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Paper VIII: Literature and Gender
Unit III
Suniti Namjoshi's Poem ("*Sycorax*" and "The Unicorn")

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Suniti Namjoshi

Suniti Namjoshi was born in 1941 in Mumbai, India. She is a poet and a fabulist. She grew up in India, worked in Canada and at present lives in the southwest of England with English writer Gillian Hanscombe. Her work is playful, inventive and often challenges prejudices such as racism, sexism, and homophobia. She has written many collections of fables and poetry, several novels, and more than a dozen children's books. Her work has been translated into several languages, including Spanish, Italian, Dutch, Chinese, Korean and Hindi.

Diasporic, lesbian and transnational, Suniti Namjoshi—within the framework of postcolonial discourse—attempts to construct an 'alternative universe' in textuality. In constructing of an alternative political identity, Namjoshi undertakes a comparative approach in selecting subjects for producing a neo-textual universe, and a comparative study of cross-cultural identities remain central to the analysis of Namjoshi's work. In this paper I argue that it is because of colonial antisodomy law, and because of religious and social stigma that the mission of constructing an alternative universe remains operative in Namjoshi's work. I also suggest that in Namjoshi's work, feminism, postcolonialism and queer theory merge but her work has been deliberately sidelined by the academia.

The works of Indo-English writer Suniti Namjoshi self-consciously emerge from the complex interaction of her Indian background, British and American upbringing, and feminist awareness, if one could ever name, and thus single out, these elements in her writing and personality. The complexity of her interests makes her a restless traveller among different potentialities of being; her poetry, often entwined with prose, is a continuous contrapuntal attempt to make sense of the multiple resonance emerging from the English language she

uses, together with her Hindu milieu and suggestions from various theoretical backgrounds, from feminism to postcolonialism. As a writer born in Western Maharashtra and now living between Devon (UK), Canada, and India, Namjoshi could easily be defined as a writer of the Indian diaspora. The choice of writing in English, language of colonization and education, heavily marks her belonging to more than one culture, history, and tradition; her strongly political self-positioning as a feminist and lesbian further complicates her writing. Still, this complexity she shows no intentions of resolving , as C. Vijasree underlines: Namjoshi represents the tensions of inhabiting and writing from margins and in between spaces as a woman, as a lesbian and as a diasporic writer. She does not, 2 however, show any anxiety about resolving the tensions emanating from such a complex and complicated subject position, but sophisticates the art of tapping on the plural possibilities afforded by her fluid state (Vijasree 15). Namjoshi's writing is troubled by the awareness that subjectivity, even the hybrid subjectivity of the diasporic writer, is the result of a conglomerate of images and imaginings, experiences and interpellations by the social systems one happens to inhabit and be inhabited by. Indeed, Namjoshi's point is that every subjectivity is in a way hybridized, the result of different inputs; and her standpoint on the matter is heavily indebted toward feminist theory, and especially Adrienne Rich's 'politics of location': "I need to understand how a place on the map is also a place in history within which a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist I am created and trying to create" (Rich, "Notes" 210). In quite the same way, Namjoshi expresses the need and the difficulty of making sense of a life experienced in-between different cultural environments: "I belong to India and to the West. Both belong to me and both reject me. I have to make sense of what has been and what there is" (Namjoshi, Goja 67; hereafter quoted as GM).

Sycorax

Character in *The Tempest*

Sycorax /'sɪkəræks/ is an unseen character in William Shakespeare's play The Tempest (1611). She is a vicious and powerful witch and the mother of Caliban, one of the few native inhabitants of the island on which Prospero, the hero of the play, is stranded. She is originally from 'Argier,' defined by geographer Mohamed. S. E. Madiou as "a 16th and 17th century older English-based exonym for both the 16th and 17th c. capital and state of 'Algiers' (Argier/Argier),"[1] from where Sycorax is banished.

According to the backstory provided by the play, Sycorax, while pregnant with Caliban, was banished from her home in Algiers to the island on which the play takes place. Memories of Sycorax, who dies several years before the main action of the play begins, define several of the relationships in the play. Relying on his filial connection to Sycorax, Caliban claims ownership of the island. Prospero constantly reminds Ariel of Sycorax's cruel treatment to maintain the sprite's service.

Scholars generally agree that Sycorax, a foil for Prospero, is closely related to the Medea of Ovid's Metamorphoses. Postcolonialist writers and critics see Sycorax as giving voice to peoples, particularly women, recovering from the effects of colonisation. Later versions of The Tempest, beginning with William Davenant's eighteenth-century adaptation, have given Sycorax a vocal role in the play, but maintained her image as a malevolent antagonist to Prospero.

William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, there is an apparent lack of female characters present throughout the play. Prospero's daughter, Miranda, is the only female character that is physically present in the play beside's the goddesses which are only briefly mentioned. However, there is another female character that carries an important role in the play despite not being directly present. Sycorax, Caliban's mother who ruled the island before Prospero arrived, acts as a counterpart and foil to Prospero.

Although Sycorax is dead by the time the events in the play are occurring, Prospero draws her back into the play by constantly emphasizing her absence. Sycorax was a powerful women and shares many commonalities with Prospero. Both character's were exiled to the island for practicing magic which was seen as witchcraft or wizardry. Also, they both brought a child with them and have both had control of the island . Despite all the things that they share in common, Prospero never refers to Sycorax as his equal. Rather, he uses negative slurs such as "foul witch" and "damned witch Sycorax." At one point he even calls her a "hag." While Prospero revere's himself, he looks down on Sycorax as weak and evil. By describing her in this way, Prospero creates a stereotype of women and reinforces a patriarchal society that serves to empower his own dominance over that of Sycorax. Furthermore, Sycorax is not present in the play in order to represent herself. Therefore, all that we know about her comes from the accounts of Prospero which are all negative slander. The reason that Prospero draws so much negativity towards Sycorax may be due largely in part to the influence that Sycorax once had over the island and over its inhabitants, including Caliban and Ariel. Now that Prospero is in control of the island, even with Sycorax now dead, he continues to view her as a threat to his authority. Prospero views himself as the master of the island and of its inhabitants and is therefore unwilling to cede power to anyone. If Sycorax had been alive when Prospero arrived at the Island, it is likely that a confrontation would have occurred and either Prospero or Sycorax would have emerged as the dominant character with control of the island. However, the fact that Sycorax was not alive when Prospero was exiled to the Island makes it easier for Prospero to quickly assume control and use his position to manipulate Sycorax's character since we have no first-hand access to her point of view.

Namjoshi's *Sycorax*

Sycorax is back claiming: "Old women do not die easily, nor / Are their deaths timely. / ... / when Prospero / said he took over an uninhabited island / save for Caliban and the enslaved / Ariel, he lied. / I LIVED ON THAT ISLAND" (2006, p. 1; author's emphasis). Namjoshi's speaker, in this case Sycorax, is closely identified with Namjoshi, the author; and she turns outward, often surrendering herself to be shaped by and to speak for others. From the feelings of an isolated individual speaker, Sycorax plays the role of a guardian. While Caliban is busy jotting down, in her diary, the daily affairs on the island, Sycorax is busy fantasizing her own authority over the island.

Like Because of India, Sycorax also puts forward a similar theme of identifying the self with the animal world: "On this island though, I may dream again. On this island, where the earth is waiting to eat me up, I know very well—whether or not the birds and beasts acknowledge it—that I am one of them" (p. 3). Similar characters such as witches and giantesses command the lesbian themes of other collections of poems and fables as well. In Sycorax, moreover, the 'highly egoistic' self of Caliban is found in the characters of Sycorax and Ariel as well. Sycorax's own understanding of Ariel is that of a gay man, eternally preoccupied with his own desire, and is free from any human bond or oppression. The postcolonial universe created is that of inflexible female and sexual liberation. Sycorax thinks: "I've decided that Ariel is a type of gay man, eternally preoccupied, and endlessly young. He could go away if he liked and look for company, but who would he find as beautiful as he? And who would I find as interesting as me? In consequence, we do not speak to each other" (p. 6). Placing such a narcissistic feeling in Sycorax has its use in framing the liberated world. It is political yet highly personal in Namjoshi. In "Letter to the Reader," a forward to Sycorax, Namjoshi writes that, unlike Because of India, she is more concerned with finding proper texture for the composition of a good poem than the politics behind such a practice. The reason behind drafting Sycorax is more personal than political. It is more about aging of the lesbian self and the political is personal which in turn becomes deeply cultural.

Writing concerning postcolonial sexualities has come a long way and Namjoshi's place is unique in this field of studies. In reconstructing what is lost in the process of colonialism and in reorganising the structure of the humanist universe, Namjoshi's initiative has been to create an alternative universe in textuality. She has justified valid reasons to ensure that the structure of the perceived universe is not for the alternative categories of people and it is mostly 'heterosexual' and 'male-centric'. Reordering it structurally, here literally in textuality and figuratively in terms of cultural materialism, has to be in the form of a mission. Placing Namjoshi's work in the academic curricula and in anthologies of postcolonial studies would not only centralise Namjoshi's work, it will also strengthen the field of knowledge enquiry on gender and sexualities. Namjoshi's voluminous work is an indicator of the process of making the up-side down — being highly subversive and constructive — and it marks the beginning of a new structure of women-centric society that resists the existing power structure of male-centric society. With a resistance of law, Indian

religion (Hinduism), social structures and with the subversion of myth, stories and narratives, Namjoshi's mission positions the lesbian self central to alterity studies.

Sycorax also, in chronological order the last of the writer's personae, embodies this need for feedback and response. In the homonymous poem, published in 2006, Sycorax is again a complex pool of different suggestions, of which Shakespeare's witch from the Tempest is maybe even not the most prominent. Again, though, Namjoshi taps into the rich stream of postcolonial critique, of which The Tempest has been one of the favourite topics. Thanks to the attention of many postcolonial writers, Shakespeare's supposedly last play has been read as a parable on early colonialism and the power of the word, embodied by Prospero, to shape narratives and identities. Hence, Sycorax, the black Algerian witch who never appears on stage, has been interpreted as the silenced embodiment of the subaltern woman with no voice.4 If Namjoshi's poem springs out of this tradition, voicing the silenced character of Sycorax, this character also emerges, as in Goja, as nothing more than "a mishmash speaking with one voice" (GM 41). More importantly though, at least in the context of the relationships between language and power in relation to identity formation, Namjoshi's Sycorax does not write out her story in counterpoint to Prospero's. Her attempts at writing, on the other hand, are a way of dealing with Death, the only element that, as already in Goja (GM 7) and in Building Babel (BB 85), emerges as the opposite of writing as creation. The concern with death opens the poem, as the narrating 'I' explains: Old women do not die easily, nor are their deaths timely. They make a habit of outliving men, so that, as I'm still here, I'm able to say clearly that when Prospero said he took over an uninhabited island save for Caliban and the enslaved Ariel, he lied.

However, this opening remark on telling the truth about her own story is thwarted by the rhyming couplets closing the "Prologue", by an unidentified third-person narrator: "The good witch Sycorax has bright blue eyes / and now she's on her own she may fantasise" (italics in the text). The act of 'fantasising', literally "to represent in the fancy" but also "to indulge in daydreaming about something desired" (OED), is the counterpart of the 'happy ending' wished for by Goja's narrator (GM 130). Yet it marks the privileged position of the readeras-writer through the strong relation, expressed by the rhyme, binding together the act of fantasising with Sycorax's "blue eyes". This detail, the attribution to the witch of 'blazing blue eyes', is the starting point for the Reader's agency, as Sycorax's attribute "blue-eyed" (The Tempest, I, ii, 269) has always been interpreted by Shakespearean scholars as a sign of pregnancy. Nonetheless, the Writer, as the archetypal Reader, has the unquestionable right to make her actually 'blue-eyed': "Blue was always my colour, my blue eyes were my one claim to fame" ("The Old Woman's Secret").6 The writer herself attributes to the reader-aswriter this right to 'fantasise' about Sycorax's eyes in her introduction to the poem: For some reason I imagined her with blazing blue eyes and the imagery entered my poem….Is it permissible for a writer then to give her blue eyes, and can the writer be forgiven for such a

mistake? These things happen. Poems are like plants. They mutate over time and give rise to other poems (Namjoshi “You Taught Me Language”). If “Prospero, that Arch Controller of Words, in his roles as teacher, parent, mage and playwright, is not all powerful” (ibid.), neither is Sycorax as she fights death and oblivion. Throughout the whole poem, Sycorax looks for interlocutors, be it animals (“Animals”, “Visitors”), Ariel, the only other character left from the play (“Ariel”, “Visitors”), and her own different selves (“Copies”). Still, these relationships are all marked by the complicity between language and power that has been outlined elsewhere in this essay, and Sycorax, as the one with the power to speak, is also often the agent of violence, as it emerges in her relationship with animals: I could catch a lizard and sink my teeth in. Yes, I've eaten her raw. Not pretty, but matter of fact. I need to live. The lizard, of course, is forced to die. No malice there. Is that my excuse? Real animals are not symbolic. They do not mean anything. And that too is a lie. (“Animals”) The fight for survival makes her and the animals enemies struggling for the same territory, as it had been with Prospero (“Were it not for the children, we’d be / two different species vying for precedence”; “For that one thing”). Yet, at the same time Sycorax follows the path of former (female) characters in Namjoshi’s fables, where exclusion from a “male-centered humanist universe consigns every other creature to the position of the ‘other’” (Dasgupta 100). Hence her fraught proximity to the animal world: “On this island, where the earth is waiting to eat me up, I know very well – whether or not the birds and beasts acknowledge it – that I am one of them.” (“Animals”). Ariel as well, as in the Tempest, is made victim of the master’s ‘epistemic violence’, as he refuses to be what Sycorax wants from him.7 In his eyes, then, Sycorax shares the same power that was the prerogative of Prospero: “It’s clear that the old woman is as bad as the old man….She does not know that in trying to please I have forgotten who I am. She sees only that I’m probably not who she wants me to be” (“Ariel”). Loneliness, in the end, appears to be Sycorax’s ultimate destiny, and the blue eyes of her own rebirth become the empty sockets of an idol:

In Suniti Namjoshi’s “Sycorax,” we see a different side to Sycorax that contrasts with the way that she is described by Prospero in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. In the prologue, Sycorax says “I lived on that Island. It was my property (at least as much as it was anybody else’s).” In these lines, Namjoshi contrasts against Prospero’s greed and desire for power of the island. Rather than seeing the Island as belonging solely to her, Sycorax acknowledges that the guidelines of who owns property are murky and in many ways undefined. There are people and creatures who must have lived on the island long before Sycorax.
However, in the end, it is Sycorax’s presence which remains on the island even after Prospero and Caliban have left. There is also a reference to gender, Sycorax declares that “old women do not die easily.” This is another contrast to Shakespeare’s version of the Tempest in which Sycorax’s gender was used as a negative trait that made her inferior to Prospero and his masculine power. In this prologue, Namjoshi sets up gender as a positive factor which is the source of Sycorax’s strength and ability to endure hardship. Although Caliban overlooked her, declaring that he took over “an uninhabited Island save for Caliban and the enslaved Ariel.” Sycorax makes it known that Prospero “lied.” Sycorax lived on that island and her strength and power cannot be overlooked. After all, it is her very essence that lives on in the island after everyone else has gone.

Looking at both *The Tempest* by Shakespeare and “Sycorax” by Namjoshi, it is easier to develop a more in-depth understanding of Sycorax’s character. While in Shakespeare’s The Tempest, we are only exposed to a secondhand description of her through Prospero and Caliban, in Namjoshi’s “Sycorax,” we are given a first hand account of the pain and resentment Sycorax feels toward Prospero for taking over the island where she lived and felt a sense of ownership over. Rather than presenting her as Caliban’s mother or the evil witch, Namjoshi adds a person dimension to Sycorax, allowing her to be seen as a strong, powerful women with the strength to overcome.


Rackham

Sycorax: New Fables and Poems is an assertion of identity and rights which raises perennial questions about the nature of a good. Sycorax is a character mentioned but not seen in Shakespeare's play The Tempest. She is the mother of Caliban. Prospero refers to her as an evil witch banished from Algiers and left by sailors on the island where, when she was pregnant with Caliban, she enslaved the spirits to work for her. Among them was Ariel, whom she imprisoned inside a tree as a punishment for his disobedience. In Shakespeare's play The Tempest, Sycorax dies before the arrival of Prospero and Miranda on the island, and it was Prospero who frees Ariel from the tree. In Namjoshi's sequence of poems, Sycorax returns to the island after Prospero and the other human beings have gone. Caliban too is gone. He „went with the gods who were only men. It's what he deserves. He wanted so much to be like them" (S 1). Sycorax has come back to the island to try and understand what her role is now. She thinks of dreaming, reflects on physicality, and listens to the stories of her visitors. The deaths of Namjoshi's close friends - Mary Meigs, the painter and writer, and Anna Mani, the physicist - also went into the making of this collection. Namjoshi begins the collection with a letter to the readers. She highlights the brief idea of this book. Harini Srinivasan remarks:

> Which explains the delicious sense of satisfaction, of having turned the tables on your tormentors, when you escape the critics and come afresh to a feted writer like Suniti Namjoshi, well-known feminist writer, to find a whole delightful new world. Not being very fond of the genre, I had read none of her previous books nor any reviews of them when I began Sycorax: New Fables and Poems. Expecting gloom, doom and heavy-handed isms, it came as a great surprise to find something so light, airy and refreshing-a very soufflé of a book. This is not to accuse it of being insubstantial, for the issues it addresses are serious ones-old age, death, love, identity, motherhood, child abuse…Yet, these are approached obliquely, making them more bearable; a lightness of touch, a playfulness and an acceptance of what is (Srinivasan 29).

Above all, Namjoshi's Sycorax is an assertion of identity and rights. „I LIVED ON THAT ISLAND" , declares the old woman all in capitals. „It was my property (at least as much as it was anybody else's)" (S 1). In Namjoshi" s poem Sycorax is alive, defiant and fierce. But she is old and old age is tragedy in itself, as Suniti writes, Old women do not die easily, nor are their deaths timely. (S1) Still they have to bear the burden of old age as they have a „habit of outliving men" (S 1).

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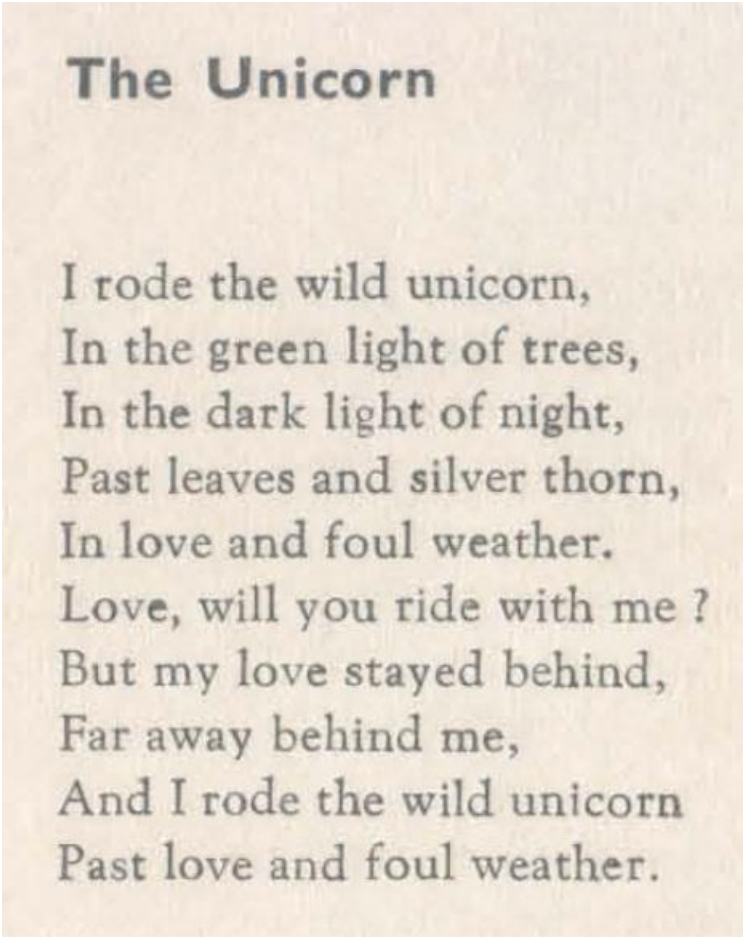
Suniti Namjoshi's "The Unicorn": Deciphering the Speaker's Voice

Raj Gaurav Verma



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.

In this poem "**The Unicorn**" Namjoshi tries to connect the real with the mythological. Not only the real and the unreal, but also the love and the idea of love are contrasted. This poem can be looked at from multiple angles depending on how you look at the speaker.

A Modern Speaker- If you consider the speaker as belonging to modern age then you can look at this poem from the point of nostalgia almost like W. B. Yeats poem "Sailing to Byzantium" where Yeats wants to go back to Byzantium because he does not find himself compatible to live in the world around him. Just like for Yeats "Byzantium" is an objective correlative for mythical past, Namjoshi too uses Unicorn to symbolize the mythic existence. This world cannot give her the solace or meaning and therefore, she brings in the unicorn that existed or perhaps not but in ancient societies where its myths could be found.

A Taming Speaker- Taming speaker in the sense that it talks about the "wild unicorn". When the speaker rides that unicorn it has actually tamed its spirit. This taming can be looked at from colonial or anthropocentric point of view in the attempt of taming Nature as the speaker is able to past "leaves and silver thorn" and "foul weather."

An Existentialist Speaker- This speaker asks the beloved "Love, will you ride with me?" But the beloved stays behind. What happens is actually a heart break. These two lines connect the two parts in the poem. Once again nostalgic by recreating the image of "past" and of "past love" and once again connecting the two lives of the same person- when the person is in love and when it has passed that love. Existential mode comes in for the sheer loss of the cause to continue life. Virtually it is the death of love. A philosophical death but then the speaker moves beyond that point and continues with the same spirit but with a sense: "But my love stayed behind,/ Far away behind me."

A Female Speaker- This will describe the man-woman relationship. You can connect this with Maya Angelou's "And Still I Rise." Why? Because the lady wanted her man to ride on the unicorn with her but the man refuses. But she continues her ride. You can correlate this with Robert Browning's Poem "My Last Duchess." In this poem the Duke Of Ferrara feels insulted when his wife rides a "white mule." He finds it ridiculous for a queen to behave in such a manner. The duke of Ferrara looks at his queen from the monarchical and patriarchal lens. Likewise, when the speaker in this poem is riding the unicorn her love just stays behind. Simply for the fact of being ashamed or perhaps unable to have courage to go along with the speaker.

A Lesbian Speaker- The movie ***V for Vendetta*** showed a couple of two girls who were in love during high school. Both the girls had dared to accost their families, so one of them leaves the house, the other one takes her love in her parents' house. Obviously, in a society governed by heteronormative, heterosexual and monogamous relationship between man and woman are unable to accept this pair. What happens is that the partner who took the girl to her house lacks the courage to follow and leaves her. Narrative voice in the movies says that as adolescents we like to carry on that love, but as adults we just forget it or want to forget it as childishness. This is precisely what you can find in this poem **The Unicorn,** Namjoshi being a lesbian writer can think of a speaker who is lesbian and is in love with a girl. It is likely that her love will stay behind as she will not be able to take such a strong step to go along with the speaker being a woman. So woman-woman relationship is something that is not only questionable in the conventional societies but also unacceptable. So the speaker carries on her ride.

A sexual speaker- If not sex, then talking about sex is at least a taboo in most of the families and even the advanced cultured society. Riding a unicorn is a mythic act and for sex one needs someone to love. Reference to "wild unicorn" indicate the element of Eros present in almost all beings. "Green light of trees" and "Dark light of night" convey the time for love making. While the "Past leaves" symbolizes image of female genital, "silver thorn" becomes metaphoric of pallus. Besides, unicorn as belonging to the horse family already enhances the sexual emphasis, "silver thorn" adds to that libido. However, the irony is that since the love stays behind it means the speaker has to carry along the task solely which is a clear indication of masturbation. The unicorn then becomes a symbol for sex toy. That efficacy of speaker to exist by himself or herself is suggested by the last lines: when love stay "Far away behind me/ And I rode the wild unicorn/ Past love and foul weather."

Conclusion: The Unicorn

This Poem is about seeking and following life in one's own self-reliance mode as Ralph Waldo Emerson point out in his essay "Self-Reliance." One should be able to trust oneself and not be moved by what the world thinks about you. The speaker shows that firmness and the decision-making power that s/he need to have though s/he may be disheartened, lost and uprooted. The speaker continues the journey "past love and foul weather." The poem culminates in an ecstasy and epiphany when the speaker is able to realize the victory over that sense of loss by "past love and foul weather."

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