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*Ār konakhāne*/‘Somewhere Else’:  
Utopian Resonances in Lila Majumdar’s Autobiographical Writing\*

SUMMARY: This article examines the autobiographical writings of Lila Majumdar, 1908–2007, a writer most famous for zany, fantastical, defamiliarizing, speculative fiction for children and young adults. Majumdar was an influential maker of cultural history. While her natal Ray/Raychaudhuri family comprised master entertainers who simultaneously brought reformist, innovative values into the public sphere of the arts, the leading woman writer from this milieu, in her autobiographical and memoir-based volumes *Ār konakhāne* (‘Somewhere Else’, [1967] 1989), *Pākdanḍī* (‘Winding, Hilly Road’, [1986] 2001), and *Kheror khātā* (‘Miscellany’ or ‘Scrapbook’, [1982] 2009), imaginatively created utopias. These ‘otherwheres’, to use a word that captures utopian connotations that she creates in her writing, give voice to the marginal and the liminal. We find in her autobiographical writing the dual urge of longing for a utopia elsewhere, and a dissatisfaction with all the places one finds temporary mooring in.

KEYWORDS: Lila Majumdar, modernity, utopia, gender, reformist, autobiography

*In memory of Professor Jasodhara Bagchi, 1937–2015,  
pathbreaking scholar of Bengali women’s writing and culture*

Remembering and haunted by lost and elusive spaces, connecting homes and worlds, building fragile everyday utopias, representing

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dystopian personal worlds, women's autobiographical writing often modulates itself in a defamiliarizing key (Smith and Watson 2010). In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a period of modernity, many south Asian female (auto)biographical 'I's, notably also Lila Majumdar's,<sup>1</sup> whose work is analysed in this article, stake out textual spaces for radically other selves, creating idioms of memory and desire which simultaneously articulate loss and agency: Tanika Sarkar's work on Rāsasundarī Devī's *Āmār Jīban* (Sarkar 1999) articulated this simultaneity memorably. That women's autobiographical writing at its most striking unsettles assumptions of even feminist scholars is borne out by Sarkar's now classic 1999 book. Rāsasundarī's autobiography is analysed by Sarkar as a text full of abstraction and a crafted devotionality. *Āmār Jīban* is a text that is neither cosy nor domestic or obviously 'feminine', and it constantly creates distances between the narrated and the written self, while also being a text in which theatrical metaphors for the world drawing partly from Vaiṣṇava Hinduism are strong. Sarkar's study of Rāsasundarī's *Āmār Jīban*, an autobiographical text of the late nineteenth century written by an old woman, became and remains a landmark in studies of south Asian women's autobiographical writing.

In my article, I examine utopian resonances in the autobiographical and memoir-based writings of Lila Majumdar, 1908–2007, children's writer, autobiographer, and humourist. After introducing the thematic triangle of women's autobiography in Bengali, utopias as the longing for elsewhere (literal translation of *ār konakhāne* of the title), and Lila Majumdar's life and work, the article investigates utopian resonances in three interrelated autobiographical works by Majumdar. Majumdar, who represents herself throughout her autobiographical writing as a hot-tempered, stubborn tomboy in her growing years, writes memorably feisty, humorous autobiographical pieces. She is a writer who also unsettles stereotypical assumptions about women's

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<sup>1</sup> I have spelt this writer's name as Lila Majumdar, since she is well known to readers in this Roman spelling. I have chosen not to use the transliterated spelling Līlā Majumadāra, though I adduce it here for the record.

writing, since she is most famous for zany, fantastical, defamiliarizing, often mischievous, sometimes speculative fiction for children and young adults. The title of one of her autobiographies, *Ār konakhāne*, translates literally as ‘somewhere else’, and has utopian resonances. The phrase itself brings to mind *Balākā*, ‘Flight of Swans’, a haunting poem by Rabindranath Tagore, about the perennial desire found in nature and man to be somewhere else, in perpetual restlessness; the poem images, for example, a mountain which wishes to become the scudding, disappearing clouds of summer.

The wings of the empty universe resound with this song –  
 ‘Not here, but somewhere, somewhere, somewhere beyond!’  
 (George 1992: 487)

That desire to be somewhere else/somewhere beyond has connotations of utopia, a mode and a resonance in human thought and imagination (Bagchi 2012: 2, 7). Utopia is a polysemic word, which is why the term resonance, with its connotation of multiple senses and echoes, is apt to designate utopian imagination. We outline below in what senses we use utopia in this article. Utopia connotes a place (topos), actual or imagined, enshrining social dreaming. Utopia is a place of the good, and a place which is nowhere to be found: paradox, ambiguity, and janus-facedness are embedded in a very modern punning coupling of the good, ‘eu’, and the nonexistent, ‘ou’, made by Thomas More in his Greek neologism ‘utopia’, the title of his eponymous book, which was written in Latin (1516). Utopias are often poised between hope and fear, reality and imagination, aspiration and irony. It is widely accepted in the scholarly community today that utopia and dystopia are universal, or that they can be translated across cultures and periods (Bagchi 2012; Sargent 2010). Modern South Asian literature and culture are also full of utopian practices and resonances. Lila Majumdar was a writer who straddled the full length of the twentieth century, and who excelled in writings for children, particularly nonsensical, fantastic, and ghostly writing. She also penned three acclaimed volumes of autobiographical writing: apart from *Ār konakhāne* (mentioned earlier, [1967] 1989), they are *Pākdandī* (‘Winding, Hilly Road’, [1986] 2001), and

*Kheror khātā* ('Miscellany', [1982] 2009). She creates utopias throughout her oeuvre, including in her autobiographical writing. These other-whereas that she creates in her writing give voice to the marginal and the liminal, with her writing being published as colonial India transformed into post-Independence India.

Jacqueline Dutton has recently argued that "based on the evidence available to us regarding the diverse belief systems and worldviews, cultural manifestations and socio-political movements that demonstrate fundamentally utopian visions, it seems that the desire for a better way of being in the world is indeed a universal concept" (Dutton 2010: 250). As far as children's literature and fantasy are concerned, it is now well-known that utopian possible worlds, often better worlds, are powerful grounding elements in such writing: the hundred-acre woods in the Pooh stories, Hogwarts school in the Harry Potter books—examples can be multiplied. Lila Majumdar's children's writing also constructs a variety of possible worlds, characteristically set in the everyday, which quickly, defamiliarizingly turn into the absurd, the zany, and the darkly comic. But I argue that to see her only as children's writer is to do injustice to the richly complex and multidimensional ways in which she functioned as writer, as well as to the ways in which utopia as a mode and resonance can be traced in her oeuvre and life, including in her memoirs and autobiographical writing. Her autobiographical writings need also to be seen as key resources for understanding the cultural history of modernity in twentieth-century South Asia.

Majumdar described herself also as a writer of '*ājgubi*' literature, which she herself translated as 'fantasy' (Majumdar 2001: 423); she did not see herself as writing science fiction (*ibid.*). As writer of fantasy, I would argue, she understood the resonances of utopia, which, like fantasy-writing, is a kind of speculative fiction, taking risks in imagining reality at a slant; this trait also shows up in her autobiographical writing. Majumdar also has a playful, wide-ranging, spatial imagination, which is important in understanding the 'topos' at the heart of utopia. The mountains of northeast India,

the houses of colonial Calcutta, the worlds of indigenous peoples in Shillong or in Dumka: these become Majumdar’s possible worlds in her autobiographical writing too. This combines most interestingly with Majumdar’s hailing from a line of Brahmo reformist men and women, in the spheres of gender, social work, and social ethics, and with herself being strongly reformist in spirit.

Perhaps most fundamental to understanding utopian resonances in Majumdar’s work is the dual urge of longing for a utopian elsewhere, and a dissatisfaction with all the places one finds temporary mooring in as the title of the book *Ār konakhāne* suggests. The desire for mooring, love, and attachment is in Majumdar’s work in constant dialogue with a sense of loss and even a desire for the loss that comes with unmooring. These oscillatory impulses towards uniquely beautiful places filled with ethical people, and a restlessness with permanent anchoring in such spaces, characterize Majumdar’s autobiography: I argue that these are utopian resonances, characterised by the same restlessness and imagination of possible, elusive worlds that one associates semantically with utopia. One also gets a sense of female-centred heterotopia in Majumdar’s memoirs, notably in *Kheror khātā*, of zany women who carve their own liminal spaces (between sanity and madness, tradition and modernity, science and spirituality) in the everyday world.

In times of modernity, of felt and experienced historical change and transition to a ‘new’ age from an ‘old’ one (Lowe 2001: 11), humanity imagines utopian possible worlds. We see in Majumdar’s writing one kind of discourse of modernity: a kind that deliberately and distinctively believes that one can find modernities in people and practices that are too often stereotypically thought of as traditional, such as female ancestors, and such modern individuals, especially women, from the past create a sense of an otherwhere, carrying, like utopia, many of the values Majumdar espoused strongly in her writing, such as strength, intelligence, imagination, independence, down-to-earthness, eccentricity, stubbornness, and mischievousness.

Before we discuss the utopian resonances in Majumdar’s autobiographical writing, it would be salient to place her within her

culturally and socially reformist and innovative milieu. Her natal family, the Ray and Raychaudhuri family, included among its members her uncle, the children's writer and publisher Upendrakiśor Rāyacaudhuri (1863–1915); his son, printer, editor, publisher and writer of fantasy and nonsense literature Sukumar Ray (Sukumāra Rāya) (1887–1923); and Sukumar's son, the filmmaker and children's writer, Satyajit Ray<sup>2</sup> (1921–1992). Majumdar and Satyajit Ray spearheaded writing for children in Bengal through their own work; they also co-edited the children's magazine *Sandeśa*, from 1961 to 1995. A large part of Majumdar's natal family belonged to the reformist, monotheist Brahma Samaj founded by Rammohan Roy (Ramamohana Rāya) in the nineteenth century. Members of this group were highly active in the movement for women's education in India. In 1923, the year Sukumar Ray died, Majumdar published in *Sandeśa* for the first time. Her last work also appeared in *Sandeśa* in 1996. From 1928–1931, at a time when Sukumar's brother Subinay temporarily kept the magazine alive valiantly, Majumdar published stories, some illustrated by herself, there. Majumdar topped the MA in English Literature at Calcutta University, went to Darjeeling for a while to teach, and was headhunted by Rabindranath Tagore, who, having read her work in *Sandeśa*, thought of her as suitable for the children's section of the school founded by him, Pātha Bhavana in Śāntiniketana, but set her instead, because of her high level of education, to teaching English for the higher sections in that school. She also taught in colleges in Calcutta briefly. In 1933, after falling in love, she married a Hindu dentist, after which her Brahma father disowned her. She retained cordial bonds with her mother and siblings. From 1939 onwards, she was associated with the welfarist organization 'Anandamela' (Assembly of Joy), but also, at the time of the Bengal Famine of 1943, with the left-leaning organization Mahilā Ātmarakṣā Samiti (Women's Self-Defence Association), and the Indian Food Committee. 1939 saw the publication of her first book, for children,

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<sup>2</sup> Since Satyajit Ray is well known to the non-Indian world in this spelling of his name, I have retained this spelling.

a collection of stories, *Badyināther bari* (‘Badyināth’s Pills’).<sup>3</sup> This was also the period of publication of a journal edited by her cousin, the great social worker and founder of the Calcutta Social Project, Kalyani Karlekar: *Meyeder Kathā*. Majumdar also gave birth in the 1930s to two children, a son and a daughter. All this can be learnt from *Pākdanḍī*.

In 1947, after Indian independence, Majumdar’s cousin Satyajit Ray wanted to have her children’s stories published in a book (Majumdar 2001: 118), by, according to Ray, “the best publisher in the country”.<sup>4</sup> This publisher was Signet Press, run by the extraordinary Dilip Kumar Gupta: *Din Dupure* (‘In broad daylight’), also a collection of stories, carrying Majumdar’s unique brand of whimsical, fantastic, humour-laden imagination, was published from this press in 1948, and is to date considered a classic of Bengali literature. In 1953 was published another classic by Majumdar, the humorous children’s story *Padipisir barmi baksa*, recently translated as ‘The Burmese Box’. At the age of 44, in 1952, Majumdar became associated with All India Radio, and involved in broadcasting programmes such as her everyday slot on *Mahilāmahal*, a programme for women. Her daily slot discussed the lives and problems of adolescent middle-class girls. She had outstanding colleagues at AIR, such as the speculative writer and poet Premendra Mitra. Humorous plays such as her own original composition *Vakavadha Pālā* (‘The killing of the demon Vaka’) were staged on the radio, and won the Delhi Sangeeta Nataka Award in 1963. Majumdar, like Sukumar Ray, wrote multiple such affectionate comedies bringing heroes of the Hindu epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* close to the viewers, with imaginative humour. The 1950s and the 1960s were her most productive, successful years.

Majumdar’s autobiographical narratives can be read by a very large age-group, from teenagers to adults. While the Ray family comprised entrepreneurial, master entertainers who brought reformist, innovative values into the public sphere of the arts, the leading woman writer from

<sup>3</sup> I have been unable to find the name of the publisher of this.

<sup>4</sup> All quotations from Majumdar are my translations.

this milieu presented her own development as a girl and human being in this milieu to her readers in complex ways, in which we see the gendering and ungendering of the self of a most subversive ‘*bhadramahilā*’ or gentlewoman (Bagchi 2009). Majumdar’s autobiographical writing also represents reformist men and women affectionately and humorously, and reimagines various, wide ranging spaces associated with them, to evoke utopia in her self-writing and life-writing. Her beloved, modern, utopian figures and spaces include Rabindranath Tagore and Śāntiniketana. Majumdar, as mentioned before, taught in Pātha Bhavana, the school founded by Tagore in Śāntiniketana, at Tagore’s request, and she lived in the utopian community of Śāntiniketana later, long after Tagore’s death.

Majumdar was born in 1908 in Shillong, and lived there till 1919. In her natal family, as there would later be in her marital life, there was a never fully resolved dichotomy between Brahma and Hindu beliefs. Her marrying for love into a Hindu milieu and her partly Hindu ancestry is also represented in her work, with attraction to and a sense of tensions between Brahma and Hindu persons and milieu in her life. Some of her father’s siblings were Hindu, while some, notably Majumdar’s father, the geological surveyor Pramadaranjan, converted to Brahmoism. Equally, her mother’s mother was disowned by that grandmother’s father because Majumdar’s mother’s father, Ramkumar Bhattacharya or Vidyaratna had embraced Brahmoism—Ramkumar left his wife and children, became a traveller, wrote about the plight of coolies in the tea-plantations of India, as well as travelogues about the Himalayas, and returned to the fold of Hinduism, becoming a *sannyāsi*, renamed Ramananda Bharati. Majumdar’s role as a powerful woman writer embedded in a culturally innovative milieu has begun to be analysed (Bagchi 2009; Bagchi 2014a; Bagchi 2014b). Majumdar wrote a bestselling cookbook which has taught generations of Bengali women how to cook economically and nutritiously (Majumdar and Chatterjee 1979). As a writer for children and young adults in Bengal, from the 1920s to the 1990s, Majumdar was a wise, funny informal public educator, who was both influential and multidimensional. The utopias



of literary and cultural modernity in modern South Asia are beautifully captured by her writing. Majumdar, indeed, grew up in and later played a leadership role in one of the major ‘literary utopias of cultural communities’, the title of a recent book (Corporaal and Van Leeuwen 2010), in which Debashish Chattopadhyay has a suggestive article on Monday Club and Nonsense Club, two civil society literary-cultural clubs led by Sukumar Ray, that are analysed as utopian (Chattopadhyay 2010). The periodical *Sandeśa* that Majumdar co-edited, with her cousins Satyajit Ray and Nalini Das, helped to form an even broader and influential cultural utopia, with elements such as communities of readers, participation in Book Fairs, writing by children in the magazine, and a nature study and ramble club that all nucleated round the magazine. Further, Majumdar’s own life showed an abiding interest and intermittent participation in a very eclectic range of social, cultural, and/or political activisms, with their own utopian projects. These range from the organization ‘Anandamela’ which promoted sport among women to the many experiments initiated by her cousin, the social activist Kalyani Karlekar, notably the pioneering Calcutta Social Project which worked with local underprivileged inhabitants in the area around the house in Calcutta in which the *Sandeśa* office was situated; it also included other fascinating experiments such as Karlekar’s journal *Meyeder Kathā*, ‘Women’s Stories’, and for which Majumdar wrote. All these utopian experiments that Majumdar participated in are remembered through her autobiographical writing, especially *Pākdandī*, which covers the full gamut of her life. (*Ār konakhāne* deals with her life before marriage, while *Kheror khātā* is a series of humorous vignettes drawing on her life-experiences.)

Majumdar’s short stint of teaching at Pātha Bhavana, the school founded and run by Tagore in the grounded utopian educational and social community of Śāntiniketana in rural Bengal (Bagchi 2016), left her with respect for the way that institution despised rigid, formal institutional education, and the way it emphasized an education that prized creativity and the experimental. Classes in Śāntiniketana 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. Majumdar chose to leave teaching in Śāntiniketana because even this was too routine and constricting for her, but she later had a house in Śāntiniketana, where she lived part of the year. Her Śāntiniketana experiences yielded hilarious anecdotes such as the one about Tagore, hearing of a cow being described as a domesticated vegetarian animal, saying that he was a domesticated vegetarian too. Tagore she views with love and admiration, but also as someone around whom petty politics and sycophancy and bitterness grew.

*Ār konakhāne* invests stylistically and affectively in representing utopian spaces, most notably Majumdar's childhood home in Shillong, a mountainous city in north-eastern India, and Śāntiniketana. Recapturing and reinventing her past self, Majumdar is also continuously attentive to the lyrical and sometimes fierce beauty of nature, to different kinds of Others to her own middle-class Brahmo self, from indigenous peoples, many of them poor and marginal, in north-east and east India, to Roman Catholic and Protestant nuns or missionaries who taught her, to the many inhabitants of Masua in Mymensingh (her paternal ancestral village, from which for example their beloved domestic staff member Jāmini, a poor, marginal inhabitant, came). *Ār konakhāne* invests powerfully in representing the tribal women of north-east India, with their fierce independence, and in depicting Majumdar's attachment to mountainous landscapes and mountain peoples. In her 1980s fantasy-writing, such as *Hāwār dāmri*, such mountain peoples and places are also at centre-stage.

In *Pākdandī*, Majumdar writes at length about the 'pākdandī' of the title: this is a winding, serpentine path used to climb steep mountains, and is seen by Majumdar as a beautiful, dynamic refuge, and a dynamic utopia. Unlike the straight, steep path to the top of the mountain that also existed in the Shillong of her childhood, the 'pākdandī' would wind up slowly, with many shadows; sometimes it would seem as if the path entered the forest, while on the mountainous side of the path, there were plants such as silver-ferns and maidenhair ferns, violets, wild strawberries, or honeysuckle. Gathering such plants and

flowers, one could climb the steepness without travails. Equally, one could lose any sense of what one’s destination was (ibid.: 133–134). She writes that the book is titled so because she sees her life as one of “being in motion while observing wonderful things, collecting beautiful things and filling up one’s mind” (ibid.: 134).

Majumdar’s maternal grandfather Ramkumar Bidyaratna/Ramananda Bharati, with his changes of identity from Hindu to Brahmo to Hindu *sannyāsi*, his writings that described the plight of coolies, and his love of and writing about mountains, is a locus, in Majumdar’s autobiographies, of movements between desire and loss and movements to otherwheres. When writing about how and why she chose to leave her teaching position in the Tagorean utopia of Śāntiniketana, Majumdar wrote, “Gurudev [Tagore] was abroad; the local authorities did not agree with me on all things; moreover, it was as though someone would whisper to me, ‘not here, not here, somewhere else, elsewhere. Suddenly, I tendered my resignation letter, and it was accepted too. It pained me to leave” (Majumdar 1989.: 175).

*Ār konakhāne* begins with the sentence “The safest place in the world was my mother’s house” (ibid.: 3). ‘High Winds’ was the name of the house in Shillong, and in fact it was the house they lived in because their father was a geological surveyor in government employment in Shillong: but to the memory-maker Majumdar, this was her mother’s home, not her father’s. In this world, domestic staff drawn from the tribal or indigenous peoples of India were fascinating close companions of the children. Take Ilbon, for example, a female servant, who would tell fantastic, hair-rising stories about serpents and suchlike. Fiercely independent, Ilbon would talk of her son Hedriksen who had gone abroad, and did not keep in touch with his mother anymore. The fruits, flowers, winds, ferns, and beauty of north-east India fill the first pages of *Ār konakhāne*. Cultivating nature brings its own parables, as for example Majumdar discovers as a young girl when, impatient when a seed she planted is not showing up as a plant, she digs up the earth, only to find she has cut a budding green shoot into two; her mother tells her, “Everything happens in good time. Nothing can be forced” (ibid.: 44).

Living in Shillong till age eleven, Majumdar's adult self recalls the little girl that she was coming to know about the First World War which started when she was six. Majumdar's father, then in his forties, wanted to join the war, and was refused because of his age. But women like Ilbon had experience of men like her son's father going to 'Frang' (France) and not returning, and of her husband's mother getting a pension as a result. Ilbon remained separated from her son and her mother-in-law, who lived in Nongpo; she refused to talk about this further with the children, but had an admirer who lived in the house next door to the children, with whom she would laugh and joke, though the children could guess that the subject of her son and her late partner pained her.

*Kheror khātā* consists of a series of small sketches. This, Majumdar's book of vignettes based on her memoirs, also creates distinctive humorous, whimsical utopias, which can be argued for as liminal spaces in the here-and-now, heterotopia, as it were, using Foucault's suggestive notion of 'real' spaces, such as brothels and cemeteries, that are liminal and offer opportunities of social critique from that vantage point (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986). Such heterotopia in Majumdar's autobiographical writing includes her depiction of the creative, festive, welcoming anarchy of 'boipārā,' the area around College Street in north Calcutta where the publishers of Bengali books had their offices and shops, and where authors and publishers would mingle and socialize, festively celebrating the Bengali new year, for example.

All the little narratives in *Kheror khātā* are autobiographical, or based on Majumdar's family lore and history, and they are also humorous snippets: history, past, present, and future, are reconfigured in them. The sketches deal with themes as diverse as the history of Bengali amateur fishing, the book trade, women's work, food, thieves, medicine and medical practices, romantic love and conjugality, train journeys, and household economy. The range is across classes and genders, though I find it telling that the collection opens with a piece called 'Meye Chākre' ('Working Women', Majumdar 2009: 1–4), and ends with another called 'Meyeder Kathā' ('Tales of Women') (Majumdar 2009: 145–148). In a sense, one gets a sense of female-centred

heterotopia in this volume, with depictions of independent-minded, memorable women, and the spaces they make their own in the world, straddling the public and the private.

Such sketches and the depictions of such women also puncture and subvert any neat dichotomy between tradition and modernity. The piece ‘Meye Chākre’ on working women is at once sympathetic and humorously critical of middle-class working women. After vividly evoking working women’s competence, intelligence, endeavour, and elegance of personal habits, Majumdar then evokes the babu-like habits that such women often adopt—refusing, for example, to do anything menial unless their ‘peons’ do it for them. The tone is always humorous and detached. Majumdar also tells an anecdote about a successful working woman who asks her if she cooks if and when her servants are indisposed or away—this lady does not, preferring to go and live with her mother in these circumstances. This acquaintance does not want to become a kitchen slave, Majumdar’s term, translated from Bengali, and Majumdar is critical of persons who see women’s household work as mere slavery. Majumdar herself expresses pride in being able to cook competently, hygienically, and with optimum efficiency, and this is part of the continuum of her competence, in which, as she says in *Kheror khātā*, she gladly cleans the bathroom drains in her home. Majumdar, who was taught to design and tailor her own clothes and those of others by her mother (who apprenticed her daughters to a professional tailor for this), thus was a most unusual ‘*bhadramahilā*,’ with none of the revulsion from ‘lowly’ tasks typical of her class.

Equally, in the closing sketch ‘Meyeder Kathā’ in *Kheror khātā*, Lila sees her foremothers as thoroughly ‘modern’ women. She narrates deftly the exploits of women who lived a century before *Kheror khātā* was written, such as Lakshmi Devi, the intellectual and writer Sivanath Shastri’s grandmother, who chased a tiger with a burning piece of wood from her oven, and in the same vein is the tale of Majumdar’s grandfather’s aunt, who walloped, with two green coconuts, a tiger who had seized a calf. Majumdar finishes *Kheror khātā* with a line about an 84-year-old aunt of her father’s, “as beautiful as a lotus”, who

would sit and smoke hookahs. “Then what shall I call modern?” asks Majumdar (Majumdar 2001: 148).

Equally zany and unique is Majumdar’s depiction of a female relative, Snehalatā Moitra, who, the writer informs us, was India’s first female graduate in mathematics. She is presented to us by her nickname Patadidi, as a wonderful, whimsical human being (Majumdar 2009: 28–31). Patadidi is represented as mixing the most practical and the most egregious advice. To cool a hot house, she recommends dumping all the foul smelling drain water on the roof—once the water evaporated, the layer of garbage would create insulation. Equally, she advises that to cool water on a hot day, one should wrap a sopping wet towel round the water pitcher and keep it on the roof when it is hottest outside—advice which worked perfectly. Patadidi is also shown straddling science and spirituality, with her ‘*rudrākṣa*’ necklace and a picture of the Hindu guru Ramakrishna Paramahansa, symbols of her spirituality, being constant companions. It is this sort of utterly confident nonchalance and virtuoso eccentricity, mixing disparate domains of life and understanding, that Majumdar loves to valorise in her writing.

Denaturalization, renaturalization, and denaturalization again—this is the constant process at work in Lila’s work, including her autobiographical narratives: arguably, utopian imagination at its best engages in the same simultaneous defamiliarization and refamiliarization, with the otherwheres of utopia taking us away from, and then signalling us back to the now-here in which utopian writing is composed. A piece on food in *Kheror khātā* narrates an encounter between the uncle of a friend of Majumdar and a fisherman on a river. The uncle saw the fisherman eating with relish the gravy of what looked like a large egg. He then learnt on asking that since this man was so poor that he could not afford anything but ‘*lankarjhol*’, ‘gravy with chillies’. He would therefore cook using a very large pebble. This is an utterly defamiliarizing depiction of how marginal, poor people cope with abject poverty, showing how the man creates, in dystopian circumstances, his own utopia or elsewhere of the imagination. Majumdar’s autobiographical writing, like her fiction, instead of having an earnest,

didactic, or fervent approach, has the defamiliarizing, imaginative, and sharply critical perspective on women’s lives that is a sine qua non in our academic work on women’s autobiographical writing, and, as I have argued, this writing moves imaginatively and continuously through the otherwheres or ‘*ār konakhāne*’ of utopia and heterotopia.

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