

Suniti Namjoshi's Feminst Fables: A Feministic Rendering

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Abstract: The Indian women novelists writing in English such as Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sehgal, Shashi Deshpande deal with socio-political themes, SunitiNamjoshi concentrates on power politics, gender discrimination, sexual politics and quest for identity. Sherry Simon observes, "what SunitiNamjoshi succeeds in doing in the almost 100 short pieces which make up collection of Feminist Fables is to subvert the fable form, making her pieces less the expression of pre-conceived dogma than the occasion for provocation and questioning".

Throughout history inequality of women has been the central theme of female writers in a male-dominated culture. Simone de Beauvoir through her work 'The Second Sex' believes that this secondary position imposed on women is by strong environmental forces of social traditions and education which have been under the control of man. Man considers himself 'Subject' and "absolute" and women is the "Other" (Beauvoir 29). SunitiNamjoshi wishes to draw attention to the raw deal that women are given and in a very subtle manner, she brings out the imbalance in the society with regard to human status in 'Feminist Fables'. Feminist Fables is a collection of 99 fables dealing with women's problems. All the fables are in the tradition of new rendering of old tales signifying that even simple literature can reflect social problems. They are in the didactic form dealing with social issues of morality. Due to its universal appeal literature can convey a message to all readers and not to the students of literature alone. A fable as we all know is a story that teaches a lesson.

SunitiNamjoshi born in India and who also has taught at Universities in India, now settled in Devon has numerous Poems, Fables, Articles, Literary Women's Studies journals in India to her credit. She dedicated her collection of feminist fables to her mother, who, she says will perhaps

be unhappy with what she has written, till she realizes that Suniti is giving voice to those very values which her mother wished to propagate. It is very unusual re-reading of stories from Panchtantra, fables from Aesop and fairy tales from Anderson. Namjoshi explodes all the myths associated with women and their behavior and voices the ideals that every sensible and educated person would second. As the back cover of the book suggests, "...collection of ingenious tales has become a minor feminist classic. In their timeless sweep through past, present and even future worlds, they rework ancient myths, legends and fairy tales from east to west. From Sheherazade to Rapunzel, Medusa to Miss Muffet, they invent a mythology that simultaneously entertains and provokes".

The blind eye that Patriarchy turns to human status of women is very much evident from the fable from the 'Panchtantra'. The fable is about a Brahmin who again and again requests his deity to bless him with a son. But for reasons unknown is granted a daughter. He raises his daughter as one would bring up a son because she is very intelligent but wish for son still remains with him. In his next life he is reincarnated as a woman and bears eight sons and the ancient tale would have ended here. But in Namjoshi's writing, on being asked, she wishes for human status for herself. This story sums up what the whole feminist movement is all about. When the brahmin who is now a woman asks God to give her human status but God replies, "Ah, that is much harder". Brahmins who are symbol of the most learned and wisest persons do not have any solution to the problem of unequal status that even Gods find difficult to eliminate.

The constant pressure applied on women to remain in the background and the failure of an enterprising woman is likely to meet whenever she aspires to equality with men is reflected in 'The Little Prince' in which the Queen wished her daughter to be the next ruler of the land. She educated her and schooled the princess to be efficient in the ways of royalty. Even after the test of ability to determine who would be the next ruler of the land, it was the prince who was supported and not the princess who was successful in proving her worth.

In 'The Lesson' she attacks patriarchy as it keeps women subservient to male domination through marriage. 'The Anthropoi' presents women as human beings like men but they are burdened with child bearing, child caring and other laborious tasks. She presents men as

“handsome athletes and noble warriors and they hunted and drank and were exceedingly clever” (p. 9). Namjoshi’s sactrical remarks on patriarchy reflected as “a species that was very like man, quite evidently inferior” (p.9). she presents the story of their conquest as men “trained other into slavery transferring to them the burden of child bearing and child rearing, and the more troublesome task, which had no prestige or required no intellect.

Namjoshi’s ‘A Room of His Own’ is a revision of favourite tale of Bluebeard and his wife. She protests against the extreme slavishdomestication of women through institution of marriage. Virginia Woolf in her ‘A Room of Ones Own’ describes the total discrimination between man and woman in a male dominated society. Woolf is of the opinion that marriage curbs women’s desires and aspirations and the same is mentioned by Namjoshi in her revised form of fable. Bluebeard is the husband and when his wife retorts to his question ‘I think y’re entitled to a room of your own’ (p.64) in an angry mood, Bluebread kills his wife on the spot. Suniti points out that if a woman shows indifferent attitude to her husband, then no meaningful relationship is possible. From feminist point of view a little provocation is enough to harm their wives. Bluebeard killed his wife and this wife beating is a regular phenomenon of the institution of marriage. Even after wife’s murder for trivial reason Bluebeard is not punished.

Although earlier writers of fairy tales tried to establish the fact that a domesticated, obedient, delicate and submissive woman will be successful in attaining utmost domestic bliss and happiness, Namjoshi’s tales do not end happily ever after. In ‘And Then What Happened?’ Cinderella has differences with the Prince. The marriage ends is an argument and the writer questions “And Then What Happened”? is loaded with implications. It is quite obvious how a woman who walks out of her marriage is looked upon by the world.

We have been reading since over childhood the story of ‘ The Hare and The Turtle’ with the message that slow and steady wins the race. But in Namjoshi’s tale Hare symbolizes woman and turtle is the symbol of male psyche. Man just wants his rules to be followed and make woman accept her defeat always quietly. “ You really should learn to be a good loser” and the tale does not end here. The turtle had a cousin who, when he raced with hares, always drew the finishing line at the edge of the ocean.

The fables are set in a time where monarchy is the ultimate form of government. The crown is being passed from one person to another by bloodline and is given to first born male of the royal family, women have never been kings. They are always the queen and never get to rule over the kingdom and has no say in it. She calls to our immediate attention to the desire for a male child that runs through the country and through the tales. The stories are putting women at a disadvantage stage using negative adjectives like witch, wicked, unlucky.

The last fable I have chosen is 'The Christening'. In the traditional fable the wicked witch curses the girl child to die but the good witch mitigates the curse by saying that she will sleep till a prince comes and awakens her but here the sleeping beauty is cursed to be 'faceless' by the wicked witch and the good witch can only say that her 'faceless meaning without an individual identity'. Woman is doomed to a status where she is unable to establish an identity of her own. It is taken for granted that she will be satisfied with domestic existence and always play second fiddle to man.

Endnotes

1. Simon Sherry, "Review of Feminist Fables" The Literary Criterion 20.1.1985
2. Simon de Beauvoir, The Second Sex (Harmandsworth: Penguin, 1983. Print)
3. Suniti Namjoshi, Feminist Fables (London: Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1981, Print)
All subsequent references to this novel are from this edition of the novel and the page numbers are given in brackets.
4. Virginia Wolf, A Room of One's Own, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1929. Print)
5. Dipali M Kadam. Suniti Namjoshi's Fiction- A Thematic Study(Ph.D. Thesis, Shiva ji University. Unpublished)