



## IRONY IN SUNITI NAMJOSHI'S *FEMINIST FABLES*

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### Abstract

The definition of irony as a literary device is a situation in which there is a contrast between expectation and reality. It is the difference between what something appears to mean versus its literal meaning. Irony is associated with both tragedy and humour. Irony is a very powerful literary device incorporated persistently in the fables by Suniti Namjoshi, an expatriate Indian woman writer in English.

Namjoshi came into prominence with *Feminist Fables* (1981), a crisp retelling of canonical and apocryphal folk tales-drawing on sources as varied as *The Panchatantra*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and European fairy tales-from a distinctly queer perspective. Reading these tales, you might be reminded of Chaucer's Wife of Bath exclaiming. "By god! If women had written stories.....". Namjoshi's work draws its subversive energies from a hardnosed understanding of social realities rather than from bookish theories. As she points out, "The fable form should make it clear that they question what happens to anyone whenever there's an imbalance of power." The point is drome in tale after tale with striking irony, perspicacity, a wry, Swiftian sense of humour and without a trace of sentimentality.

**Key Words:** Irony, Sarcasm, identity-politics, imbalance of power, patriarchy, gender discrimination, feminism, lesbianism.

### NARRATION

Re-working of fairy tales, classical tales, popular fables, a significant concern of feminist writers is taken up by Suniti Namjoshi. This is amply illustrated in her fable collections- *Feminist Fables* and other fables. In the fables, she presents the female character as liberated women contrary to their traditional roles in a male dominated society. Namjoshi in all her fable collections – *The Blue Donkey Fables*, *Feminist Fables* & *The Solidarity Fables*, *Saint Suniti and the Dragon* and other fables adopts the fable form as a suitable medium to put forward her ideas effectively, in a precise and vivid manner as it is epigrammatic, extremely ironical and absolutely concrete.

Feminist rewriting could include ironic mimicry & clever twists, as well as a whole gamut of tactics, that would open the myth from the inside as well as out, leaving in place enough of the known format to provide evocative points of reflection for its reader, but also encompassing different possibilities and other point of view.

Several women writers including Tanith Lee, Jane Yolen, Anne Sexton, Olga Browmas, Margaret Atwood and Suniti Namjoshi have focused their attention on such rewritings of fairy tales, because of its role in the acculturation of gender ideology. A close survey of the treatment of girls & women in fairy tales reveal certain patterns that play a major role in forming the sexual role concept. The good women, usually the heroines, are invariably

beautiful, passive & powerless: while the bas ones, usually the witches or step mothers, are very often ugly, bad tempered & powerful. Consequently, the message conveyed is “being powerful is mainly associated with being unwomanly” and the moral value of activity is “sex linked”.

Suniti Namjoshi’s rewriting of ancient myths, legends & fairy tales particularly in her *Feminist Fables* has made them a vehicle of new vision through the exploration of the female condition. In these fables, as Savita Goel in Suniti Namjoshi’s “Feminist Fables: A minor feminist classic” states:

“She has invented a mythology that is simultaneously thought-provoking & entertaining and deals with the aspects of women’s lives that have been erased, ignored, demeaned & mystified. The stories explore with playful irony the concepts of decency, honour and status of women. The writer tries to comprehend the social and psychic mechanisms that construct gender inequality and believes that the inequality between the sexes is not the inequality between the sexes is not the result of biological necessity but is produced by the cultural construction of gender differences.”

The fables interrogate the marginalization of women in a patriarchal society and inspire women to struggle for self-identity & autonomy. Suniti Namjoshi’s re-visioning in *Feminist Fables*, focuses on challenging traditional patriarchal myths upholding women as object, and offering new Women’s web. In relation to this Unman Datta comments:

“A feminist with Indian roots, she has explored issues of gender and sexual orientation in her writing, and *The Feminist Fables* presents excerpts from her many works.”

The fables in *The Feminist Fables* are primarily concerned with making feminist statements, but Namjoshi was mainly concerned with gender discrimination and marginalization of women. These fables have a timeless sweep through past, present and even future worlds. There

fables present ancient myths, legends and fairy tales from the East and West. Suniti makes use of fairy tale characters in a very real setting to provide an alternate paradigm to the present male dominated society.

The Women Characters in the fable “The Incredible Women” raged through the skies, lassoed a planet, set it in orbit, rescued a starship, flattened a mountain, straightened a building, smiled at a child, caught a few thieves, all in one morning, and then, took a long time off to visit her psychiatrist, since she is at heart a really womanly woman and all she wants is a normal life. Most of her creations contain a similar mix of ironic, poignant humour. Namjoshi wrestles not only with issues of gender but also with class and race, all with a wonderfully light ironical touch that balances social justice with the self-deprecation of a brown lesbian feminist (thrice-oppressed, as a less-oppressed white woman once informed her.) Fabulous feminist, she definitely is!

Much of Namjoshi’s investigations into the female psyche and the society that shapes it, are carried out in a mode of fictional life-writing in the best tradition of the genre. Think of the vicious wit of Virginia Woolf, laced with the tender melancholia of Helene Cixous, spiked with the subtle eroticism of Anais Nin.

Namjoshi criticizes the discriminatory legal system that always serves the interests of males in patriarchy. Suniti Namjoshi attacks the docile woman who is ready to accept her subordinate position as a slave to a man. ‘In Rescued’, Anderson’s woman Rapunzel bears a harsh treatment. Though she is beautiful, she cannot cope with the situation, as she is not powerful. Rapunzel rejects the dream of the original woman character and sees the dreams of liberation. Rapunzel hopes that a Prince will come and take her with him to law and order of the established society. She wants to escape from the clutches of the wicked witch.

The fable “Heart” portrays a ‘Headless Woman’ doing the jobs of cooking and cleaning without any complaints. The main purpose of her life is to serve other people. She never complained of feeling tired or exhausted. In the course of time, her children grew; her husband grew old and died.

She became lonely and so she met the government and asked for pension. But her demand was turned down. The government was not cruel but "the problem was that she had no head and could not ask. In patriarchy, women are dependent and passive. They are not required to make use of their head. It destroys the ability of women to think practically and independently. So she lacks practical knowledge, loses her identity and gets a secondary status. She represents the helpless world of females. Patriarchy inculcates notions of women's inferiority to men. It emphasizes that men are more intelligent and rational and women are romantic, sentimental and irrational in their thoughts. Therefore, they blindly follow men's commands and it never occurs to them to challenge their validity. This has destroyed their power of judgement, so they exist only in relation to their male counterpart. The story symbolizes the lamentable status of women. Women are relegated to be sentimental fools, who simply toil and in Simone de Beauvoir's view, ever ready "to lie down at her master's feet and kiss the hand that strikes her".

Namjoshi attacks the hypocrisy of patriarchy and explores the myth of a successful marriage in the fable, "And Then What Happened" In patriarchy, woman is dependent on man, her status gets marginalized as the slave or servant. But in this story, Cinderella does not live happily ever after her marriage but she prefers divorce from her husband. She enjoys liberty and walks away from her husband's home. Namjoshi has rewritten this familiar tale by giving an unconventional ending. She has tried to subvert the gender hierarchy of the prince. The conversation between the prince and Cinderella is very interesting as it throws light on the superior status of males in social hierarchy.

In the fable, "The Doll", Namjoshi ridicules the opposite sex. The two little girls make a doll out of sticks and the name of the doll is "Brittle Boy". The boy comes there and smashes the doll. The two girls are also very angry and they want to smash him but they maintain their patience. So they pick up the sticks and restart the process. The girls' act of making a male doll indicates a subconscious female desire for and attraction of the opposite sex. As patriarchy has drawn a line of demarcation between

the two sexes, the girls create a world of fantasy for gratification of their subtle libidinal instincts in their subconscious mind. Suniti suggests that females are gifted with patience and capacity to endure but males are easily irritated and are responsible for their own self destruction.

The Fable "From the Panchtantra" is taken from a Sanskrit book of fables and it contains both Brahmins and beasts. Lord Vishnu grants a poor Brahmin's wish for a son. Out of absentmindedness, Lord Vishnu gives the Brahmin a daughter. In a very short period, Lord Vishnu appears again and the Brahmin once again makes his earnest request for a son. Lord Vishnu says, "Next time around". In his next incarnation, the Brahmin was a woman and she became the mother of eight boys. In the next birth, the Brahmin girl asks for 'human status' but Lord Vishnu knows the difficulty in granting 'human status' to females; so the girl's request remains unfulfilled. Lord Vishnu appoints a committee to look into the matter. Suniti Namjoshi comments on Vishnu's prediction about the status of woman, and it is in favour of patriarchy. Even religions marginalize women Namjoshi attacks on caste and gender hegemony prevalent in the society.

"The Anthropoi" presents women as human beings like men, but they are burdened with child-bearing, child-caring and all other laborious tasks. Women are victimized in patriarchal society. It is a grim reality. The author strongly attacks patriarchy. She presents men as "handsome athletes and noble warriors and they hunted and drank and were exceedingly clever" Every sentence in this story shows the author's bitter satire on the patriarchal domination of men over women who are referred to as "a species that was very like man, but quite evidently inferior". She presents the story of their conquest as the men "trained them into slavery, transferring to them the burden of childbearing and child rearing, and the more troublesome tasks, which had no prestige or required no intellect". The author attacks the women who display the most commendable loyalty to men.

"Blood" presents the stereotypical attitude of patriarchy that treats female as a lifeless and insignificant entity. There is the Snow Maiden who

waits for the Prince. The maiden is snow white, pure and virginal, but there is no blood in her body. The Prince comes, marries her and abandons her. The Fairy tale has a happy ending in which the prince marries the snow white and gives her a heavenly life. But Suniti Namjoshi is closer to life in her interpretation of real life.

“The Hare and the Turtle” is the re-telling of the famous Aesop's Fable, *The Hare and the Tortoise*. Suniti attacks the gender hierarchy in it. The turtle, in this story is male and his cousin and the hare are females. The turtle challenges the hare to race with him. The hare accepts the challenge but she is placed at a fifty yard distance and he is placed a foot from the finishing line. Naturally the turtle wins the race and taunts the hare and reminds her of her female status. The turtle says that she is born as a female and inferior to him. His cousin is also inferior to him. Due to this gender hierarchy, females are always defeated and treated unjustly. They are treated as incompetent. Namjoshi attacks the humiliation of women. The earlier moral is that the slow and steady turtle wins the race. But suniti gives gender identity to these animals to dig out gender discrimination prevalent in the society.

“The Tale of Two Brothers” reveals the inferior status of women in a male-dominated society. Women are used as servants for doing the household duties and child caring. They are presented as the imprisoned birds in a patriarchal society and are pushed away from the centre. It is assumed that there was a man who performed all the household duties of a woman as a woman. On the other hand, his brother, Jack Clever fellow, hired a wife and got rid of that domestic drudgery.

The fable *Green Slave Women* depicts how men transformed women and trained them for slavery. Namjoshi attacks on the victimization of women in patriarchy. She argues that woman has always been exploited by men through the thousands of years. There has been no any radical change in the social, political or cultural status of women. The woman in this story, is fed up with male-domination and exploitation. There she sleeps for one thousand years in the hope that there would be changes. When she wakes up and yawns, doctors

rush towards her and ask about her age, status either married or unmarried and it reflects the patriarchal gender-bias. In patriarchy the institution of marriage has great significance. While going to sleep the woman had expected that there would be no gender-bias or gender based class-discrimination. And so after waking up she asks the doctor calmly, "Haven't things changed?" There are various changes in that thousand years, but there is no any change in the matter of class discrimination and gender norms. The status of woman as domesticated human animal has not been changed. In doctor's explanation 'man' is more important. He is at the centre and woman is at the margin. They tell the woman about the man's progress in space but unfortunately there is no 'space' for women at all. The doctors say that every unmarried man has "a house of his own and a reasonable income". This reveals that women are homeless and rootless. Man is independent but women have no income and so they are dependent and hence unimportant. Through this story Suniti makes an appeal to women to come out of the yoke of patriarchy, she asks them to become self-reliant and not to be parasites. The title symbolizes the tentativeness of women's existence. Nobody knows when they would really be free beings.

Namjoshi's '*A Room of His Own*' is a revision of favourite tale of *Bluebeard and His wife*. Suniti protests against the extreme slavish domestication of women through the institution of marriage. The British novelist Virginia Woolf in her *A Room of One's Own* describes the total discrimination between man and woman in a male centred society. Patriarchy forces a woman to conceal her spirit, genius and aspiration. She is given a secondary status before and after her marriage. Woolf opines that marriage curbs woman's all types of desires and aspirations. And the same issue is mentioned by Namjoshi in her revised form of fable. Bluebeard is the husband and when his wife retorts to his question 'I think you're entitled to a room of your own'. Then in an angry mood Bluebeard kills his wife on the spot. Suniti points out that if a woman shows indifference to her husband, then no meaningful relationship is possible. From feminist point of view, a little provocation is enough for male to harm their

wives. Bluebeard killed his wife and this wife-beating has become a regular phenomenon of the institution of marriage. Even after wife's murder for a trivial reason, Bluebeard is not punished for the brutal murder. Namjoshi criticizes the discriminatory legal system that always serves the interests of males in patriarchy. Suniti Namjoshi attacks the docile woman who is ready to accept her subordinate position as a slave to a man.

*The Mouse and the Lion* is retelling of Aesop's fable. In this fable, a mouse has done a favour to the lion and did not kill him, but the lion denies that favour. '*Jack Three's Luck*' is a revision of the fairy tale '*Jack and the Beanstalk*'. The powerful Giantess instead of devouring children wants to marry the boys. The roles of the boys are expected to reverse and perform the domestic household duties generally done by women. The Giantess tells them that "she would keep them as husbands, but they must cook and clean and make themselves useful and generally be pleasant". Docility is not a solely feminine quality. The boys are expected to take on the role of a slave to serve the master. The accepted roles of the male - master and female - slave are thus challenged and altered.

The fables '*The Loathly Lady*', '*Whore Bitch, Slut, Sow*', '*The Milk White Mare*', '*The Gods*', '*Sheherezade*', and '*Her Mother's Daughter*' depict women's victimization. Women serve males in satisfying their all physical and practical needs. In patriarchal autonomy, they become commodities and supposed to satisfy the sexual gratification of men. Women are vulnerable to inequality and exploitation as they are too timid and submissive. They give greater importance to compromise rather than confrontation, and adapt themselves according to men's whims and desires. They silently obey their orders and follow them. Suniti in her '*The Loathly Lady*' highlights the passive role assigned to women in a patriarchal society. Queen Guinevere calls for women volunteers to find the right answers to a woman's question, '*What women most want*'. A few women came forward, but '*their husbands object, their fathers object, their children are too young, and besides it's most improper*'. The Knight Arthur has to make a suitable choice and after a year he returns

with a beautiful damsel and that is the proper answer to the woman's question.

In *The Disinterested Lover*, the shepherd Narcissus is a mythological figure. He is not interested in his beautiful beloved's physical existence, but in her image. It is a bitter commentary on the Narcissistic attitude of males. The author suggests that patriarchy doesn't care for woman's inner beauty. It is interested only in its well being. For patriarchy, a woman is always the 'other'. The self-centredness of males is ridiculed in this story. The shepherd Narcissus does not respond to the woman's love. He is more interested in an image of an ideal and beautiful woman. Namjoshi criticizes patriarchy for imposing its desires and expectations upon women because for patriarchy only the woman is the object who fulfils its expectations. This is a hidden attempt to avoid their accountability towards females. The greater value is placed on external beauty in females rather than on their real worth.

*The Sow* expresses an excessive love of a greedy farmer with the animal of the opposite sex, that is, a female pig whose weight is 6,000 pounds. The farmer loved her. Finally the farmer killed her and ate her himself. Namjoshi pinpoints that the farmer's act of slaughtering the healthy female pig is symbolic of the consumptive desire of male in patriarchy that enables them to love, possess and consummate the female body through the excessive sexual exploitation.

In '*Bird Woman*', '*Broadcast Live*', '*Dragon Slayers*', '*Liberation*', '*The Dower*', '*Philomel*' and '*Svayamvara*', there is long for liberation and freedom from patriarchy. In '*Bird Woman*', there was a child who had wings. The neighbours were horrified and asked her parents to cut her wings. However, after their requests often and now, they rejected their request, and retorted 'We are teaching her to fly'. The parents long for her emancipation. The fable throws light on the social prejudice towards women. As girls grow into young women the arbitrary code of conduct is invoked by people to restrict and confine women within patriarchal discourse. Namjoshi affirms that only the

'enlightened' parents would teach their daughters to fly.

The fable *The Badge Wearing Dyke and Her Two Maiden Aunts* probes into the problem of lesbianism. There is the justification and glorification of woman's love for woman. It is suggested that this kind of love is as old as creation itself. The story deals with the life-style of two elderly poor, but respectable spinster mice who had lived together for twenty five years. On a Friday, the university-educated niece visits them. She wore many badges bearing extraordinary legends such as 'Gay Liberation is Our Liberation' and 'Lesbian Ignite'. She protests against the discrimination and preaches on lesbianism. She is the supporter of Gay Liberation. The author's message is that woman's love for woman is both natural and very ancient. There is a strong protest against the conventional gender roles imposed by the heterosexist society. This feminist thought explains that the heteronormative society has always reduced women to a lower social, intellectual and cultural sphere of life.

#### CONCLUSION

The contemporary women writers have challenged the patriarchal assumptions of the female and suggested alternative modes of perception and expression to be prevailing patriarchal ideology. In her fables, Suniti Namjoshi has aimed to highlight women's experience which has been omitted from patriarchy's account and the fresh deployment to women's images. She has questioned patriarchal myths by demonstrating ironically how they obliterate or falsely present female experience and has attempted to offer an alternative paradigm of discourse.

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