

Re-Interpreting Gender Myths: A Study of Suniti Namjoshi's Feminist Fables

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Abstract

Suniti Namjoshi's works mainly deal with the universal concern of gender and class. She portrays different cultural myths, fairy tales, etc. while positing the animal world against the human world. In her popular work, *Feminist Fables* (1981), Namjoshi deals with multiple issues related to gender. In the ninety-nine fables, she addresses issues related to homosexuality and various other unconventional matters. In a review of *Feminist Fables*, Sherry Simon observes, "What Suniti Namjoshi succeeds in doing in the almost 100 short pieces which make up her collection of *Feminist Fables* is to subvert the fable form, making her pieces less the expression of pre-conceived dogma than the occasion for provocation and questioning." (Simon 264) Namjoshi's work is unique in the way that she has related gender identity with popular fables. The form of fables makes easy access to address issues of basic human conditions, such as, intimacy, death, loneliness, anger, death, ambition, and desire. These fables interrogate the marginalization of women in patriarchal society and inspire them to struggle for self-identity and autonomy. The author exposes the exploitation of women on social, sexual and psychological ground. This paper is an attempt to explore how Namjoshi subverts the accepted gender norms and re-interprets stereotypical gender images. The paper will also look into the various ways that the author concentrates on power politics, sexual politics, gender discrimination and quest for identity.

KEYWORDS: gender, stereotypes, myths, fables, discrimination, identity, power, politics

Feministic approach to myths differ from the rest of the archetypal task of feminists of exploring the prejudice laid down on the basis of gender by the mythographers and also how mythic symbols and paradigms construct the phallogocentric reality. The job of the feminist writer is not only limited to bewray the patriarchal portrayal of women in the myths but also revise the myths, thereby, giving voice to the repressed female figures. To use Judith Fetterley's term, the feminists in turn become the Resisting Reader, who reject the male author's designs and intentions by a revisionary re-reading and highlighting the sexual biases projected in the literary work - one of the most significant developments to emerge out of the contemporary feminist movement is the quest to reclaim that symbolizing/ naming power to refigure the female self from a gynocentric perspective, to discover, revitalize and create a female oral and visual mythic tradition and use it ultimately to change the world. (Caputi 425) A plethora of women writers have stepped in the process of revisionist mythmaking and Suniti Namjoshi too has given significant share of ideas and thoughts. Namjoshi is an Indian feminist who began her career as a poet but her reputation is based on the fables. Re-visioning mythmaking is one of her outstanding traits and *The Feminist Fables* is her maiden work in this venture.

Suniti Namjoshi's best known work, *The Feminist Fables*, underlines the feministic ethos through ninety-nine fables. A prominent poet and fabulist, she wrote the fables in 1981 and it has been described as the voice of minor feminist classic. In a short introduction to *Fabulous Feminist*, Namjoshi writes, "It's true the fable is a didactic form, but I don't sit down and say, 'I am now going to write a fable making this point or pointing that moral.' More often than not - for me anyway - a fable starts with an image. The creature looking out is so eloquent that the fable begins to write itself. And once the creature starts to speak, the fable develops its own logic. The conventions of the traditional storytelling form and its powerful rhythm generate a momentum...." (Namjoshi) Namjoshi clearly brings out the issues of lesbianism, sexism, homophobia, misogyny and gender issues with regard to the attainment of power, in these fables. It can be stated as the ingenious reworking of fairy tales, mixing Greek and Sanskrit mythology with original material.

Namjoshi also draws the two contrasting worlds - animal world and the human world, only to describe the different cultural myths and fairy tales. She chooses tales from Panchatantra, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Aesop's *Fables*, *Arabian Nights*, Christian myths and Greek myths - only to deconstruct the patriarchal structure represented in these fables. All of them illustrated from different perspectives - sexist view, misogynistic view or racial view - come together and add to the themes of the work. The tales are mainly written in short, pithy and epigrammatic form. Usually when we read fables, a moral is attached to it but in the case of Namjoshi's fables, they are neither didactic nor pastime stories. The duality of these stories is that they teach as well as delight. The use of subtle humour adds on the fables an interesting tone and through the use of satire and irony the writer points the absurdities in attitudes and manners.

An intensive reading of these fables, we can roughly categorize the main ideas into three parts - the first which portrays both traditional as well as modern women in a satirical tone, the second part puts forth the classical myths in revised manner and the last part talks about the ideology of lesbianism. All these fables create a subversive image of the traditional women characters expressing their resistance to the patriarchy. Commenting on the fables, a critic says, "the issues raised in these fables are of course basic to the human condition: intimacy, loneliness, death, anger, ambition and desire, and these thread their way through their collection and are explored now with an eye for the comic, for the absurd, now with a sense of poignant sadness and longing." (Vijayasree 76)

One of such fable is 'Thorn Rose' where the princess wears men's clothes assuming that she would become a king. This fable, if viewed with respect to today's scenario, may be taken as a writer's comment on all those who underestimate a woman with regard to the work traditionally considered for men such as kingship. However, this fable is a reference to the sleeping beauty. The princess here is depicted as someone independent, masculine, not lady-like, was not cursed, but banished, not a protagonist but merely anonymous. The mention of the sister in the fable can be interpreted as a lesbian who chose to go the attic on her own accord and as described she preferred women. Therefore, lesbianism is clearly indicated here. Moreover, another stereotypical portrayal of masculinity is the battle between the siblings. The Princess lost the battle - emphasizing that the feminine is weak and masculinity wins which is considered stronger.

Namjoshi tries to prove through such kind of fables that the depiction of such ideal or wicked woman are mere arbitrary constructions, and in order to do so she defies the fixity

of feminine qualities - the qualities associated with femininity and masculinity. The fables, 'The Princess', 'The Little Prince', 'The Giantess', 'The Gods', 'The Exegesis', 'The Hare and the Turtle' and 'Signpost' are the perfect examples which highlight these elements. In the fable 'The Little Prince', the wicked stepmother's ambition is not considered something evil, as it does not conform to the archetype. The wicked stepmother married the king who was already the father to a son. The ambition of this wicked woman was that her daughter would reign the kingdom alone. She knew that the king would never agree to this so she devised a plan. She reared both the children differently. The daughter was given the upbringing of prince and the Prince was brought to be docile and shy. This role-reversal is significant from the perspective of gender-biased social structure. When the daughter was appointed to the throne, the citizens revolted; "we will not be ruled by a woman." (Namjoshi: 1981: 17) Thus, order and justice was restored only by setting the Prince on the throne. Hence, it means that within the fixed social structure, governing a kingdom is not the task of a woman but of a man, however incapable the man may be. Also what garners importance here in this fable is the kind of education provided to both the children. It can be categorized as masculine education and feminine education. Thus, Namjoshi satirically points this out through this fable.

The second category of fables is those which are revised - those fables which are taken from different tales and myths. The fables that can be included in this category are 'Perseus and Andromeda', 'Jack Three's Luck', 'In the Forest', 'Three Bears' and 'And Then What Happened'. The fable 'Perseus and Andromeda' which is taken from the Greek Myth where the Prince is supposed to heroically save the Princess from the dragon/ monster is modified by the author. In Namjoshi's revision, it is the Princess who is projected as stronger and capable of fighting the dragon. Namjoshi presents the Princess as someone having ambitions of her own. However, the prince is represented in typical fashion: "She says to the prince, 'You be the bait and I'll fight the dragon. The prince demurs. 'What if you lose?' he says. 'And what if you lose?' 'I have been brought up to fight dragons. Besides I am stronger and taller and manlier. And it's easy for me to take the risk and for you to be safe.'" (Namjoshi: 1981: 50) These lines point out the conventional mindset of the prince, which is Namjoshi's major point of satire.

Again, the fable 'In the Forest' is an adaption of the story 'Hansel and Gretel', where usually Hansel is portrayed as strong and Gretel, the weaker one. But in this revisionist adaption, Gretel takes the forefront and Hansel is projected as the one who gets frightened by the witch and runs back home cowardly. Namjoshi subverts all the qualities defining the feminine to describe the masculine. This is also seen in the fable 'Three Bears'. This fable is an adaptation of the story of 'Goldilocks' - a young 'pretty' boy. Interestingly Goldilocks is termed as pretty, it is what Namjoshi actually wants to emphasize. She subverts the usual. In the fable 'And Then What Happened', a revised version of the story of 'Cinderella', the protagonist does not want to be submissive anymore. This might be because in her past life with her wicked stepmother and step-sisters she has endured much. Thus, she walks out of the Prince's house demanding her freedom - a typical depiction of the stand taken by a modern woman. Namjoshi, through these fables creates a sort of liberation for the traditional women from various modes of suppressions expressed in these fables.

The last category which highlights the theme of lesbianism in the fables like 'The Badge Wearing Dyke And Her Two Maiden Aunts', 'Happy Ending', 'The Moral Tale', 'The Moon Shone On', 'Troglodyte', 'For Adrienne Rich', 'The Example', 'I See You What You Are' and 'ABC'. In the fable, 'The Badge-Wearing Dyke and Her Two Maiden Aunts', where two elderly spinster mice lived together for twenty-five years, their niece, that is the 'Badge Wearing Dyke' came up to stay with them, who were protesting against the discrimination laid down towards women who love someone of their own sex. On listening to these spinsters' views the dyke takes off her badges and offers them to her aunts. The fable simply states the idea that there is no harm in loving someone of the same sex. To quote: "Oh, said the spinster, but we love one another, and have done so for twenty-five years...." (Namjoshi: 1981: 11) The fable 'I See You What You Are' is a re-writing of Shakespeare's famous play Twelfth Night, a story of Viola who is disguised as a page and Olivia. Ironically narrated, Namjoshi fancies love between Olivia and Viola, giving tones of lesbianism to the fable.

Namjoshi, through this work, discusses the suffering of the women in the patriarchal setting. She deals with the aspects in the lives of women that have been erased, ignored, demeaned and mystified, some of the fables have mythical characters and some have animals like dragons, crocodiles, monkeys, dyke, ducks, swans etc., which represents the condition of humanity. Namjoshi wants to bridge the gap between animate and inanimate world with human consciousness. Through the fables, Namjoshi presented different kinds of women - ones who seemed to be quite satisfied in their submissive position; ones who are determined to protest; ones in conflict and others lost somewhere in between. It (e)xplicate(s) feminist ideas and three phases pointed out by Elaine Showalter - the 'feminine, the 'feminist, and the female. The first phase indicates women's submission to male domination; the second phase marks out the protest while the third phase stands out for search for female identity. (Kadam 230)

Namjoshi questions the norms of the society and argue that these norms are created by the dominating force of the society - MEN. Thus, her work counters discourse that subverts the patriarchal master narratives. It de-essentialises the concept of woman and shifts emphasis from a static notion of sexual difference to a multiplicity of possible subject position. Subverting the stereotypical elements in the narrative in a comical way indicate her defiance for the patriarchy.

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