

Assimilating in Alternative Spaces of Possibility: A Study of Suniti Namjoshi's Select Works

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Abstract

Postcolonial queer literature calls into question and dismantles the very notion of a community's assumption of heterosexism as the norm and 'queer' ones as deviant. Postcolonial narratives do not endorse the way in which power has structured spaces; it rather debunks and interrogates the heteronormative configuration of space. These narratives present a departure from the Eurocentric queer accounts which make them essentially postcolonial. It critiques the notion of 'compulsory heterosexuality' which in the words of Vijayasree "is a repressive social structure that systematically subordinates women." This paper attempts at exploring the different facets of lesbian desire and identity in Namjoshi's narratives. It further interrogates the heteropatriarchal space of the family, home and on the whole, the diasporic community. It also endeavors to focus on the politics of exclusion depicted in Namjoshi's select works that lead to momentary disillusionment, yet forging a space of possibility and recognition which emerges as a site of contestation from the captivity of heterosexist body and opposing Orientalism.

Keywords- Alternative spaces, Heterosexuality, Orientalism, Postcolonialism, Diaspora

Being born in India and having moved to the UK, Canada, Suniti Namjoshi can rightfully be hailed as a writer of the Indian diaspora. Her oeuvre reflects dimensions of being lesbian. "She explores the intersections of lesbianism with nationality, race, gender, class, caste, motherhood, age and species." (Vanita, 2000; Vijayshree, 2000). Gay and lesbian writers from "Third World" nations who have migrated to the "First World" nations have a difficult task of identity formation. Gayatri Gopinath points out:

Even citizenship – in the
USA – is not something
A queer Asian, unlike
The queer white American,
Can take for granted.

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[1996:120-21. Also Espin 1996]

Being a member of a diasporic community, Namjoshi faces marginalization and having chosen her sexual orientation as a lesbian, she is further marginalized. Having lived a diasporic existence, Namjoshi not only crosses borders, but also there have been psychological movements which cause dilemmas, nostalgia, a sense of displacement, and maladjustment. Vijay Mishra focuses on the ways in which sexuality becomes politicized in a diasporic discourse.

Namjoshi's stay in India made her remain silent due to strict familial relationships. This finds reflection from the following lines in "*Because of India*":

One aspect of culture shock is that one is not recognized in both senses of the word. In India I was inescapably my grandfather's granddaughter, one member of a particular family located for hundreds of years in a particular region, with a particular place in a particular system. (p.14)

While in India, Namjoshi had to hide her sexual preferences because homosexuality was considered to be punishable by law. Hence, her early poems depict that she disguised her sexual orientation. It reveals how a queer inquiry exposes the fractures of a postcolonial nation. Her community rejects her for her sexual orientation and her adopted land rejects her for skin color which makes her find herself between identities. She spends every moment of her life in negotiating border of various identities, but none of which fit her very well. However, Namjoshi's moving out from her native land, to some extent, offers her the opportunity to cross the heterosexual border which would have been impossible in her native.

Gradually, Namjoshi breaks free from societal norms to the realm of self – realization and boldly projects her lesbian desire in *The Jackass and the Lady*:

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. (p.32)

In *The Jackass and the Lady*, Namjoshi creates the Jackass, who is soon joined by many other beasts. According her, in this patriarchal society, it is only the birds and beasts that she can identify herself with. Thus she points out, "... in a humanist universe,...women are the 'other', together with the birds and the beasts and the rest of the creation." (Namjoshi, *India* 28). She feels united with animals rather than a man because this patriarchal society assumes supremacy to a man.

Namjoshi gathered enough strength from the Gay and Liberation movement while making her choice. With the above-mentioned lines, it becomes evident that she constructs a lesbian identity that is both Indian and post colonial.

Namjoshi seems to occupy ways wherein dominant discourses on gender and sexuality are debunked. This new (third) space as theorized by Bhabha is a mode of

articulation that encourages new possibility. According to Bhabha, this hybrid third space is an ‘ambivalent’ site where cultural meaning and representation have no primordial unity or fixity.’ (Bhabha,1999). Homi Bhabha’s ‘in-between’ spaces yield to new signs of identity and innovative sights of collaboration, contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (Bhabha, 1994:2)

Sexuality assumes as an area where the West establishes its superiority over the East on the basis of the representation of the West as a modern culture in contrast to the East’s primitive ones. Namjoshi’s lesbian identity offers her with a powerful political weapon of not being reduced to just one identity. She acquires a multiple, fragmented and fluid identity. In *The Conversations of a Cow*, Namjoshi reconstructs the myth of cow and blends Eastern as well as Western points of view to foreground the site of cultural hybridity. *The Conversations of a Cow* has its protagonists, Suniti, an Indian lesbian feminist professor of English and Bhadravati, a Brahmin lesbian cow. The central character Bhadravati, a cow befriends Suniti. Suniti points out:

I’m down on my knees,
waiting for the goddess’ to manifest herself.
When I open my eyes, The Cow of a Thousand
Wishes is standing before me on green turf.
Daffodils and crocuses grow at her feet,
though, incongruously enough,
the cow herself is a Brahmini cow.

[p. 13]

Bhadravati, according to her will, magically, transforms into female ‘Buddy’ or a white male ‘Bud’ and leaves the options open for Suniti to choose either male or female roles, thereby creating a new space of lesbian identity for woman. Suniti constantly looks for spaces which she can fit in, so that she can speak her voices in order to be heard. Gayatri Spivak points out:

For me, the question “Who will speak?” is less crucial than
“Who will listen? I will speak for myself as a Third World
person is an important position for political mobilisation
today. But the real demand is that, when I speak from
listened to seriously, not with that kind of benevolent
imperialism¹

After being tired of being economically disempowered, Bhadravati decides to “become” a “white” heterosexual man. As soon as they ‘become’ a heterosexual couple, Sue and Bud, people’s reaction towards them change. Such is the societal expectation regarding sexuality.

The strategy of creating a self – sustaining collective lesbian cows becomes the politics of possible; it explores ways of belonging and achieves solidarity between minorities

which is empowering. It creates a democratic space through its multiple voices which ought to be heard. This alternative site liberates her from the hegemonic world order.

As we're leaving the maitre' hotel says, Bring her again,
She's beautiful! Bud looks smug, "There, Suniti Aren't you pleased
No if you went into a parking lot with a foreign car,
It's exactly what the attendant might say to you', (p.105)

Here, Suniti temporarily feels like an acceptable woman but against her own wishes and in the process she loses herself. This is evident from the following lines:

"..... I wake up I don't know who I am. After a while I see S2
beside me sitting up in bed. Then I remember I'm supposed to
be Suniti, that particular person with those preoccupations. (p. 120-121)

Suniti's splitting from herself occurs when she has been stereotyped as Bud's foreign partner. Her splitting can be understood in terms of Bhabha's creation of 'otherness'. It occurs after the Bud section in the novel. It makes her invisible and marginalized.

Suniti has finally learned to come to terms with her 'self'. This is evident in *The Conversations of Cow* with the fluid movement which occurs between Suniti's reality and dreams. Suniti and Cow transcends all boundaries. Through their conversations, Suniti and Cow have created spaces which offer imagined communication to articulate a politics of alliance and resistance. Her writing moves away towards formulating a concept of community from isolation to recognition.

Goja: An Autobiographical Myth is about two dead women, Goja, her childhood friend and her grandmother, Goldie. In *Goja*, Namjoshi attempts to reconcile and mend their past relationships by way of fictionalizing conversations between herself and these women and one can feel the pain that she experienced as a consequence of her sexual orientation which her family saw as a sin.

The notion of 'home' offers a sense of place, security in one's life; but this idea of 'home' acts as an ambivalent site in Namjoshi's life which finds reflection in her works. Namjoshi exemplifies her exclusion from the nation space in *Because of India*. Namjoshi and Hanscambe writes:

the history not for taking
the family not for joining;
the cause not for naming;
and lover, what could we discover
in any country or poetry ? (being
visitors; and seemly) (p.62)

The above lines project that having no name, no cause, no family, no history and so on , lesbians are labelled as 'visitors', or outsiders, and are never true inhabitants of land or space. According to her, it is in India that there is "no cause for name", as the lesbians have no name identity in India. This exclusion of a name disturbs Namjoshi, because they are

excluded from national identity and occupy a space of invisibility and impossibility. They are, therefore, deemed outsiders in their own nation and move to the 'first world' metropolis to look for possibilities to be included, but to their despair, they are not even included in the 'first world' lesbian communities completely. Thus, the lesbian becomes a foreign subject to both home and host spaces and their quest for normalcy merely remains a myth.

The homosexual community symbolically corresponds to Anderson's definition of nation. As theorized by Anderson, nation is an 'imagined' political community. It is 'imagined' because there is no physical territory where the lesbians can claim to be their nation. These imagined communities enable Namjoshi to engage in struggle and self affirmation without feeling alienated. Thus, Namjoshi attempts at envisioning alternative home spaces wherein her sexual orientation and race would be 'housed', thereby dealing with postcolonial complexity in a revolutionary way. This acts as a kind of resistance to heterosexist society. In the poem, "I Moved in my House", Hanscombe and Namjoshi finds a space where they celebrate their love:

I moved in my house, doing nothing special,
Just work and pleasure, the usual pattern;
My son was busy, the garden lay stretched
As it should; my friends ran their lives.
It was just a day, like any other;
You know how it is. (p.16)

This poem exemplifies Namjoshi and Hanscombe's celebration of their new home-space. This imagined space reaffirms the obliterated queer identities and enables forging of new identities.

In conclusion, it becomes evident that Namjoshi deals with her sexual identity in a revolutionary way. She seeks to undermine the oppressive manifestations of orientation which valorises heterosexism subverting gender, racial and sexual codes. She, finally, seeks to carve out a niche for herself where she celebrates her sexuality rather than repressing it, thus creating a hybridized identity. This new space emerges as a dynamic space of contestation that debunks the notions of 'center' and 'periphery', thereby offering visibility and recognition and finding a distinctive voice.

Endnote-

¹ G.CSpivak. *Questions of Multiculturalism.*'op.cit., p.60.

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