On the whole, *Suniti Namjoshi: The Artful Transgressor* is an excellent and welcome production that should be welcomed by specialists and lay readers alike.

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