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## Suniti Namjoshi's *Building Babel*: A Critical Reading

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**Abstract** : Boundaries have been shaken and new ways of imaginings have been opened up by the works of Suniti Namjoshi. An Indian feminist author, she writes from the spaces of multiple marginalities: a woman, an immigrant lesbian woman. In most of her works, her sexual identity is unequivocally inscribed as if she is set out to dislodge the customary notions of difference between homo and heterosexuality. Her work undertaken for discussion has changed the way we think about sexuality, gender and language. Her fabulist techniques constantly subvert and destabilize the essentialist notions and patriarchal assumptions. It also emphasizes the strategic open-endedness of her ideas. Drawing most of the existing theories of knowledge in her texts, Namjoshi's works are embedded in indigenous Indian myths as well as visibly connected globally, have posed considerable difficulty in locating her conceptually as well as within a broad intellectual field. Namjoshi's prose works including fables and novellas illuminate the radical departures or transgression of the accepted norms, written with the intention to re-form thought from its base and induce in its readers a whole range of contrapuntal possibilities. The present paper attempts a critical reading of her most celebrated creative work *Building Babel*.

**Keywords:** *Patriarchy, subversion, language, power*

The most interesting and innovative of works by Suniti Namjoshi is her novel *Building Babel*. Filled with characters from fairy tales and myth, this book is unique in that the author invites the readers to contribute their speculations to the Spinifex web site empowering readers to seek resolution by rewriting stories conferring to patterns from their

'horizons of expectations.' It indicates her political movement towards intertextuality and relinquishment of the writer's ego:

Every re-telling of a myth is a re-working of it. Every hearing or reading of a myth is a re-creation of it. It is only when we engage with a myth that it resonates, that it becomes charged and re-charged with meaning. (*Building Babel* XI)

"Come and Play" invites Suniti Namjoshi, "Building Babel is what people do" (xvi). A fabulous book that recasts characters from fairy tales and myth in twentieth-century persona, it is unique experimentation with myths, tales and stories. Revisiting them, Namjoshi exhibits their arbitrariness and offers a whole new world devoid of stereotypical presuppositions and assumptions. There is a constant interchange and perpetual inversion of meaning and mythical thoughts are transformed creating new stories and new words. Canonical texts are opened and their narrative is modified revealing fresh perspectives. The form of *Building Babel* defies any categorization. Namjoshi mixes genres like prose, poems, dialogues and interludes to create a remarkably distinct style which actively engages the reader in deciphering meaning.

The narrative is infused with numerous intertextual snippets and references. It opens with a Prologue/Epilogue suggesting the possibility that the end may well be found in the beginning. The characters range from Little Red, Sister Sol, Black Piglet, Cinders, Snow White, Rose Green and there are also Villain-Villainess: 'the creature who had nothing and therefore wanted everyone's anything' (5). They were Lady Shy and the three Gorgon Sisters —Mad Med, Verity and Charity. Like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* all characters are introduced as pilgrims. Chaucer's pilgrims were assigned the role of story-telling in order to pass time making the journey to pilgrimage less cumbersome. In Namjoshi's *Building Babel* project the female pilgrims are also entrusted with the task of narrating stories but for a different purpose. The task of female pilgrims is charged with meanings; it is the labour of constructing culture: stories of histories, mythologies, politics to inscribe female culture as a counter-discourse to the patriarchal stories and ideologies. It is as if Namjoshi performs Chaucer with a new female idiom.

Little Red is like Wife of Bath who had education as well as opportunity. She is fat and sweaty and her eyes are squint and she likes 'a bit of male flesh, a bit of red meat, a glass of beer' (1). She is 'less

raucous, more seemly and is an excellent businesswoman' (1) who lives on a ranch in America, sometimes in a station in Australia and occasionally visits India where she turns into a complete vegetarian. In short, Little Red is 'ripe and rich, and she is fleshy' (1). Sister Sol, on the other hand, is skeletal: 'The wind will sing in her bones, birds will nest in her rib cage-or so she imagines' (2). She is 'severe, savage, and suggestible, like the sand, the sun, and the wind' (2). She lives in the desert and tries very hard to proclaim that she is not the person from the past. In fact, her past is shrouded in mystery. Whether she is a pauper princess from Russia, Czechoslovakia or a high flying executive who lost all her money or an unrecognized genius who took to drink is hugely debatable. She is like Shakespeare's Olivia 'who lacks common sense.' She is utterly lonely but gets a company in the Black Piglet.

The Black Piglet is the most interesting creature. She is fond of telling stories which infests her head and wandering through the mazes of 'multiple histories' she finds herself changing. She sometimes changes into Prince or Princess as the story may be. She lived chiefly 'inside her head and quite enjoyed it' (3). Sometimes she invited other people in. The contents of 'her head looked like a junk shop, though she hoped to make a garden in it' (3). In a very playful manner, Namjoshi explains her credo which is to retell old stories in a new manner and also invites the reader to partake in this adventure. So many alternative ending and beginning are suggested that it spurs the readers into imagining their own versions and involving actively in the meaning-making process.

Another character is Rap Rap who is Rapunzel of the fairy tale. She is not just locked in her tower, but the dean of her department, chaired many local councils and was often on the board of several charities: 'She was able, ambitious, she achieved' (4). She nurtured a secret love for Cinders which she kept to herself and her 'sex life resemble the clothes she wears' (4). She values friendship over passion. Then there are Cinders who is the new age Cinderella whose leap from rags to riches made her loose ambition of any further advancement. After all, the 'prince had it all, and she had the prince' (4) but she was gracious in all her endeavours.

Of the minor characters, Snow White and Rose Green are college students having long hair, wearing short skirts or whatever is in fashion. Lewis Carol's famous Cheshire cat who had the ability to vanish when

he disliked things is also present in the narrative. But the cat of *Building Babel* is an 'arrant egoist' (4). But he liked Alice and felt he understood her. In her presence he experienced familiarity. Alice herself liked power and unlike Rap Rap 'she had no misgivings, no insistent self-image of a calm, benign, well-meaning being' (5). She liked control and order and was perfectly able to exercise it. A kind of celebrity persona she had been photographed, illustrated, annotated and copiously celebrated.

Finally, there is the Villains-Villainess. Lady Shy is Shakespeare's Shylock in a female persona. But she is very beautiful: 'Beauty bred in the bone, as a poet might say' (5). She's a moderately poor, moderately rich girl who always comes second — undeservedly. Moreover, she gets no attention, no sympathy and is strongly disliked by people maybe because of 'bad PR or bad karma' (6). The three Gorgon sisters of Greek myth — Medusa, Stheno and Euryale — are renamed as Mad Med, Verity and Charity. Sister Charity is 'sweet, sickly and apparently unkillable' (6) and her sister Verity is a primal force by 'power of her name' (6) and Mad Med is all 'blood and guts' (6). She is vicious like Caliban, a rowdy who has a large appetite and her head is a 'treasure house of broken jewellery' (6). Lastly, there is Crone Kronos with siblings, Death and Mme Mem. Crone Kronos is ubiquitous time which is present everywhere and siblings Death and Mme Mem inhabit the head, living outside as well as inside. Namjoshi invents Crono Kronos as gods are invented in the Hindu pantheon.

All the disciples of Crone Kronos are assigned with the task of building Babel together. Babel in its mythical connotation referred to the tower of Babel, intended to reach heaven, the project incurred the wrath of God who punished the builders by making their speech mutually unintelligible. Namjoshi's *Building Babel* is a feminist project and the tower is to be built by female characters of history. It is as if she is attempting to displace the discourse of patriarchy and all institutionalized assumptions.

In the world of Babel all accepted notions of time, power and discipline of love come under scrutiny. It begins by building a sisterhood with common ideas and motives. Snow White and Rose Green start with concocting lies and fabricating histories. Snow White envisions a sisterhood where she can let her golden tresses down, walking straight on the streets without putting any disguises and drinking at bars without

being ridiculed at. She dreams a sisterhood where women are not treated as the 'second sex' but as equals. But Rose Green wants a sisterhood that would make her the 'boss of the whole planet' (10). This idiom of power and monopoly renders sisterhood an impossible ideal. Sisterhood in such equations becomes a mere pact of mutual convenience and benefit, and polarization of forces against a common enemy. Sister Solitude seeks sisterhood with the moon, frog, and lily but receives no answer. Lady Shy seeks sisterhood with her own mirrored image. She cannot think beyond herself. But the visionary Black Piglet realizes that the only soul-mate one can find is one's death. Alice wants sisterhood with the cat but it is very 'different' and lives from moment to moment. Thus, each and every character analyses and interrogates received notions of identity and social relationships.

The sisters strive intensely to build a Babel which would unlock them from their stereotypical representation. Cinders (Cinderella), Rap Rap (Rapunzel), Little Red, all feel that they are trapped in images of past tales and stories. Their behaviour, attitude and fates are determined by the discourse of the past. Revolting against conventional depictions, Little Red complains that she doesn't like being red. They realize that they have all been typecast and not God but man is the culprit. It is a language that situates us in logged compartments of class, gender and ethnicities. Sensing inadequacy of the present language in portraying their true nature they feel a need for 'new words' (29). The sisterhood of women decides to bring in their 'own words' and build a 'great edifice out of malleable words' (29) cultivating a culture in which common language would grow, only then the sisterhood would mean something. Namjoshi very playfully puts it that the patriarchal discourse constraints and constricts the female voice and women writers feel an urge to coin new lexicons and phrases.

In building Babel the sisters achieve connectedness and even the loners could not help taking an interest. Rap Rap becomes the architect, Little Red would find a suitable site and Cinders is to deal with the permissions and licenses. The Black Piglet does the mountainous task of sorting out different things piled up as a part of the process of Babel building but various questions and challenges are posed to the builders. Many participants do not know which medium to contribute and end up making stories about Crone Kronos using different mediums.

In the world of female Babel builders, soon power struggle ensues and various sections of builders start lobbying for positions. Black Piglet and Solitude are challenged by the revolutionaries. Lady Shy brings to fore the cause of minorities and strongly opposes the elitism of the leaders. She insists that Babel was not built by the tuneful tale-telling of few but was built by 'multitude of women' (62). She battles for these nameless mobs whose tales are not recorded in history. And a class struggle between thinkers and activists' surfaces and numerous factions, divisions and differences emerge. There are many changes, mutations, extinctions, compete erasure and re-writings in the process of Babel Building. Namjoshi puts it, 'Some memes lived, mutated and grew. And some died' (68). In fact, the memes can also be read as a metaphor for books which are read and re-read by preceding generations, some adapted and some completely forgotten.

In the newly built world of sisters, questions of power and authority re-emerge. The senile leaders leave their position and a new dispensation under Queen Alice arrives. When she takes charge of Babel she starts by building a power base and her favoured subjects are allotted positions of power. But the patriarchal malpractice against which sisterhood was built corrupts it. Hierarchies were established and subordinates were dominated and exploited. Rose Greene and Snow White were Alice's new stooges. Rose Greene became the regulator of 'gene or meme' and it became taxable in Alice's reign. Queen Alice sets herself at the apex of power and even a myth of good queen Alice is set in circulation. These depict how people in power manipulate all positions of state governance and use it for their own advantage.

In Queen Alice's Monarchy, monopoly and class systems are resurrected. Another question that perplexes this world of women is the 'Question of Men' (109). Whether they should be allowed or not is hugely debated by the sisters. Males are finally let-in mainly as immigrants but they are accorded inferior status but through toil and dedication they could achieve the status of women. Here they are treated as objects of pleasure and women of Babel indulge in playful dalliance with them and it is not considered offence or crime. Inverting the gender equations Namjoshi realigns the paradigms in favour of women.

Nothing remains constant in the tower of Babel. Queen Alice grows old and dies. After the death of Alice, chaos is let loose and a civil war

breaks out. There were violence, bloodshed and homicide everywhere. And everything was done in the name of Babel, the glory of womanhood, the beauty of nationhood and the gorgeousness of peoplehood. The cat who narrates the story concludes on a note of resignation: 'Babel was no longer distinguishable from any other city. Perhaps it would disintegrate, perhaps not. Who cared?' (140)

Now the site of Babel building is shifted to Mad Med, short for Medusa. She had inherited memes from her sisters and each time she scrambled through it, a different story is made. Namjoshi very cleverly makes use of Medusa to convey that with changing time, perceptions, interpretations, as well as meanings, change. The Greek myth of Medusa since ages has fascinated psychoanalytic readings and thereafter feminist readings. Medusa was a gorgon female monster who had a boon that whosoever would look into her eyes will be turned into stone. She was killed by Perseus and he used her head as a weapon turning all men who looked at it into stone. Freud read the severing of Medusa's head as a symbol of the mother's castrated genitals seen from the terrorized point of view of the male spectator. Freud also posited the notion of the wrathful female mythical agency in Medusa's persona-posing fear and a threat to men. In Helene Cixous's numerous writings ancient myths find resurrection and interpreted as powerful feminist statements. In Cixous's revision, she is restored to her beautiful state and she is laughing. "The Laugh of Medusa" dreams of the multiplication of woman's voice that she hopes would subordinate the clamour of logocentrism.

Mad Med inherits blocks from her ancestors and now it's her turn to rearrange it. She scrambles through the bits and each time a new word emerges. Medusa decides finally that she will build Babel with pretty bits but the range of possibilities perplexes her, frustrated she decides she needs men, since 'men can be a load of fun' (146). She petitions to Crone Kronos to allow men or else she'll quit: 'If you want me to play the memes of Babel, I must have my Man' (147). The Black Piglet transforms into a prince and presents in front of her. After a short dalliance with him, she decides not to waste time in 'pretty toy boys' and built Babel better than her ancestors. She tries hard to create stories but her efforts are countered by early builders — Cinders, Rap Rap and Little Red. Enraged Medusa, at one point, decides to kill them all. She reacts to them differently by creating an alternative version of Babel

building where a man scorns the efforts of sisters and tells them, "Babel wasn't built by the gossip of women. You have to be able to take the measure of mud. The building of Babel requires brute strength" (153). All efforts upset her and she decides to do nothing. After all 'culture does not require cultivation' (153-54).

The next section of *Building Babel* is titled 'Patched Pieces' in which all the sisters engage in retrospective analysis of the process of building Babel and it is Mad Med who discovers that 'Babel cannot bloom in the desert air, and that a text doesn't exist until it's read' (180), and the gates of Babel are opened to all. In the final section, "The Readers text," Namjoshi directly addresses the readers and invites them to contribute to the building of Babel. Jean Paul Sartre said that in texts "there is an implicit recourse to institutions, customs, certain forms of oppression and conflict" which the writer and reader have in common and the reader is supposed to participate in that world to bring about complete liberation of meanings (85). In Namjoshi's text, however, the reader is invited to preserve or change meanings and she even allows the liberty to the readers to take alternative routes. Inhabiting the world of shifting contours of thoughts, feelings and meanings lend a whole new arena for writing as well as reading texts. *Building Babel* offers an imaginative journey conjuring landscapes in minds of readers as well as lending them space to write their understanding. By placing the last chapter on the World Wide Web, Namjoshi completely hands over her texts to readers open for multiple readings and re-writings. She extends the boundaries of 'writerly text' which is not just "playful, fluid, open, plural and opposed to the repressive rule of structure, grammar or logic" but also making the reader a scripter conjuring his/her versions not just in the mind but on the web pages (6). It brings to fore the diversity of interpretation which contributes to a fuller understanding of the text.

In all her works there is a subversion of not just of literary stereotypes but there is the subversion of social stereotypes as well. It does not preach but questions. In an interview with R.Krithika, Namjoshi comments: "The advantage of being a fabulist is that people read different things into my writing" (*The Hindu*). Chelva Kanaganayakam illumines the multifaceted talents of Namjoshi:

As author and myth-maker, Namjoshi's status in the tradition of Indian writing is unique, indebted to an Indian world view

that offers a rich mythological tradition, a variety of languages, a tone of voice that is both sardonic and solemn, and Western literary history with its fairy tales, fables, literary forms, and cultural values. The relation between the two is oppositional and dialogic, leading to a vision that permeates both the poetry and the prose. The conflation of India and the West has resulted in the many experiments of Indo-Anglian authors; for Namjoshi the consequence is a sensibility that re-examines the most seemingly benign constructs and transforms them in a manner that reveals hidden agendas and oppressive ideologies. (16)

Namjoshi's works engage the readers in a dialogic interaction making them see things differently. The imaginative quotient is extensive that compels the reader to become a writer conjuring facts, making connections to understand the alternative perspectives offered in her texts.

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