

Feminism in Suniti Namjoshi' S selected fables

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Abstract: *It emphasizes that men are more intelligent and rational and women are romantic, sentimental and irrational in their thoughts. Therefore, they blindly follow men's commands and it never occurs to them to challenge their validity. This has destroyed their power of judgement, so they exist only in relation to their male counterpart. The story symbolizes the lamentable status of women. Suniti Namjoshi's rewritings of ancient myths, legends & fairy tales particularly in her "Feminist Fables" has made them a vehicle of new vision through the exploration of the female condition.*

Key words: *pleasurable, reversals, ingenious*

Narration

Rewriting of texts or rewriting of earlier texts has gained immense popularity & significance in recent times owing to the post-structuralism theory of deconstruction where Derrida re-interprets Saussure to establish that language is a free play without a Centre & that the "centre is not the centre". Owing to the arbitrary nature of the sign, it is clear that a sign has no fixed meaning for its meaning is contextual. All that a sign can do is to urge upon us to search for what is lacking & remind us what it is not. According to the theory, there is no meaning or final meaning for a text but the possibility of infinite meaning. The possibility of infinite meaning for my text offers writers the scope to rewrite or rework earlier text & present re-visionary perspectives.

Deerrida's notion of opening up the weave of writing to enable other meanings to come to the fore is a potentially empowering one of the feminists. Women writers have found this re-visionary process very effective as it affords scope to re-write earlier male

written texts from a female view point. Several women writers have focused their attention on the rewriting of previous texts including Anne sexton, Tanith Lee, Anne Rice, and Margaret Atwood & Suniti Nanjoshi.

Their writings are not "pleasurable reversals or ingenious linkings but new embroideries, adding fresh images & colors to radically alter the picture. Feminist rewriting can be looked at from two perspectives- "as an act of demolition, exposing & detonating the stories that have hampered & hindered women, & as a task of construction- of bringing into being enabling alternatives."

Feminist rewriting could include: "ironic mimicry & clever twists, as well as a whole gamut of tactics, that would open the myth from the inside as well as out, leaving in place enough of the known format to provide evocative points of reflection for its reader, but also encompassing different possibilities and other point of view"- sellers.

Several women writers including Tanith Lee, Jane Yolen,. Anne Sexton , Olga

Browmas, Margaret Atwood & Suniti Namjoshi have focused their attention on such rewritings of fairy tales, because of its role in the acculturation of gender ideology. A close survey of the treatment of girls & women in fairy tales reveal certain patterns that play a major role in forming the sexual role concept of children. The good women, usually the heroines, are invariably beautiful, passive & powerless: while the bad ones, usually the witches or step mothers, are very often ugly, bad tempered & powerful. Consequently, the message conveyed is "being powerful is mainly associated with being unwomanly" and the moral value of activity is "sex linked".

Women writers in their rewriting present a counter system emphasizing the importance of females. Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood & Suniti Namjoshi in their collections of short stories have attempted feminist re-visions of traditional fairy tales to present a counter system of the prevailing dominant ideology embedded in the traditional tales. Their female characters are strong & active, unlike the passive & docile females that of traditional tales. Moreover, they position their readers as active recipients rather than the customary passive readers of their discourses.

This kind of re-working of fairy tales, classical tales, popular fables, a significant concern of feminist writers, is taken up by Suniti Namjoshi. This is amply illustrated in her fable collections - "Feminist Fables" and "The Solidarity Fables" in the collection Saint Suniti & The Dragon and other fables. In the fables, she presents the female character as liberated women contrary to their traditional roles in a male dominated society. Namjoshi in all her fables

collections – The Blue Donkey Fables, Feminist Fables & "The Solidarity Fables" in Saint Suniti and The Dragon and other fables adopts the fable form as a suitable medium to put forward her ideas effectively, in a precise and vivid manner as it is epigrammatic, extremely economical and absolutely concrete.

Suniti Namjoshi's rewritings of ancient myths, legends & fairy tales particularly in her "Feminist Fables" has made them a vehicle of new vision through the exploration of the female condition. In these fables, as Savita Goel in Suniti Namjoshi's "Feminist Fables: A minor feminist classic" states: she has invented a mythology that is simultaneously thought-provoking & entertaining and deals with the aspects of women's lives that have been erased, ignored, demeaned & mystified. The stories explore with playful irony the concepts of decency, honour and status of women. The writer tries to comprehend the social and psychic mechanisms that construct gender inequality and believes that the inequality between the sexes is not the result of biological necessity but is produced by the cultural construction of gender differences.

The fables interrogate the marginalization of women in a patriarchal society and inspire women to struggle for self-identity & autonomy. Suniti Namjoshi's re-visioning in Feminist Fables, focuses on challenging traditional patriarchal myths upholding women as object, and offering new **Women's web- Unman Datta:** " A feminist with Indian roots, she has explored issues of gender and sexual orientation in her writing, and The Fabulous Feminist presents excerpts from her many works.

Namjoshi has dabbled in various literary forms: this book contains fables, poems, short stories, and excerpts from novels. This might be a strange combination – for most writers, such an assortment of works would be sure to disappoint the reader. But not this one; it succeeded in satisfying my palate and whetting my appetite at the same time, leaving me determined to seek out more complete versions of her work.

The book begins with selections from Namjoshi's *Feminist Fables*, and this was, for me, the most enjoyable section of the book. It entertains and shocks and thoroughly succeeds in using popular fairy tales and fables to convey subversive, feminist messages.

The Incredible Woman raged through the skies, lassoed a planet, set it in orbit, rescued a starship, flattened a mountain, straightened a building, smiled at a child, caught a few thieves, all in one morning, and then, took a long time off to visit her psychiatrist, since she is at heart a really womanly woman and all she wants is a normal life. Most of her creations contain a similar mix of ironic, poignant humour. Namjoshi wrestles not only with issues of gender but also with class and race, all with a wonderfully light touch that balances social justice with the self-deprecation of a brown lesbian feminist (thrice-oppressed, as a less-oppressed white woman once informed her). Fabulous feminist, she definitely is."

Namjoshi came into prominence with *Feminist Fables* (1981), a crisp retelling of canonical and apocryphal folk tales—drawing on sources as varied as *The Panchatantra*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and European fairy tales—from a distinctly queer perspective. Reading these tales, you might be reminded of

Chaucer's *Wife of Bath* exclaiming: "By god! if women had written stories..."

Namjoshi's work draws its subversive energies from a hard-nosed understanding of social realities rather than from bookish theories. As she points out, "The fable form should make it clear that they question what happens to anyone whenever there's an imbalance of power." The point is drome in tale after tale with striking perspicacity, a wry, Swiftian sense of humor, and without a trace of sentimentality.

The sensitive princess who could not sleep because she was troubled by an obscure pea hidden in the depths of the mattress catches a cold in the end and dies of it. A simple-minded cobra falls in love with a mongoose and is killed by the object of his affection. "This tale has no moral," Namjoshi explains darkly, "but I might point out that not all simple-minded cobras finish as victims." A "very high-minded child" goes to the forest, prays long and hard to seek an end to the ills of the world, only to be mocked by the goddess: "Live with it and lead your life." Shocking, comical and sobering, these stories straddle Alice's wonderland and Kafka's nightmare-land.

Much of Namjoshi's investigations into the female psyche, and the society that shapes it, are carried out in a mode of fictional life-writing in the best tradition of the genre. Think of the vicious wit of Virginia Woolf, laced with the tender melancholia of Hélène Cixous, spiked with the subtle eroticism of Anaïs Nin.

There is no self-aggrandizing loftiness as she pokes fun at "earnest lesbian feminists" in *The Conversations of Cow* (1985). The protagonist, Suniti, is struggling in this Orwellian tale to come to terms with her emotional

entanglements with a beautiful but moody cow called Bhadravati. In the end, having faltered in her self-deprecating quest to carve out an identity, Suniti realizes that our “ultimate aim is not to achieve a particular identity, but to divest ourselves of the particulars of identity”.

In *The Authentic Lie* (1982), which includes a sequence of grief-haunted poems addressed to her father who died in an air crash, Namjoshi is stark, acute and unsparing. Namjoshi shifts between these multiple registers with remarkable agility—no wonder she wrote her PhD thesis on the notoriously polyphonic *Cantos of Ezra Pound*—regaling the reader with her chatty, facetious blue donkey fables one moment before quickly moving on to scathing social satire in *The Mothers of Maya Diip* (1989).

Decay and mortality haunt her later poems, addressed to her dear departed cat, friends dead and gone, and to Sycorax, Caliban’s monstrous mother in *The Tempest*. Skittishness fades into heavy irony as she struggles to humanize the life of a servant, Goja. “I’m tired of all this heart/raking,” Goja’s words keep ringing in our ears as she snaps at Suniti, “You get a little bit of life/like the sparrow flitting in the Great Hall./Then it’s over.”

Namjoshi criticizes the discriminatory legal system that always serves the interests of males in patriarchy. Suniti Namjoshi attacks the docile woman who is ready to accept her subordinate position as a slave to a man. In ‘Rescued’, Anderson’s woman Rapunzel bears a harsh treatment. Though she is beautiful, she cannot cope with the situation, as she is not powerful. Rapunzel rejects the dream of the original woman character and sees the dreams of liberation.

Rapunzel hopes that a Prince will come and take her with him to law and order of the established society. She wants to escape from the clutches of the wicked witch.

The fable ‘Heart’ portrays a ‘Headless Woman’ doing the jobs of cooking and cleaning without any complaints. The main purpose of her life is to serve other people. She never complained of feeling tired or exhausted. In the course of time, her children grew; her husband grew old and died. She became lonely and so she met the government and asked for pension. But her demand was turned down. The government was not cruel but “the problem was that she had no head and couldn’t ask”. In patriarchy, women are dependent and passive. They are not required to make use of their head. It destroys the ability of women to think practically and independently. So she lacks practical knowledge, loses her identity and gets a secondary status. She represents the helpless world of females. Patriarchy inculcates notions of women’s inferiority to men. It emphasizes that men are more intelligent and rational and women are romantic, sentimental and irrational in their thoughts. Therefore, they blindly follow men’s commands and it never occurs to them to challenge their validity. This has destroyed their power of judgement, so they exist only in relation to their male counterpart. The story symbolizes the lamentable status of women. Women are relegated to be sentimental fools, who simply toil and in Simone de Beauvoir’s view, ever ready “to lie down at her master’s feet and kiss the hand that strikes her”.

Namjoshi attacks the hypocrisy of patriarchy and explodes the myth of a successful marriage in the table, ‘And

then what happened'. In patriarchy, women is dependent on man, her status gets marginalized as the slave or servant. But in this story, Cinderella doesn't live happily ever after her marriage but she prefers divorce from her husband. She enjoys liberty and walks away from her husband's home. Namjoshi has rewritten this familiar tale by giving an unconventional ending. She has tried to subvert the gender hierarchy of the prince. The conversation between the prince and Cinderella is very interesting as it throws light on the superior status of males in social hierarchy.

In the fable, 'The Doll', Namjoshi ridicules the opposite sex. The two little girls make a doll out of sticks and the name of the doll is "Brittle Boy". The boy comes there and smashes the doll. The two girls are also very angry and they want to smash him but they maintain their patience. So they pick up the sticks and restart the process. The girls' act of making a male doll indicates a subconscious female desire for and attraction of the opposite sex. As patriarchy has drawn a line of demarcation between the two sexes, the girls create a world of fantasy for gratification of their subtle libidinal instincts in their subconscious mind. Suniti suggests that females are gifted with patience and capacity to endure but males are easily irritated and are responsible for their own self destruction.

The fables in "The Fabulous Feminist" are primarily concerned with making feminist statements, but Namjoshi was mainly concerned with gender discrimination and marginalization of women. These fables have a timeless sweep through past, present and even future worlds. These fables present

ancient myths, legends and fairy tales from the East and west.

Suniti makes use of fairy tale characters in a very real setting to provide an alternate paradigm to the present male dominated society. She has extensively drawn on fantasy and fairy tale elements in her works to put across her ideas of feminism. Feminist preoccupations and concerns are predominant in her fables. She has re-written traditional tales from the female view point to emphasize the neglected aspects of feminine strength. To write fairy tales from a feminist perspective is not simply an act of symbolic writing for itself gratification, but also a political act based on the experiences with male brutality and general social violence.

In "The Blue Donkey Fables", Namjoshi's animal characters expose the gendered violence and patriarchal didacticism encoded in traditional fables in order to present the feminist thoughts. Gender discrimination as a strategy for male dominance and marginalization of women has been criticized by feminist like Namjoshi. To her, it is the patriarchy that incubates gendered notions about class of women through systematically built structures.

The contemporary women writers have challenged the patriarchal assumptions of the female and suggested alternative modes of perception and expression to the prevailing patriarchal ideology. In their short stories, they have aimed to highlight women's experience which has been omitted from patriarchy's account and the fresh deployment to women's images. These writers have questioned patriarchal myths by demonstrating how they obliterate or falsely present female experience and have attempted to offer

an alternative paradigm of discourse as opposed to the traditional patriarchal one, where women are generally passive and weak, by portraying female characters that are bold, strong and enterprising.

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