



## RESEARCH ARTICLE



**THE ART AND POLITICS OF SUBVERSION : SUNITI NAMJOSHI'S  
FROM THE BEDSIDE LOOK OF NIGHTMARES: III THE SNAPSHOTS OF  
CALIBAN**

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**ABSTRACT**

Suniti Namjoshi, an expatriate and 'inside-outsider' is one of the major Indian women poets and novelists writing in English. She is born in 1941 in Bombay, India. She received her Ph.D., in English Literature in 1972 from McGill University Canada. Now she lives in U.K. She is a regular contributor to literary and women's studies, journals in India and abroad too. Her poetry collections are *Poems, More Poems, Cyclone In Pakistan, The Jackass and the Lady, From the Bedside Book of Nightmares, The Authentic Lie, The Feminist Fables, Flesh & Paper, Goja an Autobiographical Myth, and St.Suniti and the Dragon*. Some of her novels are *The Conversations of Cow, Aditi and the One-eyed Monkey, The Mothers of Maya Dilip*. Along with her mother, Sarojini Namjoshi, she also translated *Poems of Govindagraj* from Marathi into English. Though her poetry is compared to that of Mamta Kalia, Eunice desouza and Gauri Deshpande oftentimes, she is entirely heterogeneous in her vista with multi-cultural interaction, self-exploration, self-assertion, ironic vision, wit and dualism which confers the touch of universality to her poetry. Her thematic concerns are life, the marginal status of women in society and experiences of alienation and subversion of select myths.

Suniti Namjoshi's subversion of *The Tempest* in *The Snapshots of Caliban* presents multicultural maladies and the quest for feminine identity. She utilizes the subversion as a counter mode to exemplify her theme and presents the drama with a new, possible outlook.

**Keywords:** *Subversion, Post-Colonialism, Feminine Identity.*

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Suniti Namjoshi's fifth collection of poetry, *From the Bedside Book of Nightmares*, the third section *The Snapshots of Caliban* contains the subversion of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

*Some of the "gods" want to take me  
with them. But I no longer believe  
that they are gods. I don't trust them  
(Caliban's Journal P.58 -The Snapshots of  
Caliban)*

These are the words of slave Caliban, who idolizes her master Prospero in the original play. The subversion concentrates on the plot of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* to invert it to be apt for modern times.

Subversion is one of the stylized and digressive traits of post-colonialism. This literature covers writings from Africa, the Caribbean, South Asia, South Pacific and Canada that share certain structural, discursive features, such as "resistance", "subversion" of the imperial "centre". It finds the hidden parallels midst the discrete texts from distinct hemispheres of the world and thereby provides a prefabricated network, which can be used in interpreting them. They illustrate three important features of all post-colonial writing:

*The silencing and marginalizing of the post-colonial voice by the imperial centre within the text: and the active appropriation of the language and culture of that centre. 1*

These aspects and transitions are delineated in various ways in the different texts, through formal subversions and sometimes through concentration at the thematic level.

The Post-colonial theory responds several lines of inquiry that might be addressed to the post-colonial literatures which are read as 'resisting', 'subverting', 'the centre', 'the colonizer', 'the dominant', 'the hegemonic power' and 'the west'. The discourse of 'writing back' makes many assumptions about the text, the author and the social order. It claims that the major topic of post-colonial literature is an aberrant resistance to the colonizer, now a truant. It assumes that the writers represent the people of their native society.

The contemporary phenomena of emigration and expatriation have a dramatic growth and importance in Literature. The experience of

inhabiting two geographical and culture spaces simultaneously increases tension, which results in the emergence of a powerful and impressive body of expatriate literature. An Emigrant experiences the status of a colonized in an alien land, often willingly.

The idea of colonizing and settling the New World became an epochal idea in the light of the complex set of circumstances prevailing in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. This concept may be advantageous to the colonizer in procuring the rich material resources, where he can be the precursor of Renaissance in bringing an errand of refinement. He is scot-free without any deterrent imperatives of his homeland. His faculties could accomplish highest goals both in material as well as spiritual domain. He could represent a twin function - the essence of enterprise and innovation, the promise of economic expediency and fortune, the pursuance of his own passion. He embodies an intrinsic functional cross-section of society, which results in a form of culture. It blends agrarian affluence, convergence of political power, rational elitism and secular liberalism. Later the concept leads to Colonization with the establishment of business, money power, distinctions of class and status at the paramount level. It finally leads to slavery, antithetical to natural order. Colonialism leads to post-colonialism and refers to the period after the demise of empires. There are many a contemporary theories - subjugation, domination, Diaspora and displacement.

Post-colonialism foregrounds the need for recognising identities, voices and situations that were not granted by the Colonial power. Writers like George Lamming and Wilson Harris and others use the counter mode of subversion to suggest de-countering, plurality, hybridity, a dismantling of authority based upon post-colonial ideas. George Lamming's *The pleasures of Exile* is a descriptive reflection on the predicament of a group of writers originated in the English speaking Caribbean, who have arrived in Britain as part of a larger migrating labour force. It tabulates the exigency, which has forced their decampment from the islands and the focus is on the colonial character of their relation to the metro pole. He used the interpretations of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and the reconstruction of C.L.R. James' *Black Jacobians* as the



purport of the total experience at that time could be located.

George Lamming's book depicts the selfish colonization of Prospero and its outcomings on Caliban. Prospero is a symbol of the European imperial enterprise and Caliban as the continuing possibility of a profound revolutionary change initiated by Toussaint L' Ouverture in the Haitian war of Independence and the Cuban revolution. Lamming subverts *The Tempest* to make use of it as a way of presenting a certain state of feeling; the heritage of the exiled and colonial writer from the British Caribbean. He calls Prospero, a thief, a merchant, a magician and man of God. The drama itself is the background of England's experiment in Colonization. He opines:

*Considering the range of Shakespeare's curiosity and the fact that these matters were being feverishly discussed in England at the time, they would most certainly have been present in his mind. Indeed they must have been part of the conscious stuff of his thinking<sup>2</sup>*

He feels that the drama was also prophetic of a political future and destiny of the colonized countries. He refers to the colonized countries. He refers to the art and politics of Prospero in occupying the island of Caliban. He is a king, talks like an angel and knows only to claim the land. With absolute wisdom, he allows the native Caliban to stay and assist him, serve him as a slave.

In Shakespeare's *The Tempest* Prospero is a man, Miranda is a child and Caliban, a slave. In George Lamming's inversion - Prospero, a monster; Miranda, a child; Caliban, a slave. The drama grows and matures from the seeds of exile and paradox. It's the poet's will and art to transform and hide the real intentions of occupation i.e. Colonization of new lands. The epilogue, the ship-wreck, the magic of prayer of Prospero forewarns about the politics of intrigue. Even nature conspires with the sea and rescues all the important people of the ship. The treatment of Ariel and Caliban is an example of the art and intrigue of the master towards his subjects. He confers Ariel the status of a lackey as he is the source of information. Ariel is aware of the politics played by Prospero still he serves. Even then

Prospero always reminds him of his servitude and makes him of his servitude and makes him aware of his own power over Ariel, with references of the foul witch Sycorax and how he has saved Ariel with his magic. He tortures Caliban mentally with references of his mother witch Sycorax inspite of his subjugation. He leaves Caliban a cultural wreck, a colonized in his native land like the slaves tormented by the British imperialistic attitude.

Suniti Namjoshi's subversion of *The Tempest* in *The Snapshots of Caliban* presents multicultural maladies and the quest for feminine identity. She utilizes the subversion as a counter mode to exemplify her theme and presents the drama with a new, possible outlook. She applies the art and politics of Prospero not to his advantage but to Caliban in her book. It projects two ideas : the problems faced by a woman, a girl child in the male dominated society. Hence she subverts the characters - Prospero, the monster; Miranda, a woman and Caliban, a female child and a slave. She depicts the skill and strategy of Caliban in evolving personality and sketches her character fit for the modern world; Prospero as the luring advanced civilization and Caliban as the depressed, alienated native, who is deprived of nativity due to the impropriety of alien culture into his inhabitant culture. Hence Prospero is a Colonizer and Caliban is a colonized.

Prospero's usurpation of Caliban's native land shows his political intrigue. He turns the rude Caliban to a civilized being by giving him the skill of Vernacular. It is this gift of language that brings transformation in Caliban. It causes both Pleasure and Paradox in Caliban's exile. Because she is expelled from her nativity, culture, land and even her own name. She begins thinking about the discernment of Prospero towards her. At the departure of Prospero and others, she is left alone as depressed and displaced. Prospero also analyses his own actions and feels sorry for Caliban's position. He has established one man rule with absolute power on her island, He is always precariously poised between his doing and his doubt :

*Not wrong to have wanted you,  
but wrong should the desire, being thwarted  
turn to rage.*



*And there is rage. Cal, Cal, Caliban  
threshes her limbs. For this ---pardon.  
I and my creature must seek for grace.*

*(i, Snapshots of Caliban P.53)*

Though he is not beyond Caliban's forgiveness, he doesn't ask for it because to ask a favor of a menial is to meddle with a strange outcome. Prospero's art reveals both his power and penitence.

Caliban is an innocent child of nature and is enthralled by a finicky procedure of learning and receiving. Though she is a child, her innocence is gone. Prospero is afraid of her source of energy in exploiting him. So he is disgusted with her and plans homicide and summons her:

*Come, little Caliban,  
I take you by the hand.  
We will walk upon the sand  
to the bright, blue sea,*

.....

*as we walked towards the cliff  
what fate I had in mind  
and broke from me.*

.....

*the little murderess  
chased by monstrous me  
trying to save herself  
and me from me.*

*(ii Snapshots of Caliban - P.54)*

In Shakespeare's *The Tempest* Caliban plans assassination and insurrection against Prospero but not Prospero against Caliban. Suniti's art of subversion narrates how Prospero, disgusted by the Politics of Caliban plans to murder her.

Prospero requires his slave but is always cautious and meticulous in his dealings with her. Though Caliban is submissive, there are seeds of revolt in her heart. So at every instance Prospero humiliates and threatens Caliban for her rebellion. Caliban keeps a Journal of the behaviour of Prospero and Miranda. She experiences humility in their hands. Neither Prospero nor Miranda pities her labour. When Caliban tries to show her bruised hands, Miranda wouldn't look but pities her father for his exile. Miranda also plays a part in the politics of her father. Caliban endeavors to make friendship with her masters. She wishes to join their company:

*They are playing chess. I could learn too. I  
am not stupid.*

*But they say it's a game intended for two.  
They have left me out.*

*(Caliban's Journal - Snapshots of Caliban -  
P.57)*

Caliban fructifies her knowledge along with her growing of twelve years. She has learnt everything by herself, including irony. She anticipates praise from her master, when she extols Miranda's beauty, she is thrashed by Prospero, the monster for her understanding of good and bad, beauty and ugliness. He can't endure the shrewdness of a serf. She always tries to win the affection of Miranda expecting a woman's compassion towards a fellow woman. But Miranda thinks Caliban slow-witted and never cares for her feelings. Caliban visualizes Miranda as a God. For her sake Caliban tries to convert herself a God :

*Today I made friends with the new  
gods. They were quite friendly. One of  
them asked me if I would like to be a god. I  
said, "Yes." So they gave me a potion. We  
all drank it. I remember laughing. They said I  
would make a splendid god. I wanted to tell  
M that now I was a god, but I fell asleep.*

*(Caliban's Journal - Snapshots of Caliban - P.57)*

Caliban drinks a potion for transmutation to please Miranda but in vain.

Caliban is rendezvous with the thought of perfection and applause of her master but they treat her brutally without any consideration for her merits. Prospero is always obsessed by the thought of both bondage and mutiny of Caliban. He exposes his bestiality while he tortures Caliban mentally, still she never loses her spirit of freedom and her roots. She has no confidence on the 'gods' i.e. the foreigners, who promise to take her with them. Now she realises the idea of Colonizers and the alluring advanced civilization to deprive off her nativity and her labour. Though she is sad at their departure, she is not disconcerted:

*If they all go away. I'll be left alone. That  
might be nice. But I might be lonely. I shall  
keep a Journal. Soon. Very soon. I shall  
people this island (with nice people)*

*(Caliban's Journal - Snapshots of Caliban - P.58)*



Caliban has a political intention to increase her own population and have self-rule. This very idea threatens the existence of Prospero, a king. He may permit the native Caliban to serve him but can never allow him self rule:

*There's something wrong with Caliban  
Is it her shape? Is it her size?  
If I could say that Caliban is stupid.  
then that might help, but she can read and write  
and sometimes her speech is so lucid  
She does not feel? But I've heard her howling:  
She howls like a dog or some tiresome animal, and she sobs at night.  
Yet she is Caliban. I've seen her gaping at the blue heavens, or at me,  
and I fear her dream. For there is something I dislike so thoroughly about Caliban :  
if she had her way, she would rule the island, and I will not have it.*

(vi - Snapshots of Caliban - P.59)

This is an extraordinary idea of a slave to become the master. It may be only a dream to Shakespeare's Caliban but at the changed scenario, Caliban has every right to think of his own State and Status.

Miranda, the only Crown Princess to her father, is noble and kind as a child. Now she is a beautiful maiden. Prospero teaches her the domestic history very deftly and makes her believe that she is born to be a queen. She admires her father with a child's innocence devoid of experience of the world beyond the island. He brain washes her with the qualities of virtue, nobility and chastity. She lives with the total expectation of bright future. She dreams:

*They dreamed it. There was no storm,  
no shipwreck, nobody came. Prince Ferdinand  
was a rock or a tree. M dreamed it.  
She said to the tree, "Bow gracefully",  
and the tree bowed with Ariel in it.  
As for revenge —the old man's dream —  
even in his dream he could not change them.  
not utterly; they still plotted, still schemed—  
as though in a play — until Ariel once again*

*was sent to intervene.*

*And they never got away,  
for here we all are, M and myself  
and doddering P, still islanded,  
still ailing, looking seaward  
for company.*

(From Caliban's Notebook - Snapshots of Caliban - P.60)

Miranda's dream never becomes reality. Prospero's magic and dream topple down. He orders Ariel afresh to devise the storm. Here Suniti upsets the original play, where everything befalls according to the design of Prospero, the magician. His spell fails and Miranda's dream of Ferdinand evaporates. As Prospero cannot enjoy the uncouth company of his own slave, he stares at sea for company. The liberation of both the Colonizer and the Colonized still waited. Miranda blames Caliban for her broken dream Castles in her Journal:

*All my pretty dreams smashed and broken, I  
hate Caliban. She did it. She did it the way  
she smashed my Castles when we were both  
children.*

(M's Journal, The Snapshots of Caliban -P61)

Miranda surmises, loathes and condemns Caliban, the other self of herself because she is not noble and beautiful, with all her royal mien. Suniti portrays the egos that exist among women in spite of their commonality of sex. Common sense dawns upon Miranda. She feels:

*'But that's wrong, very wrong Not what I  
intended to write at all. I shall cross it out.*

(M's Journal, The Snapshots of Caliban -P 61)

She strikes off her own writing against her own sex. Women should liberate themselves from these petty jealousies to surpass the social maladies and fight for the equal status with greater realism, analytical approach and greater awareness. This aspect is evident and Suniti continues this task with the counter mode of subversion aptly in all her works Caliban suspects that Prospero has plotted murder against her. Miranda is innocent of her father's intentions, she writes in her journal:

*Caliban is ill, I can't help wondering if she is  
going to die. I do not want her to die. I am  
surprised.. This thought surprises me.*

\* \* \*





*Caliban says P poisoned her. P is upset. He is doing everything he can try to cure her. We tried to move her into P's cell, but she says that she doesn't trust us.*

*(M's Journal, The Snapshots of Caliban -P 61)*

Caliban's suspicions are wrongful. Actually Miranda poisons Caliban, for she hates her. Now the plot is evident. Unlike in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in Suniti's version Prospero, Miranda and Caliban are aware of their own felony. This awareness and self-introspection wonderfully overtakes the original plot of usurpation, politics and intrigue of Prospero.

'Time, Magic and man' are the inseparable Trinity of Shakespeare's drama. Suniti's subversion focuses of time, magic of self-consciousness and the New woman. With the change of the Century new ideas and ideologies have crept into the society and with them the horizon of women enlarged. These ideas have the magic spell on women and the society around. Absorbing these, the modern New awakened Woman voices out her expostulations and fights for the cause of women with a newfangled vigour and cognition. In lieu of Prospero's shrewd training and his trials to separate Miranda, Caliban fails. A kind of new bond develops between them naturally and by degrees. Prospero comprehends:

*Two monsters are Crawling out of my eyes*

.....

*Of the two crabs which is more dainty? Most graceful?*

.....

*Their function escapes me.*

*They have broken their claws.*

*Oh my pretty playthings,*

*my shining instruments !*

*(ix. Prospero's Meditation : Snapshots of Caliban P-62)*

Prospero meditates upon the enduring friendship between the two women. His out dated intrigue of divide and rule doesn't work. His art and politics are at stake at the force of the colonized, Caliban. It is not always the Colonizer who influences, sometimes the colonized overcome. Miranda now understands all the hallucinations and magic of her father cannot Chisel her as a model human being. Prospero's art of training Miranda

compels her to grow up without any identity and individuality. She believes and admires whatever her father reveals her. Now she understands her position clearly :

*He talked of dukes*

*Palaces and peacock*

*fabled fountains, many such things;*

*He said I was a lady*

*-it was my .....*

*but for a king.*

*From his super knowledge he made me a dream*

*I listened*

*and understood clearly in myself I was noting.*

*(xi. Snapshots of Caliban P-49)*

The dream vanishes and factuality stands before Miranda. She assesses herself with a critical eye. She recollects the servitude of Caliban before her state of innocence and submission, she searches for the reason of her hatred towards Caliban:

*When the monster loved me,*

*She would catch Crayfish,*

*take me to pools*

*where crabs hid*

*pluck berries, and gaze longingly*

*at my blue eyes*

*It was not*

*that I did not love, or could not love :*

*I was often kind*

*and I envied her*

*her happy smile.*

*(xiii. Snapshots of Caliban P-66)*

As a slave Caliban has taken Miranda for walks about the island. She has plucked berries for Miranda to show her affection. Still Miranda can't like her and her innocent smile. Miranda, now a woman in an alien land and aware of her father's contemplations cannot smile happily. So she hates Caliban. Miranda's self examination throws light on her own intentions. She finally confesses her guilt before Caliban:

*"M has confessed that it was she who poisoned me. I was very surprised. Then I was angry. Then I remembered the tiger in the dream. I started laughing. M looked puzzled..... Then she grinned. We both*



*started laughing. M said she had not intend to kill me entirely, she had just wanted to make me sick. (I am learning irony) I thanked her for it. ....P overheard us, but we were not able to explain it to him.*

*(xvi Snapshots of Caliban P-69)*

Miranda and Caliban share the common jokes and become friends forgetting Miranda's plot of murder. Suniti subverts Caliban's murder plan in the original play against Prospero to Miranda's Plot against Caliban. It throws light on the possession of beastly qualities even by lady Miranda. These qualities are prevalent not only in Caliban, who is an uncouth person in the original play. There is no relation between qualities and appearances. Hence Suniti picturises these brutal qualities in a noble lady Miranda. She is no exception of jealousy and hatred and can retain a scheming brain.

Now Caliban's self-realization self-awareness and wisdom gives her the status of a New Woman.

*I am so pure, so snow white, I can take any colour, fit any mould, be a bird Or a bush, a thing or a dream And then I know that it is my soul and not my body that is stretched so thin*

*(xv Snapshots of Caliban P-68)*

This is the lot of transformation of Caliban from to innocence to knowledge, now she is no more a victim but a lady like Miranda. Prospero is not the master of Caliban. He confesses:

*I made them? Maiden and monster and then disdained them?*

*Was there something in me that fed and sustained them?*

*Are they mine or their own?*

*I dare not claim them :*

*(Prospero, xvii. Snapshots of Caliban P-70)*

The two women emerge out of the Cocoon of Prospero's influence with flying colours of late like a butterfly, twittering happily with newly awakened spirit. Prospero doubts his own character of evil.

Prospero gives Caliban language and with it an unstated history of consequences, and unknown history of future intentions. He tries to achieve the power and fortune of a King, the knowledge and learning and universality of Philosopher but it is in

reverse and Caliban learns the art in vice versa. Prospero may be a superior human being but he exposes his monstrous qualities. He asserts his authority of divine on Caliban's native land. He is continually haunted by the fear of losing his power. Though he hates and fears Caliban, he needs her. He arises Caliban to rage to weaken her plans. He can't conquer his artful mind in spite of his nobility. So he is depicted as a monster with bestial qualities.

Suniti's art lies in the development of the character of Miranda and Caliban, with their merits and demerits, their resurrection, their self-awareness and self-search that liberates women. Caliban, the protagonist starts with a feeble voice out of innocence, as a child and silent observer of discrimination, grows into womanhood, full of expectations but encounters only disappointments and becomes a mute spectator. Her final reflection on life and its vagaries of reversal of roles makes her realise that every lot of life as predicament.

Suniti's subversion projects the Machiavellian attitude of male dominated society in subjugating the minds of women with imposed qualities of virtue and chastity. With the changed panorama of modern times a man / woman faces a severe identity crisis and desperately searches for roots. For women this quest is gender generated and for equal status to women in a gender biased society. Modern women writing in Indian English embodies this double quest - the quest for identity as a woman and as a human being. Their literature incorporates the voice of women for independence and freedom of will. The growing up girls like Miranda and Caliban are coaxed and conditioned into stereotype roles. Growth of a real self and personality is always nipped at the initial stage. They are given secondary status and the relationship between men and women is basically one of the master and a slave like Prospero and Caliban, who is always tortured for her self-growth. Woman is a victim of the sexist attitude of society both inside and outside of the house. She is always judged as a woman and any intellectual activity is considered a taboo. Besides a woman is a victim of social evils like sexual crimes, female foeticide and infanticide. Hence the modern women poets' quest is from freedom, for a relationship of equal footing, happiness and individual identity.



They are building a tradition, making possible the potential for handing on a collective female vision.

Suniti's projection of quest for identity is not merely confined to the quest for identity as a woman but also it is social in nature. She relates herself to the world around to scan the quagmire of a world, whose values are at stake with its own values. The underlying motive of her writing is to evolve a new of values which could prevent them from cracking under the pressures of a chaotic world and to save the society from becoming an emotional and moral wasteland. Her concerns are cosmopolitan in nature that craves for the mutual concern and sympathy among humanity. As an expatriate she shares the destiny of the third world expatriates situated in highly varied ecological and cultural settings. Who are 'lost people' in their homeland and the land of their stay. She picturises her own memories and experiences as the thoughts of Caliban. It is her self-portraiture. Both as a poet and a human being she becomes "every woman" and accomplishes in her quest and tries to come up with a comprehensive solution to the problems. She selects the mode of subversion for its art in developing an old idea to suit the modern world and the crafty idea to counter the existing ideology with psyche of a woman. She develops the growth of Caliban from the point of history to future history, showing the emergence of a self-willed, self-conscious, bold and powerful intelligent individual woman.

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