

## **Writing from the Margins: Multiple Subalternity of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain**

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### **Abstract**

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain came from and wrote for a colonised, marginalised society. Hence, the question of the silenced subaltern voice and agency, and of subordinate experiences of non-Western writers is pertinent to the discussion of her work. She is a subaltern not only because of gender and colonialism, but also because of her ethnic, religious and other identities. She is subordinated as a writer of a colonised society and marginalised as a Muslim feminist scholar. Various factors that contributed to her subalternity were enmeshed together and became grounds for her marginal status among regional and global feminist writers. Based on this theoretical background, this article will discuss the term “subaltern” and examine factors that contributed to Rokeya’s subalternity.

### **Keywords**

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, subaltern, gendered subaltern, subaltern language, Islamic feminism, feminist particularism

### **Introduction**

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) fought for women’s rights, especially for their right to formal education and participation in public life. She is arguably the most prominent feminist writer and social reformer of Muslim Bengal. Braving all practical difficulties of challenging the established social order and gender hierarchy, she worked on three fronts – literary, educational and political – simultaneously and successfully. Her key concern for the development of her community and the liberation of British India from colonial rule involved the spread of a holistic female education, the promotion of which was the central aim of her reformist activities. Both social leaders and those who deemed themselves

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custodians of Islam in Muslim Bengal were opposed to female education and to women's involvement in public life, and used pseudo-religious arguments to deprive them of many of their legitimate rights. So Rokeya<sup>2</sup> had to fight social mythologies and counter quasi-Islamic, misogynistic arguments against female education. In some cases, she overtly criticised stereotypical conceptions of women that mingled with the religion of Islam as well as the culturally-inflected malpractices regarding gender relations that contributed to relegating them to the four walls of the house.

In addition to gender norms and stereotypes, the restricted familial and social environment in which Rokeya lived offered no opportunity for her to gain institutional knowledge needed to develop mental abilities and to cultivate literary taste and accomplishments. Therefore, the autodidact and enthusiast Rokeya had to persevere in her literary vocation and begin from scratch, and is rightly regarded as a “perceptive feminist foremother” (Jahan and Papanek vii). She made the greatest contribution to the development of a feminist literary tradition in Muslim Bengal where “no one – before or after her – dealt with women's issues in equal or greater magnitude” (Hasan, “Commemorating” 53). Indeed, she inaugurated a new literature devoted to the amelioration of the condition of her gender as well as her community, which is distinctive but not isolated from other literary traditions of South Asia. She left “an extraordinary body of writing, in a variety of genres, including essays, satirical sketches, novellas, short stories, allegories, parables, and fables, in which she expressed her feminism, creativity, and commitment to female education” (Bagchi, “Ramabai and Rokeya” 68). So, in terms of the breadth of her literary and thematic interests and the tenacity of her resolve for gender justice, Rokeya can be regarded as one of the most important feminist voices in the annals of twentieth-century world literature.

Rokeya's husband Syed Sakhawat Hossain was very supportive of her educational pursuits and “bequeathed her Rs. 10,000 for female education” (Hossain 514). Five months after his death in the eleventh year of their marriage, in his memory she opened a girls' school in Bhagalpur (in Bihar) in October 1909 with only five students (Tharu 341; Bagchi, “Introduction” ix). However, due to social opposition it could not be run. She started it again in Calcutta in March 1911 with eight students and, gradually, student numbers built up and it became a full-fledged educational institution which is still running today.

On the socio-political plane, Rokeya established or worked with “many... organizations and associations for women” (Bagchi, “Ramabai and Rokeya” 68-69) including Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam (Islamic sisters' association), “otherwise known as the All-India Muslim Ladies' Conference” (Minault 8), that aimed at encouraging the social involvement, and improving the educational

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<sup>2</sup> Following the Bengali convention, in the body of this article, I use “Rokeya” in short; however, for reasons of consistency, I go by her surname “Hossain” for bibliographical details.

status, of Muslim women. It was “founded in Aligarh in March 1914... [and] claimed to represent the interests of all Muslim women” (Jalal 83). Soon its branches started to be set up in various provinces, as Muslim women’s socio-political activities involving the Anjuman were decentralised and administered by regional chapters.<sup>3</sup> For example, Amir-un-Nisa, “called the Mrs. Pankhurst of the Mian family” of Lahore (Forbes, *Women in Modern India* 68) and most well-known as the mother of the politician and activist Begum Jahanara Shah Nawaz (1896-1979) – who was elected to the Punjab Legislative Assembly in 1921 and represented India at the first Round Table Conference in London in 1930 – helped establish its Punjab branch. Rokeya became involved in Anjuman activities and established its Bengal branch in 1916, “under whose aegis Muslim women would take up a whole range of activities geared towards social welfare” (Bagchi, “Ramabai and Rokeya” 68-69). Rokeya had to go from house to house in order to collect students and persuade guardians to send their daughters to the school with an assurance that she herself would take “full responsibility of looking after and tutoring them” and, what is more important, that “they would not have to pay any school fees” or transportation costs (Hasan, “Commemorating” 49). After setting up the Anjuman in Calcutta, Rokeya’s hard work was multiplied many times over, as she worked from door to door and from street to street to encourage ignorant, inexperienced and naive women cocooned in an insular world, to become involved in its social and educational grassroots work. She was so preoccupied – both mentally and physically – with writing, the school and Anjuman activities that, at the end of her life, it all “had a telling effect on her health” (Hasan, “Commemorating” 49).

Regrettably, despite her outstanding contribution to women’s empowerment and her pivotal role in creating awareness of their educational rights and equal opportunities and participation in public life, contrary to her counterparts from other cultural or geographic origins, Rokeya has not been given fitting attention in the discussion of the women’s rights movement in a global context. Based on this theoretical underpinning, the discussion in this article intends to make it apparent to the reader that it is due to her subaltern status among regional and global feminist writers that Rokeya has not received comparable attention in literary studies.

### **Dissecting the Term “Subaltern” and Factors Contributing to Rokeya’s Subalternity**

Rokeya as a writer is a subaltern and she struggled to alter the subaltern status of women in her society. Therefore, the term subaltern is fundamental to her work and requires some explanation and contextualisation to facilitate a better understanding of her cultural position in relation to race, class, religion and

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion of the Anjuman, see Quayum, “Rokeya” 21.

gender in the colonial context. Derived from Latin *alter* (other), the word subaltern denotes a person or people of subordinate position. Historically it has signified those who are “by definition... subject to the authority of dominant powers” (Gunewardena 203). Tickell provides a succinct account of the origin and connotation of the term:

Originally a word that denoted a junior officer in the British army, ‘subaltern’ was coined as a political term in the 1930s by the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci, who used it in his *Prison Notebooks* to describe ‘groups or classes’ which were socially inferior and had no ideological power. Gramsci initially used the term instead of ‘proletarian’ in order to escape censorship, but it soon came to designate less organized working-class groups such as peasants and farm labourers. (82)

In the context of the South Asian subcontinent, the definition of subaltern provided by the Subaltern Studies group founded in 1982 by Ranajit Guha and fellow historians and social scientists – who came to be known as Subalternists – is perhaps more relevant. They “extended Gramsci’s definition beyond a purely economic one” (Tickell 82), as Guha defined subaltern “as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (vii). Equally pertinent is the concern of the Latin American “Subaltern Studies group (founded by John Beverley, Robert Carr, José Rabasa, Ileana Rodríguez, and Javier Sanjinés) that focused on the analysis and representation of marginal colonial and postcolonial voices” (Majfud 21-22). That is to say, as regards the relationship between dominant Western countries and other parts of the world with lesser power and influence, the postcolonial concept of subalternity has wide-ranging implications that go far beyond the Gramscian dichotomies. It also involves the relationship of power and inequality where native and indigenous people are marginalised and are made to feel inferior in relation to colonial cultures. Therefore, even though derived from Gramsci, the concept of subalternity has a broader currency in colonial and post-colonial studies. As Spivak spelled out in an interview with de Kock, it has a more specific meaning. It is not

just a classy word for oppressed, for Other, for somebody who’s not getting a piece of the pie... whose voice could not be heard... [in postcolonial terms, it signifies] everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism... [or] a space of difference. Now who would say that’s just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It’s not subaltern. (de Kock 45)

In a subsequent work, Spivak further explained this term and stated that by subaltern she meant “those removed from lines of social mobility” (*Other Asias* 22). Likewise, considering the term from South Asian and Latin American

perspectives, in this article, I use it in a broader sense to indicate an inferior status in society and cultural marginalisation/subordination, especially in the context of colonial legacies and experiences as well as contemporary inequalities in cultural exchange and homogenisation.

According to Spivak, “‘subaltern’ in the [South Asian] subcontinental use defines those who were cut off from the lines that produced the colonial mindset” (“The New Subaltern” 325). She argues:

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced.... [T]he ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in the shadow. (Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 287)

Commenting on Spivak’s notion of the subalternity of women, Kaplan states: “This double effacement of the subaltern-as-female... is neither incidental nor epiphenomenal. Rather, it is the necessary precondition for the counterhegemonic production of the (male) subaltern as the nearly-unimaginable subject of history” (35). On the basis of Spivak’s definition of the subaltern “as a *gendered* female category,” Tickell reaches the conclusion that it “includes women from India’s middle and upper classes” (84), which we can call, in Chatterjee’s words, “the subalternity of an elite” (37). Despite Rokeya’s class background, she is a subaltern owing to her gender, which I will discuss in more detail later in this article. Equally, she can be categorised so because of “the subordination of the colonized middle class... [and] all signs of *colonial difference* by which the colonized people had been marked as incorrigibly inferior” (Chatterjee 74; emphasis added).

The Manichean categories of the coloniser and the colonised constructed the latter as backward, infantile, passive and irrational and rendered them as the racialised other. Such a dichotomy provides the basis for a cognitive distinction between these two groups to the dominance of the coloniser and to the marginalisation of the colonised subaltern. As in postcolonial discourse women are regarded as “doubly colonised,” “the voice of the gendered subaltern... is doubly oppressed inside and out by masculinist nationalism on one hand and capital globalization on the other” (Yu 586). Hence, the subject-position of the gendered subaltern has been on the margins and the bulk of their literature, either effaced or significantly under-represented.

As mentioned earlier, since Rokeya is a woman writer of colonial Bengal, the term subaltern is particularly pertinent and useful to understand her work, as it bears the implications of both gender and colonial differences. It explains Rokeya’s marginalised status as a woman in Indian patriarchal society and her exclusion from metropolitan literary culture because of her subject position as a member of the colonised. After discussing the factor of the colonial difference,

in what follows, I mention some other factors that have contributed – or have the potential to contribute – to Rokeya’s subalternity.

*Practices of Comparative Literary Studies*

Conventional particularistic practices of comparative literary studies place writers like Rokeya on the margins of discourse. Traditionally, comparative literary studies informed by transnationalism involves “the study of periods, themes, genres, translation, literature and the other arts, and influence (or a bit later, reception theory and intertextuality)” (Higonnet 1). It “has been deeply marked, if not obsessed by the question of universals and universalism” (Coste 39). Especially the French School of comparative literature sought to locate “originals” as opposed to literary productions of other cultures. There is a tendency to universalise metropolitan literary and cultural production and to provincialise those from the periphery. Thus, the concepts of cultural universalisation or provincialisation privilege Western writers at the expense of the marginalisation of their non-Western counterparts.

*Continued Dominance of English Literature*

Especially through colonial contact, Muslim Bengal, which was part of the British Indian Empire, was involved in complex relations with the coloniser. But the colonial motive of exploitation did not allow any genuine cultural exchanges predicated upon *understanding* the “other.” As part of their political strategy, the British imperialists introduced English literature in India which is still dominant in the curricula in the region. It

served as a nation-building tool to downplay the brutality of imperialism, establish cultural superiority, and perpetuate a world-view of the colonizers as humanists. By representing English writers as universal, ahistoric... the colonizers found a way to maintain control over their colonial subjects. (Narayanan 82)

One of the chief demerits of such imperialist agenda of universalising English literature is the subordination of indigenous literary traditions. The local colonial elite have gradually been drawn to Western sciences which have come to embody the most cherished values of metropolitan culture and have become widely acceptable. During the colonial period, Indians who received English education had an edge over those who were educated in age-old traditional knowledge. As a result, the colonised gentry showed an arrogant and self-righteous neglect to local literary heritage and cultural resources including Bangla literature, which eventually inferiorised and subalternised writers like Rokeya in their own land. And this has continued long after the end of manifest colonialism. Even though she is an iconic figure in Bangladesh and there is a university as well as students’ dormitories, thoroughfares and a day named after her, she is not studied at

colleges and universities in the country as intensely as many of her counterparts from English literature are. Therefore, giving Rokeya her deserved status in literary studies requires bridging gaps between the dominant and the marginalised in the curricula and pedagogical practices and facilitating an ambience to better understand each other, which has not developed fully yet.

#### *Biases of Second Wave Feminism*

The revival of Rokeya studies began in 1973 mainly with the publication of Abdul Quadir's *Rokeya Rachanabali*. Interestingly, critical interest in Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97), who assumes a unique status in feminist scholarship in Britain as Rokeya does in Bangladesh, started also in the same year. Chiefly with the publication of *Mary Wollstonecraft Newsletter* that Janet Todd first brought out in 1973, attention to Wollstonecraft "turned to explosive measure" (Gunther-Canada 215). The dominant trend in modern feminism and the rebirth and intensification of feminist enquiry and theorising – generally known as second wave feminism – in the 1970s may have contributed to the revival of writers such as Wollstonecraft and Rokeya and their works at different levels. However, in mainstream Western feminist literary studies, Euro-American, metropolitan feminism participates in the construction of cultural hegemonies and maintains an implicit protocol of exclusion of many non-Western feminist writers from mainstream feminist discourses, which Spivak regards as "the continuing subalternization of Third World material" by Western feminist criticisms (*In Other Worlds* 254). Hence, Western feminist literary criticism itself has come under serious scrutiny and re-examination by postcolonial feminist theorists because of its alleged lack of concern for the experiences of non-Western women and neglect of the feminist literary heritage of subaltern societies. And this confirms the charge of parochialism and insularity made by postcolonial feminist critics against sections of Western feminism, where subaltern feminist experiences have not found an equal standing.

The waves of feminist movements in the West show a discrepant attitude to the *stories of women* from subaltern societies most of which encountered direct or indirect imperialist domination. As Mohanty states: "Unlike the history of Western (white, middle-class) feminisms, which has been explored in great detail over the last few decades, histories of Third World women's engagement with feminism are in short supply" (45). This is largely because of the predominant trend of Eurocentrism in feminist studies. As Said observes: "Eurocentrism penetrated to the core of... the women's movement, the avant-garde arts movement" (268). Under the guise of "the form of avant-garde 'gynocriticism'... Western feminist writers... 'naturalize' and universalize their particular experiences, thereby erasing historical and cultural differences – and also concealing the (possible) complicity of their outlook in global structures of hegemonic domination" (Dallmayr and Devy 45).

Said's thesis of Eurocentric penetration is clearly reflected in Western feminist thinking. The Eurocentric slant of Western/white feminism echoes the colonising project of "suppression of a vast wealth of indigenous cultures" by exporting "European language, literature and learning as part of a civilising mission" (Ashcroft et al. 1). Similarly, Eurocentric metropolitan feminisms also sideline the feminist intellectual culture of non-Western societies and present metropolitan feminist agendas as "universal" (Ashcroft et al. 11). Mainstream feminist discourses on non-Western women and gender often implicitly replicate or re-inscribe the relations of power between the coloniser and the colonised within which they are embedded. Keeping this colonial, historical perspective in mind, Rokeya's feminist work can be linked, to put in Mohanty's words used elsewhere, to "a history of anticolonialist, feminist struggle" (129).

According to Spivak, metropolitan feminisms' discriminatory attitudes to the experiences of non-Western women are manifested at different levels: in curricular planning and in feminist literary criticism that "celebrates the heroines of the First World in a singular and individualist, and the collective presence of women elsewhere in a pluralized and inchoate fashion" (Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 168). She critiques Western feminist trends that maintain a special fascination for the experiences of the women of the so-called First World (or, in Mohanty's words, "One-Third World") and disregard or homogenise the specificities of the experiences of non-Western women. She foresees the emergence of a repository of feminist "literary heritage" in so-called Third World literature, which, once recovered, will terminate the "isolationist admiration for the literature of the female subject in Europe and Anglo-America" and will bring about equilibrium in feminist thinking by way of eliminating a mere sense of "information-retrieval approach to 'Third World' literature" (*A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 114). Like Spivak, Loomba also emphasises that "[n]on-Western literatures need to be recovered, celebrated, re-circulated, reinterpreted not just in order to revise our view of European culture but as part of the process of decolonisation" (102). Discovering the abundant literary works of non-Western culture and commemorating its feminist luminary like Rokeya is necessary to liberate the feminist movement from Eurocentric hegemony. Since Spivak, Mohanty and Loomba made these remarks, much work has been done on non-Western feminist writers, but the pace in which non-Western Muslim writers like Rokeya are given attention is still lagging considerably behind in terms of academic rigour.

Undermining the feminist experiences of subaltern societies and turning a blind eye to their literary texts belittle the rich intellectual heritage of non-Western cultures. In order to meet the demands of feminism (a democratic movement) in a truly global sense, the need for an inclusive approach cannot be overemphasised. As Pandit puts it:



Feminist studies seek to recover the voice of subaltern women from specific historical formations. Traditional literary approaches believe that literature is a celebration of universal human experience defined in terms of the dominant caste/class male values, and study it as an aesthetic artefact, independent of its context. Feminist critics reject both these assumptions and engage with issues of visibility and invisibility, hegemony and marginalisation and articulation and silence as they get constructed in cultural productions at specific times in history. The recovery of the speaking woman's voice is therefore a major task. (30)

In order to cater to this need, white women are required to get rid of hegemonic attitudes to their non-white sisters. As Minh-ha suggests, there needs to be "decolonization... within the women's movements" (268). Pui-lan contends: "European and Euro-American women must first decolonize their minds and recover themselves from the state of unknowing" (79). That is to say, it is important that they know the social and historical specificities of gender conditions of non-Western societies and unlearn their privileges in relation to their non-Western counterparts (Landry and MacLean 4-5), which may trigger "new questions for feminist historiography and epistemology" (Mohanty 45). In order for feminism to be decentred and deterritorialised and for the long history of feminist struggle to be spared the taint of Eurocentrism, experiences and scholarship of women from non-Western societies should be given their rightful weight in mainstream feminist discourse.

Contemporary postcolonial, feminist and gender studies have evoked much interest in making amends for the negligence shown to the proponents of women's rights of geographical locations other than the West. This has heralded the emergence of multicultural/multiracial/antiracist/anticolonial feminism and created an opportunity for feminist critics to focus on writers from non-Western societies. In the current plural, decentered academic context, Rokeya needs to be reckoned with, along with other foremost champions of women's rights, as a major feminist writer for her strong commitment and foundational contribution to the cause of female education and other factors that enhance women's status. In a social milieu where women's lives were constrained by gendered roles and expectations, and shaped by various internalised and institutionalised norms and structures, she created a vibrant feminist movement that made lasting impacts on gender relations. She sparked the light of knowledge and awareness for women who were secluded in the domestic sphere and excluded from education. If not for Rokeya's overarching feminist concerns and activism on multiple fronts, we wonder how long women of her society would be living under lethargic and debilitating conditions.

The material condition in which she worked and the forcefulness of her arguments for women's improved access to education, their right to participate in public life and other resources of emancipation together with her superior

literary gifts make it all the more untenable to marginalise her in the intellectual and literary history of the women's rights movement in relation to more recognised feminist writers. In a recent work, I discussed somewhat "comparable material cultures... in [Wollstonecraft's] late eighteenth-century England and in [Rokeya's] early twentieth-century Muslim Bengal" and identified ways in which they are at their most similar in feminist arguments for women's equal educational opportunities (Hasan, "Early Defenders of Women's Intellectual Rights" 1). As I mentioned earlier in this section, resurgence in studies of Wollstonecraft and Rokeya happened in the 1970s that "marked the beginning of feminist historiography, which, in the beginning, was infused with the excitement of discovery" (Forbes, "Foreword" ix). However, it had its own limitations, as Forbes adds: "Before long, it became apparent that while we were rescuing a few women who had achieved remarkable things, the lives of the vast majority were beyond our grasp" (Forbes, "Foreword" ix).

Accordingly, the recognition and attention that subaltern writer Rokeya has received is not commensurate with her erudition, stature and many achievements. Conversely, and rightly, Wollstonecraft has been widely regarded as the first feminist thinker of consequence. Hence, incorporation of Rokeya in mainstream feminist discourses will constitute part of the remedy of "a long period of neglect" of her in global feminist discourses (Jahan and Papanek vii). Although Rokeya's primary target audience was the Muslim society of Bengal, she expressed concerns about the worldwide peripheralisation of women and for awakening and uniting women of all societies towards liberation. Recognising subaltern writers like Rokeya will also bring about a sense of equality within different brands of feminism, as it will be a gesture of recognition of differences, diversity and multiplicity within women's rights movements.

### **Miscellaneous Factors**

The factors contributing to the subalternity of Rokeya that I have mentioned above are by no means exhaustive. There are other issues which put her on the margins. For example, being a Muslim she was a subaltern, as Muslims as a whole in British India were underprivileged in relation to the coloniser as well as to other religious communities. In Rokeya's view, the plight of women as a gender and that of Muslims as a subaltern group are interconnected. She said:

Unless and until our Muslim brothers give proper attention to our [women's] sufferings, the 220 million peoples of India will not give any heed to their demands, and unless and until those 220 million [non-Muslims] ignore the 80 million Muslims, their petition will not reach the ears of the British regime.<sup>4</sup> (Hossain 228-29)

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<sup>4</sup> English translations of all Bangla source texts used throughout this article are mine, unless otherwise stated.

Although Rokeya came from a landowning family and her ancestors had come from Tabriz in Iran, as a Muslim she belonged to the subordinate community of Bengal Muslims, most of whom had converted to Islam from Hinduism and their “conversion was facilitated by the fact that the masses were downtrodden, their plight aggravated by the revival of Hinduism during the Sena Period (A.D. 1100-1250)” (Khan 835). That is to say, Bengal Muslims were mainly a subaltern class. In fact, the deprivations of Muslims on various fronts in British India continued since the beginning of colonial rule. However, there were added reasons for Bengal Muslims to be subalternised. As Khan argues:

Because of the comparatively early establishment of British rule in Bengal, and because Hindus took to British ways far more willingly than Muslims in these early years, an overwhelmingly Hindu elite directed the socioeconomic, political, and administrative affairs for the majority of Bengali Muslims at the turn of the twentieth century. (841-42)

Such marginalisation – impacted by multiple and concomitant causes including Muslims’ reluctance to embrace Western modernity, limited interest in female education and lack of familiarity with the colonial system – has far-reaching consequences to the detriment of Muslims in ameliorating their condition in society. Sarkar says that “Muslims in Bengal were marginal both to... [the] process of middle-class formation and the cultural ‘renaissance’ spearheaded” by the Hindu intelligentsia (25). Hence, they lagged behind Hindus in socio-political and educational fields.

Moreover, Bengal Muslims were also somewhat subaltern in relation to their co-religionists from north India. The latter were ahead of the former in socio-cultural and educational attainments. Even in Rokeya’s school, most girls were originally from the north, as “Rokeya’s close associate” Mamlukul Fatema Khanam stated: “The girls from the north are availing the opportunity eagerly, but the Bengali girls have no interest in it whatsoever. Of the 114 students only two are Bengali” (ctd. in Quayum, “Rokeya” 13). Advancement in female education among Muslims in the north is also testified by the fact that Gail Minault discussed a number of contemporary Muslim women scholars from the region in *Secluded Scholars: Women’s Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* (1998) where Rokeya is also included mainly because of her (Urdu) language connection (Quayum, “Rokeya” 20). Incidentally, Rokeya was also a subaltern if we compare her circumstances to her predecessor in Muslim Bengal, writer and educational philanthropist Nawab Faizunnesa (1834-1903). The latter was given the title Nawab by the British colonial monarchy and had huge economic and social leverage which Rokeya did not. So Rokeya was required “to be much more focused and to exert more vigorous efforts in the establishment and promotion of her school as well as her other feminist goals” (Quayum and Hasan xiv).

Rokeya was a subaltern even in domestic and social life. Though not as stringently as is the case of the Hindu caste system, the Muslim community of Rokeya's Bengal was divided into *Ashraf* (upper-class) and *Ajlaf* (lower-class), and she belonged to the former. Therefore, her subject position as a subaltern requires some explanation. Importantly, in this case Rokeya's "aristocratic birth was not necessarily a boon" for her (Quayum, "Rokeya" 2). While her brothers were given ample opportunities and support to thrive in education, like other girls she was not sent to school by her orthodox father because of gender. During adult life, especially after the death of her husband, she was subject to mistreatment by relatives (mainly some of her in-laws). Few years after the passing of her husband, she wrote to a friend: "[E]ven my dearest relatives are so heartless that they do not hesitate in trying to deprive me of my daily food!... Kindly pray to [G]od to save me from my relatives" (Hossain 519). Moreover, her gender and initiatives for female education – which were "questionable and controversial" (Quayum, "Inspired" 60) to her community – contributed to her social isolation.

Her widowhood also exacerbated her plight and ostracised her further, as in her society widows were viewed with contempt and were stereotyped as bad omens. Some of Rokeya's detractors unmistakably referred to her marital status while opposing her educational initiatives and slandering her personally, as one public aside against her reads: "This young widow wants to flaunt and advertise her youthfulness by establishing a school" (qtd. in Sufi 41). Thus, her status as a widow in Bengal society was an added reason for her subalternity.

In linguistic considerations, Rokeya was a subaltern by choice. She knew five languages – Arabic, Bangla, English, Persian and Urdu. However, since her primary audience was the Muslims of Bengal, she chose mainly Bangla for her literary practices, while she spoke Urdu with her marital family. Bangla was a subaltern language in Bengal during her time, as it was looked down upon even by the Muslim elite of Bengal. As Quayum states:

To mark their superiority over the 'low-born' *Ajlaf* Muslims, who were seen to have converted from Hinduism and readily accepted Bengali as their mother tongue, this elite *Ashraf* community chose to speak Arabic, Persian and Urdu, rather than Bengali, in their daily life. ("Rokeya" 4)

For example, "the Suhrawardy family, the Nawab families of Murshidabad and Tallyganj in West Bengal, and the Nawab families of Bogra and Dhaka in East Bengal – all continued to regard Urdu and Persian as the languages of Bengali Muslims" (Khan 839). Although Rokeya used Urdu especially in her marital family, as her "husband was from Bihar, where the spoken language [mainly

among Muslims] is Urdu” (Quayum, “Rokeya” 20),<sup>5</sup> and it was the medium of instruction at Sakhwat Memorial Girls’ School, she chose to practice her literary career mainly in the subaltern language of Bangla in the learning of which she faced opposition from family members and relatives. Even though majority Bengal Muslims spoke Bangla, it “was not considered appropriate for the culture of high Muslim society to which [Rokeya’s] family belonged” (Ray 21). Moreover, Bangla was doubly subalternised in the sense that it was the language of both Hindu and Muslim masses, as the Bengali “Hindu brahmins clung to their religious and cultural privileges, and also to their monopoly over the Sanskrit language” (Quayum and Hasan xvi). Hindu masses and Muslims were not allowed to learn Sanskrit, and both were subaltern in relation to the brahmins and used a subaltern language (Bangla). With full knowledge of the subaltern status of Bangla, Rokeya chose it as her literary language and risked being subalternised by both Hindu and Muslim elites of Bengal who marked their distinction by looking down upon the language of the masses.

As I mentioned before, Muslims of Rokeya’s Bengal were subaltern in relation to both the British and their Hindu neighbours. Since the British coloniser dispossessed Muslims of political power, the former considered the latter as a serious threat to the colonial order. So they had a great feeling of hatred for the Muslims, marginalised them in public life and somewhat preferred Hindus to them, which Khan regards as “a Hindu British conspiracy to continue to deprive Muslims of opportunities for advancement” (841). Metcalf describes British resentment of Muslims thus:

Muslims served as a foil against which the British defined themselves: by saying that Muslims were oppressive, incompetent, lascivious, and given to self-indulgence, the colonial British could define precisely what they imagined themselves to be, namely, enlightened, competent, disciplined, and judicious. (953)

While consistently exploiting colonially cultivated Hindu-Muslim antagonisms in a divide-and-rule strategy, the coloniser favoured the Hindus and distrusted the Muslims from whom they had seized political power. This was also reflected in the colonial policy of female education that was slanted against Muslims.

Hindu social reformers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-91) worked closely with the coloniser to facilitate education for Hindu girls. He was actually “an assistant and an associate of Drinkwater Bethune” (Sinha 196). As a result, the British helped establish Hindu Balika Vidyalaya or Calcutta Female School in

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<sup>5</sup> Some of the dominant languages in Bihar are Magahi (or Magadhi), Maithili, Bhojpuri, Bajjika (a dialect of Maithili) and Angika (also known as Chhika-Chhiki). However, “as a matter of fact, Muslims in most of the north Indian states, including Bihar, speak Urdu,” which cannot be regarded as “one state specific” (Priyanka Tripathi, personal communication, December 19, 2018).

Calcutta in 1849 and “thus began Bethune’s great work for the promotion of female education in Bengal” (Sinha 196). It started receiving full government support in 1856, was renamed Bethune School in 1862-63 and upgraded to the Bethune College in 1879. However, Muslim girls had no access to this school until 1885. Only in 1939, the British founded Lady Brabourne College “mainly – but not exclusively – for Muslim girls” (Amin xiii). Thus, an intellectual movement for female education among Hindus took off in Bengal long before Rokeya started hers, and they had thousands of girls’ schools in Bengal alone by the turn of the century, whereas Rokeya’s school “was only the fourth school for Bengali Muslim girls in the whole of Bengal” (Quayum, “Inspired” 49). However, “Muslims and other subaltern groups were at first not willing to participate in [female education], and they came into the picture rather late” (Quayum, “Inspired” 47). Partly since activism for female education was mainly a Hindu phenomenon and partly since it was supported by the coloniser, Muslims had unjustified misgivings about it; hence, Rokeya had huge difficulty running her school. What is more, the coloniser took years to recognise the school (Bagchi, “Two Lives” 58). Therefore, even as an educational reformer, Rokeya was a subaltern and subject to “educational inequalities” of colonial education policy (Bagchi, “Connected” 817). It is amazing that Rokeya overcame all these disprivileging forces and eventually stood out as a formidable writer and social reformer.

### Conclusions

Rokeya’s subalternity is multifactorial. Colonial experience, gender, religion, language, ethnicity, particularism of feminism and comparative literary practices, and universalism of colonial culture – all contributed to subalternising and subordinating her to Western feminists as well as to her counterparts from non-Muslim backgrounds. The issue of subaltern status of non-Western writers was more obvious in the phase of second wave feminism. However, as a subaltern feminist scholar, Rokeya somewhat fits well in the feminist thinking of third wave feminism, as she “contested both patriarchy and imperialism through her work” (Bagchi, “Towards Ladyland” 743). Third wave feminism which is informed by postcolonial thinking and began in the 1990s treats gender issues as complex and multifaceted. It has demonstrated greater awareness of non-Western feminist movements including Islamic feminism and sought to understand their philosophies and agendas. Critical of second wave feminism, it has a transformative impact on contemporary feminist thinking. With regard to feminist attitudes towards gender oppression, there is a convergence between third wave feminism and subaltern feminism, as both are opposed to second wave feminism and do not regard the male gender as the only oppressive force; rather they are opposed to the oppressive forces of gender as well as social divisions and political machineries like colonialism.

Feminist theories of (formerly) colonised social spaces, such as South Asia, maintain a critical examination of linkages between colonial power structures and local patriarchy and their bearing upon the development of indigenous feminist thinking. Having gone through colonial subjugation, subaltern society's feminist experiences realistically took a different shape from those of Western feminist scholars. Postcolonial women's movements try to establish the indigenous roots of their feminist ideas, denying the assumption that "women's activism in the postcolonial world is only inspired by its Western counterparts" (Loomba 222). Therefore, it is wrong to generalise that feminist writers of non-Western cultures predictably and inevitably borrow their ideas from, and are influenced by, their Western counterparts. The experience of feminists in subaltern societies may not correspond to that of their Western counterparts. The framework of subaltern feminist movements should be defined according to their variant cultural-epistemic realities and historical-social contexts. In a climate of growing Islamophobic prejudice and framing of Muslim women as helpless victims in need of rescue and at the same time stereotyping and condoning attacks on them, studying the multiple subalternity of Muslim women writers like Rokeya is highly relevant.

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