

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Suniti Namjoshi, *The Fabulous Feminist: A Suniti Namjoshi Reader* (Spinifex Press, 2012)

Suniti Namjoshi's fables are lessons conveyed in poetry and fairy tales. She fills her magical world with all kinds of creatures: blue donkeys and one-eyed monkeys, glass birds and fur seals, giant lizards and strange monsters. There are human figures too: the whistling princess, Snow White and Rose Green, the Woman Who Lived on the Beach. All of them contribute to the moral and emotional lessons of *The Fabulous Feminist*.

Fables are recognised as one of the most enduring forms of folk literature. Aesop told fables that are still read today, as did Jean de La Fontaine and numerous Indian and Oriental storytellers. Think of 'The Hare and the Tortoise', 'The Goose that laid the Golden Eggs', 'The Boy who cried Wolf'. These 'stories with a moral' still resonate; Namjoshi's success lies in recreating and repurposing them as *feminist* fables, life lessons for girls and women:

The Incredible Woman raged through the skies, lassoed a planet, set it in orbit, rescued a starship, flattened a mountain, straightened a building, smiled at a child, caught a few thieves all in one morning, and then, took a little time off to visit her psychiatrist, since she is at heart a really womanly woman and all she wants is a normal life (18).

Suniti Namjoshi was educated in India, the United States and Canada before she moved to England in the late 1970s and discovered the feminist and gay liberation movement that influenced her writing so intensively. She chose the ancient form of the fable to examine and express her feminism because

I didn't much like being a second class citizen ... the fable form makes it clear that [we] question what happens to anyone whenever there's an imbalance of power ... It uses the very power of language and the literary tradition to expose what is absurd and unacceptable (2-3).

The greater part of the collected work in this reader consists of these engaging and accessible fables, supplemented by poetry and extracts from longer fictional work. As such, it is an ideal volume for browsing and dipping into rather than for reading from cover to cover. It is not a comprehensive examination of Namjoshi's feminist ideology, but it works well as a sampler of her ideas and insights.

Her work is imaginative and inspiring; most readers are likely to come across something that will resonate with them either through form, content, character or theme. I had a fondness for the Blue Donkey who replies 'Can't and won't' when she is told to change her colour to a conservative grey. I also enjoyed the poems about Medusa and Sycorax, Snow White and Pygmalion, Caliban and Miranda. One of Namjoshi's strengths is the breadth of her culture, her willingness to engage with a range of influences, from Greek legends to Indian myths, from European fairy tales to writers as different as Virginia Woolf and Shakespeare:

I made them? Maiden and monster
and then disdained them?
Was there something in me

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that fed and sustained them?
Are they mine or their own?
I dare not claim them.

(Prospero, in the sequence *Snapshots of Caliban*, 51)

This Reader was published in 2012 by Spinifex Press, an established Australian feminist publisher. Namjoshi has written another novel since then, and her considerable body of work as a creative, feminist and Indian English writer continues to attract critical acclaim. Late last year, during the student controversy around the ‘whitewashing’ of the literary syllabus at Cambridge University, Namjoshi’s *Feminist Fables* was cited as one of the most significant of the neglected ethnic minority texts left out of the curriculum¹.

Suniti Namjoshi is widely regarded as a major figure in transnational and post-colonial writing, and deserves to become better known in our country through this Australian imprint. Given the perception of her insights, and the power of her words, I don’t hesitate to recommend *The Fabulous Feminist*.

Jennifer Osborn

¹ Emma Thelwell, ‘Does Cambridge University need to widen a whitewashed reading list?’, *BBC News* 26 October 2017 <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-41749939>