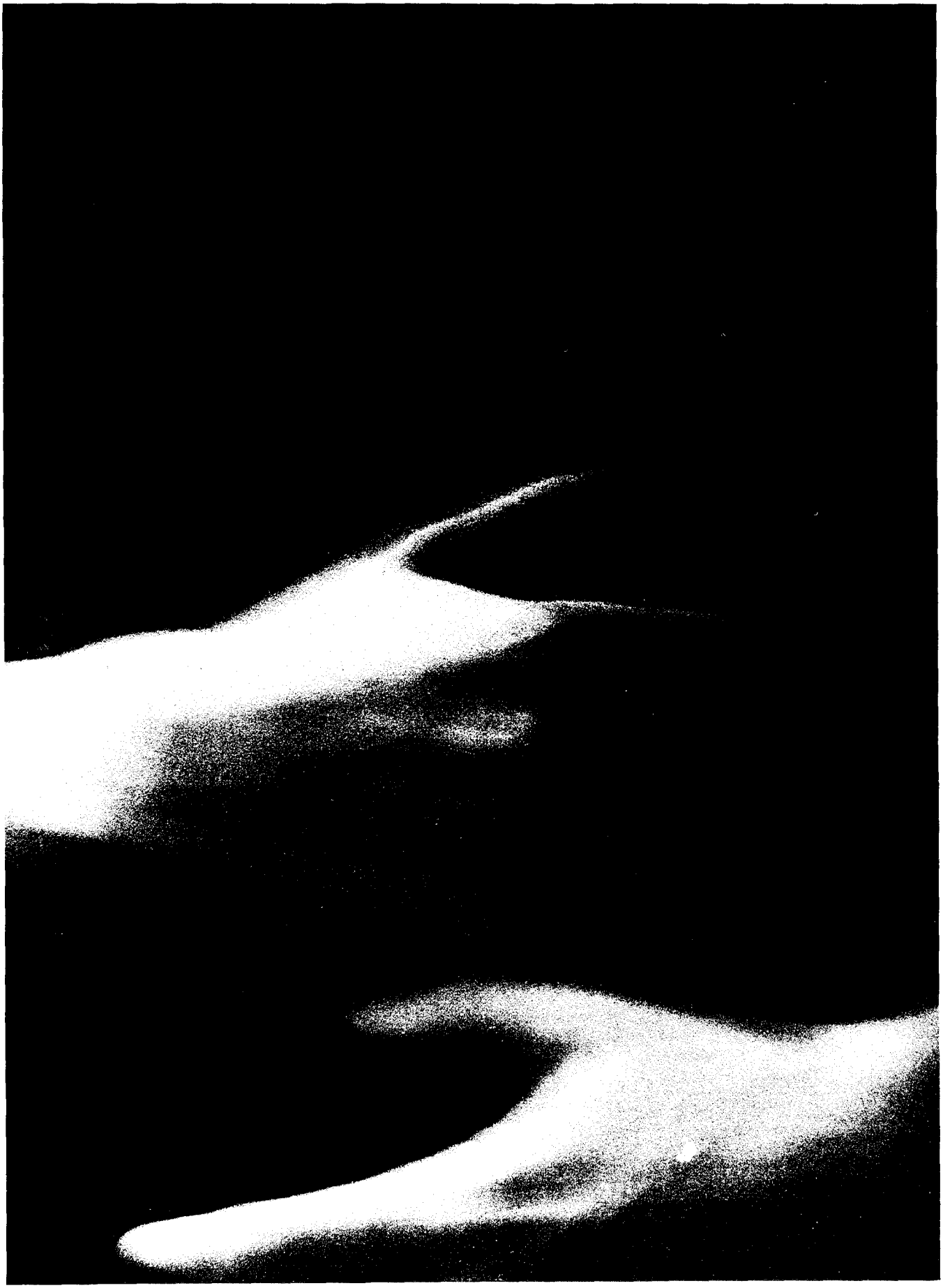
A Photo By Pamela Williams



POETRY OR PROPAGANDA?

Suniti Namjoshi

Suniti Namjoshi, poétesse féministe et écrivaine satiriste, se voit confrontée à un dilemme: doit-elle abandonner la littérature, ou le féminisme?

Les rapports entre la vie et la littérature, voilà ce qui attire l'attention des féministes vers la littérature, et toute littérature est "référentielle". Aucune oeuvre ne peut exister sans un lecteur: elle est donc toujours en puissance soit révolutionnaire soit conservatrice.

Le problème pour les écrivaines (et pour les femmes), c'est que le système extérieur de référence (y compris la tradition littéraire) contient des hypothèses patriarcales sur les rôles des hommes et des femmes. Selon le message patriarcal de la littérature, le fait d'explorer ce que cela signifie d'être humain n'est pas une préoccupation de femme. Un tel message n'est pas au centre de l'oeuvre littéraire, mais émane du système patriarcal de références.

Le féminisme libère les femmes des inhibitions patriarcales, et permet à nos propres imaginations de fonctionner. Il est donc important d'attirer l'attention sur la nature des hypothèses patriarcales en matière de littérature.

What I am dealing with here is my dilemma as a feminist: must I give up literature or must I give up feminism? The view that a proper approach to literature should not be content oriented — that is, the view that literature read properly is neither feminist nor antifeminist — can be used to set aside any discussion of feminist considerations. I am suggesting, however, that balance is necessary. The fact that there is an aspect of literature that defies paraphrase is, in fact, vital and helpful from a feminist point of view. The consequence of ignoring this point is obvious, I think. We would have to throw out an entire body of literature on the grounds that it is, on the whole, a patriarchal product, and we would be left for all practical purposes almost memoryless.

As feminists it's the connection between life and literature that tends to attract our attention first, and by this connection I mean not just the "influence" that literature has on life, but also the influence that life (in a patriarchal society) has on literature. Literature is referential. No poem stands on its own. In order to exist it has to be read, and in order to read it the reader must bring to it a great deal of external knowledge — including, of course, a knowledge of the language. The meaning or the effect of a poem or a story depends quite as much on what the reader brings to it (and this includes the reader's context) as it does on the actual text. Writers are dependent on an external frame of reference, and so what is not modified by the context of the poem is reinforced by its very use. In other words, literature is always potentially revolutionary and always potentially conservative. The problem for women writers, and for women, arises from the fact that the external frame of reference, which includes the literary tradition, contains patriarchal assumptions about the roles appropriate to women and men. My point, however, is that these are only assumptions (however potent), not immutable principles, and therefore not central to the literary process. They may be modified without damage to the literary fabric, and, moreover, such modifications are often an enrichment.

So far not a word has been said about any direct message or meaning in the actual works, and yet one often emerges fairly clearly: to engage in exploring what it means to be human is not primarily a woman's concern. This is, of course, a patriarchal message. The fact is, though, that purely "literary" considerations imply nothing of the sort. Like most sexist messages emanating from a literary work, it is incidental rather than central to the work. Such messages are the product of a patriarchal tradition and of the use of a patriarchal frame of reference. But patriarchal assumptions are in no way *essential* to literature as such.

Consider the bare bones of literature, the myths, the folk tales, the skeletal structures. Are these patriarchal? Surely the essence of a myth is that it is only a structure for formulating human thoughts and human emotions. A particular tale can be used in a thousand different ways by a thousand different people. Take the myth of Daphne and Apollo, which has a

male god saying to a harmless nymph, "Be what I want you to be or else"; and yet the sexism is not, in fact, intrinsic to its structure. The myth can quite easily be used for a feminist purpose. For example, "Nymph."

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The god chases Daphne. Daphne runs away. Daphne is transformed into a green laurel. What does it mean? That that's what happens to ungrateful women?

Daphne says, "Yes." She says, "Yes. Yes. Yes." Apollo is pleased. Then he gets bored. Girl chases god. It is not very proper. Daphne gets changed. Into what is she changed? Daphne is changed into a green laurel. What does it mean? That that's what happens to ungrateful women.

Daphne says, "Yes." Then she keeps quiet. Her timing is right. Daphne gets changed. Into what is she changed? Daphne is changed into a green laurel. And what does it mean? It means, it obviously means, that trees keep quiet.*

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Most mythologies do, I think, reflect a patriarchal system. There will be a supreme male deity, and the primary relationship of the human to the divine will be that of female to male, of subordinate to superior. From a feminist perspective, the mere substitution of a chief female deity for a male one, as in Graves's *White Goddess*, makes little difference. In Graves the centre of human consciousness remains irredeemably and exclusively male.

However, the mere presence of a female protagonist does not guarantee the absence of sexism, any more than the mere absence of a female centre of consciousness guarantees the presence of sexism. Take three well-known children's tales, "Cinderella," "Red Riding Hood," and "Rapunzel." Cinderella is, presumably, a simple success story, but it is entirely possible to question the nature of the success prescribed for women. I have called the fable "And Then What Happened?"

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The Prince married Cinderella. (It pays to have such very small feet.) But soon they started squabbling. "You married me for my money," was the Prince's charge. "You married me for my looks," was C's reply. "But your looks will fade, whereas my money will last. *Not* a fair bargain." "No," said Cinderella and simply walked out.

And then what happened?

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The technique I use with the Red Riding Hood story is rather different. The effect depends to a far greater extent on Red Riding Hood's point of view, which serves to uncover the "doublethink" I've ascribed to the others. It's called "Case History."

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After the event Little R. traumatized. Wolf not slain. Forester is wolf. How else was he there exactly on time? Explains this to mother. Mother not happy. Thinks that the forester is extremely nice. Grandmother dead. Wolf not dead. Wolf marries mother. R. not happy. R. is a kid. Mother thinks wolf is extremely nice. Please to see shrink. Shrink will make it clear that wolves on the whole are extremely nice. R. gets it straight. Okay to be wolf. Mama is a wolf. She is a wolf. Shrink is a wolf. Mama and shrink, and forester also, extremely uptight.

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In the third story my point of view isn't really close to Rapunzel's at all. It's the similarities between the "secure" conditions of the tall tower and the prince's castle that attract my imagination. This one is called "Rescued."

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And Rapunzel, tied to her chair by her golden hair, doesn't really care, doesn't really dare. And the Witch is wicked; that is well-established. The Witch has left her a pair of scissors. And therefore, Rapunzel dreams. She dreams of a Prince who is extremely powerful and extremely strong, a Prince so strong that he can lift her chair, and lift her as well, still tied to the chair, and carry her away. And Rapunzel dreams. She dreams of a castle with a very wide moat and four strong walls and a room of her own where she's perfectly safe.

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I wrote the fables first and then this article. What I'm trying to do here is express my feeling that a writer isn't really concerned with the stereotypes as such, so much as with the process. To see only the tree, rather than Daphne turning into a tree, is to see only the end product. It's the shift that fascinates, the metamorphosis.

What I'm also suggesting is that it is not literature that bars us. It's the patriarchal tradition that imposes inhibitions on women, and what feminism does is to release us from those inhibitions. Our imaginations can function, and then simply being able to range and think and feel and explore, that is glorious.

This is a cheerful conclusion, but I have another which is a little grimmer and which stresses my conviction that feminist considerations do matter. Consider "Philomel."

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She had her tongue ripped out, and then she sang down through the centuries. So that it seems only fitting that the art that she practises should be for art's sake, and never spelt out, no, never reduced to its mere message — that would appal.

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Patriarchal assumptions may not be essential to literature as such, but the sexism inherent in such assumptions detracts from literature. It is important that the nature of these assumptions be pointed out.

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*The fables in this article are from *Feminist Fables* (London, Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1981).