



Feminist Rewriting: Through The Lens of Suniti Namjoshi's *Feminist Fables*

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Abstract

This paper examines feminist rewriting in Suniti Namjoshi's *Feminist Fables* (1981), where traditional myths and fables are reimagined from a feminist perspective. Namjoshi challenges patriarchal narratives by giving voice to silenced women, exposing gender hierarchies, and critiquing caste, religion, and male dominance. Through satire and reworked stories like "The Hare and the Turtle," "Nymph," and "The Anthropoi," she highlights the constructed nature of gender inequality and urges women to reclaim agency and representation.

Keywords: Feminism, Feminist Rewriting, Gender Inequality, Satire

1. Introduction

Feminism is a movement that spreads across political, and cultural spheres to advocate for equal rights for women. It involves respecting diverse women's experiences, knowledge, and identities. It strives to empower all women and to make them realize their full rights. Feminism preaches for an even ground to be available for women in terms of opportunities and representation.

Feminism has numerous offshoots that cumulatively work together to alter the age-old underrepresented reality of women. Feminist rewriting is one such offshoot. It refers to the revising and modifying of existing written content, especially fables, myths, and legends from a feminist perspective. It aims to rewrite and reimagine the traditional narratives that often turned a blind eye to the contributions and experiences of women. Feminist rewriters strive to give female characters a voice that was previously denied. They bring the female characters from the margins of the previous text to the center. Additionally, they criticize the long-established phallocentric attitudes and male interpretations in literature.

When discussing feminist rewriting, a prominent name that comes to mind would be Suniti Namjoshi.

She is an important writer in the sphere of contemporary Indian literature in English. "She is a fabulist who is never preachy. A feminist who is never humorless. A poet who is never arcane. An intellectual who is never pedantic. Her work points to a deeply internalized radicalism, one that has as much depth as it has edge. Quirky, funny, intellectually agile, capable of making connections between the mundane and the metaphysical, adept at sniffing out the archetypal in the culturally particular, they point to a mind that is as engaged as it is engaging", writes Arundhati Subramaniam, in the *The Fabulous Feminist, A Suniti Namjoshi Reader*.

Namjoshi uses fables to examine and explore patriarchy and male dominance. She works to incorporate fantasy, mythologies, and science fiction into her work to challenge preconceived notions. Her notable works include *Feminist Fables* (1981), *The Fabulous Feminist* (2012), *Sycorax: New Fables and Poems* (2006), etc.

2. Feminist Fables

Feminist Fables is a collection of 89 rewritten fables following the Indian storytelling tradition. These fables deal with issues of women from a feminist viewpoint.

They uncover the social, sexual, and psychological exploitation of women since time immemorial. The fables primarily aim to illustrate that gender disparity is a societal construct rather than a biological one.

3. The Hare and the Turtle

The fable of "The Hare and the Turtle" which is a re-telling of the famous Aesop's Fable, "The Hare and the Tortoise", is a direct attack on gender hierarchy. The turtle in the story is a male and the hare is a female. The turtle challenges the hare to race with him and she accepts. However, the hare is placed fifty yards from the finishing line and the turtle is placed just a foot from it. Naturally, the turtle wins the race and mocks the hare for losing and reminds her of her female status. The turtle states that the hare is born a female and she must be inferior to him. Due to this gender hierarchy, women are constantly subjugated to defeat and unjust treatment. The earlier moral of the story is that slow and steady wins the race. But Namjoshi by rewriting and giving gender identities to these animals highlights the gender discrimination prevalent in the society.

4. From the Panchatantra

Through the fable of "From the Panchatantra" which is taken from a Sanskrit book of fables, she attempts to attack the caste and gender hegemony established in society. In the story a Brahmin wants Lord Vishnu to grant him a son. But out of absentmindedness Lord Vishnu grants him a daughter. However, in a very short period, Lord Vishnu reappears and the Brahmin asks for a son again. Thus, in his next incarnation, he takes birth as a woman and becomes a mother of eight boys. But this time when asked for a wish, the woman asks for 'human status' which Lord Vishnu says "is much harder" (Prabhamani, 2021) to grant. Hence, this fable is a clear portrayal of how religion too marginalizes women and in the worst cases denies them even the basic human status.

5. Nymph

The fable titled "Nymph" is an altered version of The Myth of Apollo and Daphne from Ovid's Metamorphosis. It is a perfect illustration of the consequences faced by women when they fail to abide by the rules of the patriarchal society.

The story showcases three cases and their consequences between Daphne and God. In the first case, Daphne rejects God's love proposal and runs away. As a result of which she is turned into a Laurel tree. In the second case, Daphne surrenders and accepts the proposal. She says, "Yes. Yes. Yes" (The Collector, *n.d.*). But this time, God gets bored of her. Thus, turning her into a Laurel tree again.

Finally, Daphne says, "Yes" and keeps quiet. Her timing is right. But even after that, she gets turned into a tree. Thus, through this fable, Suniti Namjoshi tries to emphasize the fact that no matter how much a woman endeavors to abide by the expectations of society, she will still be labeled as ungrateful and incapable.

6. The Anthropoi

The fable "The Anthropoi", is a direct blow to patriarchy. The story begins by portraying men as a race who propagated themselves. They are handsome, athletic, and noble warriors. However, when they came across a species that was very much like them, but quite evidently inferior i.e., women, they conquered them. Men trained them into slavery and burdened them with child-rearing. They domesticated women and used them for pleasure. Thus, it is evident that this story is a bitter satire on patriarchy and its dominance.

7. Conclusion

In a nutshell, *Feminist Fables* by Suniti Namjoshi not only retells the age-old myths and legends from a feminist perspective but also questions the obliteration and false representation of women's experiences throughout history. Through these fables, she urges women to take a stand for themselves and have a strong agency over their identities and representation.

References

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