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Tracing two generations in twentieth century Indian women's education through analysis of literary sources: selected writings by Padmini Sengupta

Barnita Bagchi 

ABSTRACT

This article uses literary sources written by Padmini Sengupta, 1906–1988 (daughter of Kamala Sathinadhan, 1880–1950, educator, writer, and editor of the *Indian Ladies' Magazine*) to map two generations of women in India from reformist backgrounds and their education and writing. Padmini's biography of her mother, *The Portrait of an Indian Woman*, 1956, is analyzed at length. Here, Sengupta offers at once a memoir of her own growing years and a biographical portrait of her mother Kamala Sathianadhan. Supplementing this analysis is an examination of how women's education is represented in Sengupta's novel *Red Hibiscus*, 1962. Padmini wrote many works of a non-fictional and biographical nature. In analyzing her writing, we also understand better how Indian women writers representing their own educational trajectories in the print and public sphere shortly after Indian independence lay the groundwork for the later development of women's history and Women's Studies in India.

KEYWORDS

Kamala Sathianadhan;
Indian women's writing;
biography; colonial India;
postcolonial India

This contribution will use literary sources written by one woman member of the distinguished literary family of the Sathianadhans, Padmini Sathianadhan Sengupta, 1906–1988,¹ daughter of Kamala Sathianadhan, 1880–1950, to map two generations of women in India from reformist backgrounds and their education and writing. (Following South Asian vernacular conventions of respect, I refer to the two women by their first names, Padmini and Kamala.) In this mapping the continuities in my contribution with earlier approaches to the history of women's education as well as emerging methodologies both involve connecting women's writing and histories of women's education. Education is seen in this article as both formal and informal, and as lifelong learning and self-development. While the history of women's education is not an established field in India or Indian studies, women's history is. There is much work in the history of Indian women and gender that takes novels, biographies, autobiographies, and non-fiction by women as sources, though very little specifically on the history of women's *education*.² My contribution follows this latter path, and examines the writings of a little-known woman. I trace women's education from the colonial period (from the early twentieth century in particular) to decolonization and postcolonial society through analysis of Padmini's writing.

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Padmini's biography of her mother, *Portrait of an Indian Woman*, 1956, is analyzed at length. Here, Padmini offers at once a memoir of her own growing years and a biographical portrait of her mother Kamala Satthianadhan, educator, writer, and editor of the *Indian Ladies' Magazine*. My contribution analyses intergenerational portraits of women's education in Sengupta's *A Portrait*, as also regional and international pictures of women's education that we find in Satthianadhan's and Sengupta's lives as represented in the biography-memoir, notably the picture of a native state where Satthianadhan was tutor to a queen and accounts of the Satthianadhans' educational sojourn in England. I focus on a mix of writing genres here, principally biography, but also, subsidiarity, fiction, non-fiction, and autobiography, the last of which is traceable in the biographical and non-fictional writing. Such a variety and miscellany of genres also epitomizes the miscellaneous, novelized pieces of the female selves constructed through the writing. The language and consciousness of the emerging nation coexists in Padmini's writing with that of international cooperation, making Sengupta's work fruitful for a transnational analysis of women's education, while simultaneously allowing us to trace a language and idiom in which the national, the associational, and the transnational are blended.

Supplementing this is an analysis in this article of how women's education is represented in Sengupta's novel *Red Hibiscus*, 1962,³ which has two female protagonists, one economically disadvantaged and lower-caste, and one upper-caste and from the middle classes. The novel also endorses a Gandhian view of politics. Thus I trace how women's education is represented in her novel, and how it supplements or differs from the accounts of women's education we find in *Portrait*. By undertaking analysis of this memoir and this novel, we also arrive at a better understanding at micro-historical level of how Indian women writers represented their own educational trajectories and their own personal histories in the print and public sphere shortly after Indian independence, before Women's or Gender studies had become established as disciplines. Padmini's work helped to lay the groundwork for the development of Women's Studies in India from the nineteen seventies onwards, through her sensitive biographies of distinguished modern Indian women and through her accounts of women's work and education. The independence and Partition of India in 1947 formed a watershed in the lifetime of Padmini and Kamala, and a certain rhetoric of proud Indianness informs both the memoir and the novel I analyse; the novel is particularly invested in delineating the 1940s from an Indian nationalist, Gandhian perspective.

Padmini's and Kamala's writings and educational-welfarist activities, I argue, need to be seen as part of South Asian women's educational and associational activism and writing that went against both patriarchal Indian nationalism and imperial and colonial stereotyping of Indian women as subservient.⁴ I also show in the article how many transnational associations and networks (notably through the YMCA and YWCA), there were in the trajectories of lifelong education of Padmini and her mother. This article thinks beyond methodological nationalism, and makes an analysis that foregrounds a transnational framework. The article shows how Kamala and Padmini, while playing active parts in transnational networks and while participating in transnational associational lives, were also active writers and actors in the local and national Indian public sphere. The article shows there were both convergences and divergences between a figure such as Kamala, who was not an active Indian nationalist or a politician, and her friend the writer, poet, and politician Sarojini Naidu,⁵ who became a very prominent Indian nationalist leader.

A cosmopolitan analysis also moves beyond nationalist framing, especially through deploying the idea of the local cosmopolitan; in the context of women's educational history, the work of Joyce Goodman on cosmopolitan women educators and students offers a supplementary approach to the one I adopt in this contribution.⁶

This article also situates itself in an analysis of female-authored auto/biographical writing, to which it adds an analysis of female-centred, female-authored fiction. Today it is widely accepted that the 'Western', autonomous, individualistic model of auto/biographical self-writing does not hold true across all cultures and can, after much feminist, materialist, and post-structuralist analysis, itself be seen to be fissured and fragmented.⁷ This article particularly situates itself and takes off from existing scholarship on South Asian women's writing, including life-writing or personal narratives.⁸ If the 'I' is always an other, and if the female I is especially an other, with a radically estranged sense of self within the phallic order of patriarchy,⁹ the south Asian female (auto)biographical 'I', in a period of modernity and colonialism, stakes out spaces for radically other selves, creating idioms which simultaneously articulate subordination, loss, and agency. Anshu Malhotra writes:

In recent years the autonomy of the individual self has been destabilized by a timely reminder that even as the individual came to occupy center stage in the intellectual and cultural development of the West, the bureaucratic and disciplinary machinery of the modern state was reducing the individuated persona to an anonymous blip in the mechanics of state power and its discursive terrain. ... What this scholarship on the mechanics of agency shows is the diverse ways in which systems and structures can be maneuvered by the marginalized, including women, to assume an agential initiative. ... However, what this elaboration of agency and constraints upon it still does not explain is the acceptance of subordination, or at times the giving up of agential initiative.¹⁰

Malhotra's points about agency and subordination, in particular about how the marginalized, including women, manoeuvre systems and structures to assert agency, hold for the texts and figures investigated in this article; acceptance of subordination or giving up of agential initiative is also found prominently in the novel by Padmini I analyse.

Portrait of an Indian Woman carries a Foreword by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, distinguished professor of philosophy, Vice-president of India at the time that the book was published, and later, President of India. Radhakrishnan's foreword is somewhat condescending, but recognizes that the book, written partly out of 'filial piety', is not about an 'angel' or 'saint', but about a 'simple good woman', who by running 'an ideal home and editing a Ladies' Magazine', 'prepared for the emancipation of women, which is the most significant feature of our time'.¹¹ Radhakrishnan also brings out a key thread in the history of Padmini, Kamala, and their family: their commitment to, success in, and support of, formal university education. He mentions that he was the first recipient of a medal endowed by Kamala in memory of her husband, the late Samuel Saththianadhan. This medal was earmarked for the BA candidate who received the highest marks in Ethics in the BA degree examination. What he does not mention is that Kamala herself, thirteen years younger than her husband, had had a distinguished educational trajectory, graduating from Presidency College, Madras in 1898, and that she was also the first woman in South India to complete her graduation. Kamala, a native or Indian Christian, was not an aristocratic or wealthy woman. She married into another Indian Christian family, the Saththianadhans, which garnered a very high reputation for their achievement

in and contribution to education and writing in India.¹² In a chapter on fiction in English and French by Indian women between 1860 and 1918,¹³ I discussed the novelist Krupabai Sathianadhan, the first wife of Kamala's husband Samuel, noting there that Krupabai Sathianadhan married into a family that was active in the literary sphere. The chapter highlights Padmini Sengupta's biographies of distinguished Indian women, such as Toru Dutt. The chapter also points out that 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 after his death.

The three generations of Indian Christian women, namely Krupabai, Kamala, and Padmini, most certainly did not have lives characterized only by elite privilege, even if access to women's education was perhaps most untrammelled for Indian Christians, among all non-whites, in colonial India. Kamala's arduous life as independent widow seeking to support her children financially and emotionally is a telling example of the struggles of widowed women of her class and religion. Women such as Kamala drew much strength from their ability to create associational and networked lives with other women. Padmini Sengupta has to date received virtually no credit for her role in this connected, associational, and networked history, and one may speculate whether this is partly because of her own literary register of filial affection and affiliation to her mother, and her representation of her mother and herself in ways that emphasize mutual love rather than any mother-daughter competitiveness.¹⁴ Padmini's literary constructions of her own and her mother's lifelong journeys of education emphasize not individualist autonomy, but connected being and doing in the private and public spheres.

Kamala is best-known today for co-founding and editing the *Indian Ladies' Magazine*. Samuel, Kamala's husband:

persuaded her [Kamala] to start the *Indian Ladies' Magazine* in 1901, because he felt that a journal for women would be of immense value at the dawn of the twentieth century. There was a great need for a Magazine in those days as the position of women was definitely unsatisfactory, and the reformers and pioneer men and women who wished to improve their status required a practical journal to publicise and co-ordinate their efforts.¹⁵

Social reform is for Padmini the key area for functioning of the *ILM*. Recent research in the history of women's education in India is beginning to show how connected, mutually allusive, and networked women actors in the field of educational and social reform were;¹⁶ Padmini anticipated the findings of such research. Padmini recollects the British Theosophist and early Indian nationalist Annie Besant driving along in her Rolls-Royce along the Marina in Madras, or at the centre of Theosophy, Adyar, with her devotees round her; Padmini also remembers Besant's short cropped hair and Indian costume. Moving back from life to the pages of the *ILM*, Padmini writes that the great educational-welfarist writer and activist Pandita Ramabai,¹⁷ the famous Indian-Zoroastrian lawyer Cornelia Sorabji,¹⁸ and Rani Lady Harnam Singh of Punjab are other women reformers who are mentioned in the early issues of the journal. (These three were all Christian women, though from very different regions.)

Padmini also writes about prominent white women educationists and writers, who were also friends of Kamala, and who also featured in the *ILM*. These included the American

educationist Isabella Thoburn,¹⁹ who founded the Isabella Thoburn College for women in Lucknow in north India in 1870, as well as Elizabeth Adelaide Manning,²⁰ who followed Mary Carpenter in leading the National Indian Association (NIA) in the UK. Manning formed the London branch of the NIA, and, while she engaged in many other activities such as championing kindergarten education, she also became a great supporter of Indian women's medical education and of meritorious Indian women wishing to follow higher education abroad. Cornelia Sorabji (1866–1954), distinguished lawyer and the first Indian female advocate, was financially assisted by Manning in completing her studies in Law at the University of Oxford; Cornelia stayed with Manning for some time in England. Padmini merely refers to Manning as the editor of the Magazine of the NIA, but by doing so she allows us to see the bonds of association and friendship existing between white and Indian women active in social reform in the early twentieth century. Padmini's biography goes in a personalized manner behind the pages of the *ILM*, of which she was assistant editor, and brings alive the personal friendships between Indian and British women active in the educational and reformist spheres.

Kamala was also a friend of Sarojini Naidu, poet and nationalist leader, and published Sarojini's poems with great pride in the *ILM*. Kamala and Sarojini however gradually grew apart, with Kamala maintaining that social reform rather than struggle for political independence from India remained her goal, and earning a Coronation Medal and an MBE from the British government, while Naidu became more and more involved in the struggle for independence from Britain. Padmini also describes her mother being 'shy and diffident', and as gradually receding into 'quiet home-life, journalism and social work, whereas Mrs. Naidu dazzled the international world with her glorious lyrics and her flair for politics'²¹ Naidu also said to Padmini that the *ILM* had finished its work.

The Magazine was once one of the important publications in the country. It was needed to awake the women of India, to right their wrongs and to announce the clarion call of reformers; but it is needed no longer now. The women of the country think they know everything. They do not wish to be taught any longer. I am glad Kamala stopped the Magazine when she did.²²

Padmini, meanwhile, from her vantage point in independent India puts forth a set of powerful reasons for seeing the *ILM* not as a failure but as a success. Some of these reasons are particularly fascinating in the context of the historical and political transitions from the colonial to the post-colonial made in the lifetimes of Kamala and Padmini.

Had it [the *ILM*] not devoted pages to international friendship, and criticised fearlessly the tendency for the English to live as superior exiles in the country of their adoption, not wishing really to become friends of India? Had it not interested the sayings of the wise and brought to the everyday home the message of the leaders of the world? Had it not fulfilled the simple but much-ignored fact that Indian women were an integral part not only of their own homes; but of their provinces, country and the world?²³

Fearless critique of the English colonizers for living as superior exiles in India, while simultaneously praising international friendship, Padmini's representation of the *ILM* squarely locates in the journal a critique of aspects of British colonialism and colonial subjectivities and a celebration of friendships and alliances cutting across nations. Deborah M Logan, in an impressive recent study of the *ILM*, sees a transformation in the magazine's discourse between 1901, when the journal began, and 1938, when the journal ceased publication. That discourse begins, in the year of Empress Victoria's death, with praise of

Victoria, seen as the mother of her colonial brood, but, by 1938, when the magazine stops publication, the discourse turns instead to praising Mother India, which now also includes Bharat Mata (a phrase which also means Mother India, in Sanskrit and several Indian vernacular languages), the nation of the Indian nationalists, while keeping alive the commitment to international cooperation and world peace.²⁴

Kamala, in her daughter's biography of her, is a unique, vivid personality, possessed of a wide circle that she reached also through her writing, and someone possessed of common sense, strong opinions, and a sense of humour: like a character in a piece of realistic fiction.²⁵ Padmini also sees her mother as an Indian mother, 'Ma Janani, Amma Garu in a home'.²⁶ Kamala is also someone whose biography 'reveals aspects of home-life of a South Indian middle class family',²⁷ running a regulated household offering 'time to read and think, which is perhaps the secret of the last generation, for our parents possessed a poise and dignity which is not so evident today'.²⁸ Dignified, poised, and reflective, Padmini's description of her mother's household is designed to attract the modern reader and sketches a distinctive idiom of vintage twentieth-century modernity in south India. Padmini is clear that the biography she is writing is also social history.

[M]y aim has been to throw a little light on the problems, the vital subjects of interest, the prominent personalities, the ways of people and the customs and traditions which affected that person, so that with the biography of one woman out of nearly 400 million inhabitants at least a microscopic part of India's social history has been recorded.²⁹

Passages like these in Padmini's work support my argument that Padmini's writing forms a bridge to academic advances in history and Women's Studies. Methodologically, such a passage sees the micro-history of a woman, social history, and biography as overlapping, an important approach in Women's Studies even now. Padmini quotes from G.M. Trevelyan, citing his remark about how the social historian would be well served if we had access to the biographies of the millions of men, women, and children who have lived in England.³⁰ Equally, Padmini's work also needs to be analyzed as a contribution to educational history, with her account of her mother's education of the Rani of Pithapuram, the reformist and educative mission of the *ILM*, of her and her mother's engagement with the lifelong learning-related activities of Y.W.C.A., all forming important parts of this educational history, which is also to be analyzed as social history.

Kamala, after being widowed, earned her living as a tutor to the Rani or queen of the native state or zamindari of Pithapuram in what was then the Madras Presidency, and is today in the southern Indian province of Andhra Pradesh. Padmini opens the body of her biography with a vivid, novelistic touch (conveying a sense of contrast between the elegance of the palace and the squalor of the surrounding area) but this time enlivened by an autobiographical touch.

The mofussil³¹ town in which my brother and I spent a number of years of our childhood with Kamala, our mother, was in reality no better than a poverty stricken village. From the midst of its decrepit mud-walled huts and evil-smelling drains, however, rose the five-storeyed white palace of a Raja. The opulent edifice springing out of a chaos of squalor and dust always resembled to my childish eyes the delicate tiers of a wedding cake. The palace was protected by a high mud wall, known as the fort. The only entrance leading into this large circular structure was an imposing gate with turrets on either side, in the dark arches of which elephants stood, for ever swaying their heavy bodies and twitching their large ears. It was inside this fort, cut off from the outer world, so to speak, that we

stayed for six years ... for Kamala had accepted the post of Tutor to a Rani about five years after the death in 1906 of her husband, Dr Samuel Satthianadhan.³²

Padmini also offers a portrait of her mother as governess, sitting beside the Rani.

Beside her [the Rani] sat Kamala, dressed more soberly in the style of the Indian Christians of the day, in a high-necked blouse with leg-of-mutton sleeves and a sari draped over a heavy skirt. Her choice of colours were [sic] usually black, grey or a deep red, for being a widow she did not wish to wear gayer hues. In her ears, however, gleamed a cluster of diamonds.³³

Kamala dresses soberly, but she wears diamonds in her ears, a characteristic of many south Indian women's attire even today. The propriety and amalgamated Indian and Westernness of her attire are emphasized. That Kamala is both Indian and Christian is, indeed, emphasized time and again in Kamala's portrait of her mother. This dual identity is reinforced by the fact that Kamala taught the Rani English, but also the ancient Indian classical language Sanskrit, associated with Hinduism. She and her pupil would have '[d]iscussions on the ideals and aims of Indian women, a comparison of Shakespeare's heroines and those of Sanskrit literature',³⁴ among other subjects. Padmini paints the picture of a close bond between teacher and pupil. The Rani would say, writes Padmini, that Kamala 'showed me that there was a world outside the palace, and a duty for us women to perform from our homes even though we keep our purdah'.³⁵ So through classics of English and Sanskrit literature, Kamala managed to teach the Rani also about the public world, and women's duty to this world. The Rani in question was Chinnamamba Devi. Her husband, the Raja, was authoritarian and arbitrary, expelling all of Kamala's family from the palace precincts when Padmini developed a rash. Kamala protested against this summary eviction, and was sacked. When the Rani on her deathbed wished to see Kamala one last time, the Raja refused permission. Such pictures of authoritarian patriarchy are rare in *Portrait*, since most of the males we see are those belonging to Padmini's family, very much part of the reformist mores and espousal of man-woman equality associated with the Satthianadhan family.³⁶

In discussing how Kamala dealt with early widowhood (Samuel died suddenly in Japan), *Portrait* comparatively eulogizes Pandita Ramabai (whose biography Padmini would later write).

Pandita Ramabai, that pioneer Indian widow who defied the grotesque conditions that custom had laid on the shoulders of widows ... She [Kamala] had also been brought up on the precepts of country. I remember Kamala speaking of Pandita Ramabai: "The true greatness of her character shone out when her husband died and left her a young widow. She never allowed selfish sorrow to submerge her; she not only fought for herself, but for the thousands of suffering young women around her."³⁷

Padmini however posits three possible roles to be adopted by an Indian widow in the early twentieth century: the reformer (one thinks not just of Ramabai but also of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 1880–1932, Bengali Muslim educator and writer),³⁸ the subservient, dependent relative; and a third, which Kamala chose, that of combining work and activity in the public sphere with great love and attention to children and family.³⁹

Padmini represents Kamala's father and her husband as encouraging her and actively aiding her to work and to work for the good of other women. Kamala's father educated both his daughters so that if needed they could earn a living. In the following passage,

one notices the deft way in which Padmini vivifies Kamala's father's views by telling a story that purports to quote him, and then by showing Kamala reacting in her own individual way to critical remarks about her lifestyle.

Kamala often used to tell us of her father's ideals and ambitions. Friends asked him why he bothered to educate his daughters when they would marry and not need to earn their own living. He would answer: "Who knows! One day they may have to work and support themselves and their children. I will never deny economic independence to my daughters. It will give them the security which the women of our country badly need." As it happened, both his daughters needed this education and security, for both were widowed after eight years of married life. ... When she accepted the post of tutor to a Rani in a small mofussil town her relatives and friends asked her "How can you live in the back-of-beyond? What will people say?"

"Why should they say anything?" asked Kamala, a little bewildered. They were doubtless hinting at the unconventional procedure of the woman of twenty-seven accepting a post far away from her relations and friends.⁴⁰

Padmini travelled with her mother and brother to England in 1919. Kamala's time in London to educate her son and daughter is depicted through everyday structures of feeling and everyday practices. Transnationally positioned as they were, by virtue of an interest in reform, writing, and higher education, for the Sathhianadhans the visit to England helped forge or cement lifelong transnational associational bonds with organizations such as the Y.W.C.A. Kamala's object in going to England was to educate her son and daughter and have her son appear for Indian Civil Service examinations from England. Padmini quotes in *Portrait* many times from memoirs of these travels which had been penned by Kamala for the Madras-based newspaper *The Hindu* in 1925. Between mother and daughter, we get vivid portraits of episodes such as squalls on board ship, moving from a boarding house in Russell Square, London, to a boarding house in Chalk Farm, to a flat at Hampstead, to another cottage, in Golders Green, the last of which suited the family. They share curries with their landlords at Golders Green, the Algars (even if Mr. Algar refuses a fiery pickle that Kamala offers!), and Kamala and Mrs. Algar share long chats on the stairs. There is a long account of the family finding that it was simplest, even if hard work, to manage without employing a maid, though a charwoman was still employed, and is vividly described. The household delineated is happy and friendly, and, tellingly, given the epithet 'cosmopolitan' by Padmini.⁴¹ As this article mentioned earlier, transnational and cosmopolitan approaches are supplementary to each other in understanding Padmini, Kamala, and their immediate family.

Padmini recounts going back to Kosi Kot, the cottage in Golders Green, in 1953.

It looked shut in and quiet and I turned away with a sigh, for I remembered that very home when Kamala was hostess there. I tried to peer into the little pocket handkerchief of a garden at the back where there used to be one cherry and three apple trees. Now Kosi Kot has relapsed into a quiet suburban English cottage very like its neighbours. I turned away with an overpowering nostalgia for those old days. What would I not give for one day revived of 1921 with Kamala busy in the kitchen cooking her curry and sambar and the boys and girls in untidy Sunday holiday mood filling all parts of the house?⁴²

Along with this deep nostalgia for her teen years with her mother in England, however, Padmini's biography of her mother also celebrates her mother's social and literary work

in England. We learn that Kamala was made member of both the Lyceum Club (at Sarojini Naidu's initiative) and of the Royal Asiatic Society. She was a committee member of the World Y.W.C.A. and of the Indian Students' Hostel. Kamala was good friends with Gertrude and Emily Kinnaird of the Y.W.C.A. Both the women were missionaries, and had lifelong associations with India, helping educational and reformist projects such as the Indian Female Normal School and Instruction Society and the Zenana Bible and Medical Mission, precursors of the present-day international Christian organization Inter-serve. Padmini maintained lifelong ties with the Y.W.C.A. too, and late in life wrote a history of the Indian Y.W.C.A. A cherished memory of Padmini in her London years was going with her mother to Switzerland for a fortnight where Kamala attended a committee meeting of the Y.W.C.A.⁴³

Padmini became an active member of the Y.W.C.A. from 1934, when she arrived in Calcutta to edit the magazine *India Monthly Magazine*, funded by an industrial house, Mahindra and Mahindra. She writes in detail in her history of the Y.W.C.A. about living in the 1930s as a working woman in Gallway House, a Y.W.C.A. hostel for working women in Calcutta.

I lived a very happy life in Gallway House and was thankful for its shelter and hospitality. I lived in the Hostel until the end of 1936 when I returned to my home in South India. Often, during my stay in the Hostel with my mother, Mrs Kamala Sathianadhan, would come and stay with me and take another guest room.⁴⁴

From 1930 to 1934, India was swept by the Civil Disobedience Movement led by Gandhi against British colonialism. Padmini writes that when she was living in Gallway House in the 1930s, she was very much a supporter of Indian independence from the British; she writes that the white British hostel superintendent, presented as a good friend, concurred with Padmini's views. But the emphasis in Padmini's account of her Gallway House years is not national politics. Noteworthy in that account is the entanglement of professional life, the facilities offered by the working women's hostel, happiness and joy in the hostel, and mother and daughter occasionally sharing this happiness in fellowship with other women inhabiting the hostel. If historians of women and of women's education are now acutely aware of the need to include in their analysis informal and leisure-based trajectories in professional women's lives, texts such as Padmini's are invaluable for such newer, connected understandings.

In Padmini's history of the Indian Y.W.C.A., we also find her writing at length about a Y.W.C.A. rural employment-generating project in Khareberia in Bengal, which continues to be active till the present day. We also read about how actively she contributed to nurturing and sustaining this project. Weaving was at the heart of this project, when the Bengal famine of 1943–44, caused by artificial food shortage created by British colonial policy,⁴⁵ was raging. In post-Independence India, Padmini worked hard to get subsidies for this project. By 1954, Padmini, by then a member of the reconstituted Central Social Welfare Board of India, got the Board to sanction some money for extension of medical work at Khareberia, especially for the establishment of a cottage hospital. The dusters, floor swabs, bedspreads and curtain materials woven by the women there became and remained popular with buyers. In a recent article Taylor C. Sherman pointed out how significant the work of women was in expanding educational facilities and access to education in post-Independence India.

She names Durgabai Deshmukh and Hansa Mehta as women active at the centre in this regard, and points out how little academic work there is on such figures.⁴⁶ Sherman's argument is especially significant because she also shows throughout the article that a certain kind of self-help or do-it-yourself socialism characterized the history of education in post-Independence India; it is not that the state intervened and invested massively in education from above.

Padmini, an elderly woman by the time she wrote her history of the Indian Y.W.C.A., writes of being addressed as 'Aunty Paddy' by Sheila Jacob, the General Secretary of the Y.W.C.A. in India, somehow an apt, affectionate address that captures Padmini's convivial and hybrid identities. Moderate as Padmini sounds to us in many respects, she voices in her institutional history, through offering what is ostensibly Sheila Jacob's point of view, a critique of patriarchal norms constricting even privileged, middle-class women in India more than a quarter century after Independence.⁴⁷ Padmini had offered in her biography of her mother, published in the 1950s, a far more optimistic sense of the potential overcoming of various hierarchies and inequalities, including those of gender, through the Constitution of India.

In 1950, when she [Kamala] died on Republic Day, the Draft Constitution of the Indian Union had already decreed unqualified equality between men and women. No discrimination was to be made on the grounds of caste, race, religion, or sex, and equal work was to earn equal pay while unconditional adult franchise removed the shackles debarring women from the vote.⁴⁸

Such optimism is much more tempered in Padmini's novel *Red Hibiscus*, 1962, which also offers a more constricted picture of women's agency than does the memoir of Padmini's mother. In this article I argue that life-writing, fiction, novel, and micro-history are to be understood in a continuum. In order to understand Padmini's writing and life, we have to see her biographies, novels, editorial work for the *ILM*, and non-fiction on subjects all as integral to the rich, varied miscellany of her writings.

Red Hibiscus is Sengupta's only novel, and a little-known text in the canon of Indian writing in English. It tells the stories of multiple women, but the protagonists are Sita, a young Brahmo Bengali woman who is studying for a BA degree, living with her brother, sister-in-law, mother, and domestic staff in a provincial town in west Bengal; and Rasmi, a lower-caste sweeper, who has children and an alcoholic husband. Rasmi first works for Sita's natal family and then for Sita in her marital family. The novel dramatizes the difficulties of an educated young woman struggling between her own desire for romantic love, and the often emotionally insensitive patriarchal imperative to have and adjust to an arranged marriage. The novel also shows the many struggles in Rasmi's life, whether with her much older alcoholic husband, or with a predatory man who threatens to, and nearly does, abduct her. Sita learns, after struggles with an old-fashioned mother-in-law and an apparently distant husband, that in fact her husband had married her because he had been in love with her. A romantic attachment that Sita had to another man before her marriage goes awry since this man proves to have been engaged to another woman. Sita goes through much turmoil, loses a baby at birth, and nearly leaves her husband, before they are reconciled. He proposes towards the end of the book that they become friends, and pays romantic and emotional attention to her. She in turn realizes that her husband

had married her because he loves her, and, having got access to the money that had been her inheritance from her natal family, decides to modernize her household, delighting in buying furniture, for example; her mother-in-law also makes clear how much she values her.

The novel subscribes to a Gandhian view of politics, with India seen as a place where Hindus, Muslims, and other faiths should be able to live together, rather than its being an ideologically or otherwise exclusive homeland for Hindus. There is a detailed account in the novel of the riots between different communities in Bengal from 1946 onwards, as the demand for Pakistan, a separate homeland for South Asian Muslims, gathered momentum. This would give rise to the Partition and birth of two nations, India and Pakistan, in August 1947.⁴⁹ Kusum, Sita's brother's wife, writes to her sister-in-law

Mahatma Gandhi is the only man who will save India, but you will be horrified to hear that there are many orthodox Hindus who say that we must have *Ram Rajya*—only a Hindu government. This is as bad as the fanatics of the Moslem league. They wish to tolerate no other community but Hindus. We can never allow this, Munna. We must fight for love to overcome hate. We must make our country secular and free and democratic. Let there be a Pakistan. Let us give up a part of our country, our beloved country. It is better than the dreadful blood bath in which we have been washed. Mahatma Gandhi's creed of love and tolerance must, and will save us.⁵⁰

Sita saves her husband from being killed during communal riots between Hindus and Muslims. Santosh, the husband, and a college professor, tries to intervene in stopping rioters, and is hurt in the process. Sita sacrificially flings herself over her injured husband and is very seriously injured herself. She recovers, as does her husband. The novel ends on 15 August 1947, the day when India became independent from Britain, with a happy set of natal and marital families for Sita, and a hierarchical and also close and cordial bond between the families of Rasmi and Sita. Santosh writes an academic book that wins a prize, and Sita, we learn, is a writer who produces poetry in private, with signs that she will cultivate her writing: a sign of lifelong learning and self-development on the part of the heroine.

The hierarchies in the novel are writ large in the ending too, with the cordiality of the Sita-Rasmi relationship all the more fascinating because it allows vivid glimpses of social history. The welfarist and simultaneously hierarchical commitment to the uplift of lower castes that Sita, her sister-in-law, and her husband all manifest offers a sense of the limits, subordinations, and closures that structure the ideological underpinnings of the novel. The novel ends with Rasmi plucking red hibiscus blossoms; traditionally, these are flowers offered in worship by Bengali Hindus. Rasmi and Sita are both associated with these red hibiscus flowers, a leitmotif in the novel. Rasmi tells her daughter that the flowers have brought her good luck and happiness; earlier, Sita has had a dream of red hibiscuses portending the arrival of another child. The hibiscus, which has associations with blood and sacrifice (the flower is prominently present when Sita is injured in riots to save her husband), eventually becomes a symbol of luck and happiness in the dynamics of the novel's plot.

Sita is an archetypal name in Indian culture, since Sita was the devoted and long-suffering wife of king Rama in the Hindu epic *Ramayana*: in that epic, Sita had had to undergo a trial by fire, not once but twice. In Padmini's portrayal of modern Indian women, the traditional archetype of the long-suffering woman is tweaked somewhat, to accommodate both romantic love and traditional marriage, but Padmini's Sita is also

devoted to her husband, and, like the older Sita, risks her life for the sake of her husband. All this takes place in the ending of the book in an atmosphere of feminized nationalism, with the loudspeaker playing a line from a popular Bengali patriotic song, by D.L. Roy, 'The country of our birth is the Queen of the world'.⁵¹

Through Sita and Rasmi, Padmini represented the choices and pains faced by ordinary middle-class and poor women in Bengal, and the tempered optimism after the bloody violence leading to independence of India and Pakistan. Partition is not directly engaged with in Padmini's novel, but the explicit espousal of a Gandhian anti-colonial position aligns Padmini with the emerging secular ideology of the Indian state. Padmini's non-fictional writings chart more public-minded paths in her mother's and her own lives, but this too is conveyed modestly.

Optimism and espousal of freedom, as well as awareness of the constrictions, subordinations, and bondages of women living in gendered roles scripted by patriarchy are both to be found in Padmini's often vividly novelized writing. A crucial connector and communicator, and a bridge between colonial and post-Independence India, Padmini records women's educational history and social history, while charting new paths. All forms of writing in which Padmini engaged yield rich nuggets into private and public histories of Indian women's education, formal and informal. Transnational networks and friendships between twentieth century reformist women in India and Britain are illuminated through her writing, as are regional and national associations and friendships between reformist and writing women. Biography, novel, and institutional history as analyzed in this article allow us to uncover intergenerational narratives in women's history, and to see our own analytical endeavours in writing the history of women and their education to be deeply and indissolubly connected to earlier histories and stories, by Padmini and many other such women writers. The affiliative, loving, multi-layered and multiscalar social history that Padmini wrote about her mother and other educative, reformist women in twentieth century India, transnationally illuminating as it also is, can serve today as validating an affiliative, non-competitive approach to intergenerational women's history. In the turns and twists in the history of women's education to which this Special Issue alerts, the present article thus also argues for the methodological fruitfulness of a more affiliative relationship with now obscure but enormously vivid and illuminating women writers and their oeuvre from twentieth century India that takes into account the range of genres which some women writers deployed.

Notes

1. The principal books of non-fiction authored by Padmini Sengupta are as follows. Padmini Sengupta, *The Portrait of an Indian Woman* (Calcutta: YMCA Pub. House, 1956); Padmini Sengupta, *Life in a Bengal Village* (Wellington, New Zealand: School Publications Branch, Department of Education, 1959); Padmini Sengupta, *Women Workers of India* (London, Calcutta: Asia Publishing House, 1960); Padmini Sengupta, *Toru Dutt* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1968); Padmini Sengupta, *Deshapriya Jatindra Mohan Sengupta* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1968); Padmini Sengupta, *Pandita Ramabai Saraswati: Her Life and Work* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1970); Padmini Sengupta, *Sarojini Naidu* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1974).

2. See, notably, Uma Chakravarti, *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998); Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag: Two Feminist Utopias*, introduced and part-translated by Barnita Bagchi (New Delhi: Penguin Modern Classics, 2005); Meera Kosambi, *Women Writing Gender: Marathi Fiction Before Independence* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012); Rosalind O'Hanlon, *A Comparison Between Women and Men: Tarabai Shinde and the Critique of Gender Relations in Colonial History* (Madras: Oxford University Press, 1994); Ramabai Sarasvati and Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai Through Her Own Words: Selected Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
3. Padmini Sengupta, *Red Hibiscus* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1962).
4. See Barnita Bagchi, 'Towards Ladyland: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and the Movement for Women's Education in Bengal, c. 1900–c. 1932', *Paedagogica Historica* 45, no. 6 (2009): 744–5. For a powerful argument about how masculinist, patriarchal nationalism sought to resolve the woman's question by ideologically constructing women as pure and confined to the private sphere, see Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question, in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid', in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), 233–53.
5. Substantive studies of Sarojini Naidu as nationalist and as transnational or cosmopolitan writer and activist include V.S. Naravane, *Sarojini Naidu: An Introduction to Her Life, Work and Poetry* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 1980); Shashilatha Reddy, 'The Cosmopolitan Nationalism of Sarojini Naidu, Nightingale of India', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 38 (2010): 571–89; Elleke Boehmer, 'East is East and South is South: The Cases of Sarojini Naidu and Arundhati Roy', *Women: A Cultural Review* 11, no. 1-2 (2000): 61–70.
6. Joyce Goodman, 'Gender, Cosmopolitanism, and Transnational Space and Time: Kasuya Yoshi and Girls' Secondary Education', *History of Education* 44, no. 6 (2015): 683–99; Joyce Goodman, 'Cosmopolitan Women Educators, 1920–1939: Inside/Outside Activism and Abjection', *Paedagogica Historica* 46, no. 1-2 (2010): 69–83.
7. See Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).
8. Tanika Sarkar, *Words to Win: The Making of Amar Jiban, a Modern Autobiography* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2014); Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, *Speaking of the Self: Gender, Performance, and Autobiography in South Asia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).
9. Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You: Sketch for a Felicity Within History* (Hove: Psychology Press, 1996), 106–8.
10. Anshu Malhotra, 'Miracles for the Marginal? Gender and Agency in a Nineteenth Century Autobiographical Fragment', *Journal of Women's History* 25, no. 2 (2013): 18.
11. Padmini Sengupta, *The Portrait of an Indian Woman* (Calcutta: YMCA Publishing House, 1956), ix.
12. See Eunice de Souza, ed., *The Satthianadhan Family Album* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2005).
13. Barnita Bagchi, "'Because Novels Are True, and Histories Are False": Indian Women Writing Fiction in English, 1860–1918', in *A History of the Indian Novel in English*, ed. Ulka Anjaria (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 65–6.
14. This brings to mind the view of relational, affective identity-formation in women put forth in the following iconic work: Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).
15. Sengupta, *The Portrait*, 41.
16. Barnita Bagchi, 'Two Lives: Voices, Resources, and Networks in the History of Female Education in Bengal and South Asia', *Women's History Review* 19, no. 1 (2010): 51–69; Barnita

- Bagchi, 'Ramabai, Rokeya, and the History of Gendered Social Capital in India', in *Women, Education and Agency, 1600–2000*, ed. Jean Spence, Maureen Meikle, and Sarah Aiston (London: Routledge, 2010), 66–82.
17. On Ramabai, see, for example, Chakravarti, *Rewriting History*; Kosambi, *Women Writing Gender*; Sarasvati, *Pandita Ramabai Through Her Own Words*.
 18. On Sorabji, see, for example, Richard Sorabji, *Opening Doors: The Untold Story of Cornelia Sorabji, Reformer, Lawyer and Champion of Women's Rights in India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2010); Suparna Gooptu, *Cornelia Sorabji: India's Pioneer Woman Lawyer* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).
 19. See Tim Allender, *Learning Femininity in Colonial India, 1820–1932* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 145 and 165 for an account of the programme of education that Thoburn ran.
 20. *Ibid.*, 95–6, sees Manning as part of a group of women who advocated female education and female teacher training in India out of a feminist critique of Indian and colonial patriarchy.
 21. Sengupta, *The Portrait*, 43.
 22. *Ibid.*, 43.
 23. *Ibid.*, 45.
 24. Deborah M. Logan, *The Indian Ladies' Magazine, 1901–1938: From Raj to Swaraj* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2017), xxix. On the nationalist discourse of nation as mother in colonial India, see Jasodhara Bagchi, *Interrogating Motherhood* (New Delhi: SAGE, 2017), 51–79.
 25. Sengupta, *The Portrait*, xi. See Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
 26. Sengupta, *The Portrait*, xii.
 27. *Ibid.*, xii.
 28. *Ibid.*, xii.
 29. *Ibid.*, xiii.
 30. G.M. Trevelyan, *English Social History: A Survey of Six Centuries, Chaucer to Queen Victoria* (London: Book Club Associates for Longman, 1973 first published 1944), 4–5. Quoted in Sengupta, *The Portrait*, xii–xiii.
 31. Mofussil: here, situated in a provincial area of India.
 32. Sengupta, *The Portrait*, 1.
 33. *Ibid.*, 2.
 34. *Ibid.*
 35. *Ibid.*
 36. For writings of the family, see De Souza, *The Sathianadhan Family Album*.
 37. Sengupta, *The Portrait*, 3.
 38. Bagchi, 'Towards Ladyland'.
 39. Sengupta, *The Portrait*, 3.
 40. *Ibid.*, 4.
 41. *Ibid.*, 124.
 42. *Ibid.*, 126.
 43. Sengupta, *A Hundred Years of Service*, viii.
 44. *Ibid.*, 86.
 45. On this man-made famine, in which the role of British colonialism and inadequate distributive systems for rice sale were major causes, see Amartya Sen, 'Starvation and Exchange Entitlements: A General Approach and Its Application to the Great Bengal Famine', *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 1, no. 1 (1977): 33–59; Madhusree Mukerjee, *Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India During World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).
 46. Taylor C. Sherman, 'Education in Early Postcolonial India: Expansion, Experimentation and Planned Self-Help', *History of Education* 47, no. 4 (2018): 2.
 47. Sengupta, *A Hundred Years of Service*, 208.
 48. Sengupta, *The Portrait*, 49.

49. For an understanding of the circumstances leading up to the Partition of India, see, for example Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
50. Sengupta, *Red Hibiscus*, 160.
51. *Ibid.*, 165.

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