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## Marginal Woman in Suniti Namjoshi's *The Conversations of Cow*

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### Abstract:

Indian women novelists in English, both native and diasporic, insiders as well as outsiders, are the essential ingredients of the total fabric of contemporary Indian English Fiction. The image of women in literature has undergone a change during the last four decades. The 'new' woman is self-assured, ambitious; she is also conscious of her independent identity. Suniti Namjoshi (1941- ) is one of the 'new' Indian women novelists in English from Maharashtra. She is emerged as a blooming star on the horizon of Indian English Fiction and has been active on the literary scene for more than half a decade. In this span she has written both in singly and in collaboration, in verse and prose; fables and dystopias, novels and short stories, fantasy and satire, children's literature with a feminist touch, and almost each genre except drama and epic. Her fiction enables the subaltern female subjectivity to voice women's concerns in the times of crisis. She is an experiential writer who dares to tackle with variety of subjects. She comments upon the universal discrimination of gender and class which becomes her major thematic concern. Namjoshi has lived her life in a different way right from the beginning of her career and it is reflected in her work. The present paper aims at the critique of Suniti Namjoshi's '*The conversations of Cow*' with special reference to her lesbian identity.

Indian women novelists in English, both native and diasporic, insiders as well as outsiders, are the essential ingredients of the total fabric of contemporary Indian English Fiction. The image of women in literature has undergone a change during the last four decades. Modern female writers like Kamala Das, Kamala Markandaya, Shobha De, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Namita Gokhale and many more write about women's protest and assertion as an individual and not just as 'other' in relation to man. The modern women writers have moved away from the traditional portrayals of enduring and self-sacrificing women to female characters searching for identity no longer characterized and defined in terms of their victim status. Recent writers depict both the diversity of women and the diversity within each woman, rather than limiting the lives of women to one ideal. Thus, an

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assertion of a woman in a male dominated society is a challenge for every woman. It is not only gaining freedom from male oppression but also gaining a new right to lead life in a new attitude. A woman has to gain her own identity than representing herself as a loyal wife and dedicated mother.

While talking about new bearings and fresh flowerings in Indian English fiction, M. K. Naik refers to these novelists as “new” novelists who “share most of the preoccupations of their male counterparts, and try to make their own room in terms of certain pressing needs and concerns” (Naik 199). Suniti Namjoshi is one of the ‘new’ Indian women novelists in English. She was born in 1941 in Chitpavan Brahmin family of Pune. She is emerged as a blooming star on the horizon of Indian English Fiction and has been active on the literary scene for more than half a century. In this span she has written both in singly and in collaboration, in verse and prose; fables and dystopias, novels and short stories, fantasy and satire, children’s literature with a feminist touch, and almost each genre except drama and epic. Her fiction enables the subaltern female subjectivity to voice women’s concerns in the times of crisis. One finds, as Jasbir Jain in her Preface to C. Vijayasree’s critical treatise *Suniti Namjoshi: The Artful Transgressor* has pointed out “the multi-dimensional explorations” (Jain 10) in Suniti Namjoshi’s fictional world. She is an experiential writer who dares to tackle with variety of subjects. Namjoshi has lived her life in a different way right from the beginning of her career and it is reflected in her work. Suniti began her literary career as a poet, fabulist, mythmaker, fiction writer, feminist, and a lesbian.

The shaping influences in the making of Suniti Namjoshi as a creative writer are her parents, grandparents, her cultural and family backgrounds, her everyday Indian experiences and “not entirely happy confluence of Western and Hindu influences” (Namjoshi 28). As a lesbian feminist, she is greatly influenced by the Feminist and Gay Liberation Movements. All her personal experiences are reflected in her writing. In the words of C. Vijayasree,

She transgresses norms of societal and literary conventions; stresses the need for looking at life from alternative perspectives so that the conventional hierarchies of class, race and gender get demolished and more acceptable and egalitarian perspective may emerge” (Vijayasree 15).

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Suniti is very much conscious about ‘self’. She wants that women must revolt against their status in male-dominated society. As a feminist and the lesbian, Namjoshi has tried to change the dominant cultural value system. She deals with the problem of womanhood and the main theme is the quest for identity. The ‘new’ woman is self-assured, ambitious; she is also conscious of her independent identity. The present paper aims at the critique of Suniti Namjoshi’s *The conversations of Cow* with special reference to her lesbian identity.

Through her quest for identity Namjoshi suggests to women that they must search their identity as a woman in male-dominated society and live in heterosexist society as an ‘individual’ of society, not as an ‘object’. Suniti appeals women to revolt against male-dominated society for their freedom and human rights. As a lesbian, Suniti indirectly reveals our society’s intention towards lesbians, that is, how the society thinks about lesbians. Suniti is staunchly against the inferior status of women in patriarchy. She appeals to all women to revolt against male-dominated society for their own identity as an ‘individual’, as a ‘human being’ and not as an ‘object’. Namjoshi’s basic concern is to make an individual identity of a woman which is defined without any accordance with men and male-dominated society. She wants that women must revolt against their status in male-dominated society. “Who you are is just who you happen to be this time around” (BB xv).

*The Conversations of Cow* is a novella, a feminist utopian tale and a lesbian bildungsroman all in one. Namjoshi’s feminist stance has been shaped by her lesbian identity and it is explored in *The Conversations of Cow*. Namjoshi herself exposed her identity as a lesbian more than two decades ago. It is a very big task for an Indian to come out as a lesbian in the western countries. It is different to come out as a lesbian in the West publically declaring her own lesbian identity in India in front of the renowned Maharashtrian family members as the lesbian relationship is not acceptable by our society. *The Conversations of Cow* is a novel, political satire, science fiction, and an extended fable or a fantasy in which the protagonist is an Indian disciple whose teacher appears to her in the form of a cow. The novel explores Namjoshi’s feminist consciousness and a lesbian feminist utopia and establishes her lesbian identity. As an Indian and a lesbian, Namjoshi is concerned with her identity as a migrant to the white heteronormative sexiest-society of the patriarchy in the West. The quest for identity is urgency for her because in the patriarchal society the lesbians are often treated as unnatural and abnormal beings. The same theme is explored in the present novel. She also faced a lot of problems by proclaiming her identity as a lesbian in the Western countries. Maggie Ann Bowers remarks:

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*The Conversations of Cow* is a parody of a quest narrative in which the character Suniti embarks on a search for her true identity. The epiphany of the quest generates a deeper understanding of the nature of identity, but one which dismisses the very notion of one fixed identity, and so dispenses with the singleness of the very aim of the quest itself. The prose fiction is also, in effect, a bildungsroman in which Suniti goes through a series of learning experiences, each dispelling or introducing an aspect of identity by a goddess who appears in many forms but who appears predominantly as a Brahmin cow, called Cow, and through them reaches an epiphany concerning her identity which enables her to find a method of living in relation to others (Bowers 55-56).

Suniti tries to seek her true self. She needs to find out the possibilities for resistance in acknowledging the fact that identity is fully fluid, so that contact between two people can be mutually influencing rather than a war of confrontation and domination. The first learning experience gets to the Western lesbian cow in Canada where the Anglo cows reveal an orientalist attitude. Suniti learns that she does not control her identity. The cows rename Suniti with the English name 'Sue' and they show the greatest interest in India. The cows form an imaginary picture of India in their own terms. Suniti herself is the protagonist who offers a biological separation and the cow Bhadravati staunchly supports her argument. She and the Cow Bhadravati are the lesbians and they are very close to each other. They visit the lesbian community of the cows. The dialogues between Suniti and Bhadravati reveal the trials and tribulations of an immigrant lesbian.

Suniti's inner quest and her outer journeys are closely interwoven. The novel focuses on her quest for identity and reality of marginalized selves. She also gives the conversations of women which reflect that women are always marginalized in the heterosexist society. Namjoshi reveals how thoughts and emotions of women have always been 'others' on the basis of gender as well as racial and sexual discriminations. During this odyssey of self-discovery, Suniti and the cow go on changing the roles of pupil and teacher. The relation between Suniti and the cow is more than the writer and the teacher. They become very intimate friends and lovers. By introducing a Brahmin cow, Suniti explores her own ways of belonging as well as unbelonging. The cow is both ordinary and intelligent in some ways. She has all the human drawbacks but she challenges all the situations imposed on her by the patriarchy. She is engaged in her struggle against that social structure which

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pushes her to the margins and makes her invisible, and at the same time; transforms her physical existence into an exotic commodity for white male. The way of her quest for identity is full of hurdles. Her status as a non-white Asian-Indian lesbian is also equally fluid because as a lesbian of non-Anglo ethnic origin in a white society, she is a minority within a minority.

The author herself in the introductory article in her collection *Because of India* aptly remarks:

It's obvious that for some time now I had been asking the question, what was my place in a world that often seemed absurd to me. All right, I was a lesbian feminist. But what was a lesbian? What was her relation to other people? And what about the problem of warring egos? (Namjoshi 83)

Namjoshi attempts to create new spaces among female identities in her fiction, and gives a privileged position to the lesbian self. She makes the use of lesbian identity to challenge the contradictory terms prescribed by the male-dominance. She tries to create a different world from the patriarchal one, and strives against the existing patriarchal world in a feminist cognitive way and wants to create a new world for women. Suniti is a spirited lesbian and rebels for her status in heterosexual society, 'just because I'm a woman and a foreigner, it does not follow I cannot be a university professor' 'And a lesbian, B adds, looking mischievous' (CC34). Lesbian feminism can be dealt with at two levels- the erotic and the second one is the political which is what Adrienne Rich terms 'Lesbian Continuum':

Many forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support (Rich 20).

As a lesbian feminist, Namjoshi goes beyond the heterosexual society and constructs the female community to wipe out the problems faced by women for their identity as a lesbian. As Kalpana observes:

In all the new critical works on images of women, there is a central underlying theme, a search for wholeness. A whole and positive image of women would combine power, discipline and intellectual strength with a capacity for rich and complex emotion. The realization of wholeness has been variously termed, however androgyny is the principal name given to the state of equality between the sexes that would result from greater flexibility and breadth in the personality of individuals. In Suniti Namjoshi's *The Conversations of Cow*,

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the writer distinguishes three degrees of identity, first, where male values are paramount, second, where there is relatively greater importance to female values and third, where there is a balance between male and female principles (Kalpana 204-205).

Her attraction for Bhadravati itself lies in the fact that she too is a lesbian. Thus, her quest for identity goes on till the end. Suniti is finally prepared to accept Bhadravati as she is. In 'Interlude' Suniti is in search of her true self and she asks Bhadravati, 'A pine, a cricket, a moon, a forest, two women ... Who am I, B?' (CC80). B tells the story of Spindleshanks to Suniti which reflects the new world for Spindleshanks. Bhadravati, the guide of Suniti suggests her that she can find her true identity in a newly created world. The change that occurs in Suniti is ultimately her quest for identity. She has an exciting dream that shows her ego to be entirely composed of fear. 'It is a shapeless and composed of terror. It can not penetrate the blackness of terror. It can not make a sound. But it is shrieking with the intensity of its own terror' (CC120). And through this revelation, Suniti is able to deal with her fear and thereby gives up her fear. Suniti accepts her identity as fluid, while retaining a sense of her uniqueness based on the subject position that she holds at that particular moment. She muses to herself, 'I'm supposed to be Suniti, that particular person with those preoccupations, well, that's all right then' (CC121).

Namjoshi presents feminine characters as doubly or triply 'otherised' and each confronts their positions of otherness in the patriarchy. C. Vijayasree aptly remarks:

In her quest for identity Suniti considers various possibilities along a culturally constructed spectrum between masculinity at one end and femininity at the other. Within the dominant culture, masculinity and femininity are defined in a binary opposition to each another, and therefore a move away from one is simultaneously a move towards the other. Suniti refuses to be torn between the binaries, and looks for a free and neutral zone where the tyranny of gender does not operate. She also rejects the lesbian duplication of heterosexual categories such as butch and femme and searches for a position of alterity outside or beyond exclusive categories of woman and man (Vijayasree 105).

The novel investigates the interest of certain Western feminists with goddess or religions. Bhadravati, an Indian lesbian cow; manifests herself to Suniti and takes her on a journey during which she changes into many forms – male, female and animals also. The novel is a

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feminist fantasy which is a quest for a feminist identity and acceptance in the society as a lesbian. Suniti is in a state of dilemma and confusion. She cannot live on or think about the future until she discovers herself. She expresses her eagerness to go on a quest or a journey of self-exploration to find out her real identity. She expresses her grief about herself to B, She says, 'But B, I'm thoroughly muddled about who I am? As for what I want, I really don't know (CC69). This shows the struggle of a feminist lesbian in the heterosexual society. Suniti wants to be an independent being. She would like to be someone bigger, better, and stronger. Paulina Palmer states:

In *The Conversations of Cow* unexpectedly combining motifs from Hindu mythology with ideas from lesbian feminism, Namjoshi explores a theme of particular interest to women in the process of acquiring a feminist consciousness- transformation of role and identity. The eponymous cow guides the astonished narrator through a series of fantastic transformations ranging from the animal to the supernatural (Palmer 59).

Suniti with her lesbian companion succeeds in achieving her quest for knowledge. She shows that the lesbian community works as an alternative society to the heteronormative sexist patriarchy. She finds it very difficult to determine her real identity, as she is unable to make a choice between a man and a woman. However, she does not wish to be a man or a woman. She thinks of other options such as a cow, a snail, a poodle, a sheep, a gold fish, and a young damsel in distress. But then she thinks that these options are the components of the patriarchy and turns to the Cow for further guidance. She is in quest for her genuine 'self' or 'identity'. She never wants to affiliate herself with the male or female. She strongly demands a free and separate space for women in order to maintain freedom from any kind of intervention by the patriarchy. She reveals the fluidity of Suniti and Bhadravati's transformation. Through the mutually shared relationship and their unusual experiences, Namjoshi shows and communicates the fluidity of fixed meanings in relation to gender, class and social roles. S 2 is the second self of Suniti. The reincarnation of S 2 is an important stage in her quest for identity. There is a kind affinity in between them, 'I find I'm as stiff and tired as S 2 herself. 'This is empathy,' I think. 'This is true fellow feeling. At last I am experiencing genuine compassion, but it's something on the whole I could do without' (CC115). In her journey towards wholeness with her lesbian companion, and with her own self S 2, Suniti celebrates her new status as an enlightened lesbian. This new identity witnesses a splitting off from her own self, 'Luckily I wake up. I don't know who I am. After



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a while I see S 2 beside me sitting up in bed. Then I remember. I'm supposed to be Suniti, that particular person with those preoccupations. We fall asleep without further trouble' (CC120-121). Namjoshi expresses the revolt against the quest for lesbian identity. The lesbians have to face the racial and gender discrimination in the heterosexist society. As Suniti aptly remarks:

Later that night my conscience bothers me. 'B', I say, 'what about our identities? Aren't we being false to our true selves?'..... It's all right,' she says, 'identity is fluid. Haven't you heard of transmigration? And you call yourself a good Brahmin?'

I don't, as a matter of fact, but I let that pass.

'But, B, aren't you really a lesbian cow?'

'Well, I don't know,' she says (CC 32).

Her attraction for Bhadravati itself lies in the fact that she too is a lesbian. Thus, her quest for identity goes on till the end. She is finally prepared to accept Bhadravati as she is. Here Namjoshi expresses the collective struggle for the independent status of women and their rights. During her quest for identity, she strives to find spaces and discursive gaps and these gaps are her conversations with Cow.

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