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# A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF SUNITI NAMJOSHI AS INDIAN WOMAN NOVELIST

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**Abstract**

*Suniti Namjoshi is one of the most important postmodern novelists who occupies unique position in world literature. She wrote number of novels. Her writings are famous for her treatment of rural and urban life. Her narrative structure attracts the attention of the academicians and research scholars. Her themes and narration are important in the context of modernization, globalization and multiculturalism. The present research paper attempts to study her works by taking into account her treatment of themes, the structure, shape and organization of contents in her works.*

**Keywords**

*Modernization, Globalization, Multiculturalism, Exotic, Ecocriticism, etc.*

## Full Article

Suniti Namjoshi was born in Mumbai in a rich Maharashtrian family in 1941. She was educated in pioneering American boarding school in Pune founded by the philosopher J. Krishnamurthi. From 1964, she employed for the Indian Administrative Service, and then completed her M.A. in business administration in Missouri. In 1969, she obtained a Ph. D. degree on Ezra Pound from McGill University in Canada. She starts her teaching career from the University of Toronto. Her early verse composed from the early 1960s, became more clearly political after a period when, during a vacation in London and Cambridge in 1977-8, she met the poet and activist Christine Donald. After her return to Canada, she involved openly in feminist politics, and developed a women's studies course at Toronto University. She was also associated with The Centre for Women's Studies at Exeter University. In London, in 1984, she came in contact with the Australian author Gillian Handscombe, and in 1987 they moved to Devon, where they continue to live. Namjoshi is famous as a poet, fabulist and novelist. Her works have been published from 1967 to 2014. Her body of works includes subversive, feminist, and humorous revision of myths and fables such as *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* and *Arabian Nights*. She also attempted at writing children's book. One of her children's book is about Aditi, an Indian, dragon-slaying princess which subvert gender stereotypes. Her work is classified as feminist, gender and lesbian collection *Wayward Girls and Wicked Women* (1986). She has been charged as a lesbian feminist; as a result she has not attracted a wider readership in the West and is now largely out of print in Great Britain, Canada and America. In an interview with Namjoshi: 'Feminism, One of her Voices,' in *The Hindu* on Sunday February 20th 2000, Kausalya Santhanam indicates from the title that Namjoshi's themes are more extensive than previously identified. Indeed, in this article, Namjoshi argues that her use of fable, which she believes an essentially didactic genre, is 'able to answer questions' concerning issues such as 'racism, gender stereotyping and attitudes towards exploitation of the planet.' Annanya Dasgupta who argue that Namjoshi's philosophy involves a

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series of 'radical regroupings' beyond gender, where 'the basis of the group shifts from biology to a kinship of shared perception' (Dasgupta, 100). Dasgupta also argues that "Namjoshi's style, although ingenious, did not dazzle the literary scene and has not collected a band of imitators. Namjoshi seems to occupy a solitary space, neither following from nor followed by recently canonized literary traditions (Dasgupta, 101).

Suniti Namjoshi was influenced by Ezra Pound's narrative style. Her seminal work *Building Babel* there is no specific amalgamating structure or definitive ending. The text is primarily concerned with economic power, cultural and political structures; involved of both prose and poetry, and combined both ancient Western and Indian mythological references. Such complexity may have proven problematic to some, but Namjoshi's compactness of style, in problematizing boundaries and hierarchies, is significant for the very reasons that it is labelled as disorientating. In an interview in 1998, Namjoshi echoes on the deeply productive nature of cultural exchange: 'By now my attitude is that all these places are mine for they have given me something and I have tried to give them something in return' (Coomi S. Vevaina, 200-201). In short Namjoshi's *Building Babel* describes collective and individual biological, cultural and environmental interchange across intricate connective tissue. Namjoshi's work, motivated by animal fables such as the *Panchatantra,* Sanskrit moral fables written in 300 AD, *Aesop's Fables* written in Ancient Greece between 620 and 564 BCE, indicate her craving not to be separated from the birds and the beasts. Her work often integrates creatures from Eastern and Western locality, and her foregrounding of usual animals in contrast.

Suniti Namjoshi crafts different metamorphoses using what Scholtmeijer calls the 'camera eye' technique found in Judy Grahn's novel *Mundane's World* (1988). There is a custom of literature that values such small class perceptions; a review of dominant voice, of relative corporeal and time scales, undermining conservative species chain of command based on dominant 'literary systems that exploit animals (Scholtmeijer, 253). As the word 'mundane' signifies, this world is not voiced by striking or 'heroic' characters, but by organisms such as bees, ants, flies, snakes, trees and weeds which, though necessary to a fair ecosystem, are usually considered as ordinary and therefore unimportant. In generating such dizzying perspectives, considerably linking 'minor' species, Namjoshi effectively undermines leading theories of anthropomorphism and evolutionary biology. Namjoshi varied and unusual perspectives, basically absorbs us in a reconsideration of our affiliation with the natural world; one that is far more multifaceted than we suppose; and much more complex than a mere web of connections. A. N. Dwivedi writes about Namjoshi's treatment of Indianness:

> Namjoshi's content is hardly ever valid from the Indian viewpoint. Those who seek for 'Indianness' in her verse will be disappointed. In this case, she is the opposite of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu, of Kamala Das and Monika Varma. Very often she goes to the West for her poems, forgetting the variegated, picturesque landscape of India and her healthy, healing air. And when she becomes aware of her motherland, it is almost always to discover her disfigured face of twisted image. The India of her poetry is the India of poverty and pettiness, of old age and lost lustre… Obviously, there is nothing wrong in having cross-cultural contact, but the balance should not tilt in favour of foreign things. And this is precisely what we find in Namjoshi (Dwivedi A. N., 220-221).

According to Namjoshi, Wester audience failed to understand her use of irony and satire because of her: 'I find I am better understood in England than in Canada – Because I come from a very old

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culture where there's a far greater appreciation of irony...even the humour is more accessible to the English than to the Canadians....' (Kenyon, Olga, 111).

Namjoshi's satirical humour reminds the Hindu concept of Leela, the serious but playful nature of the divine consciousness. It may have been misunderstood as childish in the West, or perhaps singularly inappropriate to relaying potentially catastrophic environmental anxieties. Yet, as Joseph Meeker argues in 'The Comic Mode,' biological evolution generally 'shows all the flexibility of comic drama and little of the monolithic passion peculiar to tragedy' (Meeker, 160).

Namjoshi is famous for her use of metaphors of skin in her works. In 'The Lion Skin' from Namjoshi's *The Blue Donkey Fables*, the exchange is expressed as a complete adoption of another skin. The protagonist asks: 'Do I remove my skin?' and is encouraged to do so by her lover, who ultimately flays her, saying 'You be me, and I'll be you' (Namjoshi, 1988, 33). Namjoshi authentically conveys the often slow and torturous processes of transformation at the level of skin.

Suniti Namjoshi rejects western notion and concept of species hierarchies in her works. She describes metamorphoses of 'lesser' animals, evidences and broadens the 'mesh' by relaying 'more-than-human' responses to changing physical and cultural environments. Namjoshi's animal characters are often humorous and ironic caricatures. Metamorphoses in Namjoshi's work largely pursue the naturalness of Ovid's style. It is argued that, although following an ancient tradition, such alterations are similar to the extemporaneous and rapid responses described in the emerging field of epigenetics. The different ways that Namjoshi uses the Magic Real genre allows the philosophy of science to be understood in a more comprehensive way. Namjoshi's style is more akin to Ovid's metamorphoses, but effectively describes the relative rapidity of developing evolutionary theory. Her use of often ironic humour also has a foundation in ancient literature: *Aesop's Fables* and the *Panchatantra*.

Namjoshi maintains that she is composed of a 'myriad manifestations and multiple histories,' (Building Babel, 24) of everyone she has ever known and who simultaneously inhabit her body. Indeed, in her autobiography *Goja*, (2000) she describes her body as 'infested' with the 'monsters' of her family and everyone she has ever met. Despite the use of these rather derogatory words, she does not see this as awkward. She declares: 'All these people are jostling one another, entering into me, living with me. I am an ark' (Namjoshi, *GOJA*, 30-31). This diversity may originally be evocative of the perplexity of voices in the Christian biblical tale of the Tower of Babel, yet in her revision of the tale, *Building Babel* (1996), Namjoshi stresses the strongly precious nature of multiplicity, rather than the disordered devastation of the original story. In the introduction to *Building Babel*, Namjoshi claims that such complex associations are absolutely affirming rather than disturbing. It may be meaningful though, for all of us to examine how our backgrounds have affected our thinking – or, as they'd say in Babel, to understand how our memes have mutated and merged. The results can be surprising. Namjoshi's use of the word 'memes' here invokes Richard Dawkins' theory concerning the legacy of memories as happening in much the same way as genes are inherited in Neo-Darwinian terms. In *Building Babel*, the characters of Medusa, Cinders, Red Riding Hood, Alice in Wonderland and the Cheshire Cat frequently mutate and merge into variations of themselves. Significantly, as indicated by the subtle modifications of their names, they retain crucial traces of their past, rather than undergoing complete transformations. Medusa morphs between Mad Med, Merry and M; Red Riding Hood is also Little Red; Solitude is Sister Sol, Solly, The Solipsistic one and Solicitude; the humble Black Piglet is described as both the Black Prince and the Black Princess. Ironically, in *Building Babel*, after a short period of contentment in what is described as a 'Garden of Eden' or Alice's 'Wonderland,' power structures inevitably resurface and all creatures are in therapy. It is the 'impeccably orderly' vision that Alice seeks to assert that is ultimately destructive since, in

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ecological terms, the tyranny of 'proper control' limits the potential of metamorphoses and ends in disastrous sterility.

The complexity of promiscuous individualism is similarly evident in *St. Suniti and the Dragon* (1993), where Namjoshi uses a diary form, apparently written during the Gulf War, to explore how it might be possible to live 'blamelessly'381 in the modern world. The character of St. Suniti, perpetually traverses spurious boundaries of gender and nation since the canonical, heroic male English, Christian saint and mythological figure, is also Indian, Hindu and lesbian. Indeed, in 'Sir Suniti and the Fearful Dragon,' the knight is an 'Elderly gentlewoman' seeking to make a 'bargain with the devil.' Through blurring these distinctions, St. Suniti emerges not merely as a feminist icon but as 'Humanity's Rep,'382 a universal, nongendered 'Saint,' battling the restrictions of normative gendered, species and national categories embodied in the form of the 'dragon.' In her collection of fables and poems *Sycorax* (2006), Namjoshi similarly blurs the identities of Prospero and Sycorax, from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. As Ariel states at the beginning of Namjoshi's poem: 'It's clear that the old woman is as bad as the old man. There is no difference in their indifference. Namjoshi foregrounds the character of Sycorax, previously absent from the play, and describes her fundamental resemblance to Prospero, problematizing their affiliation beyond conventional theories of central male and marginal female.

In short, Suniti Namjoshi's work opens new arena regarding treatment of animals, birds, beasts and nature. Her work proves significant in ecocritical debate because it undermines anthropocentrism, and species hierarchies. The quality of Namjoshi's prose piece is fantastic; the sentences are short and penetrating. Namjoshi often uses images of women as monkeys, and notably as one-eyed monkeys, to signify both their weakness and their physical strength; they are also creative, flexible and powerfully enduring.

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