

Towards Emancipation: Reflection of Writings of Some Muslim Women in the Twentieth Century

Dr. Dahlia Bhattacharya*

Abstract: *Education was denied to the Muslim women in Bengal . They were to receive some elementary education at home and their movement was restricted within the four walls of the house. A few Muslim women who have learnt to write with the help of some of their family members or received modern education had penned down some of their ideas in their writings. This paper wants to highlight the works of Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Begum Shamsunnahar Mahmud, Begum Sufia Kamal and Fajiltunessa who had taken the courage to overcome the hurdles of the society and had taken a step towards emancipation. It wants to highlight their concept of education, spaces and rights for women and the politics.*

Keywords: Education, Rights for women, Politics, *Saogat*, *Burqah*, Social Freedom and Nationalism.

Since 1980 there is an upsurge of post colonial literature and theory which brought subaltern voices in forefront. Many reputed scholars of South Asia have undertaken important research and role of the subaltern in the course of history. In the study of postcolonial history the term subaltern identifies “the man, the woman and the social group who is socially, politically and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure of the colony and of the colonial Mother Country”¹. Therefore, women of the nineteenth and twentieth century far from the power structure were practically subdued in the *andarmahal* without education and rights can be well categorised as subalterns. Education was denied to the Muslim women in Bengal . They were to receive some elementary education at home and their movement was restricted within the four walls of the house. A rigid boundary was drawn between their world and outside. The voices of the Bengali Muslim women seemed to be ‘invisible’ in the late nineteenth and twentieth century historical discourse. Having becoming objectified and ossified symbols of the community honour, Muslim women were confined within the walls of patriarchal household and their voices silenced. They were frequently spoken of but never allowed to speak about themselves². A few Muslim *bhadramahila* who have learnt to write with the

* Assistant Professor, Department of History, University of North Bengal

help of some of their family members or received modern education had penned down some of their ideas in their writings .. However, the Muslim women writers though few in number took to voice their thoughts though not revolutionary in their demands, affirmed traditional modes of society but their moral actions helped to improve the Muslim women in India.

There is an absence of writings about the Muslim women writers of Bengal of the late nineteenth and twentieth century. Few scholars like Mahua Sarkar, Sonia Nishat Amin, Meredith Borthwick and Gulam Murshid have focussed on the efforts of the Muslim Bengali women to improve their position in the twentieth century but large number of literature highlights the process of emancipation of Hindu Bengali women of the time.

The nineteenth century witnessed the 'Renaissance' in Bengal which touched the lives of the Hindus but it was non-existent among the Muslims in Bengal. The Bengali Hindus used the western education as a stimulus for their progress but the Bengali Muslims were reluctant to take advantage of it. There were the growth of a *bhadralok* or middle class section among the Hindus who used the English education in achieving jobs and services like clerkship and subordinate positions (*chakri*) under the British domination and hegemony³. The nineteenth century reforms and debates centred on Hindu customs like *sati*, widow remarriage, *kulin* system or child marriage. There were representations of these issues in Bengali periodicals and newspapers. The Muslims, however, took to print media much later. Theoretically the Muslim women enjoyed more rights than their Hindu counterparts. Muslim women had a definite share in the property of their departed parents or husbands. There were provisions for widow remarriage and divorce. But education among the Muslim women was similar to the Hindus⁴. Women of the middle class elite families or *bhadralok* (*sharif*) were denied of school education both in urban and rural areas. Education was restricted to home in form of elementary studies with little knowledge on Arabic, Persian, and Arithmetic. However, English education, Bengali, and lessons in modern subjects like Science, History, and Philosophy were absolutely out of their reach⁵. However, in 1867, the issue of educating Muslim girls was raised at an assembly of the Bengal Social Science Association. Maulvi Abdul Hakim of the Calcutta Madrassah dismissed the idea, maintaining that the education provided at home was adequate. On the other hand, Syed Ameer Ali stated at the All Indian Muslim Education Conference in 1891 that female education should advance at the same pace as male education⁶.

The movement for women's education among Indian Muslims was the product of articulate and literary men, participants in other Muslim educational movements of their times. On the issue of women, however, distinctions between the secular and religious

positions were not always clear. Many writings about and programmes for women's education drew upon Islamic intellectual traditions, Muslim patterns of religious controversy and traditional networks of relationship and patronage. At the same time, even the most religiously-minded was not reluctant to adopt organizational forms and printing technology from the West ⁷.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries a host of papers and periodicals edited by Muslims adopted a liberal stand on women's education. These included the *Mussulman*, *Nabanoor*, *Mohammadi*, *Al-Eslam*, *Sadhana*, *Bulbul*, and *Saugat*. These papers not only supported female education, but provided a platform for the women writers as well. Quite a large number of Urdu magazines for women also came out. In these, women's writings echoed with men's to a certain extent but they also articulated a number of issues that were either ignored or discounted by the men ⁸. There were many writings by women in these magazines on issues which were pertinent to women's lives during the first half of the twentieth century. The renaissance of reform and modernization took place colonial Bengal which gave rise to new elite Muslim women. The role model for these elite Muslim women was the English educated brahmo Hindu women –the *bhadramahila*. Literature in the form of writings became an expression in Bengali against patriarchy, creating new identities and redefining the social structure of the Muslims in Bengal. Among such works were the writings of Masuda Rahman, Khaerunnessa Khatun, Begum Rokeya, Razia Khatun Choudhurani, Mahmuda Khatun Siddiqua, Ayesha Ahmed, Faziltunessa, Sufia Kamal and Shamsunnahar Mahmud. In such a historical backdrop the present writing wants to highlight the writings of few Muslim women writers namely Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Begum Shamsunnahar Mahmud, Begum Sufia Kamal and Fajiltunessa who had taken the courage to overcome the hurdles of the society and had taken a step towards emancipation. It wants to highlight their concept of education, spaces and rights for women and the politics.

Concept of Female Education and Creating Education Space in Colonial Bengal

The education for women had been a debate among both the Hindus and Muslims during the late nineteenth and twentieth century because education had always served as a mediator between the public and private space of the middle class *bhadralok* women. During 1920s questions were raised for the right to education and medium of education for the Muslim women. Education was the main issue which was given attention by most of the Muslim women writers and considered as the only panacea to the backwardness of women in the community during the twentieth century. The prominent person who took to the cause of women's education was Begum Rokeya (1880-1931). She was born in an aristocratic family. Her father Zahir Mohammad Abu Ali Saber was against the education of women, especially about women learning Bengali. Rokeya learnt English from her brother Ibrahim Saber and Bengali from her older sister Karimunnisa. She did not have

the opportunity to go to school as it was forbidden in upper class aristocratic Muslim family⁹. She wrote that, "I never entered the precincts of a girl's school or college what little I have learnt was due to my older brother's love and care.....". Rokeya was married at the age of sixteen to a widowed civil officer Syed Sakhawat Hossain. Hossain was an enlightened man who believed in the education of women, and it was under his influence that Rokeya began to write about her thoughts on social issues of womanhood and women's degradation¹⁰. She wrote a great number of articles and books in her life time namely, *Streejatir Abanati*, *Adhangini*, *Sugrihini*, *Griha*, *Burqah*, *Sultana's Dream*, *Bhrata Bhagini*, *Abarodhbasini*, *Padmarag*, *Narir Adhikar*, and many more. In her writings she considered education as the only remedy for the backward condition of women. In her writings, Rokeya described the nature of education that an average Bengali Muslim girl received at that time. She wrote, "the arrangement for education in this country is like this: first we learn the Arabic alphabet and after that the recitation of the Quran. Since the meanings of the words are not explained, we are expected to recite it like a parrot with the help of our memory"¹¹. She advised Muslims to provide primary education to their children along with the Quranic teachings for obtaining real knowledge. She raised the important point that all children should be sent to school, girls should be properly taught and trained, and women's role should be recognized and integrated in the social process. She wrote that, "God has given hands, feet, ears, mind and ability to think. If we strengthen our hands and our feet through exercise, do good work through our hands, make good use of our ears and develop our ability to think, that is true education"¹². She believed that only bookish education without vocational training cannot be the gateway to women's development. The pragmatic views of Rokeya is reflected in the fact that she gave emphasis on physical training of the girls at home and at school. She wrote in *Istrijatir Abanati* (The Degradation of Women) to use both the body and mind for educational development. She added that, "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 should 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"¹³.

Beside publishing articles she took to spread the gospel of education among the Muslim girls first at Bhagalpur in 1909. By 1911 she moved to Calcutta and re-established her school there. The Sakhawat Memorial Girl's School started with only eight students and by 1914 it enrolled forty. During its annual assembly, some 150 Muslim women were present, along with a number of Hindu and Parsi women. The medium of instruction was Urdu revealing dominance of *sharif* culture was prevalent in Calcutta during the first decades of the twentieth century. Rokeya wanted to impart through the school an education that, "they can take up the roles of ideal housewife,

mother and woman”¹⁴. She included physical training in curriculum, and placed more emphasis on literacy and practical subjects such as handicrafts, home science and gardening¹⁵. Rokeya viewed education not only as an aid to women’s familial role, but also as a means of women’s economic independence.

The life of Begum Shamsunnahar Mahmud(1908-1964) , the capable successor of Rokeya also illustrates the grim social picture of educational backwardness of women in the Muslim community. Nahar was admitted to the Khastogir Girls High School of Chittagong where she excelled in general proficiency. On reaching class six, she was unfortunately forced to leave the school. Her neighbours and relatives criticized her for attending the school and not maintaining *purdah* in a grown up stage. When the headmistress asked her the reasons for leaving the school , she replied that now she was a grown up girl and so she could not attend the school¹⁶. She wrote in her book *Nazrul ke Jamon Dekhechi*(As I saw Nazrul)that: At a young age of nine I had to leave school. From educational life at home had begun. Years passed by, my classmates, those who were Hindus, Christians and Brahma all moved about freely. Some of them went to Calcutta after their matriculation and were admitted to Bethune College and the Diocesan College. They wrote to me frequently describing the new world in front of them. I felt that we the Muslims were residents of a dark world whereas they were of the colourful world’¹⁷.She was provided with a tutor to teach at home. While teaching always there was a screen hung between the teacher and the student and gradually due to dint of merit she completed her studies and passed Matriculation Examination with First Division in all four subjects like English, Maths, History and Science in 1926. She wanted to pursue further education but again she faced problem as her mother arranged her marriage with Dr. Waheuddin Ahmed who cooperated and supported her urge in education. Shamsunnahar passed graduation (B.A.) in 1932 from Bethune College. She was honoured by Rokeya by the words that , “Nahar stands apart from rest of the graduates- she had to achieve all these besides being involved as a wife paying attention to her husband, her children and to the total family household which are not mean achievements”. Shamsunnahar then started her career as a lecturer in Bengali in Lady Brabourne College, Calcutta in 1939 and completed her M.A, from Calcutta University in 1942¹⁸.

Shamsunnahar in her book *Punyamoyi* (Virtuous Lady) in a preface entitled ‘*Atma Katha*’ (The Talk of the Soul), she called for higher education for Bengali Muslim women and abolition of *burqah*. She in the second edition of the book referred for the gradual development of female education in the Muslim community showing the efforts of women such as Begum Rokeya had created in the interval of eight years. In the other writings she continuously advocated for the education of women. In her essay ‘*Nari Jagaran*’(Women’s Awakening), Shamsunnahar depløres the seclusion and literary

ignorance of the Muslim women. She writes that “while the husband calculates the distance of the sun and the stars from the earth, the wife calculates the length and breadth of the pillow cover”. She ironically indicates the educational difference between a man and women¹⁹. In ‘*Shishur Siksha*’ she reiterates the necessity of woman as future mothers should be educated to become better teachers to give the first lessons to the children. She wrote the biography of Begum Rokeya in 1937 as “*Rokeya Jibani*” in a magazine *Bulbul* which also raised greater awareness about education and inspiration to the Muslim women. She contributed number of articles in the contemporary magazines namely *Saogat, Naoroj, Atma Shakti, Muhammadi, Jayati, Diruba* and others²⁰.

In the meantime in 1917 the situation changed as the Report of the Committee on Mohammedan Education in Bengal, in its resolution No. 155, held that ‘there should be in every subdivision at least one special school for Muslim girls: that these schools should be aided schools that they should be under control of local committees, but Government should be asked to bear the total cost of these institutions. The Muslim Legislator A.Suhrawardy strongly pleaded for Governmental encouragement for female education among Muslims²¹. Furthermore, the Muhammadan Educational Conference who paid lip service to the cause of women’s education for several years after its foundation in 1885 thereafter, but accomplished very little changed in 1891 when it resolved, that necessary efforts should be made towards educating Muslim women. It was felt in this context that the intellectual, religious and the moral training of their women was essential, as it was they, who could impart the same to their off springs that would foster the overall progress of the community and benefit the future generations²². Another prominent factor which contribute to foster the women’s education among the Muslim community was Begum Khediv Jung. Begum Khediv Jung was an exceptional Hyderabad woman, who had founded the *Anjuman-i-Khawatin-i-Islam* or Muslim Ladies’ Association in 1913, was invited to preside over the All India Muslim Ladies Conference in Calcutta in February 1919. She stood for women’s education that would be appropriate and true to their own traditions. She spoke of the need for some women to earn a living as teachers, doctors or even typists in addition to managing a household. She felt that such social evils as excessive dowry and ill treatment of widows were issues which women were in a position to address and alleviate through organization and education.²³

In such a background with awareness developing for formal education for women Fazilatunnesa (1905-1975) and her writings were example of unconventional and unorthodox ideas within the Muslim community. Born in a small town in Tangail, Fazilatunnesa’s father, Abdul Wajid Khan held minor job on a zamindar’s estate. Though a man of modest means, Abdul Wajid Khan recognized his daughter’s intelligence and took her to Dhaka for her education. Fazilatunnesa finished her

Matriculation exams from Eden School, in 1921, and she passed her Intermediate Exam with distinction from Bethune College under the auspices of Calcutta University. She continued her education under great difficulties. Because she went to class in a sari, and not in *burqah*, she was stoned on her way to college²⁴. In spite of such obstacles, she finished her intermediate education. She wrote to Naseeruddin Shah, the Editor of *Saugot*, who was known as a liberal man in support of women's education:

'You must have heard the extent of torture I had to withstand during the course of my mission to complete my post graduation. Now I wish to go abroad for higher education. But I have no capital other than my gritty determination. The Dhaka University has declined to send me abroad as I am a Muslim woman. They fear that Muslim society will react to this, with violence, as it is against religion'.²⁵

With the negation from the Dhaka University Fazilatunnesa had to depend on other economic sources to go abroad to study. She took the help from Naseeruddin Shah who showed immense courage to support a Muslim woman in spite of opposition from the conservative section of the society. Returning to Calcutta at the conclusion of her degree in Mathematics in England, Fazilatunnesa joined Bethune College, Calcutta, as a teacher of math. Soon afterwards, she was chosen as the vice-principal of the School, a position which she served in until after Partition in 1947, at which time she moved to Dhaka and became the principal of Eden Women's College²⁶. She wrote in *Saugot* and one of her essays titled '*Muslim Nari Shikhar Proyojonita*' (The Need for Education Among Muslim Women). She wrote like her predecessors about the importance of educating women. She argued that, "By education, I do not refer only to the degrees one earns from colleges and universities. We need education that removes the prejudices from men's minds and widens them". She added that women and men should work together. The condition of Muslim women is poor because she has been denied of education and her just place in society²⁷.

Sufia Kamal (1911-1999) one of the well known protégés of Begum Rokeya as a poet and social worker was born in Shaestabad in Barisal in 1911 of undivided Bengal. She was a daughter of an affluent family. She did not receive formal school education but learnt English, Urdu and Persian at home. She learnt Bengali from her mother, who learnt it from her father. She read Bengali books secretly particularly Tagore and Nazrul and watched *jatras* and *milad mehfil*, which occasionally took place in her house. Her urge and thirst for education could not be checked.²⁸ But soon she was married at the age of twelve. After her marriage she continued to read and write in secret and her first piece of writing '*Sainik Badhu*' was published in Tarun (Youth) a magazine, which annoyed the family members. It was a shame for the women of early twentieth century to write in Bengali and publish. She wrote:

“Actually we were ashamed of the fact that we wrote. Bengali Muslim women writing in Bengali was considered to be a shameful act. Even if they wrote, they did not publish their work. It is not known how many women writers have disappeared into oblivion. If a woman was writing in our times, it would be a talking point—why is she writing in Bengali.”²⁹

She had the support of her husband but sooner her husband expired in 1933. Instead of staying at her uncle’s house in Shyestabad, in the period 1933-1939, Sufia came to Calcutta. Naseeruddin Shah, the editor of Saogat helped Sufia to find a teaching job at Corporation School in Calcutta. However, such hard work took a toll—Sufia became sick, and eventually, her friends arranged her marriage to Kamaluddin Khan, after which she became known as Sufia Kamal. Even with family responsibilities Sufia did not give up her writing career.³⁰

She was highly inspired by the writings and activities of Begum Rokeya. She expressed her views on self reliance in her speeches :‘We worked according to the ideas of Rokeya. I am probably the last woman of her century to carry out her message. I am also withering away. Still I could not find any way out for my Muslim sisters. We found the path clearing the weeds, now you proceed and learn to sacrifice.’She wrote more than 207 poems which were integrated into books named *Sajher Maya*(1967) (Illusion of Dusk), *Mayar Kajal* (1967) (Illusion of Collyrium), *Mon-O-Jibon* (1958) (Mind & Life), *Uddata Prithibi* (1968) (Insolent World), and *Diwan* (1968) (Collector of Revenue).³¹ Through her writings she emphasized on women’s rights and ability to take decision which can only come through education. Therefore, the women who came to light of education took up the issue of providing education to women for the overall improvement of the community. They highlighted the importance of education as the only means for the nurture of growing minds of the Muslims.

Social Freedom and Rights of Women

Besides education, the important element for the emancipation of women was social freedom which could be achieved with the removal of the restriction of *purdah*. *Purdah* in Islam however, did not mean that a women should live in seclusion and bear no social responsibilities. It gradually developed in the later period to keep women in seclusion. This rigid seclusion had attracted the attention of women writers of the period who had bitter personal experiences of not maintaining the system regularly. Begum Rokeya argued that women should come out from the seclusion and secondly educate themselves. To educate themselves the women should remove *purdah*. In her book *Abarodhbasini* (The Secluded One, 1929) she made a collection of women’s experiences in *purdah*. The women because of *purdah* are denied of proper medical care and the backwardness of Muslim community remains in the fact that it has kept their women within the four walls

of the house. In her presidential speech at the Women's Education Conference in 1926 Rokeya sarcastically remarked that: "If a dog is crushed to death under the wheels of a car, we notice mournful reference in the Anglo-Indian newspapers but for the *harem* imprisoned women like us there is none in India to shed a teardrop." ³² She in *Abarodhbasini* gave instances to *abarodh* and *purdah* describing *purdah* which allows to retain their modesty but *abarodh* as an extreme form of seclusion which she considered completely non-Islamic and could be compared to the deadly carbonic acid gas. Since carbonic acid causes death painlessly, people do not bother to guard against it. In the *zenana* (inner quarters) too, hundreds of inmates are dying pointlessly, little by little killed by what can be called the gas of the seclusion system' ³³. Despite of such bold statements against seclusion and *purdah* Rokeya before starting the school for girls wrote to the Editor of the *Mussalman* newspaper for funding a girl's school in Calcutta which is in strict observance of *purdah*.³⁴ 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."³⁵ In her venture of providing education to girls she adopted some alteration of *purdah*. In her school 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 who were entering new spaces, where neither the *burqah* (veil) designed as outdoor wear nor the clothes worn inside the house were suitable. But she observed strict *purdah* in bringing the students to school ³⁶. She offered a free bus for the students which she made sure was within the dictates of *purdah*. By fitting the windows of the bus with shutter, she wanted to ensure that *purdah* was maintained, however due to lack of ventilation, by that time that the girls reached the schools many of them went unconscious. Mrs. Mukherjee, a friend of Rokeya described the bus as 'a moving black hole,' and in order to make sure that the girls do not fall sick the shutters were replaced by curtains. However, she was criticized harshly for this measure and parents reacted with angry letters. She resented and condemned the situation by complaining about being born in a family which practiced *purdah*.³⁷

Similar views were expressed by women writers like Shamsunnahar Mahmud, Sufia Kamal and Fajilatunessa. Nahar in her book '*Punyomoyi*' portrays seven different heroic characters of women. In one of essays *Mata Ayesha* (Mother Ayesha) ; she portrays *Ayesha* as a heroic women who did not remain in *purdah* but accompanied Prophet Muhammad in the battlefields. She represented *Ayesha* as a symbol of courage and a co-partner of her husband on equal ability ³⁸. Sufia in her writings in *Saogat* urged that women should open their eyes and take an interest in matters as science and

technology as well as household works. Though Sufia wore *burqah* but she eventually discarded the *burqah* at the suggestion of Naseeruddin Shah and her husband. In response Sufia was accused by the critics of encouraging and spoiling Muslim girls by asking them to come out of 'purdah'. She sharply negated this attack on her by pointing out that her accusers were themselves wearing *burqahs* worth 300 rupees over *sarees* worth 1000 rupees, instead should use their wealth to benefit the society and Sufia was very bold to expose their hypocrisy. Nahar considered *purdah* as the only obstacle in the in the path of women's education. In her essay *Nari Jagaran* (Awakening of Women) she considers seclusion and illiteracy among the Bengali Muslims which made them ignorant in relation to human civilization³⁹. Fazilatunnesa, was respectful of religion but she was critical of the *purdah* system. She highlighted that, Islam does not direct women to stay cocooned. It rather directs women to acquire knowledge. The system of *purdah* under false presentation of religion is the best of the worst weapons to kill women. It is a strong deterrent against women enlightenment and employment. Such social blockades and lack of education are pushing the women to the doorway of death.⁴⁰

Besides the women writers of the century there were similar views against seclusion of women within the four walls of social oppression were expressed in the writing by Abdul Odud and Ismail Hossain.

Rokeya along with her writings about education and women's rights understood the value of creating women's network especially in the cause of social work. She established the *Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam* in 1916 an organization which would educate the poor women both Hindus and Muslims living in the slums. Through the *Anjuman* she devised an adult literacy programme. The members of the *Anjuman* or *Anjuman* women would teach the slum women about reading, writing, personal hygiene and childcare.⁴¹ She was inspired by Pandita Ramabai and became the President of *Narishilpa Vidyalaya* and *Narithirtha* (Women's Institution for Destitute Women and Prostitute) in 1927.⁴² Rokeya rightly remarked that the misery of women is not only because of the patriarchal society but the ignorance, unthinkable and lack of seriousness of them towards life. She compared a gold necklace to the dog collar which chains a person and keep them in capture. She condemned the attraction of women to gold. She tried to create a better space for women in the inner as well as outer world through her sincerest efforts.⁴³

The writings of Rokeya, Samsunnahar, Sufia Kamal and Fajilatunnesa highlighted the patriarchal society and the denial of women's rights in the society. Rokea in her *Sultan's Dream* visualized a utopian society in which through education scientific discoveries and knowledge the women would dominate the men in a Ladyland. It was symbolic presentation of a victory of intellectual power over the biological one.⁴⁴ Sufia

Kamal too joined social service by becoming a member of Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam of Rokeya. She gave up *purdah* in pursuing social service which made her disassociated with the family. But this ostracism did not prevent her from social serving by teaching vocational skills such as stitching, pottery and handicrafts which effectively would make them economically independent.⁴⁵ Fajilatunessa was greatly influenced by the ideas of Romain Rolland and Bertrand Russell, who propagated the truth that what a human being most desires, is personal freedom. She stood for the rights of women in the society. Fajilatunessa in her Article 'Muslim *Narir Mukti*' echoes the same voice that the liberation of women means liberation of her own self from the darkness of its social custom and religious prejudices continuing for centuries. It needs courage and strength to free the Muslim women from humiliation with the help of the youth they can step into a brave new world.⁴⁶ So, Rokeya along with her followers kept on highlighting the women's right in form of education, freedom, marriage, divorce, property rights and others.

Nationalism and Nationality

The Muslim women writers were well aware of the political situation of the period. Rokeya's writings as 'The Fruit of Freedom' and 'The Fruit of Knowledge' display her call for nationalist movement. But she was critical towards the male dominated nationalist leaders, who were not interested for women's emancipation. She kept herself aloof from the nationalist movement for her mission of educating the women. In her book *Suitana's Dream*, written in flawless English affirms that women could be effective political rulers.⁴⁷ Sufia Kamal was inspired by the movements taken by Mahatma Gandhi and witnessed in her memoir the iconic figure, encouraging women to participate in political resistance through the charkha and khadi movements. She describes in her memoir her sense of personal empowerment when she weaved the first *saree* by her own hand on charkha.⁴⁸ Sufia Kamal had the courage to write condemning the British rule and later criticized the incident when in 1952 the Pakistan's Government opened fire on Bengali students. She also gave refuge to the activists of the 1971 War of Independence for Bangladesh.⁴⁹ Shamsunahar was actively involved in political development of India. She joined the *Nikhil Bharat Mahila Sammelan* (The All India Women's Association) and stood for women's legislative representation after 1935 in the Government of India Act. She wrote 'Women's Political Rights in *Mahila Saogat* in 1935 after literate women or wives of propertied men had obtained voting rights. She advocated for the reservation of seats for women and more representation of women from Bengal. She represented Muslim women from Bengal in the International Women's Conference held in Calcutta in 1936 under the auspices of International Council of Women. She spoke on the slow progress of Muslim women in education in Bengal.⁵⁰ Fajilatunessa was an ardent supporter of nationalism. She argued that the Muslim children must clearly understand that their motherland is not Arabia, Persia, Turkey or Egypt they are Indians. Nationalism

is not founded upon a common religion, but open (sharing) a common homeland religion.⁵¹ Her writings on Indian nationalism countered the rising Pan-Islamism during 1920's. She wrote on a united Indian identity which provided a ground for her successors to develop in the later decades of the 20th century.

Conclusion

For centuries, Muslim women in Bengal region have lived solitary lives of *abarodh* or seclusion. This seclusion provided an opportunity to develop patriarchal domination and prevent the question of male dominance. The Muslim elites in the twentieth century were drawn to the British educational system and British institutions but it did not address to women's liberation. The upper class women had no economic and social role in the public domain, led to a total separation of the public and private spheres in the *sharif* society. The writings of these few Muslim women in the 20th century raised question against seclusion and patriarchy. It brought to the forefront the voices of women who through their personal experiences and obstacles moved towards emancipation. Their writings brought to the surface the ideas of education rights, social subjugation and nationality. They faced a lot of opposition in writing yet they took the courage to move forward. Writing in Bengali was looked down and most of the writers learned secretly their mother tongue. Begum Rokeya, who was the first person to start to write inspired the others to join. The subjugation, social obstacles, inequality and patriarchy were reflected in their writings and it served as a binding factor among them.

They got spaces to publish with the emergence of *Saogat* magazine under the editorship of Nasiruddin Shah, was a particularly important milestone in the history of Bengali, Muslim women writers. Begum Rokeya became the standing pillar followed by the others who inspired for arousing the women from the darkness of seclusion, illiteracy and ignorance. Their writings became the inspiration and eye opener for the youths as well as women among the Muslims as well as Hindus. The writings were liberal and sometimes bold and courageous against the oppression of patriarchy and took a step to change the mindset of the contemporary society towards women. Their thoughts on social issues of women's degradation and rights encouraged women and men to educate their girls. Education and social freedom which is an essential element for the development of a community either Muslims, Hindus or other were given much importance in their writings. Their writings bear similarity with the feminist philosophers of the other parts of the world. As Simone De Beauvoir, another eminent feminist philosopher, who in her *The Second Sex* (1956) stated that: "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*."⁵² Rokeya wrote that: "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"⁵³. She urged the women to free themselves from the bondage to the path of 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"⁵⁴. She added a suggestion to men: "Do us this favour, do not do any favour to us"⁵⁵. Furthermore, the Muslim women writers also stood for harmony and unity among the communities. Sufia Kamal lamented in her memoir about the partition (1947), creation of East Pakistan and the violence against women of both the communities. Their writings tried to create a bond within humanism in spite of political boundaries between nations. Therefore, the thoughts and writings of the women writers of the Muslim community in the twentieth century Bengal was in the form of protest against patriarchy implanting seeds of inequality and was definitely a step towards emancipation of women among the Muslims in Bengal.

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