

## Fruits of Knowledge: Polemics, Humour and Moral Education in the Writings of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Lila Majumdar and Nabaneeta Dev Sen

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### Abstract

This paper analyses literary sources, by three women writing in Bengali, from c.1900 to contemporary times. These writings offer far more complex, heterogeneous, innovative and creative strategies for the shaping, reform and moral education of subjects, than have hitherto been recognised. Authors focused on in the article are Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932), Lila Majumdar (1908-2007) and Nabaneeta Dev Sen (1938-). “Moral education” and “reform” have tended to carry with them a stereotypical aura of sententiousness, didacticism, humourlessness and aridness. I argue, utilising tools from literary and gender studies, that polemical and fictional writing by Bengali women writers such as Rokeya, Lila and Nabaneeta repay attention to their stylistic fertility, their ability to craft and reinvent humour and their creative reinvention of genres. The projects of reform and moral education of subjects (not only female ones) that emerge from such writing are nuanced, multilayered, subversive and wickedly intelligent.

### Keywords

Humour, gender, Bengali literature, postcolonial, fiction, South Asian literature

This article analyses literary sources, by three women writing in Bengali from the early twentieth century to contemporary times. These literary narratives offer complex, heterogeneous, innovative and creative strategies for the shaping, reform and moral education of subjects. The three authors focused on in this article are Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Lila Majumdar and Nabaneeta Dev Sen. Writing in Bengali or Bangla, their works are read today in the contemporary transnational cultural space of Bengal, which spans the sovereign countries of Bangladesh, India and diasporic Bengali communities across the world. The terms “moral education” and “reform” have tended to carry with

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them a stereotypical aura of sententiousness, didacticism, humourlessness and aridness. I argue, utilising tools from literary and gender studies, that polemical and fictional writing by Bengali women writers such as Rokeya, Lila and Nabaneeta show stylistic fertility, craft and reinvent humour, and reinvent genres creatively. (Following Bengali usage, I shall be using the authors' first names to refer to them.) The projects of reform and moral education of subjects (not only female ones) that emerge from such writing are humorous, nuanced, multilayered, subversive and wickedly intelligent.

The writings I look at span the period from approximately 1900 to contemporary times. Through polemical, witty, often humorous writing – through writing that was simultaneously supportive of the education and development of women and other socially marginal groupings – women writers such as these purveyed defamiliarising, entertaining processes of informal education to their readers. Far more than just sugar-coated pills, the educational work of such women's fiction challenges facile didacticism, and shows that through creative, humorous literary craftsmanship, one could offer lessons for life. In my enterprise, my status as literary scholar is vital to my approach: the patterns of moral education the writers offer are creative and agile. They are able deftly to play with, skirt around, be frontal or lateral with ideologies of self-formation and processes of gendering.

### **Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain**

This article starts with an analysis of the novels and essays written by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 1880-1932, educator, creative writer, essayist and feminist. A legendary icon of South Asian feminism and pioneer in girls' education, she founded in Kolkata, in 1911, a school for girls, which exists till today. She was an extraordinary fabulist and polemicist: her fable "Sultana's Dream" (1905), written in English, is a masterpiece of utopian feminist writing, as is her Bengali novella *Padmarag* (1924): the latter envisages a utopian community of reformist women (Rokeya, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag*). By 1901, Rokeya emerged as a full-fledged writer, who published in a wide range of periodicals such as *Mabila*, *Nabanoor*, *Bangiya Musalman Sabitya Patrika*, *Saogat*, and *Mohammadi*.

Rokeya's essay, "Srishtitattva," or "The Story of Creation" (*Rokeya Rachanasamgraha* 109-11) first published in 1920, shows Rokeya's daring, playful wit and humour. This essay complements an earlier essay by Rokeya, "Narisrishti" or "The Creation of Woman" (*Rokeya Rachanasamgraha* 135-39), published in 1919. In the earlier essay, "Narisrishti," the Creator states that he combined all kinds of paradoxical qualities in creating woman. This earlier essay, Rokeya states, is a free translation of a piece she read in English, itself translated from Sanskrit: "A Hindu Legend of the Creation of Woman."

Colonel Ingersoll, in his lecture on 'The Mistakes of Moses,' was fond of narrating an immemorial Oriental legend of the creation of man and woman, and trying to show how superior it was, in chivalry toward the gentle sex, to the story in Genesis. It is doubtful, however, whether he would have upheld the superiority of another narrative of this character found in a book of Hindu legends lately discovered. This work, written in Sanskrit, is called 'The Surging of the Ocean of Time,' and in the last section of it, entitled 'Of a Finger of the Moon Reddened by the Setting Sun,' occurs the following passage, lately translated by an English writer, Mr. Bain, and reproduced in the *Chicago Times-Herald* (May 7):

At the beginning of time, Twashtri – the Vulcan of the Hindu mythology – created the world. But when he wished to create a woman he found that he had employed all his materials in the creation of man. There did not remain one solid element. Then Twashtri, perplexed, fell into a profound meditation. He roused himself to do as follows: He took the roundness of the moon, the undulations of the serpent, the entwining of climbing plants, the trembling of the grass, the slenderness of the rose-vine, and the velvet of the flower, the lightness of the leaf and the glance of the fawn, the gayety of the sun's rays and tears of the mist, the inconstancy of the wind and the timidity of the hare, the vanity of the peacock and the softness of the down on the throat of the swallow, the hardness of the diamond, the sweet flavour of honey and the cruelty of the tiger, the warmth of fire, the chill of snow, the chatter of the jay, and the cooing of the turtle dove. He united all this and formed a woman. Then he made a present of her to man. Eight days later the man came to Twashtri and said: 'My lord, the creature you gave me poisons my existence. She chatters without rest, she takes all my time, she laments for nothing at all, and is always ill.' And Twashtri received the woman again.

But eight days later the man came again to the god and said: 'My lord, my life is very solitary since I returned this creature. I remember she danced before me, singing. I recall how she glanced at me from the corner of her eye, that she played with me, clung to me.' And Twashtri returned the woman to him.

Three days only passed and Twashtri saw the man coming to him again. 'My lord,' said he, 'I do not understand exactly how, but I am sure that the woman causes me more annoyance than pleasure. I beg of you to relieve me of her.'

But Twashtri cried: 'Go your way and do your best.' And the man cried: 'I cannot live with her!' 'Neither can you live without her,' replied Twashtri.

And the man was sorrowful, murmuring: 'Woe is me, I can neither live with or without her.' (Anon., *A Hindu Legend of the Creation of Woman* 642)

Rokeya undoubtedly transcreated this story, adding, for example, key elements in her version: her list includes 33 elements in all, including the sourness of tamarind, the bitterness of quinine, the fiery taste of chillies, the

absentmindedness of philosophers, the proneness to error of politicians and the liquidity of water: a more complex and localised list, with the original story undergoing fascinating processes of re-translation, and the emergent female identity that is created also seen in far more varied, creative, colourful light.

In “Srishtitattva” or “The Story of Creation,” we get a fascinating picture of women from various religions sitting together in conviviality: numerous other examples in Rokeya’s oeuvre depict the same scene (Rokeya, “The Worship of Women”). Twashtri or Tvasti (the latter is how Rokeya transcribes the word) appears before the women. (In Vedic religion, Twashtri is the “heavenly builder,” the maker of divine implements, especially Indra’s weapon the *vajra* or thunderbolt. The word Tvastri means “carpenter” and “chariot maker.” Twashtri is a Proto-Indo-Iranian divinity.) In a witty passage, Rokeya combines an account of recent political developments which brought lots of men into M.K. Gandhi’s political non-cooperation movement of “Satyagraha” (literally “eagerness for truth,” or civil disobedience) with Twashtri’s revision of the original story of creation:

Tvasti: ‘It is this: she gave the article titled “The Creation of Woman” to the monthly journal named *Saogat*. At that point the Editor was not in Kolkata; the fools in the office published it omitting two footnotes written by her. Without these footnotes, the essay has become difficult to understand in places. So discerning readers, not being able to comprehend it fully, cannot be fully satisfied. Then they say, “Call that blighter Tvasti, let him come and explain where and what the mistakes are!” See, at convenient and inconvenient times, if they find occasion for a planchette, they call me from heaven and bother me. Listen to today’s incident: some young men have got caught up in the “satyagraha” movement. The ruling officials say, give up the eagerness for truth [satyagraha] and embrace the eagerness for lies [mithyagraha]. Two lawyers, who were harassed by the police since they did not embrace falsehood, have escaped to Ranchi. Their home is not far from yours. But you should know that robbers never listen to religious tales. Even in the unceasing rain and mud of Ranchi they have no respite. During the day, they devote themselves to the propagation of the attempt to embrace truth, against the embrace of falsehood, and spoil the peace of the country by their lecturing! And at night the friends spoil the peace of heaven with their planchettes! Until midnight or one o’ clock at night we are disturbed by the summons of the lawyers. At least in your mortal world there is the C.I.D. to punish young men for breaking the peace: but in heaven there are no measures to subdue them. That is why, you see, my chariot of vapour got caught on a pitcher on your roof while I was returning so late at night from the lawyers, and I too barely escaped from falling noisily. Being drenched by rain does not suit me in my old age, and so the moment the brave Bina opened the window, I entered the house.’

What revision to the story does Tvasti propose?

We saw that poor Lord Tvasti was overwhelmed by sleep. At times he was speaking in a low voice while yawning, with eyelids nearly closed; at yet other times he was rubbing his eyes and speaking in a loud voice, and was testing whether Bina had written things down correctly. If there were mistakes, he was making her cross them out and write again. It was as if he was trying to prove by the elaborateness of his words that he was not assailed by sleep. At one point he roared and said:

‘Do you know, my children, when I was creating woman I had no objects in hand: I had to collect the smell of one substance, the taste of one, and the vapour of one. But during the creation of man I did not have to worry at all. I had many objects in my treasury – I took what came to me when I stretched out my hand. Such as, when I was creating teeth, I took the whole poison-fang of the snake; to prepare hands, feet, nails, etc. I took the whole claw of the tiger; at the time of filling the brain cells I used the whole brain of the donkey. [“Cells” in English in the original. – Translator.] At the time of the creation of woman, I took only the heat of fire. In the case of men I took a piece of burning coal. Child! Write this.’

Bina wrote, ‘Burning coal.’

Tvasti: ‘Children! Listen attentively, in the case of women I took only the cold of snow, while in the case of men I used pieces of ice, and even the whole Kanchenjunga peak. Have you written this, Bina?’ (Rokeya, “Srishtitattva”)

Rokeya’s presence as a polemical, uncompromisingly feminist writer in the literary public sphere – as “Srishtitattva” amply bears out – made her job as educator challenging: she could never pass off as a docile teacher helping to turn out equally biddable girls who would not challenge patriarchy or colonialism. But her status as writer, especially as a witty, biting, often humorous writer, also gave Rokeya’s work a sharpened edge, greater public visibility, and greater power to mould public opinion about women’s education. She combined pedagogic work with action in a more broadly defined social and public sphere. She used irony, wit, humour and satire with devastating effect, combining such witty, biting, funny polemics and feminism with a frontal presence as respectable formal educator.

The solution that Rokeya offered for the negative forces of Indian patriarchy and British colonialism was women’s and men’s education. From this education, she argued, an emancipatory knowledge would be born. In her novel *Padmarag*, Rokeya described Tarini Bhavan, a community of women and a feminist utopia situated in the heart of Kolkata. In this institution, which is not unlike Rokeya’s own school, some women, led by a Brahmo widow named Tarini Sen, create a world of welfarist action. The women in the community of

Tarini Bhavan (Hindus, Brahmos, Muslims, Christians, Blacks and Whites) work for advancing healthcare, education, the welfare of the disabled and the handicapped, and run income-generating training courses. This is an integrative model of action by women. For Rokeya, the power of women to form associations with the complete consent of the individual women is the principal means of advancing human liberty – and the power to narrativise such action through creative writing adds extra charge and creativity to her agency. Such agency is exercised in everyday office work by working women, wonderfully represented in *Padmarag*. Women type documents in typewriters, prepare reports of the school jubilee and deal with the everyday hassles of running a girls' school in the face of conservative parents ready to take offence at the slightest hint of a threat to the girl's "character" or respectability. Parents complain about their children not winning a prize, the housepainter demands more lime for the walls, the coachman reports that a wheel needs to be changed and the gardener demands money for paints. The Tarini Bhavan women need an important lady, connected with officialdom, to preside over their prize distribution, but none is available, so Usha suggests tongue-in-cheek that their local constable's wife should distribute the prizes! The ladies who live in the community of Tarini Bhavan have an almost omnipresent register of humour when they converse among themselves – and this gives to *Padmarag* as a literary work a welcome tone of good cheer and optimism, even as that work anatomises the myriad injustices that women and egalitarian men are subject to under patriarchy.

### **Lila Majumdar**

Lila Majumdar (1908-2007) belonged natively to a culturally and socially reformist and innovative milieu. Her family, the Ray/ Raychaudhuri family included among its members her uncle, the children's writer and publisher Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri (1863-1915), his son, the publisher and writer of fantasy and nonsense literature Sukumar Ray (1887-1923), and his son, the filmmaker and children's writer, Satyajit Ray (1921-92). Lila and Satyajit Ray spearheaded writing for children in Bengal through their own work and their co-editorship of the children's magazine *Sandesh*. Lila's family belonged to the reformist, monotheist Brahmo Samaj founded by Rammohun Roy in the nineteenth century. Members of this group were some of the most fearless and active campaigners for women's education in India. Lila tells anecdotes about the husband and wife Dwarakanath Ganguly (1844-1898), and Kadambini Ganguly (1861-1923), near relations from her mother's side (Majumdar, *Kheror Khata* 101-03). She describes Kadambini's highly successful practice as one of India's earliest women doctors. She also tells with relish an anecdote about Dwarakanath, who, incensed by derogatory remarks about Kadambini Ganguly and other educated women published in the periodical *Bangabasi* in 1891, went

to the office of the publication and forced its editor to swallow the piece of paper in question: that is, he made the editor literally “eat his own words” (Majumdar, *Kheror Khata* 103).

Lila’s role as a powerful woman writer embedded in this milieu has just begun to be analysed. *Sandesh*, founded in 1913 by Upendrakishore, played a major role in creating a Bengali literary public sphere for children in which humour, unsectarian ethics, adventurousness and creativity were promoted. Lila also produced pieces for All India Radio. As a writer for children and young adults in Bengal, from the 1920s onwards, Lila was a wise, funny imparter of humane values, all the more effective because she did not write pompously or sententiously. Lila’s role as public educator was thus both influential and multidimensional.

Lila wrote autobiographical pieces, collected into three major booklength works, *Ar Konokhane* (Somewhere Else, [1967] 1989), *Kheror Khata* (Miscellany, [1982] 2009), and *Pakdandi* (Winding, Hilly Road, [1986] 2001), which recount the processes of education that she went through, as a girl and young woman, in the hills of north-east India and in Kolkata. These narratives can be read by a very large age-group, from teenagers to adults. While the Ray family comprised entrepreneurial, original master entertainers who simultaneously brought civilising, humanist educative values into the public sphere of the arts, how did the leading woman writer from this milieu present her own development as a girl and human being in this milieu, to her readers? She did so in complex ways, in which we see the gendering and ungendering of the self of a most subversive gentlewoman.

Lila was a highly successful achiever in formal education from school till the completion of her M.A. degree in English Literature from Calcutta University. She also describes in her autobiography her career as teacher, first in Maharani Girls' School, a pioneering girls' school in Darjeeling, a hill station in Bengal, then in Patha Bhavana, the school founded and run by Rabindranath Tagore in the innovative educational and social community Shantiniketan in rural Bengal, and then in Asutosh College, a college for girls in Kolkata. Tagore’s own ideals of education emphasised getting away from rigid, formal institutional education, and emphasising an education that prized creativity and the experimental. Classes in Shantiniketan would frequently be held in the open air under trees. Creative writing, painting, batik, dancing, singing and other such crafts and creativity-based activities would be encouraged. Lila chose to leave teaching in Shantiniketan because even this was too routine and constricting for her, but she later had a house in Shantiniketan. She remained a loyal part-time resident of Tagore’s “abode of peace.”

Dissatisfied with institutional education, Lila was nonetheless shaped by her own higher education, knew what it was to teach in schools and colleges, and chose as her vocation creative writing, which would cut cross the formal

narrowness of institutional education, yet combine entertainment with an imparting of education through fiction. Her work was recommended highly and taught in high schools in Bengal when the present writer was growing up.

Lila's autobiographical writing represents the schools she went to in Shillong and Kolkata, and her experiences as a teacher in Darjeeling and Kolkata. She interweaves this with representation of informal processes of education, whether from women of the northeast Indian hill tribes that Lila interacted with in childhood, or whether from her remarkable family members, including Sukumar Ray. In the vignettes/scraps/sketches in *Kheror Khata*, or Miscellany/Scrap-Book, Lila offers a sketch about a tribal, Santhal boy who had *jalebis* and *samosas* (very popular sweet and savoury snacks respectively originating in North India) on the prize distribution day in a school started by boys from Visva-Bharati, the university at the core of Shantiniketan. On being asked how he had liked this fare, he gave a big smile, and replied, "Great. But field mice taste even better" (Majumdar, *Kheror Khata* 37).

Lila's most well-known work has boys at the centre, although girls and women also occur in them somewhat peripherally. Ghost stories, short stories in the vein of nonsense and fantasy, detective and adventure stories, science fiction: these were some of her most favoured genres, and in all of these, Lila praises mischief, waywardness and quirkiness. Such praise is also interwoven into her ostensibly more feminised writing, such as her autobiographies and her female-centred suspense and romance novels. In all her oeuvre, we find imaginative scepticism about rote-learning and institutional education. This is the case even in her conduct-book *Manimala* (originally a series broadcast in 1947-48 on All India Radio), which offer letters of advice from a grandmother to her "very ordinary" granddaughter, tracing the granddaughter's path from age 12 through to her falling in love and marrying against her father's wishes, much as Lila had done (Majumdar, *Manimala*). Lila's writing arguably creates adventurous new notions of decorum, while refusing any straitjacketing into limited notions of what a woman writer catering to children and young adults should write. She expanded the middle-class child's world to take in the poor of India, the indigenous people of India, even the thieves of India: she has superb humorous vignettes and stories about encounters with clever thieves (e.g. Majumdar, *Kheror Khata* 44-47). Lila both participated in and represented multiple layers and complexities in education. She crafted roles for herself that were both overtly gendered (wife, mother, writer of cookbooks and conductbooks for girls) and not overtly gendered (writer not primarily of girls' stories but of zany, humorous, fantastic adventures and science fiction). Her husband was trained as a dentist in Harvard, and the couple lived in a household which bridged westernised mores with Hindu and Brahma values: the fact that Lila chose to marry outside the Brahma Samaj created a permanent rupture with her father. In all her writing, Lila shows many loyalties: loyalty to

her Brahma roots and personality, to the Hindu values and cultural richness she encountered after marriage, and loyalty to a thoroughly cosmopolitan, transcultural sensibility, whether shown in her love for Dickens' novels and Gothic-style romance novellas, in the constant presence of sahibs, mulattoes and Anglo-Indians in her stories, or in her tremendous love for the geography and highly hybrid society of the Indian hills (based no doubt on her childhood upbringing in the hill-station of Shillong in north-east India).

Lila in turn fictionally depicts young women who are in college, or have graduated from college and are working: these are her relatively neglected novellas for young adult women. Some of these novellas have been collected in the anthology *Ami Nari*, "I am a Woman." These are fine works and perhaps some of the very few works in the female Gothic mode in Bengali, carrying the combination of *bildung* (education and development of the self) and suspense, usually romantic suspense, that one finds in the works of skilled, elegant and neglected writers such as Anne Radcliffe in the late eighteenth century and Mary Stewart in the twentieth century. Stories of romantic suspense, they are also tales of "female difficulties" resolved. Lila says in *Pakdandi* that these novellas give happy endings to their heroines, all of whom are orphans or homeless, have undergone trials and difficulties, and are overwhelmingly working women.

These are precisely the sorts of stories that young girls in Bengal would read, from their teens onwards – except that by their late teens, many of these young girls would already have got married, and been reading as young wives. Somewhere in between the "kishori," the female adolescent, and the "nari," the woman, is the reader of the tales. Like Lila's children's tales, these too are not heavy-reading novels. A frisson-filled plotline of exquisite fear and/ or suspense and the continuous presence of romantic threads create stylised and predictable structures in these novellas.

They are unusual novels. The first novella in the anthology *Ami Nari* is called "Kestadasi," and its eponymous narrator is a poor lower-caste woman. She is also a working woman and social worker. It is Kestadasi or Krisnamani's diary which forms the novel, as she struggles between a whole variety of subject-positions, from her current gentrified status to memories of abject poverty and rough living that shaped her early life. Kestadasi is rescued from a state of penniless destitution by a gentlewoman named Mani. Kesta, through Mani's support, comes to work in a women's welfare project, teaching weaving to other women. She earns a monthly salary, lives with Mani, and to the *bhadramahilas* or gentlewomen who run the ladies' welfare society, the Mahila Sangha, is known as Krisnamani Devi, marker of her upward mobility. She is not classifiable as a domestic servant, since she does not take a salary for doing Mani's work, and is thought to be Mani's relative. Indeed, it is a fascinating relationship that is posited between the women, at once socially unequal, inwardly equal, friendly and affective. Inside herself, Krisnamani thinks of

herself as Kestadasi, and feels torn about the abjectly poor, traumatised life in the slum of Hogalkunre she had left behind. Right at the beginning of her diary she remembers her teacher in school asking her father's name; she replies cavalierly that she had no trace of a father. And when, as instructed, she goes and asks her mother, the mother in turn replies, "there never was a father, and he never had a name. Tell your teacher that. All this nonsense" (Majumdar, *Ami Nari* 3; my translation). That is the kind of unsentimental, brisk attitude that Lila makes Kestadasi display at least in one part of herself. Another part of Kesta is unashamedly, engulfingly sentimental. Both these parts get triggered when, on the one hand, the ladies' society takes up a welfare project in Hogalkunre, and, on the other, a newcomer appears in the locality, a film-star, with his little son Rahul, and there is a mysterious relationship between him and Mani, which gets unravelled.

In this part of Lila's oeuvre we get fascinating accounts of a whole era of welfarist, active Bengali women, running Ladies' Committees in primary schools, and creating Ladies' Societies, the *Mahila Sangha*-s, the cosy malice and competence of which is wonderfully captured in the members' conversations in Kestadasi. Lila's work and life offer records of and links to a distinguished strand of modernising Brahma female welfarist activism, which is also prescient for our current canonisation of civil society. It was at least partly Lila's belonging to a Brahma milieu, and her often-expressed admiration for crusading welfarist working women, which shaped such narratives as "Kestadasi." She worked herself, with some seriousness and great enjoyment, with such civil society organisations such as "Anandamela" or Joyful Gathering.

### **Nabaneeta Dev Sen**

Nabaneeta Dev Sen is the latest of the writers I look at, born in 1938, and an enormously popular writer in India, where she lives, and in Bangladesh, where she is widely read, to this day. Her writings appear in printed periodicals, newspapers and as books, while she also gets published electronically in cyberspace. Like Rokeya and Lila, Nabaneeta's generic diversity is virtually unending. Highly educated, a traveller across a myriad countries, a professor of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University until retirement, an articulate scholar of oral cultures and women's and vernacular retellings of Sanskrit epics such as the *Ramayana*, Nabaneeta brings a particularly wide variety of honed skills to her status as celebrated and loved woman writer. Humour has remained a key resource and weapon in her quiver of quills. She has been described as follows, in a passage about her that was used as epigraph in a celebratory article about her published by the Sahitya Akademi, India's national academy for literature,

How, for example, can one not be amazed at the apparent good-humoured ease with which Nabaneeta Dev Sen, internationally known scholar-critic, poet, novelist, and short story writer, has turned the orderly Bengali patriarchal family edifice topsy-turvy? Through her highly popular, acute, humorous travelogues, short stories, and novellas, she brought her own women-only and female-headed household into the living-rooms of Bengalis (as she says, she used humour as a means of distancing the personal), and in the process created a universe in which women can ride off on the back of a truck to the edge of Tibet on the Macmahon line, recount wanderings in the Kumbha Mela in modern idiom, or hold intensely cerebral conversations about life and letters. On the one hand a pioneering researcher into women's Ramayanas, she has in her creative avatar written searing fiction using those motifs recreated in annals of modern life (most notably in her novella *Bamabodhini*). Yet as her conversation in a volume on women, literature, and censorship conveys, she too has faced censorship, even if it is most often the threat of censure. Part of this is to do with the desire to placate those whom we love, to not offend them, to preserve familial respectability, to avoid being spoken of as the unruly or the improper woman – the ideology of respectability and propriety comes up again and again as a potent form of self-censorship for the writers. And each of them knows that somewhere in their minds there is a madwoman in the attic.” (Bagchi, “Review of *Storylines*” 211)

Nabaneeta Dev Sen has written, in a number of academic pieces, such as “Lady Sings the Blues: When Women Retell the Ramayana,” of the many versions of the *Ramayana* written by women. This includes the Telugu *Ramayana* written by Molla, the Bengali *Ramayana* written by Chandrabati in the 16th century and the *Ramayana Vishabriksham*, rewriting the Rama tale from the Marxist point of view, by the Telugu Marxist-feminist writer, Ranganayakamma: the latter is Nabaneeta's contemporary, born in 1939. As a *sudra* and a woman, Molla subversively writes a classical *Ramayana*. Chandrabati's is a woman's gaze, sharply critical of Rama. Nabaneeta herself has written witty, biting, funny revisions of the *Ramayana*, collected into the volume *Sita Theke Shuru* (It All Began from Sita, 1996).

Nabaneeta enjoys writing for children, too, especially fairy tales for children. She describes fairy tales as “good food for encouraging a child's imagination, as well as for instilling the right values at an early stage.” (Satchidanandan 218) She further writes in the aforementioned literary memoir published by the Sahitya Akademi,

My fairy tales have queens and princesses as heroines, intelligence, wisdom and goodness are the resources they use to overcome problems, not weapons. There are no fixed hostilities between communities, all demons are not harmful, for example there are good demons and bad demons like

people, and peace, not riches and power is the ultimate goal.  
(Satchidanandan 218)

A poet, a writer of fairy tales, a novelist, a short story writer, she, on being asked whether her writings are subversive or transgressive, wrote, “I said, I believe, both. Some of my work is subversive, as well as transgressive, and some are transgressive but not necessarily subversive” (Satchidanandan 220).

She has expressed time after time a sense of how the society that she writes for is salacious about her, brands her as an improper woman, yet admires her writing, her agency, her place in the public sphere. Nabaneeta has kept on speaking up for pluralism, humaneness, underdogs, dogs, cats and sundry other animals. Feisty and undaunted, she has expressed personal pain, while she has also strongly and successfully built up associations – most notably the women writers’ group which she, with dazzling wit, named “shoi” – as she has said, this is a triple pun on three different meanings of the word in Bengali: first, signature, second, “I tolerate or suffer,” and third, a close female friend. Like the wonderful Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Lila Majumdar before her, Nabaneeta Dev Sen is a virtuoso entertainer-educator: their wit and humour mark out their writing and play a crucial role in making them successful educators in fiction.

## Conclusion

Through narrative writing that is often humorous and polemical, and through writing that was simultaneously supportive of the education and development of women and other socially marginal groupings, women such as the three I have examined purveyed defamiliarising, entertaining processes of informal education to their readers. Far more than just sugar-coated pills, the works of such women’s fiction challenge facile didacticism, and show that through creative, humorous literary craftsmanship, writers could offer lessons for life.

Multi-semantic, entertaining, educative and funny, they chart women’s quest for unusual, feisty, independent patterns of education, growth and development. Entertainer-educators, reform-minded fiction-writers, their wit and humour mark out their writing and play a crucial role in making them successful educators in fiction: their defamiliarising irreverence that has drawn the loyalty of generations of readers, and made possible the transmission of their messages in a non-didactic style. How do we analyse their humour? Two words I have used earlier are important for an understanding of their humour: irreverence and defamiliarisation. Pomposity, earnestness and powers-that-be are all treated with laughter and lack of respect. And a fresh eye is cast on the world, where eating field mice is both funny and natural, as in Lila Majumdar’s writing, where Sita’s descent into the underground is stagemanaged by cruel patriarch-gods who press a remote control button to fling her into a pre-dug

pit, as in Nabaneeta Dev Sen's *Sita Theke Shuru*, or where to be "mannish" is to be shy and withdrawing, as in Rokeya's "Sultana's Dream." The triptych of figures discussed in this article are moral educators with piercing, estranging, witty gazes – and also highly successful women writers in Bengal across the long 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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