

# biography

volume 39 . number 2 . spring 2016

*an interdisciplinary quarterly*



STEPHEN TAYLOR MARSH

*Self-Sacrifice in David Foster Wallace's  
The Pale King*

VANESSA GUIGNERY

*Jonathan Coe and B. S. Johnson:  
A Dialogue with Biography*

PRAMOD K. NAYAR

*Radical Graphics: Martin Luther King, Jr.  
and B. R. Ambedkar*

SUCHITRA SAMANTA

*Auto/Biographical Reading of Studio  
Photographs of My Mother*

SHEILA J. NAYAR

*White Overseers and the Story-Told Self  
in Early African-American Autobiography*

*Reviews*

**AN INTERPRETIVE AUTO/BIOGRAPHICAL  
READING OF STUDIO-POSED PHOTOGRAPHS:  
TELLING MY MOTHER'S LIFE IN COLONIAL  
AND POST-COLONIAL INDIA**

SUCHITRA SAMANTA

**INTRODUCTION**

In this essay, I “tell” my mother’s life through photographs of her, specifically those taken in studios,<sup>1</sup> but as more than a chronological life story. I intend to rediscover the person that she was, or was not, but chose to present. A deeply personal as well as feminist sensibility inspires this essay, to give voice and substance to a long silence. As colonial India approached independence, Ma successfully availed of opportunities for women to study medicine. But she would confront, in her circumstances and in her time, obstacles to her aspirations, and she died in her mid-forties. I draw from historical research on photography and on British initiatives to train Indian women in medicine, as well as other “texts,” to offer context and dimension to my reading of the photographs. I conclude with other possible narratives (cultural, religious, and philosophical) that contribute to my endeavors, a half century after her death.

Surabala (née) Karmakar (1918?–1965) came from a middle class (*bhadralok*) family of modest means in Bogra, in then East Bengal and present-day Bangladesh, in British India. She studied medicine at Calcutta Medical College (CMC), entering a class of ninety-seven men and eight women in 1935, and graduating with several high awards in 1941. She worked at various hospitals in and near Calcutta<sup>2</sup> from 1942 on, and married my father, her classmate Sushil Kumar Bardhan Ray (“Baba,” 1918?–2009) in 1946. Illness during her late pregnancy with me at the end of 1948 forced her to give up work. For reasons centrally related to the partition of India and Pakistan (1947),

such as the loss of my paternal grandparents’ home and farmland in then East Bengal, and my father’s need for secure work with the (British) Indian Medical Service (IMS) that would support both his own large family as well as Ma’s financially struggling family, she would not again have a career. She accompanied my father as he continued to serve in independent India’s Army Medical Corps, in his postings across India. As I turned sixteen, Ma died of a stroke in Pune, western India.

I have gathered these facts from various sources, including my father’s unpublished memoir (in English), family recollections, my own memories, testimonials written by Ma’s seniors at work, and CMC *Annual Reports* and certificates. But these are others’ voices that speak to Ma’s life’s trajectory and personality. In this essay, I seek some semblance of *her* voice in professionally-taken photographs, ones she chose to take, even though those other voices, including mine, through questions, interpretation, and comment, necessarily intervene. Three of the photographs are from family collections. Five are from an album evidently compiled by Ma as she graduated, dated in her handwriting “5th February 1942” on the inside front cover.

Different aspects of a “self” are revealed in these photographs, from a spirited young medical student, to a newly minted professional, to a new wife’s gift of her photograph to her husband. However, one photograph of her as a mother with her young children (my sister and me) suggests a domesticity I do not associate with Ma. Anecdotal recollections by family and descriptions of her or observations from Baba’s memoir support that reading of a woman who is likable and modest even as she is unconventional, and a brilliant high-achiever. But there is, I argue, a coherence between the younger woman and the mother I remember, who was not particularly sentimental, was given to rages, and ambitious to educate her daughters, but who could be deeply caring. I proceed, however, with some caution in my endeavor, given the uncertainties at stake.

The theme of ambiguity in reading photographs, from a point distant in time and possibly space, is taken up by several scholars. Conventions of photography at an earlier point in time, for example, contribute to particular kinds of posed images. A studio picture may have been dictated by the photographer, implying an element of playacting and a subject who may or may not have chosen to represent herself in that way (Karlekar, *Re-visioning* 11). Commenting on the “inauthenticity” and even “imposture” of the posed photograph, Barthes observes that “I constitute myself in the process of ‘posing’” (10), and that as subject, he is at the same time “the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art” (13).

A significant aspect for the viewer especially of family photographs is the emotion that colors that seeing. Even as different people might see an old

photograph in different ways, and offer different interpretations and even contexts, the familial seeing can uphold or contest dominant family ideologies, history, and structure (M. Hirsch, *Family* 117). While the subject aspires to her “visual immortality,” the viewers “answer to their own longings and curiosities” (J. Hirsch 9), navigating between “ambiguity, intention and actuality” (12). For viewers, such pictures are both “text and image, intricately tangled in a narrative web” connecting family in emotions of “desire and disappointment, love and loss,” revealing even as they conceal (M. Hirsch, *Family* 4–5).

Other writers suggest that if a reader’s affect and a photographer’s control over the image contribute to what is unknowable in a photograph, social, cultural, and historical contexts can inform the viewer. Bourdieu describes photography as a “system of schemes of perception, thought and appreciation common to a whole group” (6), noting that photographic conventions are associated with the values and *ethos* of a class (8). Analogously, Barthes proposes the concept of *studium*: the political, social, and historical context of a photograph for the viewer (28). He also, interestingly and with pertinence to some of the photographs I will discuss, distinguishes *studium* from *punctum*, by which the viewer is “punctured” by some element in the photograph, forcing an engagement. The *punctum* is there without the intention of the photographer, startling the viewer (47) and “disturbing the *studium*” (27). If the *studium* explains, the *punctum* inspires curiosity, questions, and possibly affect, critique, and a personal investment (see also M. Hirsch, *Family* 4; Karlekar, *Re-visioning* 10). Citing Barthes (76), Christopher Pinney examines the “event” of the photograph at the moment of exposure, distinguishing the “corps” from the “corpus”—that is, the relationship of that event to the psychic, social, and historical reality within which it is embedded—and asks if what the camera records can then be called “true” (“Coming Out Better” 25).

In light of the preceding, to what degree of veracity can I aspire in writing Ma’s life, surmising at the person she was this many years later? Looking at my mother’s photographs invokes in me a sense of poignant loss and hurt for a life of promise cut short. Such “looking” has impelled questions about my own life, its gendered trajectory, and travails. It is a feminist gaze I bring to bear, one that includes an old grief and many questions, for I have come to a point of empathy that connects Ma’s life narrative with my own. But I proceed with caution, wary of a “wanting to see.”

#### THE PAST AS PROLOGUE

I begin with a particular photograph I had seen over the years only in passing on the wall at my sister’s home in India, but which I actually noticed only in 2013 (Figure 1).



Figure 1. CMC group graduation photo, 1941 (photo courtesy of the author).

Ma is the only woman among thirteen men in a professionally-taken group graduation photograph. The picture has no provenance, but my family and I have surmised it to be of her graduation from CMC in 1941, given the gender ratio (and that her secondary education was at an all-girls school). She sits with her left leg sticking out slightly, the sole of her shoe to the camera, in a culture where such a posture can be seen as disrespectful. Unlike the others, she holds no diploma, while her robes, open where the men’s robes are closed, slide slightly off her left shoulder. She appears impatient, spirited, as she looks at the camera.

Was she late in showing up for this photograph, and had she left her diploma behind? Was she confident about her place as the sole woman in the group, or defiant, or both? Five of eight women in her entering class would graduate (*Annual Report*). Did the photographer insert the other four in other group photographs? Does Ma appear confident because she has successfully concluded a difficult, expensive, six-year course at a prestigious medical institution, in spite of her financially struggling family? Is she confident too because she is evidently beautiful? What, I ask, lies behind such achievement for a woman in her day, and such attitude?

To discover the narrative of her life, I connect a particular memory, an image associated with Ma's final days, and one immediately after her death, to the photograph in Figure 1. I remember Ma at the end, pale, thin, silent, and utterly vulnerable as she sits on the verandah of our home in Pune, watching me leave for the tennis courts after school. It is an image that sharply contrasts with Figure 1. She would have two mild strokes in 1964, and her last one in February 1965, and she died on April 11th, 1965. The day after her cremation on a wood pyre, my father and I sifted through her ashes (to cast into the river Hooghly at her funeral later in Calcutta). I found a small, thick, charred piece of bone. Even as my young mind asked how this was all that could be left of the lively, lovely, fierce mother I had known, I showed the bone to Baba. He said quietly, "That's the bone from her forehead. It does not burn easily." I reflected even then that my heretofore assured and unquestioned childhood could never again be so.

A day or so after Ma was cremated, I saw Baba weeping quietly as he sat alone on the verandah where Ma used to sit. He would raise two young daughters by himself in conservative Indian society, a formidable task. However, fearing social criticism of a growing and now motherless daughter, my father sent me to a reputable liberal arts institution, Lady Brabourne College in Calcutta to study English literature. In my second year of college, at age seventeen, Baba (and my extended family) began to pressure me into marriage, fearing I might bring dishonor to the family—despite my own excellent academic achievements at the time. I married at age twenty, by choice of a kind, putting my own dreams behind me. I left that marriage twelve years later with the clear sense that I deserved better and could do more than "tradition" demanded, and further, that much had gone wrong in Ma's life, not necessarily by choice. Determined that I would try to do what she could not, I applied to and was admitted to graduate school at the University of Virginia in the United States. I came to the USA on a wing and a prayer, to continue my interrupted studies and start over. Baba, though disapproving of my decision, paid for a semester's tuition and my air ticket—what he could afford.

A half-century after her death, the mother of a daughter myself, an academic, and a feminist, I reflect on the many contingent choices and compromises I have had to make in my life and in my own aspirations to higher education, for no reason other than that I was born a girl. Today, I reflect on the irony of what my father said after Ma was cremated. Behind that remnant of bone there had been a mind, the intense intelligence of a woman who had dreamed in her day of what she could be, and had availed of new opportunities for women in British India. She had dared.

### THE MOTHER I REMEMBER

There is one surviving studio photograph of Ma with my younger sister and me. I estimate its date as around 1954, based on how old we appear to be (Figure 2). I will start with what surprises me about it, and why. In the subsequent section I will return to photographs in Ma's album, with the intent of connecting the ambitious medical student, the doctor, and the mother I remember.



Figure 2. Ma, with my sister and me (photo courtesy of the author).

This is not the mother I remember. Her head is covered with the *anchal* (end) of her sari, a traditional method of veiling (*ghomta*) for married Hindu women at their wedding, but especially in the presence of in-laws. Ma did not like doing this, my father would say, nor do I remember her doing so. Here, she appears to be the image of compliant, conventional domesticity, a Bengali wife and mother, comfortably plump, with her young daughters, in a pose of maternal protection and love. Did she choose such a pose, or did the photographer choose for her? Did he ask her to cover her head?

Ma was not, as I remember, concerned with matters domestic or religious. No altar to Hindu deities graced our home. Nor was she overtly sentimental

or expressive in her love for her children, though this may be more of a cultural convention, or the lack of mothering in her own life.<sup>3</sup> However, in retrospect, I realize that Ma's concern and care for us was expressed in her uncompromising, even punishing, expectations for her girls' academic performance. My sister and I were sent to excellent and expensive schools in the cities where my father would be posted, where Christian, mostly European nuns taught us in English. This could not have been easy to afford for my young parents, given their financial commitments to both sides of the family. In post-colonial India, however, such an education afforded the best opportunities, as well as social status, and we were, I reflect today, being given every advantage.

I feared Ma's fierce wrath, the colorful curses she directed at her daughters, in Bengali ("You sister-fucking child" was one gender-inappropriate one I recall). With dispatch, she severed the tail of our spaniel puppy with a razor blade, declaring "It's only cartilage," and she would know. Since I witnessed this at a tender age I could claim a lifetime's trauma, but I also recall an unfazed puppy. I held a deep grudge towards her for her unsentimental attitude to my beloved dogs—"disappearing" (as in unilaterally abandoning) one when it gave birth to a litter of puppies. In another context I, then around nine, watched in awe as she roundly beat (by hand) her much younger half-sister into taking a nursing examination, when the latter balked. Ma had no inheritance, two feckless brothers, a father long dead, and was without an income to support her family, including an illiterate stepmother. After the beating, my aunt would take the exam, and work in a reputable cancer hospital in Calcutta, even rising to a senior position towards the end of her career.

But I also recall moments of maternal tenderness. When I was about eight years old, she would diagnose me when I developed acute appendicitis, and weep all the way in the ambulance that took me to the hospital. Since she was not usually given to emotion, I remember, even at the time, being surprised. After I severely pulled a muscle at a high school athletics meet (bringing home the Senior Division track and field championship), Ma stayed up through the night massaging my back with garlic boiled in hot mustard oil—but grounded me from all sports indefinitely, an injustice I chafed at but abided by, out of fear. I realize now that she gave short shrift to my love of, and success at, sports for fear that an injury might jeopardize the future she had in mind for me. Education, she believed, would empower her girls, where marriage would disempower them. Hence her repeated declaration to family that she would never marry us off, but educate us to the farthest extent possible. Yet, she allowed me to roam freely with my young friends through the fields and woods that surrounded the old British bungalows in which we lived—spaces with aggressive monkeys, and poisonous snakes—a freedom I reveled in, and evidently survived.

During these years Ma "speaks" herself once, in the only surviving piece of writing by her. On a yellow postcard, dated March 12, 1963 and handwritten in ink, in Bengali, Ma writes to my father as (I assume) he sees to family affairs in Calcutta. My translation follows:

Dear Bardhan,

I just had my *abcess* [sic] *opened*. I got this done by *Colonel B---*, [and] *M---*. My blood sugar is not high. At noon today I had the *operation*, and returned home by 2 pm. *B---* [another doctor] organized everything. Injection of *pethidine* and *local spray* was used for the procedure. There is nothing to worry about. The *dressing* will be changed daily. It will take about a week to clear up. And the children are well. For two to three days I suffered from the pain. I hope that it will be better by tomorrow. Don't be worried, everyone is looking after me well. Take your time to do what you need to before you return. The children are all right. Ma [her stepmother, then staying with us] is suffering from lumbago, as you know.

I end here,

Bochan

The tone of the postcard is gentle, caring, and in control even as it expresses her pain. It also hints at her stoical, courageous forbearance. She is the doctor, in her details of the surgical procedure she has just undergone at the army hospital, and the names of the anesthetic substances used (in English). But she is also wife, mother, and daughter, with different responsibilities. She addresses Baba by his last name, as he was known in college (and contrary to the traditional usage where a married woman, even today, often does not address her husband by his first name). He would call her "Snub Nose," *Bochan*, which is how she signs off.

In sum, even if colored in these brief vignettes by a child's, then a rebellious teen's (possibly biased) memory of a demanding mother, Ma seems to have been her own person—contrary to her placid self-presentation in the photograph—in control, defining maternal love unsentimentally, holding me to high educational achievement, and setting boundaries even as she allowed me freedom.

#### THE MEDICAL STUDENT AND DOCTOR

The contents of Ma's album, based on the few pictures with dates, span her college years from 1936, to photographs at their wedding, and subsequently, at least till 1946. Besides the three professionally taken photographs I will discuss, the other photographs in the album are ones she chose to include. For example, there are studio photographs of several women friends, non-studio ones of my father (traveling with the IMS), the young doctor herself at what

appear to be places of work, the new bride with her husband at the wedding venue in Calcutta, and my twin paternal uncles.<sup>4</sup>

Scholarship on the centrality of the studio-taken photograph for the upwardly mobile Indian middle classes (and aspiring women) in colonial India, as well as British initiatives to educate Indian women in medicine, provides some context to my discussion. Karlekar notes that by the mid-nineteenth century particular poses and backdrops in studio photography had spread from Europe to the colonized territories (*Re-visioning* 3; *Visual* xii).<sup>5</sup> Ramaswamy adds that in the visual regimes of Europe and its colonies, “image-making technologies” such as photography and film were “imperial dispersed but locally appropriated in creative and unexpected ways” (2). Pinney notes the “mechanization and industrialization of perception” in this technological innovation, but also criticizes photography as having “too many meanings for any efficacious nationalist instruction” (*Coming* 49). He also notes, however, the “central” place of the studio in people’s encounters with photography in early twentieth century India, where customers go to “local studio impresarios” in the hope that they will “come out better” in the hands of technicians who use costume, background, lighting, and camera angles to produce the “desired look . . . or expression” (“Coming Out” 29–30). In this vein, Geraldine H. Forbes, also noting how photography found a market with both colonial authorities and the new Indian professional class (“Small Acts” 59), proceeds to “tell” the photographs of three women (supplemented substantially by interviews, references to memoirs, and personal letters), where meanings are not fixed but rather “objects of negotiation” between subject (the woman) and viewer. In these “showing photographs” the young women posed for prospective in-laws, but were, in fact, resisting both their own families as well as the in-laws (60). These “new women” of the 1920s and 30s, wanting to pursue an education, resisted patriarchal authority by deliberately posing with body language or facial expressions not meant to please. Their photographs take on layered meanings, and argue against, says Forbes, the passive Indian woman (77).

The state of Bengal brought in 44 percent of the total revenue for the British, and their first capital, Calcutta, grew, as did the numbers of those Bengalis aspiring to white collar work as professionals. Women’s emergent roles went together with such aspirations to mobility (Karlekar, *Re-visioning* 6). The photograph became “precious evidence” of such recently acquired mobility and status, outweighing the “proscriptions of caste and community” (72). For enterprising men and women, “the appropriate photograph” provided a possible advantage for entering a new life (12).

In tandem with the changes I have described, a concern with educating Indian women came to the forefront from the mid-nineteenth century to the

years approaching Independence. The “woman question,” focused on alleviating Indian women’s “degraded” condition through education, was seen as central to the definition of modernity for the new nation-to-be (Bala; Chatterjee; Forbes, “Medical Careers,” *Women*; Ray; Seth 274). English-educated Indian women would bridge the gap between tradition (as defined) and modernity—that is, they would be cognizant of their domestic responsibilities, and serve as a home’s spiritual center, while men would do the public work that nationalist activities required.<sup>6</sup> Femininity, in the context of the “new woman” in an aspirant and modernizing India, was carefully defined and bounded, a “new patriarchy” that “legitimately” subordinated women (Chatterjee 248). The twentieth century women’s movement, “inextricably bound” to the freedom movement, would question the private-public dichotomy (Ray 177). In fact, Bengali women would be reported in British newspapers as the “most dangerous” of revolutionaries (189).

Women, and their relegation to the domestic sphere, played a complex role leading to a need for women doctors in colonial India. The “elusiveness” of Indian women challenged the hegemonic ambitions of Western medicine (Arnold 4), especially in the space known as the *zenana*, the secluded inner quarters where wives and family members of affluent Indians resided. The *zenana* was an “uncolonized” space, a “battlefield” where diseases such as tuberculosis, as well as neonatal tetanus and infant mortality, ran rampant. The Western concept of hospital births ran counter to notions of birth pollution and seclusion for women of the elite Hindu castes and Muslim women in *purdah* (256–57).<sup>7</sup> As late as the First World War, urban middle class Indian women were reluctant to enter hospitals (258). While missionary women attempted through education to “penetrate the *zenana*” (256), scholarships were provided to train midwives (*dai*) in modern sanitation and medical knowledge, but with little impact even into the 1920s. Addressing public health issues associated with the women of affluent Indians was also an issue of strategic importance for the British, who sought both donations as well as support from them (Forbes, *Women* 60).

In response to the need to address women’s health, the Lady Dufferin Fund, set up in 1885 and funded by the state as well as by private donations, was designed to be a separate medical system employing women doctors (as well as nurses, midwives, and hospital assistants) to serve in women-only *zenana* hospitals. The Fund had “considerable impact” on women’s health and medical education, and the numbers of women and children attending hospitals in the first years after it was set up “represented a significant widening of the bounds of Western medicine” through the end of the nineteenth century (Arnold 263). The Fund initially recruited Western women to serve

in India, who saw it as a career move, but many suffered health problems. They were criticized by Indian newspapers as ignorant of native traditions of childbearing, and returned home, at which point it was seen to be necessary to train Indian women. By 1928 the Fund had four hundred women doctors across India (268). Appointment to a Dufferin hospital was seen as prestigious.

"Widespread antagonism" confronted the first Indian women doctors. Kadambini Basu, who attended CMC on a scholarship and graduated in 1888, was appointed to the Lady Dufferin Women's Hospital. A good doctor and the mother of five children, Basu, however, was called a "whore" by a conservative Bengali magazine (Forbes, *Women* 162). Haimabati Sen (1866–1933) established a good practice at the Dufferin Hospital in Chinsurah. But she was treated as a midwife, and her title continued to be that of "hospital assistant" (Forbes, "Medical Career" 520). Forbes quotes from Sen's memoir, where she describes her many domestic duties to her husband and children, interspersed with her work (*Women* 157).

In the early decades of the twentieth century, Indian middle class women, who saw Western medicine as modern and scientific, demanded more female medical professionals; they were also required for women working in the manufacturing sectors, for whom services were mandated by law (164). After World War I, in response to a greater need for women doctors, more medical institutions began to accept women. However, women living together in hostels faced the risk of breaking caste rules (see also Arnold 267). If they lived in private homes, they risked taunts traveling to classes. Professors separated female students from the men, and hence many women failed to graduate. Society had little tolerance for single working women, who also faced sexual harassment. European and (Christian) Anglo-Indian women dominated the profession, earning much more than other women (Forbes, *Women* 166), even though overall, women doctors of any race who worked in the Dufferin hospitals made one third the salaries of both British and Indian male doctors serving in the IMS.

Both in its official introduction of English, as the language of instruction in the arts and science in government-financed schools, and the establishment of the CMC, 1835 marks a seminal year. The CMC was founded on European models, with instruction in English (Gorman 280). Its faculty was drawn from the IMS, and its students from the Hindu upper castes (281–82; see also Bala 112).<sup>8</sup> Between the years 1835 and 1858 the CMC was regarded as being on par with the best medical schools in Europe (Gorman 297). Between 1917 and 1921 the numbers of students attending CMC rose (Bala 121), and after World War I, as government subsidies were withdrawn, affluent students paid high fees to attend (140).

I have no anecdotal or other evidence that Ma was aware of these new winds blowing across the nation as she entered high school, then college, and subsequently the CMC. The oldest of four siblings, she rode, with evident ambition and drive, a wave of opportunity for women in her day, while it is questionable if her siblings made it past high school. In 1935 Ma would enter CMC, then the most prestigious medical college in eastern India (Gorman), where instruction was in English only. She acquired her initial facility in English at Vidyamoyee Girls' High School, in Mymensingh, present Bangladesh.<sup>9</sup> Ma completed a two year Intermediate in Science diploma at Vidyasagar College, Calcutta, a requisite for entrance to CMC and also a program that required fluency in English. According to a paternal uncle, she spoke the language with greater fluency than Baba. She attended the CMC on a (Dufferin?) scholarship. I would learn from family that she sent some part of this meager money home to her struggling family, and offered tuitions to make ends meet.

An intriguing image appears on the first page of Ma's album (Figure 3). Oval in shape, an inch and half in size, it is centered on the black page. A cut-out, it may or may not be studio-taken but appears to be. It is worthy of notice not only because it appears right at the start of the album, evidently claiming the album as hers, but for what it seems to reveal about Ma.



Figure 3. First page of Ma's album (photo courtesy of the author).

Other than the disembodied presentation, the long, dangling earrings caught my eye, the picture's *punctum*, if you will. Did she borrow these from a friend? What was the occasion of this picture? She does not wear such ostentatious jewelry in any other photograph, nor do I remember her wearing such flamboyant jewelry. Did she select this picture because it portrays a remarkably lovely woman—and one apparently aware of it? And why does she glue it, a face looking brightly, luminously, out from the black page at the start of her album? Why did she not include the rest of herself? Were there others in this picture, people she cut out to present just herself?

This is followed by another photograph (Figure 4), this time of Ma looking out between “Anima” and “Lila” (who are identified on the backs of separate, individual studio photographs of them in the album).



Figure 4. Ma, with her friends (photo courtesy of the author).

This photograph shows what appears to be a conventional pose dictated by the studio photographer; all but one of her women friends appear in a similar pose, pictured from the bust up, with forearms and hands gracefully crossed in front, and visible on a table, or laced under the chin.<sup>10</sup> Ma, with her two girlfriends, looks lively, even playful, while to her left Anima looks serious, and Lila has a little smile on her face. Given that the women in other studio photographs in the album at best hint at a smile, and mostly offer a three-quarters profile, Lila's smile is striking, as is the girls' direct gaze at the photographer. They look like they are having fun, a moment they want on record. As friends graduated and went their separate ways, they evidently “gifted” their studio photographs to Ma—there are other such “gifts” of women friends in the album, inscribed on the back, for example, “To S. Karmakar. From Lila.”

In a photograph dated “5th Year, 1939” on its back, Ma presents a different image (Figure 5). Taken past mid-point in her studies at CMC, in this photograph Ma looks almost film-star-like in her pose, as, unsmiling, she looks off to her left, up, and into the far distance, with her arms crossed in front of her. Her long black braid hangs in front of her, over her right shoulder. She wears no make-up, as in all the other pictures, just a *bindi*, a black dot, in the center of her forehead. In none of the more informal pictures of her in the album does she wear a *bindi*. Evidently she has “dressed up” for



Figure 5. Ma, 5th year, 1939 (photo courtesy of the author).



er studio pictures—all except, interestingly, the two graduation photographs (figures 1 and 6).

The album includes a second studio-taken graduation photograph of Ma, though no provenance is provided (Figure 6). In this picture she stands in a cap and gown, clasping her rolled up diploma horizontally in front of her, with both hands, one from above, the other from below. She leans a little to her left, a gentle, steady expression on her face. It contrasts, in its greater formality, with how she appears in the group picture (Figure 1), as well as with Figure 5, where she does not look directly at the camera.

A third studio photograph follows, dated 5th August, 1941, the year Ma graduated (Figure 7). This reveals a less glamorous, apparently more professional image of Ma. She wears no jewelry, a black *bindi* graces her forehead, and her hair is possibly put up or braided, but at the back. She looks slightly away, to her right, at some distant point—but not into the far distance, as we see in Figure 5. Like the other studio photographs of women in the album, her arms are crossed elegantly in front of her, on a table, but with a finger crooked. She looks serious, and capable. Her lips are together, almost firm, less relaxed than



Figure 6. Ma, with diploma (photo courtesy of the author).



Figure 7. Ma, 5th August, 1941 (photo courtesy of the author).

in the other pictures. Perhaps this photograph marks the end of an arduous journey, both personal and academic, to award-winning professional, a doctor at last. Perhaps it was the photograph she attached to job applications.

A paternal aunt said, how your mother loved saris! But in college she didn't have the money to buy any. Baba would remember to me Ma's loud, open-hearted laugh as she came down the stairs of the women's hostel at CMC to meet him. She smoked, he said, until he got her to stop. She held hands with him under a dissected cadaver in anatomy class (said a classmate of theirs). This is how they first met, in his words, from his memoir:

The first year of medical college was of special significance to me. Here I met my classmate and friend who became my wife later. . . . Fate brought us together. . . . We had just come out of Practical Chemistry class. It was raining heavily. She had a big umbrella. I ran and took shelter under her umbrella and stayed there forever. That was the beginning of our acquaintance which developed into friendship and college comradeship through our six years of college life, and ultimately after the end of the World War II culminated in our marriage.

Baba's next reference to my mother (always as "Miss Karmakar," later "Dr. Miss Karmakar," and eventually after 1943 as "my friend and fiancé, Miss Karmakar") is a brief, but significant one, both in terms of her achievements as they graduated, as well as her personality. On the evening before their examination in surgery, he—an "ardent devotee"—walks to the temple of the goddess Kali near CMC. A severe storm breaks out. He waits, then after the storm abates, continues to the temple. After the exam, he learns from a friend that he has passed (he attributes the storm to his uncertainty, his success to his devotion to Kali). Another friend then informs him that Ma has ranked at the top in surgery, her success reported in the newspapers. She had written a note to him without mentioning this, for "she would never brag about this achievement!" Indeed, I never heard her talk about her achievements either. Baba refers again to Ma's "brilliant medical academic career" when he precedes her (and we follow) for graduate study at Guy's Hospital in London in 1954. She had thought of pursuing her studies too, he says, but decided against it since my younger sister was about one year old, and Ma was "unhappy" about the crèche where she would have to leave her. It is possible that this is his reading of her decision.

Ma would earn the Baccalaureate of Medicine and Bachelor of Science degree (MBBS) in 1941. Three medals, all dated 1941 and inscribed with her name, attest to her achievement, including a gold medal, the top award in her class for surgery, a silver medal for "3rd MB" (possibly as third overall ranking), and a silver medal with gold rim, inscribed with the name and insignia

of "Lord Linlithgow, Viceroy of India," but without further information.<sup>12</sup> When I returned to Calcutta to conduct doctoral research in 1986, I discovered Ma's medals in a dusty shoe box under my bed at Baba's apartment. I brought them back with me, in their square, satin-lined boxes, for safekeeping—precious material mementos of her achievement, though I knew nothing of her story then.

Ma received her certification in June 1942, and then worked briefly at the Lady Dufferin (Imambara) Hospital in Chinsurah, Hooghly district, in pre-Independence Bengal state. She moved, after being sexually harassed by the District Magistrate, to the Lady Dufferin (Victoria) Hospital in Calcutta in 1943.<sup>13</sup> She would tell me about the terrible effects of the great Bengal famine of 1943, where the bodies mostly of the rural poor lay on the streets of the city.<sup>14</sup> Her father had died in early 1945, as Baba, deployed with the MS to Europe, returned home at the end of the War. Ma now took a position at the state-run Shambhunath Pandit Hospital in Calcutta (SNPH). While Baba notes in his memoir that she applied to, and got a position with, the prestigious Women's Medical Service,<sup>15</sup> she decided to take the state job at SNPH. I can only assume that she made this choice with her family in mind, to be nearer to them. At SNPH she would describe to me the horrific injuries she treated in the Emergency Room, as Muslims and Hindus fell on each other in the lead up to Independence and Partition into India and Pakistan. A few surviving letters, written by senior hospital officials, attest to Ma's excellent work in women's health, her management skills, her competency in gynecological surgeries, blood transfusion, and anesthesia, her pleasant ways, and patients' high regard for her. Almost all attest to her good moral character.<sup>16</sup> One letter, written by a senior gynecologist apparently as Ma applies to the Lady Dufferin hospital in Calcutta, given the date of the reference, notes:

I was so impressed with her efficient work, excellent moral character and dignified manners that I strongly recommended her confirmation in her present post in January 1943. . . . Her work in the hospital was very satisfactory and the present improvement in the female side owes a good deal to her tactful management of the ward and kind treatment and attention to the patients, who always spoke highly of her. (28th February 1943)

Ma married my father for love, and across caste difference, against some resistance from my paternal grandmother, who objected to her lower status in that social hierarchy.<sup>16</sup> My parents were married in Calcutta on 17th April, 1946. A 5x7 studio photograph of Ma notes on the back the date, and its recipient, my father: "11th November 1946. To Bardhan" (Figure 8). I



Figure 8. A new bride's gift to her husband, 11th November 1946: "To Bardhan" (photo courtesy of the author).

especially notice in this photograph, evidently given to Baba seven months after their wedding, a gentleness of expression different from the lively, playful, glamorous, or somber pictures above. She also does not wear a *ghomta*, or any jewelry, unusual in a newly married Indian woman. This is the only surviving studio photograph of Ma from the time that she was working.

Ma continued to work at SNPH until late into her pregnancy with me, at the end of 1948, when she fell ill with high blood pressure. She joined my father, now the radiologist at the army hospital in Pune, in western India.

After my birth, Baba comments that his "family life started in full swing," and that it was a "happy" one. Baba would have a successful career in the Indian Army's Medical Corps. Ma, however, resigned from SNPH in September 1949, and did not pursue a career in medicine. She would work in an honorary and part-time capacity at the Family Planning Clinics of the Indian Red Cross Society in two Indian cities where my father was posted. Baba was transferred again to Pune in 1962, where Ma spent the last three years of her life.

Towards the end, I remember a mother who now moved slowly, after two strokes; who exercised her weakened fingers at the piano; who sat alone on the verandah, injecting herself with insulin; who very slowly negotiated the steep stone steps on a family visit to the ancient Buddhist caves of Ellora. I recall a quiet passivity, the flash of hurt on her face at a comment, without response, when she would have not let this go earlier. A paternal aunt and uncle tell me that her final stroke was precipitated by an ugly note from her brother, demanding money. On the morning of her final stroke I noticed her standing in front of the dresser mirror, pulling at her drooping mouth. That evening, as we stood at her bedside, and I chattered desperately at her, sensing something very wrong, her eyes sparked once with recognition, then faded, with finality. She died for me at that moment, a severance that has seared itself into my memory. Baba, at her bedside, looked silently at me, with an expression I read today as one that knew what lay ahead, for him, and for us. Over forty-seven days she would lie in a coma at the Pune military hospital, as Baba, my sister, and I watched her teeth and hair fall out, and her beauty fade. My sister and I would not be with her at her actual time of death, for Baba had sent us to the military club to be with other children. In the all-Commonwealth examinations in Class 11, I was to achieve top rank, with honors, in my class, and first division ranking. I would learn this while Ma lay in a coma—but she would not. We left by train for Calcutta for her funeral, and Baba writes: "My wife, who was very fond of Calcutta and train journeys, traveled in an urn in her last journey to her beloved Calcutta."

After we returned from the funeral, Baba, in a rare expression of emotion in his memoir, describes the "all-pervading emptiness and loneliness . . . [as if] the life of the house had been extinguished." I would soon leave for college, while he wrapped up the household and came to Calcutta with my sister, joining the military hospital as radiologist. "So, I left Pune," he writes, "where we first started our married life . . . and it is in Pune that our home shattered . . . due to the untimely demise of a very nice, affectionate and loving wife and mother."

### CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

In the photographs above I have attempted to read the person that Ma appeared to want to present. In the interests of veracity and to the extent possible, I have substantiated my reading of those photographs with other "texts," including college reports, letters, testimonials, historical scholarship, my father's memoir, and anecdotal accounts from family and friends. My own memories are a part of those "texts," this archival trove, but my voice has necessarily intervened, with many questions but without definitive answers. Yet, at the (inconclusive) end of this enterprise, I have a sense of discovery. I can now both *see* some part of that story, even as I *read* who Ma was.

In contrast to my youthful memories of an unsentimental and academically demanding mother, the image Ma presents in her photographs (and in Baba's memoir and family anecdotes) reveals a young woman of considerable beauty, evidently spirited, fun-loving, with many women friends, and a boyfriend. She appears self-possessed and confident, and proud of her achievement. She flirts, laughs heartily, loves, and marries across social barriers of caste and class. References from superiors at work testify to a capable doctor, liked by her patients, a woman of moral rectitude. Yet I also learn of her financial struggles in CMC, and her need especially after her father's death to financially support her family. This possibly explains her decision to marry Baba soon after, for "security," as he would tell me. Her posed picture with her young children, an apparent image of compliant domesticity (Figure 2), contradicts the mother I remember. Yet there is some coherence among the high-achieving medical student, the efficient doctor, the gentle, new bride, and the demanding, scolding, yet tender mother.

A fundamental question remains, one which I cannot read in photographs. Can I understand her early death in light of her immense early promise, and her subsequent inability to see that promise to fruition? Family and friends note Ma's "frustration" at her inability to have a career in medicine, her tearful rages. My sister would tell me that she had often said that her CMC classmates, with lesser achievements, had gone on to have careers, while she had not. This contradicts Baba's memoir, where he, several times, describes her as "happy"—for example, in her volunteer work at reproductive health clinics. They had considered setting up in private practice after they married, he would tell me, but the financial needs of the families at that point in time, post-Partition, had made that a risky option.

I return to the image of the charred bone on my palm, for it is an image that has stayed with me, demanding explanation. While her final stroke is one explanation for her death, there may be other possible narratives. Feminist

analyses, drawing on psychoanalytical models from Lacan, note that mothers in Western texts and culture are represented as more body than mind, "nature" rather than "culture," and without voice in their private, domestic sphere, and that "culture," language, and the public sphere are associated with masculinity and the father (Bailey and Cuomo; Boulous-Walker; Cahill; M. Hirsch, *Mother/Daughter*; Siegel). An Indian context offers less dichotomous perspectives, where "nature" and "culture" are both cultural constructs, as Ramanujan has noted. In myth, for example, a powerful Hindu goddess embodying creative power (Sakti) defeats demons in battle, and is lauded as the "form" (*rupa*) of compassionate mother as well as wisdom and intelligence (*Devi Mahatmya* 7: 19). In Indian philosophical thought, the concepts of mind and body are often likewise integrated. Linguistically cognates, the English "mind" and Bengali "*mon*" are respectively descended from sister languages Latin (*mens*), and Sanskrit (*manas*). While the functions of the "mind" are distinct from those of the body in the Cartesian tradition, in Indian contexts "mind"/*mon* can simultaneously think, reflect, remember, hold secrets, feel emotion, and be "broken"—like the (English) heart (*mon bhenge jaowa*).

Even where indigenous tropes seem to empower women, however, it appears that historical and personal reality may be inversely related to metaphor. As Ma confronted, at a critical juncture in Indian history, the social, cultural, and class norms of her day (her "demons"), the specifics of her life's story do not fit tidily into either a Lacanian, Western schema, or an indigenous (post-colonial) one. She aspired, achieved in a public sphere, "spoke"—and loudly (as I well remember)—even as a mother and wife, but was ultimately silenced. Where the *mon* is capable of "breaking," perhaps this silent and psychic injury in the face of multiple patriarchies dealt her that final blow. In this context I share one more memory that has stayed with me, and which I try to understand today. On one occasion (only), Ma, shortly preceding her death in Pune, sat at the dining table and remembered her father to my sister and me, and quietly wiped the tears from her eyes. Perhaps he had, in her aspirations and in her day, been her one support, her refuge. Her brothers, to the end, would betray her.

Today I, her daughter and a feminist, seek to discover the systemic inequities she confronted and transcended, but also those she could not. Researching and writing this essay and reflecting on its larger message for aspiring women has been illuminating for me, as it has been for a generation of younger women in my family. A niece would remark that she finally had a context for the photograph she had seen over the years (Figure 1). But it remains to be said that too many Indian women I know, including myself, in the diaspora and into the twenty-first century, continue to negotiate, or fail

while trying to negotiate, the uneasily bounded spheres of public life and traditional constraints, confronting those "demons" at our cost. "*Ghar ghar me* [in every home] this in an issue," said a woman friend to me, a physician and naturalized Indian American, in 2016.

#### NOTES

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I am grateful to Professors Barbara Ellen Smith, Katy Powell, and Laura Gillman in the Women's and Gender Studies Program, Department of Sociology at Virginia Tech for their guidance with this essay, and to my teaching assistants, Kristin Richardson and Lipon Mondal, for their immeasurable help. My thanks are also due to the thoughtful reading of my paper by *Biography's* reviewers, and their suggestions.

1. The studio photographs are identifiable by their poses, as well as blank backgrounds, in comparison to those taken by friends or family.
2. During Ma's life, and long after, "Calcutta" was the Anglicized name of the city "Kolkata" (as pronounced in Bengali), which is now the official name of the city. For consistency, in this essay I am retaining the spelling Calcutta.
3. Ma's mother died when Ma was very young, leaving behind three small children: my mother and two younger brothers. According to a paternal aunt, my maternal grandfather married an illiterate woman, whom Ma avoided, refusing to go home during school vacations.
4. Soon after the wedding, my parents visited my paternal grandparents' home in Srimongol, present-day Bangladesh, the locale for the photographs of my uncles.
5. Karlekar notes that the camera and studio also served the interests of Empire for the purposes of surveillance and control (*Visual* xiv).
6. Seth notes this initiative in the 1920s (281). Ray comments on the "deplorable" state of nineteenth-century Bengali women, and on those progressive men who worked to abolish customs such as widow-burning (*sati*), but also those "junior partners of the colonial rulers" who preferred that women serve in supportive roles, earning their husbands titles and honors from their colonial masters (179).
7. Forbes also notes the demand for female medical professionals in India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, describing the *zenana* as a "demonized space" for the British ("Medical Careers" 518).
8. Using the 1901 Census of India, Bala offers non-gendered statistics on total male literacy of 10 percent, with Baidya, Brahmin, and Kayastha castes engaged in medical education (Fig. 3, 120). I could not find female literacy rates in the 1930 Indian Census, but in 1950 they were given as less than 10 percent.
9. After the Indian Mutiny in 1857, the British withdrew support for government-funded schools. The Bengali *bhadralok* established and endowed girls' schools that could teach in either English or Bengali, or both. They saw competence in English as a mark of status and upward mobility, leading to white-collar jobs (Bala). I would learn of Ma's secondary education at this reputed school from her classmate, who also lived in the school's hostel with her.

10. Towards the end of the album, there is an un-inscribed photograph of a lovely, dark-eyed young woman who looks over her right shoulder at the camera, with her loose, black, long hair flowing behind her. This is the most overtly seductive picture of Ma's friends.
11. My father refers both to a political event as "fate," I think, as well as his first meeting with Ma in CMC. The Chittagong Armory raid in 1930 by Indian freedom fighters, and the execution of its two leaders by the British in January 1934, resulted in the police "grabbing" him when he was about to interview at a medical school in Chittagong for a Licentiate degree (not the MBBS he would get from CMC). Earlier in his memoir he refers to his pro-freedom activities, such as refusing when asked by his father's British superiors to spy on Indian revolutionaries. I can only infer that his arrest at the interview had to do with those actions, at a point when tensions were high in Bengal. The police clearance came too late for the application deadline. He applied to, and was accepted at, CMC. Ma too missed a deadline at Campbell Medical College, and entered CMC the same year, 1935. Photographs of Baba appear some way into the album, of his travels with the IMS. On one page my parents appear together, but without provenance, possibly when Ma worked at Lady Dufferin Hospital in Chinsurah
12. The British Library in London, from where I got the *Annual Reports*, had none after the 1939–1940 year. As with the preceding years, the *Reports* list the award winners for the year. I have the medals, however, and both my parents' diplomas.
13. While Baba is vague about this incident in his memoir, a paternal uncle identified the harasser.
14. This was a human-engineered famine that killed an estimated two million people in Bengal. It was caused by the shortage of rice, a staple that was being sent to the British and Indian troops at war in Europe, and hoarding at home by indigenous black marketers.
15. British women doctors lobbied for the Women's Medical Service, which came into its own in 1914. Forbes notes that while the WMS, modeled on the all-male Indian Medical Service (which employed my father), professed concern for Indian women doctors, it was the British women who gained the most from it (*Women* 167).
16. Ma's last name, Karmakar, although also of the Kayastha caste, belongs to a lower category than that of my paternal family.

#### WORKS CITED

- Annual Report on the Working of the Medical College*. Calcutta. 1935–1936. British Library. Print.
- Arnold, David. *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1993. Print.
- Bailey, Alison, and Chris Cuomo. *The Feminist Philosophy Reader*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008. Print.
- Bala, Poonam. *Imperialism and Medicine in Bengal. A Socio-Historical Perspective*. New Delhi: Sage, 1991. Print.

- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981. Print.
- Boulous-Walker, Michelle. *Philosophy and the Maternal Body: Reading Silence*. London: Routledge, 1998. Print.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Photography*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990. Print.
- Cahill, Susan. *Mothers, Memories, Dreams and Reflections by Literary Daughters*. Bergenfield, NJ: New American, 1988. Print.
- Chatterjee, Partha. "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question." *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*. Ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1997. 233–53. Print.
- Devi Mahatmya*. Trans. Swami Jagadiswarananda. Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1953. Print.
- Forbes, Geraldine H. "Medical Careers and Health Care for Indian Women: Patterns of Control." *Women's History Review* 3.4 (1994): 515–30. Web. 8 July 2016.
- . "Small Acts of Rebellion: Women Tell Their Photographs." *Behind the Veil: Resistance, Women, and the Everyday in Colonial South Asia*. Ed. Anindita Ghosh. Ranikhet, India: Permanent Black, 2007. 58–82. Print.
- . *Women in Modern India*. 1996. *The New Cambridge History of India* Part 4, Vol. 2. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007. Print.
- Gorman, Mel. "Introduction of Western Science into Colonial India: Role of the Calcutta Medical College." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 132.3 (1988): 276–98. Print.
- Hirsch, Julia. *Family Photographs: Content, Meaning, and Effect*. New York: Oxford UP, 1981. Print.
- Hirsch, Marianne. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997. Print.
- . *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989. Print.
- Karlekar, Malavika. *Re-visioning the Past: Early Photography in Bengal 1875–1915*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2005. Print.
- . *Visual Histories: Photography in the Popular Imagination*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2013. Print.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Tavistock, 1977. Print.
- Pinney, Christopher. *The Coming of Photography in India*. London: The British Library, 2008. Print.
- . "Coming Out Better." *Where Three Dreams Cross: 150 Years of Photography from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*. Whitechapel Gallery, London, in collaboration with Fotomuseum Winterthur. Winterthur, 2010. 25–33. Print.
- Ramanujan, A. K. "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?" Ed. McKim Marriott. *India through Hindu Categories*. New Delhi: Sage, 1990. 41–58. Print.
- Ramaswamy, Sumathi. "The Work of Vision in the Age of European Empires." *Empires of Vision: A Reader*. Ed. Martin Jay and Sumathi Ramaswamy. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2014. 1–22.

- Ray, Bharati. "The Freedom Movement and the Feminist Consciousness in Bengal, 1905–1929." *From the Seams of History: Essays on Indian Women*. Ed. Bharati Ray. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1995. 174–218. Print.
- Seth, Sanjay. "Nationalism, Modernity, and the 'Woman Question' in India and China." *Journal of Asian Studies* 72.2 (2013): 273–97. Print.
- Siegel, Kristi. *Women's Autobiographies, Culture, Feminism*. American University Studies Series 27: Feminist Studies. New York: Peter Lang, 1999. Print.

## THE ENSLAVED NARRATIVE: WHITE OVERSEERS AND THE AMBIGUITY OF THE STORY-TOLD SELF IN EARLY AFRICAN-AMERICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

SHEILA J. NAYAR

*The self of autobiography comes into being in the act of writing, not before.*  
—John Sekora, "Black Message/White Envelope" 509

### THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ART OF COMPROMISE

In the beginning of the eighteenth century, there was the Word, and the Word was vital, and the white man owned it. Glib and confrontational as the preceding may sound, it is also, in the American context, irrefutably true.<sup>1</sup> But if ownership of the written word was denied most humans in bondage, that was because, in the context of the master-slave relationship, a literate slave was a dangerous slave. While the slave capable of *reading* could "transmit news that the master wanted to keep secret," such as news of slave uprisings, the *writing* slave could forge "free papers" and passes for fugitive slaves (Starling 244)—and of even greater peril, was "more apt to run away" (Hager 46). The presence of literate slaves thus "threatened to give lie to the entire system," as Heather Williams explains in broader sociological terms: "Reading indicated to the world that this so-called property had a mind, and writing foretold the ability to construct an alternative narrative about bondage itself. Literacy among slaves would expose slavery, and masters knew it" (2).

No wonder, then, that many of the antebellum narratives tell of fellow slaves who resisted even glancing in a book's direction for fear of the punishments meted out to those caught interacting with the alphabet (Starling 244). In this sense, the slave was doubly enslaved: not only was she somebody else's material and economically tradable property, she was without the cultural, and arguably epistemic, capital essential to negotiating the civic and