Identity isn’t only a matter of self definition. It also depends on the identity that other people attribute to one… [A]s a creature, a lesbian creature, how do I deal with all other creatures that have their own identities, or perhaps their own identification? It’s apparent that the components of core identity change from place to place and period to period. Today the main component seem to be based on gender, skin colour, and sexual choice as well as other factors such as nationality and religion (italics: mine)….Any threat to the sense of the self causes a violent reaction. But how then are we all to live? (Namjoshi: Because of India: 1989:84)

Suniti Namjoshi (b.1941), in all her writings, addresses the issues related to multifaceted forms of her own identity as a diasporic, Indian lesbian feminist coupled with other types of specified identities. She scrupulously questions the all forms of essentialist identities based on gender, skin colour, and sexual choice as well as other factors such as nationality and religion and offers new forms of subjectivities that dismantle the binaries-dependent patriarchal worldview and the notion of the self/selves. Namjoshi was the first Indian (up to many extents the first South Asian) writer to talk about her lesbian sexuality openly who challenged not only patriarchy but also compulsory heterosexuality, racial discrimination within dominant western feminist and lesbian theories. Born and brought up in India, Suniti Namjoshi has lived in America, Canada, and is now finally settled in England and displays, in her feminist parodic idiom, the situatedness of a marginalized Indian Hindu in the racist social set up of these countries. In her fictional as well as poetic works, Namjoshi as a politically committed lesbian feminist, interrogates, subverts, transgresses and unsettles focal traditions of both Western and Eastern world-the patriarchal humanism of the west and the hegemonic androcentric culture of India. She, as a diaspora, engages herself in the larger framework of questioning and defining lesbian feminism, the notions of identity and offers a ‘new politics of difference’ adopted by lesbian feminists of colour quite different from the othering feminism of the
west based on the principal of *global sisterhood*. She shares her ideas with lesbian British film-maker of Indian origin who defines the attitude of the lesbians of colour:

> We are not interested in defining ourselves in relation to someone else or something else, nor are we simply articulating our cultural and sexual differences….We are creating a sense of ourselves and our place within different and sometimes contradictory communities, not simply in relation to…not in opposition to…nor in reversal to…nor as a corrective to…but in and for ourselves. Precisely because of our lived experiences of racism and homophobia, we locate ourselves not within any one community but in the *spaces between these different communities*. (5)

Namjoshi also writes between the *spaces between these different communities/cultures* she has/had between a part of. She destabilizes both eastern and western, Christian and Hindu, oriental and occidental worldviews that has stereotyped, gendered and dwarfed women. She neither confirms to the First World image and desire of the Third World Women nor does she go back to hegemonic Indian traditionalism. The present paper is an attempt to read Namjoshi’s *The Coversations of Cow* with a special reference to the writer’s diasporic lesbian feminist background. It'll highlight the various issues Namjoshi has dealt with in the novel such as gendered identities, sexual orientations, racial discrimination within feminism and so on. The paper will also be focusing on the meatficitonal mode of the writing as well as the other characteristic features of Namjoshi’s writing such as wit, irony, lyricism, playfulness, parody and pithy satire.

Myths and fables are inhospitable terrain and the constant source of critique as well as creation for Suniti Namjoshi. In all her works, Namjoshi engages herself in a dialogue with and interrogation of the patriarchal perspectives embodied through them (myths and fables) and produces a counter discourse, exposing, subverting, reappropriating and rewriting the patriarchal representations of women in these myths. Her works suggest the significance of the re-writing of the old stories and myths from a woman’s point of view as it offers a new space for a woman to understand and represent themselves and world around them. Namjoshi seems to have derived this idea of re-visioning the mythologies from Adrienne
Rich who in one of her very influential essay entitled ‘When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision’ highlights the importance of the revisionist project as follows:

Re-vision- the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from anew critical direction- is for us more than a chapter in critical history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we can not know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society (1975:90)

Similar to Rich’s hypothesis, Namjoshi also undertakes a revisionist mythmaking project using mythology as intertext, deconstructing it and its stereotypical representation of women, dis-covering its patriarchal domination and building new stories and myths to recover woman’s herstory. In her The Convesations of Cow, Namjoshi re-visions the myth of sacred cow, Kamdhenu and successfully mixes eastern as well as western points of view to foreground the site of cultural hybridity, as an Indian diaspora living in west, along with a subtle interrogation of compulsive heterosexuality as a lesbian writer. *The Conversations of Cow* has its central character as Bhadravati, a Brahmin lesbian cow, ‘goddess of a thousand faces’ and ‘a thousand manifestations’ who strikes up a friendship with Suniti, an average middle-of-the-road lesbian separatist who teaches English Literature in Canada and the narrator of the novel. Both of them are ‘non-white’, ‘lesbian’, ‘woman’ immigrants in Canada and together share the space of multiple marginalities. Bhadravati, on taking her new friend, Suniti, visits her friends, a self sustained community of the lesbian cows in the country. In fact, the novella is an account of Suniti setting out for a voyage of quest to come to terms with her own identity as a lesbian in a heteronormative patriarchal society and the ‘Cow’ Bhadravati, at sometimes ‘baddy’ and at other times an anonymous B becomes her guide (if the novella is to be read as a western allegorical quest narrative) or Guru (in the context of Indian spiritual narratives) to help her, assist her and educate and together they explore the multiple identities that Suniti is forced to adopt or live with. Bhadravati, magically transforms herself at will into female ‘Baddy’ or a white male ‘Bud’ to let the options remain open for Suniti to choose either male or female roles. But Suniti is not at ease with either roles and displays a strong contempt for either
sexual/gender role playing. The problem which still remains before Suniti is how to deal with her identity as a lesbian and a woman of colour.

The novel blurs the distinction between the fantasy and fiction, human and animal in a magic realist metafictional mode. The cow and Suniti are reported to having conversations and the Cow can transform herself into human form per her wishes. The question which arises, on account of the erasure of the distinction between human and animal world, before a reader is: Why does Namjoshi choose a cow, a beast, to write about? How far does she succeed in projecting the cow to discuss her lesbian identity? Answering the first question why she writes about birds and beasts, Namjoshi writes in her *Because of India*:

…in a humanist universe, which has been male-centered historically, women are ‘the other’, together with the birds and beasts and the rest of the creation. An identification with the rest of the creation, possibly with the whole of it, would only be logical; unless, of course, one wished to create a mirror image of the humanist universe, with woman at the centre, accepting consequences of consisting everything else to ‘the other’. But I don’t want to be separated from the birds and the beasts, nor do I want to “humanize” them particularly. (1989:28-29)

Thus we see ‘the otherness’ of women as well as the birds and the beasts in a ‘man-made universe’ results into the identification of one with the other. The other point which one can figure out is that the strategic use of birds and beasts dismantle and dislocate stereotypical paradigms of gender as these (birds and beasts) do not fall under the purview of rigid fixed male/female categorization. The readers can easily discern and Namjoshi herself has confessed it that the appearance and inclusion of beasts and birds has been a continual part of Indian heritage. Panchtantra is the foremost example of this. Birds and beasts were/are symbolically related to Gods and goddesses in Hindu religion, often the vehicles (Vahana) of Gods and manifestations of divinity not ‘bestial’ in the sense of the western world. This identification of the human and birds and beasts also exhibit the deep proximity and the influence of Hindu philosophy in the works of the writer who thinks them to be an inseperable part:
To me a beast wasn’t “bestial” in the western sense. To me a bird or a beast was a creature like anyone else. Hinduism is afterall pantheistic; and the popular notion of reincarnation attributes a soul to everyone. This may sound odd to western years, but for me, it was familiar as it was unconscious. (*Because of India*:1989:28)

The other question that how far does the writer succeed in projecting the cow to discus her lesbian identity can be answered if one keeps in mind the revisionist project of the writer. Namjoshi does not simply revisit the old myths but revisions and re-appropriates them to suit her purpose. The cow has a motherly image in India. And the Cow Bhadravati of the novel, already discussed, corresponds the mythological goddess Kamdhenu, the goddess of wish fulfillment who is supposed to be the perfect embodiment of the woman, a mother-figure. The purpose of Namjoshi is to subvert here this representation of perfect women of which motherhood is a prerequisite qualification. Bhadravati, the cow is a lesbian in the novel and thus dismantles the mother image of the women (cow) and creates a new space of lesbian identity for women through appropriation of the myth. In the novella, Namjoshi purifies the divinity of the Hindu mythological cow Kamdhenu equating the cowness with the otherness/outersider, lesbian as well as female and critiques the gender discrimination, compulsory heterosexuality by assigning several multiple choices to the cow Bhadravati.

When the narrative opens, we find Suniti invoking on ‘knees, waiting for the goddess to manifest herself” to accompany her on the voyage of her ‘self-definition’ and when she opens her eyes, she finds The Cow of Thousand Wishes standing before her with ‘Daffodils and crocuses grow at her feet’. The Cow corresponds to the Indian mythic cow Kamdhenu, the daughter of Brahma who belonged to Sage Vashistha. Indian mythology believes Kamdhenu to be celestial which could grant and fulfill any wish. In the novel Namjoshi empties the cow out of her sacrosanct religiosity and divinity save her magical powers to transform her form. The cow, humorously, Namjoshi notices that in the novella, ‘drops in for a drink again: scotch and water’ and ‘uses certain Americanisms’. She survives on ‘welfare not as good as the pickings in India. There one is supposed to be worshipped as a god’ and receives ‘a cheque’ to live on. Thus we notice that Namjoshi has totally transformed the pious and holy image of the cow. The reason obvious for this subversion of pious into profane is to deconstruct the oppressive fabrication of mythologies which are patriarchal, hetronormative and phallogocentric. Namjoshi demythologizes the
cow to an ordinary level to speak of lesbian identity in a fabulist mode. The cow for her becomes a sort of metaphor for lesbian identity which for Namjoshi seems neither male nor female. In the novella, Bhadravati shows a strong contempt against Suniti when she tries to associate cowness with femininity:

What are you thinking about?
‘Oh nothing,’ but finally she tells me. ‘I’m wondering whether cows are really like men.’ The thought does not please her.
‘Perhaps they have more in common with women?’
This suggestion seems to please even less.
(The Conversations of Cow: 1985:24-25)

At the very outset, Suniti figures out that ‘they (Suniti and the Cow) have something in common’ (18) i.e. their lesbian identity. They both know that they posses a peripheral space of multiple marginalities as a non-white immigrant, a woman and a lesbian. But what haunts and troubles them most is their gender identity. The lesbians are not the not norms and therefore unwelcome in any society be it India or Canada. A subject must opt for or choose between the two preexisting essentialist sexual categories of masculine/ feminine or male/female or in Namjoshi’s terminology, Class A/B. The society is structured on binarism, the former always privileged over the latter. Since the cultures and societies are patriarchal, they privilege male over female. Talking of this discriminatory nature of societal organization, the Cowslip, one of the members of the self-sustaining community of lesbian cows, remarks:

The world is neatly divided into class A humans and class B humans. The rest do not count. How they look, walk and talk depends on television, but there are some factor which remain constant for several years. For example, Class A people don’t wear lipstick, Class B people do. Class A people spread themselves out. Class B people apologise for so much as occupying space…Class A people never smile. Class B people smile placatingly twice in a minute and seldom require any provocation. (Ibid.,:24)
One can easily identify here Class A people with male and B with females. In any society ‘the rest (lesbians, gays, and queers) does not count’. One must / will have to choose one of these two roles. How the gender specific roles and accordingly behaviour are prerequisite to have some space in society can best be described by the episode in which Baddy, the cow does marketing for Suniti to make her look like a woman, Class B human. She buys lipsticks, powder cascades, and eyeliner. She explains Suniti that one of them will have to adopt Class B role otherwise they can not be accepted in the society:

I was trying to make you into a Class B human.’ She says it just like that.

The answer, of course, is obvious. But to hear it said shocks me somehow.

‘But why, Bhadravati? Don’t you like me as I am?

‘Yes, of course I do, Suniti.’ Bhadravati is entirely serious. ‘But you see, we have to survive. And I thought that perhaps if you dressed up as a Class human and I dressed up as Class A, we’d manage better. We could have adventures, see all sort of things. Won’t you consider it? We’d learn a lot.’

(Ibid: 31)

When dressed up as a Class B human, Suniti goes with Baddy, as a Class A human, for a walk, she notices that everyone seems to approve of them but she, herself, does not approve of this. Later in the novel when Bhadravati offers her to choose either male female role where in they could be either MR. and Mrs. Suniti or Mr. and Mrs. Bud, she rejects both. She does not want either to be the two-man or woman. She asks Baddy: ‘B,’ I say, ‘what about our identities? Aren’t we being false to our true selves?’ In reply to this, Baddy very categorically points out that ‘the identity is fluid. Haven’t you heard of transmigration?’ What Namjoshi is trying to make Suniti realize through Baddy or Bhadravati is that identity is something always fluid, contingent, shifting and evolving. There are always possibilities for uninhibited notions of the identity. Throughout the novel, Suniti considers various possibilities she can be. She wonders about becoming bisexual snails, or a poodle, a sheep, a gold- fish and finally opts to be a lover. This desire is suggestive of lesbian identity which resists every sort of fixity, rigidity, stasis and revels in ‘transformations’, contingencies, pluralities, and indeterminacy.

Throughout the novella Namjoshi explores a complex notion of subjectivity and gender identities. She speaks for herself and her identity as a diasporic Indian lesbian woman reclothing it in a fabulist and
metafictional mode. A long term companion of Gillian Hanscomb, another famous lesbian activist, Nasmjoshi very well understands what it means to be a ‘lesbian woman’ and especially ‘a lesbian from India’. A lesbian is not only other to a man being a woman but also an other to a woman being a lesbian woman. She is always an ‘outsider’, excluded and marginal in a heterosexist patriarchal social set up. Namjoshi seems to deconstruct this heteronormative sexuality and celebrates her lesbian self. Namjoshi questions the discourses that privilege heterosexual choices and prohibit non-heterosexual expressions of desires. She counterpoints and creates an interrogative dialogue against popular ‘normal’ sexuality. She disrupts and opens new spaces for women in love with women. For Nanjoshi, a lesbian is not to be confused with a masculine woman, other than a woman or ‘a man trapped in a woman’s body’. She also denies that to be a mother and a lesbian are mutually contradictory (in The Mothers of Mayadip, Namjoshi articulates this issue). For her, Lesbian sexuality offers a new space outside the oppressive and delimiting binaries of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ which is repressive and coerces women into her own subordination reducing her merely into an ‘other’ in a male-dominated socio-cultural system. Namjoshi stands very close to Adrienne Rich who in her an important and controversial essay entitled *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence (1980)* challenges the naturalization of heterosexuality pointing out that heterosexuality is not ‘natural’ or innate rather it is, in fact, an institution designed to perpetuate male social and economic privilege and, obviously, a construction. Rich, in her essay, goes on to argue that it is the primary bonding between women that is, in fact, natural but which is disrupted by the imposition and socialization of compulsory heterosexuality. Namjoshi too interrogates humanist essentialist gender roles to "liberate" lesbian identity from patriarchal control. In *The Conversations of Cow*, Suniti and Bhadravati companionship questions, challenges and redefines socially conditioned role-playings. It disrupts the fixity and universality of heterosexual gender stereotypes. Suniti and Bhadravati who live together as lesbians experience that people don’t welcome them and one must adopt the conventional gender roles- masculine/feminine. The magic cow transforms herself into a white heterosexual man, Bud and prepares Suniti to dress up as a woman. Interestingly, one notices that people dramatically change their reaction when they notice them as a heterosexual couple-Sue and Bud:

‘How do I look?’
‘You look charming,’ she says.
I preen a little.
‘But your skin is still brown.’
‘Yes?’ I say, challenging her, but Bhadravati is in a good mood.
‘It’s all right.’ She winks at me. ‘You’ll pass.’
‘Bhadravati, let us try it out. Let’s go for a walk.’ I’m very excited.
B rises. She opens the door elaborately for me. We set out. An elderly gent tips his hat to us, his elderly wife beams at us. Everyone seems to approve of us. I feel so good, so safe, so respectable…I belong! (Ibid.:31-32)

Thus ‘the approval’ is a necessity to belong or have an identity in the society. Another fact that a reader easily notices that a society can approve of a white man’s relationship with a woman of colour (Sue and Bud) but it can not approve a woman’s love for woman (Sue and Baddy).

Notice that Society does demand the gender specific behaviour from its individuals. When Baddy turns into Bud (a white man), it is ‘he’ who ‘opens the gate’ for Sue, drives and pays the bills. Baddy has to imitate the heterosexual male role and behave accordingly.

The other remarkable point worth-noticing in the novella about female companionship is that it reverberates the long-forgotten female erotics embedded and present in the ancient Indian writing. Suniti and Bhadravati’s same sex companionship can be equated with the Sakhi relationship in ancient as well as medieval India. In Sakhiyani: Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India (1996), Giti Thadani traces the rich presence of ‘feminine erotics’ later repressed and masculanised. She points out that “words such as Bhagini, sakhi, jami have lost their former sexual, cosmo-social meanings and are simply translated as sister and woman-friend (77)” and she uses these words to connote same-sex female sexual orientation in ancient India. Namjoshi does not explicitly suggest this idea yet the sections wherein Suniti dreams exotic goddess-like Bhadravati sitting in the Sari under a ‘banyan tree’ while mynas feed on the lawn are the sublimations of same-sex feminine erotics. Namjoshi, in my opinion though one might counterpoint that this is because of Suniti’s nostalgia of India, deliberately shifts the setting from Canada to India to suggest the lesbian undertones also available to trace its origins in Indian soil.
Suniti Namjoshi uses ‘new’ feminist strategies to dislocate preexistent old paradigms of gender in favour of new ones. In her writings, she endeavours to comprehend and dismantle the social and psychic mechanisms that construct and perpetuate gender discrimination. Namjoshi often pronounces in her writings that ‘gender’ must not be confused with biological sex. Gender identities are the results of the continuous process of becoming and one ‘performs’, displays and enacts one’s gender. Namjoshi can be rightly regarded as the precursor of and the writer practicing Judith Butler before she came up with her influential notion of performative gender identity in her book *Gender Trouble*. For Namjoshi and Butler both, gender is the effect of ‘reiterated acting’ or doing one’s gender. Butler argues in her *Gender Trouble* that the the natural-seeming categories of sex, gender, and sexuality, infact, are culturally constructed and gender, along with sex and sexuality is performative. She questions the essentialist assumptions about the distinction often made between sex and gender which views sex to be biological and prediscursive, while gender to be culturally constructed. Butler considers both gender and sex as largely constructed via cultural and linguistic performances but she does not deny the materiality of the body: “For surely bodies live, and die; eat and sleep; feel pain, pleasure; endure illness and violence; and these ‘facts,’…cannot be dismissed as mere construction” (*Bodies That Matter*: xi). But the bodies themselves are sexed and can not signify without gender. Gender is ‘a corporeal style’, a bodily performance and the idea of sex prior to discourse and cultural construction is merely ‘an effec’ of the gender performance. Butler further claims in her *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* that gender is a reenactment, reiteration and re-experiencing of a particular type of process, ‘a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory framework’. These regulatory frameworks are socially modeled and culturally constructed offering normative sexual positions and heterosexuality a compulsory law. Viewing sex and gender performative and a cultural construct Butler opines that the gender identities too are performative, always in process and construct: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results” (Gender Trouble 33, italics mine). Butler locates the possibility for subversion of hetronormative gender discourse in the subversive performances of gender: “The more insidious and effective strategy [for subversion of the patriarchal power structure] is a thoroughgoing appropriation and redeployment of the categories of identity themselves, not merely to contest ‘sex,’ but to articulate the convergence of multiple sexual discourses at the site of ‘identity’ in order to render that category, in whatever form, permanently problematic” (*Gender Trouble*: 163)
In *The Conversations of Cow*, Namjoshi too engages herself in the subversion and re-appropriation of gender identities though she does it before Butler’s *Gender Trouble*. The subversion of gendered roles recurs throughout the text, especially in the confused gendered identities of Suniti and Bhadravati. For Namjoshi, like Butler, sex and gender both are performative. One becomes what one performs—Baddy in the novel ‘performs’ several transformations sometimes ‘to pass’ and sometimes for fun and every time, Namjoshi seems to pronounce, like Butler, the idea that the bodies are sexed and inscribed with socio-cultural gender norms. Bhadravati when transforms herself into a ‘large white man’ shows complete change in her behaviour and body-performances. Ordering a hamburger for Suniti in a restaurant, she growls at the waiter. Later when both of them are walking down the street, her bodily gestures and behaviour becomes manly:

‘Baddy,’ I plead with her. ‘We’ve got to talk.’

In reply she grunts. She sets off down the street with an appaling swagger, jostles everyone; one or two people are knocked off the pavement. I follow in her wake. At the street lights Baddy crosses on a flashing green. (*The Conversations of Cow*: 1985:26)

Further when a car ‘comes to a screeching halt’ due to her careless crossing, she yells at the woman driver, ‘You fucking cunt!’ Suniti is shocked at and perturbed by this sudden aggressive and violent change in Baddy’s behaviour. She asks: ‘Baddy, You’re not a man, you’re a lesbian cow. How could you say that?’ In reply to this, Baddy says with laughter, ‘Who are you calling a fucking cow? Ha!’ For her ‘it was the part of the role’. By playing the role of man, Baddy highlights the constructedness of ‘natural’, Martian-like behaviour of men. Even Suniti or Sue feels unease and objects to such abusive behaviour which makes her merely an appendage, a secondary person. She wants to dispense with Bud (male). The significance of this episode lies in B’s parodic subversive imitation of *masculine behaviour* to destabilize the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality which foregroundes the idea that sex as well as gender and related specific roles are merely performative, prescribed not natural.
Namjoshi chooses non-realistic metafictional mode of narrative and experiments in fabulation and magic realism. The novel abounds in dreams, hallucinations, fantasy: the cow appears, disappears, turns into a man, into a beautiful maiden, drinks scotch, does shopping: and the locale also keeps on shifting between India and Canada. In addition, the novel simultaneously runs on an allegorical level making it a voyage of the quest of the self. The form of the novel is metafictional: the story ends in the beginning as the readers come to know the narrator of the novel, Suniti is going to write the story of the divine visitation of the Cow and is invoking the cow similar to the opening of the novel. But the worth-noticing point is that this final invocation is self-reflexive, written, re-written, quoted or perhaps misquoted. In child-like allegorical non-realist narrative of the novel Namjoshi adeptly deals with the issues of identity, sexuality and gender. She writes in *Because of India*:

…Cow was intended for my private amusement and Christine’s [Christine Donald] bedtime reading…I played with the notions of identity and alienation in Cow…

**References:**


