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Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Her Vision of Women's liberation in Sultana's Dream

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Abstract

The nineteenth century was a period of darkness, gloom and despair for the Muslim women of Bengal together with the Muslim women of the whole Indian subcontinent. Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, the pioneer Bengali Muslim feminist, was a prominent writer on women's issues, the lady with the lamp in the rights, education and modernization of women in Colonial Bengal. In her society, she was the herald of a new age when Muslim women would be fully vindicated as human beings. She found misinterpretation of Islam and social backwardness to cling to patriarchal tradition to be the root causes behind women's unspeakable misery. Now women are looking forward to shaping their own lives, households, communities, and nations despite the restrictive gender ideologies and practices. Most of her writings are in Bengali but a few works of her are written in English. This article explores the world of women in South Asia, especially in Bangladesh, in light of Begum Rokeya's Sultana's Dream. In her society, she was the herald of a new age when Muslim women would be fully vindicated as human beings.

Keywords: Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Muslim women, colonial Bengal, patriarchy

Introduction

Colonial Muslim South Asia had two leading cultural centres: Bengal and North India. As part of the far-reaching reformist movement during the colonial period and beyond, intellectual work from these two places included a powerful segment of feminist writing which has remained the harbinger of the women's rights movement among Muslims of this region. It is important to give research attention to South Asian Muslim writers, many of whom have been marginalized mainly because of the dominance of, and sometimes overriding and disproportionate focus on, their Hindu counterparts. Against this background, this article discusses the life, incredible commitment, sacrifice and feminist accomplishments of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932). It will also contextualize her ideas in the broader South Asian Muslim feminist tradition.

The whole world knows that England has her Mary Wollstonecraft and France has her Simone de Beauvoir as feminists, but the world knows a very little that Bengal also has her Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain, an intrepid feminist, who struggled till the last day of her life for the perfectly right assessment of the neglected Indian women, was born in 1880, in Pairaband, a small village in British India which now lies in the north-western part of present-day Bangladesh. She pioneered women's advancement and led the way to enlightening and empowering women breaking all the traditional social barriers. When the whole women folk were utterly distressed, deprived, and drowned under the dirt of illiteracy, fanaticism, superstitions, and prejudices and could not think of equal rights and

freedom, she raised her voice through her writings and worked to uplift the fortune of women, instilled a sense of renaissance in them and led them to tasting the flavor of freedom opposed to the current of patriarchal social views. Based on this bold attitude toward female emancipation, Rokeya can easily be acclaimed as a feminist whereas some critics have viewed her as a Muslim or Islamic feminist which is nothing but an immature attempt to underestimate her genius. This paper, therefore, aims at exploring Rokeya's *Istrijatir Abanati (Woman's Downfall)* (1903) with a view to showing her firm determination, endeavors, and voice to emancipate women, and advocating her as a concerned feminist.

In 1905, a Madras-based English periodical, *The Indian Ladies' Magazine* carried a story titled *Sultana's Dream* written by Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. It was a "utopian fantasy" – the first known example of such a work by a woman in India – in which Rokeya imagines a world where cooking is a pleasure, horticulture is an important activity and science is used only for humanitarian ends. It is a woman's world – peaceful and ordered – where men are "shut indoors" in the *murdana*. As Rokeya's husband remarked on reading the story, it is indeed a "terrible revenge" on men.

Rokeya was undoubtedly a remarkable writer and thinker whose contributions to the rich intellectual discourse of late colonial Bengal has begun to receive the attention, it has always deserved, in recent years. Thanks to efforts by feminist scholars, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's name has now found its way into the list of "exceptional," "early feminist" women writers from colonial India circulating in critical academic circles within the Anglo-American academy. What has remained less noticed are the works of the other dozen-odd Muslim women – such as Masuda Rahman, Khaerunnessa Khatun, Razia Khatun Choudhurani, Mahmuda Khatun Siddiqua, Ayesha Ahmed and Faziltunnessa to name a few – who were also writing on a wide range of issues pertinent to women's lives in the first half of the twentieth century. A few others such as Sufia Kamal and Samsun Nahar Mahmud may have gained recognition for their writing and/or their activism over time, but few readers outside Bangladesh and West Bengal would recognize their names, even in the subcontinent. As historical sources, the work of all these early women writers is important. They were also seminal in gaining the attention and eventual confidence of readers who were by and large averse to the idea of the emancipation of women at that time. And yet such efforts are rarely acknowledged, leaving one with the impression that Rokeya was a thinker "out of time and place" (Sarkar, "Looking for Feminism" 325-27).

A Glimpse into her Life as a Daughter

Though born in an aristocratic Muslim family in the village of Pairaband, Rangpur, located in the British Bengal Presidency, which now lies in the present day Bangladesh in 1880, Begum Rokeya herself had the firsthand experience of gender discrimination meted out to her and her other sisters by her father Zahiruddin Muhammad Abu Ali Hyder Saber. As daughters of an elite conservative Muslim family, Rokeya and her sisters had to observe strict *purdah* (veiling or covering of body from head to toe); even they were not allowed to speak and mix with any male persons beyond close family members. Recounts of many sad incidents of her childhood life with great sorrow and bitterness are found on various points of her writing. Because of her father's loath and insular mentality regarding women's education, she along with her sisters was barred from attending schools for studying Bengali, English and pursuing any other forms of knowledge except learning the skill to read the Qur'an in parrot-like manner to become a future ideal wife and mother. Her father's opposition to and disapproval of Rokeya's learning Bengali was mainly because of the existing ethos of upper class Muslim families almost all over India. They considered Urdu as the *lingua franca* of royal Muslims and so made it the medium of

instruction in almost all Muslim- dominated schools in greater Bengal region. Although majority of people in Bengal region were speakers of Bengali, this language was looked down upon as the commoner's language, and therefore, considered to be inappropriate for the high cultured Muslim family members to master this language. Moreover, he imposed restriction on his daughters believing that girls' exposure to education at school might contaminate their minds with non-Muslim ideas.

But he did the opposite to his sons by encouraging and even patronizing them to learn English so that they could enter civil service holding respectable positions. Therefore, his son Ibrahim Saber was sent to the prestigious St. Xavier's College in Calcutta and later to England for higher studies. This exposure to modern education and society gave Ibrahim Saber an opportunity to get acquainted with a relatively liberal societal attitude towards women, which made him progressive and supportive of female education. Later returning home from abroad, he began to give Rokeya a covert education on English secretly at night and continued doing so even under the most scornfully taunting remarks of their relatives. Prior to it, Rokeya already learnt the Bengali language under her elder sister Karimunnesa Khatun's benevolent grooming from childhood. Her childhood biography tells the story of her unbending craving for education under unfavorable circumstances. Another person who could perceive her dormant talents as a writer was her husband, Khan Bahadur Syed Sakhawat Hossain, an Urdu speaking district magistrate in Bhagalpur, presently situated in the Indian state of Bihar, who married the sixteen-year old Rokeya in 1896. Not provincial but progressive in outlook as an England-returned educated man like his brother in law Ibrahim Saber, Sakhawat Hossain actively helped in fructifying and flourishing Rokeya's nascent multifaceted genius. His support to his wife's literary activities during his lifetime extended beyond when he bequeathed her a handsome amount of money to start a school for Muslim girls. She was a promising writer when her husband was alive, but came in the spotlight as a feminist author, educationist and women's right activist after his demise in 1909. Since then, her mission to emancipate the voiceless women of Bengal never faltered, and continued with the most vigorous spirit of earnestness, sincerity and dedication.

Method

This paper is developed based on the analysis of both the primary and the secondary sources. Primary source refers to the author's own writings whereas the secondary source refers to the works done on the author. The secondary information were collected from published books, journals and research papers, most of which were published during the period of 1937 – 2011.

Result

This paper is expected to establish the nature and extent of women's empowerment and emancipation through education and economic freedom in the form of self reliance as Rokeya delves into in her utopia: Sultana's Dream.

Status of Women and the Idea of Female Emancipation in Colonial Bengal

When the sufferings of women reached its culmination, a lot of writers, social reformers, private organizations, and print media came forward to uplift the status of women through their reform activities which actually show the cruel adversity of women in Indian sub-continent. "The main purpose of all reform-attempts was to tear the fetters of womanhood and establish their rights restraining Sati, forbidding polygamy, allowing widow-marriage, resisting the practice of aristocracy and spreading female-education" (Alam, 2009, p. 40).

Another observation in this regard is:

Bengali reformers, Brahmo and otherwise, still held the nation first propagated widely in 1855 by Akhoy Kumar Dutt and Vidyasagar, that Hindu social reform in Bengal must start with the emancipation of women. Because women played such a crucial role in shaping the character and thought of children, it was essential that they be educated properly. (Kopf, 1975, p. 46)

In connection with this, “Keshab Chandra always believed that no substantial progress in society was possible without first emancipating women from the fetters of ignorance, superstition and inhibiting customs...a solid education should be given to women if their miseries were to be alleviated” (Sinha, 1968, p. 251). Infact, starting with Ram Mohan to Rabindranath Tagore,

Almost all the writers and social activists thought over women’s right and the main characteristics of their writings were raising awareness of female distress and wishing for its remedy throughout 18th and 19th century. Though they used the term “female emancipation” in some or other places, it was completely absent from their writings if it means the acknowledgement of female independent personality. (Hasan, 2008, p. 121)

That is why Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, despite his being a great social reformer, but at the same time due to the existing social norm for not to introduce girls on stage in any theatrical performance, did not yield to the proposal made by Michael Modhushudhon Dutt to use female characters in the stage performance of his “Sharmishtha” even though they were taken from brothel. Consequently, he left the theatre when Michael Modhushudhon Dutt wanted to introduce girls to play the role of woman on the stage. When Keshab Chandra Sen, another social activist, allowed his daughter’s early-marriage, all his endeavors to emancipate women ended in smoke. Robindranath Tagore also married a girl who was 11 years old and he gave his daughters in marriage around 10. Actually, they did not dare to assert the ideal of female emancipation breaking the prevailing social taboo against women. Besides social activists, some Christian Missionaries established *The Female Juvenile Society for Establishment for Bengali Female School*, *Bengal Christian School Society*, and *Ladies Society for Native Female Education in Calcutta and It’s Vicinity* with a view to educating Bengali girls in the first half of the 19th century. But their endeavors ended in smoke when their motif of converting the girls into Christianity was exposed. Toward the end of the 19th century, some women reformists from the Brahmin society came forward and established *Bama Hitoishini Shova* (1871), *Bharot Asroy* (1872), *Arzo Nari Shomaj* (1879), and *Shokhi Somiti* (1886) in order to help poor women, educate girls, and establish female rights. In the mean time, some newspapers and magazines like *Bango Mahila* (1870), *Onathini* (1875), *Antapur* (1898), *Kohinur* (1898), *Nobonur* (1903), and *Sougat* (1918) covered arguments and counter-arguments regarding female education and their emancipation. All these activities, in fact, centered round uplifting only Hindu women and led them clearly ahead whereas the Muslim community, being influenced by the Bengali Renaissance, understood the importance of female education late and at the same time could not help questioning the female emancipation raising the issue of seclusion in the name of purdah.

So, the Indian womanhood and the general fate of women remind us what Nora said her husband in *A Doll’s House*: “Our house has been nothing but a playroom. Here I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I used to be papa’s doll-child” (Ibsen, 2006, p. 164). In such a state:

When the entire nation was suffering from suspicion, hesitation and bewilderment from all around, Mrs. R. S. Hussein came down to earth from the Heaven with the message of belief and life wherein our all destroyed strayed society found an enlightened path. (Kha, 1339, p. 267)

As a representative of female voice, “Begum Rokeya tried to repel the age-old social prejudices regarding women preaching progressive trend of thoughts through her writing” (Hossain, 1384, p. 226) in the beginning of the 20th century. In her *Istrijatir Abanati*, which has recently been translated as *Woman's Downfall* by Mohammad A. Quayum and published in Transnational Literature by Flinders Institute for Research in the Humanities, Adelaide, Australia, Rokeya has made an attempt to unsheathe the enslaved women and get them dependent on their own with a view to taking a swipe at men for their oppression against women and emancipating them from the vicious circle of ignorance, indolence, and subjugation physically, psychologically, intellectually, socially, and economically.

Reasons behind the Degradation of Women

In *Woman's Downfall*, first published in 1903 as *Alankar na Badge of Slavery (Jewellery, or Badge of Slavery)* in Mahila, a monthly magazine edited by Girish Chandra Sen, Rokeya categorically reviews the downfall of women as slaves and the reasons behind it, the ways to come over their bondage and the assertion of their independent self-identity. In fact, her own experience of secluded life at home, her great affection and stern responsibility for the destitute women of the society and, afterwards, her passion for equal rights of European people encourages Rokeya to raise her voice to the principle of female emancipation. Therefore, she invites the female readers to think of their misfortunes in the beginning of the essay: “What are we in this civilized world of the twentieth century? Slaves! I hear slavery as a trade has disappeared from this world, but has our servitude ended? No. There are reasons why we are still in bondage” (Quayum, 2011, p. 6).

To talk about the adversity of women, she boldly expresses her grievance over men who deprive them from receiving education, do not give them opportunity to show their “efficiency”, consider them as “weak”, “incompetent”, and “inferior”, and extend their helping hand leading them to “become slaves of indolence and, by extension, of men”. Because of the lack of education women lose their “ability to differentiate between freedom and captivity, progress and stagnation, slowly, from being landlords and master of the house, men, in stages, have ended up being our lord and proprietor” (Quayum, 2011, pp. 6-7). They gradually make woman like one of their “domesticated animals, or some kind of a prized property”. Rokeya here simply resembles what Wollstonecraft believed (2007) “that all the writers who have written on the subject of female education and manners, from Rousseau to Dr. Gregory, have contributed to render women more artificial, weak characters, than they would otherwise have been; and consequently, more useless members of society” (p. 18).

Rokeya also considers the careful and earnest attention of men and their shielding of women with the armor of love and affection, which women are swinging along, heaving, bobbing, and dissolving to, responsible for the world-wide degradation of women: “In fact, their compassion is the source of our ruin.

By cooping us up in their emotional cage, men have deprived us from the light of knowledge and unadulterated air, which is causing our slow death” (Quayum, 2011, p. 9). Being constantly protected from the dangers and difficulties of the society, women lose their courage, confidence, and will altogether. They become totally dependent on their husband renouncing self-reliance. When they face the slightest of difficulties, they rush

into the house and start wailing at the highest pitch. Therefore, Rokeya humbly pleads to the honorable brothers: "Do us this favour, do not do any favour to us" (Quayum, 2011, p. 9).

Begum Rokeya is equally critical of the women for colluding in the victimization of men through submission to tradition and excessive love for ignorance and indolence. Very often, in all ages, women cling to tradition out of their simplicity which may degrade their self-dignity. Simone De Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex* exposed this tendency thus:

When man makes of woman the *other*, he may, then, expect her to manifest deep-seated tendencies toward complicity. Thus, woman may fail to lay claim to the status of subject because she lacks definite resources, because she feels the necessary bond that ties her to man regardless of reciprocity, and because she is often very well pleased with her role as the *other*. (Parshley, 1976, p. xxi)

Such a tendency, which women were now accustomed to gradually enslaves them all around leading them to the emotional cage of men. In this regard, Rokeya considers the most cherished jewelries of women, one of the favors of man, as the badges of slavery and shows them, who wear fetters of gold or silver as an object of affection, like the prisoners who wear shackles of iron. She is wondered to see the eagerness of women for this jewelry as if the happiness and prosperity of the whole life depend on it. Bearing the marks of slavery on their body, they feel proud of themselves and swell with self-esteem and delight. She satirizes this tendency of women and urges them to think that jewelry is nothing but an insignia of slavery.

That is why Rokeya asks women to leave their tendency of beautifying themselves with the badges of slavery, and put it around the neck of pet animals to make right use of jewelry if it really means the demonstration of the wealth of men. Cowardice and physical weakness are yet other reasons for the degradation of women which Rokeya present ironically:

Let alone a tiger or a bear, we are terrified at the sight of a cockroach or a leech. Some of us would even swoon at its sight. A nine or ten year old boy can intimidate all the women in the family with a leech trapped in bottle and amuse himself. (Quayum, 2011, p. 10)

Here Rokeya's description of the timidity of women sounds almost identical to Wollstonecraft's representation of women's abject timorous mental condition:

Fragile in every sense of the word, they are obliged to look up to men for many comforts. In the most trifling danger they cling to their support, with parasitical tenacity, piteously demanding succor, and their natural protector extends his arm, or lifts up his voice, to guard the lovely trembler—from what? Perhaps the frown of an old cow, or the jump of a mouse; a rat would be a serious danger. (Wollstonecraft, 2007, p. 79)

Rokeya also depicts women as the mere drawing room ornaments for men leading them to physical weakness which she presents through a newly-wed woman of Bihar, who takes a load of eight seers of gold on her body and becomes an inanimate object. For the lack of physical movement, her feet get wearied and exhausted. Her hands are utterly useless. Dyspepsia and lack of appetite are her constant companions. There is no spirit in her body and mind. Her head and heart have become perpetually weak. Showing the condition of the women when Rokeya tells one of the girls to run about half an hour daily, she laughs boisterously which means women have lost the capacity of appreciating new knowledge. Without cultivation for a long time, the higher faculties of women get nipped

in the bud and gradually their body, soul, head, and heart all have accustomed to slavery. Men, on the other hand, take the opportunity out of their servitude:

We see families where poor women earn their livelihood by menial labour and support the husband as well as the children, yet there, too, the effete man acts as the patriarch. Again, a man who has no income of his own but marries an heiress of considerable wealth; he too lords it over his wife. (Quayum, 2011, p. 13)

Their faculties of self-reliance and courage have stopped sprouting altogether and there is no autonomy and strength of their soul left. Therefore, Rokeya invites them: "Rise, oh sisters, rise" (Quayum, 2011, p. 13).

Rokeya's Idea of Female Freedom

Rokeya tries to electrify the feeble women to rise and assert their freedom disregarding the affliction, strife, and capital punishment given by the Muslims and Hindus of Indian society. By freedom, she means a successful life like men. She says that nothing meaningful can be achieved without efforts and enduring hardships. In this context, she gives the example of Parsi women who can now ride around in a carriage without covering their face, speak freely with other men, run their own business, and renounce purdah which they could not do before. When a few men allowed their wives to step out of purdah, there was an outcry everywhere that doomsday was looming. But the world has not destructed yet. Rokeya, therefore, invites women: "Let's all move forward collectively to attain our freedom; the dust of anger will settle with time" (Quayum, 2011, p. 14). This invocation resembles what Simone De Beauvoir urges women: If we are to gain understanding, we must get out of these ruts; we must discard the vague notion of superiority, inferiority, equality which have hitherto corrupted every discussion of the subject and start afresh (Parshley, 1976, p. xxvii). However, to attain freedom, Rokeya emphasises on equal education and economic independence for women first.

Literary, Political and Educational Activism

Rokeya had to work on three fronts simultaneously: literary, political and educational. The publication of the essay "Pipasha" in the Calcutta-based *Nababprabha* in 1902 marked the inauguration of her literary career. Despite her tremendous creative talents, insights and energies, we notice a gap in her literary production from 1909 to 1914. During this period, she could not focus on writing, presumably because of multiple griefs caused by the deaths of her parents, children and husband. Her life was full of trials and tribulations. During her short-lived married life, she had to look after her much older, ailing husband and bear the demise of her "two baby daughters" at their early age, "one at the age of five months and the other at four months old" (Quayum xxiii). The following lines she wrote to a certain Mr. Yasin sharply describe the suffering of her life:

You need not feel so keenly about me, I do not repent for leaving Bhagalpur, but at times I feel some sort of yearning to see the grave of my husband and the tiny graves of my babies. But never mind. I am brave enough to bear my grief. ("Letter to Md. Yasin" 504)

Such agony in personal life was compounded by the misconducts she received from her step-daughter and step-son-in-law owing to family disputes over inheritance. Moreover, she had to employ utmost efforts to establish her school. These may have been the reasons why Rokeya could not produce works between 1909 and 1914. However, apart from this break of continuity in literary production, we find Rokeya relentlessly writing

for a whole period of three decades beginning in 1902 and ending with her death, and producing foundational literary works of different genres and subject matters, predominantly women's issues. Her last essay "Narir Adhikar" (Women's Rights) was left unfinished on her table on the night she died of heart attack, and it was posthumously published in the magazine *Mahe-nau* in 1957 (25 years after her death).

In British India at that time, Muslims had some political and educational organisations like the All India Muslim League, the Central Mohammedan Association and the All India Educational Conference. All of these were chiefly run by and for men. There was no platform from which Muslim women could raise their voices and become engaged in the public spheres of power and influence. The central Indian Muslim women's organisation, Anjuman-i-Khawatin-i-Islam founded in 1914 was based in Aligarh, about 800 miles away from Rokeya's Calcutta. With Rokeya's initiative and tireless work, Anjuman's Calcutta branch was launched in 1916.

Rokeya's tenacious work made Muslim women aware and brought them from the darkness of their domestic prison to Anjuman meetings. Consequently, later the All India Muslim Educational Conference opened its Bengal chapter – the Bengal Women's Education Conference – of which Rokeya was an important member. She was elected the President of one of its sessions in its 1926 conference and gave a valuable speech.⁷ Rokeya's dream about the Anjuman finds a fictional representation in *Padmarag* in which she depicts the Tarini Bhaban (the House of the Rescuer), a refuge centre for the oppressed women that houses the Nari-Klesh Nibarani Samiti (Society for the Prevention of Women's Sufferings). Tarini Bhaban gives shelter to a group of female social outcasts who make a world of their own on its premises.

The focus of Rokeya's activism was the promotion of female education. In British India, the social setting was so hostile to female education that even the giant Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-98) did not dare to include it in his powerful movement for Muslims' education, thinking that such a move would frustrate the ultimate objective of their advancement. But Rokeya did not give in; she waged a persistent battle for female education, braving the social norms and barriers that stood between women and the prevailing intellectual culture.

It is important to note that Rokeya raised the issue of female education at a turning point in the history of Muslim Bengal. After a long period of colonial oppression, Muslims realised its economic, political and cultural detriments. Under the leadership of Sayyid Ahmad Khan, they began to work to end this deplorable situation. But Rokeya detects a serious flaw in the social therapy, as Muslims were all busy setting up different organisations and launching different movements, while the most important programme – female education – was missing. She makes an unconventional, pathological analysis of Muslim society's backwardness and questions, "Can a community, that has locked half of its population in the prison of ignorance and seclusion, keep pace with the progress of other communities that have advanced female education on a full par with men?" (Rokeya, "Bongio Nari-Shikhwa" 225).⁸ She draws the attention of the Muslim community to a historical fact that there was a time when Muslim religious leaders were opposed to English education, the bitter harvest of which they were currently reaping (Rokeya, "God Gives" 477). That imprudent stance of the Muslims denied them access to a vast treasure of knowledge and the resultant prosperity.

Upon starting her school, she became extremely preoccupied with it mentally and physically. Towards the end of life, that hard work had a telling effect on her health. She walked around from door to door in order to collect students and persuade the guardians to send their daughters to the school. She assured them that she would personally take full responsibility of looking after and tutoring them and, what is more, they would not have to

pay school fees or travel costs. In order to convince the parents and guardians, Rokeya ensured that the school carriage was fully covered, which made it look like a moving tent.

Reasons behind Rokeya's harsh language of protest

The harsh tone and flavour of her writings was directed to both Muslim or Hindu patriarchs who treated women in the most unlawful manner. While invoking all women to rise against the injustice done to them, she even risked an infuriatingly violent response from the whole male section of the Indian society. She wrote, "I know that Indian Muslim will be inclined to 'slaughter' us (i.e. condemn us to capital punishment) and Hindus will drag us to the funeral pyre or to a fire of eternal affliction." (Hossain R. S., 2011, p. 13) Biographically speaking, in order to translate her philanthropic vision into realistic and gritty action, she had to confront with many odds and challenges from the tradition-bound segment of the society with parochial attitudes. Because of her relentless effort in favour of women, she became the target of tremendous hostility and scolding remarks from the conservatives. Their opposing outcry in the society went so far that she was even titled "a shameless woman, a misanthrope, a radical misguided by the proselytizing propaganda of Christian missionaries, and a sexist." (Jahan, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *Sultana's Dream, A Feminist Utopia and Selections from The Secluded Ones*, 1988, p. 53) Some called her fellow activists as 'prostitutes', 'the scum of society', and even branded Rokeya 'a woman of loose morals'. But nothing could stop Rokeya from her vision and mission.

The question of why Begum Rokeya's used bitter language to speak and work for establishing the rights of women needs to be explained so far as the slow pace, and in some cases, failure of the male initiated reform efforts are concerned. She felt furious because of the then Muslim community's little interest to let their daughters step outside of home for whatever reasons there might be. She knew how Maulvi Abdul Hakim of the Calcutta Madrassah disagreed and summarily dismissed the idea of educating Muslim girls in an academic setting maintaining that the education provided at home was sufficient when the issue first raised at an assembly of the Bengal Social Science Association in 1867. Among many other semi-religious or semi-behavioral manuals advocating ideal role models for women that were written and published during the first three decades of the 20th century, Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi's exemplary book *Bihishti Zawar* or **Heavenly Ornaments** (1905) in Urdu provided basic egalitarian principles for both men and women and a detailed guide for respectable Muslim women. This book got much appreciation and applause from both Bengali and non-Bengali Muslims on the ground, as Barbara Metcalf (1990) says: "it sought to do nothing less than bringing women into the high standard of Islamic conformity that has been the purview of educated religious men." (Metcalf, 1990, p. 7) But Maulana Thanwi was questioned and criticized because of his duality in the book who, on one hand, proposed an egalitarian Islamic sanction for men and women, and on the other, propagated highly problematic patriarchal value systems. Throughout the book, he never questioned the disparity and imbalance between men and women's social role and power dynamics. Thanawi was not radical as a Muslim theologian who, according to Seema Kazi (1999),

"Acknowledged equal mental and intellectual potential of men and women, but delineated domestic roles for women in great detail, restricted women's participation in public life and extolled the virtue of the family." (Kazi, 1999, p. 7)

A similar type of duality and ideological split towards women is found in Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), the paramount figure of Muslim modern education of the time who had a great influence on other Muslim reformers in Greater Bengal regions

for his views of modern secular education. But surprisingly, he too did not support formal schooling and western type of education for women, and adamantly opposed to bring women out of veiling. Almost all Islamic scholars so far supported female education, but certainly within the jurisdiction of the Qur'an and its interpretations. They agreed upon and opined for only home education for women to calm down the conservative section of the Muslim community that was completely unwilling to send their daughters to school as it would be a violation of Islamic sanction. To talk about the Islamists' puritanical views about women, Rachana Chakraborty (2011) states:

Their consideration of women's position in the family and plans for women's education included discussion of household customs and rituals, of purdah, and of Islamic law as it pertained to women." (Chakraborty, 2011, pp. 77-78)

Conclusion

Begum Rokeya's unfaltering language of protest against the wrongdoings of the patriarchal society to women stirred the very root of it, and led to a growing demand for change. Her voice of disagreement never retired even under great public debates and scrutiny often posing great challenge as well as dilemma for ongoing women's movements. Rather she moved forward with renewed spirit and reached the vantage point of feminist radicalism. Her voice to free women and her feminist doctrine of social enlightenment lived on and will live on for indefinite times to come. Along with many other women holding respectably important government and corporate positions, the present day Bangladesh has already seen women as its democratically elected leaders and the West Bengal of India has voted for a woman Chief Minister. Her legacy remains as countless women of different casts, creed and customs are now occupying a sizable portion in the total workforce in Bangladesh and West Bengal. Now, women in general have got legal and constitutional safeguard against any form of discrimination. The trail of the language of protest she blazed years ago still finds its way among the people in this part of the world.

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