

Cheery Children, Growing Girls, and Developing Young Adults: On Reading, Growing, and Hopscotching Across Categories

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In the early 1930s, the Bengali writer Lila Majumdar was teaching English grammar in Santiniketan in winter, under a tree, to a restless class. In her words and my translation,

I was surprised to see a twelve or thirteen year old boy, sitting sideways to me, reading some book with rapt attention. As he read, his hair stood on end, his eyes nearly popped out, his chin hung slackly. That book could not be English Grammar. (Majumdar *Pakdandi* 131; Majumdar *Kheror Khata* 15-16)

The book turned out to be *The Horrors of the Tibetan Cave*. Majumdar said to her erring student, 'I'll keep the book. Take it tomorrow. It's bad form to bring story-books to class.' (Majumdar, *Kheror Khata*, pp. 15-16)

The covert message of the story, which Majumdar tells with relish in twice in two autobiographical volumes, is that the school-marm herself would be reading the confiscated book avidly. The educative gentlewoman, the scene of an open-air, open-minded pedagogy, the pleasures of illicit reading, the ability of children's adventure stories to grip child and adult alike, and the ruefully acknowledged necessity of maintaining class decorum are some of the elements evoked by this scene.

Lila Majumdar, one of our best and best-loved children's writers in Bengali was born in a famous Brahmo milieu in 1908. She has led a virtuoso life, juggling a wide variety of roles. At one level she has lived to the hilt the life of a busy, prudent, and proper gentlewoman, mother, and wife. She has brought up an extended family, helped to train and make self-sufficient a widowed niece-in-law, and, to give a symptomatic detail, confesses to having tailored most of her own and family members' clothes. Earlier, as a young woman, she had been a stellar student of English literature, topping the Calcutta University MA. Though her restless creativity did not allow her to settle into the discipline of teaching, she had distinguished stints of

school and college teaching, having been head-hunted by Rabindranath Tagore. She wrote bestselling cookbooks and household hint books which are benchmarks of excellence in their field, worked successfully for years in All India Radio (1956-63), and took active interest and part in social welfare activities organised by pioneering civil society organizations. A niece of the writer, printer, publisher, and editor Sukumar Ray, and an aunt of Satyajit Ray, she collaborated with the latter in reviving the pioneering children's magazine *Sandesh*.

Her children's books, such as *Din Dupure*, *Padipisir Barmi Baksa*, and *Halde Pakhir Palak* are some of the best fantasy, adventure, and ghost stories in Bengali, the sensitivity and zany imagination of which have kept readers in thrall for decades. In my opinion, she is the true heir to the glorious zaniness, fantastical imagination, humour, and endless literary creativity of Sukumar Ray: may I confess that as a writer of children's literature I find her incomparably superior to Satyajit.

Another part of Majumdar's oeuvre lies in the lesser-known, but beautifully written works she penned in the romantic suspense and female gothic mode, blending female *bildung* and thriller-like plots. She also wrote autobiographical works that allow us see how her imaginative and creative worlds blossomed, first in a distinguished Brahmo milieu and then in a marital Hindu household. The pleasures and perils of a *bhadramahila* writer, from infancy to old age, are captured in these memoirs.

Lila Majumdar's audacity of imagination in her works of fantasy and adventure has never ceased to amaze me, all the more so since she maintained a quiet, proper, gentlewomanly existence, while hopscotching across all sorts of categories. This paper is about such hopscotching, and in turn jumps over many disciplinary categories, from literature to gender studies to development studies. The child intently at play over the scrawled squares of the hopscotch board, with touchingly ludic concentration, is the obvious hovering presence in my paper. This child is a girl, but she mutates into the human, the not-girl and not-boy, as much as into the growing young girl, and finally into the full-grown reading and writing human being and woman. She is also a subject of reading in another way, when she as growing child gets 'read' by grown-up professionals trying to understand the perceptions and narratives of 'stakeholders in developmental processes', as the professional argot puts it: the importance of imagination, empathy, and according priority

to the child's own perception, rather than the manacles of adult professional traitjackets, are vital to the success of such processes.

Also shaping the paper is my own voice, itself juggling a multiplicity of roles, and seeing how a synthesis can be achieved between them. At one level this is the voice of the interdisciplinary academic who brings a literary training to bear on the field of development studies, where with increasing urgency experts try to record voices and to read subjectivities for their narratives and perceptions of development. I am particularly interested in girls' narratives, just as I am in women's writing in India and Britain. Yet such gendered voices are also human voices, and the category of 'girl', 'boy', 'woman', or 'man' is donned and doffed in complex, often intransigent ways. And it is at that complex level of gendering and ungendering that a writer such as Majumdar is such a powerful, playful, and creative presence.

I also speak as an avid, admiring reader of Majumdar's fiction, whether for children or women, and seek to bring together how one read simultaneously, and with immense pleasure, as child, as young adult, and as developing female subject in 1980s Kolkata, and beyond. Between the ages of ten and sixteen, we know, one is all at once, bewilderingly, and excitingly, a child, a teenager, a gendered subject, and a young adult. One reads for pleasure, if one has suitable access, hopscotching across a whole variety of categories. I ask what the ramifications are and were, of growing through reading, especially of growing up a girl, and a particular kind of proper young girl, anxious to grow, but happy to alternate between childhood, girlhood, and adulthood. For in the case of my peer group, one grew up, grew inwards, grew out, and grew into someone or multiple someones, largely through 'rectangular things', John Fowles' marvellous coinage in *Daniel Martin*.

I draw on memory and personal experience, as a privileged, eclectic, promiscuous, and perhaps precocious reader. Such readers as myself were common, in a city, a milieu, and a class, that still produces an avid breed of sophisticated readers. Always ready to mythologise its reading practices, Calcutta in my childhood and teens yielded freedom and a diversity of spaces to read. One read books from pavement bookshop-cum-circulating libraries in Gariahat, from more established circulating libraries which had their own shuttered shops in the same area, such as the famous Orchid, and from children's libraries of the ex-

British Council and the Ramakrishna Mission. At home, one subscribed to, begged, bought, or borrowed, Bengali periodicals. Bengali bookshops and the Book Fair allowed one to be as greedy and wheedling as possible in buying books. Academic trips abroad by parents meant that they were in danger of bankruptcy buying books for their daughter. Shelves at home yielded parents' and grandparents' novels. From the derelict pavements of Gariahat to the hushed genteel interiors of Theatre Road to the Maidan *mela*, we were mobile readers, with the freedom to choose one's reading milieu from the time one was allowed to travel alone, from the age of ten.

In an intensely politically conscious city, in a left-liberal, feminist ambience, we did not even as children view books as 'innocent', reading as we did literature stamped 'political', from Subhash Mukhopadhyay to Nikolai Ostrovsky. But, comfortable with deciding to grow up a feminist, in a world where women's studies flourished at home and outside, I found that ostensibly unpolitical books such as *Little Women* and Chalet School books, Noel Streatfeild's books about developing young female performers like Gemma, Lila Majumdar's niece Nalini Das's girls' adventure stories starring the Gandalu quartet, or Mati Nandi's tale of the struggling young female swimmer *Kani* all fitted well with the variety of persons that one wished to grow into.

The story of reading I have recounted is that of a young, middle-class, cosmopolitan Bengali girl, liberal in taste and choice, albeit characterized by an attraction towards the deceptive cosiness that characterizes much of British and Bengali gentlewomen's writing, especially its fiction. At the same time, a distinctive moral-political contour to my reading was given by the flowering of women's studies within my familial context, watching as a daughter and a 'girl child' a mother involved with the interdisciplinary School of Women's Studies at this university, seeing pioneering work being produced on the social and cultural roles of the girl child in Bengal, a figure both 'loved and unloved', as went the title of a volume published by this school in 1997 (J. Bagchi et al).

A large part of life in childhood and teen years was then constituted by the pleasures of reading children's fiction and gentlewoman-authored fiction, and groping to find ways of articulating the thought and belief that just because one *enjoyed* reading apparently cosy novels such as *Pride and Prejudice* or Lila

Majumdar's women's tales anthologised in *Ami Nari*, did not mean that they were merely frivolous or apolitical. One also tried to grasp how it was that Majumdar's children's fantasy tales such as *Halde Pakhir Palak* created both immense wistfulness and immense pleasure, how it was that she brought the world of the wizened old servant Jhagru or of the tribal boy Pannu, sharing his home peacefully with twenty-five piglets, home to us, and the canny way in which she defamiliarised our sense of the domestic, without ever sermonising, while writing in a briskly domestic idiom, creating in her pages, for example, delicious descriptions of food, which fed the reader's appetite.

Later, when a Canadian-Indian friend suggested that Jane Austen probably seemed more familiar to me rather than her, because the women's appointed end was marriage, I remember being struck at the absolutely felt untruth of the statement. And I would have said exactly the same about Majumdar's own tales of romantic suspense for young girls. Much later I was to analyse Austen's place in the lineage of radical conservative Romantic-era British novelists, and the way she sharply punctured unintelligent, bombastic ideological pressures operating on young girls' education. With Majumdar, equally, one enjoyed the sympathetic accounts of struggling young working women who tot up their meagre salary but revel in the empowerment that their earnings bring them.

And one learnt through such children's books and such gentlewomen's books that pleasure did not preclude a politics at once quietly subversive and empowering, which, even as one grew up, managed to make one ask whether one really grew 'up', or went 'forward' through such growth, except in the inexorable linearity of a time-bound life. Certainly, reading Lila Majumdar's extraordinary volumes, one lurched sideways, or ran backwards, perhaps, but traversed no linear or familiar paths of growth. Instead, as happens in the realms of fantasy and nonsense, a world was made strange and reinvented.

Reading Majumdar's autobiography *Pakdandi*, which means a steep, spiralling mountain path, I was struck by the good-humoured yet determined way in which she defended her own kind of 'puerile', 'frivolous' and 'feminine' writing, while also maintaining close friendships with a whole variety of political and activist social and intellectual formations. At two points in her autobiography, Majumdar cites a progressive intellectual friend, Niren Roy, part of the famous intellectual and political *Parichay* group, who would with

good-humoured (one hopes!) derision say to her, ' Do you know how much Lin Yu Tang had accomplished at your age?', referring to the 20th-century Chinese novelist, philosopher, satirist, and essayist, who was thirteen years older than Majumdar. She in turn dealt good-humouredly with such snobbery, and it is left to our generation to re-consider the power and value of Majumdar's oeuvre.

Back again to my childhood Calcutta. We read *Sandesh* regularly, including Lila Majumdar's late works serialised there, which were mostly her unique kind of quasi-science fiction. The entire world of *Sandesh*, of Sukumar Ray and Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri's heritage, was a living presence, particularly as the *Sandesh* office was located in the home of Ranajay Karlekar, a family friend and legendary, much-loved teacher at this department. In that house, as one remembers it, producing children's literature, being a humanities academic, and being committed to socio-political development went hand in hand, from the the karate classes held at the back of the house to the annual days of the Calcutta Social Project, a pioneering social work organization that his mother Kalyani Karlekar ran, an organization which Majumdar expresses great admiration for at many points in her autobiography.

Ranajay Karlekar's own radical leftist politics seemed to coexist harmoniously with his mother's more welfarist model of social development. Similarly, Majumdar, his great-aunt, expresses in her autobiography her admiration for women members of the communist Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti and their work after the 1943 Bengal Famine, even though she herself worked with more middle-of-the-road welfarist civil society organizations. I shall argue later that to understand feminised social capital, we need to delve into the lives and work of women like Majumdar or Karlekar.

As a Bengali reader and a reader of *Sandesh*, the oeuvre of Majumdar, Das, and Satyajit Ray acted as triggers to an entire universe of exciting reading and civilized values. But what had Majumdar's being a woman to do with this love? Majumdar did not write, in the stories she is best known for, for girls, or focusing on girls.

Far more readily gendered are Nalini Das's Gandalu stories, starring four schoolgirls whose names end with 'lu'. Inhabitants of a boarding-school, the girls set off on a range of adventures not unlike those in Enid Blyton. If Kalu is the courageous commander, then Bulu is the frightened girl who changes into a lion

when faced with true danger. In my copy of a collection of Gandalu stories, Das, who had taught for much of her life in a women's college, had inscribed, 'Be courageous like Kalu'.

Majumdar's world of fantasy, on the other hand, usually had naughty boys as heroes, whether Panchu in *Padipisir Barmi Baksa*, or Gupi and Panu in a number of novellas and short stories, such as *Nepor Boi* and *Bhutor Diary*. Gupi and Panu, two of Majumdar's favourite characters, are enthusiastic boys who constantly back up Gupi's uncle, an apparently meek and cowardly fledgling private detective who is also a gourmet chef. Panchu, the narrator of *Padipisir Barmi Baksa*, or Bhuto, the wandering young waiter whose father is serving a term in prison, or the heroes of the outrageous, zany tales in *Din Dupure*, do not act like little girls.

I shall not be attempting to straitjacket Lila Majumdar as children's writer into some putative neat model of women's writing. As I have said, it is my sense and admiration of her hopscotching of categories that led to the conception of this paper. Equally, one needs to be very clear that while she wrote with boy heroes, she never wrote boisterous or hearty tales celebratory of embryonic robust masculinity. One recognises throughout her works a deep sense of whimsy, pathos, wistfulness, elusiveness and compassionate humaneness, chiming with the adventure. 'Sensitive' is a word that is well used of all her writing: she exhibits an omnipresent sympathy for the underdog, appearing in a whole multiplicity of avatars.

Majumdar expresses particular fondness for her much-acclaimed fantasy 'Halde Pakhir Palak' (The Yellow Bird's Feather) in her autobiography *Pakdandi*. An elusive note of sadness, eeriness, and the uncanny sounds throughout the work, as a brother and sister encounter a strange world of loss, fantasy, the supernatural, and sadness through their interaction with the aged servant Jhagru, from the poverty-stricken area of Dumka in erstwhile Bihar and what is now Jharkhand. The children lose their beloved dog, and believe that being brushed by the feather of a damaged bird has turned him into a little boy, as Jhagru's Dumka lore would have it. Tale after tale by the wizened, whitehaired, wise Jhagru induct them into a world where magic and sadness couple to produce a somewhat eerie empathy with humanity.

In a fair, the children encounter a fascinating, frightening magician-figure, only one of whose pieces of ware Jhagru allows the children to buy: the seed of a plant called 'Gunamani', literally 'the gem of virtues',

which will only flower on a garbage dump or a heap of ashes: as Jhagru says, like the virtues or good qualities of humans, it blossoms only through pain. So it is, too, that the children hear of Jhagru's brother Jhamru, the unthinking, harsh goatherd, who is 'bitten' by a plant—and if blood runs out of Jhamru's hand, then white blood also runs out of the plant when he tears off the branch. When Jhamru overturns stones, exposing to unbearable light the insects which live underneath them, the magic plant follows him and bites him again. Again and again, Jhagru's tales of Dumka reveal a world of great material poverty and great imagination, from where most people are forced to migrate, carrying inside them memories of a world as harsh as it is beautiful.

Jhagru's narratives also bring things down to earth, reminding us again and again that all these enchanted individuals must by the nature of things live out what is often an unlovely mundane life. So, when the little girl Rumi surmises that Jhagru's brother Jhumri must have died, Jhagru, annoyed, replies, 'Jhamru now works in the police in Baddinath, he has five sons and five daughters; none of them have died.'

(Majumdar *Chotader Amanibas* 41)

After the children go through their rite of passage, coming to terms with the strangeness and magic of life, as it were, through the combination of their own yearning for Bhulu and learning from Jhagru's tales, they also find a way of making their dog return. By this time, they know that it is possible to find a *paksiraj*, the mythical winged horse, without warning: it appears to them as a cringing animal so thin that its bones stick out. They learn that one should never approach a horse from the back, and that magic creatures must be treated with great gentleness. Only then will the fathomless eyes of the winged horse become soft as velvet, and in that moment of tenderness, Jhagru will speak not of triumph or mastery, but of the never-ending rootlessness that takes hold of those who, like him, feel the yellow bird's wings sweeping them away from the familiar on and on. And out of such sadness comes the day that the plant on the ash-heap flowers into manycoloured blooms, shaped like butterflies, with a delicate fragrance. Bhulu, the beloved mutt, also returns to them, dirty, dusty, and as wicked as ever, as he delights in muddying the children's clothes and biting Jhagru's foot.

Majumdar writes many other stories which act as unreductive parables of power, as gritty as they are compassionate. She had spent many years of her childhood in Shillong, and has much to say of the strange stories, tough friendliness, and an utter intransigence that she had felt in the northeastern tribal women, whose matriarchal life she describes. Equally, she wrote again and again about the Jhagrus of India, its indigenous people, perhaps from memories of the holidays she spent, like so many middle-class Bengalis, in the Santhal Parganas and Chotanagpur, with growing cousins and nieces such as Kalyani Karlekar and Nalini Das, who partly grew up there .

So, in Majumdar's story 'Hans' ('The Geese'), the little middle-class boy Nimai, on a holiday in a tribal village where his grandparents live, tries to stop his uncle from shooting down wild geese. We see him moving in and out of the home of his upset friend Pannu, who is a tribal. He finds the tribal village of Phulmani spotlessly clean, while inside Pannu's house, in one room food is cooked, while the other is shared by a pig, twenty-five tiny piglets, Pannu's younger brother and sister, and their aunt. All this is presented with great matter-of-factness.

Nimai goes for advice to the village elder, the illiterate 'buro thakurda' Hireman, who spends his time gazing at water and making songs without words, about wildfires in the *sal* forests, about the sowing and reaping of paddy, about crops dying during drought, and about 'bongar bari' or heaven (Majumdar, *Chotader Amanibas*, 364). And yes, Nimai manages to use the money he gets as reward for good grades in school to good purpose, conspiring with the villagers to hire drummers so that the noise keeps the birds keep away. Stories such as these, as I have said, are unreductive parables of power and humanity, and are murdered by too much dissection.

Majumdar's ghost stories are some of the most funny, unfrighting, yet uncanny stories ever written in this genre. Some of these are on the verge of the sentimental, as for example, 'Pilkhana', where we find a boy, stranded in his father's ancestral home with unfriendly relatives, befriended by a ghostly *mahout* and his elephant. They cheer him up, and set him free, and the boy's father, too, remembers these figures, who only appear to those who are 'dukhhi'—vulnerable and sad.

In the tale 'Ahididir Bandhura', a housewife in a new residence decides to make friends with the mysterious naughty boys who come and spoil the food and milk she prepares. She makes a bargain with them to feed them delicious snacks every day, and tells them tales of suffering children who find a haven in death. Only one of the boys speaks to her, and she later learns that the tongues of the others, all children of milkmen, had been cut off by a rich trader; they had annoyed him by being noisy while accepting his invitation to have stale 'pithes' or cakes during *paus-parban*, the winter harvest festival.

On a completely different note, we find a story called 'Laksmi', appositely or ironically about horrendously naughty girls. Having gone through a veritable carnival of naughty pranks, the Laksmi starring in the tale is left behind in boarding-school while others go off to a picnic, and is beset by a troupe of girls from a ghostly school for delinquents. They take her off beyond a forbidden stream, into their ruined school, feed her berries, and make friends with her, to leave Laksmi with the prospect of seeing 'things which are not there'.

Then there is the tale of the meek, poor, beleaguered tubercular clerk and his wife, providentially offered a stint at managing a cousin's hotel in a hill-station. When an aggressive young man refuses to let the couple use the owner's house, another comfortable bungalow appears for them, a house belonging to a ghostly philanthropic doctor, complete with friendly dog, though the couple never realise the 'true' state of affairs.

When I was eleven, I encountered another avatar of Lila Majumdar the writer during a bout of hepatitis, through a copy of her novella *Srimati*. This, I learned later from her autobiography, was commissioned by a friend for an ephemeral women's journal. A year or so later, I discovered another collection of tales which I much admired, given the title *Ami Nari*, or 'I am a Woman'. These are fine works, and perhaps some of the very few works in the female Gothic mode in Bengali, carrying the combination of *bildung* and suspense, usually romantic suspense, that one finds in the works of skilled, elegant, and neglected writers such as Anne Radcliffe in the late eighteenth century and Mary Stewart in the twentieth century. Stories of romantic suspense, they are also tales of 'female difficulties' resolved. Majumdar says

in *Pakdandi* that these novellas give happy endings to their heroines, all of whom are orphans or homeless, have undergone trials and difficulties, and are overwhelmingly working women.

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

They are unusual novels. The first novella in the anthology *Ami Nari* is called 'Kestadasi', and its narrator is a poor lower-caste woman, as the name indicates. She is also a working woman and social worker. It is Kestadasi or Krisnamani's diary which forms the novel, as she struggles between a whole variety of subject-positions, from her current gentrified status to memories of abject poverty and rough living that shaped her early life.

Kestadasi is rescued from a state of penniless destitution by a gentlewoman named Mani, Kesta's Mani-didi. Kesta, through Mani's support, comes to work in a women's welfare project, teaching weaving to other women. She earns a monthly salary, lives with Mani, and to the *bhadramahilas* who run the ladies' welfare society, the Mahila Sangha, is known as Krisnamani Devi, marker of her upward mobility. She is not classifiable as a domestic servant, since she does not take a salary for doing Mani's work, and is thought to be Mani's relative. Indeed, it is a fascinating relationship that is posited between the women, at once unequal, friendly, and affective.

But inside herself Krisnamani thinks of herself as Kestadasi, and feels torn about the abjectly poor, traumatised life in the slum of Hogalkunre she had left behind. Right at the beginning of her diary she remembers her teacher in school asking her father's name; she replies cavalierly, 'babataba nei'—no trace of a father. And when, as instructed, she goes and asks her mother, the mother in turn replies, 'babataba chila na kono janme, tar namo chila na. Balis didimanike. Jatasab barabari' (*Ami Nari*, 3). 'There never was a father, and he never had a name. Tell your teacher that. All this nonsense'. And that is the kind of

unsentimental, brisk attitude that Majumdar makes Kestadasi display at least in one part of herself. Another part is unashamedly, engulfingly sentimental. Both these parts get triggered when, on the one hand, the Mahila Sangha takes up a welfare project in Hogalkunre, and, on the other, a newcomer appears in the locality, a film-star with his little son Rahul, and as you might guess, there is a mysterious relationship between him and Mani, which gets unravelled.

In this part of Majumdar's oeuvre we get fascinating accounts of a whole era of do-gooding Bengali women, running Ladies' Committees in primary schools, and creating Mahila Sanghas, the cosy malice and competence of which is wonderfully captured in the members' conversations in *Kestadasi*. As I have touched on earlier, I am discovering, as part of my current excavation of gendered social capital in India and Britain, that Majumdar's work and life offer records of and links to a distinguished strand of modernizing Brahmo female welfarist activism, which is also prescient for our current canonization of civil society. It was at least partly Majumdar's belonging to a Brahmo milieu, and her often-expressed admiration for crusading welfarist working women, which shaped such narratives as *Kestadasi*. She worked herself, with some seriousness and great enjoyment, with organizations such as Anandamela.

We are currently witnessing what I call the feminization of development through community-based civil society movements, and in such movements educated gentlewomen are playing increasingly important leadership roles in areas such as education, health, and nutrition. The basic structure of power is still very much the hierarchised welfarist structure depicted by Majumdar, and her work has the merit of being briskly honest about it, unlike sections of contemporary development professionals and civil society organizations which elide clearly maintained inequalities and hierarchies between the leaders and managers, on the one hand, and the lower-level workers and the beneficiaries of the projects, on the other. If we are to benefit fully from what I, like many others, believe to be rich possibilities unleashed by such feminised civil society, then a writer such as Majumdar has a great deal to teach us about its history as well as its moral –political contours and limitations.

In other Majumdar novellas in 'Ami Nari', the suspense plot is more vivid, as in 'Pakhi', narrated by a young working woman employed to look after a mysterious aristocratic woman. We slowly learn that the

employer has been in prison, for what reason we do not know, and that there is a mystery attached to house she lives in. The older woman is treated with sympathy and pity, even as she is eventually proved to have been a murderess. The plot-line is engaging, and we have fantastic descriptions of crumbling, old-fashioned North Calcutta mansions, of Anglo-Indian families, and, as in Radcliffe, all is filtered through the refined, intelligent, fearful yet courageous sensibility of the heroine. Another tale in 'Ami Nari' is about a young female private detective, who goes back to her hill-station home to the mansion of a matriarch with Portuguese blood in her veins. This young woman, Maya, is illegitimate, and has behind her a failed marriage and a dead son.

These are tough young heroines who readily find adoptive children, are maternal as well as competent, do not quirk an eyebrow at unmarried or divorced mothers, and eventually find happiness in romantic marriages. And the tone in all of these is that unique combination of the brisk, the whimsical, and the wistful that characterizes Majumdar's work.

There is thus, as this paper can only hint at, much for scholars of the social history of Bengal as well as of its literature to mine from the rich ore of Majumdar's work. In her autobiography, we get vivid descriptions and glowing tributes to her *Barda*, Sukumar Ray, the inspiration and first instigator of her writing, as well as accounts of Satyajit's important role in bringing her back to the literary scene: it was he who, while working with the Signet Press, one of Bengal's finest and most distinctive publishers, instigated the publication of *Din-Dupure*, a collection of stories in the fantasy mode which I consider to be at par with Sukumar Ray's *Ha-ja-ba-ra-la*.

To the annals of the gentleman and renaissance man Sukumar Ray, printer, publisher, editor, and children's writer, or to the other virtuoso filmmaker, editor, and writer Satyajit Ray, we need to add the annals of their close relation, the virtuoso gentlewoman Lila Majumdar, every bit as talented a children's writer, and as much a virtuoso—but a *female* virtuoso. Majumdar's cookbook and book of household hints sell like hot cakes even today. She needs to be remembered for her pioneering work with All India Radio, where she crafted a whole range of programmes. Unlike Sukumar Ray, who died at the age of thirty-six, she

has had a long, rich life, in which the familial and domestic has played a large role. Her decision to marry a Hindu created a permanent rupture with her father, and she transplanted herself with great success to a very different milieu. She was the wife of a successful Harvard-trained westernized dentist, but unhesitatingly took into her own household the young, widowed, formally little-educated traditional Hindu daughter of her widowed sister-in-law and her children. Under her aegis, her niece-in-law trained herself into an expert tailor, taught with distinction in a school, and bought her own flat. For Majumdar, a brisk, caring, competent welfarist ethic was as much part of her life as it was of her work.

Majumdar's female virtuosity, then, is different from Sukumar or Satyajit Ray's male virtuosity. For a gentlewoman, virtuosity appears in an idiom of domestic competence, of housewifeliness, and of the ten-handed Durga who in goddesslike fashion would not dream of being called anything so performative as a juggler, but whose entire life is an unacknowledged multitasking performance. Her oeuvre and life show the combination of eclecticism and ambition that has characterized so many women's careers.

And gentlewoman though she is, as I have shown, Majumdar also pens the majority of her children's fictions starring boys, in a way that is loved by both boys and girls. Her writings do not script her readers into a linear, gendered model of growth, through a kind of reading in which pleasure acts as handmaiden to propriety. Even her women's fiction, while being in an idiom of proper femininity, creates a new kind of garment for its heroines to wear, in which issues of competence, work, legitimacy, and home are most interestingly interwoven in plots of suspense, romance, and female *bildung*. As writer, she can thus create in the modes of boy's own, girl's own, young girl's own, and the child's own, while her autobiography allows us to see that she did indeed live the life of a distinctive and distinguished woman.

For myself, then, the much-loved oeuvre of Majumdar created scepticism about any definitive tale of growing, even as it created a sense of excitement about diverse kinds of growth; it showed one how to value girlhood as well as childhood, offered space for being at once child, girl, and incipient grown-up, and allowed one to ridicule those who sit comfortably in the chair of 'grown-up', with a complacent sense of maturity.

This questioning model of growth and development, garnered from years of promiscuous reading as child/ girl, comes back to haunt me in my current professional field of gender and development studies. Powerfully entrenched notions of development have seen this as a field which opposed itself to voice and subjectivity, revelling instead in its world of technocratic utopias, big projects, and big dams. This paradigm has now shifted in favour of far greater attention given to voice, to the perceptions and narratives of subjects, to the need to be self-reflexive about the categories one inhabits as development researcher, and to virtues such as conversations and listening.

I close with memories of a field trip I had embarked on last year, to an economically poor, multicultural, paternal ancestral district of Murshidabad, in order to carry out a study I had designed (B. Bagchi). This was based on listening to and recording the perceptions and narratives of education by 10-14 year-old girls, and their sense of the threats and aspirations generated by their schooling or lack thereof. An omnibus of Majumdar's work, and the remembrance of the wizened Jhagru and his child-listeners, was as good a field-guide in avoiding canned analyses, in foregrounding the child's voice, and in exercising the imaginative empathy that makes such field-interviews a success, as a compendium on recording voices of the poor, of the sort that the World Bank now delights in bringing out (cf. Narayan).

This is only one of the rich, complex dimensions, ranging from hearing the voices of tribals imaginatively, to deepening one's knowledge of feminised civil society, to the power of the defamiliarising fantasy mode, that crowd Majumdar's work for children, girls, and adults, and make her such a happy hunting-ground for those of us who think passionately that questioning, non-linear, adventurous forms of growth and development are enriched by imaginative, engaged reading of narratives, real-life and fictional.

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