

Carrying Over: Analysing Female Utopias and Narratives of Female Education from 17th-century France to 18th-Century Britain and 20th century India¹

To carry across or over, to ferry, to bridge—that is one resonant meaning of translation. The use of the metaphor of translation is deliberate, as the listener of my paper today prepares to be carried across and over great spans of space and time, with an Indian feminist woman academic journeying back to seventeenth-century *ancien regime* France, to 1770s Scotland, to 1790s England, to early 20th-century Bengal, and back again to where she started from, 21st-century India. An ongoing act of actual translation of one of the texts analysed will also figure in this journey.

At each of the points she stops, her focus will be on women educators and utopias of female education, either representations of real-life communities, or fictions, in narrative form. The two figures at the beginning and end of her journey are real-life women, the first Francoise d'Aubigne, Madame de Maintenon, French aristocrat and founder of a celebrated female seminary at St-Cyr, and the other Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, pioneering South Asian, Bengali, and Muslim writer, polemicist, feminist, and educationist. In between, one shall encounter fiction by Lady Mary Hamilton, a cosmopolitan Scottish woman of letters, and Clara Reeve, a provincial English Bluestocking writer, both writing in the late eighteenth century. Female identities, in particular as shaped by the journeys of female education, real-life and fictional communities founded and led by women with a utopian impulse, and the diversities and disjunctions we encounter in recovering and carrying over the creativity and heritage of our foremothers: these themes will be in highlight.

So far, I have been deliberately using the distancing pronoun 'she' to describe myself. To turn the 'she' back to 'I' will also involve carrying over, into my reading of these historical women and their lives and narratives, what my identities do to reshape the recovery of these voices, these identities, these texts. As a cosmopolitan Indian middle-class working woman in academia trawling through development studies in a Third World context, I find it epistemologically rich and generative to analyse the fictions and real-life histories I examine today as historicised testaments of women

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building social capital (translating a concept from the social sciences to women's literary texts) in the field of education, through their writing and their lives, with some of the disturbing exclusions, limitations, and disjunctions in their work as valuable for our understanding of women and development today as are their creative vision, boldness, and achievements.

Francoise d'Aubigne, Marquise de Maintenon was born in 1635, and died in 1719. Her birthplace was a prison, where her father was confined. Her mother raised her daughter on the streets while living off charity from her relatives. Francoise found herself, at the age of fifteen, in Paris, in a dependent and almost menial position. The teenager decided to marry the middle-aged poet Paul Scarron, became a famous *salonniere*, and after his death became highly involved in the affairs of Louis XIV. She acted as confidante to Madame de Montespan, Louis XIV's mistress, and as governess to Montespan's children by Louis; she was a friend and confidante to queen Marie Therese who died in her arms; she then became Louis XIV's companion and was married secretly to him in 1684.

But it is Maintenon as passionate advocate of girls' education that I focus on today. Herself a governess as we saw to royal pupils, Maintenon wished to establish a home for poor girls of noble extraction placed in such dire straits as she herself had experienced. She started a small home for poor girls at Ruel, afterwards moved to Noisy, which was the nucleus of the splendid institution of St-Cyr,² endowed by Louis XIV. Maintenon herself framed the rules of the institution, concerned herself with details, personally got to know her 'little girls', as she called them, and it was at St-Cyr that she died in retirement in 1719.

The house at Saint-Cyr, called the 'Institut de Saint-Louis', was intended to receive 200 young ladies, who had to be poor and also able to prove four degrees of nobility on their father's side; on leaving this house each one was to receive a dowry of 3000 crowns. Instead of beginning as a convent school, St-Cyr emphasized teachers from the secular world coming in to teach the pupils, the object being to turn out well-educated women, and not nuns. In line with this view, luminaries of arts and letters were involved in pedagogic activities at St-Cyr. Racine and Boileau approved the plans. The celebrated educator and moralist Fénelon came to Saint-Cyr to preach.

² Much of the information on St-Cyr is from the online *Catholic Encyclopedia*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09548b.htm>, accessed 3 September, 2003.

Lulli composed the music for the choirs. Racine wrote for the pupils the plays *Esther* and *Athalie*, which were performed by the girls in 1689 and 1691.

At the instigation of Jesuits and Jansenists, this encouragement of female theatrical talent was stopped, and in 1692, the school became a monastic boarding-school. Even then, of the 1121 ladies who passed through Saint-Cyr from 1686 to 1773, only 398 became nuns. And the course of instruction was superior, it was generally agreed, to that of any other French school in the eighteenth century. Part of this curriculum was Mme de Maintenon's oeuvre: her 'Entretiens', 'Conversations', and Proverbs, unique contributions to French literature and pedagogy.

Through biographical narrative, Maintenon was a potent influence for British women of letters and educators. The novelist Charlotte Lennox, for example, whose most famous work was *The Female Quixote* (1755), translated five volumes of biographical material on Maintenon.³ Among other notable women influenced by Maintenon were Lady Mary Hamilton, and Clara Reeve, who reacted to their predecessor in quirky and striking ways in their own narratives describing female-led and female-centred utopian communities, published in 1778, and 1791-92 respectively.

The eighteenth century has proved a treasure trove for readers and delvers into the history of women's writing. This is a period, particularly from the middle of the eighteenth century, when the public sphere of writing, especially fiction, sees an explosion of writing by women, whom Samuel Johnson, himself a notable encourager of a group of intellectual 'Bluestocking' women, described as 'amazons of the pen'. At the same time, this is a period when the relationship between women, education, writing, and fiction is close. A far more educative, didactic model of writing, particularly fiction, than we have had since then is influential at the time. It is accepted that nothing teaches or corrupts better than fiction: Rousseau's treatise on education, *Emile* (1762) is fictionalised, while Samuel Richardson's novels *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1746) are read as much as manuals or conduct-books on female education as novels. In the mean time, an ambitious, articulate breed of educated gentlewomen is emerging into the world of letters.

Delving into eighteenth-century women's writing, one finds many texts describing educative female utopias. Mary Astell's *Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of Their True and Greatest Interest* (1694) describes a female community and seminary where the women inhabitants devote themselves to improving their own minds and to educating younger

³ Charlotte Lennox, *Memoirs for the History of Madame de Maintenon and of the last age. Translated from the French* [of Laurent Angliviel de la Beaumelle], 5 vols (London: A. Millar, 1757)

gentlewomen. Astell's work is not a fictional narrative work, but the ones that follow her in this trend are, most notably Sarah Scott's *Millenium* [sic] *Hall* (1762), Mary Hamilton's *Munster Village* (1778), and Clara Reeve's *Plans of Education* (1792).

Utopias etymologically hinge on the pun in the meaning of the Greek word, at once 'no place', and 'a good place'. Female utopias conjure up an idealised world where active, thoughtful women ameliorate the 'wrongs of women'. I am looking today at utopias where education is a central concern. While it is doubtful whether any of the women I focus on, whether French, British, or Indian, would have used the term to describe their works, it is we who translate the notion of utopia to women's fictional worlds, seeing the combination of yearning and ambition powerfully charging these works as epitomizing a utopian impulse. Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall* (1762) through its title evokes a paradisaical world, one recreated by redemptive women, the supposed agents of man's Original Sin. *Munster Village* uses the image of the landed estate and its owner, to describe a village founded and administered by a woman. *Plans of Education* uses a mixture of fiction and polemic to didactically describe a seminary for poor, well-born women. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* (1905) uses the dream vision form. Her *Padmarag* (1924) is structured as a narrative romance cum novella describing an educative and reformist community founded and administered by women. All are fruitfully considered as female utopias. And for many of the British women, Maintenon's real-life St-Cyr did seem like an experimental educative utopia.

Munster Village by Lady Mary Hamilton (1739-after 1818)⁴ is a flamboyant novel. Published in 1778, the novel has a heroine, Lady Frances Darnley, who, after the death of her brother, is left guardian to a minor nephew and niece, and caretaker of a large landed estate. Lady Frances founds a village that she designs herself, and proceeds to organise every aspect of it. Indeed, in Scotland at the time, there was a real-life tradition of planned villages being set up and administered by the landed gentry.⁵ The village that Lady Frances founds is, however, motivated not primarily by wealth-generating considerations, but by benevolent and welfarist ones: she

⁴ Chapter I in Barnita Bagchi, *Pliable Pupils and Sufficient Self-Directors: Narratives of Female Education by Five British Women, 1778-1814* (forthcoming, New Delhi: Tulika, 2003) analyses Hamilton's oeuvre in greater detail.

⁵ T.C. Smout, 'The Landowner and the Planned Village in Scotland, 1730-1830,' in *Scotland in the Age of Improvement: Essays in Scottish History in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by N. Phillipson and R. Mitchison (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970), pp. 73-106.

believes that 'society is manifestly maintained by a circulation of social kindness'⁶, and her enterprise is an attempt to invigorate and give direction to such circulation.

While I do not have space here to go into the details of activities undertaken in her village, let me assure you that they are encyclopaedic, ranging from measures to regulate trade and industry, experimenting with new crops, encouraging sericulture, to founding an ambitious library, maintaining an academy for boys, and, in more limited fashion, encouraging the formal education of girls. However, depiction of such formal education of girls is only a small part of the larger picture of female education and development in the work. *Munster Village* is filled with the life histories of an array of Lady France's women friends, who find refuge in her community. Such women have encountered great suffering from a range of patriarchal, familial oppressive practices, such as despotic husbands whom they cannot legally divorce according to laws of the time, or lovers who abandon them after having children with them. We have sympathetic pictures of women journeying through the 'school of adversity' or the 'school of hard knocks', using their talents and education to navigate the process. Such narratives of women's lives are arguably central impulses in an overwhelming majority of female utopias, from Hamilton to Hossain.

Hamilton's writing is cosmopolitan and European in perspective, full of accounts of Italian women mathematicians, praise of Dutch virtue and education, and other testaments to her love of Continental European culture. But, strikingly, she is NOT an admirer of Madame de Maintenon's educational project, because she does not find it useful enough: the good old Scottish love of the functional, we may say! She explicitly contrasts the Munster school with Madame de Maintenon's Saint-Cyr, 'where the young women, who should have been instructed in rural labours, and economy in the duties of a family...by their education, were only fit to be addressed by men who were rich enough to require in a wife nothing *but virtue*.'⁷ Hamilton dignifies and justifies this accent on usefulness, citing the ancients, 'who esteemed it an honour to understand the making of every thing necessary for life one's self, without any dependence on others.'⁸ The same principle of accenting the useful is also followed with the boys and even in Lady Frances's own family, where she chooses to educate her nephew to be a merchant. Indeed, many of her adult female protagonists, who have received a more advanced education, also pride themselves on having

⁶ Mary Hamilton, *Munster Village*, ed. By Sarah Baylis ([1778] London: Pandora, 1987), p. 20.

⁷ Hamilton, *Munster Village*, p. 26.

⁸ *Munster Village*, p. 26.

useful skills that can, and are used for the ‘natural purpose’ of earning one’s living—one of them makes and sells artificial flowers, while another sells her own paintings.

Hamilton’s ideal vision of female selfhood is inflected by European, not primarily British, influence: she presents an ideal of a distinctive brand of female virtuoso. For Hamilton, the term virtuoso goes beyond its etymological origin, the amoral, Italian, Machiavellian *virtù*, and has the added connotation of moral virtue, which, in their surprisingly varied and unusual ways, each of her women characters possesses:

The Italians, on the revival of the liberal arts and sciences, gave them the name of *virtù*; from this was derived the term *virtuoso*, which has been accepted throughout Europe. Should not this appellation intimate, to those who assume it to themselves, that the study of what is beautiful, in nature or art, ought to render them more virtuous than other men.⁹

When women become virtuosos, they also overturn the amorality institutionalised in existing norms of virtuosity. They combine action in the public and the private spheres, harmonise refinement and virtue, and are anitheses to a strongly masculinist and negative type of the virtuoso, a type embodied by the despotic husbands, amoral fathers, and cruel lovers in the novel. A meditation on the word and the meaning of ‘virtue’ and ‘virtuoso’ is opportune here. Among the Romans, ‘virtue’ (Latin *virtus*) meant valour or courage on the field of battle, stoutness of heart in a soldier. It came from the Latin root for man, *vir*, and so represented something inherently masculine. But by the time Hamilton was writing, ‘virtue’ was reserved almost exclusively as a euphemism for a woman’s ability to preserve her virginity before marriage. This allows us to see how bold Hamilton’s double reconfiguring of ‘virtue’ and ‘virtuoso’ is. Hamilton’s work is filled with women, such as Miss Harris in *Munster Village*, who have lost their chastity before marriage, but are seen as highly virtuous, cultivated, sensitive; most of them are also competent working women. Meanwhile, Hamilton’s ideal of virtuosity, instead of prizing ruthless display of manly talents, prizes benevolent sociability expressed through concrete, useful social development, and the harnessing and generation of social capital through projects in education, economics, and social engineering.

⁹ *Munster Village*, p. 28.

Clara Reeve (1729-1807)¹⁰ also wrote narratives of female development describing women engaging themselves in educational and welfarist work. A pioneering critic of the novel, her *The Progress of Romance* (1785), in conversation form, has three protagonists, two female and one male, with Euphrasia, the Reeve-voice, choosing to defend the moral, aesthetic, and epistemological value of the romance and the novel against the male detractor, Hortensius: the gendering of narrative fiction is thus graphically obvious in Reeve's work.

In the early 1790s, in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the war of ideas, as Marilyn Butler has termed it,¹¹ that shook Europe, Reeve penned two remarkable pieces of fiction, *The School for Widows* (1791) and *Plans of Education* (1792).¹² In *The School for Widows*, the two widows of the title, Mrs Strickland and Mrs Darnford, both suffer from and escape unhappy marriages, one through separation, the other only through early widowhood. Mrs Darnford is the doughtier and more pioneering of the two, and she chooses to leave her husband when he tries to sell her sexual favours to an aristocratic friend. Reeve gives us fascinating and graphic descriptions of Mrs Darnford embarking on a long struggle to establish herself as a teacher, first resisting the insolence meted out to governesses by employers, then choosing to start up her own school, in friendship and alliance with a lower-class carpenter's widow. As a powerful, rational, yet affective educator, she rescues an incarcerated madwoman in her charge back to sanity, and acts as confidante and advisor to her friend Mrs Strickland after they reunite after Mrs Strickland's despotic husband's death.

Madame de Maintenon is a powerful presence in the sequel to *The School for Widows*, *Plans of Education* (1792). Reeve here shows Mrs Darnford, now a happy working woman living with an adopted daughter, planning a community or Protestant convent of sorts to train poor, gently-born women in paid trades. She proposes to do this partly from an awareness of the threat of prostitution for such women, even while she expresses sympathy for prostitutes. In this, Reeve is not unusual among women writers in the 1790s,¹³ and is in fact an early articulator of such

¹⁰ See Chapter II in Bagchi, forthcoming, *Pliable Pupils and Sufficient Self-Directors*, for a detailed analysis of Reeve's trajectory as writer on female development and education.

¹¹ Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

¹² See Barnita Bagchi, 'Re-Visiting Clara Reeve's 1790s Fiction: *The School for Widows* (1791) and *Plans of Education* (1792)', paper presented at the Eighth International British Women's Writers Conference, Albuquerque, September 1999, <http://www.igidr.ac.in/~barnita/bwwc1.pdf>.

¹³ See Vivien Jones, 'Placing Jemima: Women Writers of the 1790s and the Eighteenth-Century Prostitution Narrative,' *Women's Writing*, 4.2 (1997), 201-220.

views, which radical writers such as Mary Hays, Mary Anne Radcliffe, and Anne Frances Randall also express later in the decade.

Reeve proposes that widows, women whose husbands work abroad, abroad, single ladies, and ladies of advanced age who wish to retire from the world¹⁴ should found and manage this community. The structure of the seminary would be a Sisterhood, with a Council, comprising twelve members to govern the community. The head would be a Superior. Each member of the Sisterhood would have a particular office: there would be a Treasurer, a Superintendent of the Household, a Governess, a Housekeeper, an 'Intendant' (Intendant is an 'ancien regime' French officer) of the garden, of the cellar, of the dairy and poultry and of all the 'works done in the community, particularly those made and sold for the benefit of the poor young women in it,' a Secretary, and an Accountant.¹⁵ The conception of the council is a combination of the secular and the religious: we have the Superior, and also the twelve members of the council, the number bringing to mind the twelve apostles. At the same time, the offices are practical and administrative.

The inmates and students would be a combination of charity pupils and fee-paying pupils. The charity-pupils will in turn be educated to be working women: to be assistant teachers, milliners, lace-makers, stay-makers, embroiderers, knitters, or florists,¹⁶ spending part of their time using the skills they are being trained in, and what they make will be sold. The profits would be used for the charity-pupils, to set them up in business or as their marriage portion.¹⁷ These pupils are to be called 'Assistants' to the Sisterhood, even their name signalling their status as nascent working women.

In the course of my research, I found that this structure, and the kind of pupils sought, are almost exactly those adopted at St-Cyr. Reeve's charity pupils were to be 'daughters of clergymen, officers in the army and navy, placemen, or any profession whose parents have died in indigent circumstances, and left them entirely destitute of any provision.'¹⁸ The Letters Patent of St-Cyr granted by Louis XIV seek to educate young women of noble birth whose fathers have died in

¹⁴ Clara Reeve, *Plans of Education* (London: Hookham and Carpenter, 1792; repr. New York: Garland Publishing, 1974), p. 152.

¹⁵ *Plans of Education*, pp. 142-144.

¹⁶ *Plans of Education*, pp. 146-148.

¹⁷ *Plans of Education*, p. 148.

¹⁸ *Plans of Education*, p. 144.

service, or whose families have exhausted their resources.¹⁹ The wording is similar in both cases. Like St-Cyr, Reeve's community has a Superior and other Sisters in charge of teaching and administration.²⁰ As in St-Cyr, so in Reeve's community both teachers and pupils are bound by vows.

Why Maintenon, and why did I go back to her while researching Reeve? The answer is provided by Reeve's eulogy in *Plans of Education* of Madame de Maintenon as an ideal educative woman, who through her benevolence and charity atones for the corruptions of Louis XIV's court. Reeve counters Tom Paine's *Rights of Man* (published, like Reeve's *The School for Widows* and *Plans of Education*, in 1791-92) by invoking Maintenon, thus adopting a conservative feminist position. It was Maintenon who influenced Louis XIV to endow St-Cyr, and Reeve states, 'Once when Madame de Maintenon was speaking to him [Louis XIV] of the good effects of the education at St-Cyr, he answered, 'O that I could give to God as many souls as my bad example has snatched from him!''²¹

In *Plans of Education*, a dark, disjunction-ridden work, Reeve shows the dialectic of Enlightenment consummately—she speaks against the abolition of slavery, recommends that the poorest children in her society need not be literate, and speaks against the mixing of races in the Caribbean. Her commitment to female competence and female education starkly shows up its prejudices and limits in a work penned during a polarising period, after the French Revolution.

So, if we carry over Reeve's pioneering depiction of courageous women leaving oppressive marriages, her striking, earthy depictions of women trying to gain dignity as teachers and school-owners, her attempt to formulate a vocational training scheme for poor gently born girls, her fascinating iconography of the woman educator as symbol of redemption of a corrupt aristocracy, we also need to carry over the dark exclusions in her narrative of 'plans of education' led by British gentlewomen.

¹⁹ '...we thought it no less just and useful to provide for the education of young girls of noble birth, especially for those whose fathers, having died in service, or having been depleted by expenses, found themselves unable to make suitable provision for their daughters.' My translation, from French quotation of the original document in Jacques Prévot, *La Première Institutrice de France, Madame de Maintenon* (Paris: Editions Belin, 1981), p. 24.

²⁰ Prévot, *La Première Institutrice de France*, p. 28.

²¹ Reeve, *Plans of Education*, pp. 205-206.

We journey now from the late eighteenth century in Britain to the early twentieth century in India, to the extraordinary life and oeuvre of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, educationist, campaigner for women's emancipation, essayist and polemicist, novelist, and social worker, who lived from 1880 to 1932. Space does not permit me to go into the full range of achievements of this clever, untiring, creative, and daring woman.²² In the context of this paper, we need to remember that like Madame de Maintenon, Rokeya was a real-life pioneering educator of women, who founded one of the first successful, modern schools for Muslim women in Kolkata, named after her late husband (which is today a government-aided school), and also engaged in social welfare-oriented work, including slum development and organizing vocational training for women through an organization she mobilised, the Anjuman-I-Khawatin-I-Islam.

Rokeya wrote two educative female utopias, of which one is very well-known today, while the other has sunk into obscurity. The first, *Sultana's Dream*, was written in English, and was published in a Madras-based periodical, the *Indian Ladies' Magazine*, in 1905. The second, *Padmarag*, was written in Bengali, and published by the author in 1924. The first work is a short, witty, delightful dream-vision, describing a 'herland' (to evoke the association of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's female utopia of that name, published a full ten years after Rokeya's work), ruled by clever, educated women, led by the principal of a college who rules the country, who take over through sheer intelligence the government of a land formerly ravaged by masculine, aggrandizing war and conquest. In Rokeya's Ladyland, men are secluded, since they are the ones who pose threats to women.

'Sultana's Dream' is a virtuoso work, formally elegant and compact, stylistically smooth-flowing, and intellectually witty and cunning. It deserves to be widely known—but the fact that it is very well-known certainly owes much to its being in English. The edition of 'Sultana's Dream' I use is published by the Feminist Press of New York,²³ and you will find on the World Wide Web the full text of the work.²⁴

²² See Sonia Nishat Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal 1876-1929* (Leiden: Brill, 1996) for a valuable exposition of the times and contexts of Rokeya. See also Bharati Ray, *Early Feminists of Colonial India: Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).

²³ Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *Sultana's Dream and Selections from The Secluded Ones*, ed. and trans. By Roushan Jahan, afterword by Hanna Papanek (New York: The Feminist Press, 1988).

²⁴ <http://www.geocities.com/sultanarokeya/naristan.html>

In today's paper, I am going to devote greater attention to the second work, *Padmarag*,²⁵ a work I am engaged in translating. In every sense of the term, this is far less easy to access than 'Sultana's Dream'. Written in Bengali, brought out not by a well-known publisher but by the author, hitherto untranslated, stylistically hybrid and uneven, dark and complex in its vision of female difficulties and female-led reform projects, it calls for nuanced translation, annotation, and analysis, which I am trying to do, and it is a challenging task!

Padmarag creates a complex educational and philanthropic female utopia. It describes a female-founded and female-administered community set in contemporary Bengal, where women from diverse religions, regions, and ethnicities, with unhappy histories of patriarchal and familial oppression, band together with an educative and philanthropic project, their set of activities ranging from formal education to propagating crafts and caring for the sick and the destitute. It offers a series of personal narratives of the women working in the institution, narratives which recount and indict the familial and marital oppression to redress which the institution Tarini Bhavan is founded. The novella thus simultaneously indicts the 'wrongs of woman', (the subtitle of *Maria*, 1798, another searing late eighteenth-century utopian feminist novella by Mary Wollstonecraft), while offering a reformist educative project administered by powerful, benevolent gentlewomen, which will offer 'a vindication of the rights of woman' (the title of Wollstonecraft's most famous work, published in 1792).

The philanthropic institution at the centre of *Padmarag*, called 'Tarini Bhavan', is named after its founder, a young widow named Dinatarini Sen. 'Dinatarini' means saviour of the poor: literally, 'tarini' means a boatsman, who rows the distressed out of danger. It is a name infused with the spiritual and the religious, and one notes in Bengali cultural heritage many songs addressed to God imaged as Dinatarini, particularly in the voices of old women, often widows, praying to God to steer them across the sea of life to a haven beyond. Tarini Sen rescues and looks after many women, including widows, for whom death has become preferable to life, not to mention those whom she saves from death's door.

Tarini Bhavan has a school, a workshop or training institute for adult women, a home for widows, and a home for the destitute. The school has both day-scholars and boarders. A 'Society for the Alleviation of Female Suffering' forms the moral, ideological, and institutional core of the

²⁵ Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *Padmarag*, in *Begam Rokeya Racanavali* (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1993).

project. Some of the inhabitants of Tarini Bhavan are called 'sisters', short for 'sisters of the poor', wear a uniform of saffron or blue, and have no separate rooms: the monastic ideal of service and renunciation is thus as present in the institution as it is in its founder's life. The space that is created in Tarini Bhavan is indeed somewhat like a nunnery or ashram, secluded from the mainstream social and familial space that most women occupy, even though the workers of Tarini Bhavan have to come into constant contact with the established social milieu in the course of their work. Tarini Sen's activities are not looked upon with favour by her family, who ostracise her, and spread scandal about her as a consorter with fallen women, lepers, and orphans. In a sense, Dinatarini, like many of the women she befriends, is an outcaste from society ('samaj-chyuta'), as Rokeya says. The institution lives under the constant threat of being branded immoral or improper, as indeed Rokeya's own school was throughout her life, so that, for example, the mother-in-law of a student in the Tarini Bhavan school has no hesitation in branding Dinatarini a whore.

In the Tarini Bhavan workshop or training institute, needy women are trained to earn their own living. Unmarried women, married women, and widows—women from all statuses and classes come here. Bookbinding, spinning, and sewing are undertaken, sweets are made to be sold, teacher training is given, typing is taught, as is nursing: we get a veritable compendium of the various marketable skills for women in Rokeya's time, as we do in Reeve's *Plans of Education*. The women also set out to deliver relief in kind, including through nursing, to places struck by disasters such as famine or floods. Some of the trainees help in running the home for the destitute where refugeless poor and handicapped people receive medical attention.

The school does not take government grants or sponsorship. Nor does it accept donations or help from native states pledging allegiance to the British government. Nor are they taught the kind of colonial history that teaches them to despise their own pasts and culture. Rokeya's nationalist agenda becomes clear through such prescriptions. The pupils are also given an education in all standard subjects, such as mathematics, geography, physical and life sciences, and are taught to be self-sufficient, and not 'wooden dolls'.

Generically, *Padmarag* is a very hybrid piece. It is a novel with a free-flowing narrative style, with a liberal element of melodrama and romance-type coincidence. It is also a boldly polemical, intellectual, passionate feminist treatise. If romance and melodrama form one strand, another strand is grittily and wittily realistic, in its depiction of a female-administered school and institution: Rokeya, well-endowed with her own experience of running a pioneering school for

Muslim girls, gives us wryly humorous descriptions of the thousand little and not so little trials and tribulations besetting the administration of a girls' school. She gives us vivid vignettes of pioneering working women, typing, or writing, or teaching, or taking care of a thousand other duties, trying to create a utopia in an unhelpful, lacklustre workaday world.

Rokeya's vision in this novella is uncompromisingly unsectarian, showing that Hindus, Brahmos, Muslims, and Christians, black women and white women, all suffer from patriarchal oppression, and all must receive succour and education from communities of women absolutely determined to fight these evils and reform society. Reading this novella brings home to us just how bold, wide-ranging, and universalist Rokeya's vision of feminism and education was. She creates critique after critique of institutionalised familial, marital, and sexual practices which lead women literally to madness or the brink of death or suicide, as in the case of the eponymous heroine of the work.

The narratives of these women are conveyed through the topos of 'sad stories' or pathetic tales, almost in a gesture of playful cliché. These women are all, in differing ways, 'biye fail',²⁶ as the novella says, in a pun on 'biye' or marriage, and BA, the academic degree, a play on words that conveys in wry shorthand the difficulties, terrors, and sadness of women failing at their most common degree, examination, and vocation, namely marriage. This ranges from Saudamini, the chaste Hindu wife who is demonised and driven into madness after being seen as a monstrous stepmother, to the white Englishwoman Helen Horace, 'tied for life to a lunatic' whom she cannot divorce according to English laws.

Padmarag is named after a mysterious young woman rescued by the Tarini Bhavan sisters, nicknamed Padmarag (meaning Ruby), who carries a bewildering number of names and identities, including Siddika and Zainab. At the end of the novella, Rokeya refuses to give her heroine the conventional ending of the courtship novel, rejecting marriage and heterosexual domesticity as the telos of women's lives: she explodes the romance-style courtship narrative in which the highminded, well-educated, suffering young woman is reabsorbed into the world of patriarchal domesticity.

With all their heterogeneity and their distance across space and time, *Padmarag*, as should be clear by now, also has resonant affinities with the late eighteenth-century female utopias by Lady Mary Hamilton and Clara Reeve that I presented to you earlier, notably a narrative of a

²⁶ *Begam Rokeya Racanavali*, p. 346.

female-founded, female-led community, plans of reform that accord great importance to female education, personal histories of women living in the community highlighting patriarchal and familial despotism, and ambitious developmental and welfarist projects which notably involve training women in paid trades and caring for the destitute and the sick.

I now bring together some of the issues involving translation, identities, diversities, and the pleasures and perils of comparatist cross-cultural, cross-historical feminist work, before I conclude my paper with an argument that utopias of female education contribute to our conceptualisation of social capital and ethical development practices.

I invoked the real-life aristocrat-educator Madame de Maintenon, and showed that, reading two British women writer's female utopias as European and not merely British texts, Maintenon emerges as a significant influence, in surprising ways. Lady Mary Hamilton spent the latter part of her life in France, wrote her last novel in French, and *Munster Village* was translated into French. A love of European culture permeates her work, in particular for the European model of the *salonniere*-intellectual. But Maintenon is not a model of the female educator that she admires. On the other hand, Clara Reeve, who writes as a thrifty, stern, provincial British gentlewoman, does admire Maintenon, and uses her female community and seminary as a model. Such fascinating cross-cultural influences and antagonisms emerge when we start reading works by British women also as European ones.

I also swept forward through history to read Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's two educative female utopias. Here, through her works, we saw that Rokeya, a Muslim woman, showed unwavering commitment to unsectarian solidarity with women of all religions, particularly as found in *Padmarag*. In analysing this remarkable work, I raised the point that 'Sultana's Dream' has contributed to a particular understanding of Rokeya, while *Padmarag*, in Bengali, and far more obscure, will raise some more dark and complex issues, and deepen our knowledge of how ambitious Rokeya's vision of female education and reformism was in real life, in line with the more grittily realistic texture of *Padmarag*.

Diversities and disjunctions, I have been arguing throughout, are essential to cross-cultural, cross-historical feminist scholarship. So it is that a highly provincial English gentlewoman uses a Europeanist perspective in her reinvoking of the *salonniere*-aristocrat Maintenon, while a

Scottish woman of letter's notions of female virtuosity are far better understood by using a European rather than British perspective. So too a pioneering Bengali feminist who struggled all her life to write in Bengali against the hegemony of Urdu is best remembered by non-Bengalis today for a female utopia she wrote in English, while another, longer, more complex novelistic female utopia in Bengali by her is virtually unknown.

Such comparatist cross-cultural, cross-historical feminist work leads us to moments of affinity, as when we encounter Rokeya's narratives of women from all religious backgrounds banding together to form a community. Such work also leads us to moments of shock and revulsion, as when we encounter Reeve's obnoxious views on race, slavery, and miscegenation. Reading Hamilton, Reeve, and Hossain, we celebrate tales of working women and powerful social engineers forging female identities, and creating educative spaces for women. But we also actively write in the disturbing exclusions generated by the limitations of the particular socio-historical affiliations of many such women.

What have narratives of female education or real-life and fictional educative female-led and female-authored utopias got to do with development or social capital? Thankfully, while some audiences might find the connection obscure, I am sure that an audience familiar with an organization like Katha will not. This after all is a civil society foundation that explicitly links narrative, creativity, and translation with real-life development practices, including education and training in urban Indian slums.

'Society is manifestly maintained by a circulation of kindness', wrote Lady Mary Hamilton, we saw, in *Munster Village*. She was the citizen of a country and a period that saw a blossoming of what we today call the Scottish Enlightenment, which successfully philosophised ideals of virtuous sociability and how this is crucial to the development of a self-renewing, civic-minded, commercial society. Sensibility, a commerce in social kindness, and sympathy were seen to be indispensable for a virtuous, civic-minded society where economic progress would go hand in hand with growth in civilization and altruism. Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* (1705) provoked debate on the issue by its notorious thesis that 'private vices' lead to substantial 'public benefits', whereas virtuous behaviour does very little good at all. The Scottish philosophers disagreed, as did Hamilton or Reeve—or as many of us here today would.

Going back to a period when modern European economics and education were being shaped, we find Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* to be one in an array of writings (by Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, Adam Ferguson, Thomas Reid, and Dugald Stewart, to name the most prominent philosophers²⁷) penned during a time when moral philosophy and political economy were overlapping subjects. In today's parlance, eighteenth-century Scotland engaged in pioneering discussions of 'social capital'²⁸ -- or the networks, norms, and trust that facilitate social organization (to take Robert Putnam's definition²⁹), and fuel its development, not just in economic terms, but through commitment to social networks, civic vigilance and activism, and public action. Sympathy or the circulation of social kindness, I argue, is a vital constitutive element in the ethical practice of development, and narratives by women such as Hamilton, Hossain, or Reeve, all make important contributions to historicized development studies that puts long-neglected women at the centre-stage of enquiry.

Nor does this kind of work have to be from a Eurocentric paradigm. Indeed, both universalism and cosmopolitanism are epistemological as well as ethical frameworks that I myself work by. When we rediscover the vast richness of Rabindranath Tagore's writing and practice, for example, we find a fascinating combination of similar attempts to theorise altruistic sociability with hands-on attempts to practise education and development in innovative ways that prize the social, creative dimension of life. For me, this is an ongoing area of enquiry, and I leave it as a pointer to yet another journey.

But my own research is particularly interested in the intersection of gender and social capital. To be gendered a woman in a commercialising society has paradoxical consequences, particularly for gentlewomen. On the one hand claimants of a status as key citizens of a

²⁷ Francis Hutcheson, *Inquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue, in Two Treatises* (1725); David Hume, numerous significant works, among them *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40), *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, (1748), and *Political Discourses* (1752); Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767); Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, 1764; Dugald Stewart, *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, 1792.

²⁸ For a persuasive argument that Scottish Enlightenment philosophy can be seen as pioneering discussion of social capital, see Lindsay Paterson, 'Civil Society and Democratic Renewal', in *Social Capital: Critical Perspectives*, ed. by S. Baron, J. Field, and T. Schuller (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 39-55. The volume in which the article appears offers a number of excellent discussions of social capital which pay particular attention to education, social exclusion, and the role of social capital in making progress in these areas.

²⁹ Robert Putnam (with Robert Leonardi and Rafaella Nanetti), *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 167.

supposedly polite and civic-minded emergent bourgeois society, women also, on the other hand, find and reveal through their writings the limits, margins, deprivations, and inequities that get embedded in society in its phase of modernization and commercial progress. Women like Mary Hamilton push for cautious modernization, and write intensively about ways to secure women's education in a period where 'progress' and 'growth' are vaunted watchwords—but they also find the ambiguities of progress, and attempt to bring into their work and writing notions recuperated from the domestic sphere, such as compassion, trust, affective bonds, inwardness, conversational networks and so on.

Since I have worked primarily on gentlewomen-educators, that is my area of competence. Others who have worked on working class women writers, peasant women educators, or Dalit women educators will uncover further dimensions, which will in turn, like the very different women's voices in this paper, have their differences and disjunctions from the kind of texts and contexts I have uncovered today.

The apparent 'softness' of the areas of activity that women such as Rokeya or Maintenon chose, notably education, welfarist work for the sick and the destitute, and training the resourceless in vocational trades, can mask how oppositional these women writers' work is to narrowly utilitarian notions of the individualistic, atomised 'homo economicus', driven by self-interest and calculations, marching to the promised land of economic progress, occasionally condescending to formulate welfare measures for the poor, the women, the underclass. That there is no such easy, selfish march to progress is amply demonstrated by their work.

Social capital emerges as a highly generative tool for analysing the intersection of gender, (in particular women as agents of social change), education, and human development in Britain and India. 'Social capital' brings together the norms and practices of the sociable human acting to create and foster trust and networks, and the norms and practices of the economic human being working to manage and generate wealth. With economics seen, in its Greek sense, as the art or technique of managing our global household of wealth, whether human, social, or physical ('oikos' means household, while 'nomia' signifies laws— another act of translation, from a 'dead' language, that validates new ways of knowing), women function at one level as agents who are powerful in their traditional roles of nurturing, caring and fostering bonds of trust and altruism. At another level, particularly in periods of sweeping social change, such as Industrial Revolution Britain or colonial India or present-day India, women also become powerful agents of social transformation,

demanding and creating spaces for themselves and other disprivileged groups, most notably in the realm of education, an area that offers the consummate bridging of the private and the public spheres.

I have shown that the women's own narratives of identity-forging are integral to the models of development and social capital generation they engaged in or represented. Current practices and models of development are valuing the role of women as agents of social change and the particularly important role they play as educators: see, for example, the ongoing reports produced by Amartya Sen's Pratichi Trust which highlight the roles of caring women teachers, or the many examples of successful, often women-led civil society developmental and educational initiatives in India that put women at centre stage.

Indeed, I would argue that a feminization of the social sectors, especially education, is currently taking place in India, and also internationally in developing countries. Increasingly, as the state is seeing itself as a facilitator rather than deliverer of services such as education, there is stress on community participation and mobilization. Much stress is laid on the power of community trust and resources, and on women's ability to generate such trust and networks in their 'padas' or 'mohallas' in the realms of health (think of the 'pada workers' active in government health schemes) or education (whether in government programmes such as DPEP or Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, or in civil society movements such as MV Foundation, Pratham, or Katha).

While there is much criticism to be made of state indifference or withdrawal in these crucial human development areas, it is also the case that to fill the vacuum, women are emerging as key leaders and agents. Some of the most powerful Indian civil society movements are led by highly effective, articulate women leaders, from middle-class backgrounds, and they in turn mobilize numerous other women, often from lower classes, to further progress in areas such as education and abolition of child labour. The life-long learning processes, generating their own rich narratives,³⁰ that such contemporary leaders and agents undergo in the course of their developmental work unleashing social capital have rich resonances with the active, committed, sometimes disturbing women educators I have presented from history.

These historical women are part of the complex, thoughtprovoking heritage that we are recovering and reinventing, and they offer ample resources for furthering sceptical, questioning,

³⁰ See, for example, the web-page of Pratham India Education Initiative (<http://www.pratham.org>), which presents a continuing series of portraits couched as personal narratives of their successful teachers, trainers, and mobilizers, who are overwhelmingly women.

ethical, and creative models of development and education that dare to place women at centre stage, to benefit society as a whole.

I finish with a powerful reminder of the exclusions and disjunctions that must constantly be battled if we are not to leave behind whole sections of society in our own practices of education and development. A critical stance towards our own process of identity-formation and self-reflexiveness about our feminisms is indispensable for this, together with the readiness to learn from the richness of the past as we create a future.

A view of translation as 'carrying over' is invaluable here, for we know that in our acts of carrying over, there are always things that we leave behind, or add, according to the exigencies and needs of the source to target migration: let our creative self-reflection be nimble and alert in taking stock of the incommensurables, without debilitating or detracting from the immense richness that such 'carryings over' create.

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