

Recovering a Tradition

Forgotten Women's Voices

Indian women, writing in English in the 19th and early 20th centuries, wrote about their lives and experiences in a variety of forms – letters, tracts, diaries, magazine articles, speeches, autobiographies, short stories, novels and biographies. Many, if not most, were concerned with the position of women like their education and the purdah. But a lot of research is still required into other forgotten or ignored names. The contribution of women writers, particularly those from the western and southern regions, also needs to be acknowledged fully.

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Some years ago, when I was researching 19th and early 20th century women's lives and writing in English in India, I wanted to call the anthology which resulted from the research "The Lost Tradition" because most of the women included had been forgotten or ignored. The publishers felt that "Women's Voices" would slot the book more clearly, and that is what it was eventually called. Of course, many male writers of this period have also been forgotten or ignored, and I tried to remedy that in subsequent volumes. But, for the moment, it is women writers who concern us, and will be the focus of this article. Sarojini Naidu and Toru Dutt are perhaps the best known of the women writers. K.R. Srinivas Iyengar's history *Indian Writing in English*,¹ first published in 1962 contains an entire chapter on Sarojini Naidu, and a chapter on post-independence novelists which begins with some reference to Toru Dutt's novels, and to Cornelia Sorabji. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra's *An Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English*² which he edited in 2003, doesn't go much further. There is a chapter on Sarojini Naidu and Cornelia Sorabji, another on Toru Dutt, and some reference to Krupabai Satthianadhan among the early novelists. All this amounts to a distortion of the contribution of women writers to the history of Indian writing in English which is far more rich and varied than the accounts in these histories would suggest. The situation has been ameliorated by the re-publication of some pre-independence texts, notably by the Sahitya Akademi in its Rare Book Series, and by Oxford University Press. But what we really require is a re-writing of history on the basis of the texts and anthologies which have been published in the area, and further research into other forgotten or ignored names. The contribution of women writers, particularly those from the western and southern regions should be far more fully acknowledged.

The women discussed here, and many others were, as I have noted elsewhere remarkable women, pioneers in various fields, literary and social, and the word "first" occurs several times in a list of their achievements. They were political activists, diplomats, legislators, doctors, writers. They published and were feted abroad. They travelled extensively. At home they often took risks in their personal lives. They wrote about their lives and experiences in a variety of forms – letters, tracts, diaries, magazine articles, speeches, autobiographies, short stories, novels and biographies. Many, if not most, were concerned with the position of women, but they also wrote about their travels, doctrinal

problems, prison conditions, theatre and dance. Many were occasional writers. The ones discussed here attempted novels, short stories, autobiographies. Strangely, there is very little poetry, or at least, very little that has been re-discovered so far. Many wrote significant non-fiction, but they are not included here.

Geraldine Forbes has observed, "During the course of the 19th century, the pattern of women's lives began to change. In reality the concept of the "perfect wife" was being redefined. First, there were modifications in the appropriate area for female at different stages of her life. And third, there was a new and growing approval of individualism...As a consequence of changes set in motion by the British conquest of India, by the end of the 19th century, there were a number of women who were educated, articulate, mobile, and increasingly involved in public activities."³ In this essay I am concerned mainly with those women whose quest for individuality resulted in their being writers of short fiction, novels and autobiographies. This did not preclude their involvement in other activities, for none were full-time writers, but the focus is mainly on their writing though some mention is made of other activities. Some of them have to be brought back into literary history, others could do with a reassessment of their work. The Satthianadhan family, for instance, should be at least as well-known as the Dutt's.. Partly for that reason, I titled my collection of their writings *The Satthianadhan Family Album*.⁴ My interest in them, a family of converts to Christianity, began when I discovered that almost all the members of the family were writers of one sort or another. Krupabai Satthianadhan is the only one now known, as new editions of her books have appeared. But both the men and the women wrote non-fiction, essays, diaries, short stories, "guide books", for women and folktales translated from Sanskrit and other languages such as Tamil and German. Much of this material was unavailable in India, and could only be obtained from the British Library and Partnership House in London. Yet they were well known at their time, and active in many fields. Many of the issues they raise in their writing continue to be of relevance. As Eleanor Jackson observed, "The Satthianadhans oscillated from generation to generation between anglicisation and what they viewed as Indian tradition. In this they were a paradigm of many Indian families, Hindu and Christian."⁵ The issues they raised in various ways in their writings were concerned with the state of Indian society, social problems, female education, child marriage, caste, the dilemmas of Indian

Christians and missionaries, the “Indianness” of the church. Some of their attitudes may not find favour today, and conversion continues to be a contentious issue. But Christianity was central to their lives, and this fact lends perspective to their views. Further, we look at writing, fictional or otherwise most usefully when we can see it as a product of a time and place.

Krupabai and Her Novels

From the point of view of this essay on Indian women writing in English, the Saththianadhan story begins with Krupabai (1862-1894) who wrote two novels, *Kamala: A Story of Hindu Life (1894)* and *Saguna*, the first autobiographical novel in English, written by a woman. Both books were first published serially in the *Madras Christian College Magazine*, and both were published posthumously as books by Srinivasa, Varadachari and Co, Madras in 1894 and 1895 respectively. *Saguna* was presented to and read by Queen Victoria who then asked for other work by the author. Both were popular and favourably reviewed. In his unpublished doctoral thesis,⁶ Lindsay Pereira, commenting on *Kamala* writes, “The narrative plot is fairly straightforward, beginning with Kamala’s idyllic childhood spent in quiet surroundings with an affectionate father, and moving on to the sudden cultural shock of marriage and life with her in-laws.. Her experiences as a child-wife are intrinsic social documents that speak volumes not only about existing conditions in women’s lives, but also about Saththianadhan’s private beliefs that prompt her to use *Kamala* to come to terms with her own life and attitudes towards gender and a female identity”. *Saguna* is perhaps a more complex novel. The original title was subtitled “A Story of Native Christian Life”, a subtitle changed to, “the first autobiographical novel in English by an Indian woman, in the Oxford University Press edition published in 1998 and edited by Chandini Lokuge. The complexity comes into play because, in addition to the new ideas brought through the west, there is the ambivalence experienced by the convert to Christianity. As in other stories of the time, there is a conflict between the deep-seated ideas of caste and the “veneer”, as it would sometimes seem, of Christianity.

This ambivalence is explored again in the short stories of Kamala Saththianadhan, the woman Samuel Saththianadhan married after the early death of Krupabai. *Stories of Indian Christian Life (1899)*⁷ contains six stories by Samuel, and six by Kamala. His tend to be more satirical, hers psychological. The story, “The Native Pastor and His Flock” by Kamala, for instance, explores the hopelessness Daniel, the pastor, felt about his work. He works hard, but fails to convince people to convert. “The Hindus pointed to the Christians and would ask in what way the latter were better than themselves; and Mr Daniel could give no answer, which would cover the practical reality...all sorts of doubts began to assail him about his own salvation.”⁸ Samuel pointed out in the preface, “The Indian Christian community affords one of the most interesting illustrations of the influence of western thought and Christianity on the eastern mind. Very little has been hitherto written, illustrative of such an experiment in a concrete fashion, though abstract discussions on the theme have been endless.”⁹ Padmini Sen Gupta, the daughter of Samuel and Kamala has written an interesting life of her mother, *The Portrait of an Indian Woman (1956)*.¹⁰ Kamala emerges from this account as very much the new woman of the times, a strong and independent woman who did not go back to her relatives after the death of

Samuel in 1906, who tried to earn a living by giving lessons in Sanskrit to a local rani, and accompanied her son to England when he went to study there. She also edited the *Indian Ladies Journal* to which many of the major names among women of the time contributed, including Cornelia Sorabji, Sarojini Naidu and others.

Shevanti Bai Nikambe, born in 1865 in Poona, wrote a novel about the necessity of education for high-caste married girls. Titled *Ratanbai*, it was originally published by Marshall Brothers, London in 1895. Subtitled, “A Sketch of a Bombay High Caste Hindu Young Wife”, it tells the story of a girl who was married when she was nine. Her father arranges with the father-in-law that she should be allowed to continue her studies, but both Ratan’s mother and an old widowed grand-aunt do not believe in this and keep finding excuses to keep her at home. The father is not strong enough to withstand the constant pressure from the women, and, oddly enough, his progressiveness does not extend to mealtimes when he is served before the others. None of this is helped by the fact that Ratan does well at school while her husband fails his BA exam. Nevertheless, when he finds out how the education of his young wife is being interfered with, he insists on letting her continue her studies uninterrupted. Nikambe is at pains to show in her novel that education does not alienate a girl from her culture. She is a dutiful daughter and daughter-in-law, helps with the housework, embroiders, and while at her needlework, “She merrily hummed one of the infant school tunes, and was then singing softly a Sanskrit sloka.”¹¹

The context of the novel is of course the debates about the education of women. Nikambe assisted Pandita Ramabai in the Sharada Sadan High School in 1890 before it was transferred to Poona. Nikambe was a Christian, according to *Women in India Who’s Who* published by the National Council of Women in 1935. She visited Europe and America to study Christian work and methods, and visited Europe again in 1913 to study educational and social work on the continent. She served as a headmistress at various institutions, and between 1912 and 1934, conducted a special school for married ladies. The text of *Ratanbai*, as with so many others, was not available in India and was ultimately obtained from the India Office Library.

Autobiographies: Pre-Independence Period

Among autobiographies of the pre-independence, period, the one written by the maharani Sunity Devi, is of special interest as she was the daughter of the reformer Keshub Chunder Sen, and her marriage into the royal family of Cooch Behar split the Brahmo Samaj into two factions, liberal and conservative. Keshub Chunder Sen had at first refused to allow the marriage, but he eventually allowed it for reasons he did not explain. E F Chapman writes, “The prince was the head of one of the most ancient royal families in Bengal, which, however, had the disadvantage of belonging to a low caste, the Sankochi Ketry caste...the principle they professed with regard to caste prevented any objections being raised on that ground, but they vehemently opposed the project, both on the score of the youth of the contracting parties and also on that of the religion of the bridegroom.”¹² Sunity Devi was 14 at the time, and the groom 16. The autobiography, *The Autobiography of an Indian Princess (1921)*¹³ discusses the events which led to her marriage, which, as with many other royal marriages, was brokered by the British. Sunity Devi, commenting on these events says, “My father’s name is forever associated

with the Civil Marriage Act, as it was entirely owing to his exertions that the government passed this wise measure fixing the marriageable age of men and girls at 18 and 14 respectively.”¹⁴

One of the liveliest autobiographies, *The Story of My Life* appeared in 1911 in Bombay,¹⁵ written by Dosebai Cowasjee Jessawalla. She appears to have been, like many of the others, a formidable woman, with a zest for life, and a belief that reform began at home, but did not end there. She dedicates her book to her mother for giving her the privilege of being the first Indian girl to receive the benefits of an English education. She tells us that it was her mother who prepared her for an active part in the history of Indian women by being a pioneer in education. In the first chapter, she talks about the hostility she faced when she decided she wanted to go to Delhi for the Durbar. “I fancied I could hear the jeering queries. Is it a Parsee female’s business to mix in such demonstrations?...Parsee men were notoriously selfish and had monopolised to themselves every pleasure and indulgence, fancying that women were only created for household drudgery.”¹⁶ A later chapter details her ascent in a balloon in Paris. “Next morning I heard that a balloon was to ascend from the Trocadero (the exhibition), and that any one who liked could enjoy the novel pleasure of an aerial sail. My hotel friends were surprised to hear that I ardently longed to go up in a balloon and asked me, whether all the Parsee women were a bold, intrepid nature like myself. I had to dispel this very erroneous idea by telling them that a few years ago Parsee women and even a few of the men were frightened at Europeans, and would run away if they saw any approaching them.”¹⁷

Purdah evoked a wide range of literary and non-fictional responses, from accounts of dealing with ‘zenana’ women, to ironic but passionate accounts of the system. Cornelia Sorabji (1864-1954) who worked with zenana women and wrote about her experiences was described by Margaret Cousins in 1941 as, “always picturesque and striking in appearance, the legal champion during the past 40 years of the purdah-enwrapped aristocratic women... a notable figure..the first Indian woman barrister, the historic Indian Portia.”¹⁸ Guile was Portia’s weapon, tact and humour were Sorabji’s. She had to deal with wily priests who advised gullible purdah women, usurpers ready to do anything to get their way with the women’s possessions. Her work as legal adviser for the government of India to ‘purdahnashins’ in Bengal, Bihar, Assam and Orissa, a post to which she was appointed in 1904, involved a great deal of travelling. Despite this she wrote several books about her experiences, short stories, stories for children, a biography of her sister Susie who was deeply involved in educational work (a road where the school she founded stands is named after her in Poona), and a memoir of her parents who had converted to Christianity. Cornelia Sorabji is certainly one of the most accomplished writers to have emerged in the pre-independence period. “Making a Hindu Will” from *India Recalled* (1936)¹⁹ is one of the most amusing descriptions of the Byzantine world of legal procedures one is likely to come across. So is her account of being asked to take on an elephant as a client – he had been accused of uprooting and eating too many sugar-palm trees, and her account of the way the case was judged. “That which you have asked is already granted,”²⁰ the bench said when she entered the courtroom, even though she had not even begun to argue the case. It turned out that it was the dog at the entrance of the court who decided cases. She is told, “When the Thakur-Sahib became Raja and Judge in the Durbar Court, he made this plan. He knew no law, and cases were long and tiresome. He

devised a remedy. This favourite dog of his should sit at the door of the Court and decide all questions brought before the Durbar. “Whomever the dog likes, to him the Huzur gives whatever he desires, even, as you saw, against himself and his own desires.”²¹

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s (1880-1932) *Sultana’s Dream* (1905)²² has been frequently anthologised and is now well known. First written in English, and then translated into Bengali, it is a feminist fantasy utopia in which women control the state and men are confined to the ‘mardana’. Rokeya and her sisters were prevented from learning Bengali and English so that they would not be contaminated by new ideas. But she was lucky to have a brother who taught her in secret, and a husband who believed firmly that educating women was the cure for the ills of society. The husband died 11 years after they were married, and in his memory she started a school, the Sakhawat Memorial Girls’ School in Calcutta, and then later, in 1916 founded the Bengali Muslim Women’s Association.

Writings on the Purdah

But two other novels about purdah have yet to be given the importance they deserve: Iqbalunnisa Hussain’s *Purdah and Polygamy* published in 1944,²³ and Zeenuth Futehally’s *Zohra*, published soon after independence in 1951.²⁴ *Zohra*, in a version edited by her daughter Rummana Denby with amendments she knew her mother had wanted to make, was re-published by OUP in 2004. But *Purdah and Polygamy*, a fine, ironic novel has not yet found any takers. Iqbalunnisa Hussain was born in Mysore (nd) and was married when she was 15 to an official of the Mysore government who was sympathetic to her desire to learn English. She already knew Urdu and Persian. She was active in education, was the headmistress of a primary school which she turned into

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an Urdu girls middle school, instituted a school of home industries for Muslim women in Bangalore, formed a teachers association for Muslim women teachers, and a Girl Guide movement for Muslim girls. Brought up in strict purdah, Iqbalunnisa Hussain did not feel that purdah had any sanction in the tenets of the Prophet. While she frequently reiterates the effects of seclusion on the body and mind of women, she advocates only gradual change. Teresa Hubel writes, "The custom continued to be so widely practised that when Hussain wrote her novel in the 1940s, she could depict every single one of her middle class Muslim female characters in a strict state of purdah and not stretch the bounds of the realist mode in which she was writing".²⁵ Part of the problem was, of course, that purdah was thought of as a sign of status and prosperity.

The ironic note that informs Iqbalunnisa's novel is evident from the start. In chapter 2 she writes, "Zuhra fainted when she knew her husband was dead. Her mother and sister who lived in the same city had come a few minutes before Umar passed away. They looked after her and her belongings. A death affords a good chance to the poor to get away with portable articles which can be hidden under the full-size veil. All big and small things were locked up in a lumber room."²⁶ And in chapter 5 she says, "His polygamous nature has an excuse: a man doing brave deeds needs every sacrifice by others. A woman who does not show the proper spirit by gulping down ready-made beliefs is condemned by the rest as 'douzahki' (hellish). The great fuss made over him gives him no time for introspection. He has accepted and assimilated the dogmas without analysing them. Unequal distribution of labour and regard is the social code made by man in his own interest. There are some who relinquish their birthright, but their number is not legion".²⁷

According to Zeenuth Futehally (1903-1992) her novel *Zohra* published in 1951 is romantic fiction. In her preface she writes, "Amongst our people, fiction, and specially romantic fiction, is deprecated. But I have put aside my misgivings on this score as it is only through ordinary human emotions that one can best convey the lives of people. And no society, however strict or conventional regarding its women, is yet free from emotional entanglements."²⁸ Futehally's daughter, Rummana Denby explained in conversation that the word "romantic" here means a story that broke taboos.²⁹ Zohra, married to Bashir, falls in love with his brother Hamid, and he with her. Set among aristocratic Hyderabad families, the novel was very well reviewed when it first appeared, but disappeared from sight till it was reprinted.

Elsa Sen (b 1899) wrote stories, biographies and essays. A Bengali Brahmo, she decried the government of the day in her preface to *Darkening Days* (1944)³⁰ a book of stories about the Bengal famine. She emphasises the suffering of women, though, as she says in the preface, the suffering of men was no less. All the stories have been taken from real life, though the names have been changed. As a freelance journalist, she contributed to all the leading Indian national dailies between 1938-1945, but she was also special correspondent for the *Hindustan Times* between 1946-54, and also contributed to newspapers overseas. She translated Tarashanker Banerjee's *The Eternal Lotus* in 1945 and Premendra Mitra's *Kaleidoscope: A Novel* in 1945. Later she migrated to England.

A writer who belongs to a category of her own is Noor-un-Nissa Inayat Khan, (1914-1944) the great great grand-daughter of Tipu Sultan. Born in Moscow to an Indian Sufi mystic and singer and an American mother, her family fled the Russian

revolution of 1917, and then left Europe because of Hitler. Noor studied the harp at the Paris Conservatory and child psychology at the Sorbonne. When Hitler began his campaigns, Noor and her brother decided, despite the fact that she was a pacifist, that non-violence was not enough. She volunteered for the British secret service and helped to restore the links in the broken resistance network in the Paris area. She was ultimately betrayed to the Gestapo, and died in Dachau in 1944. But she is included here for her translations of the Jataka tales which were published in 1939.³¹ Each of the 20 stories she retold is a story of sacrifice, and her favourite was "The Fairy and the Hare". A hare and his friends decide to give whatever food they find to someone needy. The friends find food, but the hare cannot, so he decides to offer himself as food to whoever needs it. Fortunately for him the starving beggar turns out to be a fairy in disguise who absolves him of his sacrifice. But for Noor there was no such reprieve.

The writers discussed are only a sampling of the rich and varied material written by Indian women writing in English in the 19th and early 20th centuries. There was, of course, a great deal of non-fiction in various forms, critiques of educational and social systems, suggestions for improvement, suggestions for new careers for women, speeches in legislatures, letters, outlines and rules for new associations. Not all of this is literature in the stricter sense of the term, but it is writing and it is the voices of women, and together they create a picture of a remarkable group of women who created a great deal to the fabric of modern India. ■■■

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Notes

- 1 *Indian Writing in English*, Sterling 1984 edition, New Delhi.
- 2 Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2003.
- 3 *Women in Modern India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, second reprint 2000.
- 4 Edited with an introduction by Eunice de Souza, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2005.
- 5 Ibid quoted in introduction, p ii.
- 6 'Gender Attitudes Implicit in Nineteenth Century Indian Fiction in English', Department of English, University of Mumbai, 2003, p 101.
- 7 Srinivasa Vardachari and Co, Madras, 1899.
- 8 *The Sathianadhan Family Album*, pp 112-13.
- 9 Ibid, p xi.
- 10 YMCA Publishing House, Calcutta, 1956.
- 11 Edited by Eunice de Souza, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2003, p 25.
- 12 Quoted in *Women's Voices*, edited by Eunice de Souza and Lindsay Pereira, OUP, Delhi, 2002, p 66.
- 13 John Murray, London, 1921.
- 14 Quoted in *Women's Voices*, p 67.
- 15 Published by the *The Times of India*, Bombay.
- 16 Quoted in *Women's Voices*, p 3.
- 17 Ibid, p 10.
- 18 Ibid, p 76.
- 19 Ibid, pp 89-94.
- 20 Ibid, p 88.
- 21 Ibid, p 89.
- 22 Ibid, pp 163-72, first published in *The Indian Ladies Magazine*, 1905.
- 23 Hosali Press, Bangalore, 1944.
- 24 Hind Kitabs, Bombay, 1951.
- 25 Quoted in *Women's Voices*, p 390.
- 26 Quoted in *Women's Voices*, p 390.
- 27 Quoted in *Purdah* edited by Eunice de Souza, OUP, New Delhi, 2004, p 508.
- 28 Quoted in *Women's Voices*, p 265.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Sushil Gupta, Calcutta, 1944.
- 31 Harrap, London.