



## BLUE DONKEY FABLES BY SUNITI NAMJOSHI : A RE-READING FROM FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract

*The Blue Donkey Fables* consists of more than seventy small fables and poems. All these prose and poetic pieces are mirth provoking but there is an undercurrent of criticism of discrepancies of contemporary human world. Written in a comic and sarcastic mood by making animals and birds as characters in the absurd drama of life and putting them in equally absurd and incongruous situations, Suniti makes fun of the trivialities and pretensions of human world. All the fables in this book are a serious appeal to humanity for a reflection upon the marginalization of women as a gendered class of second-rate citizens in whom the dialectics between their physical bodies and psychological spirits would be maximum. She critiques the contemporary social norms, gender stereotypes, classical myths, all types of constructs and reality.

**Keywords:** Fable, Lesbianism, Identity- Politics, Gender Discriminatory Practices

### A brief profile of author:

Suniti Namjoshi, an Indian born writer, has established herself as an acknowledged Fabulist of the current age of Literature in English. She is an active expatriate, diaspora writer of the period with her witty, satiric, humorous short fables. As a fabulous feminist, she explores Body-Spirit Dialectic from radical perspective in all her fables. Her issues are parallel to third wave feminism issues and very close to 'lesbian continuum'.

Namjoshi has chosen 'fable form' to express her dialectics on gender discrimination, identity politics and lesbianism. The term 'fable' is derived from Latin word 'Fabula' which means 'discourse' or 'tale'. Jean. de. La Fontaine, a French fabulist defines it as 'a small tale that enshrouds a moral under the veil of a fiction'. The Columbia encyclopedia, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. defines fable as a brief allegorical narrative in verse or prose, illustrating a moral thesis or satirizing

human beings. The characters of a fable are usually animals who talk and act like people while retaining their animal traits.

Right from the beginning of her literary career, Namjoshi has experienced life differently. The radical changes in her life shaped her temperament and personality. She was influenced by Feminist and Gay Liberation Movements and all her personal experiences are reflected in her writing. C.Vijayasree calls her 'The Artful Transgressor' and says that her aptitude to writing is one of the 'transgression' rather than 'aggression'. She 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". Sumitra Puri observes, "Rejection of prestigious positions led her to

investigate the nature of all modes of dominance- of class, race, gender and nationality and to transgress them. This transgression became her key concern"

### Discussion

The collection *The Blue Donkey Fables* establishes a fictional world with an array of beasts, birds and human characters to represent the inner struggle between body and spirit of her characters as well as ideologies, views and concepts. The blue donkey after which the collection is named is the central character of most of the tales. The fables can be seen as a criticism of anomalies of contemporary world and provide instructions for a practical way of life and for an amicable co-existence in today's world. The ideas discussed in this collection of fables, tales and verses have universal significance. The author gives free reign to her imagination and weaves fabulous tales using a range of animal and human characters.

The first fable "The Blue Donkey" presents some of the principal images in the form of donkey, red bridge, pink carrot, blue flowers and two parties to illustrate that a tradition of images was linked to the body-spirit dialectic. Namjoshi in this fable reproaches the society for its patriarchal bias and indifference to women as a class. The Blue Donkey lived by a red bridge and the councilors called it "Inartistic". According to them the donkey must be of the purest and silkiest white or it must be moved away from red bridge. The Blue Donkey became a political issue. One group remarked that the donkey would never be white and the opposite group said that the donkey was grey instead of blue. There is no consensus among them, so they went to see the donkey. They asked the donkey either to turn grey or move away from the bridge. The donkey refused and the councilors began to dispute among themselves. Their objection was to the blue colour of the donkey. The blue colour signifies the female donkey's efforts for liberty, but it invites anger and criticism of the male-dominated society. Lesbian affiliation can be associated with the colour blue. It also exposes power-politics and popular perceptions about female identity, gender, class and colour.

Colour has fascinated scholars for millennia (Sloane, 1991; Gage, 1993). Theorizing on color and psychological functioning has been present since Goethe (1810) penned his *Theory of Colors*. The color gray which the counselors want the donkey to be is an unemotional colour. In the meaning of colors, gray is conservative, boring, drab and depressing on the one hand and elegant and formal on the other, yet never glamorous. The society is not ready to accept the colour Blue which also signifies the spirit of freedom of choice. Whatever the society decides for a woman, i.e. the best for a woman. But through a series of movements, woman's body with liberated spirit is getting accepted gradually. The study of Feminist Movement is essential to support Suniti Namjoshi's views.

The second fable "Apotheosis" is about the commoditization of female body. In the middle of her years, the Blue Donkey acquires a certain fame. The townsfolk grew quite proud of her. She attracted tourists. Blue Donkey bars and bistro sprouted. There was a brisk trade in T-shirts and Blue Donkey Toys. She herself was installed in a stable and in order to see her it became necessary to buy tickets. The delighted tourists told her, "O Blue and Beautiful One, we admire you so. Your fame has travelled on the four winds" (BDF 3). The Blue Donkey enjoyed the attention. Then she grew bored, and she took to questioning the tourists. But the tourist would just say that they admire her so much and her fame reached all over the world. And she felt pleased. Soon she began to look scruffy. They shut down the stable and begged her to grow her fur quickly. Then they discovered that her fur turned into a beautiful grey. They were horrified. The aging process brings her closer to the stark reality of her empty existence. So she decides to retire and prefers to become a legend. The soul was innocent, and the body impassible, but both would be subject to change. Suniti deplors that women have a very low opinion of themselves. They consider themselves to be passive, dependent and incapable of accepting any challenging responsibility. A woman has to establish her identity with her intelligence & individuality, not with her female attractive body which certainly undergoes aging process.

In "Curtain", the dilemma of the Blue Donkey whether to tell the truth or not is well depicted. Now the donkey had retired. It had become a legend. The people thought her to be dead. Then she told the mayor of the town that she is not dead. She walked through the city and proclaimed that she is alive with changed colour and her colour is grey. The mayor and people became happy as the intake tourists have redoubled. Suniti satirizes the human world of patriarchy that offers a tailor-made role to women. Any difference from the prescribed path invites threats and dangers to their very existence. A very strong come back is what is required. Women have to claim their rights & privileges which are never given to them automatically. Supreme Court judgment is still not been successfully implemented in allowing woman to Shabarimallai Temple in Kerala, India. Thrupthi Desai, a contemporary Indian feminist was not able to get a taxi to temple premises. Still her attempt is to prove her presence.

The fable "Last Word" suggests that in spite of her substantial contribution to the society, the Blue Donkey is regarded as a liar. In this fable, the Blue Donkey leads a retired life, telling lies. There were several rumors about her. Her motive for lying is her weariness and uninteresting life. The irony is that her lies are about her own experiences. In patriarchy she is forced to assume and perform a gendered role and suffer silently. Finally, she asks her devoted disciples to write down her innermost thoughts, ideas, aspirations that are labeled as lies by the society. It is her appeal to feminists that through a female tradition of writing women can explore and establish a sense of identity.

"In Explanation", entitled "No Daffodil", "Lions", "A Difference and Cornered", Suniti Namjoshi associates herself with birds and animals. For her animals are more human than human beings. Her Hindu origin plays a major role in shaping her consciousness. Using Hindu moral principles and identification with animals, she emphasizes the universal truths and human values and problematizes the acceptance of the discriminatory preaching of Hinduism through her clever use of animals, birds, and plants such as daffodils, trees, cats and dogs. She provides explanation for her choice of animals, birds and beasts. She argues that

except women, all the other natural creatures are very fortunate because they are free from the danger of "man-made" constructs of gender discrimination.

"Lions" exposes the female psyche which is the silent spectator to its own marginalization. The statement "Control your emotions", the grown-ups had said (BDF 7) clearly highlights the suppression of one's feelings for societal constructs. Socrates, in Plato's "Phaed", maintains that, anyone who has the spirit of philosophy will not fear death or discrimination. He says "the body fills us with all kinds of lusts, desires, fears, phantoms and a great deal of nonsense, with the result that we really and truly never ever get a chance to think about anything at all."(Plato's Phaedo 183)

In "A Difference", the helplessness of woman is highlighted and in *Cornered*, Namjoshi abhors patriarchy for its indifference to women.

The body and its desires are entirely responsible for war, fiction and fighting. Since it is the acquisition of money which is responsible for all wars it is the body which compels us to acquire money. We are slaves in its service. "The One-eyed Monkey Goes into Print" is a feminist agenda of asserting an authentic self through acquiring economical status as well as creative self. Women's writings were considered to be inferior and not worth publishing. It is a challenge to theory and a new way of looking at reality, creativity, language, society and gendered structures through women's eyes. The One-eyed Monkey decides to write a book about her personal experiences, but the crocodiles ridiculed her idea. She wrote a book entitled "The Life and Leanings of a One-eyed Monkey" and sent to the publisher who sent it back to her with a remark that the book lacks in "human interest" (BDF 9). She disparages the resistance posed by publishers who favour male writers and their hetero normative agenda to ignore women's creativity. Namjoshi protests that women's writings have always been marginalized, and labeled as lacking in intellectual substance. Women's creativity is always invaded by patriarchy. Her subject, position or self, or identity is culturally constructed. The dualism between her conscience and body is well depicted

by Namjoshi. There is a conflict between the female spirit and the patriarchal body. For all these reasons the body gives us no time for philosophy. The body keeps cropping up at every point in our enquiry. It causes chaos and confusion and so preventing us seeing the truth. Socrates says, "It has been well and truly proved to us that if we are ever going to gain pure knowledge of anything, we must get rid of the body. And we must look at things themselves with the soul itself." (Plato's Phaedo 256)

In "Mute Swan", an ordinary Swan which represents a conventional woman changes herself to the needs of the Lady of the Lake who represents a feminist. In the fable there is a graceful swan and the Lady of the Lake. The Lady of the Lake tries to educate the swan by teaching her nuances of the patriarchy. The lady is a feminist who brings about the initiation of an ordinary woman into a world of feminist by awakening a spirit of rebellion in the mind of the mute swan. The author reflects upon the conventional female identity. Like the swan, every woman leads a life of seclusion and rejection by patriarchy. The fable is progressively in a quest of the self for a heightened female awareness. Loneliness and oppression are common to the conventional female body and her spirit is awakened through feminist dialectic.

The fable "The Creation Plan B" is a dramatic simplification of the strong need to liberate the women's world from the patriarchal intrusion and to create a separate world to women excluding men. The fable ensures that traditional organized religion, art, philosophy, history and culture are patriarchal interpretations and learning. Namjoshi suggests that entire culture is charged with male values. The title is ironic. It reminds of the original creation, termed as 'plan A'. In it, males are perfect and first rate citizens while women are second rate citizens. So the parrot and tortoise want to exclude males from their plan B. Women's souls are the freest when they are contemplating the divine mind, a little less free when they are joined to bodies. They are the masters of their world, exclusively a 'female world'.

### Conclusion

Suniti wants to suggest that her lesbianism comes out of the male-domination and lack of

compromise on both the sides. More than her bodily transformation. Suniti says her soul has transformed to a level where she can't accept male as a companion. The death of Sycorax in her retold fable of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is symbolic of the conflict between body and spirit where none of them rests in peace.

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