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The Begum of Bengal had a Dream: a Liberal Feminist Reading of Rokeya Sakhawat

Hossain's Life and Works

That Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) is a renowned feminist in general terms in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengali literature is an established critical view. Previously nascent in the writings of her immediate predecessors, her emergence in the rich literary spectrum of her time has not only introduced feminism as a complete trend of writing, but contributed heavily to making a respectable world for the neglected women of the age and beyond. But she has been partially and narrowly categorized as a Muslim or Islamic feminist because of her inclination for changing the lot of the suppressed, oppressed, deprived and secluded Muslim women of the period. This view falls short of properly weighing her writings and so, needs more distinctively elaborate evaluation and categorization for a better understanding of feminist approach ingrained in them. Therefore, the paper investigates the type of Rokeya's devout feminism on a theory-based analysis. For this purpose, it simultaneously discusses her unique contribution as a social worker towards female emancipation to make a world of their own and critically analyzes her literary stance from liberal feminist discourse.

Key words: liberal; feminism; rights; emancipation; movement

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, popularly known as Begum Rokeya, was an outspoken feminist author, a prominent educationist and a dedicated women's right activist in the British Bengal during the late 19th and early 20th century. Among the other feted feminist writers in the Indian sub-continent, she is held in high esteem chiefly because of her literary and social contribution to awakening the stream of feminist consciousness particularly among the voiceless Muslim woman-folk of her time. All she wrote may apparently appear to be a literary exposition of Muslim women issues of the time, but a thorough reading of her various writings with a deeper critical insight prompts us to rethink of Rokeya's feminist genre and unveils her universal visionary liberal feminist standing for equal rights and privileges of the suppressed women of the age. In fact, her feminist critique against the prevailing patriarchal value systems provided an invigorating spirit to the then deprived women irrespective of racial and religious ethnicity. Her literary and social preaching also amounted to an organized feminist social movement during her lifetime in order to bring about a change in the treatment and status of women in all spheres of life. Her defying views against the established social and religious convention towards Muslim women made a significant impact on the society that resulted in legislative reforms to address the ill practices perpetrated mainly against women. She blazed the light of gender equality amidst a sea of hesitation, bewilderment and suspicion among the contemporary literary thinkers, social and religious reformers that strongly made a breathing space for women in general. Though stinging and pinching in nature, her gender gospel is marked with her repeated call for relooking into views derived from the Qur'an regarding Muslim women. Her opposition to the male interpreted Islamic codes of conduct for those women, her relentless campaign for ensuring equal education opportunities for girls, her non-sectarian belief in a religiously

inclusive society, her persistent demand for women's rightful employment outside their homes and etc. provides ample ground to regard her as a religiously nonbiased liberal feminist thinker.

Feminism is a generic term that can be defined as the theory of the political, economic, and social equality between men and women, and an organized activity or movement to address the common interests, rights and other issues pertaining to women. Though feminism, both as a literary theory and political movement, has numerous subtypes and prototypes, they are inextricably intertwined since they focus on the equal rights and privileges all women should have. As a subtype of feminism, liberal feminism is an individualistic form of feminism and theory, which focuses on women's ability to show and maintain their equality through their own actions and choices.

Born in 1880, in an aristocratic conservative Muslim family in the village of Pairaband, Rangpur, located in the British Bengal Presidency, which is now located in the present day Bangladesh, Begum Rokeya herself had the sour taste of rampant gender discrimination meted out to women by the orthodox family and society of the time. Because of her father Zahiruddin Muhammad Abu Ali Hyder Saber's loath and insular mentality regarding female education, she along with her sisters were not allowed to attend schools for studying Bengali, English and pursuing any other forms of knowledge except learning the skill to read the Qur'an to become a future ideal wife and mother. Her father's opposition to and disapproval of Rokeya's going to a formal school was mainly because of the existing ethos of Muslim families almost all over India that girls' exposure to education at an institutional setting might contaminate their minds with non-Muslim ideas. So, he only allowed home education for his daughters and imposed strict *purdah* (veil from head to toe) on them from a very early age.

Historically speaking, the British colonial initiated steps, in some cases their financial patronage, helped to create the English educated *Bhadralok* (men's gentry) community in the

19th century Bengal. It comprised of elite educated, progressive and well off sections of the society, and various professionals and government servants who played a leading role in implementing a model of female education in Bengal. But their concept of women's emancipation was not free from the patriarchal norms of traditional Hindu society. For instance, social reformers and literary thinkers like Michael ModhushudhanDutt (1824-1873) and Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-1884) were working to alter some of the social anomalies against women. Muhammad Shamsul Alam (2009) thinks that

“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 40)

Their collective social reform efforts could successfully lead to an organized movement to ensure limited rights to Hindu women in particular. But the basic difference between the social and literary works of the male reformers and those of the female reformers in contemporary and subsequent times, according to Rubaiyat Hossain (2011), lies in the fact that

“while the former group recognised women as only means to others, let it be mothers, wives, or upholders of national identity; the latter group recognised women as independent agents, thus as means to themselves..... , and their success in breaking down the home-world, private-public, spiritual-material demarcation of nationalism pronounced by patriarchal reformists..... thus, their final call was to the awakening of the individual subjects in Muslim women”(R. Hossain)

Moreover, male authors and social reformers took cautious steps to raise women questions, because there was always the risk of violent public outcry from the orthodox segment of the society. This fear made their efforts limited to spotlight women's equal rights and privileges in all walks of life. Morshed Hasan (2008) opines that

“almost all the writers and social activists thought about the rights of women and the main features of their writings were to raise awareness of female distress and long 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 121)

The then Muslim community in comparison showed little interest to let their daughters step outside of home for whatever reasons there might be. It does not mean that there was no reform initiative from the Islamic thinkers and scholars of that time for Muslim women. They wrote many semi-religious manuals during the first quarter of the 20th century. Their main focus was to prescribe an ideal role model of Muslim woman in the light of Quranic principles and Islamic tradition. For example, Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi, in his exemplary book *BihishtiZawar* (Heavenly Ornaments) in 1905, gave basic egalitarian views for both men and women and advocated a detailed behavioral guideline for respectable Muslim women. It received showering appreciation and applause from both Bengalis on moral ground as Barbara Metcalf (1990) says: “it sought to do nothing less than bring women into the high standard of Islamic conformity that has been the purview of educated religious men.” (Metcalf 7) But Thanwi was questioned and criticized for his dual approach in the book. He proposed an egalitarian Islamic sanction for men and women but also propagated highly problematic patriarchal value systems. Throughout the book, he never objected to the disparity and imbalance between men and women's social role and power dynamics. Not radical as a Muslim theologian, Thanawi, says 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, Muslim Women in India 7)

The conservative section of the Muslim community was completely unwilling to send their daughters to school as it would be a violation of Islamic sanction. So, they largely remained in favor of *Zenana* education or education at home for girls. 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 77-78)

Now the question of why Begum Rokeya is not only a Muslim or Islamic feminist and how her feminism can be categorized as liberal requires a detailed discussion to determine the issue. Liberal feminism downplays any types of sexual differences and emphasizes equal individual rights and liberties for women and men. According to Rosemarie Tong (2009), “female subordination is rooted in a set of customary and legal constraints that blocks women's entrance to and success in the so-called public world.” (Tong 15) Rokeya's social and literary preaching of ensuring equal education opportunities for both men and women, of bringing women out of the dungeon of ignorance and suppression and of establishing them as equal partners in all family, social and economic affairs echoes the basic foundations of liberal feminism in every sense. She understood the suppressed female voice of the early 20th century in the undivided British India in general and the Bengal in particular and so, tried to repel the anachronistic social prejudices regarding women preaching liberal and progressive trend of thoughts through her writing. Her sole purpose of writing was not merely to entertain people, but to help bring forth a liberal approach in the treatment of women so far as the history of their misfortune in the name of religion and other social and customary practices are concerned. Roushan Jahan (1988) rightly says:

“she did not write primarily to entertain. Rather, she marshaled her thoughts and arguments in order to question the existing order of things, to raise doubts about seemingly accepted facts,

and to motivate people to take the necessary actions to change customs she considered evil and unjust.” (Jahan 3)

She is often accused of bitterly criticizing the religious section of the society for their insistence to uphold Islamic principles in all domestic and public affairs. But the real fact is that she never challenged or declined to obey the fundamental Islamic codes of conduct for women. However, she vehemently opposed the abusive and bullying imposition of some of them on women by the ultra conservative Muslim families and society of the time. What she wanted to do by that was to liberalize the society’s attitude to women challenging the fabricated patriarchal Islamic views about Muslim women. In her opinion, the first obstacle that came in the way of women’s progress was the rampant imposition of extreme *purdah* on Muslim women of the time. So, she boldly worked throughout her life to eliminate the strict version of *Purdah*, which she terms as the “purdah of ignorance”.(Susie Tharu and K. Lalita 340) Another important aspect of her liberal feminist views is that she never ruled out the importance and contribution of her male counterpart to alter the fate of women. She understood how much important it is particularly for a wife to get support from her husband if she wants to flourish her own career. To talk about her husband’s support and contributions to her career as a writer to articulate her unorthodox ideas and even to publish them, Rokeya said:“If my dear husband had not been so supportive, I might never have written or published anything.” (Hossain 40) Quite a good part of her writings is marked with such acknowledgements and gratitude to his male family members who really helped her.

Rokeya has been categorized as an Islamic feminist only on the basis of her over concern for the deplorable condition of contemporary Muslim women. But the underlying worth of her writings is not confined to this particular genre of feminist discourse. Islamic feminism is another subtype of feminism that was first used in the 1990s. According to Margot Badran (2006), it means

“a feminist discourse and practice that derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeking rights and justice within the framework of gender equality for women and men in the totality of their existence.”(Badran)

But what Muslim women were getting their rights from their respective families puts a big question mark. As far as history is concerned, it was male interpreted Quranic and Islamic principles that predominated over the lives of all Muslim women of that time. Some very common practices among the Muslim families were to cocoon their girls within the four walls of their house, deny an institutional education as their male counterpart in the family, impose a strict version veiling on girls and women, marry them off at a very early age, prohibit them from any form of employment outside their homes etc. While speaking out against the Islamic preachers in the preface of her book *Abarodhbasini*(The Secluded Ones)1929, she boldly wrote:

“When visiting Kurseong and Madhupur, I picked up many beautiful attractive stones. From the sea beaches of Madras and Orissa, I gathered seashells of many colours and shapes. And during my twenty years of service to the society, I have collected only curses from our die-hard Mullas..... Every part of my body oozes sin, so I make no apology for any fault in this book.” (R. S. Hossain, Rokeya Rachanabali [Collected Works of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain], ed. Abdul Quader 431)

Rokeya had a liberal and practical view on *purdah* as she made a clear distinction between veiling (*purdah*) and seclusion (*abarodh*). Veiling as a means of suppression and seclusion in the name of religion and with the aim of denying women access to formal education and social interaction was completely unacceptable and therefore, this doctrine received merciless attack from her. It might sound a little radical when she said in *Abarodhbasini*,

“the system reminds me of the lethal carbonic acid gas, which being a painless killer, its victims are never alert to its hazards. Women kept confined to the home die a slow death by the effect of this fatal gas known as purdah.” (R. S. Hossain, 1993, 441)

But her real motive was not to attack and defy this mandatory Islamic code for women; what she wanted was to show the orthodox Islamists and the secluded women how strict *purdah* restricted women from participating in activities in and outside their homes. Like a scientist, she continued to tell that this extreme form of confinement to a room or to the interior of the house was injurious to health that eventually dulled their brains and made them succumb to innocuous and worthless patterns of behavior. That is why, she, in her essay *Tin Kure* (Three Idle Men), threw a straight question to the upholders of orthodox beliefs: “Purdah does not mean deprivation of all rights and confinement within four walls. Have you read at all the Koran Sharif? Or do you just hang it around your neck?” (R. S. Hossain, 1993, 486) She also considered extreme veiling and early marriage for girls as two major impediments to Muslim women’s education. She defied the so called male propagation of strict *purdah* and in the essay *Bhrata-Bhagni* (Brothers and Sisters) strongly suggested that:

“removal of that artificial restriction keeping women confined to homes will lead to unrestricted spread of education among women. And it will then be impossible to arrest the progress of such education.” (R. S. Hossain, 1993, 476)

She held a liberal view of Islam to the core discarding ill-motivated patriarchal views against women. In *Sultana’s Dream* (1905), she envisioned a Ladyland, where education was spread far and wide among women, early marriage was stopped for good, no woman was allowed to get married before the age of twenty one, and veiling had vanished for the convenience of women’s work and so on. She might have been a little extreme in this feminist utopia for turning the men’s world upside down i.e. men live in seclusion taking care of the house and the children. But the basic points she talked about and wanted her male counterpart to think

over prove her to be truly a liberal feminist, who wanted men to treat women justly and equally. Roushan Jahan has rightly opined:

“Rokeya’s story does not tell us whether Ladyland changes the basic human nature. Perhaps that was not her intention. All we are certain of is that she never again suggested the extreme measure of male seclusion. Indeed, given Rokeya’s yearning for liberty and equality, it is hardly likely that she would have found the domination of either sex agreeable.” (Jahan 1988, 4)

Begum Rokeya could never agree with the so called male interpretation of women’s roles and position within the family and society. Because she strongly believed that

“the existing inequality does not rest on an ideological or biological theory of women’s inferiority, but is the outcome of specific social institutions designed to restrain her power: namely segregation and legal subordination in the family.” (Mernissi 19)

As deprived of equal education and other rights and privileges which her brothers enjoyed, she felt that the condition of women was nothing different from what Henrik Ibsen made Nora say to 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 164) That is why, she took her liberal husband’s encouraging patronage as an opportunity to manifest her thoughts in black and white, which in no way contradict but complement to the Quranic interpretation of women’s rights. Though meant on the surface for the roles of divorcing a woman if necessity arises and the way the couple can be reunited if they wish so, one of the verses in the holy Qur’an clearly outlines the rights and responsibilities of both husband and wife which may surely be applicable to all men and women in general in other affairs too: “ And they (women) have rights (over their husbands as regards living expenses) similar to (those of their husbands) to them (as regards obedience and respect) to what is reasonable,” (Khan 49) She was totally convinced that it was not Islam or the holy Qur’an but

the then male dominated society that subjugates women often in a pretentiously loving manner only to limit their potentials and restrict their rights. Therefore, a strong movement and firm initiative was a demand of the time to address the issue of equal education and other rights and privileges for women in a more liberal sense. So, she started her literary and social campaign of asserting women's rights that had long been denied in the name of religion and the false pretext of male superiority and other dogmatic views.

The target of her criticism was not the male section of the society; she also took a big hand to the foolish women who readily accepted their subordination and subjugation without realizing the consequence of their silent submission. She was equally critical of her own women folk for their tendency to remain under confinement. In her essay *Istrijatir Abanati* (1903) (Woman's Downfall), a translation by Mohammad A. Quayum, she not only rebukes men for encircling women from receiving proper education, not giving them the opportunity to prove their efficiency but categorically tends to sort out the reasons behind women's downfall as slaves devoid of any self identity. She is outrageously critical of men for their shielding of women with the so called armor of love and affection, which only make women lose their courage, confidence and will power altogether. She thinks:

“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.” (R. S. Hossain 9)

She refuses to acknowledge women as inferior beings; rather she finds equal talents and potentials in them and so, wants them to be free and self reliant. She at times blames women for their blind submission to the caring affection of men and asks them to renounce this treacherous favor which only makes them over dependent on men. She bitterly criticizes women for their tendency of clinging to tradition out of simplicity which ultimately diminishes their own choice and self-identity, and of considering jewelry as an instrument of

adornment. A thorough reading of this essay takes Rokeya closer to Simone De Beauvoir, an eminent feminist philosopher, who in her *The Second Sex* (1956) talks about the same tendency of women:

“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*.” (Beauvoir 20)

Rokeya considers jewelry that women use to beautify their bodies as badges of slavery, because they also greatly restrict women’s free movement. She has given a detailed description of how women are made to live under permanent imprisonment because of this adornment with gold and other precious metals. For women’s over fascination towards ornaments, Rokeya satirically writes:

“A cow-owner perforates the nose of a bullock to put the harness; our masters in this country have made us wear a nose ring set with a pendant. That nose-ring is the symbol of the master’s being and presence.” (R. S. Hossain 2011, 8)

That is why, she invokes all women to come over their bondage of slavery in order to pave the way for standing alone with self-identity and self-reverence: “Rise, oh sisters, rise let’s all move forward collectively to attain our freedom; the dust of anger will settle with time.” (R. S. Hossain 2011, 13-14) She also puts forward a remarkable suggestion to men: “Do us this favour, do not do any favour to us.” (R. S. Hossain 2011, 9)) Such an invocation to women and a suggestion to men cannot but teach women to learn to leave their feeble life and live an independent life of their own. Like a liberal feminist thinker, Rokeya wanted all women to live freely on their own which would enable them to determine their own course of life and living.

Begum Rokeya knew what was going on in Europe to ensure women's rights in all spheres of life. It might be said that her writings bear similarities with those of Mary Wollstonecraft, a paramount feminist figure in Great Britain, who wrote extensively in favor of the rights of women. Her awareness of the European concept of free woman is clearly evident when she wrote in her novella *Padmarag*(1924) or (Ruby), a translation by Barnita Bagchi:

“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.” (R. S. Hossain, *Padmarag (Ruby)* 6)

Both Rokeya and Wollstonecraft had complaints against their male counterparts as they failed to address the women's issues whole-heartedly. However, there is a keen difference between them in their complaint against man. Wollstonecraft believes:

“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.” (Wollstonecraft 18)

On the other hand, Rokeya does not point her finger of complaints to any particular man, philosopher or educationist for women's degrading position in all spheres of life. The target of her criticism is various family and social practice in the name of religious bindings obsessively designed by men to establish their control over women. She did not defy Islam or any other religion; she sarcastically criticized the misuse of its core principles against women. The leitmotif of her writings is to make women realize their foolishness of becoming a willing prey to their men's cunning wishes of keeping them as lifelong captives. Rokeya, therefore, urges women to nurture and develop their dormant innate faculties through the cultivation of knowledge, because she considers knowledge or education as their 'Saviour'.

Her belief that only bookish knowledge and education without vocational training cannot be the gateway to women's true advancement and emancipation indicates her pragmatic feminist thought. She also gave special importance on women's physical strength, and advised parents and teachers to provide physical training to girls both at home and at school. While urging women in *Women's Downfall* to employ their body and mind, she wrote:

“We are born with certain natural faculties, gifted by God, and to hone these faculties through rigorous training is real education. One must aim at both physical and mental efflorescence, and learn how to put to effective use of all the organs gifted by God. One has to utilize usefully one's hands and legs, observe carefully with one's eyes, listen attentively with one's ears, and think intelligently with one's brain.” (R. S. Hossain 1993, 18)

Her effort was not limited to giving such advice only; she tried her best to implement these ideas at her school in Calcutta. She thought the desired progress of women to be an urgent necessity for the advancement of a society, because no society could ever move forward in the real sense of the term leaving half of it at home. That is why, she spoke of women's equal participation in the work force side by side with men, asked women to start their independent business with the labor they employ in their master's household, and put a visible way forward for women to achieve economic emancipation:

“Firstly, we must have the will and an unwavering resolve to work alongside the men in all affairs of life. We should also have a firm conviction that we were not born as slaves. We will do all we have to in order to attain equality with the men. If earning a livelihood freely brings our freedom, then we will do that. If need be, we will begin by becoming clerks and then magistrates, barristers-at-law, judges; we will work in every profession.” (Quayum 2011, 14)

She knew that women's true welfare was impossible without their financial self reliance, which was perhaps one of the most important prerequisites to get rid of their misfortune. But the society of her time considered education important only for men, and regarded it as a

'passport to gainful employment'. Rokeya opposed it and argued in favor of women's employment beyond their domestic chores. She questioned the tradition bound society for their backdated view:

"Why should we not have access to gainful employment? What do we lack? Are we not able-bodied and endowed with intelligence? In fact, why should we not employ the labour and energy that we expend on domestic chores in our husband's home to run our own enterprises?" (Hossain, 1993, p.20)

Though she was a woman of Islamic faith, her religious and ethnic identity is overshadowed by her liberal feminist philosophical views found in her writings and her social activities directed to uplifting the status of women irrespective of cast, creed and religious faith. Historically speaking, all social reform activities were not going on in united manner; the Hindu and the Muslim intellectuals and reformers largely remained at two different poles on what should be the roles, responsibilities and rights of women. That is why, they had their own different versions of addressing the women issues of their own communities. On the contrary, Rokeya visited the nearby Brahmo and Hindu schools to master the techniques of administering her own school as she did not have the experience of attending a formal school, let alone running it. Because she believed in mutual sharing of knowledge and learning; religious identity was immaterial to her. It should be mentioned here that though the first female students admitted in her school were Muslims, within five years from its inception with the initial number of only eight students, the number multiplied ten times along with the Muslims, a few Hindu and Parsi students.

Apart from these real events, She envisioned a racially inclusive female world where all women from all religious backgrounds would not only receive education but also training on miscellaneous skills and craftsmanship in order to ensure economic independence. She manifested this vision in the novella *Padmarag*, an extraordinarily realistic feminist utopia,

the story of which revolves around an institution called TariniBhavan which caters to oppressed and battered women from diverse religions, regions, and ethnicities who have nowhere else to go. It is founded and run efficiently by women who have striven hard to rise above their circumstances. These are the women who have seen it all –cruel and cunning husbands and in-laws, indifferent parents who don't spare a thought for their daughters' education or welfare, and scheming relatives and landlords who have no qualms about duping women of their property and inheritance. TariniBhavan is a nunnery or ashram like asylum comprised of a school and a workshop or training institute where all destitute women get training on a veritable compendium of the various marketable skills such as bookbinding, sewing, spinning, sweet-making, typing, nursing and even teaching so that they can use their skills in the real life world to earn a living for themselves.

Rokeya upbringing in strict purdah convention and Islamic cultural milieu could not interfere in her belief in a secularistic society that she had shown through Tarini Bhaban where Hindu, Muslim and Christian women lived like sisters and enjoyed deep bond of mutual love and respect under the headship of a Hindu woman. In her preface to that novel, dedicated to her brother Ibrahim Saber, she used a remarkable metaphor to show that no difference between one religion and another ever existed for a person truly devoted to the welfare of mankind. She reaffirmed her racially non sectarian inclusive philosophy by stating:

“Religion is like a three-storied mansion. The ground floor has many chambers housing Hindus with their many factions, such as Brahmis, Sudras etc., Muslims with their many communities, like Shia, Sunni, Hanafi, Sufi etc., and similarly, many Christians with their different denominations, Roman Catholic, Protestants and the like. Go to the first floor; there are only Muslims, only Hindus, with no divisions into factions. On the second floor, there is just one chamber inhabited by only people, all the same; there are no Hindus, no Muslims; all

are worshipping only one God. In the final analysis, there is nothing-except the great God” (R. S. Hossain 1993, 263)

Such a liberal and secular vision of religious harmony and ethnic reciprocity bears special significance from the viewpoint of forging a society free from the complex of religious superiority or inferiority. An ideological standing like this had a universal appeal that promoted peaceful coexistence of different ethnic groups in British Bengal where ethnic tensions, turbulence and riots were a reality.

Her non-sectarian view was a leading characteristic feature of her writings. Her writings, public speeches and social works were not merely meant for the emancipation of Muslim women; she spoke for the freedom of all women in general and addressed them as sisters, Indian women, and women folk etc., not as Muslim girls or sisters. It is true that Muslim women issues covered a relatively large part of her writings. This is because the Muslim community, particularly Muslim women during that time had less or almost no exposure to formal education in comparison with Hindu or Christian women who had already many schools for them to study in greater Bengal. Therefore, her main focus was of course on the ongoing misfortunes of Muslim women. But she was at times very much concerned and well aware of the indispensability of the greater well being of all Indian women irrespective of religious and ethnic identity. This is evident in her another essay titled *Educational Ideals for the Modern Indian Girl*(1931) in which she said:

“We should by all means broaden the outlook of our girls and teach them to modernize themselves... We should teach our girls if they are to fulfill their heavy duties commendably, above all to concentrate on desires and efforts which are not superficial... The future of India lies in its girls.”(R. S. Hossain 1993, 495-496)

She did not have a narrow thought of the future prospect of girls or women from any particular region or religion; hers was a universal concern for the collective welfare of all

Indian women, perhaps all women of the world. She strongly believed that it was wives and mothers in the Indian family that might teach the lesson of humanity and humility in which regional, political and ethnic identity must come next. What could be a better example of her non-sectarian approach when she wrote in the essay *Sugrihini* (The Good Housewife):

“We ought to remember that we are not merely Hindus or Muslim; Parsis or Christians; Bengalis, Madasis, Marwaris or Punjabis; we are all Indians. We are first Indians, and Muslims or Sikhs afterwards. A good housewife will cultivate this truth in her family. This will gradually eradicate narrow selfishness, hatred and prejudice and turn her home into a shrine; help the members of her family to grow spiritually.” (R. S. Hossain 1993, 39-40)

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 1988, 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.

She was not fully content with pace of the ongoing male-initiated reform agendas. So, she felt the urgency of a concerted movement for reform that could better and more effectively serve the cause of women’s emancipation in every sense. While talking about the Muslim women in the colonial Bengal and the Bengal Renaissance, S. N. Amin (1996) writes:

“The Women’s Awakening in the Muslim community was concretely manifest in the women’s reform movement of the early twentieth century, which mainly sought to redress perceived social ills (such as polygamy and child marriage) and advocate female education

and eradication of *abarodh* (lit. “seige” – used to mean extreme purdah) and generally improve women’s status in society.” (Amin 1996, 11)

To reach these goals, Rokeya initiated the Bengal chapter of Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam (Muslim Women’s Association) in 1916. Its activities were, as Raushan Jahan (1988) says:

“related directly to disadvantaged poor women. It offered financial assistance to poor widows, rescued and sheltered battered wives, helped poor families to marry their daughters, and above all helped poor women to achieve literacy.” (Jahan 1988, 42)

In order to promote female education and eradicate other social anomalies, government initiative and support were of crucial importance. But the quality of education being provided to girls by many government aided schools was very poor even in later times. The prevalence of home education and early marriage in Bengal during Lord Curzon’s vice-royalty (1899-1905) and afterwards largely remained as an obstacle to formal schooling for both high cast Hindu and upper class Muslim girls. Therefore, the high dropouts of these girls after their early arranged marriage became a major concern for the colonial government. Rokeya made a breakthrough in this regard too. Avril Harley and Lambert Siobhan (2006) states:

“when Begum Rokeya Hossain’s remarkable public, yet purdah school, the Sakhawat Memorial Girl’s School, founded in Calcutta in 1911, received its first government grant, the ground was well laid for the new women’s socio-political organizations of the post-war era to begin to campaign for the extension of female education on a much wider front than the zenana sphere.” (Harley 76)

All through the 1930s, in order to press their demands, women’s organizations formed committees on legal status, undertook studies of the laws, talked to lawyers, published pamphlets on women’s position and encouraged various pieces of legislation to enhance women’s status. The basic arguments revolved around the need to get rid of age-old traditions, customary practices and social taboos, which were sapping the vitality of women’s

role and position in familial, social and national life. In collaboration with such associations, Rokeya's little centre played a vital role in making Muslim women's journey from domesticity to liberty; from traditionality to modernity. Minault Gail (1998) says:

“Her writings point to the emerging views of the next generation Muslim women who gradually evolved their own viewpoints on purdah, polygamy, divorce and other social issues, distinct from those of the men in the generation of reform.” (Gail 262)

Rokeya's political affiliation to end the British colonial rule was limited, but she morally supported the national *Swadeshi* movement against the colonial regime. She also tried to convince the feuding Muslim and Hindu politicians to resolve their differences which was delaying their demand for a free motherland. However, hers was primarily a politics of gender; she joined the group led by Kamini Ray, who met the then Viceroy, Lord Lytton, to get support for women's suffrage in all elections. In order to take women to a better position in the society, she worked closely with both Hindu and Muslim female women's right activists of the time. Legislative reforms in the 1930s, like the Hindu Woman's Right to Property Act (1937), the Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929), the Hindu Woman's Right to Divorce Act, the Muslim Personal Law Bill, the Prevention of Polygamy Bill, and the Muslim women's Right to Divorce Bill were introduced as a piecemeal approach to improving women's status. Begum Rokeya's courageous liberal stance by the side of women's interest doubtlessly played a significant role.

She was the boldest and most outspoken critic of discrimination against women at all levels. Of course, she did some compromise by following the strictest rules of female seclusion in transporting the girls to and from the school. But it was never spontaneous; she had to follow it lest the girls should be disallowed to attend formal schooling. This unwilling compromise might be another reason for her stinging criticism of this practice. Some of her writings went farther, especially her two feminist utopias *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag* reached the

radical culminating point by creating a women's world run by truth and love, and filled with tranquility enriched with universities, laboratories, observatories, solar heaters and air cars' all constructed by educated women. Like a modern and liberal educationist in belief and practice, Rokeya, contrary to most of the shools for Muslim girls in the Indian sub-continent, placed more emphasis on literacy and practical subjects such as handicrafts, home science and gardening. She even included physical training in the curriculum; the girls had to wear only a head cover inside the school. This new head cover signified a new form of modest attire, suitable for the modernizing women now entering new spaces where neither the burqah (veil) designed as outdoor wear nor the clothes worn inside the house were suitable. Her energy, dedication and organizational skills coupled with sheer courage to confront indifferent and hostile public opinion made her a remarkable modern free thinker.

Begum Rokeya's feminist trend tapestry set forth an exclusively novel form of liberal feminist ideology both in literary and social arena of 19th and early 20th century Bengal. Her unfaltering voice of protest against the wrongdoings of the patriarchal society stirred the very root of it. How far her pinching criticism, amid great public debates and scrutiny often posing great challenge as well as dilemma for ongoing women's movements, reached the vantage point of feminine radicalism is still open to criticism. But what may be said for sure is that she wanted all men of all religions to set their daughters free and let them employ their own potentials for their own well being. Though the greater parts of her literary and social activities were aimed at Muslim women issues, she travelled across the undivided India to talk about all women of all religious background. The writer who at times spoke and worked against the extreme religious practices against women, who always thought of a harmoniously participatory society, composed of women from all religious and ethnic identity, who never declined to acknowledge the roles and contribution of her male

counterpart, deserves to be a non-sectarian liberal feminist rather than merely an Islamic or Muslim feminist.

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