

CONVERSATION

Suhasini Vincent

'Poetry is the sound of the human animal' – *A Conversation with Suniti Namjoshi*

PRELUDE

Suniti Namjoshi worked in the Indian Administrative Service in India, and then went to Canada where she did a doctorate on Ezra Pound at McGill University. What I find most interesting in her works is her ability to rework ancient Greek and Indian myths and stories from Eastern and Western traditions to create a fictional space which depicts facets of women's lives that have been ignored or degraded or depicted from the outside. In her corpus of fables, she uses the form to subvert restrictive traditions and stereotypes. In my conversation with her, I've tried to discover how she reconfigures the unstable, shape-shifting personae and plots of fairy tales, myths and their literary progeny to expose the underlying patriarchal context and to allow more egalitarian ideas of personal transformation to emerge.

For example, in her fable "Multicult Mart" she arranges tectonic-layers of word configurations to carry out an experiment on the power of language. A question is asked: "Did the container alter the thing contained" (*Sycorax* 113)? In this creative and linguistic experiment, six words are distributed to six participants. The first friend thought the words were paving stones and danced on them; the second companion assumed they were loaves of bread and ingested them; the third acquaintance decided that they were bits of art and strung them into a necklace; the fourth imagined them as globes and looked at them; the fifth participant decided to set the words free and let imagination capture them; the sixth tossed them into a sea and

watched it absorb the fictional configuration.

The fabulist subsequently raises the next question: "Are verbal art forms dependent on their medium" (*Sycorax* 113)? The contestants reply unanimously without hesitation, "The message is not the medium. You gave them to us. To have and to hold. All we did was recycle them" (*Sycorax* 113-14). I think that this fable speaks for Suniti Namjoshi's postmodern endeavour. She restructures stories and fables from different sources and resets their moral lines and narratives in such a way that like tectonic plates shifting and rearranging themselves each fable abounds in rich inter-textual allusions.

Suniti Namjoshi is the author of a number of collections of poems and fables as well as children's books. These include - *Feminist Fables* (1981), *The Conversations of Cow* (1985), *Aditi and the One-eyed Monkey* (1986), *The Blue Donkey Fables* (1988), *Saint Suniti and The Dragon* (1993), *Building Babel* (1996), *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth* (2000), *Suki* (2013) and *Foxy Aesop: On the Edge* (2018). In the past she has had several Canada Council grants.

I first interviewed Suniti on 5 March 2006 in Paris after the release of *Sycorax: New Fables and Poems* (2006). At the time, I was a doctoral candidate at the Université de Paris 3 – Sorbonne Nouvelle. In this conversation with her in May 2018, I want to highlight her craft as a fabulist. Her most recent book, *Foxy Aesop*, ends with the words: "The fables remain ... repeated, mutated, fizzing with energy". The same could be said of her own work.

CONVERSATION

- *Suniti, here we are, once again for another Conversation after nearly 12 years.*

Yes, I remember we met for lunch when we happened to be in Paris on a holiday. I was very taken with the fact that you lived in a place where they produced champagne. To live in Champagne seemed very exotic! But then I live in 'Wessex' – Thomas Hardy country. I suppose to somebody somewhere that too is exotic.

- *Yes Suniti. I still in live in Reims in Champagne-Ardenne or the Grand Est. It was a Conversation on your Animal Fables. You've had many Conversations with talking animals (Cow, Dragon, One-eyed Monkey, Blue Donkey) and nature (River, Stones). How do you choose the conversationalist in your fable? How do you set the stage for the interaction?*

I don't really 'choose' the creatures who have conversations with each other or with a character called 'Suniti'. For some reason the animal images are vivid in my mind and they have something to say, they're eloquent. There's a podcast I did called 'Unreal Animals' for 'Papercuts,' an online magazine. In it I've tried to explain why animal imagery is particularly powerful for everyone - not just me. We are connected to the animals – they are our fellow creatures - and we want to establish a connection with them. We admire their valour, their swiftness, their beauty, and sometimes, of course, we want to shy away from the connection. Animal imagery allows us to take a really good look at ourselves and perhaps that is why the 'unreal' i.e. literary animals occur so often in poems and fables everywhere.

- *Like many children in India, the first Indian fables I read were from Amar Chtira Katha's The Panchtantra and the Jataka Tales. Did you read them?*

I read *The Panchatantra*, also Greek myths, fairy tales, anything and everything really. My mother had a huge collection of books and later she gave me an account at a good bookstore. I was a bookworm – in those days we didn't have TV. Perhaps that's why 'unreal animals' – dragons, gryphons, and other creatures like nightingales who have real counterparts, but have somehow become literary because of the stories and poems written about them – that's why these creatures seem as real to me as the ones that one can actually see or touch. I remember when I was about eight not being sure about the difference between an account of how chocolate was made from cocoa beans hanging on trees and a fairy tale I was reading. After all, which is more unlikely – chocolate growing on trees or princes and princesses riding hither and thither?

- *I'd opt for the fairy tale, though reality is really different...*

Of course, there's a difference between writing a poem or a fable and living one's life. I don't know whether you've read the book, *Suki*. It's about my beloved cat. It took me 16 years after her death to be able to write about her – just couldn't get the distance for a long time. In a poem about her called 'Deaf Eurydice' I say:

This is twilight
time, Orpheus time, Demeter time, when they
call the long dead, and deaf Eurydice
struggles to hear and hearing nothing falls behind
till her footfall makes no imprint save on the mind.

An imprint on the mind is quite different from a physical presence.

- *Suniti, what inspired you to choose the form of a fable?*

I didn't 'choose' to write fables, though it's true that one of the first things I got published (in *Shankar's Weekly*, perhaps in 1958 or 1959) was about a pensioned off lion and his daughter sitting in the rose garden sipping tea. It was highly reactionary, I'm afraid. I think I was annoyed about the way the other politicians were treating my grandfather. I was only 17. That was 60 years ago.

- *And, did it lead to your transition from poet to fabulist?*

I don't see it as a transition. A fabulist is a poet. The sense has to be embodied in the sound and in the imagery – just as in a lyric poem. And, of course, both are highly concentrated forms. As Suniti says to her friends in *Saint Suniti and the Dragon*, "Poetry is the sound of the human animal" (29). In the early days I sometimes found I was writing prose poems. Later I discovered that the driving force of prose narrative could be very useful in reinforcing a startling conclusion.

- *My favourite fable "Broadcast Live" is from your collection of Feminist Fables? "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" (Feminist Fables 63). How did you build this fable?*

The fable you like works well in part because of the speed of the syntax. "Straightened a building, smiled at a child" etc. is a rapid sequence, then the slowness of "all" in "all in one morning" wraps up those activities. The phrasing of "took a little time off" is like "lassoed a

planet,” but different, because what is happening now is different. The fable consists of just one sentence, which both contains and juxtaposes the two contradictory aspects of her being. Syntax matters! Wish I could persuade the schools and the universities of that.

- *Who were your influences?*

I read Aesop, folk tales, fairy tales anything I could get hold off and of course, I was told stories. I think these might have been more than just influences – they entered my imagination, became a part of my mind. I remember though, the first time I came across Thurber’s fables – my mother had bought a couple of his books. I was charmed!

- *You express this idea of being charmed in a Blue Donkey poem entitled “Explanation”
The cat charmed me.*

The tree disarmed me.

And though the real people

hadn’t yet harmed me,

I thought that they would

given the chance. (Blue Donkey 7)

Is the intent of this poem to express the idea that people can be harmful when compared to harmless nature? Or is it a story from your childhood memories?

The former. Not that our fellow creatures, the animals, can’t be dangerous, but we, humans use our intelligence to carry destructiveness to new heights. A story I’ve used more than once is the one about the monkey and the crocodile. Goja, whom I loved dearly and who used to look after me when I was little, used to tell me it to me at bedtime. It was about how the crocodile thought that the monkey’s liver must be exceedingly sweet because the monkey fed on ‘jamboons’ – I don’t know what they’re called in English. I didn’t realise until much later that the story was from the *Panchatantra* It’s strange how that story stayed with me. The one-eyed monkey keeps recurring in my work. Goja had indeed lost an eye, I don’t know whether that has anything to do with anything.

- *How has growing up in India affected your cast of fables?*

Once, after a visit to India, my partner, Gill, said to me, ‘It’s very strange. Whenever I ask a question I get a story instead of a straightforward answer’ She didn’t mind. She liked the stories. I hadn’t noticed that we often say what we want to say through a story. Perhaps we do. We are, after all, a nation of story tellers. And we don’t mind embroidering the stories! – I just realised that I’ve replied to your question with a story.

- *Your postmodern fables are a hybrid intermingling of the old with the new with resonances of the East and the West. How do you weave the web of a fable?*

Like any other writer, I make the new out of the old. As Pound said, 'Make it New'. Or as Yeats said we use "the monuments of unageing intellect" as well as the "rag and bone shop of the heart". There is no progress in literature, but a writer can't copy old poems – she would produce dead poems.

- *That's interesting! In your latest work of fables, Foxy Aesop - On The Edge, in a conversation with Aesop, Aesop asks Sprite, "Are you re-writing my fables?" Sprite replies "No, I don't re-write them really. I just use them to make new ones" (61-62). Like Aesop the foxy fabulist, do you voice your thoughts in the guise of Sprite, a figment of the future, a TNP (Third Person Narrator)?*

Yes, that's part of the strategy I use, especially as I'm writing about the problem of being a writer, and particularly a fabulist. In this instance the Sprite doesn't have the disinterested authority of the normal third person narrator. She's also a first person narrator and a character in the narrative – she's silly sometimes and can get quite huffy – especially when called 'Sprout' by mistake.

- *In your other fable collections, 'Suniti' often surfaces or makes her appearance in a fable. While reading Foxy Aesop On The Edge I missed her. Was it deliberate?*

She's there in the guise of 'Sprite' – the hero worshipping, yet critical fabulist from Aesop's future.

- *The book, Foxy Aesop - On the Edge, is aptly punctuated with sketches of Foxy Aesop's fables in the vineyard and lend colour and ambience to the theme of living life on the edge! Would you like to comment on the artwork?*

I came across the images of the woodcuts on a website set up by Prof. Laura Gibbs. I didn't know anything much about them or even how to set about getting permission to use five or six of them from the Library of Congress. Prof. Gibbs was very helpful to me though we didn't know each other at all.

- *As a present-day fabulist do you live by the watchwords – "Even if foxes can't write, don't take the trouble to outfox a fox"?*

Are you quoting from that bit in *Foxy Aesop* where the fox steals from the honey pots and leaves a note behind?

- Yes, and I find it witty for a fabulist trying to outfox a fox!

It was only a little joke about realism in fables. You are right though, the stuff of literature isn't so much words on paper as language itself. Having grown up in India like you, I know that a strong oral tradition trains the mind!

- *Sprite isn't your first spirit cast in a fable! In Sycorax: New Fables and Poems, Shakespeare's Ariel from The Tempest has a voice in this collection of fables. Does Sprite have a specific significance for you?*

No. Ariel derives from Shakespeare's Ariel. But here the narrator is called 'Sprite' only because they don't know what else to call her.

- *Who is sprite in the Namjoshian fable? Is she the celtic spriggan? Or is she an icon in a computer game that can be manoeuvred around the screen or in your fable with a joystick? Or do you refer to the Green Woodpeckers from Suffolk? Or a lemon-lime refreshment?*

I didn't know that the Green Woodpeckers from Suffolk were called Sprites. Are they different from other green woodpeckers? Alas, this particular Sprite is only a fabulist from our time who is hell bent on questioning Aesop.

- *I was just wondering if you write only in English?*

I was educated in English, so I think in English. When my parents sent me to an American school (as opposed to one run on the British public school model) I remember being told by them, "Learn what they have to teach you, but never become one of them" How can one learn what someone has to teach you – especially when it's an entire language – without to some degree becoming "one of them"? Being sent to the J. Krishnamurthi Rishi Valley school later was helpful. Having more than one language and more than one perspective can be useful. But you know that ...

- *Yes, like most Indians who are proud of their regional languages, I do speak Tamil to my son in France. I do all my writing in English. Would your fables have a similar cast in Marathi, which I think is your mother tongue?*

Some of the fables work well in Marathi. It's a highly ironic language. And I suspect that the driving force of narrative might not be all that different in the Indo-European languages. Specifically Western references might cause a problem, because they would have to be explained and that would spoil the concentrated impact of the story.

- *Do you have a preference for English? Tamil is my mother tongue and it was my second language in school with English being the language of instruction in school. I think like*

many Indians we tend to choose English. In the mode of the fable, does the medium of language cast different shades or light on the moral of the fable?

I don't have a 'preference' for English. I don't have a choice. My Marathi just isn't good enough. Not having spent more time on Marathi is one of the things I regret in my life. (The other is ever having smoked.) And yet I think a Maharashtrian sensibility permeates my writing – the irony, the playfulness and the highly developed sense of the absurd are characteristic of Marathi - of some of the other Indian languages also perhaps.

- *As a researcher living in France, I have already contemplated the idea of translating your fables from English to French but have hesitated to do so for fear of losing the original texture or altering the fit of the fable or diluting its cultural essence in a case of 'lost in translation'! Have your fables been translated into other languages? Have you considered the idea of translating them into Indian languages yourself?*

For fun you could try translating a fable into French and into Tamil and see what happens. You might find that the Tamil actually works very well. Some of the fables have been translated into Marathi, Norwegian, Italian and so forth. The whole book, *Feminist Fables*, has been translated into Dutch, Italian, Spanish and Korean. Not being competent in all these languages, I don't know how well they work.

- *I'll give it a try and will get back to you on that later. Even though your fables portray a large array of issues ranging from creation myths, good v. evil, truth, paradox, irony and cultural stereotypes, you've been labelled as a 'feminist fabulist'. What's your reaction to that?*

I don't mind being labelled 'feminist'. When the day comes when being a feminist is as much a matter of course as being truthful or honest or being against racism, or being against cruelty, it won't matter. To ask, "What does it mean to be human?" applies equally to women. I'm not sure though how soon that day will come. When I first became politicised and discovered that there were other people who were questioning the patriarchy and doing so brilliantly, I felt so pleased, so invigorated. I couldn't wait to tell my mother. I was astonished by her response. She said the equivalent of "I'll be damned if I see myself as an oppressed woman!" Of course she didn't swear, but it carried that force.

- *In your recently published book of fables *Foxy Aesop*, Sprite muses on 'how much power does a writer have?' What's your take on that? Will your fables change the*

world? What led to the writing of Foxy Aesop? You've also written a "Homage to Aesop" in Sycorax: New Fables and Poems...

I'm afraid writers don't have very much power, no single individual does. But we've got to try – the world, the planet itself, needs saving. We've made a mess. Why did I write *Foxy Aesop*? For fun. I wanted to play with Aesop, trade fables with him. I also wanted to ask him, and therefore myself, what my function was as a fabulist. After all, the fable is a didactic form. The role of the Sprite as Tipon, Third Person Narrator, was a bonus – it allowed me to demonstrate just how circumscribed such a role is.

- *Do you have a 'pet' fable?*

It changes. Perhaps my favourite is often the last one that I've been working on. Here's one about Goldilocks:

GOLDY?

The original tale tells of a badly-behaved old woman who enters the forest home of three bachelor bears whilst they are away. (Wikipedia)

The old woman in the forest is faint with hunger, delirious with pain, barely able to stay upright as she staggers through the snow until she sees, or thinks she sees, a small cottage. The door is unlatched. It looks inviting. It's what she needs. There's porridge on the table – three bowls of porridge! She gobbles them up, stumbles over chairs and falls across a bed.

She no longer knows whether she's awake or fast asleep. She's little again, and has golden hair. The cottage is her home, the food on the table was made for her and this is her bed. She is much loved. This is heaven possibly. She does not know whether she's alive or dead. She is discreetly dead and lying in the snow. The owners, when they return, do not have to concern themselves. Perhaps when she was young it was still a dream – who knows? – it was an excellent one, and much to be desired by everyone.

- *What's your next 'fable' project?*

I don't know. I have a manuscript consisting of a long sequence called *The Dream Book* based on the dream imagery in 'The Tempest' and then various poems and fables which could be added to the book. There's a sense in which fables and poems write themselves. They have to work out their inner logic and I have to help them. It's something like that. I hadn't thought of Goldie as a person in need or a refugee. (That she can be seen as a refugee becomes clearer in later sections of the short sequence.) And yet, it's obvious – anyone seeking food and

shelter is a refugee – a person seeking refuge. I’ve often thought that a poet or a fabulist or perhaps any writer really is the child saying, “The Emperor has no clothes on” It’s obvious. And the obvious is devastating.

- *Thank you Suniti for your time. It was interesting to have this Conversation with you!*



Suhasini Vincent is an Associate Professor of Legal English at the Université de Paris 2 – Panthéon Assas. Her research focusses on the legal scope of environmental laws in postcolonial countries and explores eco-critical activism in the essays and literary works of Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh and Yann Martel. She has also presented papers on Experimental Writing in the works of Salman Rushdie, Suniti Namjoshi, Namita Gokhale, Shashi Tharoor, Anita Desai and Kiran Desai in international conferences in Europe. Her research interests include the postcolonial dynamics of translation, and she has interviewed Tamil authors like Ambai and Sivashankari, well-known translators and editors in the Indian literary scene.