

Cultural Feminism in Sunithi Namjoshi's *The Mothers of Maya Diip*

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Abstract:

Cultural feminism is a variety of feminism which emphasizes essential differences between men and women, based on biological differences in reproductive capacity. Cultural feminism attributes to those differences distinctive and superior virtues in women. What women share, in this perspective, provides a basis for "sisterhood," or unity, solidarity and shared identity. Thus, cultural feminism also encourages building a shared women's culture. Sunithi Namjoshi an Indian born British fabulist has created a unique feminine world in her novel *The Mothers of Maya Diip*. The Mayans conform to the traditional views of women as nurturers of the young and bearers of the cultural values of love and co-operation. This paper would explore cultural feminism perspectives predominant in the novel.

Key words: Cultural feminism, Feminism, Culture, motherhood, matriarchy.

“Cultural feminism”, explains Jone Johnson Lewis, “as a variety of feminism which emphasizes essential differences between men and women, based on biological differences in reproductive capacity. Cultural feminism attributes to those differences distinctive and superior virtues in women. What women share, in this perspective, provides a basis for "sisterhood," or unity, solidarity and shared identity. Thus, cultural feminism also encourages building a shared women's culture” (web2017). Cultural feminism, has been associated with lesbian identity, which includes female connectedness, women- centred relationships and culture.

Suniti Namjoshi, an expatriate Indian writer has been active on the literary scene for more than five decades. She belonged to the royal family of Maharashtra and enjoyed the privilege of good education. She has also served as an IAS officer and later moved to America, worked in Canada and at present she resides in England. She has been endowed with the creative faculty and has written singly and in collaboration verse and prose, fables and dystopias, fantasy and satire. She traverses from genre to genre as she has from country to country and has rich experience of different culture. Suniti Namjoshi decodes the misogyny and cultural imagery which are impacted in the myths, legends and fairytales from both East and the West. Suniti portrays countless images of women in patriarchal societies and reveals the oppressive nature of sexist, stereotypical representations of women. If these are converted into role models would offer alarming limited view of a woman's expectation from the society.

Cultural feminist argue, the traditional male behaviours like aggressiveness, competitiveness and domination are harmful to society, including business and politics. They believe that emphasizing, caring, co-operation and egalitarianism would make a better world. Cultural Feminist who portrays women as biologically more kind, caring, nurturing and co-operative they also make their stand clear that women could be included in decision making processes in society and in particular fields within society. They aim at reversing the cultural valuation of the male and the devaluation of the female.

Suniti, creates an utopian world in *The Mother's of Maya Diip*, where the women and motherhood in particular are glorified. "The feminist utopia is an attempt to defamiliarize the familiar tyranny of gender inequities" (K.S.Vaishali P 63). Maya Diip, is an imaginary lesbian island cut off from the heterosexual world outside. The inhabitants of this island are unaware of the patriarchal system. The state controls the reproduction in this island. The pretty boys are milked for semen after which they dive into the sea and 'turn into foam' (MM52). The women who are qualified as mothers are rationed with the collected semen. The mothers of this island

consider the boys not as children but only “as necessities” (*MM* 52-53). “Boys aren’t the norm on Maya Diip. The boys fight among themselves, the mothers of Maya let them. Eventually there’s nothing left to fight, only the waves. So they fight the waves turn into foam, so to speak...” (*MM* 160-161). Asha, the eldest daughter of the matriarch is branded an apostate and exiled from the kingdom for opposing this cruel practice.

The Mayans conform to the traditional views of women as nurturers of the young and bearers of the cultural values of love and co-operation. Motherhood and childbearing is glorified and considered the most sacred duty of the mothers in Maya Diip. “It’s the duty of every Mayan to sacrifice herself for the welfare of children” (*MM* 146). To the women of Maya Diip, any dissatisfaction with ‘mothering’ is a sign of failure as a person. The magnificence of motherhood, a well structured myth, is in circulation in the island. Grade A mothers had propriety rights over daughters, Grade C mothers do the chores for children. They can move up the hierarchy only through hard work and perseverance.

In Maya Diip, adulthood is synonymous with motherhood. The daughters of the Mayan matriarchate consider the Matriarch ‘Rani Saheb’ as the supreme mother. This obsession with motherhood deeply perturbs Jyanvi, who visits the island with her friend the blue donkey. She believes that Maya Diip is a difficult society where the women’s lives and aspirations are sacrificed at the altar of motherhood. Valerie, a western immigrant who has settled in this island for ten years, explains to Jyanvi that “it’s not like that at all. As you know, in patriarchies, the children govern and thought, to be a woman is bad, to be a mother is usually worse. Here on Maya Diip we have the Rule of the Mothers: the Rule of the Mothers is just, gentle and generous”. (*MM* 87)

Jyanvi believes that Mayan society dehumanizes reproduction by turning it into a mode of commodity and she succeeds in disturbing the equanimity of Mayans and strips motherhood

of all its glories. According to the Mayans, Jyanvi has sinned against motherhood, which is the premier identity of the Mayan women, their religion and their family structure. Jyanvi in her 'song of a non-mother' strikes a discordant, disharmonious note of a woman's wish not to be mother. "The compulsory child bearing or child rearing has managed to excise female sexuality as an autonomous realm of pleasure, dissociated from reproductive duties" (K.S. Vaishali 68). "Not loving children is a sacrilege in Maya"(MM 35) so, the Mayan authorities try to reform Jyanvi. She is appointed as Grade C mother to Gagri the Good who is to succeed the matriarch. Jyanvi resents her duty and shares her grief with her friend the blue donkey. She believes that motherhood is an extremely unrewarding experience, where the children take everything and give nothing. "Jyanvi considers motherhood as a duty without rights or rewards, a form of exploitation; subjugation of a whole class recognized either as mothers or nothing. It is therefore imperative not to idealize motherhood or glorify it" (K.S.Vaishali 69). Shulamith Firestone in her *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* posits that the bases of women's oppression is the biological mothering and the tyranny of heterosexual reproductive practices. Namjoshi vindicates that women's compulsory reproductive duties could be burdensome and femininity is a construct of culture rather than a fact of nature.

The divulgence of the experience of motherhood in patriarchy is a major development in the women centred analytical work of the 1970's. Abolishing motherhood in its current form would change society, argue Firestone. She further points out the fact that "women and not men reproduce is the reason for the gender based division of labour on which patriarchy and its ruling ideology of sexism are constructed" (70). Adrienne Rich believes that the way in which the society has institutionalized motherhood is the problem rather than the biological experience of motherhood. The dialectical structure of *The Mothers of Maya Diip* makes it fascinating. As the name suggests 'Maya Diip' is an illusory utopia, an ideology prevailing in

patriarchies. Jyanvi wonders if matriarchy would be a salutary substitute for a patriarchy or would it enslave women in a different way.

Suniti Namjoshi reveals in *The Mothers of Maya Diip*, the reproductive power politics of our societies. She exposes the mental and physical constraints that the ideology of femininity imposes on all women. It's unimaginable if women refuse to be silent bearers of children and step out of their traditional roles. Suniti Namjoshi speculates the radical possibilities and questions the centrality of dominant heterosexist ideologies and refutes the 'closure' they represent by subverting them and exposing their spurious complacency.

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