



**POETRY OF SUNITI NAMJOSHI IN THE POSTMODERN SCENARIO**

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**Introduction**

Indian English poetry has changed its face from imitative to experimental. Indian English sensibility has acquired a postmodern face now. The present research paper aims at tracing the postmodern tendencies in the poetry of Suniti Namjoshi. As a result of a changed postmodern world the sensibility of Indian English poets is changed into a postmodern sensibility. I have also aimed to trace the exposure of the select poets to postmodern tendencies. As a result of these tendencies their sensibility is changed thoroughly into postmodern sensibility. The postmodern sensibility is a continuation of the modern sensibility as well as a break from it. Hence it is very necessary to throw light on the key terms, modernism and post modernism.

**Modernism or Postmodernism : Debatable Issue**

There is always a hot debate whenever the mention of difference between modernism and postmodernism is made. Modernism has its roots deep in twentieth century culture. Postmodernism is believed to have come to life in the 90s of the 20th century. Modernism is the name given to the movement of Arts and Culture in 20<sup>th</sup> century. The movement shattered the pre-twentieth century practice in music, literature, architecture and painting. The movement took shape in Vienna in 1890-1910. Later on, it spread in France, Italy, Germany and Britain in the form of Dadaism, Futurism, Cubism and Surrealism. Hence, it becomes indispensable to understand modernism for understanding the 20<sup>th</sup> century culture. Modernism brought about changes in arts, for instance, melody and harmony were driven out from music. Perspective and direct pictorial representation were also ousted from painting and abstractions introduced. Traditional forms and materials were abandoned from architecture. In literature traditional realism was rejected and omniscient narrator, chronological plot, closed endings and forms were experimented with.

High Modernism (1910-1930) consists of the span of 20 years. The modernist literary high priests of this period were James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Wyndham Lewis and Wallace Stevens. The French and German Modernists include, Franz Kafka, Marcel Proust, Andre Gide, Rainer Maria Rilke and Stephen Mallarme.

Characteristics of literary modernism practiced by these modernists are as follows:

- An Introduction of fragmented forms, discontinuous narrative and collages.
- An introduction of new tendency towards reflexivity : As a result of this, novels, plays and poems raise issues related to their own nature, role and status.
- Novels featuring – fixed narrative points of view, omniscient external narration and morality.
- Distinction between genres disappeared : for instance, prose like poems, lyrical and poetic novels appeared.
- Impressionism and subjectivity was emphasized, for instance, how we see rather than what we see (Stream-of-consciousness technique)

So we have a literature dedicated to experimentation and innovation. The years 1930s onward modernism started to retreat because of political and economic crisis. Again the year 1960

brought the resurgence of modernism but for a short while. Then the important question which arises is whether postmodernism is a continuation or opposition of modernism ?

J.A. Cuddon's *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* describes postmodernism as, 'characterized by 'an eclectic approach', [by a liking for] aleatory writing [and for] parody and pastiche..' <sup>5</sup>

The definition underlines the continuation of modernism in postmodernism and no significant distinction between the two is brought out. The word 'eclectic' in the definition shows the use of fragmented forms as characteristics of modernism.'

### The Emergence of Postmodernism

It is quite difficult to mention the exact dates of the emergence of postmodernism. Hence, the year 1941 is used as a rough boundary-line for the postmodern beginning.

The prefix 'post' indicating two implications :

I. *Reaction against modernism in the wake of the World War II*; with its disrespect of human rights, just convinced in the Geneva convention, through the atomic bombardment of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (1942) and the *Holocaust created by it*.

Postmodern also implies a reaction to significant post-war events; viz, civil rights movement in the United States, the beginning of the Cold War, post colonialism, rise of the personal computer (Cyberpunk fiction and Hyper text fiction).

II. The prefix 'post' implies 'a new era'.

According to some experts beginning of postmodern literature marked either with the publications or literary events. For instance, John Hawkes', *The Cannibal* (1949) and the first performance of *Waiting for Godot* (1953). The beginning of postmodernism is also marked with the help of such critical theories as, Jaques Derrida's, '*Structure, Sign and Play*' (1966) or as late as in 1971 Ihab Hassan's usage of the word postmodernism in his critical essay, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*. There is no doubt that many postmodern works have developed out of modernism.

Modernism is related to epistemology - theory of knowledge, while postmodernism is concerned with questions of ontology.

The condition related to postmodernism and its impact on literature stated above is related to the Western world. What is the status of postmodernism in India today? Whether postmodernism has really existed in our country? If yes, then how? Is it reflected in literature? These are some quite interesting questions of which answers are to be searched in the present research paper. The research paper aims to delve deep to find out postmodern sensibility reflected through the literary works. It attempts to find out the answer to the question, what is postmodern sensibility? Possible answers to the last question can be as follows :

- Postmodern sensibility is a continuation of the modern sensibility.
- The postmodern poets try to be emulating the modernists.
- There is deliberate poetization with respect to an audience.
- The sincerity in dealing with an experience has mounted up.
- The normal and banal themes are dealt with a new mode of treatment.
- The urban world with all its associated evil is dealt as such in poetry.
- The response to the natural world becomes remote.
- The poets are more engrossed with men's problems than their relationship to the passive non-human world.
- The poets' experience dullness and boredom.
- There is alienation, rootlessness, meaninglessness and the problem of self-identity.

An Era of

In the... and customs... and become... despite differ... Even the co... opens the... thousands o... (expanding)... demarcation... races and ide... into the new... mingling of... postmodern e...

Mingling and Mixing

a cultural mixing causes to encounter contrary view... and creeds etc. Everything seems to be mixed cre... at media. This hodgepodge further leads the wo... the people. Every creed and concept is undergoing... an exception to this change. The invention of info... communication. Cultures have been fragmenting... cultures. As a result of this we are to view the wo... 'g' (shrinking) place. Every postmodernist is tr... ally changing postmodern world. Almost everything... in this changing postmodern world. Postmodern c... literature and coming out with gems of new experienc... cultures. Hence he creates a work of art consisting...

Indian Sensib

Indianness... postmodern... Comparatively... following rea...

Modern Sensibility; An Encounter

Sensibility are drastically affected when there is a... modern time Indian poetry has changed but... time is ushering quick and instant changes especial...

- The world... village.
• The happ... world can be felt at every corner due to the advancem...
• Technolog...
• Hyperactiv... viz. Newspapers and Television.
• Knowledge... sides on the fingertips of the cyberpunk due to intern...
• Hyperactiv...

- The mixing... local is common, as a result of this 'glocal' comes int...
• E-books, e... interviews, revolutionize, Indian life.

The pos... ability is imbibed into the Indian English poets. The In...
connected with... the world. A poet living in America or Britain is con...
Indian poet. He... postmodern thoughts on internet freely.

Impact of Post

ility on Indian English Poetry

The pos... ability in globalized and postmodern conditions passes...
English Poetry... ed communicative technology. It makes ripples on...
Poetry. It chang... of Indian English poetry. The impact of postmodern...
deepened in our... period. Though Indian English Poetry started out of...
it seems that it... point of 'fulfilment'. Indian English Poetry learn...
traditional, nat... and post-independence make-up. It has entered into...
age now. We... vent of Globalisation ushering in Westernized...
mutations . The... e reflected in Indian English Poetry as postmod...

Factors respons

- > Advent o...
> The post... by Indian English Poetry.
> Mounting...
> Employe... m themes and techniques.



- Revolutionary and uninhibited work comes out.
- The world used as 'locale' in the works of the Indian authors.
- New meaning is searched in old myths, legends, images and philosophy.
- Changing social environment demands *New* meanings.
- Postmodern sensibility brings about revolutionary transformations in perceptions.
- Rebellious attitude towards society mounted up.
- Traditional social order and value system affected drastically.

These points along with some others are reflected in the works of viz., Suniti Namjoshi.

### Suniti Namjoshi : Postmodern Voice

The New Indian English poetry voices celebrated poets of diasporas and vents out their sense of alienation, double home situations, up-rootedness and impact of non-Indian culture. Suniti Namjoshi's poetry reflects the repercussions of the diasporic conditions.

Suniti Namjoshi (b.1941) is an important figure in contemporary Indian writing in English. She has five anthologies of poems and several works of fiction to her credit. Narrative technique, formal experimentation, revisionist myth-making, diasporic experience and sexual politics are the outstanding features of her poetry. Her latest work is located within the context of feminism, post colonialism and postmodernism. She dexterously blends Eastern and Western ideas, myths and modes of perception.

Suniti Namjoshi began writing in the late sixties. The productivity of her work of art as well as the range depth and variety of her work make her significant. Her experimental writing becomes attraction for research to me. It also inspired me to find out traces of 'postmodern sensibility' in her writing. She is really a creative genius. She belongs to Indian Diaspora and lesbian literature. Her work is rich in allusions. Her inventive and innovative quality lies in drawing on Greek as well as Christian myths and legends, fables and fairy tales old and new writers and weaves an intricate network of intertexts into her texts. Instead to serve meaning, she allows her readers to draw their own inferences as she thought that **there is no authoritarian meaning, the very postmodern concept indeed!**

Suniti Namjoshi's work is a treasure house of the postmodern traits for a researcher like me, her work is a non conformist. It transgresses norms of societal and literary conventions. It stresses the need for looking at life from alternative perspectives. It demolishes the conventional hierarchies of class, race and gender. It let emerge more acceptable and egalitarian perspectives. She looks at writing as charity- the highest ideal of human life. Her experience is marked with binaries East and West, rich and poor, centre and periphery. Her non-hegemonic expressions creates dialogic and conversational texts wherein the reader is incorporated as a co-author- a latest postmodern trend of writing. Namjoshi evolves more sophisticated forms of fictional and poetic expression. In this context her work of fiction, *Building Babel*, is very innovative in form. It creates a collaborative reader and leaves the narrative open ended so that each reader may add her/his own version to the text. Here Namjoshi addresses the important issue that is the power of language to both control and subvert authority. And the courage to claim and proclaim both language and biology. She presents sisters engaged in Babel building in *Building Bable*, who analyze the situation thus :

"The problem is we've all been typecast"

"The problem is God"

"No, no, the problem is man!"

"The problem is us. For original sin/Look within"



"The problem is mother!"

"The problem is words"

(Building Bable)

The above mentioned Westernized socio-cultural mutations are surfacing in to the work of the poet. Her *Because of India* (1989) where she discusses her own experiences. The book shows a strong bond of Namjoshi with India and provides an expatriate writers grateful tribute to her Motherland.

**Irony** is the most important weapon to the postmodern authors. Suniti Namjoshi is a master of this device. By employing this device she in the words of Monica Varma, 'rueful truth telling'. In this context Mrs. Varma remarked, 'It is this in particular that I find the most distinctive feature of her poetry'<sup>13</sup> The experience of postmodern conditions moulds her life. It is filled with untoward incidents. As a result of this she employs irony to present her secret thoughts in such poems as *Beauty and the Beast* and *Courtship*. The irony employed by the poet in these poems is having the ironic perception of the great poets of our times, viz, Shiv K. Kumar, Jayant Mahapatra and Kamala Das. Namjoshi writes in *Beauty and the Beast*,

Beauty loved the ugly beast  
 And thinking it was a prince she'd wed,  
 Waited for his shape to change  
 And found there were two beasts in bed.

(Beauty and the Beast)

**Irony** is trickling down from each line here. The original myth reversed. These are the specialties of the postmodern authors. The mind of the reader is filled with disgust in the matter of love and sex. The lines are 'self-searching' and 'truth telling'. This is Namjoshi's forte which can be discovered in several poems in her three collections. In her first collection we have, *Aphrodisiac*, *The Lesson*, *Terra and the Spectator* and *Flawed*. In the second, *Perplexities*, *Cyclone in Pakistan*, *Small Point*, in the third, *In Three Tenses*, *A Problem*, *Call This A Forest*.

Her attitude is molded with the postmodern conditions. Her dumb acceptance of the ineffectuality, defunct state of God is coming out from the poem, *The Lesson*,

Truly, oh God, betwixt you both,  
 We have learnt 'how to suffer'

(Italics Mine, More Poems)

Her attitude is made harsh in the postmodern conditions. The reflection of it can be witnessed through the poems - *It's Quality of the Gods*, *Terra and the Spectator*, *The Unicorn*, *The Flee-Bitten Monkey*, *The Old Country*, *My Aging Country*.

Postmodern literature focuses on **intertextuality**. It means relationship between one text to another. This intertextuality is abundantly found in the poems of Namjoshi. It seems her pastime to bring out past literary works. The best example in this context is her poem, *Theatre of the Absurd in Toronto*, This poem is having abundance possibilities of inter-textual readings or misreadings. The poet here presents 'the sub-life of the sub-way' is like 'the sub-life of the stage' instantly reminding Shakespeare's world famous utterance, 'all the world is a stage'.

Poems appeared in *Cyclone in Pakistan* (1971) voices Namjoshi's views on the current issues, for instance, meaningless conditions in life, advent of war and violence. The poems vent out the anger suppressed into the mind of the poet.

Poetry in the hands of Suniti Namjoshi takes the experimental turn very often. As the poet exposed to the Western world and became the part and parcel of it. The postmodern trends are reflected at the earliest in her poetry because of her diasporic experience. She turns poetry as a



techniques are revealed from her work. She has taken male (patriarchal) authority to task by converting old myths and offers new modes of perception.

The journey of Indian English poetry from imitative to experimental has come to an end. The works of the Indian English poets reflect postmodern tendencies. Suniti Namjoshi's work has postmodern inclinations. Her maximum exposure to the postmodern conditions reflects postmodern tendencies through her works. As a result of this her sensibility is changed thoroughly into postmodern sensibility. The chief pursuit of this paper is to underline these mutations in Indian sensibility which seems to be quite mature in the postmodern era.

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