

Lesbianism as a Counter-Attack on Gender Exploitation: A Study of the Poetry of Suniti Namjoshi

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Abstract

Suniti Namjoshi strikes a different note when compared to other contemporary women poets, as she expresses her anger and resentment against male dominated society not only as a woman or a feminist writer, but also as a lesbian writer. She comes out openly and boldly as a lesbian and considers her defiance of social norms as a counter-attack on gender exploitation. Lesbian theorists argue that by rejecting stereotypes about women, these women can think radically and profoundly about the possibility of social change with reference to gender arrangements. Namjoshi, too, seems to consider that by rejecting heterosexuality a woman can decline secondary, derivative, or second-best to men positions. She was so much disappointed with the heterosexuality that she prefers to be united with animals rather than a man. It is lesbianism only that seems to give her some contentment.

The poems written by contemporary Indian women poets express their deep dissatisfaction with the given world and order of things, and their realization of the need for a transformational change leaves them perplexed and baffled. The same frustration and dissatisfaction can be seen in the poetry of Suniti Namjoshi. The discontentment, conflict and dilemmas which she faced as a woman in patriarchal set up made her not only a feminist, but also a lesbian. In an interview with Christine Croyden, Namjoshi expresses how her mother disapproves of her freedom, “*She has never been particularly happy about that I'm a writer, or, a lesbian feminist. She sees these as notoriety, tarnishing the good name of the family*” (Croyden 1).

While discussing her lived experience with her partner Gillian Hanscombe, Suniti Namjoshi in the “Introduction” of *Flesh and Paper* write, “. . . a lesbian woman does not inhabit the worlds that make sense to heterosexual men.” Both Namjoshi and Gillian Hanscombe do not consider “male heterosexual literary tradition” as “universal” and say:

For us, love is not the same; sex is not the same; parenting is not the same; work is not the same; safety is not the same; respect is not the same; trust is not the same. Only death might, perhaps, be the same. (Namjoshi, *Flesh* 3)

Heterosexuality is thus a system of male ownership of a woman, participation in which is compulsory for man and especially for woman. A woman's heterosexual orientation perpetuates social, economic,

emotional, and sexual dependence on and accessibility to man. To Namjoshi, being a lesbian means ending identification with heterosexuality. It means ending the personal stake in the male world so that she joins women individually and collectively, to end their oppression.

Though the lesbian movement is supported by a number of critics, an attempt has always been made to cripple it as the heterosexual women who are in majority snub the lesbians and their social perspectives. Male society, too, defines lesbianism as a sexual act only. The male-centered society has invented lesbianism as a label to throw at any woman who dares to be man's equal, who dares to challenge his prerogative and who dares to assert the primacy of her own needs. Similar is the situation with Suniti Namjoshi. A few critics like A.N. Dwivedi and Monika Varma accuse her poetry as mere "*literary doodles*" (Varma 3). Instead of understanding her position in the patriarchal society and the reason of her abhorrence for heterosexual love, Monika Varma denounces her poetry for the "*absurdities like Beauty and the Beast or Aphrodisiac*" and asks her "*to be more careful*" (6). A. N. Dwivedi while discussing her poetry states:

Namjoshi comes out as a pitiable poet in the long run, lisping in foreign tongue and alien numbers and breathing the Western air and showing unnecessary compassion for her motherland. . . . If one were to accept her version of love, as indicated in 'Beauty and the Beast,' the whole human relationship between man and woman would flounder on the rocks of ruin. (214)

Kanwar Dinesh Singh at times seems to be denouncing Namjoshi's "*utterly nauseating and repulsive satire*" (79) but then he supports her also by saying that her "inner self is disconcerting and conflict-ridden" because of the "*painful surroundings*" (80). Regarding her lesbian sensibility, he comments, "*She finds some kind of recompense in lesbian gamut against the betrayal shown by her male companion/lover*" (81). Rashmi Bajaj, too, seems to be justifying her lesbianism by pronouncing that she is "*so much disgusted with the merely physical in love that she talks nowhere of love but always of sex in a satirical vein*" (51).

Lesbianism is much more than a matter of an individual's sexual preference. It "*is much more than the defining term for the sex of your bed partner.*" It is a "*total life commitment to a life with women*" and "*an entire system of world view and life living*" (Quoted in Koedt 2). The "woman-identified-woman" i.e. the lesbian commits herself to other women for political, emotional, physical and economic support. Women are important to her and she is important to herself.

According to Adrienne Rich, the "*social relations of the sexes are disordered and extremely problematic, if not disabling, for women, all seek paths towards change*" (24). Lesbian existence is the breaking of social taboos and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is an attack

on the male right to the access to women.

Suniti Namjoshi's innermost feelings and proclivities can also be observed as a lesbian-feminist writer. Her search for identity "*as an Indian living and writing in a predominantly White world, as a woman working in a largely male academia, as a Hindu in an all-Christian world*" (Vijayasree 52) takes her to lesbianism.

Namjoshi's *The Jackass and the Lady* spells out her position as a lesbian writer. In this she creates the Jackass, the poetic persona, who is soon joined by many other beasts. She makes this choice because in this male-dominating society she can find only birds and beasts with whom she can identify herself, thus, rejecting all gender stereotyping. She convincingly argues: "*. . . in a humanist universe, which has been male-centered historically, women are 'the other', together with the birds and the beasts and the rest of creation*" (Namjoshi, India 28).

Suniti Namjoshi and Gillian Hanscombe in *Flesh and Paper* express their feelings as friends, poets, lesbians and lovers. In "Narrative Distance" this sentiment can be seen:

Climb up here on this ready-made mountain,
sit beside me, and watch the two women
walking on the beach, observe their relation,
mood and emotion, each connected to each. (1-4)

Namjoshi discards the traditional sex roles and heterosexuality as they confirm the subordination of a woman. In heterosexuality every woman is simply defined by and is the property of men with a right to her body, her services and her children. It is a system which supports male domination, instead of love and support from a male. Lesbianism, on the other hand, seems to be providing a sense of relief:

And if the sun
is too strong, should burn too much, will you
walk with me to where the light is more calm
and be in me where the seas heave and are
serene and heave again and are themselves?

("Well, then let slip the masks" 18-22)

Lesbianism celebrates the relation of one woman with another. As lesbian poet Caroline Halliday while describing lesbian eroticism states: "*The lesbian erotic poem is not only about connections and explorations. It is also about celebration, about breaking taboos, naming what is and what is ours*" (Quoted in Vijayasree: 59). The same lesbian stance can be seen in Suniti Namjoshi's poetry. In her *Flesh and Paper* the two voices (i.e. of Suniti Namjoshi and Gillian Hanscombe) "*shape a universe in which the lesbian consciousness is central. What is unusual in the sequence is the sense of equality and partnership, so that traditional barriers between speaker and listener, poet and audience, dissolve*" (Namjoshi, *Flesh*). Both the women are leading a carefree life:

One of them laughs, the other smiles; they appear
uninhibited, careless, carefree;

.....
They are digging in the sand,

Then they stop, consult one another, then proceed.
 And now they are walking hand in hand;
 They are picking up pebbles, sea shells, seaweed.

(“Narrative Distance” 5-6, 9-12)

She seems to consider that by rejecting heterosexuality a woman can decline secondary, derivative, or second-best to men positions. Her eve prefers to be coupled with the snake rather than remain chained to Adam and bear the badge of a fallen woman:

Eve
 in her turn
 encircled the snake, pressing her body
 to him.
 Curious coupling, brown snake and Eve,
 caught in a twist
 of the blind green coil being Adam
 and evil and Eve.

(“Her Form in Clear Water” 3-10)

She was so much disappointed with the heterosexuality that she prefers to be united with animals rather than a man. It is not that heterosexual women are evil or do not care about women. It is because the very essence, definition and nature of heterosexuality give importance to men first. Her Circe symbolizes liberation from heterosexual norms and forges possibilities of alternative sexualities.

Circe,
 all animals adore you,
 you are all things to each
 in the tutelary garden, at the continuous feast,

(“Homage to Circe” 27-30)

Namjoshi is an impulsive woman who wishes to act according to her inner compulsions. She wants to be a more complete and free human being than her society would permit. It is lesbianism which gives her freedom from all restrictions. She with Gillian Hanscombe feels liberated to act according to her own free will:

We can
 - I/you can—press dreams and theories, bellies,
 breasts, hair, hips, lips; and words; all
 plaited now, until tomorrow.

(“Because of India” 12-15)

Suniti Namjoshi, on the whole, is not able to accept the limitations and oppressions imposed on her by the society — the subordinate, domesticated, submissive female role.

Ebb is easier than flow;
 to then fro. She
 motioned
 and she motioned back.

.....
 What drew them went unsaid;
 and they were faithful
 and content.

(“I invent the movie” 23-26, 30-32)

Namjoshi's "I Give her the Rose" is an early example of Namjoshi's lesbian eroticism. The poet in the poem uses nature imagery of a rose. She seems to convey that lesbian sexuality is natural unlike the heterosexuality which is culturally conditioned:

I give her the rose with unfurled petals.
 She smiles
 and crosses her legs.
 I give her the shell with the swollen lip.
 She laughs. I bite
 and nuzzle her breasts.
 I tell her, "Feed me on flowers
 with wide open mouths,"
 and slowly,
 she pulls down my head. (1-10)

The poem is an expression of the poet's courageous defiance—defiance of all norms. It celebrates the freedom of lesbian erotic feeling, and affirms lesbian relationships actual, physical and sexual. The same sensation can be seen in her "*Well, then let slip the masks*" in which the poet with her partner Gillian Hanscombe expresses her lesbian desires:

The curve of your breast is like the curve
 of a wave: look, held, caught, each instant
 caught, the wave tipping over and we in our bower,
 the two of us sheltered, my hands on your thighs,
 your body, your back, my mouth on your mouth
 and in the hollows of your jaws and your head
 nuzzling my breasts. (7-13)

In the same poem she goes on expressing her sexual desires with an unusual boldness and audacity and her schizophrenic behaviour as seen in her earlier poetry is put back by her significant confidence:

Will you
 take to the sea, my darling? Will you let me caress you?
 The tips of your feet, your legs, your sex?
 Will you let my tongue caress you? Will you
 lie in my arms? Will you rest?

("Well, then let slip the masks" 14-18)

But this sensation of a woman's passion for another woman is met with resistance everywhere in society. A lesbian may think that she is free since she escapes the personal oppression of an individual male/female relationship. But to the society she is still a woman. This society hates women who love women, and so, a lesbian, who escapes male-dominance in her private home, receives it doubly at the hands of male society.

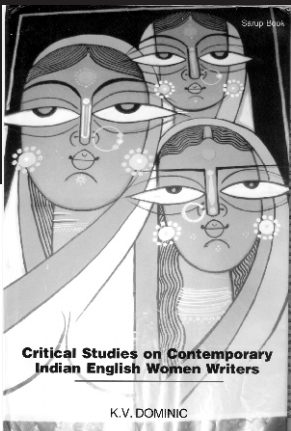
Thus, Suniti Namjoshi comes out openly and boldly as a lesbian and considers her defiance of social norms as a counter-attack on gender exploitation. She feels so oppressed by this male-dominated socio-cultural system that reduces a woman to the status of the "Other", that "*she considers compulsory heterosexuality as a repressive social structure that systematically subordinates women*" (Vijayasree: 26). On the other

hand, the lesbianism seems to threaten the ideology of male supremacy by destroying the lie about female inferiority, weakness, passivity, and by denying women's "innate" need for men.

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ISBN 978-81-7625-631-5

Critical Studies on Contemporary Indian English Women Writers

- KV Dominic

Sarup Book Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi

First Edition (2010) | Pages: 336 | Price: ₹1100.00

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Rajkamal Shiromani*

HAIKU

Love is a passion,
the need of both flesh and soul.
Bliss divine! Sublime!!

What are you my love!
a beginning or an end,
or a dilemma?

What are you, my love!
My soul's body or my body's lust,
or a fulfillment?

What the world needs most,
amidst unrest and chaos,
is a pinch of faith and love.

When your dancing eyes
and twisting lips say something,
Why do I go blind?

Fingers keep moving
in search of some happiness.
Illusion or mirage?

The rhythm in your bosom!
The tide in the full-moon night
is jealous of you.

You and I alone;
searching lost identity
and clothes thrown around.



* An academician and a bi-lingual poet and story writer, Shiromani, the founder President and MD of ICLLC (International Congress of Language, Literature and Culture) is the *Editor* of IJELL (International Journal of English Language & Literature | ISSN: 0976-5581). His collection of 222 Haiku poems 'YOU AND MY HAIKU' is being released in Aug-2010.

P. Gopichand & P. Nagasuseela

When Will 'She' be Free?

It's fine as a babe;
 Its hard as a girl;
 Many things at her hurled;
 Dos and don'ts sting her hard;
 Her nerves and muscles are ready to serve
 Till her bones and her joints break.
 From fatherland to husbandland,
 No land of her own,
 Not even a grain of sand;
 Brings tools with her that lifelong last
 Makes the lives around her last long;
 With countless fasts for family welfare
 She learns to speak in 'others' language
 But none cares to learn 'her language'.
 Her tender hands are praised as beauty marks
 Till the marks of mehendi lasts;
 At daily chores she spills her blood;
 Her monthly cycles flush streaks of blood;
 Her deliveries flow streams of blood;
 She is born to bleed!

When people say ,
 "A girl is born," it becomes a 'sentence';
 When will 'she' be free?
 When shall 'she' be free?

The winds of freedom
 Break the fetters of Rigid
 Custom, Tradition and Culture;
 Centuries ventures may bear fruit.

