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Exile Without Geography: Diasporic Selfhood and the Poetics of Unbelonging in Suniti Namjoshi's 'To Be a Poet' and 'The Unicorn

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Abstract

This article takes a fresh look at Suniti Namjoshi's poems *"To Be a Poet"* and *"The Unicorn"* pushing the idea of diaspora way past its usual ties to moving from one place to another. People often read Namjoshi's work through feminist or queer perspective, but not many talk about her poetry in terms of diaspora, how it feels to experience that disconnection not just in terms of physical boundary but also how it affects you mentally. Through this article I demonstrate that the voices in these poems show a different kind of diasporic identity. For them, being an outsider isn't just limited to missing or leaving a homeland, it's about never quite fitting into the boxes society sets up, it is always feeling a bit out of place and distant from people. If you dig deep into the poems themselves, you'll see that both the poet in *"To Be a Poet"* and the unicorn in *"The Unicorn"* stand for this kind of in-between existence. They're not at the centre of things, they live on the edges, almost invisible in the stories society tells about who matters and who doesn't. In their worlds, poetry and fantasy aren't just ways to escape. They are how these characters survive in crucial world, how they speak in favour of themselves, and how they make exile a choice instead of a punishment. By focusing on what it means to be in "exile without geography," this article tries to shake up the notion how people think about diaspora. It is not just about moving from one country to another; it is also about the sense of unbelonging and the search for identity. The poems of Namjoshi offer us new ways of discussing these issues, especially in the framework of contemporary diasporic writing.

Keywords: Diaspora, Unbelonging, Imaginative exile, Poetic selfhood, Namjoshi

1. Introduction

Suniti Namjoshi and the Critical Gap:



(Source: https://herder.com.mx/sites/default/files/uploads/writer_images/sunitinamjoshi.jpg)

Suniti Namjoshi carves out a special spot in diasporic literature. She was born in India, but most of her writing generally comes from Britain and Canada, so people usually call her an Indian diasporic writer. Namjoshi has published several volumes of poetry, using her poetry to express her views on gender equality and societal transformation. Her style often incorporates humor and wit to convey thought-provoking ideas, (Pitliya and Gahlot, 2023). Critics usually focus on feminist and queer readings of her work, analysing how she resists patriarchal norms and heteronormative concepts of sex and gender. It is worth noting, however, that there is something else going on in her poetry, something that is commonly overlooked: her feelings of not belonging. Again and again, she has proved with her poetic voices that is stand apart from social norms and group identities. Her poetry not just talk about being away from home; it talks about a deeper kind of exile, something that sits in the mind rather than just on a map. “In her book 'Because of India', Namjoshi writes about her great sense of displacement and loneliness in America: '...In India I was inescapably my grandfather's granddaughter...but now I was literally 'Nobody from Nowhere' - and I didn't like it' [1].

2. Re-defining Diaspora

People usually think of diaspora as something tied to leaving home only; a story about migration, distance, and feeling cut off from where you came from. If we talk about the classic version or the prominent themes then it is all about exile, longing, loss, and wanting to go back home to find the lost identity. But lately, scholars have started to push back against this idea that diaspora is only about where you are (or aren’t) on the map. They point out that you don’t have to move at all to feel exiled. With this new perspective, diaspora isn’t just about physical distance. It becomes more of a psychological thing, and emotional discomfort, something felt in alienation, in feeling split or out of place, in that nagging sense you don’t

really belong. Even if you've never actually left home, you will feel a discomfort and alienation in your own homely environment.

Through this article I am shifting your focus towards the other dimension of diaspora, a newer concept in which you will recognize the actual stressful feeling of being left out from the society, even though you are living in between it. With Namjoshi's given poems this diversion can be felt more deeply [2].

3. Diaspora, Literature and Poetic Unbelonging:

Poetry and literature open up a creative space in which people can talk about forms of diaspora that aren't necessarily related to geography. It provides people who are on the margins of society with the ability to explore their identities without necessarily choosing one culture, one nation, one social group. There is always a constant voice in diasporic poetry, always lost and trying to find themselves and their voice in the void of in-between places that don't quite fit inside or outside the mainstream. These kinds of poetries always have that lost touch of homeland. Identity here isn't settled; it moves, shifts, and keeps changing. So, poetry really fits when it comes to exploring diasporia as an internal feeling of emotional distance or living in your imagination far from home, even if you never actually leave. Namjoshi provided us the best version of this kind of diasporic poetry, where she talks about how it feels being alone in the world full of people. The feeling of migration (psychologically) while living at home. We can say she is an excellent example of a plant nurtured in a different field. At some places she exhibits the consciousness of exile and at some other places she exhibits an all-amalgamating spirit. At some places she reveals a crisis of identity and then in poems she is at home in exile [3].

4. **Introduction to the poems central concern:**

The poems *"To Be a Poet"* and *"The Unicorn"* really capture what it's like to feel out of place, even when you haven't physically gone anywhere, it feels like you are physically present here, your body is here but mentally you are somewhere else. In the poem "To Be a Poet," the feeling of writing is that of loneliness. The poet appears to be an individual who simply does not belong. They seem to be out of sync with the rest of the world, as if they have an alien personality that is attempting to blend in with the rest of the normal population. The poem makes it clear: being a poet means you're always a bit set apart from society. People will generally think of a poet as a different human being who has some extraordinary power. But in reality, as Namjoshi puts it forward, a poet is also a simple human being like all others. In the poem *"The Unicorn"* Namjoshi takes a different route, using the symbol of a unicorn, a creature nobody has ever seen, to show what it's feel like to live on the edge of reality, never fully accepted or understood. The unicorn's outsider status lines up with the poet's own sense of exclusion, suggesting that being left is a very crude feeling. And no matter how beautiful your appearance may be, you can still feel alienated from the society, like the unicorn. Although, this poem mainly focuses on the theme of queerness but from a deep critical viewpoint and keeping the theme of diaspora in mind, we can make say that in

deep rooted meaning of the poem we see some effects of alienation and lost identity that the poet is trying to find [4].

5. Method and Contribution:

By digging deep into Namjoshi's writing, this study shows how she uses poetry and fantasy as new spaces for survival and self-expression. In her poems, exile isn't something you fix by going back home or finding a place to belong. Instead, it's something she lives with on purpose, turning it into her own way of being. This article puts unbelonging right at the heart of what it means to be part of a diaspora. It pushes diasporic literary studies past the usual focus on migration stories, shining a light on the power of inner, imaginative exile in today's diasporic poetry. It is very important point that Namjoshi highlighted through her poetry that diaspora isn't just about being away from home, it is not merely a concept of physical distance, rather it is a concept of mental distance from the people and society you belong to. A concept which is not very common in Diaspora studies but Namjoshi gave rise to this new phenomenon of mental apartness through her works [5].

6. Close Reading of the Poems

I. "To Be a Poet"

"Saying that this was what it felt like to put
the right foot forward, and then the left, saying
that this was the taste of morning porridge,
that of milk, and this other of a niggling
but persistent pain, saying —
that, I suppose, was what was distinctive —
being unable to keep my mouth shut,
my mind from working. But a poet lives
like any other creature, talks perhaps
more than is normal, her doom no brighter,
nor her death less dismal than any other." (Namjoshi, 2017, Poemhunter)

Reading Analysis: In "To Be a Poet," Suniti Namjoshi doesn't paint the poet as some empowered figure basking in glory. Instead, she digs into the loneliness, the awkwardness, the feeling of being out of step with everyone else. The poem doesn't blame migration or losing your roots for this sense of not belonging. It's just how the poet sees things. That strange way of looking at the world pushes the poet outside, turning perception itself into a kind of exile. It tells how the general people often assumes a poet to be different because they have a tendency to think outside of the box, but Namjoshi argues that a poet is not different, s/he might just be thinking differently but their nature is same as other human beings.

If you look at it from the diaspora's point of view, the poem is actually talking about the experience of not quite fitting in, not quite fitting into your place, not because you're not in your place, but simply because you can't or won't quite integrate into the world that's going

on around you. The poet is not with the group; he's not quite one of the group; he's more of an observer than a participant. The language of the poem continues to drive this notion of separation. There's always a little bit of space between the poet and the world, as though he's in two places at once. This is kind of what the diaspora is like, this in-between space [6].

The poem is about the ambivalent nature of being a writer. Poetry is a way for the poet to voice her opinions, and at the same time, it makes her go further into the margins. That is the essence of the diasporic paradox, and it is discussed in the poem as follows: "just because you find the words doesn't mean you find belonging." The poet's decision to display her difference actually underlines how separate she is from all the other people in the world. Being exiled is not something she will eventually outgrow, as discussed in "To Be a Poet." She does not wait for an opportunity to go back, and she finds a way to live despite the fact that she feels like she does not belong. Therefore, the poem reveals what it means to be an exile without actually leaving home. The poet's feeling of not belonging is not necessarily about moving around the map of the world, but it is about seeing the world in a different way. The poet becomes a diasporic subject not necessarily because she has moved, but because she is dislocated from all the other people in the world [7].

II. "The Unicorn"

I rode the wild unicorn,
In the green light of trees,
In the dark light of night,
Past leaves and silver thorn,
In love and foul weather.
Love, will you ride with me?
But my love stayed behind,
Far away behind me,
And I rode the wild unicorn,
Past love and foul weather. (Verma)



"The Unicorn Rests in a Garden," also called "The Unicorn in Captivity," is the best-known of the *Unicorn Tapestries*. (Source: Wikipedia)

Reading Analysis: In *"The Unicorn",* Namjoshi uses myth and fantasy to dig into a deeper sense of not belonging. The unicorn isn't just a mythical animal it lives completely outside

what's real or recognized. Where the poet in *"To Be a Poet"* still has some kind of place on the margins of human society, the unicorn is pure otherness. It just doesn't fit anywhere in the usual ways we make sense of things. Most critics often look at this poem and the metaphor of unicorn as something related to homosexuality; There is an obvious presentation of the love of sexual indulgence (lesbian) and the love of literature (Nagar, 2023). This, as we have seen, is the representation of the unicorn as homosexual. But if we view this representation from the diasporic perspective, then we see that it is actually representative of those who do not belong in the world, not because they have lost their home, but because they do not belong. They are invisible, misunderstood, or made to feel that they do not exist. And I think that is what is so sad about the diasporic experience: being physically present but still being made to disappear from the scene.

In the poem, fantasy is a means of survival rather than escape. The unicorn escapes the violence of forced assimilation through its existence in the realm of the unreal. By failing to be acknowledged on terms that are dominant, the poem suggests that unbelonging is a means of survival, allowing the individual to maintain their integrity. Diasporic resistance to homogenization is closely linked to this concept. Furthermore, the existence of the unicorn subverts the notion of identity that is traditionally held. The unicorn is a diasporic selfhood that is unable to be defined or classified in any way. "A Unicorn" takes the notion of exile and radicalizes it, making it a state that is inhabited rather than one that is lamented.

7. Comparative Reading of both Texts:

When the two poems, *"To Be a Poet"* and "The Unicorn," are read together, the two poems create similar images of diasporic identity. In the two poems, the poet and the unicorn are not part of the normal structure of society, but their intention is not to conform or go back. This is not the physical place of exile; it is the place of existence. This is the beauty of the poems that Namjoshi has chosen, as she has created a sense or feeling of this concept through the characters of the poet and the unicorn. This is the way that Namjoshi is telling the society that the place of exile is not physical; it is also mental. This article is following the same spirit that Namjoshi has created in her poems, as a new definition of Diaspora is told in this article.

The body of poetry as a whole suggests a new way of thinking about diaspora as a state of mind, rather than as a physical act of moving. An exile with no particular place, where feeling like you don't quite belong is a constant, and even welcome, state of being.

8. Conclusion

Through the critical lens of diasporic studies, this article has examined Suniti Namjoshi's poems *"To Be a Poet"* and *"The Unicorn"* in order to rethink diaspora as a condition extending beyond geographical displacement. The idea of "exile without geography" has been foregrounded in this study to argue that Namjoshi's poetic speakers instantiate a diasporic selfhood grounded in psychological, imaginative, and existential unbelonging rather than necessarily a physical condition of migration. Paralleling each other, the poet and the unicorn emerge as figures that exist at the threshold of social legibility, inhabiting spaces

resistant to assimilation into stable or normative identities. The article has, through close textual analysis, shown the ways in which poetry and fantasy work not to escape from but as intentional ways of survival and articulation of the self. In “To Be a Poet,” writing itself is what generates distance from communal life, where poetic identity would be intrinsically isolating. In “The Unicorn,” myth becomes a metaphor for radical otherness, allowing the subject to maintain integrity by refusing recognition on dominant terms. Both poems, together, blur the assumption that exile necessarily involves notions of loss, nostalgia, or longing for return. Through this project, it becomes possible to situate Namjoshi’s oeuvre within an extended diasporic paradigm, thus adding to the critical debate on diasporic literature today, wherein unbelonging emerges as a defining, continuous aspect of diasporic subjective existence. The project further contends that it becomes possible to perceive diaspora not as a movement between transnational spaces, but rather as an existence, wherein marginality becomes an intention rather than an actuality. In doing so, it not only extends the trajectory of diaspora studies, it further encourages critical encounters with voices from poetic discourse that perceive exilic existence as an imaginative reality.

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