

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and the Debate over Gender Relations among Muslim Intellectuals in Late Colonial Bengal¹

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Abstract

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was undoubtedly a remarkable intellectual and social reformer of her time, and in recent decades, her work has rightfully found its place among writings by “exceptional,” “early feminist” women from colonial India. This paper is an attempt to situate Rokeya’s contribution as a writer and reformer within the larger context of debates over the “woman question” as it unfolded in discussions of Muslim intellectuals in late colonial Bengal. It proceeds from the premise that without such contextualisation, Rokeya and her work is too often cast as “out of” or “ahead of” her time, when in fact Muslim intellectuals – a number of women among them – were engaged in vibrant debates over a range of social and political issues in the first half of the twentieth century that has been marginalised within normative histories of that time.

Keywords

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, early feminist, colonial Bengal, Muslim women intellectual, debates over gender relations, woman question

One evening I was lounging in an easy chair in my bedroom and thinking lazily of the condition of Indian womanhood. I am not sure whether I dozed off or not.... All of a sudden a lady stood before me.... I took her for my friend Sister Sara.

‘Will you please come out and have a look at our garden?’ [She asked]. I looked... at the moon... and thought there was no harm in going out at that time....

When walking I found to my surprise that it was a fine morning. The town was fully awake and the streets alive with bustling crowds. I was feeling

¹ This paper is based in part on Sarkar, *Visible Histories*.

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very shy, thinking I was walking in the street in broad daylight, but there was not a single man visible.

Some of the passersby made jokes at me.... I asked... ‘What do they say?’

‘The women say... that you are shy and timid like men.’ Timid and shy like men?... [This] was really a joke, [I thought]....

‘I feel somewhat awkward,’ I said, in a rather apologizing tone, ‘as being a *pardanishin*³ woman I am not accustomed to walking about unveiled.’

‘You need not be afraid of coming across a man here. This is Ladyland, free from sin and harm. Virtue herself reigns here.’...

I became very curious to know where the men were. I met more than a hundred women while walking there, but not a single man.

‘Where are the men?’ I asked her.

‘In their proper places, where they ought to be.’... ‘We shut our men indoors.’

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *Sultana’s Dream* (7-9)

Introduction

In 1905, a Madras-based English periodical, *The Indian Ladies’ Magazine* carried a story titled *Sultana’s Dream* written by Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. It was a “utopian fantasy” (Tharu and Lalita 340) – the first known example of such a work by a woman in India – in which Rokeya imagines a world where cooking is a pleasure, horticulture is an important activity and science is used only for humanitarian ends. It is a woman’s world – peaceful and ordered – where men are “shut indoors” in the *murdana*.⁴ As Rokeya’s husband remarked on reading the story, it is indeed a “terrible revenge” on men (Jahan 2).

Rokeya was undoubtedly a remarkable writer and thinker whose contributions to the rich intellectual discourse of late colonial Bengal has begun to receive the attention, it has always deserved, in recent years. Thanks to efforts by feminist scholars, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s name has now found its way into the list of “exceptional,” “early feminist” women writers from colonial India circulating in critical academic circles within the Anglo-American academy. What has remained less noticed are the works of the other dozen-odd Muslim women – such as Masuda Rahman, Khaerunnessa Khatun, Razia Khatun Choudhurani, Mahmuda Khatun Siddiqua, Ayesha Ahmed and Faziltunnessa to name a few – who were also writing on a wide range of issues pertinent to women’s lives in the first half of the twentieth century.⁵ A few others such as Sufia Kamal and Samsun Nahar Mahmud may have gained recognition for their writing and/or their activism over time, but few readers outside Bangladesh and West Bengal would recognise their names, even in the subcontinent. As historical sources, the work of all these early women writers is

³ A woman who observes *pardah/parda/purdah* or seclusion.

⁴ Men’s quarters; opposite of a *zenana* or women’s quarters.

⁵ For two important exceptions, see, Akhtar and Bhowmick, 1998; and Amin, 1996.

important.⁶ They were also seminal in gaining the attention and eventual confidence of readers who were by and large averse to the idea of the emancipation of women at that time. And yet such efforts are rarely acknowledged, leaving one with the impression that Rokeya was a thinker “out of time and place” (Sarkar, “Looking for Feminism” 325-27).

This paper is an attempt to situate Rokeya’s contribution as a writer and social reformer within this larger context of debates over the “woman question” as it emerged in the discussions of Muslim intellectuals in late colonial Bengal. In terms of absolute numbers the Muslim middle class in Bengal was certainly not large at the beginning of the twentieth century, but the debates they carried on were vibrant. A survey of the various social, political and economic concerns that surfaced in the pages of the many magazines and periodicals published from Kolkata and Dhaka in the first half of the twentieth century is of course far beyond the scope of the present essay.⁷ Suffice it to say that they stemmed from a range of ideological positions, and engaged a large number of issues that included the need for maintaining a distinct identity that would be both Bengali *and* Muslim through the cultivation of the Bengali language and literature, the importance of spreading non-Islamic, western education among Muslims alongside a better knowledge of the basic tenets of the religion, the need for a wider political consciousness regarding colonial rule and the anti-colonial struggle, the relationship with non-Muslims especially Hindus in the realms of social intercourse, political cohabitation and literary/intellectual production, and social reforms that impinged upon normative gender-relations and the organisation of social life. And it is to this last category of debates that I will restrict my focus in the rest of this paper.

The Debates over Gender Oppression/Privilege

As such, a substantial number of Muslim writers across the ideological spectrum were troubled by what they considered the “deplorable condition” of Muslim women in colonial Bengal (Sarkar, *Visible Histories* 111-13). Many of the articles, penned mostly, although not always, by men in these early years, were preoccupied with the institutions of child marriage, the indiscriminate practice of polygamy, the problem of easy divorce, widow remarriage and the need for literacy among women.⁸

⁶ For a similar argument, see Hossein 13. Hossein in fact believes there is a larger political significance to women making their appearance in public for the first time.

⁷ For a discussion of these larger debates see Sarkar, *Visible Histories* 98-111.

⁸ *Nabanoor* carried a number of articles on the position and treatment of women between 1903 and 1905, including several essays by women authors such as Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Khaerunnessa Khatun. See, for instance, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, “Borka” (April-May, 1904), and “Amader Abanati” (August-September, 1904); Khaerunnessa, “Amader Shikshar Antaray,” *Nabanoor* (November-December, 1904), 368-371; also cited in Akhtar and Bhowmick, 39-42.

From a survey of the articles of that era it would be fair to say that the overwhelming tendency among male writers was to wax eloquent about the “plight” of Muslim women in early twentieth century Bengal, but for a majority of them the underlying preoccupation was the supposed failure of Muslim men to interpret and observe the tenets of the holy texts and the resultant degradation of the *practice* of Islam in Bengal, and the general decline of the Muslim community. The condition of women served largely as a discomfiting index to these larger problems. In article after article, one thus comes across discussions of the “abuses” and “excesses” of the institutions of polygamy, men’s right to *talak* (divorce), dowry or even child marriage, resulting presumably from widespread ignorance of Islamic law, or the bad influences of Hindu practices.⁹ What is missing is any attempt at developing a thoroughgoing critique in the works of most male writers of that time of these institutions as unilateral technologies of domination deployed against women by men, even in their more benign forms.

A second, and related, tendency was that even as the “condition of women” was widely understood to be a result of men’s neglect, ignorance or even cruelty, there was little acknowledgement in these writings of the relational nature of women’s oppression and male privilege. In other words, “women’s condition” was ultimately seen as somehow innately related to women only, which could be fixed by simply relaxing the severity of the restrictions imposed on them. Men’s responsibility was seen to be limited to their agency in maintaining the social constraints that disadvantaged women; there was little understanding of men benefiting from women’s near incarceration and forced dependence on men. As we shall see presently, it was precisely attention to this relational aspect of gender oppression that sets apart Rokaya’s work from most contemporary intellectuals.

Women Writers

A number of women were also publishing from the very beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁰ And unlike male writers, who articulated the need for social reforms in terms of the regeneration of the community/nation, the early women writers honed in on the issue of women’s welfare. As they saw it, women could not continue to rely solely on men’s ability and inclination to

⁹ This specific argument appears in an editorial entitled “Bibahe Barpan” in the *Samyabadi* (June-August, 1924), cited in Islam, 65.

¹⁰ A few Muslim women published their work in the nineteenth century. They were: Bibi Taherunnessa (1865), Faizunnessa Choudhurani (1876) and Latifunnessa (1897). In the twentieth century, we know of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1901) and the poet Azizunnessa (1902) as the first writers, followed by Khaerunnessa (1905) and Bibi Fatema (1905) both of whom published in the *Nabanoor*. For a discussion of the work of these authors, see Amin 214-19.

change women's condition; they (women) themselves had to take matters of reform in their own hands.

One of the earliest enunciations of this stance can be seen in the writings of Khaerunnessa Khatun, who was the principal or "headmistress" of a girl's school in North Bengal (Akhtar & Bhowmick 36-39). As she put it in an essay on the need for literacy among Muslim women:

It is not within our means to overcome the restrictions [placed on us by Islam], and it is illicit. We do not have the unrestricted right to travel to other villages like Hindu women do.... The first and main obstacle to the spread of education [among Muslim women] is [therefore] the lack of appropriate schools... [which have to be established] in each town, each village, and if necessary, even in each neighbourhood.... [The] schools... ought to be established... in such a way that... women [can maintain]... seclusion [when attending them].... [The] future of our society depends on girls; therefore, we [should concentrate on]... educating them now. (Khaerunnessa, "Amader Shikshar Antaray"¹¹)

Khaerunnessa's reform agenda was admittedly not very expansive, and yet, one is struck by the pragmatism and concreteness of her ideas and her interventions. She started a night school for girls, and travelled from village to village to mobilise families to let their daughters attend her school. Khaerunnessa was simultaneously a working-woman, a social reformer and an active participant in the nationalist agitation against the first partition of Bengal in 1905 (Akhtar & Bhowmick 38-39; Sarkar, *Visible Histories* 114-15). She refused to observe *parda* at a time when seclusion in some form or other was the norm for an overwhelming majority of middle class women – Muslim *and* Hindu.¹² She was also among the earliest Muslim women known to have publicly expressed her concerns relating to contemporary social and political issues.¹³ And yet, it is hard to find even the barest traces of this remarkable if understated figure in the official history of colonial Bengal.

A second writer, who took on the subject of social inequalities with particular attention to men's possible investment in keeping women both uneducated and dependent, was Masuda Rahman or Mrs. M. Rahman.¹⁴ Dubbed as "Banglar agninagini" (Bengal's fire-serpent)¹⁵ for her fiery prose and her intrepid attacks on male domination, Masuda Rahman came to be seen as

¹¹ *Nabanoor*, November-December 1904, 368-71, reprinted in Akhtar and Bhowmick 39-41. Note that this and all subsequent translations are done by the author.

¹² "Mahiladiger Abarodhpratha," *Mahila* (September-October, 1903), cited in Chakrabarty 196. For a discussion of the practice of seclusion among Hindus, see Urquhart 1983.

¹³ "Swadeshanurag" (1905), cited above.

¹⁴ This is the name which Masuda Rahman herself used.

¹⁵ Samsunnahar Mahmud, "Mrs. M. Rahman Smarane," *Naoroj*, (June-July, 1927), cited in Akhtar and Bhowmick 50.

something of “a revolutionary writer” of that age (Akhtar and Bhowmick 47-51; Sarkar, *Visible Histories* 115).¹⁶ Masuda’s response to societal injunctions was clear: there was little sense in waiting for men to implement changes since men were deeply implicated in the misery of women. “The mistake,” she wrote,

... is [indeed] totally ours. Whom do we expect our rights from, from men! Those who do not have any claims on anything, who themselves seek to... [be] beggars, who... [caught in the vice grip of slavishness] have reduced their life’s ideals [to nothing], whose very souls have become enslaved, *they* will grant us our rights? They will give us freedom? [Are we] mad...?¹⁷

Masuda Rahman was undoubtedly a powerful voice in early twentieth-century Bengal. She was not necessarily considered to be an extraordinary writer by her contemporaries,¹⁸ but her defiant prose stood out amidst the sluggish, male-centric reform discourse of that era.¹⁹ What is more, her work marks the distance that women in Bengal had travelled, even if mostly in thought and writing, since the mid-nineteenth century when the first women – Brahmo and Hindu in the main – haltingly pleaded with men for better treatment, or at best, ventured oblique critiques of male domination. And while, concerns for the welfare of the Muslim community or Indian nation were often present in Masuda’s writing, but they were not allowed to overshadow her primary commitment to the idea of women’s welfare and even autonomy. Finally, it bears noting that although Masuda wrote often about the misery of women, they *never* come across as objects of pity in her essays. They are, to borrow her words, “blood-thirsty tigresses,” and “trampled serpents”²⁰ – caged, put upon, neglected, but rising to seek revenge, rights, and, above all, freedom, albeit defined somewhat fuzzily and entirely uncritically in these early decades of the twentieth century.

Towering over everyone else in this period and beyond was the widely respected, and at the same time, intensely criticised Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, whose career in writing and reform-work spanned roughly three decades, with a short break of about six years in the wake of her husband’s death in 1909. In a sharp departure from most reformist agendas of her time, which focused on

¹⁶ Mrs. Rahman began publishing sometime after the World War I, that is, after Khaerunnessa’s death.

¹⁷ Masuda Rahman, “Amader Dabi,” *Dhumketu*, September-October 1922, reprinted in Akhtar and Bhowmick 63.

¹⁸ For instance, the contemporary writer Abdul Kadir described Mrs. M. Rahman’s work as “unremarkable” in “Begum Rokeyar Sahitya Kirti,” *Masik Mohammadi*, January-February, 1932, cited in Quadir 547.

¹⁹ See for instance the discussion of Masuda Rahman’s work in Akhtar and Bhowmick, especially 50.

²⁰ Mrs. M. Rahman, “Amader Dabi,” cited above.

women's welfare within their conventionally defined roles as "wife and mother,"²¹ Rokeya, who was born into an orthodox Muslim aristocratic family and grew up observing strict *parda*, firmly believed that in order to really stand up to male oppression women had to be economically independent, even seek employment outside the household if necessary. Not surprisingly, she faced tremendous criticism for her essays – in which she questioned what it means to be simultaneously a woman, Muslim and Bengali – as well as her efforts to facilitate women's education, especially amongst Muslims in Calcutta. Apart from numerous critical essays²² published in a whole array of periodicals run by both Hindus/Brahmos and Muslims, Rokeya also wrote a novel, *Padmaraga*, and a number of short stories.²³

While much can be, and has been, written about Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, I would like to foreground two elements of her argument-making that, in my opinion, place her work in a realm quite apart from that of her contemporaries – Muslim as well as Hindu. First, the consistency with which Rokeya explores, especially in her early work, the relational nature of gender privilege/oppression – i.e. the links between men's privilege and women's subordination – and, second, her insistence on women's agency, not only in terms of its supposed emancipatory potential, but also, rather more strikingly, its complicity in perpetuating women's subservience to men.

We will begin with her (in)famous essay "Amader Abanati" (1904), and its subsequent revised version, "Streejatir Abanati" (Women's Degeneration, 1905), in which Rokeya argues that women's oppression should be understood as a direct consequence of unfair, male-centric "social injunctions" embodied in all religions, and not merely as a by-product of the misplaced conservatism of a few orthodox mullahs. In her memorable words:

... [Whenever a woman] has tried to raise her head, [she has been]... crushed with the excuse of religion or the holy texts... [and we have gradually] come to accept [such repression] as religious injunctions... Even our souls have become enslaved... Where the bond of religion is slack... women are in a state as advanced as men... I have to say that ultimately 'religion' has strengthened the bonds of our enslavement; men are lording over women under the pretext of religion. Hence I am forced to [raise the issue of] 'religion.' For this[,] religious people will forgive me.²⁴

²¹ Hossein, "Prekshapat," 15.

²² Many of Rokeya's essays were compiled in a volume titled *Motichur*, published in Calcutta in 1921, now part of Quadir, ed. *Rokeya Rachanabali*.

²³ The first biography of Rokeya in Bengali, *Rokeya Jibani*, was written by Samsunnahar Mahmud, (1937/1996), a close friend and associate of Rokeya.

²⁴ "Amader Abanati," *Nabanoor* (August-September, 1904), cited in Quadir 11-12; see also Akhtar and Bhowmick 19-20.

Note that in referring to “religion” in the abstract, Rokeya implicated *all* religions in the oppression of women, highlighting the universality of the problem of gender inequality,²⁵ at a time when with few exceptions Muslim intellectuals engaged in the reform debates throughout the first half of the twentieth century were quite unwilling to go beyond the customary claim that Islam granted enough rights to women.²⁶

“Amader Abanati” incensed even the “liberal” thinkers of that time, men and women, Muslim and Hindu.²⁷ By the time it was reprinted in 1905 as part of Rokeya’s first anthology, *Motichur* (Volume I), the essay’s title had been changed to “Streejatir Abanati” (Women’s Downfall), and it had lost five provocative paragraphs that dealt frontally with male agency in both the social construction of religions and their uses in the project of subordinating women. Rokeya would not tackle this difficult topic until much later in her career, but the theme of discrimination of women by men would continue to organise her understanding of the social and political issues of the day, including her views on community. So, for instance, in the 1920s amidst rising communal polarisation of Muslims and Hindus, Rokeya denounced communalism for facilitating the exploitation of women, as exemplified by the vicious campaign around the issue of “abductions.”²⁸ As she wrote in a powerful essay titled, “Subeh Sadek”:

For some time now our masters have considered us akin to valuable ornaments. So... many kinds of ‘Women’s Protection League’ are being set up. Truly, since we are living luggage, there must be a need for alert guards to ensure that we are not stolen. My unfortunate sisters! Do you not feel insulted by this? If you do then why do you suffer such... ignominy in silence? (Quadir 271-72)²⁹

By treating the abductions problem as only one problem among many that the “women of Bengal” (*banganari*) faced at that time, Rokeya effectively moves our attention from the prevalent communalised meaning of “abductions” – viz. Muslim men abducting Hindu women – being touted by Hindu nationalists to its significance as a tool of male oppression writ large.

²⁵ Murshid 153; Datta 216-218; Bhattacharya and Sen 6-7.

²⁶ For one such exception, see Abul Hussein, “Adesher Nigraha,” (1929), cited in Monir 223-224.

²⁷ For discussions of the reactions to Rokeya’s work, see Quadir, “Editor’s Note,” especially 12-14; Akhtar and Bhowmick 4-5. For examples of conservative responses, see the journal *Mihir O Sudhakar* which published a critical response, Author Unknown in the September-October issue of 1904, cited in Amin 188.

²⁸ See Rokeya, *Padmarag*, especially chapter 14, in Quadir 345-358. For a discussion of Rokeya’s position on communalisation, see Datta 216-18.

²⁹ First published in *Moajjin*, August-September 1904, reprinted in Quadir.

In her subsequent writing, Rokeya focused increasingly on the problem of women's culpability in their own continued subordination to men, and the need to encourage a desire for self-reliance in women. As Rokeya saw it, the lack of opportunities for engaging in any meaningful activity produced a state of permanent idleness among women, and fed their dependence on men. Rokeya's critique of women's "mental enslavement"³⁰ is particularly sharp when she discusses the importance of jewellery in a woman's life – a theme she had touched upon already in an essay published in 1903³¹ to produce a veritable furore, but proceeds to develop further in "Amader Abanati." To quote her,

And our beloved jewellery – these are [nothing but]... badges of slavery. [P]risoners wear iron shackles... we [lovingly] wear chains made of gold and silver.... And how eager women are for [these signs of bondage]! As if life's happiness and enrichment depend solely on them.... No matter how destructive alcohol is, the alcoholic does not want to give it up. Likewise we feel proud when we bear these marks of slavery on our bodies.... (Rokeya, "Streejatir Abanati," Quadir 11-12)

Rokeya's comments drew angry responses – many of them from women – labelling her as misguided, almost anti-feminine.³² And indeed, taken in isolation, her vitriolic attacks of women's love for jewellery may seem somewhat extreme. But a closer look reveals that her critique was in fact anticipating something of the late twentieth century western feminist critique of the impossibility of questioning masculine rule – i.e. a husband's *god-given* sexual claims on the wife's body – based on perceived notions of essential differences between the sexes, and the "natural subjection" of women, bolstered in turn by religious texts. Her attacks on women's love of jewellery should, therefore, be read as a critique of what she thought was a sign of their *willing* submission to masculine rule – i.e. their husbands' unquestioned access to and control over their bodies.

Note also that Rokeya's criticism is directed at a certain normative vision of femininity – docile, inactive and ultimately serving to strengthen male dominance both at home and in the world – that was underwritten by middle/upper class privilege.³³ In my reading, Rokeya's focus on jewellery may indeed be suggestive of a complex understanding of gender as "a constitutive

³⁰ In "Ardhangi," Rokeya wrote: "I have discussed mental slavery [of women]." Quadir 26-27.

³¹ Rokeya, "Alankar or Badges of Slavery," *Mahila* (April-June, 1903).

³² See for instance the responses in *Mahila* (July-August, 1903) by a number of Hindu/Brahmo women; S.A. al-Musavi, "Abanati Prasange," *Nabanoor* (September-October, 1904), and Nausher Ali Khan Eusufji, "Ekei Ki Bale Abanati?" *Nabanoor* (October-November, 1904).

³³ It seems that Rokeya was aware of the different experiences of women in other classes. See for instance the following comment: "... even in the workplace a man's labour is worth more, woman's labour is sold cheap." Rokeya, cited in Quadir 21.

element of social relationships” – an understanding that is typically ascribed to late twentieth century feminist thinking (Scott 41-42).

No other Muslim author, either before or after Rokeya, addressed these thorny issues quite as openly as she did. Indeed, as one commentator pointed out, fifty years after Rokeya’s death, no contemporary Hindu/Brahmo woman is known to have written such powerfully critical essays.³⁴ Even those authors who were committed to women’s “awakening” in that era, did not quite wish for the kind of critical consciousness that Rokeya embodied, or for the self-reliance that she already advocated for women in the very first decade of the twentieth century,³⁵ when she wrote,

We have to establish that [we are not slaves]. To achieve equality with men we will do whatever is needed of us. If we have to earn [our own]... livelihood... we will do that also.... Why should we not earn? Do we lack hands, or feet, or intelligence? What don’t we have?... Educate the daughters and let them join the [paid workforce]... let them earn their own food and clothing. (Rokeya, “Streejatir Abanati,” Quadir 21)

And while Rokeya often defined independence for women as equality with men, her work is also suggestive at times of a desire to see women as both self-respecting and truly independent of men, in thought and deed – yet another feature that separated her reform vision from that of most of her contemporaries.³⁶

Finally, it is useful to remember that Rokeya’s world view was a complex outcome of many influences, including her critical appraisal of the kind of “privilege” and token freedom that a new, more benevolent order of male dominance brokered/allowed in the lives of contemporary elite Hindu/Brahmo or Parsi women.³⁷ The specificity of her approach to women’s subordination and its possible solutions thus cannot be explained simply in terms of her frustrations as a *pardanasheen* Muslim woman, as both her Hindu/Brahmo contemporaries and even recent scholarly work have suggested (Ray 75-77).

³⁴ Shibnarayan Ray, “Bangalir Atmajignasha,” *Purogami*, (February 16, 1979), cited in Akhtar & Bhowmick 5.

³⁵ Akhtar and Bhowmick 3-6. See also, Amin 108.

³⁶ The clearest enunciation of this desire can be found in Rokeya’s *Sultana’s Dream* (1905) and her novel *Padmarag*, written in 1902 but published in the mid-1920s. See Quadir 293-428. For discussions of the novel, see Murshid 149-152; Amin 110.

³⁷ Parsis are Zoroastrian descendants of Persians who fled to India in the wake of the Islamic conquest of Persia in the 7th century. They were among the early modernising and westernised groups in the subcontinent. Rokeya discussed the “token freedom” of Parsi women in “Ardhangi,” cited in Quadir 27. See also her critique of Mankumari Basu, a renowned female intellectual of that time, in “Griha,” also in Quadir 63.

In the 1920s, the debates over the “condition of women” increasingly came to centre on the intersecting issues of seclusion vs. *parda* and the need for formal education for Muslim women. Even the most conservative male writers thought that some Islamic and traditional education was “necessary” in order to set women free from their “misery,” and help “restore happiness and peace” in Muslim households.³⁸

There were others who saw seclusion (*abarodh*) as the single most significant impediment to the spread of education among Muslim women, and hence inimical to the very task of building a nation.³⁹ But even these writers would typically distinguish between the practice of *abarodh* (the actual physical confinement of women within the home) and *parda*, defined generally as the “preservation of women’s decency and dignity”⁴⁰ and, at times more specifically, as the use of concealing attires such as the *borkeha* (veiling gown) or the *chador* (shawl) in public.⁴¹ Armed with the conviction that men and women were inherently unequal and hence could never have “equal rights,” most writers proposed programmes that rarely went beyond the kind of tokenism that Rokeya had cautioned against, almost two decades before such debates gained momentum among Bengali Muslims. To quote her:

... [It] is true that seclusion among Parsi women has ended, but has that ended their... [dependence on men]? Of course not... they are just as inanimate as they were before. When men kept them in the *antahpur* [inner quarters] they stayed there. And when men have forced them... to come out... they have come out of *parda*. What is women’s achievement in this? Such [token] opposition to *parda* is never praiseworthy. (Rokeya, “Ardhangi,” Quadir 27)

In Rokeya’s understanding, seclusion was a symptom of women’s subordination, not necessarily a cause. Therefore, simply abolishing the practice without making access to adequate education and the opportunity to work for a living available to women might help men in their quest for a “liberal/modern” self-image and adequately “modern” companions, but it would achieve precious little in terms of helping women gain economic and psychological independence, or self-respect.

Men were not the only ones reluctant to endorse the kind of far-reaching changes in the normative definition of women’s place in society that Rokeya

³⁸ F.M. Abdul Hakim Bikrampur, “Nari Samasya,” *Saogat* (1927), in Akhtar & Bhowmick 17. Note that although this article appeared in the *Saogat* – a periodical known for its explicitly liberal stance – Bikrampur was seen as a “conservative” writer. Hossein, “Prekshapat,” 17.

³⁹ See Monir 218-246, especially the article “Bangali Musalman” by S. Wajed Ali 240; Nasiruddin 496-498.

⁴⁰ Monir 231.

⁴¹ Mohammad Sahidullah, “Abhibhashan,” cited in Monir 224-225.

was proposing; many Muslim women who publicly expressed their thoughts at that time also seemed reluctant to imagine gender reforms that transcended the prescribed needs of the community or nation or went against the prescription of companionate marriages. The following excerpt from a public speech by the celebrated novelist Nurunnessa Khatun Bidyabinodini offers a useful reminder not to read women's entry into the public sphere automatically as examples of resistance to existing structures:

Perhaps some people will wonder – Are... [educated women] going to gallivant around... in the name of social improvement, or suffused by the light of... women's Franchise pretend to be men and knock at office-doors in... [search of] a living? No, I did not come here today to give you such inventive advice. Rather, it occurs to me that we have to get down to work with the firm belief that education is not for money.... Women's education... is surely indispensable.... An educated woman's *son* can never be ignorant... [If this idea] is instilled in us, then our improvement is inevitable.... I am not calling on my *swajatiya* [Muslim/Bengali] sisters to educate themselves to earn degrees. All I wish to say is that they should not stay completely ignorant. (Emphasis added)⁴²

In other words, Nurunnessa's reasons for advocating women's education – to be good mothers, especially to their *sons*, and adequate companions to men – are defined strictly in terms of the idea of women as support systems, albeit formidable ones, for men and their community/nation(s). As her somewhat caustic references above to both women's struggle for franchise and their attempts to enter the paid workforce indicates, she, like many of her contemporary Hindu and Muslim writers, was deeply uneasy with the possibility of women outgrowing their dependence on men.

Of course, a few women did join Rokeya in advocating wage-work as a means to self-reliance for women. Ayesha Ahmad, for instance, wrote passionately in favour of women seeking gainful employment. Citing the example of western women in the professions, Ahmed argued that girls earning their own living ought to be seen not as a slight to "family honour" but rather as a solution to "economic problems."⁴³ A few other maverick women adamantly upheld the idea of women's independence, braving much social opprobrium for both what they wrote, and the choices they made in their personal lives. Most notably among them were Faziltunnessa, who ignored contemporary social conventions to become the first Muslim woman to study

⁴² Presidential address, Bengali Moslem Mahila Sangha, published in *Saogat* (January-February, 1927). See also Akhtar and Bhowmick 109-14.

⁴³ Ayesha Ahmed, "Muslim Samajer Unnatir Antaray," *Saogat* (August-September, 1929), cited in Amin 207.

in Dhaka University, and eventually travelled abroad for further studies. Or poet Mahmuda Khatun Siddiqua, who refused to acknowledge a marriage forced upon her in her childhood, choosing instead an independent existence outside the bounds of both marriage and *parda*. Or Samsunnahar Mahmud, who battled the conservatism of her elders to pursue education and eventually became a well-known writer and activist, and Sufia Kamal, who never received formal education, but became one of the most revered poets/writers and political activists of twentieth century Bengal.⁴⁴ And while these women received support from a number of male intellectuals dedicated to the cause of “women’s liberation,” they were also acutely aware of the dangers of women’s protest against men being appropriated within a male liberal discourse of reforms and a politics of incremental accommodation within an overall structure of male domination. As Sufia Kamal rather tersely put it in a letter to the editor of *Saogat* in 1929,

All the essays [by women these days]... [forcefully express] women’s hatred for men; and these writings are being published in male-edited periodicals themselves! I am not inclined to complain about you to you.⁴⁵

Or as Mahmuda Khatun Siddiqua cautioned a few years later, women “... must have the ability to earn [a living] – so that... men... [do] not get the idea that without [them]... women have no other options.”⁴⁶ For these women, clearly influenced by Rokeya’s ideals, education was not just a means to greater self-expression for women, but an indispensable tool in women’s search for economic self-sufficiency, independence and, ultimately, dignity.

Conclusion

It is true that the main impetus for liberal reforms among Muslims – indeed among any community – in colonial India in the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries stemmed undoubtedly from the perceived need of men of a slowly emerging professional middle class for companionate wives and adequate mothers (Rouse 52; Minault 62; Ali xiv). It is also important to acknowledge that such reform agendas brought welcome changes to the lives of some women. But, in the final analysis, in these reform movements, it was still men who “... remained the actors: it was they who granted women education; they who were called upon to be generous to women (Metcalf 11; Majeed 136, 151).⁴⁷ While in Bengal, too, it was the middle class that was at the helm of

⁴⁴ For informative discussions of these and other contemporary women writers see Akhtar and Bhowmick.

⁴⁵ Sufia Kamal, Personal letter, in Akhtar and Bhowmick 21, 230.

⁴⁶ Mahmuda Khatun Siddiqua, “The Present Responsibilities of Women,” *Moajjin* (1932), cited in Akhtar and Bhowmick 182-83.

⁴⁷ For a different reading, see Lambert-Hurley, “Fostering Sisterhood.”

liberal reform movements; however, as we have seen above, here it was women themselves who were sometimes at the forefront of reform initiatives most immediately relevant to women. Consequently, the objectives and the scope of the reforms proposed, although not always implemented, were perhaps more far-reaching at times than what a male-centric desire for suitable wives and mothers, which seemed to dominate attempts at “gender reforms” among the north-Indian *shurafa*, would have allowed for. It is indeed shameful that the criticism and protest registered by the work of a handful of courageous women – Rokeya undoubtedly foremost among them – a hundred years ago in Bengal against male domination continue to be so relevant in the subcontinent today.

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