

*“Because Novels Are True, and Histories
Are False”: Indian Women Writing
Fiction in English, 1860–1918*

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While visiting England in the early 1870s, the prodigiously talented teenage writer Toru Dutt met “Lord L.” – or Lord Lawrence, former viceroy of India. He asked her what book she and her sister Aru were reading. The book in question was a novel, *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856), by Dinah Maria Mulock. Lord L. replied, “Ah! you should not read novels too much, you should read histories.” While Aru did not reply, Toru answered, “We like to read novels.” On being asked why, she responded, smiling, “Because novels are true, and histories are false” (H. Das 23). Here, Toru Dutt was articulating and helping to constitute a kind of cultural modernity in which the truth of the novel, a particular form of fiction, was crucial. This truth was particularly seized upon by women, who were making strides toward fuller participation in the public sphere, including in the construction of knowledge. Fiction written by women in English and other languages in India, whether in the form of full-fledged novels or as shorter fiction, contributed to a renewal of language, identity, and history.

Already by 1875, quite a few pieces of English-language fiction had been written and published by Indians. Notable among these is Shoshee Chunder Dutt’s “The Republic of Orissa” (1845). Shoshee Chunder Dutt (1824–85) was a cousin of Toru’s, and he, like Toru’s father, had converted to Christianity. (Toru’s father Govin Chunder, along with his brothers and nephew, published a collection of poetry titled *The Dutt Family Album* in 1870.) Meanwhile, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay’s novel in English, *Rajmohan’s Wife*, had come out in 1864. Dutt was one of several Indian women novelists writing in the period 1860 to 1918, along with Krupabai Satthianadhan, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, and Swarnakumari Devi Ghosal. These writers, from a range of backgrounds – Hindu, Christian, Brahmo, and Muslim – also published in a range of genres, encompassing, for example, the Gothic novel (Toru Dutt), novels of sensibility (Toru Dutt), speculative and utopian fiction (Rokeya Hossain),

the Bildungsroman (Dutt, Satthianadhan, Hossain, Ghosal), love stories (Ghosal, Hossain), and novels about religious conversion (Satthianadhan). The spectrum is thus wide, but the gendered voices of female agency are heard in all the fictions in question. Throughout their works, the authors express their visions not just of India but of the world, making wide claim to agency and articulation. Their fiction is also richly and subversively multilingual, spanning Indian *bhashas*,¹ English, and other European languages, including French.

The history of Indian fiction in English by women needs to be seen, then, as part of the connected cultural histories of world literature. In that context, Toru's remark on novels and history echoes the comments made by Jane Austen's highly ordinary yet subversive heroine Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* (1817), on why she dislikes reading history: "The men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all – it is very tiresome: and yet I often think it odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention" (88). The narrator of *Northanger Abbey* says, equally, that novels express the highest powers of the human mind in the best chosen language:

"Oh! it is only a novel!" replies the young lady; while she lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame. . . or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language. (22)

The observations of Catherine and the narrator of *Northanger Abbey* resemble the pithy daring of Toru's remark. Unfortunately, at this time such potentially subversive remarks as Toru's were constantly troped in a discourse of Orientalism; accordingly, Toru's correspondent and friend Clarisse Bader reduced her preference for fiction and legend to her status as an Oriental woman: "Toru Dutt, in replying with such a paradox, proved a true daughter of this poetical Hindu race who prefer Legend to History" (H. Das 24). However, far more relevant, in my view, was Toru's ability to see, like Austen, that the novel as a form provided a space for the production of a particular kind of truth, one accessible to marginal or subaltern groups such as women because of its still relatively non-canonical status. The distinguished sociologist and gender historian Meera Kosambi has termed Marathi upper-caste reformist women writers such as Ramabai and Kashibai Kanitkar, whom we encounter later in this chapter, "gendered subalterns" (*Women* 5). I argue that this term applies to

all the women writers examined in this chapter. They are women who, to varying degrees, contest patriarchy, colonial racism, and the orthodoxies of brahminical Hinduism, many of them from their positions as religious minorities.

At the heart of the novels are vivid and gendered imaginings of selves and subjects. Reform is crucial to these enterprising undertakings – reform of the self and of society, including of patriarchy and racism. The fiction of Toru Dutt, Krupabai Sathianadhan, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, and Swarnakumari Devi Ghosal, set in the interstices of the private and public spheres, participates in the larger, multivalent reform of gender relations and other matters in late nineteenth-century Indian society. The focus of reform in these fictions often concerns women’s education, livelihoods, and claims to spaces in the public sphere. However, reform in these novels also takes the shape of concerns over affect, finding love, or seeking conjugal, romantic, or sexual fulfilment in ways that stretch and question patriarchy. The much-derided cultural figure of the woman novel-reader (so present, implicitly, in Lord L.’s remark to Toru and her sister, for example), steeped in socially unsanctioned enjoyment, is turned around in many of these fictions to present instead a self-cultivating, virtuous, developing female subject who seeks reform of many aspects of Indian society, even while seeking to engage in a very personal/individual process of self-reform and self-education.

Toru Dutt: Romance and Cosmopolitanism

Toru Dutt (1856–77) herself did not publish her fiction in her own short lifetime, although she did publish and gain a reputation for her poetry. Toru was a cosmopolitan, transnational writer whose fame spanned India, Great Britain, France, and the United States. Born to a gifted literary family, Toru’s prodigious talents were encouraged by her father, although she only saw one of her works published during her lifetime: *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* (1876), a volume of French poetry translated by her and her elder sister Aru. Renowned British critic and poet Edmund Gosse reviewed the book favorably in 1877.² After her death, Toru’s collection of Sanskrit translations, *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, was published in 1882 with an introductory memoir by Edmund Gosse.

Toru’s cosmopolitan interest in literature and her transnational friendships with other intellectual women were fostered by a four-year stay in Europe. After the tragic death of her brother Abju, the family traveled to Europe, where they stayed from 1869 to 1873. They lived in France,

and Toru's interest and proficiency in French grew, leading to her 1876 publication. From 1871 to 1873, Toru and Aru attended the Higher Lectures for Women at Cambridge University. While living in Cambridge, Toru became very good friends with Mary Anne Martin, the daughter of John Martin of Sidney Sussex College. Toru and Mary Anne corresponded with each other after Toru's return to India until her death. After her return to India, Toru learned Sanskrit and became busy with translations and adaptations from ancient Sanskrit literature. She also wrote memorable English-language poetry evoking the Dutt family's environs, including the beautiful gardens of the family retreat at Baumaree. Toru also became friends through correspondence with Clarisse Bader, the French writer mentioned earlier, whom she had come to admire after reading Bader's book *La Femme dans L'Inde Antique*. Toru's French was so accomplished that she completed a full novel in that language. This work, *Le Journal de Mademoiselle D'Arvers*, was published in Paris in 1879, with a prefatory piece by Clarisse Bader on the life and oeuvre of Toru Dutt, whom the front matter of the book describes as a "jeune et célèbre Hindoue de Calcutta, morte en 1877."

Toru's cosmopolitan linguistic multiplicity manifested itself in her choosing to write in both English and French, as well as in her translating poetry from French and Sanskrit into English. Her father, Govin, published her unfinished English novel *Bianca, or, the Young Spanish Maiden* in *Bengal Magazine* after her death.³ Prophetically, melancholy, death, and tragedy brood over this novel from its beginning to its incomplete end. The tale is about a half-Spanish, half-British young woman, Bianca. Her sister Inez has just died, and she and her Spanish father are continuing to live in exile in England. The novel is written in a highly affective register, with a jealous, over-possessive father who resents his surviving daughter being courted by the British aristocrat Lord Moore. In the delicate, sensitive, intelligent Bianca, who is steeped in French poetry and is very much an outsider in England, we see valuable traces of Toru creating a blossoming young female self. Bianca quotes to her father this beautiful description of dawn in a poem by the French poet and novelist Claude Adhémar André Theuriet (1833–1907):

Je m'endors, et là-bas le frissonnant matin
Baigne les pampres verts d'une rougeur furtive,
Et toujours cette odeur amoureuse m'arrive
Avec le dernier chant d'un rossignol lointain
Et les premiers cris de la grive.

(T. Dutt, *Collected* 118)⁴

In addition to voicing the poem within her novel through the character Bianca, in her personal life Toru quoted this poem in a letter to Mary Jane Martin (H. Das 135)⁵ and praised and quoted these lines in the original French in *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* (305). Such repeated quotations make it clear that Toru fashioned Bianca as a young woman who shared many of her own aesthetic preferences. Moreover, Bianca's transnational positionality also echoes Toru's cosmopolitan identity. When Bianca nearly dies after an illness, her father consents to her engagement to Lord Moore. Lord Moore's mother, however, calls Bianca a "wild girl" and "as proud as if she were the Queen of Spain" (T. Dutt, *Collected* 114).⁶ Toru's awareness of English snobbery and xenophobia is obvious in such passages.

The themes of melancholy, tragedy, madness, and death also dominate Toru's French novel, *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers*, even while it weaves a story of romantic love. N. Kamala has argued that Toru could only have written such a story of romantic, sexual, and affective awakening in a language such as French (Kamala 109). Placing her stories in European contexts also allowed Toru to more easily utilize plots of sensibility and the Gothic that she gleaned from reading European novels. Again, like Bianca, the heroine of Toru's French novel also bears strong resemblances to Toru herself, in physical description, sensitivity, and intelligence. Toru Dutt's oeuvre, as we saw, bridges the worlds of Indian and European sensibilities, as well as languages, notably English, French, Sanskrit, and her mother tongue, Bengali. Her novels, which are heroine-centered, constitute a distinctive and unique part of the larger line of nineteenth-century Indian women writers' fictions delineating female growth and development. Writing as she did in both prose and poetry, Toru Dutt's experiments in creativity are cosmopolitan, multilingual, and bold.

Krupabai Sathianadhan and Ramabai: Conversion and Reform

Krupabai Sathianadhan (1862–94) was a younger contemporary of Toru Dutt; she too died tragically young, at the age of thirty-two. Like Toru, she was Christian. When considering Sathianadhan's remarkable fiction, it is illuminating to juxtapose her oeuvre with that of another even more celebrated Indian Christian woman writer, Pandita Ramabai, also known as Ramabai Saraswati and Ramabai Medhavi Dongre (1858–1922). A high-caste Indian Hindu widow who converted to Christianity in 1886,

Pandita Ramabai played a multifaceted role as a writer, essayist, campaigner for women's education, and founder of multiple developmental organizations (including a school and homes for widows, prostitutes, and the destitute). There are some striking similarities between Ramabai's and Krupabai's lives: both intended to study medicine; both had to give up their plans due to health reasons. Ramabai had a hearing impairment, and Krupabai, who won a scholarship to study medicine in England, was not allowed to go because of her failing health; she later enrolled at Madras Christian College for the same purpose but had to give up her studies as a result of a health breakdown. Sathianadhan, like Ramabai, was an actor in the educational and welfarist sphere: the former, after marrying Reverend Samuel Sathianadhan, started a school for Muslim girls in Ootacamund, with help from the Church Missionary Society, and she taught girls in other schools as well. Both published their writings at roughly the same time.

In 1883, supported by the Anglican order, Ramabai set sail for England, where she was to remain until a visit to the United States in 1886. In England, she converted to Anglican Christianity, although she later adopted a non-denominational form of Christianity as her faith. Ramabai makes a scathing critique of brahminical patriarchal Hinduism in her book *High-Caste Hindu Woman* (1887), which offers a novelized portrait of the sufferings of the upper-caste Hindu widow in ways that parallel, but also contrast with, Krupabai Sathianadhan's 1894 novel *Kamala*. In 1889, Ramabai published a Marathi travelogue, *United Stateschi Lokasthiti ani Pravasavritta*, loosely translatable as *The Peoples of the United States*, which was published in Bombay. This text offers a wonderfully detailed and acute portrait of U.S. society in the late nineteenth century. On her return to Maharashtra, Ramabai established institutions in Mumbai, Pune, and Kedgaon, such as Sharada Sadan (a school and home for child widows), followed by Mukti Sadan and Kripa Sadan (which served lower-caste women, rescued sex workers, and offered training and refuge to blind and other disabled women).

Sathianadhan's first novel *Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life* was serialized in the Madras Christian College Magazine in 1887–88, and her second novel, *Kamala: A Story of Hindu Life*, was published in 1894 in Madras. While *Saguna* tells the semi-autobiographical story of a young Indian woman who converts to Christianity, *Kamala* is the story of an upper-caste Hindu child wife and, later, widow. Although *Kamala* refuses the chance to escape the sufferings of her life by remarrying, the novel is not primarily judgmental. Instead, it offers a sympathetic anatomy of

Kamala’s life. Her ultimate satisfaction comes from her many acts of philanthropy and charity.

A posthumous collection of Saththianadhan’s miscellaneous writings and reviews of her books that I discovered shows how sophisticated the literary reviewing sphere was in relation to Indian women’s writing in English by the closing decade of the nineteenth century and how attentive writers and publishers in India were to culling and publicizing such reception of literature (Saththianadhan, *Miscellaneous* 118–29). Take this excerpted review:

India has given its native poetess in the late Toru Dutt, and in Krupabai Saththianadhan, who last autumn laid down the pen for ever at the early age of thirty-two, we have the first native lady who had ever attempted fiction in the sense understood of the modern novel. Her last work “Kamala” has been issued posthumously, and has just reached this country, where it deserves attention as showing in a manner that the most sympathetic European could never convey, the everyday life and thought of the average purdah woman of the East.⁷

The term “New Woman” is used with ease when discussing Saththianadhan’s heroines:

Saguna, her first book, may be described as a study of the “New Woman” as she is in Indian surroundings. It is to some extent biographical. . . . The story which relies on characterisation rather than plot is told in the first person. . . . We get many glimpses of inner native life and thought almost unknown to European readers. Many of her descriptions of scenery, household routine, and pleasures, and jealously believed legends are fascinating reading, and she possesses a vein of incisive satire.⁸

Thus, although literary scholars are currently excavating these early Indian women writers’ texts, part of that excavation should entail recognizing that such texts and their writers had attained a high reputation even in their own times.

Toru Dutt and Krupabai Saththianadhan were both members of literary families, although in the case of Saththianadhan it was the family that she married into that was active in the literary sphere (de Souza). For instance, Padmini Sengupta, Krupabai’s step-daughter, wrote several biographies of distinguished Indian women, such as Toru Dutt,⁹ while Padmini’s mother Kamala, Krupabai’s husband’s second wife, edited the *Indian Ladies’ Magazine*, in which Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain published her now-classic feminist utopian narrative “Sultana’s Dream” (1905). Kamala edited this distinguished magazine first with her husband, from 1901 until 1906,

when Samuel died. Undaunted, she continued to publish the magazine until 1913 and revived it after it was discontinued in 1918, in 1919, and again from 1927 to 1934. Sarojini Naidu was one of the other contributors to *The Indian Ladies' Magazine*, a remarkable periodical that is now beginning to receive the scholarly attention it deserves.¹⁰

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain: Feminist Utopias

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932) was an educator, creative writer, essayist, and feminist. In 1911, she founded a school for girls in Kolkata, which still exists today. Her feminist utopian narrative “Sultana’s Dream” (1905), written in English, is a masterpiece, as is her Bengali novel *Padmarag* (1924): the latter envisages a utopian community of reformist women. By 1901, Hossain had emerged as a full-fledged writer in Bengali and had been published in a wide range of periodicals, such as *Mahila*, *Nabanoor*, *Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Patrika*, *Saogat*, and *Mohammadi*. A biting, humorous, witty writer, Hossain, like Sathianadhan and Ramabai, used her writing in tandem with and as a form of action in the educational and welfarist public spheres. Besides “Sultana’s Dream” and *Padmarag*, she wrote many other short satirical parables and fables. Elsewhere I have analyzed two such notable pieces, “The Fruit of Knowledge” and “The Fruit of Freedom,” which demonstrate the richness of her novelistic imagination (Bagchi, “Hannah Arendt”).

“A terrible revenge!” said Hossain’s husband when he read his wife’s narrative, “Sultana’s Dream.” *The Indian Ladies' Magazine* published the story, written in English by a woman who had no formal education in that language – her brother had helped her learn the language at home. “Sultana’s Dream” remains widely read and loved, retaining its status as one of the most successful pieces of Indian writing in English. In the story, the driving force behind the utopian feminist country of Ladyland and its success is women’s education. In particular, Hossain emphasizes women’s scientific cultivation and condemns male militarism. In her inverted world, the men, mostly brawn, remain confined to the *mardana* and perform the quotidian chores, while the women, mostly brain, govern the country wisely and well, headed by a queen who is aided by the Lady-Principals of the two women’s universities.

As a fable, “Sultana’s Dream” has a succinct plotline. In Ladyland, the women are busy cultivating their minds, thanks to a queen who decrees universal female education and bans child marriage. In the two universities created exclusively for women, innovative schemes are drawn up, one

of which allows water to be drawn directly from clouds, while another permits solar heat to be collected and stored. When the country is threatened with defeat in war by a rival nation, the Lady-Principals of the universities step into the breach, making the withdrawal of men into the *mardana* a precondition for agreeing to rescue the country. The enemy is attacked with missiles fashioned from the concentrated heat developed by the women's universities and is defeated. Since the men are now safely in the *mardana*, the women continue to govern the country, now called Ladyland, creating a utopia where science, technology, and virtue work together harmoniously.

By contrast, *Padmarag* (1924, but believed to have been written before 1916 [B. Ray 444]) is generically hybrid. It is a short novel with much melodrama and romance. It is also a polemical, passionate work on feminism, social welfare, and education. Thus, contrasting with the melodrama is a realistic and gritty strand, particularly in its depiction of a female-administered school and institution, Tarini Bhavan, founded and led by a Brahma widow, Dina-tarini Sen. Hossain, richly endowed with her own experience of running a pioneering school for Muslim girls, includes wryly humorous descriptions of the trials faced by the administrators of a girls' school. She also gives us vignettes of working women and reformist women writing, teaching, typing, and taking care of other duties, trying to create a utopia in a humdrum world.

Moreover, Hossain in this novel offers a series of portraits of abusive familial, marital, and sexual practices that lead women to madness, the brink of death or suicide, as happens in the case of the eponymous heroine of the work, Zainab, who is also known as "Padmarag" and "Siddika." These critiques are conveyed through a series of pathos-inducing narratives, of women who are "biye fail" – a pun on "biye," or marriage, and "BA," the academic degree. While Siddika/Zainab/Padmarag has undergone much suffering before she comes to Tarini Bhavan, she comes to realize that other teachers also have suffering and pathos in their pasts, despite maintaining remarkably cheerful outer demeanors. Listening to their stories bonds Siddika with these other women.

By the end of the novella, Siddika, inspired by the other inhabitants of Tarini Bhavan, has initiated a process of self-development and the fervent quest for a useful vocation that will help others. Most of her friends hope that she and her benevolent, kind-hearted fiancé, Latif Almas, from whom she has been estranged due to both chance and machination, will reunite and live happily ever after. But Siddika is adamant in her resolve to reject married domesticity. Hossain thus gives her heroine a novel

ending: Siddika decides to go back to Chuadanga, bring up her brother's eight-year-old son, and supervise the estate there. She declares that she will spare no effort to awaken Muslim women. Thus, although she leaves Tarini Bhavan, she does so for a far more difficult existence.

Bridging fantastic and realistic utopian modes, with a flair for satire and humor, Hossain's literary oeuvre is fascinating for its stylistic and generic innovations. Equally, her literary works offer striking insights into how an educational leader and pioneering activist for girls' and women's education could also keep her literary creativity alive.

Swarnakumari Devi Ghosal: An Unfinished Song

If a Brahmo woman leads Hossain's fictional community Tarini Bhavan, the Brahmo writer Swarnakumari Devi Ghosal (1855–1932) had crafted an impressive place for herself in the literary sphere in Bengal by the late nineteenth century. She was an elder sister of the writer Rabindranath Tagore, and some of her works, translated from the original Bengali, were also published in English. Ghosal edited the Bengali literary monthly *Bharati* from 1884, on and off, for nearly thirty years. Although she wrote twenty-five works in Bengali, her finest work is the novel *Kahake* (1898), which she herself translated into English, and which was published in London as *The Unfinished Song* (1913). This is a novel of manners and a whimsical, subtle love story about Moni, a sensitive, intelligent young woman seeking to find true love in the heart of the artificial, Anglicized Bengali drawing rooms of early twentieth-century Calcutta. At first, Moni falls in love with Romanath, but, on discovering that he had made promises of love to a young Englishwoman whom he then spurned, she cannot accept his advances. Since this causes the gossip mills to grind furiously, Moni's father decides to take her back to their country home and arrange her marriage. Meanwhile, Moni falls in love with a young doctor. It is symptomatic of the doctor's character that he considers George Eliot, a woman writer, to be as great as William Shakespeare, and that he views Eliot's women characters, such as Maggie Tulliver and Dorothea Brooke, who are searching for love and meaning in their lives, with great sympathy.

Here, as in other novels by early Indian women, such as Kashibai Kanitkar's Marathi novel *Ranga Rao* (1886–1903), we see how Indian and British societies, literatures, and ideals are discussed and debated in women's fiction. Kashibai Kanitkar (1861–1948) has her eponymous hero in *Ranga Rao* hold forth on the Darcy-Elizabeth Bennet union in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* as an ideal, romantic marriage of choice (Kosambi,

ed. 141–2), but, in real life, he learns to reconcile love and negotiated marriage. Meanwhile, Kanitkar, who was corresponding with her husband’s friend and her literary mentor Hari Narayan Apte, found that he, excited to discover the first “lady novelist” in Marathi, suggested two possible role models for her writing: George Eliot and Jane Austen. He rejected George Eliot for being too learned and instead suggested that Kanitkar model herself on the supposedly less learned and more modestly domestic Jane Austen (Kosambi, ed. 11).

Like Ramabai, Sathianadhan, and Hossain, Ghosal was active in social reform. She founded the Sakhi Samiti, an organization to help widows and destitute women. In 1889 and 1890, she, along with Pandita Ramabai and other leading women actors in the Indian public sphere, took part in the annual sessions of the Indian National Congress, then still very much a nascent political body. In the preface to her translated novel *The Fatal Garland* (1915), published in London, Ghosal offers valuable and intriguing remarks on her writing and its reception (Ghosal, *Fatal* 11–15). She writes:

It is now thirty-eight years since the publication of my first novel *Dipnirvan*, and thirty since I took over the editorship of the *Bharati*. At that time the well-known monthly magazine, the *Bangadarshan*, under the guidance of that brilliant writer and novelist, the late Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, had passed away, after inaugurating a new era in Bengali literature; and the *Bharati*, which had been edited for seven years by my eldest brother, Dwijendra Nath Tagore, one of the eminent literary men of Bengal, was also about to retire from the field when I took over the editorship. It is difficult now to imagine the courage then required for a young and inexperienced woman to undertake such an arduous task, and how many difficulties I had to overcome. The literary talent of our Bengali women was at that time almost latent; and if, by any chance, any one among them showed any ability, the public was astonished. (11)

This is a clear-sighted analysis of herself as a woman writer breaking new ground in the male-dominated literary sphere of Bengal. Later in the preface, she also writes:

The *Adelaide Review* (South Australia) remarked in a review of my book, “An Unfinished Song,” that it was curious to find in a book showing such evident traces of English influence on Indian Society, no mention of the English people who reside in India. That newspaper does not know, perhaps, that while Indian and English people live side by side in India, they have really very little social intercourse. In rare cases they make strong and lasting friendships, but the governed and the governing races form, for the

most part, only formal and official relationships. And if this is true today, how much more so was it the case twenty years ago, when that book was written in my own tongue? (*Fatal* 13)

It is notable that while transmitting her story in a transnational, cosmopolitan public sphere by writing it in English, Ghosal is simultaneously protesting against the racism that was integral to colonialism. She further writes:

There is an Italian saying to the effect that a translator is a traitor; and it is true that to translate the word is only too often to traduce the thought. This is the case with translations made from one European language into another, and infinitely more so when works in Indian literature are translated into English. European nations have more or less the same traditions and ideas, and also a common religion. Their modes of life and thought are very much alike. A literal translation from one European language into another conveys often not only the denotation, but also the connotation of words. But it is very different when an Indian language is translated into English; then the connotation of words is sometimes different, and associations of ideas are sometimes actually opposed. Hence the necessity for encyclopaedic footnotes, and even these fail to convey the actual meaning of a word, and to conjure up the thoughts and sentiments that give to it vitality and importance. (*Fatal* 14)

The complexity and insight of this preface shows that Indian women writers could by 1915 confidently reflect on their own literary journeys and achievements, as well as on the problems that beset them, including what gets transmitted and what gets lost or added in the “carryings over” or “trans-latio” of Indian literature into English. We also see how the question of race was multiplied by patriarchy. Indeed, Rabindranath Tagore was not sympathetic to his sister’s international literary ambitions; in February 1914, soon after *An Unfinished Song* was published, he wrote to his friend William Rothenstein: “She is one of those unfortunate beings who has more ambition than abilities.... Her weakness has been taken advantage of by some unscrupulous agents in London and she has had her stories translated and published.”¹¹

Against both these views, Ghosal believed that women writers could be as great as or greater than the most celebrated male writers. E. M. Lang, introducing *An Unfinished Song*, stated that Ghosal was one of the many early Indian writers who were creating innovative discussions about the comparative reading of literature in ways that were transnational and cosmopolitan, while being impassioned about women’s rights to agency and power, literary and otherwise (Ghosal, *Unfinished* 7). It is in this spirit that

we can read the following quote from *An Unfinished Song*, from a section in which the relative merits of George Eliot and William Shakespeare are being debated:

“What is the discussion about? George Eliot? Oh, she is a great woman, we must admit that, I am sorry to say.”

“That is a very reluctant admission. Do you not as a man glory in such a genius in woman? She had a truly grand intellect combined with the sympathetic heart and subtle instinct of a true woman. Think of the masterly way in which she shows that every act of man, small or great, springs from a deeper motive, a finer sense of the inner nature. Has any writer of the stronger sex been able to equal her in that?”

“I disagree with you,” said my brother-in-law. “Do you mean to say she is as great as Shakespeare, for instance?”

“Of course,” was the doctor’s warm reply. (Ghosal, *Unfinished* 126–7)

As one of India’s leading early women writers claims for a leading British woman writer the highest possible place in the literary canon, Ghosal’s creation Moni, along with Saguna, Kamala, Marguerite, and Siddika, deserve their own distinctive and unique niches in our contemporary, emergent canon of Indian writing in English – which, as we saw, also straddles literature in other European languages and in Indian bhashas. Fiction by Indian women continues to be, from the early women writers we encountered in this chapter to contemporary writers such as Arundhati Roy, Sunetra Gupta, Shashi Deshpande, and so many others, an arena of heuristic knowledge and an experimental laboratory in which women try on and experiment with many different kinds of selfhood and course along a variety of paths and journeys of development.

Notes

- 1 Given that the word “vernacular” originates from the Latin *verna*, meaning “home-born slave” or “native,” I prefer the term *bhasha* to describe the range of Indian-language literatures. *Bhasha* means “language” in Sanskrit and a number of other Indian languages.
- 2 Gosse’s review appeared in *The Examiner*, August 26, 1876.
- 3 *Bengal Magazine* vi, January–April 1878.
- 4 “I fall asleep, and there the quivering morning/
Bathes the green vines in a shy blush,
/ And this loving smell still reaches me/
With the last song of a distant nightingale/
And the first cries of the thrush.”
- 5 Letter to Miss Martin, March 13, 1876, in H. Das 135.
- 6 Lord Moore’s mother never ends up consenting to the marriage, but Lord Moore stands by his intention to marry Bianca. However, at the close of this

- unfinished novel, Lord Moore leaves to fight in the Crimean War before the marriage can take place; he places a ring on Bianca's "marriage finger" before he leaves (T. Dutt, *Bianca* 114).
- 7 Review in *The London* (Sketch), April 17, 1895. Quoted in Sathianadhan, *Miscellaneous* 129.
 - 8 Miss Billington in *The Daily Graphic*. Quoted in Sathianadhan, *Miscellaneous* 123.
 - 9 See Sengupta, *Sarajini*; Sengupta, *Toru*; Sengupta, *Portrait*; and Sengupta, *Pandita*.
 - 10 See, for example, Emily J. Monteiro, "Communal Formations: Development of Gendered Identities in Early Twentieth-Century Women's Periodicals." Ph.D. Dissertation, Texas A&M University, 2013.
 - 11 Rabindranath Tagore, Letter to William Rothenstein, February 1914. Quoted in Tharu and Lalitha, eds., 238.