

Suniti Namjoshi

Suniti Namjoshi was born in Mumbai, India, in 1941. Her father, Captain Manohar Vinayak Namjoshi, was a senior test pilot and was killed when his plane crashed in 1953. Her mother, Sarojini, nee Naik Nimbalkar, comes from the old princely state of Phaltan in Maharashtra, India. As a child Namjoshi was sent to boarding schools, first Woodstock School in the north and then Rishi Valley School in the south.

Namjoshi obtained her BA (1961) and MA (1963), both in English Literature, from the University of Pune. She lectured at Fergusson College, Pune, for a year and then was selected for the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) in 1964.

It was after she joined the IAS that Namjoshi took up writing verse. Namjoshi's first book of poems, 'Poems' was published by P. Lal of Writers Workshop, Calcutta in 1967. During this period she translated some poems from old Marathi into English with the help of her grandmother, Laxmi Devi Naik Nimbalkar, as well as some poems from more recent Marathi poetry with the help of her mother, Sarojini Namjoshi. The latter were published as 'Poems of Govindagraj' (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1968).

In 1968, Namjoshi took study leave from the Govt. of India, and undertook a Master's degree in Public Administration at the University of Missouri in America. In her book 'Because of India', Namjoshi writes about her great sense of displacement and loneliness in America: '...In India I was inescapably my grandfather's granddaughter...but now I was literally 'Nobody from Nowhere' - and I didn't like it'.

In 1969 Namjoshi resigned from the Indian Administrative Service and did her doctoral dissertation on the 'Cantos' of Ezra Pound, at McGill University, Montreal, Canada (1969 - 1972). From 1972 until 1989, she taught at Scarborough College, University of Toronto. During a sabbatical in 1978-79 Namjoshi went to England and spent time in London as well as at Cambridge. It was during this year that she was politicised by the evolving feminist and gay liberation movements. In 'Because of India' she particularly acknowledges the influence of her friend, the poet and activist, Christine Donald.

On her return to Toronto in 1979, Namjoshi wrote her widely acclaimed 'Feminist Fables', (Melbourne: Spinifex, 1993). It has been translated into several languages and was first published by Sheba Feminist Publishers in London in 1981. She describes the book as being 'a way of exploring feminist ideas and their implications for the patterns I had inherited through the mainstream literary tradition'. In these fables, and in subsequent compilations, Namjoshi often subverts well known fairy tales, as well as stories from Greek and sometimes Indian mythology. At this time, Namjoshi also came out as a lesbian, and, with the help of colleagues, started a Women's Studies Programme at Scarborough College.

Suniti Namjoshi's writing consists of fiction, fables and poetry. 'The Conversations of Cow', (The Women's Press, London, 1985) describes the travels of Suniti, an expatriate Indian lesbian, and Bhadravati, a Brahmini cow. It is a satirical questioning of stereotypical notions of identity and gender. 'The Blue Donkey Fables' published

by The Women's Press in London in 1986 contains poems and a number of fables in which the Blue Donkey figures. In 'The Mothers of Maya Diip' (The Women's Press, London, 1991), Namjoshi makes clear that merely putting women in charge (instead of men) does not necessarily solve anything. The story is set on an imaginary island off the west coast of India where 'a matriarchy bloomed unashamedly'.

Suniti Namjoshi's books of verse include 'The Authentic Lie' (Fiddlehead Poetry Books, 1982), and 'From the Bedside Book of Nightmares' (Fiddlehead Poetry Books & Goose Lane Editions, 1984). 'Flesh and Paper' is a sequence of poems consisting of a dialogue between Namjoshi and her partner Gillian Hanscombe (Jezebel Tapes and Books, UK 1986; Ragweed Press, Canada 1986).

Namjoshi has also published books for children. The first, 'Aditi and the One-Eyed Monkey' (Chennai, India, Tulika Press, 2000), arose when she decided to write a story set in India for her niece, Aditi. It was first published by Sheba Feminist Press in 1986. Namjoshi then wrote a second book, 'Aditi and the Thames Dragon', (Chennai, India, Tulika Press, 2002) after the children of Blue Gate Fields Junior School, London had just read 'Aditi and the One-Eyed Monkey' as part of a story telling session in Tower Hamlets and had wanted Aditi and her friends to come to London. The third book in this series, 'Aditi and the Marine Sage' (Chennai, India, Tulika Press, 2004) is set on the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, and the forthcoming 'Aditi and the Techno Sage' is set on a lake in Canada.

Her last three books for adults have been published by Spinifex Press Melbourne. 'Saint Suniti and the Dragon' (Spinifex, 1993; Virago, 1994) presents Saint Suniti as the protagonist, an ordinary human being who wants to be good, though not too good, because that is too hard. 'Building Babel' (1996) is concerned with the process of building culture and has the last chapter located on the internet. The hypertext links are open for readers to write extensions attached to parts of the text so that the cultural process is enacted.

'Goja: An Autobiographical Myth' (Spinifex, 2000) is, among other things, an attempt to explore the relationship between language and experience. Namjoshi says in the Preface, '...this account is autobiographical in that my experience is all I have. It's fictional since any version manipulates facts. And it's mythical, because it's by making patterns that I make sense of all I have.' 'Goja' moves from narrative to interrogation, from description to poetry, from dialogue to recollection and deconstructs Namjoshi's journey through childhood and adult life in conversations with her grandmother and Goja, the two people who loved her as a child when she needed it most.

Suniti Namjoshi has published a sequence of poems called 'Sycorax', in which Caliban's mother, now an old woman, returns to the island after Prospero leaves and tries to work out what she thinks about it all. Namjoshi's work has been published in India, Canada, America, Australia and Britain. Scholarly studies of her work include the book by C. Vijayasree, 'Suniti Namjoshi: The Artful Transgressor' (Jaipur and Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2001). An archive of Suniti Namjoshi's papers is located in the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.

Suniti Namjoshi lives in Devon, England, with her partner, the poet and writer, Gillian Hanscombe.