

SUNITI NAMJOSHI

# TALES TELL TALES...



-Amba

When we as women begin collectively to define our identity, we have to pick up the magnifying glass, to critically re-evaluate the whole legacy of human culture and civilization. We have to re-discover our history and re-create our own myths.

These tales which tell new tales about women's experience are an attempt to do just this. Suniti Namjoshi picks up old fables, fairy tales, legends, and by retelling them with a slight twist, exposes the prejudices against women which pervade them. Often, she uses the same language as the original storyteller did, but by changing the events slightly, given this language ironic meaning. She calls the Stepmother "Wicked" but leads the reader to question the value system which has so branded her.

As we read, we are forced to ask many questions. For instance, why is it that the stepmother, the witch, the strong woman in the fairy story is always bad and the good girl is always helpless, needing the protection of a Prince Charming? Does our experience confirm this – is it true that women are always either good and weak or bad and strong? Or is this just another way of teaching us to avoid exploring our strength and to become Sleeping Beauties?

These fables raise questions but they also make statements, create vision which we need to inspire our daily struggles.. Visions of strong, self-dependent, humorous, loving, struggling women, who are beginning to "fashion their own fables."

## FROM PANCHATANTRA

In the holy city of Benares there lived a brahmin, who, as he walked by the river, watching the crows floating downstream, feeding on the remains of half-burnt corpses, consoled himself thus: "It is true that I am poor, but I am a brahmin; it is true that I have no sons, but I, myself, am indisputably male. I shall return to the temple and pray to Lord Vishnu to grant me a son".

He went off to the temple and Lord Vishnu listened and Lord Vishnu complied, but whether through absent-mindedness or whether for some other more abstruse reason, he gave him a daughter. The Brahmin was disappointed. When the child was old enough, he called her to him and delivered himself thus: "I am a Brahmin. You are my daughter. I had hoped for a son. No matter. I will teach you what I know and when you are able, we will both meditate and seek guidance."

Though only a woman, she learned very fast, and then they both sat down and meditated hard. In a very short time Lord Vishnu appeared. "What do you want?" he said. The Brahmin couldn't

stop himself. He blurted out quickly: "I want a son," "Very well," said the God, "next time around". In his next incarnation the Brahmin was a woman and bore eight sons. "And what do you want?" he said to the girl. "I want human status." "Ah, that's much harder", and the god hedged and appointed a commission.

## THE LITTLE PRINCE

The Wicked Stepmother married a king who already had a son, and within a year she gave birth to another child, this time a daughter. Both children were healthy and affectionate, and good-natured and kind and fond of one another. But this wicked woman had an extraordinary ambition: she herself had married a king, but she wanted her daughter to reign alone.

She brought up her children to this end. The princess was tutored to assume the sovereignty of her possible kingdom, while the prince was taught to be demure and shy, and docile and gentle. The king rarely saw them; he was immersed in the affairs of the kingdom.

One day, the wicked queen fell to her knees and begged the king for a small

favour. "that depends," said the king, "what depends," said the king, "what do you want?" "You have two children," she said, "let the more capable rule the kingdom." "That's nonsense," said the king, but she was persistent. "Set the tests," she said. The king refused. But she kept nagging till the king concurred. It could do no harm, and it would teach her a lesson.

They set the tests: hunting, drinking, tennis and mathematics, and a knowledge of the law. The princess won. The prince failed, or nearly failed, the entire set. The king was very angry, but he was also angry with his own son, so he kept his word. Fortunately, the citizens had more sense. They all rose up as one man and yelled at the palace gates: "We will not be ruled by a woman." They hauled out the prince and set him on the throne. The wicked queen and her unlucky daughter were exiled forever. And thus, order was restored, and justice done.

## THE SNAKE AND THE MONGOOSE

Once upon a time a snake fell in love with a pretty mongoose. Her little pink face, the way she turned her head and

looked backwards, all this enchanted him. And on a brilliant afternoon, under the shade of a gigantic banyan, he declared his love. "I am a prince," he began, "ruler of the snake world, and on occasion a god, but nonetheless, little mongoose, I'm in love with you," He reared himself up and spread his hood and looked tremendous. The sky was dusty and white at the edges, the grass was scorched, the rivers were dry, and the sun blazed down. The mongoose just looked at him, but she didn't kill him. She let him go. Now this was in April, at the height of summer, but in early June when the rains first hit the west coast of India, the simple-minded cobra was still in love. "She's probably shy and much over-awed. I'll approach her again and force my attentions."

This time they met in a small clearing, close to a village, and they had an audience of villagers. But the cobra didn't care. He called out to the mongoose : "Watch out, little mongoose, I have come to get you." Then he lunged. She struck back.

It was a magnificent fight. The cobra was fierce, but the mongoose was quicker. It took half an hour. The cobra was killed. The mongoose was tired, but she cleaned herself and licked off the blood. The watching villagers buried the snake. They mourned their god, but they fed the mongoose.

This tale has no moral, but I might point out that not all simpleminded cobras end up as victims.

### **THE UGLY ONE**

Once upon a time there was an extraordinarily ugly creature. It dribbled; snot leaked from its nose, wax from its ears, and excrement clung to its tattered clothing. Its sex was indeterminate, but after its death people generally agreed that it had once been a woman.

The creature was not unique nor exceptional in any way: at birth, for example, there had not been a trace of any congenital defect. But, as time went on, she had tended to generate such extremes of disgust that wholly without

effort, she had, in the end, acquired a certain status.

For doctors and psychiatrists she was the Unhealthy Aberration. For hard-working men she was the Spectre of Failure. For young boys and princelings she was the Object of Scorn. And for many little girls, and women also, she was Wholly Non-existent except when they suffered from hideous nightmares.

In brief, for people in general, she became the living example of what they most genuinely did not want to become. Had she been poor ? They would not be poor. Had she been starving? They would eat well. Had she been stupid? They would be cultured. Had she been a drudge? They would have leisure. Unfortunately, these noble aspirations create problems. Not all could have leisure, not all could eat well, but that didn't matter. The values remained.

**Moral :** Even the lowliest creature serves humanity. Indeed, she serves and serves...

### **WHORE, BITCH, SLUT...**

Once upon a time there was a wicked woman, who was generally known as Whore, Bitch, Slut, Sow. Being a strong-minded woman and totally unashamed of being herself, she made a petition to the Chief Judge. She asked that the labels she bore be changed to some others that would more accurately express her wickedness as a human being, rather than as merely a woman. The Chief Judge, as it happened, was rather bored at the time. "Very well," he said, "you can have a hearing, and the learned of the city, on the day appointed, will be asked to submit an alternative label."

The day came and the judge looked around and asked the scholars for the alternative label, but the Eldest Scholar looked embarrassed and said, "The fact is, your honour, we have not been able to reach an agreement." "Really ?" said the judge, "Well" I should have expected as much. I suppose you got lost in philosophical discussion? Never mind, sit down. I'll do the job. "How about

'thief'?" he said turning to the woman. "May it please you, your honour," said the Eldest Scholar, "'thief' is excellent, but this woman renders service for moneys received, so that unfortunately, your honour, that particular term is not applicable."

"Well, how about 'beggar'?" said the Judge. But the Learned Scholar interposed once again, "It is not quite clear, your honour, that being a beggar is in itself a sign of wickedness. Moreover this unfortunate woman does not beg." "Oh," said the Judge, "How about 'bastard' ? No, I suppose you will find some other objection, Well, what is the problem? Why are we having so much trouble ?" "The truth is, your honour," the scholar replied, "that her wickedness consists in the fact that she is a woman."

"Ah," said the Learned Judge, "That is the answer. Go away, Woman, that is your name and your new label."

### **THE DEBT**

Once upon a time there was a poor widow, who lived with her daughter in a small hovel on the edge of a forest. And, as sometimes happens, there was a great thunderstorm, and the Prince, who was hunting, somehow got lost and appeared at long last, quite wet and miserable, at this wretched hovel. The widow was kind to him and gave him shelter. And the following morning, when the sun shone, again, the Prince rode off and made his way to the family palace.

The King and Queen were greatly relieved and when they learnt what had happened, they sent off a courtier to thank the woman who lived in a hovel. "Little did you know," said the courtier, to the woman, "that the boy you sheltered was the Prince himself." "I knew it perfectly well," said the woman, "what is your business ?" "I have been sent by the King himself and the Queen herself, to thank you," he said. "If they wish to thank me, let them do it themselves," said the woman; and the courier rode off and reported to the King what the woman had said.

The King smiled a bit and forgot about it; but when the Queen heard of it, she was troubled. "I am not angry," she thought, "should I be angry? But then, why does it bother me? The woman was kind. The Prince is safe. We have thanked the woman. Surely that ends the matter? Am I in her debt? I'm not in her debt."

But she decided nonetheless to visit the woman.

The Queen knocked on the door and the woman asked her in. She made her some tea. The Queen thanked the woman and the woman merely said that it had been raining and that the Prince was rather wet. "Well, thank you once again," said the Queen, rising to go, "and if I can ever help you or anyone like you, don't hesitate." "You can't," said the woman. "Why not?" said the Queen.

"Because," said the woman, "there are too many like me and it frequently rains."

## THE MONEY AND THE CROCODILES

A MONKEY used to live in a large jamun tree which grew on the banks of the river Yamuna. The fruit of this tree was usually delicious and a bit like plums. At the foot of the tree lived two crocodiles. The monkey and the crocodiles were very good friends. The monkey would feed to crocodiles plums and the crocodiles in return would make conversation. They also protected her – though she did not know it – by keeping a watchful eye on her.

The day came when the monkey began to feel more and more restless. "I'm off," she said, "to explore the world." "Here, jump on my back," said one of the crocodiles, "and I'll ferry you over." "No," she said, "I don't want to go to the other river bank. I want to follow this river to its ultimate source." "that's dangerous," said the crocodiles. "Why?" said the monkey.

"There are beasts along the way. They'll eat you up." "What sort of beasts?" asked the monkey suspiciously. "Well they are long and narrow with scaly

hides and powerful jaws." "I don't understand," said the monkey. "Don't go," said the crocodiles. "But I want to find out and see for myself," "Beware of the beasts," said her friends the crocodiles.

The monkey set off. Seven years later she hobbled back. She had lost her tail, six of her teeth, and one eye. "Did you find the source of the river Yamuna?" "No," said the monkey. "Did you encounter the beasts?" "Yes," said the monkey. "What did they look like?" "They looked like you," she answered slowly, "When you warned me long ago, did you know that?" "Yes," said her friends and avoided her eye.



## THE FEMALE SWAN

And then there was the duckling who aspired to be a swan. She worked very hard, studied the history and literature of swans, the growth of their swanhood, their hopes and ideals, and their time-honoured customs. In the end, even the swans acknowledged that this duck had rendered them a signal service. They threw a banquet (no ducks invited) and

gave her a paper which stated clearly that thereafter she would be an Honorary Swan.

She was highly gratified, as were some of the ducks, who began to feel that there was hope for them. Others just laughed. "A duck is a duck," they said, "and ought not to aspire to be a swan. A duck, by definition, is inferior to swans." This seemed so evident that they forgot the matter and paddled off. But there were still others who were angered by this. "Those ducks do not think," they said, "but as for the learned one, she has betrayed us to the cause of swans. She is no longer a duck. She is a swan." This too seemed evident.

They turned to Andersons "Well", he said, "there are a great many ducks and a great many duck ponds." But that didn't help, so he tried again. "The thing is," he said, "you are beginning to question the nature of ducks and the values of swans." "Yes", they said. "We know", they said, "but where will it all end?" "I don't know," said Anderson, "You're learning to fashion your own fables."