

## Resisting the Fables of Suniti Namjoshi

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Classical myths are in Alicia Ostriker's phrase 'handed down', which is considered to represent fundamental truths or set of ideals about human nature. Irrespective of the nation and race every myth acts as a source book of culture and tradition, which is used for various interpretations. For instance the psychiatrists and anthropologists, to trace out the origin and nature of human behavior have used myths. Thus myths occupy a significant position than any other works of literature.

Feminist's approach to myths differ from the rest that feminist thinkers engage themselves in the task of exploring the gender bias of the mythographers and also how mythic symbols and paradigms construct the phallogocentric reality. The job of the feminist does not stop with exposing the patriarchal portrayal of women in the myths but they also attempt to revise the myths, thereby giving voice to the repressed female figures. To use Judith Fetterly'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)

Many women writers have participated in this process of 'revisionist mythmaking' and Namjoshi too has given her contribution. Suniti Namjoshi is an Indian lesbian feminist who began her career as a poet. But her name is readily associated with fables than with her poems. 'Revisionist Mythmaking' is her remarkable trait and *Feminist Fables* is the maiden work in this venture, which continues in her other works, *The Blue Donkey Fables* and *From the Bedside Book of Nightmares*.

FF is a collection of hundred fables. Namjoshi has made use of Anderson's Tales of Panchatantra, Aesop's Fables, Greek Myths and other Christian Myths as intertexts to deconstruct the patriarchal structure represented in these fables. The fables are composed in a short, pithy and epigrammatic form. A fable is usually read for its moral and is didactic. But in Namjoshi's case fables are far from being didactic but are also not mere pastime stories. These fables at once both teach as well as delight. The use of subtle humour makes the fables more interesting. The writer to point out

the absurdity of certain attitudes and manners, which were followed traditionally, uses satire and irony.

In myths men are represented as Gods and heroes. Women represented in myths fall into two antithetic patterns. One is the idealized projection of women, who are shown as innocent, passive, powerless, humble, sacrificing, subservient and docile. The other one is the demonic projections of women, who are projected as the sources of all evils and are destructive. To the former kind may be included characters like Madonna, the Muses of arts, Dante's Beatrice, the pure and innocent virgin and Cinderella. To the latter kind may be included characters like Eve, Medusa, Pandora, Delilah and Circe. These are the recurrent and distorted images of women. Women are either angels or monsters. Myths at one both reflect as well as dictate how a typical woman should be. Powerful women are constructed as evil, ugly, ill tempered and abnormal. Being powerful is always associated with being unwomanly. Thus many women writers and Namjoshi too has attempted to break the dichotomy in the representations, by characterizing women with their own individuality and originality. Namjoshi examines both the external as well as internal struggle in many of the fables.

Adrienne Rich in her theoretical essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision" stresses the importance of re-writing the old stories, myths, legends and fables in the gynocentric point of view. This acts as a counter-discourse attempting to subvert the male-biased versions of the world.

Re-vision- the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old texts from a new critical direction is for us more than a chapter in cultural history; it is an act of survival...this drive to self- knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society.(Rich 167)

The fables, in this work of Namjoshi *Feminist Fables* could be roughly divided into three categories. The first category is fables, which portray traditional as well as modern women. These fables are composed in a satiric mode. The fables in the second category are the classical myths, which are revised. The final category belongs to fables which putforth the ideologies of lesbianism. All these fables are resisting fables in the sense that Namjoshi by creating subversive image of the traditional women characters in these fables express her resistance to the patriarchy.

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)

Namjoshi tries to prove through many of the fables that depiction of woman as either ideal or evil is mere arbitrary constructions. She attempts to defy the fixity of feminine qualities. Qualities associated with femininity and masculinity is the consequence of training. These themes are reflected in fables like "The Princess", "Thorn Rose", "The Little Prince", "The Giantess", "The Gods", "Exegesis", "The Hare and the Turtle" and "signpost".

In certain fables Namjoshi has used the strategy of subversion and composed them in satiric mode. In the story "Next Time Around" a woman sleep for thousand years and wakes up only to find that though man has advanced in science and technology, the attitudes and ideologies remain the same.

To the second category of the fables belong those that are revised. "Perseus and Andromeda", "Jack Three's Luck", "In the Forest" highlights the reversal of role played by men and women. "Perseus and Andromeda" is an adaptation of the story from the Greek Myth in which Perseus heroically saves Andromeda from a sea-monster. But in Namjoshi's version, the princess is also shown as strong and capable of fighting the dragon. In "Jack Three's Luck" the giantess replaces the giant. It is the giantess who kills the two brothers and marries the third brother who "did his best to be pleasant and useful, the giantess loved him and was kind to him" (FF 55). "In the Forest" is an adaptation of the story Hansel and Gretel. In this revisionist myth Gretel is dominant, brave, powerful and wise while Hansel is frightened by the wicked witch and runs back to the home cowardly. "Three Bears" is the Goldilock's story in which Goldilock is a little 'pretty' boy who has all the qualities of a girl. The term 'pretty' is always used to describe the beauty of women but Namjoshi here uses to refer to a boy. She subverts the usual. "And Then What Happened" is the revision of Cinderella's story in which Cinderella does not feel comfortable in being submissive and dependent on the prince but rather walks out leaving the prince, reminding the readers of Nora of Henrik Ibsen. "For Carla and Aditi" is the story of Eve. Eve is usually considered as evil, who committed the sin of disobeying God and the one who persuaded Adam to commit the sin. But here Eve is the one who creates paradise wherever she goes.

In all these stories Namjoshi revised the fables and subverted the traditional elements in it. Through these stories Namjoshi resist the culture of patriarchy expressed in these and gives an emancipatory note to the woman in the dominant discourse. She liberates the traditional women from their stereotypes.

The third category of fables deals with the themes of lesbianism. "The Badge Wearing Dyke", "Happy Ending", "A Moral Tale", "The Moon

Shone On”, “Troglodyte”, “For Adrienne Rich”, “The Example”, “I See You What You Are” and “ABC”—all these deal with the issues of lesbianism.

“I See You What You Are” is an interesting fable, which is the re-writing of Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night, story of friendship between Viola disguised as Page and Olivia, which is narrated ironically. Namjoshi here imagines love between Olivia and Viola, Olivia knowing fully well that she is in disguise. The author by giving lesbian touch to this scene questions the abnormality in it.

Namjoshi discusses the sufferings of women in the patriarchal society. She deals with the aspects of women’s lives which have been erased, ignored, demeaned and mystified, some of the fables have mythical characters while some have animals like dragons, ducks, swans, as its characters representing the condition of humanity. Namjoshi thus attempts to bridge the gap between the animate and inanimate with the human consciousness.

The characters are not given individual names but descriptive names. Through this technique, Namjoshi has attempted to make her characters represent the issues, which have relevance to the entire female community. The characters are restless with the identities, culture has imposed on them and thus they launch in the mission of casting away those stereotypes and create their own identity. Namjoshi has shown women who are satisfied with their secondary position, women who are in conflict, in the transition stage and women who dares to protest against the restrictions. It

Explicate 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 third phase stands for search for female identity. (Kadam 230).

The author has made best use of the fable form to bring about transformation. The narrator of the fables like the characters belongs to no place and no time which makes her story to have universal significance. Namjoshi attempts to deconstruct patriarchy by re-creating myths and portraying women opposed to convention, tradition and destroying the stereotypes. She has shown woman as woman with their real facet. The desire to bring about transformation from the base makes these feminists indulge in revisionist mythmaking. Namjoshi through these stories raise the question that who creates the norms of the society. She seems to argue that all these norms are created by the dominating voice of the society, which are men. It is created out of the vested interest of men to retain their own power and significance.

She tries to prove that the inequality between the sexes is not a biological one but a cultural construct. Thus, her work serves as a counter-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 positions. . She has subverted the traditional elements in her fables in a comical way thereby indicating the defiance for the patriarchy. This work

Function as a kind of counter-form, working against its own drive towards certainty. What Suniti Namjoshi succeeds in doing in the almost 100 short pieces, which makes up her collection of *Feminist Fables* is to subvert the fable form, make her pieces less the expression of pre-conceived dogma than the occasion for provocation and question. (Narasimhaiah 264)

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