

Revisionist Mythmaking in Suniti Namjoshi's Fables

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Abstract

*Suniti Namjoshi, best known as a fabulist, is also acclaimed for her revisionist mythmaking in her works. Revisionist mythmaking has been one of the strategies used by women writers in the 1970s after the emergence of the second wave of feminist theories. Authors have employed revisionist mythmaking to resist and question patriarchal traditions and socio-cultural norms. The myths that may imply heroic valour or moral force to a male author have been considered by female authors to be patriarchal narratives of victimization of women. This essay will firstly discuss the concept and significance of feminist revisionist mythmaking; secondly, provide a brief overview of Namjoshi's major issues and concerns in her writings; and finally examine some fables from Namjoshi's collection *Feminist Fables*, through the lens of revisionist mythmaking.*

Keywords: Suniti Namjoshi, Feminist Fables, revisionist mythmaking, gender norms, patriarchal institutions

... a myth is not a lie or a false statement to be contrasted with truth or reality or fact or history, though this usage is, perhaps, the most common meaning in casual parlance. . . . In its positive and enduring sense, a myth is a story that is sacred to and shared by a group of people who find their most important meanings in it.

-Wendy Doniger

Suniti Namjoshi, best known as a fabulist, is also acclaimed for her revisionist mythmaking in her works. This essay examines Namjoshi's revisionist mythmaking in her fables.

Revisionist mythmaking has been one of the strategies used by women writers in the later part of the twentieth century after the emergence of the second wave of feminist theories. Authors have employed revisionist mythmaking to resist and challenge patriarchal traditions and socio-cultural and religious norms. The myths that may imply heroic valour or moral force to a male author have been considered by female authors to be patriarchal narratives of victimization of women. This essay will firstly discuss the concept and significance of feminist revisionist mythmaking; secondly, provide a brief overview of Namjoshi's issues and concerns in her writings; and finally examine some fables from Namjoshi's collection *Feminist Fables*, through the lens of revisionist mythmaking.

Namjoshi, as is well-known resigned from the IAS and began writing. And writing for Namjoshi must have been perhaps what Helene Cixous said in her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa”:

To write. An act which will not only “realize” the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal; it will tear her away from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being “too hot”; for not being both at once; for being too motherly and not enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing...)—tear her away by means of this research, this job of analysis and illumination, this emancipation of the marvellous text of herself that she must urgently learn to speak. (880)

Adrienne Rich in her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" argues that in order to discover their own voice, women need to be aware of the myth of the woman as represented in past literature and then subvert these representations, what she calls “re-vision”. She emphasizes the need for re-visioning:

Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. (18)

For Rich, women writers should not follow the tradition set by male writers, but be conscious of it, subvert it and create their own: "We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us".(19) According to her, "a radical critique of literature, feminist in impulse would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped us as well liberated us; and how we can begin to see-and therefore-live afresh."(18)

As has been widely observed and acknowledged mythology plays a crucial role in fashioning our material world as well as non-material aspects of women's lives. As AnaLouise

Keating points out, "mythic stories embody a culture's deep-seated, often unacknowledged (and therefore unquestioned) assumptions about human nature, revisionist mythmaking offers an important tool to effect transformation on multiple levels—ranging from our psychic lives to our social structures—and beyond."(112) Myths are commonly considered as the archetypal images and collective experiences of humankind that are unchanging and remain constant. If it is accepted that myths are timeless and eternal, and remain relevant to contemporary societies as they were to ancient societies, one may also have to admit that gendered, racial, religious, caste-based and economic hierarchies that determined an individual's status in the past and concomitantly one must also accept that socio-culturally and economically privileged, heterosexual powerful men will continue to remain in control and lead an advantaged and honoured life. However, with the rise of the first and second waves of feminisms, this view of myths as unchangeable and constant was interrogated and challenged. Feminist theorists as well as authors have questioned myths as continually relevant in their original forms.

Alicia Ostriker in her article "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking," has remarked that feminist revisionist mythology is "the challenge to and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myth" (73). Ostriker observes that works which adhere to this kind of feminist revisionism of myth necessarily "consist of hit-and-run attacks on familiar images and the social and literary conventions supporting them" (74). Further, Ostriker suggests that "revisionist mythmaking in women's poetry may offer us one significant means of redefining ourselves and consequently our culture" (71). Feminist revisionist mythmaking as a conscious strategy was practised by many authors in the 1970s. The writers in different parts of the globe have used feminist revisionist mythmaking as a social and political act to interrogate, critique and resist the dominant discourses of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation produced, sustained and perpetuated in myths. And as pointed out by Keating, "revisionist mythmaking can take a variety of forms: we can entirely reject the existing stories, rewrite portions of them, retell them from different perspectives, recover alternative versions that have been lost (*or that never before existed*), and create new myths." (112)

Several Indian writers in English and in Indian languages have employed feminist revisionist myths in order to challenge the hierarchies and the dominant discourses of caste, class, gender, sexuality, race and language. A few among them are Suniti Namjoshi, Chitra

Banerjee Divakaruni, Kavita Kane (English) Pratibha Ray (Odia) and Volga (Telugu) who use re-visioning as a powerful mode of countering patriarchal discourses in their varied forms. Namjoshi, a radical lesbian feminist writer, has examined different forms of oppression that work at different levels in a gender-biased world. As Jasbir jain points out there are "multi-dimensional explorations" (Vijayasree 10) in Namjoshi's oeuvre. And Namjoshi undertakes these 'multi-dimensional explorations' in her verse and prose: poems, fables, fairy tales, novels, short stories and children's literature. And Vijayasree points out:

Namjoshi makes clever use of Anderson's tales, Panchatantra stories, Aesop's fables, and other texts as intertexts to deconstruct the patriarchal world order surely ensconced in these seemingly innocent stories on which generations of children are raised. Even nursery rhymes and songs are re-viewed here from a feminist perspective.... (75-76)

Several Indian women writers in English since Krupabai Sathianadhan have interrogated the status of Indian women and their secondary position and the various socio-cultural, economic, and political factors responsible for the marginalization of women at different levels. However, Namjoshi is interested in not just making feminist statements but rather focuses on the various centres of power such as race, class, gender, sexuality, religion and caste in order to understand the unequal distribution of power; and Namjoshi in an interview with Vijayasree has stated:

In *Feminist Fables* I wasn't so much concerned with making feminist statements as with using the form to understand the imbalance of power and to question it.... And it's worth considering that feminism in its broadest sense questions the roles the powerful assign to themselves in relation to relatively powerless. (Vijayasree 178-179)

Namjoshi engages with the actual process of marginalization and 'othering' that aid in perpetuating the power hierarchies and privileging and maintaining the status quo of the powerful and the dominant cultures and communities. In all her works Namjoshi criticizes the institutions which have perpetuated fixed notions of female identity and subjectivity. Her work deconstructs stereotypical representations and dismantles binaries in order to expose the marginalization and victimization of the oppressed in terms of class, race, gender, sexual orientation, caste, religion. And Namjoshi's questioning of the world order also encompasses the world of animals and animal rights along with human rights. Through her works, from her early poems to her latest published works, she envisions an alternative existence and reconstructs an alternative world.

Namjoshi in choosing to interact with and revise myths seeks to communicate the fluid human experiences and interrogate the images that are established within the myths. Namjoshi's feminist revisionist mythmaking has a complex and varied purpose of representing a wide variety of contemporary female experiences. Namjoshi's works are known for their subversive quality. She challenges the stereotypical assumptions and subverts the male-dominated literary traditions. Vijayasree calls her "The Artful Transgressor" and says that her aptitude to writing is one of "transgression" rather than "aggression". Namjoshi succeeds in conveying that women's life and experiences are not singular as perpetuated by the dominant patriarchal discourses, grand narratives and popular myths. Through revisionist mythmaking Namjoshi offers counter discourses by challenging the dominant images and representations, and experiences. She is predominantly concerned with the processes of 'othering' and marginalization and examines these processes in her various works of prose and verse

Originally titled 'The Monkey and the Crocodiles', *Feminist Fables* was published in 1981 by Sheba Feminist Publishers. It has been considered a minor feminist classic. Namjoshi later in her book *The Fabulous Feminist* (2012) argued that the term 'feminist' has a very limited sense of being only concerned with cause of women and is perceived as such by many surface readers. For Namjoshi, the term 'feminist' in the title has a clear disadvantage; however, she has observed that 'the fable form should make it clear that they question what happens to anyone whenever there's an imbalance of power'.(2) However, besides feminist concerns Namjoshi's fables also focus on the larger human emotions and concerns as pointed out by Vijayasree:

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 this collection and are explored now with an eye for the comic, for the absurd, now with a sense of poignant sadness and longing" (76).

Another significant aspect of Namjoshi, besides her feminism is her Indian and her lesbian identities which are articulated in her works. *Feminist Fables* was published in the backdrop of the Canadian lesbian-feminist ideals combined with her Indian inheritance. Vijayasree aptly remarks, "Namjoshi is the first Indian woman writer to have openly declared her sexual choice as a lesbian and has since held that the kind of sexual life one chooses to lead is a purely personal matter, where an individual's autonomy should neither be checked nor curtailed" (26). Namjoshi's Indianness and her lesbian point of view come together in *Feminist Fables*.

This collection of fables ranging from ancient to modern, is a blend of Greek and Hindu mythology, Christian myths, stories from *Jataka* and *Panchatantra*, *Arabian Nights* Anderson's *Fairy Tales*, *Aesop's Fables*, Grimm Brothers. Namjoshi re-visions these myths, tales and fables as stories about women seeking identity, self-actualization, equality, independence, and autonomy. Some of them show women being devalued, ignored, voiceless or/and being made invisible. She has depicted the hypocrisy of Hindu male gods and attacked religion and the Indian caste system. As Vijayasree has observed:

Namjoshi makes a clever use of Anderson's tales, Panchatantra stories, Aesop's fables and other texts as intertexts to deconstruct the patriarchal world order surely ensconced in these seemingly innocent stories on which generations of children are raised. Even nursery rhymes and songs are reviewed here from a feminist perspective. (75-76)

The fables have a broad temporal and spatial scope, ranging from ancient to modern and from east to west. Namjoshi expands the boundaries to include tribes, villages, cities, housewives, working women, the poor and the rich, heterosexuals and homosexuals, the birds and the beasts among others. Namjoshi's treatment is playfully ironical:

In these hilarious, witty and elegantly written fables, she [Namjoshi] has invented a new mythology that is simultaneously thought-provoking and entertaining and deals with the aspects of women's lives that have been erased, ignored, demeaned, and mystified. (Goel 177)

All the ninety-nine fables in *Feminist Fables* focus on the different forms of discrimination, marginalization and oppression such as the Indian preference for a male child, killing the girl child even before taking birth, denial of equal opportunities in living and life, patriarchal perceptions of marriage, misogyny, mandatory heterosexuality, homophobia and many more. Her fables reflect the silencing of the female voice and the subordinating of women in various patriarchal institutions of the society such as family, marriage and motherhood and in fixed identities and roles of a daughter, wife, mother and in that order. All the fables interrogate peripheralization of women and women's roles while simultaneously challenging the other forms of discrimination based on race, class, gender, sexuality, caste, and religion.

An analysis of only one fable is attempted here in order to demonstrate the ingenuity and wit with which Namjoshi exposes the androcentric world and posits that there has not been much change in the socio-cultural and political status of women nor in other patriarchal institutions

such as caste, religion, race and gender. The first fable "From the Panchatantra" is about the preference for a male child. It narrates the desire of a poor brahmin living in the holy city of Benaras. Though he is poor he consoles himself that he is a brahmin, then he is disgruntled that he has no son but takes pride that he is a male: 'It is true that I am poor, but I am a brahmin, it is true that I have no sons, but I, myself, am indisputably a male. I shall return to the temple and pray to Lord Vishnu to grant me a son.' (FF 1) Lord Vishnu listens to him and grants his wish. However, the brahmin is disappointed when a daughter is born instead of the promised son. Namjoshi attributes the cause to "absent-mindedness or whether for some other more abstruse reason, he [Lord Vishnu] gave him a daughter". (1) However, the brahmin reconciles to the situation and decides to educate his daughter, so that when she is ready both of them are to meditate together and seek guidance. The brahmin gives her knowledge, then both of them pray and Lord Vishnu appears again, the brahmin cannot stop himself from asking for a son again. But this time Lord Vishnu does not respond directly, instead gives a cryptic reply, "Very well," said the god, "Next time around." (1)

However, the brahmin is born a woman in his next birth and gives birth to eight sons. The brahmin's wish for sons is fulfilled but he is made to experience the life of a woman. And this time when Lord Vishnu asks the woman for her wish, the reply is "I want human status". Even Lord Vishnu finds it difficult to grant this wish and admits, 'Ah, that is much harder,' and the story concludes with the god appointing a commission to look into the matter.

A close reading of the story reveals how cleverly Namjoshi explores and exposes the various intersecting factors such as class, gender, caste, religion, and politics that are responsible in assigning a secondary and inferior status to women and continue to maintain their subordinate status. The story begins by focusing on the brahmin's pride in being a male and his desire for a son which is indicative of the primacy and preference given to a male child in the Indian thought, philosophy, culture, Hindu scriptures and which is present among many Indian communities. A male heir is believed to continue the family legacy and tradition, carry on the family line and take on the responsibility of looking after the aged parents. The demographics have changed, gender roles have changed, social roles have altered yet the preference for male children predominantly continues in many families. Though India has advanced in all spheres yet statistics reveal the preference for a son even among certain affluent and educated families; and female foeticide is a harsh reality still prevalent in various parts of India. What Namjoshi was

concerned with in 1980s continues to be of great concern in contemporary India.

After commenting on the gender prejudice, Namjoshi highlights the casteism by commenting, "though only a woman, she was a brahmin, so she learned very fast..."(1). It reveals the caste bias showing the social hierarchy of brahmins being at the top and exposes the prejudiced belief that brahmin class is more intelligent and knowledgeable than the non-brahminical sections of society. The daughter, though a woman, but being a brahmin enjoys a privileged place and her father is willing to use her prayers for fulfilling his desire for a son. Here the caste factor triumphs over gender. Namjoshi very cleverly points out the privileging of caste over gender on one hand and discrimination against the non-brahmin class men as well as women on the other.

In the next incarnation, when the brahmin is born a woman and bears eight sons and experiences the life of a woman. Experiencing the inhuman existence as a woman, when she prays for a 'human status', even god finds it hard and cannot grant the wish. Namjoshi, underscores the impossible situation that women are in where even 'God' cannot come to their rescue. Instead he appoints a commission. Namjoshi scathingly attacks the male gods who discriminate against women. The institutionalized religion too marginalizes women and there is no hope of liberation for women from their secondary and oppressed status, and from their peripheral existence in all patriarchal institutions. And Namjoshi concludes the story by comically juxtaposing the sacred and the secular when she says "and the god hedged and appointed a commission." (1) The remark is also a sharp satire on politics, administration and governance wherein commissions are appointed to enquire into serious issues and forgotten thereafter and they take years to come out with their reports which are then either pushed under the carpet or fade from public memory and the issue remains unresolved and pending just as is the case with many of the issues related to women.

Similarly, all ninety-nine fables in the collection explore and expose the marginalization, discrimination, subjugation, suppression and oppression experienced by especially women but also other humans and animals across cultures in ancient and modern times as well as in most of the eastern and western societies. Some of them highlight the silencing of female voices or rendering them speechless as in 'The Little Prince' (FF 15), 'Bird Woman' (FF 16), 'The Gods' (FF 35) and many others; however, many of her fables are about those who are rebellious and who resist and challenge the societal norms and demolish taboo. Some of these fables are: 'The

Runner' (FF 7) in which Atlanta the fastest runner in all Attica tried to escape marriage; in 'Svayamvara' the little princess resolves to marry on her terms, choosing to marry the person who is defeated but admits that he was beaten fairly by the princess. Further, Namjoshi, also highlights friendship and love between women. In 'For Adrienne Rich--If She Would Like It' (FF 70), though the Caliph is willing to make Sheherazade his queen, for her it meant very little. Instead, she prefers her sister Dinarzade who smiles and Sheherazade responds, 'I have my reward, I have been given it' (FF 42).

The central concern in all the fables seems to be " Man is at the centre. There are no human women" (FF 53). This status of women has continued to remain secondary and passive since last several centuries and there is not much change. Namjoshi succinctly puts it in 'Next Time Around' in response to the question, 'Haven't things changed?' asked by a woman who has woken up after a thousand-year sleep expecting things would be different. But the response from the men is:

'Oh, yes,' they answered, 'In 1,000 years man has advanced to the planets and stars. Our children are well-fed, our women looked after; and every single man has a house of his own and a reasonable income.'(59)

Sherry Simon rightly sums up Namjoshi's contribution to the feminist cause, "What Suniti succeeds in doing in the almost 100 short pieces which makes up her collection of *Feminist Fables* is to subvert the fable form making her pieces less the expression of preconceived dogma than the occasion for provocation and questioning" (Simon 264). The 'artful transgressor' not only transgresses the societal and cultural norms but also the standards and conventions of literary genres. Namjoshi employs the strategy of revisionist mythmaking to subvert the dominant discourses by bringing the 'othered' characters from the periphery to the centre of the narratives. An important literary technique for socially conscious authors, revisionist mythmaking assumes several forms, like the rejection or revision of dominant mythic traditions, the recovery of lost/ignored/silenced myths, and creation of new myths. Myths symbolize a culture's inherent, and often subconscious and unacknowledged worldviews, and therefore revisionist mythmaking can become a significant instrument to bring about transformation on several levels.

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