



Bio: **Samhita Mukhopadhyay** is a writer, speaker and technologist residing in Brooklyn, NY. She is the Executive Editor of Feministing.com and is the author of *Outdated: Why Dating is Ruining Your Love Life*.

She has written for multiple news outlets including *The Nation*, *The American Prospect*, *Alternet* and the *Guardian UK*. She has been profiled in *India Currents Magazine*, *Nirali Magazine*, *Brown Girl Magazine*, *Rabble.ca* and on *Alternet*.

In 2007, she was named a Champion of Sexual Literacy by the National Sexuality Resource Center

Samhita is a sought after speaker, lecturing regularly at college and universities about race, politics, technology, sexuality and feminism. She is also a web strategist who has developed and managed the online technology strategies of leading grassroots organizing groups.¹

An Interview with Samhita Mukhopadhyay

Conducted by Leadership Scholar Arabelle Sicardi, Class of 2014

Edited by Nicholas Salazer

Arabelle Sicardi: What were your first visions of women?

Samhita Mukhopadhyay: My first visions of women were family members. My parents are from India, but I was born in the United States, and I lived back and forth between the United States and India as a child, and my parents lived in a joint-family house in India. I had about nine different aunts that all lived in the same house, and they gathered together, they cooked a lot of their meals together, they cleaned together, and they gossiped a lot and chatted. They were middle class Indians that had servants and stuff, and so it was a very interesting model of femininity, one of motherhood and holding culture and the family and stuff. But I think my first visions of women in pop culture that I can remember are I think En Vogue, maybe? And Madonna, which says more about me than you need to know, probably.

AS: What effect did your family and childhood have on your understanding of politics and identity? Did you grow into the roles you saw at home or did you step away from them intentionally?

SM: Much to my mother's chagrin, no. I am probably the most acceptable type of woman to her today than ever before. From a very young age I was incredibly rebellious I don't really remember what exactly started off that kick, but I got into riot girl culture really early, when I was thirteen or fourteen years old and I was very angry. I grew up in a really homogenous place. I grew up in a working class suburban town where people weren't exactly open-minded and I

was angry all the time. So, I shaved my head when I was fifteen and was a punk rocker and a riot girl and all this stuff, and my parents were very frustrated and were like, why did we come to this

Mark <[http:// www.jodisolomonspeakers.com/SamhitaMukhopadhyay.html](http://www.jodisolomonspeakers.com/SamhitaMukhopadhyay.html)>

country so our daughter could act like this? So, I always felt very suffocated by social expectation and no one tells you that you can make a career out of that but that's the direction I ultimately went.

AS: Can you talk to us more about your childhood and how it has impacted you and your writing, specifically with your aunts?

SM: I didn't actually live with all those aunts, I grew up in the United States, born and raised in New York, and so I traveled back and forth to India, but those were my first visible memories of women. I grew up in a suburban town outside New York City and that's why I sound like a valley girl when I talk. [I] definitely went to one of those high schools [where] everyone wanted to be the captain of the football team or the lacrosse team or a cheerleader, and I was one of the freaks, geeks, and weirdos, and my friends were all hackers and wore trench coats. I was really angry and just so upset that everyone was so normal. My parents were not fully aware of how difficult high school was for us. I think that for them, they were like, we are in the United States, you are going to get an education, you're going to do your best, and I wasn't really a good student. I was on the debate team, that's kind of where I put all my energy. But I wasn't a good student, so they just didn't understand. They were like, why are you doing so poorly, and later found out it was because I was made fun of a lot, picked on, teased for being different, and so I had a very kind of disconnected relationship with the students around me. I think that had more of an impact, like I'm still that angry girl in high school but I'm getting revenge one blog post at a time. I've definitely reconciled it but sometimes I still feel like that angry teenager that is constantly fighting against what the world wants for me.

AS: Can you tell me any specific event that made you become a feminist?

SM: There are a variety of events. A couple of years ago Courtney Martin wrote *The Click Moment*, an anthology for feminists on what feminist's click moments were. I ended up not submitting because I couldn't figure out what my click moment was, mainly because I was such an angry child and I was constantly rebelling. And [I] didn't really find the language of feminism until riot girl and Ani DiFranco, where I embraced the language of it and started to identify as a feminist because of that, and I didn't really flesh out what I felt my feminism was until I reached university when I was nineteen or twenty years old. I don't even remember when I said, I am a feminist, because it was such a no brainer to me. There was never one moment where I said I am a feminist. I probably started calling myself that probably when I was about fourteen or fifteen years old and it pretty much stuck.

AS: How has feminism impacted your relationship with your parents? Were they initially very averse to the label? Do they understand what you're doing now?

SM: I was such a volatile teenager that they were really hesitant to ever criticize anything I was doing, lest I burn the house down. They definitely have at moments; I think you know, I was having emotional breakdowns at the thanksgiving dinner table at twelve years old because my uncle was pro-life. Literally, in tears, I would put my fork down and run out of the room and was like, Thanksgiving is over for me, you guys are conservatives and I hate you and you're oppressing me, and they were like, how is your twelve year old this angry, this politicized? So, they kind of always knew that that was the direction I was going. I think there was definitely some concern along the way with, how are you going to make this financially feasible for yourself? My father is an incredibly well read political figure, and my mother is a musician, and so they come out of a historical and cultural legacy of social change and post-colonial India where social change and activism was very normal and was part of the culture I think it wasn't weird for them that I was so involved with it and was actually a point of pride, and they've been incredibly supportive, and they always just wanted me to do something for me that was productive, and always wanted me to do something that made me happy and healthy. They're not exactly psyched that I'm not getting married and that kind of stuff, but I have amazingly supportive parents.

AS: Can you give us a story about a really important person in your life?

SM: I feel that so much of what influenced me in my life is what I read, which is why I think I ultimately became a writer. I think [an] incredible moment [was] the five-year Feministing party. I think that all of us were, for the first time, realizing what a big deal we were, since tons of people came out and we got Kathleen Hanna to host the event for us. I was so nervous to meet [her] that I circled her a couple of times and might have spit on myself, and I was trying to rehearse what to say to her and I was literally like walking circles and just went up to say to her, hi my name is Samhita, I'm a really big fan. Surrounded by Feministing readers, they were like, what is wrong with Samhita right now? And she goes, yeah, I really like your writing. And it was all a blur what happened after that. I think I said a couple of things that made no sense and she was like, oh, uh, yeah, okay. And I think I was like, repeatedly, I am such a big fan, you made me a feminist, that kind of thing. That was really exciting, that she would know who I am. I think she's an incredibly gracious and wonderful person and very much an activist.

AS: What made you decide to write about feminist politics for a living?

SM: Feminism, I think, in so many ways, theoretically explains so much in social justice, inequality, focuses on giving voices to disenfranchised communities or unheard of voices. For me, I'm educated in feminism; I have an undergraduate and graduate degree in women's studies and it just was the methodology that made the most sense to me, to evaluate the world around me. And it highlights and illuminates a lot of the inequalities, and not just along the lines of gender. I do think that there is an over focus in mainstream feminism on gender inequality, but, if

you actually look at it theoretically, it talks about all different types of kind of axis of difference. I think, of the different social change models that I've look at, and all the different social methodologies that I read, feminism seemed the most authentic in it's depth of analysis, and in really bringing a compassionate quality to how we understand difference. So that's why I think feminism is important.

It was either, write about [feminist politics] or be really angry all the time and have no outlets. It was kind of survival. I think some people go into writing to be writers. They go to school to journalism, and they're like, what topic should I focus on now? For me, it was exactly the opposite. I knew my content; it was the writing that I didn't really know how to do. And I've taken the last seven years to learn how to write. I have always been told you know, you should consider writing. You should think about writing, because I was very vocal as an activist in college and I always, loved writing in my women's studies classes. And it felt frustrating; I didn't feel that the writing was accessible to a larger audience. I still respect and value academic feminism but I felt this need to have accessible feminist writing and so that's pretty much what I focused on.

AS: Do you enjoy your job, do you feel that you're making a positive impact and how?

SM: I do. I appreciate you calling it a job because that assumes that I get paid for it, which I don't. But, it is in fact a job [because] we all take it very seriously. It is enjoyable, I think that avenues to social change and self-expression have become increasingly difficult to access and as a result blogs have opened up space and potential to make change and access communities in a way that you kind of haven't seen before in history. And that's really exciting and also exhausting, because just like every other type of activism, it's exhausting, and you sometimes feel setbacks very strongly. But, for the number of people who have either commented or sent emails or come up to me at conferences and say to me, something you wrote this many years ago had this big impact on my life, that's beyond happiness. It's what everyone hopes to have happen right there.

AS: When did you know that you wanted to take blogging to a more professional level and stop teaching?

SM: I never thought I was going to take blogging to a professional level. I started blogging when I was teaching, and then I decided to go back to school to get my masters in women's studies and it kind of was, I just didn't know what I wanted to do next. I just knew that I wanted more time and space and so I focused on my writing. I wrote my masters dissertation on the politics of the feminist blogosphere, which at the time was such a burgeoning field and still is in so many ways, which is really exciting. Through that process, I got interest from C.L Press to write a book and I was like, wow, I think I can actually do this, and so I finished my masters, [and] got a job for a year while I worked on the book. I was working on the book, and the blog, and the job at the same time. I started to feel really frazzled so I quit my job, moved home to my parent's house, and finished my master's thesis and my book.

AS: What does women's leadership mean to you and is it important?

SM: Women's leadership is complicated. I do think women's leadership is important just on a face value. When it comes to politics and leadership, as my colleague at Feministing has said in the past, Anne Friedman, a woman candidate is not necessarily a women's candidate. And I think that extra analysis is more pertinent now than ever because as we look at female leadership, who are the leaders that actually make the lives of women as a group better and who are the ones that don't? I think blind following of leadership just because they have a vagina is not really enough, I think it's the type of analysis we really need to develop further.

AS: So do you yourself consider yourself to be a leader?

SM: I think that I am a leader, in the sense that I am the executive editor of a very well known feminist blog. But I also think leadership looks different in our generation, and I think that I am a leader in some ways, and I think that other bloggers are leaders in other ways, and all of us together represent leadership in our generation. So, we are all leading on different topics and different issues, and I don't think there is a single leader anymore; there is no single leader to movements period, which I think Occupy Wall Street's major point is, there is no one leader, there is a general consensus about three hundred people in the general assembly kind of stuff, and I think contemporary feminism is similar.

AS: What motivates you to do what you do? How did you get to this point in your life?

SM: I think that when I open a mainstream newspaper and it continually has stories that shame women, and much of the media that impacts the lives of young people, all of these talks about the masculinity crisis, and all of these problematic representations of young people that continue to pervade mainstream media, that is what motivates me, personally, and gets me writing. What has gotten me this far is that when you see a response that makes you realize people want to see this kind of analysis, that people want to know the real story, that does keep you going.

AS: What have been some challenges that you have faced in your field? The successes that you've experienced?

SM: Being a woman in this field in particular is almost taken for granted to a frustrating degree. I think that women studies and feminism, and feminist organizing, is still dominated by a female face. That has to change because I think that as there's no single women's leadership anymore, we need to look at how men or how gender is no longer a binary. I think we need to really shift our analysis around. I've experienced many successes in this work. I think that on the interpersonal level, young women in Canada that are like, I grew up with no one who looked like me and I just didn't know that I had the right to have opinion like this, you know, thirteen year old girls sending me emails, that makes me feel successful. In terms of broader social change, Feministing has changed the landscape of contemporary feminism. It's changed the stakes of who needs to be involved and who needs to be listening and who needs to be analyzing, and I

think it's decentralized what leadership looks like in feminism and in feminist activism. Feminist blogs have essentially become the communication in current feminism. And so, I think that that has been a tremendous success and it's also a difficulty in terms of figuring out a way to sustain it in a way that's practical since it's still new and most of us aren't funded.

AS: Do you think that we can possibly bridge the gap between academic feminism and grassroots, mainstream people and get them involved?

SM: Absolutely, it's more than a possibility; it's a necessity. Any effective organizing campaign is going to be built off of things that are learned in an academic setting. I think that in a lot of ways, especially with an expansion in the last thirty years of Women's Studies Departments, Sociology Departments, that kind of stuff, the study of social movements is invaluable, I think. So is some of the language. I think that intellectual thought production around social movement is really important. And I think that the late eighties really showed this effective connection, between using political methodology, as learned in college, in organizing specifically around how HIV activists and gay men's activists used the teaching of Michel Foucault. And that is a really good example of bringing academic work into the pop culture sphere. It's become more and more increasingly popular. More and more academics in the mainstream spotlight, definitely in the liberal world, talking about these more complicated ideas, in a way that larger communities can understand. So, it's happening and it's true. A lot of the language of SlutWalk wasn't accessible and a lot of it was accessible, and I think that that combination is an important depth and part of the development.

AS: What would you classify this movement as? What's the ultimate defining moment, if there is one?

SM: The ultimate defining moment in our generation is that there isn't one. I think that's very difficult for traditional media and even for feminist theory to accept, that maybe there isn't a fourth wave, and that maybe what we're at now, if there is a fourth wave of feminism, I think it's online feminism, which like any wave, very exclusive in its analysis. Because there is a lot of feminist activism that's happening that's not even being documented online, it's very difficult to say exactly when and where the fourth wave is. I do think that feminism has shifted. We may not see necessarily feminist organizing happening, but feminists are organizing. I think that's the shift in our generation. Activism has really become more issue focused. So, you could have a series of political ideologies and feminism could be one of them, but you're working on economic justice or you're working on slut shaming or you're working on the environment. That is the most exciting thing about our generation. I think the defining moment is that there is no definition. We are a variety of things at the same time.

AS: What do you think mainstream media has to learn from Feministing? If you could change one thing, what would you change immediately?

SM: Representation. The way young women are represented in the mainstream media. That is why we need feminist blogs. The one thing I would change is the way young people are talked about in the media as though they are blights on society. Everything they do is either a panic or a crisis, or a reason to shame women because they're not virgins at twenty-eight. That kind of stuff I think really hurts women's everyday lives and is inaccurate to how we actually live our lives. So I do think that's one thing we need to change in the mainstream media.

AS: What's your end goal?

SM: My end goal depends what you're talking about. My hope is definitely to create sustainable avenues for feminist self-expression. And that means making Feministing sustainable, or creating a pipeline for grassroots lead feminist thought production that's either sponsored or foundation funded or whatever the case may be. I do think that what has happened is the face of feminist activism has changed, and as a result, the money is not going where the actual action is happening. And it could be said that maybe money would change that. But, I think increasingly that as we are living in an economy where we don't have jobs, and young people are so in debt, that we just don't have the same kinds of options that we used to have. Activism is becoming more and more of a sacrifice. I'm interested in creating sustainable outlets for this kind of expression.

AS: Can you define what you mean by sustainable? What is the dream of that word?

SM: When I think about what sustainable means I think about educated, nurtured, active involved conscientious thinkers. What are the conditions that create people as agents? That they're conscientious in what they're doing, that they're aware of all the different positions, they are educated on the different topics, they're nurtured in their personal lives, in their communities, in their self-care. You don't really have effective social change if the people in it are hurting. And you don't have a just society if the people in it are hurting. So, that's what I think about when I think about sustainability.

You know when I started blogging, I was a full-time school teacher actually, and so I taught second grade, and I would wake up at five o'clock in the morning and I would write from five to six thirty and then I would go and teach from seven thirty until I took the kids out to recess, and then during recess I would check my comments. And that's you know, just blogging. Organizers, that don't get paid, are working third, fourth, fifth shifts, they have children, they're not making ends meet. That is not sustainable. And the amount of pressure that is put on the figurehead of a lot of these organizations isn't sustainable, and the salaries that people make. And so, that is what I think about sustainability because I don't think social change is effective in the long term if you don't have engaged, conscientious members.

AS: Do you think that you're still going to be doing this five to ten years from now?

SM: I hope that I am paid for it if I'm doing it five or maybe ten years from now. I don't know if I'm going to be doing Feministing five to ten years from now. I probably won't because I think it's incredibly important for that to be a space of young women, and in five or ten years I won't be a young woman anymore. So I don't know if I'll necessarily be doing Feministing. Will I still be writing? Yes. Will I still be an activist? Absolutely.

AS: What are you afraid of?

SM: I am really afraid of this conservative attack on women's rights currently. I'm really afraid of how many rights are being stripped out right from under our noses. And we're being sold a false bill of goods; that the rights we have are being taken for granted and that if conservatives can have it their way they will overturn Roe v. Wade and they will take over and put women back in the kitchen. That is their agenda goal and that makes me really nervous and really scared.

AS: What do you think we should be doing right now to prevent that from happening?

SM: We should be organizing. I think that we are educating, but I also think that a lot of what's happening, in terms of anti-choice activism, their grassroots game is really tight, whereas ours is a little bit lacking in terms of membership and getting awareness up and getting women in a lot of these contexts who are losing rights, kind of involved and organized. So that is definitely one of the things that needs to happen right now.

AS: Can you offer one piece of advice for me as I set out on my goals and graduate college?

SM: We are in such a critical time right now for young people to be engaged. What I do is not the common kind of work. The number one thing is to stay positive because it is so overwhelming right now; just the financial situation with our country right now and our future, and how the last ten years have been very hard for a lot of young people. We don't have a ton of money [or] a ton of job options. The downside of that is that there are not a lot of jobs right now and so we have no health insurance, etc. The upside is that we have to be creative and be innovative in ways that we have not seen in forty years. You need to really stay enthusiastic and excited about that. You may not buy a house by the time you're twenty-four and you may not get married. The traditional kind of next steps in life have changed. You can either be bogged down by that or be really excited. I think it's really exciting.