“WHY ALL THIS MYTHICISM?”: TRANSGRESSION IN *ST. SUNITI AND THE DRAGON*

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By

Jason W. Breiter

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Dean
College of Graduate Studies and Research
University of Saskatchewan
107 Administration Place
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Canada

ABSTRACT

Suniti Namjoshi's short work "St. Suniti and the Dragon," found in the author's fabulist collection of the same name, is a formally amorphous text that alternates among allusion and alteration of Western canonical myth. The story, in which the journey of the aspiring hero St. Suniti is detailed, alludes primarily to *Beowulf* and the legend of "St. George and the Dragon" in a manner similar to, but expansive upon, the feminist revisionist project of the last few decades. While Namjoshi navigates feminist politics, she also examines the postmodern impulse to consider identity as subjective experience. In so doing, she deconstructs notions of canonical character archetypes while suggesting that identity politics must involve a multiplicity of archetypes – that is, the self is seldom archetypal in the singular, but rather an amorphous and discontinuous series of mythic archetypes. Thus, the form of Namjoshi's text – generically ambiguous and varied – mimics the author's suggestion for the composition of identity. The result is a story that transgresses prescribed social conventions and archetypes while simultaneously invoking their mythic sources as means of argumentation.

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"Why all this mythicism?": Transgression in *St. Suniti and the Dragon*

"Ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created."

(Mary Douglas, quoted in Gedalof 12)

"I will tell you what I think are the differences and similarities between mathematics and literature. In mathematics, you have a system and from those axioms everything else follows…. You cannot jump from one system to another. If you do that, you will get insane results; but in literature when you juxtapose the systems, you get your most witty and ironic effects…. The way I see it, what is really elegant in [my stories] is the juxtaposing of systems with their respective logic intact. It is in this way that the absurdity becomes clear."

(Suniti Namjoshi, quoted in Vevaina 197-8)

Suniti Namjoshi is, like her work, difficult to describe accurately with any brevity. Born into the Indian aristocracy (Kafka 55), Namjoshi was a member of the Indian Civil Service before attending university in the United States and receiving a Master's degree from the University of Missouri (Karpinski 227, Steinisch 265). She followed her education at Missouri by completing her Ph.D. at McGill (Montreal) and lecturing at the University of Toronto. Raised in the East and educated (thoroughly) in the West, Namjoshi put her vast cultural knowledge to work throughout the 1980s and into the new millennium with titles such as *Feminist Fables* (1981), *The Authentic Lie* (1982), *From the Bedside Book of Nightmares* (1984), *The Conversations of Cow* (1985), *The Blue Donkey Fables* (1988), *Because of India* (1989), *The Mothers of Maya Diip* (1989), *St. Suniti and the Dragon* (1994), and *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth* (2000). She has been called a writer of "contemporary postcolonial transnational literature" (Karpinski 227), "an expatriate Canadian South Asian author currently living in England" (227), an "Anglo-Indian or Indo-English writer" (227), a "fabulist, fantasy writer, and mythmaker" (227), an "autoethnographer" (228), an "allegorical fabulist" (Palekar 107), and a "diasporic, Indian

lesbian-feminist author" (Mann 97), among other things. But despite the myriad labels Namjoshi has had bestowed upon her, she remains generically elusive and enigmatic. Her work, in which she (or a thinly veiled version of herself) is often the protagonist, consistently explores the challenge and inevitable folly of applying labels to groups and individuals. And while many critics have attempted to label Namjoshi's work, I am interested instead in the difficulties surrounding generic identification of her texts and the literary implications of her generic ambiguity. One story clearly exemplifies Namjoshi's generic multiplicity and ambiguity. This story, "St. Suniti and the Dragon," simultaneously uses various generic conventions and thus defies even the tenuous generic classification of the rest of her corpus. Such ambiguity makes "St. Suniti" arguably the most difficult of Namjoshi's texts to define in terms of genre or mode. Scholars such as Sabine Steinisch have suggested that Namjoshi's works are, primarily, feminist rewritings of fables and fairytales (270, 277); however, if this claim is true, then Namjoshi also innovates considerably within the feminist re-visioning project of the later twentieth century: she expands the possibilities of revision rather than simply participating in an established trend. The most important issue, though, is not whether "St. Suniti" revises (or even redefines) one genre more than others, but rather how the multi-generic quality of the story affects the reader's experience of it and its intertexts. "St. Suniti and the Dragon" exemplifies the transgressive nature of Namjoshi's work in terms of both genre and content, and prompts responses to the hitherto unanswered questions about her unique writing: why the varying form, why the generic ambiguity, and – as St. Suniti's friends inquire – "why all this mythicism?" (Namjoshi 50). As Namjoshi supplements stories from the Western canon with her work, she deconstructs both notions of canonicity and archetypes. Thus, the mythicism central to "St. Suniti and the Dragon" is a means of self-definition for the oft-labeled author; her appropriation and re-working of

mythic conventions, and her simultaneous varying of form and genre, re-presents identity as a discontinuous multiplicity of archetypes.

St. Suniti and the Dragon comprises two sections: the first is the eponymous story, while the second is a group of short fables called "The Solitary Fables." It is with the first section that this essay is concerned. The story – I am wary of labeling it anything more specific – follows the titular heroine, St. Suniti, in her quest to achieve sainthood. She considers the traditional methods by which one may become sainted – warrior heroics, martyrdom, missionary work, meditative study and benevolent sagacity – determining, if nothing else, that she does not conform to traditional models. And as Suniti explores the various forms of sainthood, the story, too, varies in form. That is, while Namjoshi alludes to and plays with different generic conventions, she also varies the physical layout and appearance of the text. Sometimes prose and sometimes poetry, sometimes diary and sometimes postcard message – readers are never certain what the turn of a page may bring. During her quest for sainthood, Suniti meets Grendel, Grendel's mama, and an elegy-producing dragon (in homage, certainly, to Kenneth Grahame's "The Reluctant Dragon"). Her reactions to and interactions with the *Beowulf*-ian monsters are intriguing for both readers and Suniti herself, and she often finds herself questioning her relationship to the monsters, unsure of how to proceed with creatures that do not perform the murderous atrocities they do in other stories. Suniti's intense contemplation of the supposed prerequisites for saintliness, along with her unexpected relationships with "monsters," challenges the conventions of the hero/villain binary, and all that each category of that dichotomy entails.

By complicating the hero/villain binary, Namjoshi draws the reader's attention to the social construction of such literary – and indeed mythic and archetypal – roles. *St. Suniti* is, in part, an exploration of such social constructions, and significantly addresses the politics of

identity. As Mary Douglas has indicated, civilizing systems of social order, meant to remedy an "untidy experience," are based on polarities exaggerated to the point of artifice. She notes that "[i]t is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created" (qtd in Gedalof 12). Order, here, creates meaning, and transgressing the social norm exposes the artifice upon which that order is built. The politics of such polarities, specifically in patriarchal and heterosexist Western societies, leads to a hierarchy based on centre-margin distinctions; that is, one pole is favoured over the other, and so the civilizing systems invest some poles with social power and, concordantly, divest others. Namjoshi, as indicated in the second epigraph above, has stated that she prefers to juxtapose multiple "systems with their respective logic intact. It is in this way that the absurdity becomes clear" (qtd in Vevaina 198). She thus transgresses systems of meaning-making by invoking multiple systems in such a way as to have them compete with one another. The competition reveals the absurdity of each system by subverting their respective claims to universality, and so enables the individual to recognize the irresolvable disparities and contradictions intrinsically tied to the notion of selfhood.

In *St. Suniti*, the social systems are informed by Namjoshi's intertexts as well as by references to contemporary society. The story alludes primarily to *Beowulf* and the legend of "St. George and the Dragon," two works in which heroes and villains are clearly defined and assigned opposing social spaces – heroes belong at the centre of civilization (Heorot, for example) and villains at the periphery (toxic fen spaces). The logic of the binary is undermined, however, through the literature's juxtaposition with, for example, the Gulf War. Namjoshi ponders the artifice of heroism in contemporary society, and notes that the soldiers "are not posing either. Even if they wanted to, they haven't the time. They haven't claimed that they're

St. George" (Namjoshi 40). Heroes function in a different manner here than in Namjoshi's intertexts, and their heroism is even questioned – they don't have time to "pose" as heroes. While traditional stories such as "St. George and the Dragon" inform the model of heroism in Western culture, Namjoshi ponders the heroic qualities of those protecting contemporary society. The soldiers certainly perform that task; however the complex politics of war trouble their sense, and the author's understanding, of the chivalric heroism apparent in "St. George." The soldiers do not call themselves St. George, and neither does Namjoshi. Heroism here is a guise to be donned, a label to have applied to one's actions, a pose; unlike the story of St. George, there is no obvious distinction between good and evil. Rather, there is only a sense of opposing national politics and competing social systems and cultural constructions. As Anannnya Dasgupta observes, "Namjoshi consistently employs this technique of juxtaposing mismatched worlds in order to interrogate the values of each system without allowing it the comfort of its familiar rhetoric" (104). By doing so, she uncovers the contrived social constructions of identity. And this thematic move is of prime importance to Namjoshi; as a lesbian, a member of a racial minority in North America, and a feminist, Namjoshi is clearly on the margins of society and thus has a vested interest in centre-margin politics. But she also transgresses the system in such a way as to deconstruct the notion of centres and margins. Her politics of absurdity seek to strip away the artifice of polarizing social systems and lay bare the misconceptions and inequities inherent in a system of "order." It is in this transgressive mode that Namjoshi writes and is part of the reason that she invokes relatively generically stable intertexts in *St. Suniti*.

The invocation of *Beowulf* and the legend of "St. George and the Dragon" associates "St. Suniti and the Dragon" with a revisionist style of storytelling that came into prominence in the 1970s and has carried on to this day. That style, generally speaking, involves the appropriation

of cultural stories – such as folktales, fairytales and fables – in order that they may be revised or re-imagined to reflect the contemporary concerns of the author and her/his audience. Many such stories have been rewritten by social minorities to subvert the social inequities apparent in the stories central to the Western cultural value system. Feminists, for instance, have contributed *en masse* to the growing corpus of works in this mode, generally with aims of redefining the role of females in the tales, and thus culture. Donald Haase notes that Alison Lurie's article "Fairy Tale Liberation" (1970) catalyzed feminist revisions of fairytales, effectively spawned a new mode of criticism, and inspired the production of such literature (1, 22). Haase catalogues the emergence of female-centric anthologies of fairytales, both original and gathered, and summarizes his findings by noting that "anthologies of literary fairytales by and about women complemented… collections of folktales from the 1980s and 1990s. Some of these drew attention to historically neglected fairytales penned by women. Others assembled contemporary fairytales authored by men and women engaged in the cultural debate over gender and sexual politics" (9). Some of the most important critical work in the field, claims Haase, was produced by Jack Zipes. Zipes insists that "stories are continually being rewritten to respond to the prevailing ideology… [which is one of the most] crucial starting points for a feminist reading of the genre" (Sellers 14). If the cultural stories are rewritten to reflect changing social attitudes, then stories will not become static and stagnant in their sociopolitical dimensions. It is with this progressive attitude that writers such as Anne Sexton, Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood and Emma Donoghue[1], amongst many others, have begun to "write back" to the dominant cultural paradigm of heterosexist patriarchy.

[1] Examples include works such as Sexton's *Transformations* (1971), Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), Atwood's *Bluebeard's Egg* (1983) and Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* (1997).

One cannot, however, simply speak of feminism as a single and unified ideology. It is, rather, an umbrella term for a wide range of beliefs that reflect a common desire for female equality. Misha Kavka has said that "feminism is not… the object of a singular history but, rather, a term under which people have in different times invested in a more general struggle for social justice and in so doing have participated in and produced multiple histories" (quoted in Gillis et al 4); there is a sense of multivocality here which allows individuation. However, such individuation has, of late, been a site of contention. The role of the individual within the category "woman" – which in the first and second "waves" has been stressed as a category of solidarity – has contributed to the debate about the "third wave" of feminism. While the 'first wave' is clearly regarded as that which encompasses the suffrage movement, the 'second wave' is regarded as the rise of political activism that began to take place in the 1960s and 1970s. Gillis expounds upon the ebb and flow of the feminist movements:

> Despite the political intensity of peace camps, anti-racist activities and 'reclaim the night' marches, this concentration on 'woman,' as both the object and subject of discourse, resulted in a shift within the movement. The concept 'woman' seemed too *fragile* to bear the weight of all contents and meanings ascribed to it. The elusiveness of this category of 'woman' raised questions about the nature of identity, unity and collectivity. Appearing to undercut the women's movement, fundamental principles of the feminist project were hotly contested. What we now understand as the 'third wave' emerges from these contestations – and the responses to them. (1)

The "second wave," which attempted to define "woman," has been, for some people, supplanted by a "third wave" which allows for individual self-determination without a definition of what a

"woman" should be. As Ann Martin notes, "third wave" feminism attempts to avoid the "reductive stability of oppositional politics and of totalizing or exclusionary categories… and emphasizes the complexity and provisionality of their identities" (8). In "third wave" feminism, the idea of the feminist-determined objective "woman" begins to be deconstructed.

What all of this means, then, is that the feminism apparent in, say, Carter's 1979 collection *The Bloody Chamber* is not identical to that in "St. Suniti." Kevin Paul Smith advises that when one encounters a revisionist story, the reader should ask why the author has chosen to rewrite an older text. In terms of Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, his answer is that the book has "an intent in line with that of second wave feminism: to reclaim fairytales for women by highlighting the underlying misogyny of certain stories, or the way in which these stories have been used against women" (36). Carter's fairytales in *Chamber* provide an alternative to traditional fairytales for women; and thus, she relies heavily on her intertexts and only minimally changes the plot so as to reveal a feminist version of the text. In the titular story "The Bloody Chamber," for instance, Carter retells the story of Bluebeard and, while expanding the story narratively, retains almost the entire original plot. The major alteration occurs at the end of the story when the female protagonist's mother, rather than her brothers as in Perrault's variant of the tale, comes to the rescue. By retaining the plot and only revising details, Carter and her contemporaries attempt to reclaim a space for women as more than victims in these powerful cultural narratives. Tom Shippey has noted the efficacy and frequency of such revisions:

> By the 1990s, the traditional fairy tale had become a contested site, viewed by many as an actual or potential means of social comment, social control, or social change. This development was both a recent and an academic one, brought about

> when new modes of criticism exposed long-familiar fairy tales as transparent, suggestive, and above all, pliable. (253)

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, criticism and revisions of fairytales proliferated and became so common that Shippey has further commented that "[e]verybody [uses fairytales for their own purposes] nowadays, *because they have been shown how to*" (258-59, italics Shippey's). The frequency of such use suggests that the re-imagining of cultural stories is a productive means for the marginalized to carve out a space for themselves socially, as the re-imaginings juxtapose new archetypes (which represent the marginalized) with traditional ones.

Namjoshi shares the spirit of resistance to heteropatriarchy with Carter; her tales illustrate a will to challenge dominant cultural value systems that are based on the centre-margin binary. And while the authors express themselves in different ways, it is quite apparent that both Carter and Namjoshi share a political unwillingness to accept the marginalizing meta-narratives of patriarchy that permeate Western cultural stories. Such incredulity, as Jean-Francois Lyotard so famously announced, is the postmodern condition. Thus, while ostensibly reflecting different aspects of feminism, Carter and Namjoshi participate in both it and postmodernism. The relationship between feminism and postmodernism, however, has in the past been tenuous; many scholars are reluctant to acknowledge synergy due to the generally political quality of feminism and the seemingly apolitical nature of postmodernism. For example, Steinisch notes that "feminist theorists consider the postmodern deconstruction of a unified subject a danger to feminism in general" (266). However, the "third wave" functions more readily with the postmodern impulse, as it is more concerned with writing from the margins and with exploring subjective experience than was the "second wave." As Magali Cornier Michael observes,"[t]he postmodern destabilization of binary logic can be the site of a political intersection with

feminism, since feminism seeks to eradicate men's dominance over women as well as revalue women's differences from men and (the more recent move among feminists) women's differences from each other" (25). In "St. Suniti," the intersection of postmodernism and 'third wave' feminism is apparent. The result is a story that defies easy classification and, indeed, works to reveal the artifice of classification.

Namjoshi's story is concerned with the philosophy of "third wave" feminism, specifically its postmodern emphasis on individual self-determination and the provisionality of identity. Namjoshi's transgression pulls no punches: her work is not afraid to implicate other women as contributors to the social woes of the female populace – men and women, judged on an individual basis, can be equally guilty of ignorance and folly. This fact has not always been clear in critical analyses of Namjoshi's texts. Steinisch, for instance, argues of Namjoshi's work that "retelling fables and fairy tales from a woman's point of view is the counter-discourse with which she subverts the imperialist patriarchal assumptions underlying the world of traditional fables" (277). However, Namjoshi is not writing on behalf of all women; rather, she is writing as an individual. Her work is indicative of individual self-determination, rather than a public form of collaborative female activism. Indeed, she indicates in *Because of India* that she dislikes activism and instead writes in order to "try to make the patterns that [are] authentic to me" (Namjoshi 79). Namjoshi's work, then, is an expression of her personal experiences rather than a universalizing feminist treatise, as Steinisch seems to imply, and the exercise in subjective expression is based in Namjoshi's suspicion of the meta-narratives of both patriarchy and the constructed Woman, no matter who the architect(s) may be.

Namjoshi's reason for revising cultural stories, then, differs from Carter's. Namjoshi's "third wave" postmodern story does not rely on her intertexts for the plot, and is really only

barely recognizable as a revision. Her story alludes to creatures and instances from her source material, and has some analogues to their plots, but is largely an original text, both thematically and formally. Thus, while Carter revised the ending of the Bluebeard tale to insert a female heroine, Namjoshi revises aspects of the structure of the intertexts, and instead uses characters from the works in a wholly new way so that she may tell an original story. Further, Namjoshi's story challenges traditional narrative and generic conventions. Her variation among forms – such as prose, poetry, journal, etc. – is unrecognizable as either a formal adaptation or a revision of either of her primary Western intertexts. A very important distinction between Namjoshi and her predecessors is that she is not attempting to supplant her intertexts with feminist alternatives, an act which propagates further patriarchal/feminist binaries and attempts to replace the centre with the margin. Rather, she is supplementing them by alluding to characters in patriarchally authorized stories and exploring how her character might interact with them in a given situation. By borrowing from cultural stories such as *Beowulf* and "St. George and the Dragon" for their characters rather than their plots, Namjoshi makes the characters, in part, her own. She avoids replacing the centre with the margin, as previous feminist revisions may seem to do, thus illustrating her postmodern sensibilities.

Namjoshi's story avoids polarizing classifications of identity, and indeed "emphasizes the individual's involvement in contradictory discourses and irresolvable situations" (Martin 14). For Namjoshi, identity politics are not as simple as one coherent category winning out over another (i.e. feminism over patriarchy, or vice versa). Namjoshi's unwillingness to resolve identity politics may trouble the reader's recognition of her sources and their traditional archetypes, but the author also avoids the theoretical quagmire that feminist revisionists have traditionally encountered when they attempt to rewrite stories in such a way as to empower

women. Since they must invoke their intertexts as the culturally authoritative "originals," they propagate the patriarchal sources and simultaneously – through their alternatives – illustrate that they must be replaced by stories written in the feminist mode. In other words, the revisions reiterate – and therefore authorize – the very texts they intend to subvert, thus compromising the subversion. This is what Namjoshi avoids: she is not retelling *Beowulf*, nor is she retelling "St. George and the Dragon." She is, instead, appropriating the characters for her own ends.

Because of the way in which she uses her intertexts, calling Namjoshi a revisionist in the same sense as Carter and her contemporaries is a misunderstanding of her methods. It is also difficult to ascribe to "St. Suniti" any generic classification – it is not entirely a fairytale, certainly not a folktale and not wholly a myth. It has similarities to D.L. Ashliman's description of a saint's legend (203), like "St. George and the Dragon," though it does not entirely conform to the genre. Unlike the legend of "St. George and the Dragon," which is best known from Jacobus de Voragine's *The Golden Legend* (originally *Legenda Aurea*, a massively popular fantasy and simultaneously a collection of hagiographies), Namjoshi's story is not primarily concerned with providing a "didactic function, [with] the exemplary behavior depicted by [the protagonist] serving to enlighten and inspire… readers" (Ashliman 203). St. Suniti's consistent indecision and ultimate inability to fight monsters in the same manner as St. George hardly equates her to the legendary dragonslayer. And if one hopes to find answers to the question of genre in the other main intertext, *Beowulf*, disappointment must surely result. While *Beowulf* is a stable text – the only recorded text occurs in the Cotton Vitellius manuscript (London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A.xv) – the generic classification of the work has changed with the passage of time and academic zeitgeists. Originally considered a history, critics slowly began to regard the poem as both an epic and a legend. This initial stage of genre classification of

Beowulf relied upon the reception of the poem as a record of true events, and much scholarship was concerned with extracting as many historical details as possible from the manuscript (Klaeber xxvi, xxxvi, xliv). Academic focus, and certainly genre classification, was shifted considerably by J.R.R. Tolkien's influential paper "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," delivered in 1936 as the Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture. The paper argued for critics to recognize the fantastic elements in *Beowulf*, and consider the literary quality of the poem rather than its potential for disseminating historical information. The epic now began to be seen more as folktale than as legend, and thus criticism changed accordingly. Tolkien describes *Beowulf* as folktale (97), but it is not simply a variant to him. Instead, it is a generative seed of a strand of folktale, the poem authorizing the form. So, while there are analogues of *Beowulf*-ian episodes in stories such as *Grettis saga* (also known as *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*), Tolkien maintained that *Beowulf* is the authoritative folktale from which all other similar tales derive. From Tolkien's standpoint, then, the text of *Beowulf* is authoritative, even if its generic classification has changed over time. Namjoshi, a scholar in her own right, is surely aware of the generic ambiguity surrounding the canonical poem. So while she seems to be using stable and authoritative intertexts, Namjoshi is actually engaging with works that have proven generically indeterminate in the past, an act which contributes to the generic ambiguity of her own work.

So, as Kevin Smith would have us inquire, why is Namjoshi using these intertexts in particular? In the case of her engagement with *Beowulf*, part of the reason is the generic ambiguity that the text lends to an already ambiguous story. Another central reason is the canonicity of both of the works. As noted above, *Beowulf* is currently only attested in one manuscript, while the legend of St. George is primarily known through *The Golden Legend*. Both heroic protagonists hold imposing positions in the literary canon and in Western history;

Beowulf is the first epic written in English (albeit Old English), and, despite Tolkien's emphasis on its place as a folkloric text, is a major source of historical information of the culture in which it was recorded. St. George is the patron saint of England, revered for his chivalry and ideals to the same degree as Arthur. His story is widely known, and his battle with a dragon challenges Beowulf's in fame. The two figures help define the heroic for Western culture, and unmistakably illustrate the desire for Good to triumph over Evil. Their stature in literary and national canons, as well as their moral simplicity, makes the texts obvious targets for Namjoshi to challenge.

However, she does not invoke them in order that she may redefine the heroic, or alter what is Good and what is Evil. Instead she troubles the very idea that the purely heroic exists, that people can (and want to) be purely good or evil. "St. Suniti" is not a work of subversion, in the sense that that it is not a story that strives to reveal the errors of the respective value systems in *Beowulf* and the legend of St. George. Rather, it is a story that complicates the notion that such value systems can be deemed completely wrong or right. Namjoshi juxtaposes the social values in the intertexts with another option, in the form of an alternate (and not a replacement) story – one of her own creation. And by using the intertexts in this way, she authorizes a new model, or makes unofficial the models in the intertexts. As Cristina Bacchilega notes, "[t]he postmodern fairytale's dissemination of multiple possible versions is strangely powerful – all re-tellings, re-interpretations, and re-visions may appear to be equally authorized as well as equally unauthorized" (23). By supplying an option that alludes to, but does not supplant, the Western canonical stories, Namjoshi moves the stable characters into an unstable realm, and places them in a wider cultural story-pot; they become culturally accessible characters – that is, accessible and thus malleable and pliable for contemporary storytellers – rather than authoritative and static

canonical icons. Such a move towards accessibility is reminiscent of the oral storytelling tradition in which the exploits of cultural heroes are mutable depending on the orator, audience, and the circumstances in which the story is being told. Namjoshi, then, restores the characters to a previous state of accessibility; the analogues between *Grettis Saga* and *Beowulf*, for instance, have certainly been used to argue that both are simply variants of the same original story, each of which evolved independently according to different oral traditions[2]. By using the characters in her own way – in a move not unlike John Gardner's in his 1971 novel *Grendel* – Namjoshi deconstructs the authority of the canon by allowing the canonical Western heroes to enter into dialogues with her own creations. Namjoshi can thus freely explore themes and preconceptions in the source material while writing her own story. The paths to becoming a hero or saint, then, can be explored, compared and contrasted rather than only authorized or subverted as is the case with "second wave" revisionist politics.

Such dialogue between characters occurs constantly in *St. Suniti*. For instance, one day St. Suniti is approached by both Grendel and his Mama (alternately called Mum, but never Mother as in translations of *Beowulf*), and she must decide how to react to the matriarch's demands:

> "We're going to have to eat you, you know. It's not for myself, you understand, but Sonny Boy here is starving to death and I've got to feed him." Suniti glanced at Grendel, a long adolescent with hungry eyes; she looked away quickly. It was a difficult situation: could she talk her way out?
>
> "Please Madam," she began tentatively, "as a fellow woman you are surely unwilling to fatten your son by victimizing me?"

[2] Examples of academic investigation of the connection includes works by T.M. Andersson, L.D. Benson, M. Fjalldal, G.N. Garmonsway, R.L. Harris, R.W. McConchie, C.S. Smith, D. Stedman, and A.A. Wachsler. Refer to "Works Consulted."

> "Willing or unwilling, don't really matter," the Mama replied. "He's got to be fed and that's about it." Then she looked cunning, and in a fair imitation of Suniti's voice, added slyly, "But surely, Sunny, as a fellow woman you ought to be willing to aid and abet?" (16)

The fierce Grendel that any reader of *Beowulf* expects to find is absent, replaced by a "long adolescent" who is incapable of hunting for himself. It is Grendel's Mama, still nameless, that is capable of both procuring food and conversing with St. Suniti. Unlike her textual predecessor, Grendel's Mama attempts to reason with and justify her actions to the "hero" figure: Grendel needs sustenance in order to survive. This simple addition to the interaction between the "monster" and "hero" figures adds a realistic level of complexity to the relationship: the "monsters" are not acting out of a desire to be evil, but rather out of the need to survive. And the situation, unlike in the Old English epic, is not resolved by blind violence. Instead, St. Suniti wonders if she can talk her way out. And here is the point at which Namjoshi makes apparent two systems of order simultaneously at work: the "monster versus hero" system of *Beowulf* is juxtaposed with contemporary 'second wave' mentality (which supposes a universal loyalty between women), and their interaction with one another evokes a sense of the absurd. As St. Suniti attempts to resolve the hero/monster situation, she attempts to negotiate with Grendel's Mama (unlike *Beowulf*, who did not attempt to talk his way out of such situations). But the feminist logic that she employs – surely Grendel's mama would not victimize a fellow woman – fails to change the reality that Grendel has to eat. The "second wave" mentality that all women should unite against patriarchal control is undermined here in the face of the immediate and local need of Grendel's Mama to feed her child; the idealism of the 'second wave' is compromised by such reality. What is more, Grendel's Mama turns the tables and uses the same logic to suggest

that as a woman, St. Suniti should help her by offering herself to Grendel in the cause of nourishing the dependent young. Namjoshi uses the dialogue between the characters as a point of intersection between the two systems of order, and the result illustrates that neither system – that of the hero/monster binary or that of the feminist/patriarchal binary – is completely functional. As a result, St. Suniti must transgress the bounds of both systems in order to find a reasonable solution to the situation. Further, the boundaries between the perceived consumer and the potentially consumed are blurred as Namjoshi connects the two via homonym: Sonny, a.k.a. Grendel, and Sunny, a.k.a. St. Suniti, are connected here as Grendel's Mama reasons with the protagonist. Again, the hero/monster binary is troubled and the parallels between the two illustrate Namjoshi's unwillingness to draw binary distinctions.

Namjoshi does not fill old wineskins with new wine, to borrow a phrase from Carter ("Notes" 37); instead, she mixes old and new wine in a wineskin of her own fashioning. That is to say, the formal innovations apparent in the structure of *St. Suniti* – the wineskin – contains some borrowed content. The old wine, in this case, is the analogous content of *St. Suniti* and its intertexts. As in *Beowulf*, Namjoshi's story contains encounters with three "monsters": Grendel, Grendel's Mama, and a dragon. And like Beowulf's quest, St. Suniti's journey is one of personal self-improvement and social recognition, though the two heroes have very different means and ends. For Beowulf, that recognition comes through feats of strength and bravery against inherently evil adversaries. The path for Beowulf is conceptually simple, if physically daunting: there are evil creatures that he must kill, and by doing so he earns prestige amongst his *comitatus*, or social group. For St. George, the other Western hero to which Namjoshi alludes, the process of becoming a saint is not unlike Beowulf's path to glory. St. George, like Beowulf, battles a dragon; however, instead of simply killing the evil monster, St. George leads the

wounded beast into a nearby town and terrorizes its citizens – "twenty thousand men and a multitude of women and children" (Voragine 234) – into converting to Christianity. For Beowulf, it is enough to kill the monsters that threaten the physical safety of society. For St. George, true heroics consist of ending the physical and moral threat to society – and he earns his sainthood by doing so. Namjoshi uses the system of heroics apparent in both *Beowulf* and "St. George and the Dragon" as a formal frame for her story, and so some plot points – such as encounters with monsters and a desire to be recognized as a saint for such interaction – are echoed from the intertexts. But St. Suniti's actions are vastly different than Beowulf's or St. George's in such encounters. For instance, St. George sees a human sacrifice – the princess of the nearby town Silena – approaching a lake and asks what she is doing. The princess admits that she is to be eaten by a dragon and

> [while] they were in speech, the dragon reared his head out of the lake. All atremble, the maiden cried: 'Away, sweet lord, away with all speed!' But George, mounting his horse and arming himself with the sign of the cross, set bravely upon the dragon as he came toward him; and with a prayer to God he brandished his sword, and dealt the monster a hurt that threw him to the ground. (234)

St. George sees the monster and reacts immediately by stabbing it with his sword. And yet when St. Suniti comes across the Grendels, she attempts to discuss and then solve their hunger problems; while her goal is self-preservation, the means employed by St. Suniti distinguish her significantly from the heroes of the intertexts. This instance of disparity between source material and Namjoshi's story is one of many examples in which a plot point is reproduced only to have it

thematically transformed. For Namjoshi's protagonist, the path to sainthood is not as black and white as it is in the source material.

In her quest for sainthood, St. Suniti explores the conceptual difficulties associated with that role, and of the concepts of good and evil in particular. She finds that they, too, are not as clear-cut as Beowulf or St. George would have one believe. Instead, St. Suniti muses, the good/evil binary is illusory, an artificial structure that allows one to invest personal actions with a feeling of righteousness, or to commit atrocities and simultaneously shirk full responsibility for them:

> It is necessary to have a devil in order to fight a war. The devil is on my side, but that means that at least the responsibility is shared. And the devil does not fight God – whoever that is. God has nothing to do with this. The devil and the human beings on my side fight the human beings, probably plus another devil (it is better if that is indubitably so), on the other side. Then we can have an epic war. We can have heroic devils. We can be demi-devils ourselves. (41-42)

Good and evil are concepts that can be alternately invoked by ordinary people, who are really neither. St. Suniti "had tried being good, and that was too hard. Trying to be evil seemed equally difficult. And she knew that it wasn't very different for anyone else" (48). And yet, she observes, people still fight wars for what they believe to be a righteous cause, still commit atrocities, still die. Despite these facts, she is morally certain that, if asked, no one would willingly commit an act of evil (48). Even Grendel and his Mama are not wholly evil – maybe not evil at all – a fact that bewilders St. Suniti. The "monstrous" pair call on St. Suniti in the middle of the night and ask to be invited in: "Suniti didn't know what to do. Her new resolutions hadn't prepared her for this. In her mind's eye she had worked out strategies, survived sieges and

fought many battles; but what was she to do with friendly aliens?... daily life with well-meaning monsters – was it possible?" (55). Good and evil are not simple signifiers, inherent in the character of people and creatures. They are illusory and abstract concepts upon which a system of "right" and "wrong" is built, artificial social binaries that favour insular security and demonize the foreign threat of difference. The fact that this observation comes directly after the interjection of St. Suniti's "War Diary" is no coincidence; the complexities of good and evil in her characters echo such labels in a war that St. Suniti "observes from a distance too close for comfort":

> For the first time in my life
>
> I would like to believe
>
> that Evil is substantial;
>
> so that then one can clout
>
> evil on the snout
>
> and fight an uncivil war. (37)

Her desire for a substantial evil is ill-informed, however; she notes that those who believe the "enemy" to be evil people revel in the latters' deaths and are gladdened by such destruction (38). For Namjoshi, a foreigner living in the West, such demonizing of Easterners is yet another contribution to her marginalization. In a war between artificially labeled "good" Westerners and "evil" Easterners, the diasporic Namjoshi would become the "friendly alien" and the "well-meaning monster."

Because of Namjoshi's personal experiences as a diasporic Easterner, then, she is passionate about deconstructing the notion that the foreign is inherently threatening, a trend obvious in her discussions of war and her intertexts. In both *Beowulf* and the legend of St.

George, for instance, the threat comes from without. Specifically, the threats come from the fens, or swamp-lands. Grendel's mere, famously analogous to Hell – or alternately its entrance (Klaeber 200) – is a space outside of society in which Grendel and his Mama dwell. The dragon of St. George, too, resides on the outskirts of society in a swamp lake area. The fen-space stands, physically, for the margins of society in these cases, and its inhabitants are those seen as a threat to the stability of the social system. These spatially marginalized characters, then, are "evil" in the sense that they are perceived to constitute a threat to the system upon which the society is built, the centre which, if it fails to hold, will cause things to fall apart. Indeed, when St. Suniti eventually decides to visit the Grendels, she refers to it as "The Descent into Hell" (57), a journey that qualifies a tale as epic and consequently betrays St. Suniti's preconceptions about the Grendels – and about her own role, for that matter. Like the heroes who journey to the aquatic marginal spaces of *Beowulf* and the legend of St. George, St. Suniti is vastly changed by the experience. But rather than making a hero of St. Suniti, the journey contaminates her with that which she confronts. In *Beowulf*, the eponymous hero dives into the mere, slays Grendel's mother, and returns with Grendel's head, thus cleansing the place of evil. In the legend of St. George, the swamp/lake space is purified (and in fact the water becomes imbued with disease-curing properties) when the adventuring hero captures and eventually kills the monster dwelling in it. In both instances, marginalized spaces are purified by the removal (read: execution) of their inhabitants. The inhabitants of the margins, then, are threats to the social order that both Beowulf and St. George represent.

St. Suniti's experience, though, is much different. Before she sets out on her journey, she likened to Grendel through the Sonny/Sunny comparison noted above, and thus partially contaminated by the monsters. Rather than acting as a purifier of the margins on her journey,

she is contaminated further by them and thus becomes a member of the margins. Her journey, which has not been taken with the intent of killing the Grendels, reveals that consorting peaceably with the margins turns one into (or allows the journeyer to perceive they are) *the enemy* the person had feared:

> Armed with disgust and an immense intolerance, Suniti slipped and slithered through the mud. The slime crept about her. The slime transfigured her. She probably looked like Grendel's Mum. She was Grendel's Mum? In panic she fell and groped in the mud: where was her sense of heroic purpose? Deep from her throat, rage and resentment boiled out of her. (57)

As a member of the group at the societal centre, St. Suniti journeys magnanimously (in her eyes) to the margins, though still maintaining an attitude of disgust and intolerance towards its inhabitants. However, her identity becomes confused in the process, and the howl of rage she emits is that of Grendel's Mum, the monster with whom she tentatively self-identifies: the howl is that of the marginalized. What follows is a stream-of-consciousness poetic conversation with an unidentified speaker, a conversation in which St. Suniti's *katabasis,* or descent into the underworld, is narrated. Her trip to the margins is a trip to Hell, a Hell which is constructed by her "hurts and [her] hates" (59). The monsters on the margin appear to Suniti

> …evil
> Ugly and uncivil.
> …cruel,
> Afraid and needy,
> Uncouth and seedy. (62)

She is told she must bless all the little monsters of her Hell, must kiss them and come to some

sort of peace with them, a thought that St. Suniti finds revolting. "You might as well," the little monsters inform St. Suniti, "You are part of us" (62).

The social space that Namjoshi constructs here is important. She constructs The Hell to which she journeys: it is a margin built upon St. Suniti's psyche. The Hell she visits is the place to which St. Suniti has banished all that she finds monstrous and evil, ugly and uncivil. And spanning the psychological chasm in order to reach her own Hell, she confronts her fears and preconceptions. Significantly, the inhabitants of the fen-space here are those people that she has marginalized in her own society, those whom she has "othered." In other words, St. Suniti has her own preconceptions about "the other" in her society – that they are cruel and monstrous – and she uses Grendel to depict the stupidity of such monsters. But she is careful to note that Grendel is not evil. He is simply a "ubiquitous lout" (54), a vandal of the sort that scuffs carpet and muddies floors (55), rather than the Heorot-terrorizing beast of *Beowulf*. What one sees, however, is that Namjoshi herself is writing from the margins as a negatively racialized diasporic lesbian-feminist. The irony is that the marginalized characters of her story – the Grendels – are actually those who occupy the oppressive and ignorant centre in Namjoshi's world. Grendel's ubiquity is both a character trait and a statement about society: his kind – the ignorant, pusillanimous and cruel devourers of female flesh – are everywhere apparent in Namjoshi's world. And "all the little Grendels" (56) of the world – those who feed off and hate their mothers (56), those who are murderously fearful (63) – are represented by the Grendel of Namjoshi's story; he is "all the little monsters rolled into one" (63). Grendel's position is twofold, then; he is the marginalized monster-villain of the heroic tale of St. Suniti (although the only damage he causes is a bitten finger [63]), and he is also representative of the ignorant and oppressive centre in Namjoshi's society.

St. Suniti's attempt to make peace with the "other" is, then, truly a charitable act of forgiveness for the oppression that Namjoshi-the-author has withstood. When St. Suniti kisses the monster (not unlike the fairytale princess kissing the frog), Namjoshi figures her own ability to overcome her rage and contempt at being marginalized, and blurs the boundary between margin and centre. As both marginalized author and fictional hero of the centre, Namjoshi inhabits both spaces simultaneously, and thus reveals the artifice upon which they are built. She transgresses the binary logic of the system, and does so by fracturing her identity between the writer and the written. It follows that the hero-villain binary, bound intrinsically to notions of centre-margin distinctions, is troubled further. Namjoshi muses that a "clever monkey has overrun the planet," a monkey which, regardless of gender, can "kill with a will" (65). The monkey, of course, is human, and the creature can kill or, like Namjoshi, write elegies. There is no centre or margin, no distinctions between types of monkey; there is only the acknowledgment that the monkey can do different things, which is to say that all people are simply people, unified in their complete difference from one another and therefore without labels, and each must traverse the universal terrain of the human condition. "Love is the Law," she informs the reader, "and Cruelty the Climate, / Let the Cultures collide" (63). Again, the good/evil binary is deconstructed and Namjoshi urges that people recognize that the law of love is one which encourages openness and growth through the collision and interaction of multiple cultural perspectives. Further, the harsh and troubling social milieu that is predicated upon the artificial differentiation of identity types necessitates the interaction for any who do not wish to maintain the hegemony of the status quo.

Namjoshi's text welcomes the notion of multiplicity in identity politics. That is, individuals do not necessarily have to be limited to a singular identity type. The logic employed

here is that if archetypal identities (man, woman, hero, villain, etc.) are artificial, a person may participate in multiple identity types – even those which may seem, superficially, mutually exclusive. Thus Namjoshi, while writing "St. Suniti, was both a respected and privileged member of academia, as well as a marginalized diasporic lesbian Indian – two identities which seemingly represent different poles in the social hierarchy. The fracturing of identity, or perhaps the fusion of multiple identities, is echoed in the form(s) of the text. Aside from the obvious fact that the form varies, the particular forms with which Namjoshi engages are significant. Myths, for instance, are often expressed in terms of archetypes, those identities which engage in "typical forms of behaviour" (Sellers 4). These normative identities "generate and shape our most powerful thinking" (4), and so some myths can be thought of as essentially reaffirming the practices of the status quo which they represent. Similarly, fables, folktales and fairytales often have a didactic purpose and thus can serve to teach dominant social practices and attitudes. So Namjoshi uses literary forms that traditionally illustrate the cultural practices of the majority and that often rely upon the fantastic to do so. However, she also engages in intensely personal forms such as journal entries, in which she breaks from the fantastic and reveals her most pressing immediate concerns. In this small sample of her formal variation, Namjoshi is creating an identity through which she performs vastly different roles. The protagonist of the sections even changes – throughout the fantastic sections, St. Suniti is at the centre of the narration while in the journal sections the reader connects with the self-reflexive author.

St. Suniti, then, is represented in terms of a mythic archetype, and yet she is also a didactic character in the folktale sense – someone with whom the reader may connect, and yet also someone from whom the reader is meant chiefly to learn. Further, the protagonist St. Suniti and the author Suniti Namjoshi are conflated, and so the reader must alternate between the two in

different sections of the story – or rather, they must reconcile the fact that the fantastical St. Suniti and the journal-writing Namjoshi are simply closely related parts of the same identity. Namjoshi, as both writer and subject, struggles throughout the story to reach some resolution to her identity issues. St. Suniti strives to be conquering maid, saint, hero, poet, and ultimately good person. No matter which, if any, of these St. Suniti eventually becomes by the end of the story, the fact remains that she is continually indecisive about what, or who, to be. Dasgupta says of Namjoshi's identity politics that "her works engage extensively with the problems of self-conception that arise when a decision to adopt a particular identity has to be carefully negotiated with a resistant and unwieldy universe" (100). St. Suniti chooses to construct her own identity, but the identity she chooses changes along the way. And rather than reaching any resolution, Namjoshi illustrates that the negotiation of identity politics is an irresolvable task. She is in dialogue with her different selves, each of whom participates in a different, and even multiple, cultural and/or literary tradition. And it is such dialogue, such multivocality, which challenges the notion that Namjoshi has a singular identity and illustrates her rejection of the unified self in favour of the concept of the unstable, and ever-evolving, postmodern subject.

St. Suniti's dialogue also takes place through the different genres in which she participates. As such, each of her different generic selves has a unique meaning according to the systems to which it belongs. Once again, Namjoshi juxtaposes multiple systems; however, in this case, her identity itself is the site of multiplicity and therefore the object of absurdity and transgression. Here, the politics of identity at play reveal that self-determination is of itself an absurd process. The archetypal identities among which Namjoshi fluctuates are supposedly stable; her strategy, however, is to destabilize the identity types by performing them simultaneously. And such a simultaneous performance, as equally balanced as it is, prevents the

assertion of one identity over any other, and thus no value system emerges as the primary. Namjoshi is both writer and written, hero and monster, sinner and saint, real and imagined, marginal and central; she is not one more than any other, but rather a conglomerate of contradictions. Namjoshi's identity, then, is fictionalized, imagined: it is a malleable construct, a fluid design rather than anything coherently defined or definable. Her invocation of canonical characters is one manner in which she may make evident the contradictions of which she is a part; the invocation is a method of self-exploration and expansion in the sense that the characters she loosely mimics allow her to assert new roles for herself. By engaging in dialogue with canonical and imagined characters, she destabilizes the reader's perception of the sources while simultaneously allowing the texts and their norms to influence how she perceives herself. And she must rely on such influence for a modicum of self-definition or suffer the imposition of stable and binary labels thrust upon her by the society in which she participates. Namjoshi's invention of herself transgresses the social value systems of which she is a part; she revels in the "untidy experience" of which Douglas speaks.

When asked by her friends why she engages in "all this mythicism," St. Suniti replies, "[b]ecause an ordinary person going on and on about angels and devils, that, don't you see, is the human condition" (50). For Namjoshi, the human condition is the act of defining oneself with the aid of the metaphysical and the fantastic. And that is exactly what she is up to in *St. Suniti and the Dragon*. She is engaged in self-definition, but she also reveals that arriving at such a definition is likely impossible because of the irresolvable contradictions inherent in the multiple value systems at work in any individual. The mythicism in which Namjoshi engages, then, is the myth of the self. As myths are archetypal and people see themselves in myth, Namjoshi reveals a method by which to see the myth(s) in herself. She varies the form of her text just as she has

the various characteristics which contribute to the way in which she perceives herself. The generic ambiguity of the story, then, is reflective of the contradictory parts of Namjoshi's identity – such as her social marginalization as a diasporic Indian lesbian and her central social position as a highly educated and respected academic. By figuring her identity as a discontinuous series of myths rather than as just one of the myriad labels that may be placed upon one in a system of social nomenclature, Namjoshi transgresses traditional notions of the self. So why all this mythicism? Because it is Namjoshi's condition, the human condition.

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