

Gender and Suniti Namjoshi : A Study

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Received: 31 August 2023 Accepted and Reviewed: 31 August 2023, Published : 10 September 2023

Abstract

Gender is a unique term with multiple meanings. It is primarily a social construct and understood in relation to sex and sexuality. Gender was initially used to refer to the cultural and social aspects of sexual difference. The present paper focusses on the concepts of sex and gender from the viewpoint of Suniti Namjoshi. Suniti Namjoshi enters into the world of letters as a woman who rejects social norms. She counters attacks on gender exploitation. Lacking sexual ties with men and managing enough space for getting herself free from the heterosexual commitments. Namjoshi can think radically and profoundly about the possibility of social change with reference to gender arrangements. The present paper's focus is on Queer theory. It focuses gender and sexuality, sex and desire etc. It undergoes a psychic reading of man in order to present the deviation in the mind of people and its effects on society. This theory gives rise to a debate whether sexual orientation is natural or essential to a person, or if sexuality is mere a social construction and subject to change. Indian Society is a unique and especial. In this society woman is designated as either too good as God, or too bad as devil. There are only two shades of woman. Suniti Namjoshi's feelings and her style of writing can also be observed as a lesbian feminist. She belongs to the group of writers who had taken a step forward in their thinking, style and even expression. The main focus is her poems. The paper tries to unveil her ideas on the major issues of society in the form of poetry.

Keywords – Sex and Gender, Patriarchy, Homosexuality, Queer and Hegemony.

Introduction

An esteemed Indian writer, poet, prose writer and a well-known personality in India Suniti Namjoshi is a lesbian poet living in England. Suniti Namjoshi was born on April 20, 1941 in a highly influential Chitpavan Brahmin family of Pune. She was the granddaughter of Laxmi Devi Naik Nimbalkar and daughter of Ranisaheb Phaltan. Her father was a young Maratha Royal Airforce pilot, killed in a crash during World War II. After her father's death, her mother, Sarojini Namjoshi became the young, beautiful and widowed princess of a Maratha principality. Suniti Namjoshi belonged to an esteemed and reputed family of people who gave strict adherence to rules and regulations. She was a bright child in her childhood; attentive in studies, a good listener, a brilliant orator and disturbed at heart. She completed her graduation from Pune University in 1964 and has recruited by Indian Administrative Services (IAS), but life appeared to be tedious for Namjoshi. She then took a study leave to pursue a master's program in Public Administration at the University of Missouri, Columbia. In 1969 she resigned from the Administrative service and moved to Montreal, Canada to do a PhD at McGill. She worked on modern poetry and was awarded doctoral degree for her thesis "Ezra Pound and Reality: The Metaphysics of the Cantos". Namjoshi taught courses in literature at Scarborough College, Toronto University for the next fifteen years. A major shift occurred in her career as well as creative life when she was spending her time in London and Cambridge between 1978-79. At this period of time she came under the influence of Gay Liberation movements which provided her the tool

to describe her own beliefs and inner selves. This was the period of introspection for Namjoshi. She made herself strong and bold enough to reach to a particular decision and managed to develop strong political and ideological positions that manifest and sustain her later poetic and fictional compositions. In 1988, she resigned her teaching position and moved to Devon.

Namjoshi's literary career began with the publication of a slim volume of poems in 1967. They are poems composed on random themes which expressed the sensitivity of the author. In the same year she also published *Poems of Govindagraj* which she translated from Marathi with her mother. Another two Anthologies of poems of Namjoshi, *More Poems* and *Cyclone in Pakistan* came out in 1971. These works portray the maturity and shifts in the life and writings of Namjoshi. She is a sensitive person and was not extrovert in her young age. As time passed, she came up with new and fresh insights through her poetry. *The Jackass and the Lady* consolidated her poetic achievement. She wanted to be a writer. She is a known lesbian writer living in London, attracting people's lives by her writing power than by her administrative position. She got involved in politics and her ways of expression got clarity. By the time her political input is complete, she comes out openly and boldly with the clear indications of her identity as a feminist and a lesbian. Her inner impulses and sexual preferences expressed through symbolic medium in some of her rich and provocative verses of her next collection of poems *The Authentic Lie* (1969). It focuses on the theme of death and sentences are rich in metaphysical speculations. This is an autobiographical collection of poems and deals with her own childhood grief of losing her father. As signified by the title *The Authentic Lie*, this collection is rich in paradoxical thought and expression and reflects the philosophical disposition of poet's mind.

Namjoshi has a fascination for fables and fairy-tales and indulged in deconstructive readings of the texts exposing the harmless children stories. In *From the Bedside Book of Nightmares*, William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is rewritten. It is composed from the perspective of racial and gender exploitation focussing on a living Sycorax. Namjoshi has always preferred symbolic and allegorical mode for realistic presentation. Fancy and fantasy are her bases to introduce her satiric attack on the anomalies she finds in the world around her. Reality presented by the writers in their texts is a moulded reality ruled by patriarchal social setup. Feminist writers like Ursula Le Guin, Angela Carter, Jody Scot, Margaret Atwood have all moved away from realism since they believe the so-called reality. There are long and full - fledged debates on real and reality. In this world, for a deconstructive writer, nothing is real because reality is pertained to change. The poems written by Contemporary Indian Women poets express their deep dissatisfaction with the given world and order of things, and their realization of the need for a transformational change which leaves them perplexed and baffled. They seem to believe that there is no precise and final answer to the dilemmas of life. As a result, their restless and persistent mind that questions probes and covets starts articulating the inner conflict. The same frustration and dissatisfaction can be seen in the poetry of Suniti Namjoshi. Namjoshi uses fantasy as a technique of defamiliarization in *The Conversation of Cow* (1985) and *The Mothers of Mayadiip* (1989). To quote Rosemary Jackson: "The fantastic traces the unseen and the unsaid of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made absent" (3-4). The only book where Namjoshi expresses her personal experiences and contexts took shape in *Because of India* (1989). She strikes a different note from other contemporary poets taken up for study, as her schizophrenic identity results not only from the attempt to resolve her tensions as a woman or a feminist writer, but also as a lesbian and a diasporic writer. The most important contribution of

Namjoshi to contemporary Indian English fiction lies in creating a sensitive and responsible reader. Her work continues to remain passive and complacent. The writer indulged in parodic and metafictional writing and weaves a lot of metafictional allusions in order to explore her ideas in a radical way. Her works and texts are closed and it is the responsibility of the reader to decode it and cult out the meaning. *Building Babel* co-opts the reader into co-authorship in the process of building babel.

Suniti Namjoshi's first book *Poems* (1967) contains 24 poems. The first book is dedicated to her grandmother. She dedicates 'In English' to her mother:

Brocade and silk, ambergris, attar and cloves,
My oriental princess listed to the sound of the erotic.
A bullock cart trundled past the window.
My oriental cock in russet, gold and blue
Is very male and doing nothing outside
You roll a heart-shaped 'paan' for yourself.
More local colour Oriental princess,
How can I make these foreigners understand you are my mother? (10)

The work clearly shows Namjoshi as a beginner in the field of creativity. She addresses her mother as an 'oriental princess'. Words like 'Brocade and silk, ambergris, cloves, 'oriental princess', 'bullock cart', 'heart-shaped paan' shows that the poem has an Indian touch.

Suniti Namjoshi enters into the world of letters as a woman who rejects social norms. She counter attacks gender exploitation. Lacking sexual ties with men and managing enough space for getting herself free from the heterosexual commitments, Namjoshi can think radically and profoundly about the possibility of social change with reference to gender arrangements. The concept 'woman identified woman' was an important lesbian slogan in early 1970s. It was an attempt to place woman at the centre. Lesbians promote women who are supposed to be on the periphery in the patriarchal world. According to lesbian theorists woman is not the prefix but the root word which makes all the creation happen. "Lesbian was a source of an alternative model of female identity, not simply a choice of sexual activity" (Humm 164). In "The Unicorn" Namjoshi says:

I rode the wild unicorn
In the green light of trees,
In the dark light of night,
Past leaves and silver thorn,
In love and foul weather.
Love, will you ride with me?
But my love stayed behind,
Far away behind me,
And I rode the wild unicorn
Past love and foul weather. (*Poems* 198)

This is a ten lines poem in two parts about two loves. A unicorn is trapped when the Lady stands against the tree to attract him. He charges at her to injure her with his horns, but unfortunately, he gets trapped by his horns in the tree. A unicorn is a symbol of Christ. It has a spiritual value. So does poetry. The unicorn metaphor is transparent. The lesbian lacks horn (a phallus, hence he uses dildo, a substitute

phallus). Love is 'foul weather'. The poet invites the unicorn to 'ride with me'. But the answer is not given by the poet. There is an obvious presentation of the love of sexual indulgence (lesbian) and the love of literature (poetry). Monique Wittig ends *The Straight Mind* with this sentence: "Lesbians are not women" (32) because the sign 'woman' carries with it too many constructions and associations. According to her, "it is oppression that creates sex and not the contrary" (Wittig 6).

Woman is always taught. Society considers her good for nothing. Body of a woman, according to Steve Jackson and Sue Scott "is to develop a theory itself as socially constructed" (*A Glossary* 46). The consequence is that women have to find alternative ways to value their bodies as women. Against Freudian theory, then, de Lauretis argues the lesbian, unlike the heterosexual man, is not trying to find a substitute mother or a substitute for the maternal phallus, as Freud suggests. Rather, she is trying to find a desirable and lovable female body-image.

Society sets up a rule that a woman is just a prefix 'wo'. The root word is 'man'. Alfred Lord Tennyson in *The Princess* says:

Man for the World; woman for the hearth
 Man for the sword; and for the needle she
 Man to command ; woman to obey
 All else confusion.

In normal life too she is considered as a creator. According to the patriarchy the process of generation cannot be completed without penis. So woman is synonymous with pity, hence her condition is pitiful. A lesbian woman defines herself in terms of a woman only and rejects the male dependence and need in her life. She projects herself as a free bird flying in the world of expectations. Lesbianism threatens male supremacy at its core. The lesbian "rejects male sexual/political domination; she defies his world, his social organization, his ideology, and his definition of her as inferior" (Bunch 83). In 'The Elsewhere Fish', Namjoshi writes:

I would need wings, seven league boots
 And a cloak of invisibility
 To come to you.
 In this country the days
 Offer themselves like a pack of cards,
 Different, but blue-backed,
 Stacked with white clouds.
 The fish nibble my feet.

I hope you exist in that other country. (*More Poems*10)

Days are compared to the pack of cards. Every day unfolds a new meaning. The fish cannot live in this world because she is a member of "the other country". The life of a woman is like a fish who dives and swims in water. Fish cannot survive without water, in the same way the woman cannot exist without her freedom.

Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai claim that there is a genealogy of queering tradition in India. They anthologise passages from the Mahabharata, Panchtantra, Kamasutra, Bhagvata Purana and other Puranas. India still holds a conventional belief on the love that dare not speak its name even today. No love outside heterosexual mono/polygamous marriage, or no love that cannot take a spiritual form is

accepted; any articulation of such love outside sees social rejection, violence, punishment or judicial action.

Two negative forces against same- sex love must be addressed to understand queer studies in India. The first is that queer sexuality is not Indian; and second that it is against Indian tradition and culture. The first negative force forms the root of homophobia in India. Desire and Sex are two interconnected terms. Desire is a psychoanalytic base. It has a special place in Lacan's work. Desire has also undergone many attacks and counter attacks of whether it is a condition or an affect. Lacan focussed in analysis of desire as an affect than condition. Lacan quotes:

Desire is what manifests itself in the interval demand excavates just shy of itself, insofar as a subject, articulating in the signifying chain, brings to the light his lack of beings with his call to receive the complement of his lack from the Other – assuming that the Other, the locus of speech, is also the locus of this lack. (*Ecritis* 6)

Desire is defined in a theoretical way where it is treated as a subject. The subject is moved to make a demand. This demand highlights the need which is termed as 'Other'. So the desire is a demand for the 'Other'. In order to fulfil the demand, need gets vanished. Thus suggests a lack of something. Thinking of desire filling the lack is itself whimsical because what is demanded is never needed. Lacan says “... in making the demand, the Subject assumes that the Other has whatever it needs, while in fact the Other is lacking as a Subject” (*Lacan* 110).

Namjoshi's *The Jackass and the Lady* spells out her position as a lesbian poet taking and acting freely in a world which had provided her the ground to raise her voice. She is an Indian lesbian writer living outside expressing her emotions in a way that is unacceptable in India. In *Jackass* she has created a poetic persona which is joined to a beast. It reflects the different but a unique aspect of the poet which is aloof, spontaneous and free. The collection is divided into three parts 'The Reluctant Cannibals', 'Homage to Circe', and 'The Overgrown Garden'. The imagery and the style opted by the poet is directed towards the radical thinking of the poet. She argues that “... in a humanist universe, which has been male-centered historically, women are the 'other' together with the birds and the beasts and the other” (*Because of India* 28).

Her collection *The Jackass and the Lady* is an open declaration of her being a lesbian writer. This also depicts the spontaneity of thought of the writer. In this she creates the Jackass, the poetic persona, who is soon joined by many other beasts. She makes this choice because in this male-dominating society she can find only birds and beasts with which she can identify herself, thus, rejecting all gender stereotyping. She seems to consider that by rejecting heterosexuality a woman can decline secondary, derivative, or second-best to men positions. Her eve prefers to be coupled with the snakes rather than remain chained to Adam and bear the badge of a fallen woman:

Eve
in her turn
encircled the snakes, passing her body
to him.
Curious coupling, brown snake and Eve.
Caught in a twist
of the blind green coil being Adam
and evil and Eve. ('Her form in Clear Water' 13)

Instead of getting close to Man (Adam), a Woman ‘encircles the snakes’. Snakes symbolize lust. Lust is associated with man. Here a woman (mother earth) gets entangled with lust. She abandons the stereotypical, mythical setup of society because it is all patriarchal. Body is used as a metaphor to convey the erotic portrayal in a language used by Suniti. She was so much disappointed with heterosexuality that she decides to be united with animals. In the poem symbols work strongly. Eve alludes to the marginal group of society where the Other prefers to get coupled with the Other. The above lines smell anarchy taken up by the poet because Adam who symbolizes patriarchy, is completely neglected. Here the desire crushes the demand and need gets fulfilled. Namjoshi uses short sentences which are symbolic. Her rejection of heterosexuality reminds the clear influence of Adrienne Rich on Namjoshi. It is not that heterosexual women are evil or do not care about women. It is because the very essence, definition and nature of heterosexuality give importance to men first. In her poem ‘GILL AND HIS MERMAID’ she quotes:

A woman in a glided sarong said
 Now for the first time in your life
 you live. The palm trees are real,
 the sand is real and I am real.
 I have made this possible.
 But one day she died
 and there was only a great dead fish
 on the shore which wasn't quite real anymore. (*The Jackass* 21)

In *Sycorax and Other Poems*, she rewrites *The Tempest*. Sycorax is a female Caliban. She finds Miranda attractive and wondrous. She thinks that she is a god. Prospero cheated her by getting the secrets of the land and steal her land from her. Sycorax represents the periphery that has a charm for ‘blue eyes’. She is a need and Prospero is the subject who demands the land of Sycorax. In order to fulfil the demand of the subject, need gets vanished. She understands the reality and the trick after losing everything in the hands of Prospero.

Thus, Suniti Namjoshi and her assertion towards society is direct and unique. She is a post-colonial and post-feminist lesbian. She breaks down the hierarchy between Man and the beast, Men and Women, Hetero and Homosexual, Europe and Asia, Gender and Genre. Her genre flows between autobiography and novel (*Goja*), prose and poetry (*The Fables*), and between history and fiction.

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