

An Interview *with Suniti Namjoshi*

COOMI S. VEVAINA

BORN IN BOMBAY, in 1941, Suniti Namjoshi, a fabulist and mythmaker, has published poems, fables, articles, and reviews extensively in anthologies, collections, and literary and women's studies journals in Canada, the US, and Britain. Her best known works are *Feminist Fables* (1981), *From the Bedside Book Of Nightmares* (1984), *The Conversations of Cow* (1985), *Fleish and Paper* (1986), *The Blue Donkey Fables* (1988), *The Mothers of Maya Diip* (1989), *Aditi and the One-eyed Monkey* (1989), *St. Suniti and the Dragon* (1994), and *Building Babel* (1996). She has worked as an officer in the Indian Administrative Service and in academic posts in India, Canada, and Britain. She now lives and works in Devon, England. This interview took place in Pune, India, 19 October 1997.

"Feminist Fables" has caused critics to label you a feminist. There is no doubt that like every self-respecting woman you are opposed to the oppression which women are subjected to in patriarchy. In "The Mothers of Maya Diip," however, you seem to indicate that like men, women too find it difficult to handle power. Could you spell out your feminist position?

Feminism is nothing as idiotic as women replacing men. What I am concerned with in all my works is considering the moral position of a human being. Once I say that women too are centrally human then it becomes the moral position of a human being who happens to be a woman. What sometimes happens in the course of activism is the tendency to claim moral ascendancy on the grounds that one is oppressed and that is not really reasonable. For one thing, if one is oppressed in one way, it does not imply that one is oppressed in every way. It is as ridiculous as

saying that just because the British ruled the Indians and did what they should not have done, every single Indian is morally superior to every single English person. But once we start considering women as moral human beings then all the considerations which apply to male human beings apply to us. We too as human beings are capable of the misuse of power; we too have all the dilemmas of living a moral life without either being thoroughly exploited or exploiting other people. That is what is being considered in a *The Mothers of Maya Diip*.

The blurb on the back cover of the book describes "St. Suniti and the Dragon" as "a fantastic and thoroughly modern fable, [which] explores with playful irony the concepts of decency, honour and sainthood." More importantly, the quest of Suniti for sainthood strikes me as supremely Jungian at every stage and particularly when she says in her poem,

all the little monsters said in a chorus:

You must kiss us.

What! You who are evil,

Ugly and uncivil.

You who are cruel,

Afraid and needy

Uncouth and seedy . . .

Because, said the monsters, beginning to laugh,

Because, they said, cheering up. You might as well. You are part of us.

This is precisely what Jung and his followers like Erich Neumann and Jolande Jacobi say about the Shadow archetype. Yet some of Jung's views like those on the anima-animus are blatantly phallogocentric. How do you as a feminist archetypalist regard Jung?

I can't really say anything sensible on Jung because I haven't read a word by Jung. All I know is what the ordinary educated person knows. But I feel that all of us living in the late twentieth century have as our background everything that Freud and Jung and of course Darwin have said and done. So it is not surprising that some of the ideas are similar. One of the things I was trying to do with *St. Suniti and the Dragon* is to go outward so that one is considering the world, history, and the Gulf War in the macrocosm and go inward into the self, and when one does that one encounters the little monsters. The answer to the problem of dealing with evil can only be found within oneself. If the answer is

finding charity, then, paradoxically, one can only have charity for others when one is charitable to oneself by embracing everything within oneself. There can be people in the outside world on whom one projects one's dislikes and whom one thinks are terrible, but it is necessary to make our peace with them.

These are our Shadow figures according to Jung and his followers.

Any kind of sensible thinking becomes similar ultimately. Don't you think so?

I tend to feel that it may be similar because your thinking is archetypal.

Possibly.

Could You comment on your engagement with the fable as a literary form?

When my friend Gill was in India, she said to a friend that every time you ask an Indian a question, you will get a story as an answer. I hadn't noticed it because we are so used to it. So part of it is that it is just the way we think. If it illustrates the point for us, it does not matter if you are talking about a Brahmin, a monkey, a goddess, or whether you are talking about what happened yesterday. Often the kinds of distinctions that are made in the West are not relevant to us. The history of ideas is different. We do not separate the secular from the sacred in the same way. In the West, secular means not religious but when our Indian constitution says we are secular we think of ourselves as having every religion and every religion's holidays. Thus, what seems like a strange or an antiquated form, one that crops up only occasionally in the West in Aesop or La Fontaine, is much more a habit of thinking for us. Also, there are writers whose imagination flares when they use realist imagery, while there are others who have the same experience when they use animal imagery, and this is how my imagination works. Another reason for my engagement with the fable form could be my training in mathematics. I did it up to the BA level. The two writers whose work enters my imagination time and time again are Lewis Carroll and Jonathan Swift—and Carroll was a mathematician. I will tell you what I think are the differences and similarities between mathematics and literature. In mathematics, you have a system and from those axioms every-

thing else follows. If you had a different set of axioms, you would have a different set of outcomes. It is elegant and lovely the way everything follows. This love of pattern, of system, is what is similar. One more thing is that in mathematics these systems must be consistent. You cannot jump from one system to another. If you do that, you will get insane results; but in literature when you juxtapose the systems, you get your most witty and ironic effects. While doing so, however, it is necessary to retain control. The way I see it, what is really elegant in *Feminist Fables* is the juxtaposing of systems with their respective logic intact. It is in this way that the absurdity becomes clear. Take that simple fable of the mouse and the lion taken from Aesop. In the traditional tale, we are told to do a good turn even to the meanest of creatures because—who knows—some day it may be able to do us a favour. Now juxtapose that with a system that says, “Yes, but what is the nature of this favour?” Thus the mouse in my fable says: “Well, I’ve done you a favour, I haven’t killed you and that is the only favour you’ve done for me.” So at that point what you are doing is jumping out of one system into another one and that is how you get at the ironic effects of the tale.

Would you then say the verbal economy in your works could also be attributed to your interest in mathematics?

The economy is related to mathematics and to poetry. Even though the fabulist may write in prose, the thinking is far closer to the thinking of a poet than of a prose writer. And what happens in poetry and mathematics is the use of symbols and the symbols contain all that needs to be said. So all you do is manipulate the symbols. And that’s where the economy comes from.

In an interesting article on contemporary British fabulists Antonia Byatt says, “The fabulists look at life from a distance, through a telescope, and from very close, with a microscope. They study worms and stars. They describe discrete fragments and turn them into glittering patterns in a kaleidoscope. They are metaphysical makers of imaginary time and space and objects, who reflect on what they are doing.”¹ Is this how you regard yourself and other fabulists?

I don’t know what she means by it but it is beautifully written and reminds me of Blake talking about eternity in a grain of sand. She

seems to be describing poets, not necessarily fabulists. What she is also perhaps saying is that though we make these distinctions between poet and prose writer, every great novelist is in fact a poet. Jane Austen, for example, is regarded as writing in the realist tradition. You could, however, think of, say, *Pride and Prejudice* differently: Elizabeth resembles a prince in a fairy tale who has to undergo three tests; or Psyche, who is tested similarly by her mother-in-law Venus in the Psyche and Cupid myth. Elizabeth, with very little money, has to undergo, and in fact passes, three tests—she laughs off Collins, keeps her balance with Wickham though tempted by him, and, despite Darcy's enormous wealth she also temporarily rejects him. So it is easy to recognize imagery when we are talking about stars and worms, and we tend not to recognize it when we are talking about teacups. We see the teacup as a piece of information, but it too can be symbolic.

Are the marvellously archetypal sketches in your books done by you? If they are by you, did you conceive of them in black and white or in colour?

They have not been done by me, so I do not accept any praise or blame for them or for the blurb. I have a very visual imagination but I just cannot draw. Sometimes I write fables based on pictures and postcards. My friends send me cards and pictures which they feel might generate a fable. Among several others, the first story in *The Blue Donkey Fables* was created that way.

I am told that "Building Babel" is in the form of an electronic book which can be accessed on the Internet and that it requires the reader to participate actively in the completion of it. Could you talk about your recent interest in technology?

The book is concerned with the process of the building of culture. Cultures, the way I see them, are made out of other bits of culture. Richard Dawkins, in his book *The Selfish Gene*, talks about a *meme*. Think of it not as a gene for the purpose of genetics but as piece of culture. Like a seed, some sprout, some don't sprout, some mutate. They come together like building blocks to make patterns. All this is done subject to time. Things grow, change, mutate, and die in time. In my book, the process of

building Babel (which is not a tower as it is in the Bible but a city) is the process of building culture. Because it is fiction, I don't explain but embody all this. Further, the logic of my text requires that I hand over this piece of culture to you and say, "Out of the pieces of *my* poem, make your poem." Therefore, the last chapter is called "The Reader's Text." The book is dedicated to the reader, "that sweet barbarian," without whom no text is possible. Now how do I hand it over to the reader? I persuaded the publishers to put it on the Internet. So the readers imagine, for instance, the architectural plans of Babel and send them in. In this way, the Babel building site gets built up and what we are doing is enacting the process of building up culture. People have been contributing and a few years from now the publisher plans to bring out the reader's ideas in an anthology. The old text will be forgotten, but it has functioned as the basis on which a new text has come into existence. Again, this is something which every Indian knows.

In "Poets in Limbo," the Caribbean-Canadian poet Claire Harris says that diaspora makes the world "home." Do you regard your condition similarly? If not, is UK, Canada, or India "home" to you?

I don't think of diaspora as home. Remember I grew up here. My mother and my entire extended family are in Poona. All our lands are in Palton. I come to India every year. In a sense, I have never *left* home. India is not something anyone can either give or take away from me. So it is not roots or a home that I am looking for. These are not roots which are possible for me to leave. It is very difficult to explain to a Westerner how intimately tied one is to some other person. A particular person may be connected to me not in one but in six different ways. What ties one to India, even when one does not want to be tied, are a thousand strands. Sometimes this makes one feel like Gulliver tied down in Lilliput. Also, when one lives abroad, one goes through various phases in one's relation to the country in which one is living. In the beginning, one may start out not feeling very patriotic but when the Americans say that their culture is better than any other culture, you suddenly become patriotic in a way you never were before. By now my attitude is that all these places are mine for

they have given me something and I have tried to give them something in return. Ideally I would like to feel that every place matters to me in the same way, and what happens to a Canadian or an English person or anyone anywhere, for that matter, is as important to me as what happens to an Indian person. But I have to confess, and I am not proud of this, that when something happens in India, it tears me apart in a way that is more fundamental than if the same thing happened say in England.

NOTE

- ¹ This comment is taken from Byatt's "Permenides and the Contemporary British Novel," published in *Literature Matters: Newsletter of the British Council Literature Department*, Issue 21, December 1996, pages 6-8.