

## **A Step towards Liberation: Re-Visiting the English Writings of Begum Rokeya**

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The Subaltern voices came to be heard and visible in the South Asian post-colonial literature and theory since 1980s. Many reputed scholars of South Asia have undertaken important works, research and role of the subaltern in the course of history. In the study of post colonial 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”.<sup>i</sup> Women in the nineteenth and early 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 women irrespective of religion. However, the Hindu women were in the nineteenth century in ‘Renaissance’ Bengal was constantly under focus of debates of Hindu orthodoxy, British Government, the reformists and later the nationalists. But the Muslim women were largely forgotten in the British period and “simply disappear from public discourse” in compared to their Hindu counterpart. 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 and 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 themselves.<sup>ii</sup> In this background the present article aims to look into some of the writings of Begum Rokeya which became an expression in Bengali against patriarchy, creating new identities and redefining the social structure of the Muslims in Bengal. It tries to focus on the courage taken to overcome the hurdles of the society and on the step taken towards emancipation and freedom.

### **Rokeya ’s efforts to learn and write**

Begum Rokeya was born in the village of Pairaband in Rangpur on 9 December 1880 in a conservative Muslim family where she was tutored in Arabic and Urdu.<sup>iii</sup> She grew up in a family where she was to observe purdah and as she

mentions later , “I had to observe purdah even from woman from the age of five. I did not understand why it was improper to meet somebody, but I had to observe purdah. The inner side of the house was out of bounds for the menfolk; so I did not have to suffer by their presence. However, women freely entered the house, and I had to hide myself before they could see me. As soon as any woman of the locality would come, somebody of our house would give a signal with the eye and I would run pell mell and hide myself anywhere—in the nook of the kitchen, within the rolled up pallet of the maid-servant and sometimes under the bedstead. I had to run and hide myself just as the chicks do when their mother gives them the signal against a kite. But while the chicks had a definite place—their mother’s wings—to hide, I had no such place. Moreover, the chicks understand their mother’s signal instinctively. I had no such instinct, and if I failed to understand the signal of the eye and came across somebody, the well-wishing elders used to say “How shameless the girls have become!”<sup>iv</sup>

Gender roles were strictly defined and education was classified for boys and girls. Her father Zahiruddin Saber although learned was particular about the education of his sons in Government schools and colleges and did not provide any formal education to his daughters chiefly for the fear of social stigma associated with female education.<sup>v</sup> Female education and “girls with education at that time were regarded as being as abominable as those without purdah”.<sup>vi</sup> The nineteenth century had social taboos against female education, child marriage and *purdah* among both Muslims and Hindus , which rendered their formal institutions of learning “devoid of female students”. It is true that there were no proper educational institutions for Muslim girls in Bengal in the nineteenth century. J.E. Drinkwater Bethune established an educational institution for girls in 1849 called Bethune School which later became Bethune College in 1879. The Muslim girls received access to the school after 1885. Initially it was known as “Hindu Female School, as it was set up exclusively for educating middle-class Hindu pupils <sup>vii</sup>.

Rokeya’s father permitted his daughters to read only Quran in Arabic. Rokeya was primarily self-educated and home-taught, she knew at least five languages: Bangla, English, Urdu, Persian and Arabic. Initially, she learned Bangla mostly from her elder sister Karimunnessa and English from her brother Ibrahim Saber. Her elder brother Ibrahim Saber taught her English secretly. <sup>viii</sup> Shamsunnahar Mahmud, her first biographer describes: “They had to wait for the dead of the night to be able to conduct their clandestine studies since the family objected to

such untraditional learning for girls.”<sup>ix</sup>With a deep sense of gratitude, Rokeya dedicated a paragraph of her only novel called *Padmaraga* with the following words: “You have moulded me from childhood...your love is sweeter than honey which after all has a bitter after-taste; it is pure and divine like *Kausar* [the stream of nectar flowing in heaven mentioned in the Quran]”.<sup>x</sup>

At an early age of 16 she was married to a magistrate, Khan Bahadur Syed Sakhawat Houssain whose encouragement and official connections widened her exposure to the western world. She got an opportunity to communicate with educated women and it helped her to become “perfect in English.”<sup>xi</sup>Shamsunnahar Mahmud mentions that: “Later, her husband actively fostered her education and encouraged her to write. Consequently, in spite of never having been to a school to learn, Rokeya grew into an exceptionally knowledgeable woman. Her struggle to achieve this feat indicates the strength of prejudice against female education in her culture.”<sup>xii</sup>Besides this he had set aside 10,000 rupees for Rokeya to start a school for girls. Upon his death in 1909, Rokeya inherited riches worth 50,000 rupees (a big amount of money at that time) and immediately started a girls’ school first in Bhagalpur in 1909 and then in Calcutta in 1911, named it after him and employed all her knowledge, wealth and energy for its progress. That school is still functioning as Sakhawat Memorial Govt. Girls’ High School, in Kolkata, India.<sup>xiii</sup>

### **Literary Activism**

Rokeya’s literary activities started with the support of her husband. She wrote that, “If my dear husband had not been so supportive, I might never have written or published anything”.<sup>xiv</sup>On the insistence of her husband, Rokeya continued with her writing skills and eventually, in 1903-1904, published articles in journals in Calcutta on the oppression of women. She was aware of the fact that women in all patriarchal societies are exploited and oppressed, but felt a need to shed light on women of her group. After losing two children in infancy, Hossain faced deep loss. But she was persuaded by her husband to continue her intellectual pursuits. With continued support from her husband, she published and wrote extensively. She garnered attention when *Sultana’s Dream* was published in 1905 in *The Indian Ladies Magazine*.<sup>xv</sup>

The Muslims in colonial India had some political and educational organisations like the All India Muslim League, the Central Mohammedan Association and the All India Educational Conference largely 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 in Aligarh and under Rokeya's initiative and untiring work, Anjuman's Calcutta branch was launched in 1916.

This association gave women a chance to assemble and discuss on important women's issues. She especially reached out to women of the poor class and offered financial assistance to poor widows, rescued and sheltered wives that were victims of domestic violence, and provided matrimonial and educational services.<sup>xvi</sup>

Through her writings, Rokeya challenged long-standing notions about women and argued that providing education for women would be advantageous for society. She strongly believed that an educated woman would be beneficial to her community and her family. Her writings are a reflection of her thoughts on the plight of the Indian woman. Her literary activities spanned three decades, from 1903-1932, in which she became an influential speaker for the rights of women and living example of her works. She mainly focused on women's issues and discussing and solving social problems relating to Bengali Muslims. One of these issues was a woman's right to

education. Rokeya placed great importance on education and addressed antiquated attitudes from

Muslim men here: "Most of the people are so prejudiced against female education that the very term makes them shudder with all the possible evil effects. The society might forgive the pitfalls of uneducated women, but the slightest mistake—real or imaginary—on the part of a woman with some education is magnified hundredfold, and laying all the blame at the door of education they shout in one voice "down with female education".<sup>xvii</sup>

She also believed that education was a necessary mental exercise that was important for a woman's development. In her words, "God has given us hands, feet, ears, mind and ability to think. If we strengthen our hands and feet through exercise, do good work through our hands, make use of our ears and develop our ability to think that is true education"<sup>xviii</sup>. Rokeya would often focussed her

writing to address the immediate need for women's awakening, Muslim awakening in Bengal and Bengal's awakening in matters of women's rights. Rokeya writes about the degraded status of women in *Stree Jatir Abanati*, about the evolution of man into a being who subordinates women through intellectual and physical prowess.<sup>xix</sup> In a series of reports, Rokeya also depicted the degraded status of women in Griha (Home), Ardhangi, Muktipal, Aborodhbhasini, Padmarag (Ruby), Bhrata bhagni and Nari Sristi.

Her main concern was the stress and change of Indian Muslims under colonial rule. In 1903 Rokeya published five articles titled: Strijatir Abanati (The Degradation of Women), Ardhangi (The Female Half), Sugrihini (The Good Housewife), Borka (The Cloak), and Griha (Home)—which discussed purdah and seclusion extensively. These works were later collected into a book in 1908 titled Motichur. Other works included Pipasa (Thirst), Murder of Delicia, Padmarag (The Ruby), Sultana's Dream and Abarodh Bashini (Those Behind the Curtain). Rokeya in her writings stood against patriarchy and conservatism in Muslim society. She wrote mostly in Bengali and much less in English. Among her writings which have been much talked of Sultana's Dream was written in English, a Utopian feminist novel and two essays in English on women's education namely, God Gives, Man Robs and Educational Ideals for the Modern Indian Girl.

### **Sultana's Dream: A Feminist Utopia**

Sultana's Dream was one of Rokeya Hossain's English-language publications. Published in 1905, Sultana's Dream was featured in the Indian Ladies Magazine that was based in Chennai, India. Kamala Saththiandhan started The Indian Ladies Magazine in July 1901 and its audience was primarily women in India who could read in English and wanted to keep abreast of women's issues.<sup>xx</sup> For Rokeya Hossain, to write in English was an anomaly. She acknowledges her brother in teaching her English and consistently tutoring her in language. Yet *Sultana's Dream* became a pivotal and famous work in her career. Rokeya Hossain originally wrote the piece to pass the time until her husband would come home. When her husband did come back, she did the following: "When Sakhawat came back after two days, the first thing he did was to ask casually what she had been doing in his absence. Rokeya then showed him the story and, wrapped with

curiosity, Sakhawat read the whole piece without caring to sit down. When he finished, he mumbled, "A terrible revenge."<sup>xxi</sup>

Sultana's Dream was a simple story of a woman that is dreaming and happens to visit a land which is called "Lady land," where there is law and order. The land is devoid of violence, corruption and crime. The people of "Lady land" have learned to appreciate Nature and treat each other with respect and love. In "Ladyland," child marriage is banned and education is encouraged amongst women. Rokeya Hossain wanted to motivate Bengali Muslim women towards a process of self-realization and lift the obstacles away that hindered women and society. *Sultana's Dream* captures many issues regarding women's rights, and reflects a relentless and lifelong battle against people in her society that limited women from being able to control their fate. "Lady land" is Rokeya Hossain's ideal of a place where women are free to be a part of society and innovate to their hearts' content. It is a place where men are put in the zenana [seclusion] and where Rokeya Hossain addresses the contrast of personality between men and women.<sup>xxii</sup>

Rokeya narrates the story through three main characters: Sultana, Sister Sara and The Queen. The first important part in *Sultana's Dream* is the description of "Ladyland." The setting in *Sultana's Dream* is quite important as the main character is slumbering in a zenana [seclusion]. Sultana wakes up to find Sister Sara and follows her outside. This is where "Ladyland" is introduced to readers: "Where In their proper places, where they ought to be. Pray let me know what you mean by 'their proper places.' O, I see my mistake; you cannot know our customs, as you were never here before. We shut our men indoors".<sup>xxiii</sup>

The setting of "Ladyland" is of a place where women have successfully freed themselves from the control of men. She has envisaged a society for women where women are free to practice scholarly pursuits. Rokeya is argues about the narrow customs of the society and the custom of women kept in seclusion. It is been shown in a dialogue between Sister Sara and the Sultana :

"But, dear Sultana, how unfair it is to shut in the harmless women and let loose the men. Why? It is not safe for us to come out of the zenanas [seclusion], as we are naturally weak.

Yes, it is not safe so long as there are men about the streets, nor is it so when a wild animal enters a marketplace. Of course not. Suppose some lunatics escape from the asylum and begin to do all sorts of mischief to men, horses, and other

creatures: in that case what will your countrymen do? They will try to capture them and put them back up into their asylum.

Thank you! And you do not think it wise to keep sane people inside an asylum and let loose the insane? As a matter of fact, in your country this very thing is done! Men, who do or at least are capable of doing no end of mischief, are let loose and the innocent women shut up in the zenanas [seclusion]! How can you trust those untrained men out of doors? We have no hand or voice in the management of our social affairs. In India man is lord and master. He has taken to himself all powers and privileges and shut up women in the zenanas [seclusion].”<sup>xxiv</sup>

It is interesting to note how Rokeya discusses the issue of power and how men hold dominion over women. The terms “lord” and “master” is a kind of a crusade against the subjugation of women and the status of women during her time. She brings to attention the issue of power and privileges. Another aspect that Rokeya Hossain discusses how men unfairly use their power to keep women secluded physically, but also mentally. She argues this creates a situation for women where they cannot contribute to society and become burdens to their families. Rokeya Hossain uses an accusing tone that questions the practice of seclusion as being too steeped in superstition.<sup>xxv</sup> The indignation present in Sister Sara and Sultana’s dialogue is present as if Rokeya is arguing the unjust system of seclusion. Rokeya is sympathetic to the plight of the women, but also a critic in the following excerpt below:

Why do you allow yourselves to be shut up?

Because it cannot be helped as they are stronger than women.

A lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race. You

have neglected the duty you owe to yourselves, and you have lost your natural rights by

shutting your eyes to your own interests.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Rokeya draws an analogy between the human and lion reveals two things: strength does not equal power and believing one is weak is walking away from the duty of pursuing self-interest. Another way of discussing this passage is that Rokeya Hossain is holding women accountable for their misery. Rokeya Hossain continues this style of conversation between Sister Sara and Sultana. When

Sultana asks about the creation of “Ladyland,” Sister Sara provides a brief history here:

‘The Queen circulated an order that all the women in her country should be educated. Accordingly, a number of girls’ schools were founded and supported by the Government. Education was spread far and wide among women. And early marriage also was stopped. No woman was to be allowed to marry before she was twenty-one.’<sup>xxvii</sup> In the passages above, Rokeya Hossain emphasizes her interest in educating girls and women, but also terminating the practice of early marriage. In “Ladyland,” Rokeya Hossain sets the marriageable age at 21.

The idealism of “Ladyland” as a place where women can innovate comes into question by the men. The men belittle the achievements of the women and Rokeya Hossain describes the men of “Ladyland” as those interested in “increasing their military power” and being dismissive towards the achievements of the women in Ladyland.<sup>xxviii</sup> Intentionally, Rokeya Hossain created “Ladyland” to be an antithesis to her homeland of India. As Roushan Jahan, a biographer of Rokeya Hossain, notes:

Women in Ladyland are powerful, but to portray a society where women are in position of power, Rokeya did not find it necessary to eliminate men or to propose anything so drastic as Charlotte Perkins Gilman did a few years later in *Herland*, in which pathogenesis was the means for continuing a unisex society. In Ladyland, men are part of the society but are shorn of power, as women were in Rokeya’s India. They live in seclusion and look after the house and the children, again, just like the women in Rokeya’s India. Women, the dominant group in Ladyland, do not consider men fit for any skilled work, much as Indian men thought of women at the time.<sup>xxix</sup>

Indeed, Rokeya Hossain wanted “Ladyland” to portray women at their best and at the same time exact revenge on a male population that had taken delight in shutting women indoors. Rokeya Hossain purposefully removes men from power to show that the power in women’s hands can be used more efficiently than by men. This role reversal is intriguing, and it is not shocking that Rokeya Hossain chose to write *Sultana’s Dream*. She wanted it to be a feminist utopia that elements of fury, cynicism and revenge. Despite her scathing portrayal of men in *Sultana’s Dream*, Rokeya Hossain’s revenge on men was not to get rid of them. Instead, Rokeya Hossain subjected the men of “Ladyland” to the same conditions they placed on the women of “Ladyland.” Hence, it came as no surprise that

Rokeya Hossain chose to include the clash between the men and women in “Ladyland”.<sup>xxx</sup>

In Sultana's Dream, women emerge as superwomen through education. They have the caliber to use science and technology for the best of their country. The basic theme of Sultana's Dream is education and adaptation of science. Rokeya distinguishes feminine and masculine technology very clearly. Musai supports her saying: “Feminine technology is related to solar energy and is environment friendly. On the other hand, masculine energy is based upon the power of muscles and weapons.”<sup>xxxi</sup>

### **God Gives, Man Robs**

God Gives, Man Robs was published in ‘The Mussalman’ on December 6, 1927. In this essay Rokeya criticizes the male-dominated society for depriving women from their rights. She criticizes her Mussalman community for their lag- behind attitude towards education, and Hindu communities for banning widow marriage. In words this essay speaks of the deprivations of the women in the society, especially their deprivation to get education which brings emancipation from the restriction of humanity and slavery. Rokeya writes, ‘The best crime our brothers commit against us is to deprive us of education.’ In Islam it is said that, “It is the bounden duty of all Muslim males and females to acquire knowledge”.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Rokeya gives her personal opinion that , God who is the Giver while it is man who is the robber. She goes on to say that God has created men and women with same animal instincts such as hunger, thirst, and the necessity to sleep. Rokeya further states that as per Islamic statute, both men and women are dictated to pray five times a day. Therefore, there is no dissimilarity that has been divinely sanctioned upon men and women. In the essay “God Gives, Man Robs”, Rokeya touches on the core of Islamic teachings; according to her, leave no room for gender injustices which were clearly prevalent in her society. Rokeya critiques patriarchal, mainstream interpretations of Islam and re-examines them by using the hermeneutic tool of ‘ijtihad’, critical thinking and reinterpretation of the Qur’an and prophetic teachings, in order to restore the egalitarian message of Islam and to get rid of misogynist elements mixed with it in her social setting.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Thus, she pointed her finger at those who thought themselves the custodians of Islam and abused this position to promote patriarchal authority at the expense of women’s sufferings. Rokeya asks for the true values of Islam: “In Arab society,

where women were being oppressed and female infanticide was widespread, the Prophet Muhammad came to their rescue. He not only promulgated some precepts but also set an example how to treat women with respect. He showed how to love one's daughter by demonstrating his love to Fatima [his daughter]. That love and affection for one's daughter is rare on earth. Alas! It is because of his absence among us that we [women] are in such a despicable plight! Rokeya did not go against her religion or cultural values.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Hossain notes: "When Rokeya looked for role models to show that emancipation was possible, she turned not to Western women but those of the subcontinent or the Muslim world." She promotes 'idealised Islamic values' and highlights Islam's emancipatory aspects by looking at Qur'an and Hadith through the prism of justice and jurisprudence of gender equality. She also expresses her anger towards Calcutta Corporation for not establishing a safe environment for girls' education. She ends the essay with a hope to convert Shakhawat Memorial High School to convert into a one congenial for girls' education.<sup>xxxv</sup>

#### **"Educational Ideals for the Modern Indian Girl"**

Her second essay written in English deals with the criticism of the existing educational system in India, its evolution history, and how it transformed into a hotchpotch after getting blended with the western ideals for education. She emphasizes on the importance of planning an education for the girls that will in the long run cause intellectual and moral development of the girls. Here we get a glimpse of how advanced Rokeya was in terms of thinking about the female education and how serious she had been about the advancement, education, emancipation and after all the good of the girls. She writes, "We should by all means broaden the outlook of our girls and teach them to modernize themselves." For this the needs of education is immense and Rokeya understood this at the advent of twentieth century. She believes, "The future of India lies in its girls." She ends her essay hoping that Indian girls will attain education and education will broaden their outlook, will make them sensible, will refine them. Indian girls will not only pursue University degrees but also become obedient daughters, loving sisters, dutiful wife and instructive mother.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

The essay reveals her intense desire for educating women. Rokeya says that girls should broaden their outlooks and modernize themselves. Girls should be taught how to carry out their duties “commendably” and focus on long term plan, which is not “superficial” but pragmatic because the future of India “lies in its girls”. Rokeya invites all women to come forward and educate themselves to challenge this onslaught on them. She wanted to see Indian women educate through awakening their consciousness, self-confidence, and self-respect about their own right which should drive them forward. She talked about women’s educational advancement in relation to men’s interest in it and argued that if the mothers remained ignorant their sons would never be brave and bright.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

### **Conclusion**

For centuries, Muslim women in Bengal region have lived solitary of *abarodh* or seclusion. Their 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 the Rokeya raised the question of patriarchy and seclusion. It brought in the fore front the voice of a woman who through their personal experiences and obstacles moved towards emancipation. Her writings brought to the forefront the ideas of female education and women’s social rights. Social subjugation, social obstacles, inequality and patriarchy were reflected in her writings.

Begum Rokeya became a standing pillar followed by many Muslim women writers like Shamsunahar Mahmud, Fajiltunessa, Sufia Kamal who inspired for arousing the women from darkness of seclusion, illiteracy and ignorance. Her writings in English were liberal and sometimes bold and courageous against oppression of patriarchy and took step to change the mindset of the contemporary society towards women. Her writings bear a similarity with feminist philosophers of the other parts of the world. As Simone De Beauvoir, an eminent feminist philosopher writes, “When man makes of woman the other, he may, then, expect her to manifest deep-seated tendencies towards 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”.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Similarly Rokeya wrote: A Cow owner perforates the nose of the 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.”<sup>xxxix</sup> Hence the thoughts and writings of Begum Rokeya in the twentieth century were in the form of protest against patriarchy and was a step towards liberation of Muslim women in Bengal.

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## Notes and References

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<sup>iv</sup> H. Joarder, *Begum Rokeya, the emancipator*. Dacca: Nari Kalyan Sangstha :distribution, Bangladesh Books International, Dacca, 1980, p-6

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<sup>xii</sup> Susmita Roye, Op. cit., p. 141

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- <sup>xvii</sup>H. Joarder, op cit, p-12
- <sup>xviii</sup>Ibid , p. 24
- <sup>xix</sup>Ibid , p. 20
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