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Depiction of homosexuality in Suniti Namjoshi's writings

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Abstract

Suniti Namjoshi not just gave a voice to the lesbian desires in her writings by positing female protagonist at the center point of the narrative she also chooses to challenge the existing male centric universe by re-writin existing mythology, fables and texts. Among Namjoshi's central concerns are the actual processes of 'othering' and marginalisation; which means how racist, patriarchal and homophobic society maintain and perpetuate homophobic discourses through direct and indirect ways. In her works we witness a subversion of traditional fables by rewriting ancient fairy tales and fables in her new conceived alternative lesbian universe. one of the crucial elements of Namjoshi's Lesbian Feminism is the notion of non-hegemonic women relations. Hegemony is perceived as a disruption in the making of a community which cut across different trajectories which includes- feminism, lesbianism and colonialism, racism etc. Anthropomorphism is seen as a vital tool in her writings to- subvert the masculine and heterosexual constructs and see the same narratives through a female gaze, secondly, to identify a thread that amalgamates different living being into the universe where each being has a soul, and every being is humanized, thirdly, she also uses these animal fables to point out the fallacies and pitfalls of reading Hindu scriptures uncritically.

Keywords: Homosexuality, Lesbianism, Same- Sex polities, Suniti Namjoshi

Introduction

Heteronormativity is often seen as the natural order of sexual order in Indian society so much so that any other form of sexual expression is seen as a transgression from the norm. This socially constructed norm of sexual orientation has posed multiple problems in defining the social outlook of indian society- firstly, gender is socially constructed in a way that people are trained to conform their sexuallity within the confines of the acceptable sexual orientations. Secondly, it poses problem for the people who have sexual orientations generally defined as LGBTQ and many more. Many of these classes either are not able to make their orientations public due to the fear of social ostracization or they have to face heavy price for coming out as LGBTQ. Thirdly, there is a dearth of works in literature, cinema and other art forms which reflect the causes of homosexual community with enough sensitivity without alienating them from the society at large. Suniti Namjoshi becomes an important voice in that sense, for expressing the voice of these groups who were hitherto underrepresented in the traditional archives and annals of history and literature. We will try to understand the notions of homosexuality as reflected in the writings of Suniti Namjoshi.

The important works of Namjoshi that is under the consideration of the present article includes- *Sycorax: New Fables and Poems*, *The Jackass and the Lady*, *Because of India: Selected Poems and Fables etc.* Suniti Namjoshi not just gave a voice to the lesbian desires in her writings by positing female protagonist at the center point of the narrative she also chooses to challenge the existing mlle centric universe by re-writin existing mythology, fables and texts. For example, in her work *Sycorax: New Fables and Poems* she rewrote the portions of *Tempest* by William Shakespeare. There was what we call the subversion of traditional symbols in the fables by giving them a new orientation in the light of the female characters. Namjoshi's other works like *Because of India: Selected Poems and Fables* (1989) and *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth* (2000) are somewhat autobiographical in nature which show the dilemma of a lesbian poet in a world of heterosexuality. This lesbian identity is further enhanced in her works like the *Conversations of Cow* (1985) and *The Mothers of Maya Diip* (1991) etc.

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One of the remarkable quality of the writings of Namjoshi is that it understands identity as something fluid, constantly changing, which has so many contradictory versions that many a times the many selves within the self of a person comes into conflict with each other. She recreated this idea by taking the myth of Protea in the Greek mythology where it actually represents an old man who could change many forms, and turning it into a female character making it a study of psyche of female desires and identities. Similarly, in *Conversations of Cow* she tries to name her many selves based on the Hindu Shastric texts. This serves as an acknowledgement of multiplicity of identities.

Next she tries to understand the history of origins of the homophobic tendencies in the Indian society. In her work *The Jackass and the Lady*, she tried to understand the sexual and textual boundaries established by the male centric society which puts restrictions in the pursuit of alternate sexualities, established by men to maintain their status quo through patriarchal notions. Also in her work *Because of India* she commented on the role of law, religion and social discourses due to which 'coming out' is hardly possible for closeted women.

Namjoshi through her reworking of *Tempest* extended the scope of homosexual writings to include three variables- colonialism, feminism and lesbianism. In her work *Snapshots of Caliban* she extended the argument of Edward Said of contrapuntal reading to include contrapuntal re-writing as well. She employed *Tempest* in two of her works- one in *Sycorax: New Fables and Poems* and other in *Snapshots of Caliban*. Her reading of *Tempest* goes beyond the traditional feminist understanding of the text of identifying the patriarchal norms reflected in *Tempest* through the character of Miranda. Namjoshi re-imagines Caliban as a lesbian woman who is colonized by white men who not only enslaved her but also the land she considered hers. Thus Namjoshi's writing was a curious reimagining of lesbianism and colonialism. Thus the whole narrative focused on Caligula regaining her control over the island, and thus the relation between Caligula and Miranda also underwent a change in Namjoshi's rendering of the text. And like most of her writings even here the natural universe was identified as women centric with animal characters given feminine features or simply identified as women.

Namjoshi's writings are crucial because of her multiple identities reflected in her career and her writings. She was a woman, a lesbian, woman of color from the third world living in the occident world. What we see through her works is that she challenged the stigma associated with Lesbian women who are seen as unreal women but rather a disrupter of the heteronormative gender binary established in a patriarchal order. Among Namjoshi's central concerns are the actual processes of 'othering' and marginalisation; which means how racist, patriarchal and homophobic society maintain and perpetuate homophobic discourses through direct and indirect ways.

In her works we witness a subversion of traditional fables by rewriting ancient fairy tales and fables in her new conceived alternative lesbian universe. Namjoshi's reframing of lesbianism in this context provokes a significant debate about the status of lesbian identity in India—is it a natural life restricted in the poems, is it a political life aspired, is it a life in the state of immediacy, or is it a politically-mediated life? In the review of Namjoshi's writings Ruth Vanita points out- "...animal tropes suggest crossings of the

boundaries of race, gender, culture, nationality, and sexuality. Her beasts, with their capacity to transform themselves and to live at ease in more than one skin, are less containable than human beings already positioned in categories of nationality and gender"

Namjoshi's lesbian ethos is closely linked to the lesbian feminist and gay rights movements that emerged in the late 60's and 70's where one of the major ideas developed was the formation of an "all female" lesbian society. Through her novels as well as reworking of Aesop Fables, Greek Mythology and Panchatantra she expressed the same thread of thoughts which finds its origins in the 20th century lesbian feminist movements. Namjoshi's lesbian-feminist politics suggest that it has increasingly become difficult to separate the spaces of public, the private, the artistic and the theoretical in her writing. She deliberately chooses not to be a 'poet of impersonality', as Diane McGifford points out- *For Namjoshi's art, this policy- the rejection of impersonality and the integration of her various selves into her work- is a sound one since it has given birth to a genuine poetic voice.*

Through constant positing of animals as central characters Namjoshi tries to underline that in a male centric world there are barely any recognition of women as human. Thus she recognizes the subversive potential of women's relation with other women. For example, in her story "The Thousand and one Nights" she changes the traditional story of consummation of marriage between the woman and the Caliph, and ends the story by woman refusing to stay with the Caliph and instead going to her sister. Even though she recognizes the kind of relation brewing between women, she is critical of the universal sisterhood of women expressed in particularly the American feminist movement, because it ignores the racial and colonial divisions that separates the unity and companionship of white women vis a vis women of color. Thus in her *The Blue Donkey Fables* she posits the relation between the donkeys (who are recognized as female in the narrative) not on the basis of their lesbian relation but rather on the basis of their blueness or the sameness of their color. Thus one of the crucial elements of Namjoshi's Lesbian Feminism is the notion of non-hegemonic women relations. Hegemony is perceived as a disruption in the making of a community which cut across different trajectories which includes- feminism, lesbianism and colonialism, racism etc. Anthropomorphism is seen as a vital tool in her writings to- subvert the masculine and heterosexual constructs and see the same narratives through a female gaze, secondly, to identify a thread that amalgamates different living being into the universe where each being has a soul, and every being is humanized, thirdly, she also uses these animal fables to point out the fallacies and pitfalls of reading Hindu scriptures uncritically. She also subverts how lesbian feminist views will be perceived in the occident world with a pinch of colonialism. So she changes the traditional equation of the relation between Prospero and Caliban in her re-writing of *Tempest*, as she not only makes Caliban a lesbian woman but also a literate, which challenges the colonial assumption of the meeting of the oriental and occident as a clash of dialectical civilization-between lettered and unlettered beings. For her, it is just not important to subvert the discourse but also the tools through one community establish hegemony over others. She questioned how in the majority of English literature not only were the nouns and pronouns were

gendered in a male centric way, but the very imagery of these literature was male centric. Thus Suniti Namjoshi is important literary figure for subversion of this very imagery that dominates English literature.

What we see through our analysis is that not only Suniti Namjoshi provided a space for discourse for the homosexuals and other repressed sexualities; she also through her poems subverted the commonly appropriated and understood literary symbols to enable us to see them in a new light and with a new sensitivity. She identified the universe as essentially male dominated where for all other beings, which not only constituted women, transgender etc but also animals as well, have to carve niche for themselves. She pioneered the creation of an alternate textual universe cohabited with alternate sexualities. This tendency can see its roots from the anti-sodomy laws prevalent since the colonial times and the strong social stigma attached with homosexual desires.

Finally she became a voice for the groups who wished to “come out” with their same sex love, as this coming out is very vital in her poetic expression and the themes she worked on in her books. Thus she comes across as one of the most important neo-textual voices on homosexuality and thus needs to be celebrated for her immense sensitivity of writing and braveness and audacity to choose a voice for the classes who are still waiting for an adequate voice to echo their voice.

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