

# THE HINDU

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## Feminism, one of her voices

"Don't be silly, darling. Only little boys grow up to be Emperors. As for little girls, they marry emperors; and they learn to hold their tongue, particularly on the subject of the Emperor's clothes."

"The Lesson"

"She was indeed blessed with great ability. But everyone in the village was critical of her." "To be so damned good," they said, "is not womanly."

"The Gods"

There was once a man who thought he could do anything, even be a woman. So he acquired a baby, changed its diapers and fed the damn thing three times a night. He did all the housework, was deferential to men, and got worn out. But he had a brother, Jack Cleverfellow, who hired a wife, and got it all done.

"The Tale of Two Brothers",

Feminist Fables

Suniti Namjoshi is best known as the author of Feminist Fables. First published in 1981, the book, which has been lauded as "a minor feminist classic", is a superb retelling of myths and legends. The Arabian Nights, English nursery rhymes, tales from Indian epics, fairy tales and the Greek myths are all grist to the gifted writer to comment on the female condition.

Having done her schooling at Rishi Valley, which taught her to examine everything she saw with fresh eyes, Suniti went on to become a lecturer at the University of Poona. She passed the IAS in 1964. Soon after she took study leave to do her Masters in Public Administration from the University of Missouri, Columbia, U.S.. She resigned from service and obtained her Ph.D on poet Ezra Pound from McGill University, Canada. In 1978 she went to England where the feminist and gay liberation movement influenced her greatly. From 1987, Namjoshi devoted herself to writing full time. A brilliant body of work, marked by sparkling wit,



word play and inventive power, emerged: Seven volumes of verse among them "Cyclone In Pakistan", "The Jackass And The Lady", "The Authentic Lie", and "From The Bedside Book Of Nightmares"; "Verses and Fables: St. Suniti And The Dragon", "Feminist Fables", "The Blue Donkey Fables" and "Because Of India". Fiction: Aditi And The One-Eyed Monkey (for children), The Conversation of Cow and The Mothers Of Maya Diip. Suniti has collaborated with Gillian Hanscombe on a collection of poetry "Flesh And Paper" and on a play "Kaliyug - Circles Of Paradise". Suniti lives and works in Devon, U.K..

Building Babel, her most recent book is about building cultures. Here, she once again plays brilliantly with characters from stories and myths. It is up on the Internet to enable maximum writer-reader interaction. Suniti is above all a poet. For her, poetry is the framework of reference. She believes "... the techniques and considerations that apply to poetry, if properly understood, can then be given a much wider application". The writer regards change and renewal as essential to her creativity.

Namjoshi was recently in Chennai where she participated at the release of her book for children, Aditi and the One-Eyed Monkey.

Earlier, Namjoshi conducted a three day residential workshop, "The Eye of Childhood: Sound, Sense, Imagery and Myth", at Madurai, cosponsored by Tulika, publishers on writing for children.

At the office of the publishers,

Suniti Namjoshi answers questions put to her by KAUSALYA SANTHANAM on her various forms of writing, on literary devices and of course on feminism. If one expects an intense self-appraisal and an elaborate description of the process of artistic creation by the writer, it is absent. Suniti is very low key and self-effacing. Her work speaks for itself.

YOU have produced such a diverse body of work and speak in so many different voices - poet, feminist, fabulist, children's writer and playwright. How do you adapt to the demands of each sphere of writing and what qualities do you bring to bear on each one of them?

The work has been done over an enormous period of time. I am quite old now. I will be 60 next year. It is different at different phases. My work consists of poetry, verse and fable. Perhaps I am not as diverse as you give me credit for.

Why is fable such a favourite form with you?

One does not know why a writer's mind works in a certain way. It just does. The reason may be that I have grown up in India. Here, everytime someone asks a question, the answer is in the form of a story. We are a nation of story tellers.

If one wants to answer questions, the fable is a good form, for it is didactic and helps in dealing with issues such as racism, gender stereotyping and attitudes towards exploitation of the planet.

Are you actively involved in feminist causes? Do you feel that writers

should, like Arundhati Roy, actively engage in causes they believe in and battle for them? The problems women face differ in the West and in India. What aspects do you deal with in relation to the West and to India?

I think for writers to turn activists requires a great deal of courage.

As for being a feminist, the problem is that feminism has been turned into a bad word and become restrictive in meaning. The imbalance of power exists whether in the form of race, gender or poverty.

What a text means depends not just on what you write but how it is read as well.

When you think of "The Mouse and the Lion" in *Feminist Fables*, it can be interpreted in many ways. As a woman protesting to a man saying, "I'm nice to you, isn't it enough?" It also be seen as the White man replying to the Black, the upper classes to the lower. Finally it is not a matter of saying, "Women are great, men are awful."

(She quotes the first two lines from Kate Millett's "Sexual Politics").

"To a lady who congratulated herself on giving her maid her discarded dresses, Genet quietly replied, "How nice, and does she give you hers?"

This shows how women treat each other.

The interpretation of the fables in the West and here can be different too. In the *Blue Donkey Fables*, the donkey is discriminated against because its colour is blue. This was seen as a protest against racism in the West, while in India it was seen as a feminist protest. Here too a kind of racism exists in the form of the caste system and there are various kinds of snobbery. I meant it as someone bullying another.

You seem to be fascinated by the figure of the dragon. As a symbol, how much does it mean to you and what dictates the fact that you are the heroine of your fables - St.Suniti?

I do not know why the dragon. Maybe I read too many tales about dragons when I was young. As for the use of my name, there are many reasons. One is private. Many of our devotional songs like those of Saint Tukaram and Sri Tyagaraja end with the signature of the saint.

The reasons also have to do with text and theme. If you are going to satirise someone, you can do it thoroughly using your own name for then you avoid pointing a finger at another. There is also Suniti as the digest within the text. It helps to place the writer in a political context, in an internal context and in self-examination. By using it, I did not have to go into explanation that I am an Indian and spell out my Indian attitude.

What are the requirements of a good children's writer? Why is there so much blood and gore in *Aditi ...*? Are they going to be sequels? What were the ideas thrown up at the workshop?

We worked very hard at the workshop Tulika conducted and I find it heartwarming they care so much for producing good books for children.

At the workshop in which illustrators, film makers and others participated, we explored ways in which we could give children the best. We dealt with questions of writing and rewriting myth. In the last session we put our minds to the problem of illustrating text. The roles were reversed with artists giving us paintings for which we provided the texts. Then we examined in which of our efforts the pictures and words together made an integral whole.

I am not really a children's writer. I wrote Aditi .... a long time ago in the 1980s. I was sending books to children from England and I found they were about Christmas and the characters had Anglo-Saxon names. What about a book with "us" in it, asked the children. So the book was born for Aditi, my niece. I had not meant it for publication.

We discussed the question of violence at the workshop. On the whole, the view is you cannot cut out violence altogether. Then you have to cut out the epics too such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. And the fairy tales and the folk tales. Even while I was writing the book, I was aware of the question of violence. Aditi and her friends try to reason with the dragon but they are forced to fight. The ultimate solution is however a peaceful one. I could not write a book where children get battered and killed but do not fight.

Is the interest in Indian writers in English a passing phase in England or have they established themselves not only among the intelligentsia but also among ordinary readers? How well do the books sell?

Arundhati Roy and Vikram Seth are well known and of course Salman Rushdie. Some Indian writers are doing such good work they just cannot be ignored.

Ordinary people in England do not read, they watch TV. When we were children, we had only books for entertainment and those of us who like to read feel sad - but these changes are happening.

The sales of my books used to be good. Feminist Fables always sells. Now of course smaller publishers have gone under. Big publishers want blockbusters.

It all depends on the shelf life of the book. Publishers find it better perhaps to keep 50 copies of a bestseller and sell it like bread.

Maybe if books are sold through Internet, sales will pick up. But this not my area of expertise.

Was your play "Kaliyug" staged?

Yes, it was performed by Mallika Sarabhai  
in England.

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Monkeying around

FIRST published by Sheba Feminist Publishers, London in 1986 and then by Beacon Press, Boston, Aditi And The One-Eyed Monkey by Suniti Namjoshi has been brought out elegantly in a reprint by Tulika Publishers.

The story begins with a lovely description of the activities of the monkey on a summer afternoon.

"The one-eyed monkey had stopped leaping and loping and rambling through the countryside and had taken refuge in a shady neem tree. Everything was so hot and blazed so blindingly that the monkey fixed her gaze on the roots of a tree where a number of ants were busy working."

The monkey strikes up a conversation with the ants who are hoping to conquer the world. Why? "Because its there", of course. An ant who wishes to measure the earth becomes the monkey's friend. They set off to explore the world with an elephant joining them on their adventure. The monkey has a dream that night which decides how the story will shape. An old woman explains the dream and this leads the three friends to the little princess Aditi. Her grandparents, the king and queen of the country, are forced to send her to a fierce dragon in order to placate him. The monkey, ant and elephant decide to accompany Aditi to the dragon's cave. They acquire a cloak of invisibility, a sword of courage and a ball of magic clay to help them face the dangers. And find the way with the help of a sage who is guarded by lionesses and cubs. Do they manage to travel unscathed to the dragon's lair? How do they tackle him?

The modern fairy tale has the answers. The writer puts across many messages without taking a moral tone. These come through very strongly in the practice run of arguing with the dragon in which each of the friends takes on the role of the angry beast. This is the best part of the book with many issues being raised - the question of honour, of keeping promises, about treating someone as a mere object of injustice, and how wrong it is to destroy and kill.

Again at the end when the adventures persuade the dragon to see reason, the arguments are meaningful and reveal the author's sensitivity. The need to have friends and to be loved and appreciated is conveyed as also the pitfalls of pride and egoistic thinking. There are messages here for adults too. In the episode of the monkeys who act superior, the question of racism is raised.

The beginning of the book with the chain elements of a mango grove, rose garden, the dragon in a faraway land and the help rendered by the balloon fish are in typical fairy tale format. The story gets progressively better reaching its high point when the dragon adorably announces his plan of writing the story of his life. There are flashes of humour everywhere. The elephant rolls her eyes to practise at getting angry as she is taken advantage of for being a good natured beast. But she soon stops doing it as "it isn't comfortable". The ant knows big words like "provocation" and thinks big. There is quite a bit of violence too with descriptions of fights and references to blood and gore. But the climax builds up in quite a thrilling fashion and the ending is good. Do the last few lines promise a sequel?

The illustrations by Bindia Thapar are done with a complete understanding of the text. The dragon's expressions are a treat. In a hurrah for feminists, the sage is depicted as a girl in a salwar kameez.

"Ideal for eight years and above", says the blurb on the jacket. Definitely for "and above" to understand the nuances woven into the intelligent text. There may be more twists and turns in the story than necessary and the description of the journey and food may be a trifle tedious at times. But the adventures of Aditi and her companions definitely enchant.

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