

Commemorating Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Contextualising her Work in South Asian Muslim Feminism

Md. Mahmudul Hasan¹
International Islamic University Malaysia

Abstract

Colonial Muslim South Asia had two leading cultural centres: Bengal and North India. As part of the far-reaching reformist movement during the colonial period and beyond, intellectual work from these two places included a powerful segment of feminist writing which has remained the harbinger of the women's rights movement among Muslims of this region. It is important to give research attention to South Asian Muslim writers, many of whom have been marginalised mainly because of the dominance of, and sometimes overriding and disproportionate focus on, their Hindu counterparts. Against this background, this article discusses the life, incredible commitment, sacrifice and feminist accomplishments of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932). It will also contextualise her ideas in the broader South Asian Muslim feminist tradition.

Keywords

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, South Asian literature, patriarchy, South Asian Muslim feminism, Islamic feminism, Muslim women writers

Introduction

Muslim women of various socioeconomic backgrounds have a glorious past in the South Asian subcontinent. In known history, it dates back to the reign of Razia Sultana (1205-40) who ruled most parts of the region from 1236 to 1240 and encountered stiff opposition from the male power structure mainly because of her gender. Then Muslim women's role and status witnessed a spectacular rise during the Mughal period (1556-1707) in which women's education was encouraged, and their engagement in public life and in major responsibilities, recognised. As a result, they rose to high esteem and there was a galaxy of successful women, such as: the poet and author of *Humayun Nama*, Gulbadan Banu Begum (1523-1603); the unofficial stateswoman, Hamida Banu Begum

¹ Md. Mahmudul Hasan is Assistant Professor of English at International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). He did a PhD in feminist comparative literature (University of Portsmouth, 2007) and taught at Dhaka University before joining IIUM. He was Postdoctoral Fellow at Heidelberg University (2009-2010). His research interests span South Asian literature, gender studies, twentieth-century and contemporary British literature, and Islam and literature. He has published in *South Asia Research*, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* and *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*.

(1527-1604); the regent Maham Anga (d. 1562); the influential Hira Kunwar (also known as Mariam uz-Zamani [1542-1623]); the warrior and “Invincible Lady of Ahmadnagar,” Chand Bibi (1550-99); Mehrunnisaa (famously known as Queen Nur Jahan [1577-1645]); Arjumand Banu (widely renowned as Mumtaz Mahal [1593-1631]); Jahanara Begum (1614-81); the poet Roshanara Begum (1617-71); and the Sufi poet, Zebunnisa (1638-1702). All of them wielded huge political or cultural influence during Mughal rule, and they and other contemporary influential Muslim women, such as Aisan Daulat Begam and her daughter Qutlugh Nigar Khanum (d. 1505), “respectively the maternal grandmother and mother of Babar” (Mukherjee, 12), Shah Begam (d. 1605) and Zinatunnisa (1644-1721) are established figures, especially in the normative historical accounts of Mughal India.²

However, their successors, Muslim women of British India are largely forgotten and “simply disappear from public discourse,” as during the colonial period their Hindu sisters remained “constantly the focus of debates between the Hindu orthodoxy, the British government, the reformists, and later the nationalists throughout the nineteenth century” (Sarkar, “Muslim Women” 226).³ It seems that the end of Muslim rule, caused by the seizure of power by the British administration in eighteenth-century India, metaphorically cast a pall of dust and smoke over the achievement of Muslim women who are generally portrayed as “passive victims” of (un)Islamic patriarchy (Sarkar, “Muslim Women” 226). Viewing Muslim women with a distinctly orientalist paternalism, the dominant narrative has portrayed them as “invisible,” “the backward other” and “silent victims” and distinguished their Hindu counterparts as “liberated and modern” (Sarkar, *Visible Histories* 49). In other words, the hypothetical backwardness of Muslim women has been used as a marker of the supposed forwardness of Hindu women. Elora Shehabuddin observes that anti-Muslim biases have actually “plagued histories of late colonial Bengal,” as a result of which there is “a manufactured blindness to Muslim women’s own writings and thoughts” (1). An example may make this clearer.

The 25 October 1986 issue of the Bombay-based prestigious *Economic and Political Weekly*, that presumably bears “witness to the quantitative and qualitative strides women studies research has made in India in recent years” (Krishnaraj 3), published Srabashi Ghosh’s “Birds in a Cage: Changes in Bengali

² For further details on the roles and contributions of illustrious Mughal Muslim women, see Soma Mukherjee, *Royal Mughal Ladies and Their Contributions* (2001); Gouri Srivastava, *The Legend Makers: Some Eminent Muslim Women of India* (2003); and Abraham Eraly, *The Mughal World: Life in India’s Last Golden Age* (2007).

³ However, women like Azizunnissa Begum (1780-1857), the famous triumvirate (the Begums of Bhopal) – Sikandar Begum (1819-68), Shah Jahan Begum (1838-1901) and Sultan Jahan Begum (1858-1930) – and Bi Amman (1852-1924) are widely known as historical figures.

Social Life as Recorded in Autobiographies by Women.”⁴ Contrary to what the title suggests, the article includes Bengali Hindu women autobiographers only and insinuates that the writer equates Bengal with Hinduism and vice versa. She provides a long list of women autobiographers, and begins thus:

The first Bengali autobiography “My Life” was published in 1876. The title page described the authoress, Rasasundari Devi, as a religious lady and a devoted housewife. Then came “My Story” by Binodini Dasi (1912), followed by the “Autobiography of Devi Saradasundari” (1913), “Tales from the Past” by Nistarini Devi (1913), “Tales of Yore” by Prasannamayee Devi (1917), “Amiyabala’s Diary” (1920), “Memories of My Life” by Sudakshina Sen (1932), “Leaves Shed from Life” by Sarala Devi Chawdhurani (1944), “Clanging Chains” by Bina Das (1947), “Diary of a House-Wife” by Kailasbasini Devi (1952) and another book by the same name by Manoda Devi (1955). These were succeeded by Ginadanandini Devi’s “Days Gone By” (1956), “Memories from the Past” by Shanta Nag (1970), “With Regards to All” by Kananbala Devi (1973), “Ferrying Down the Memory Stream” by Sahana Devi (1978), “They Call Me Back Even Now” by Shova Ghosh (1981), and “Tales from Those Days” by Manikuntala Sen (1982) one after another. (88)

Not a single Muslim woman writer is included in this impressive catalogue of Bengal women autobiographers. Truly, the genre of autobiography was quite popular among Bengali Hindu women writers (Hasanat 36), but it will be wrong to surmise that there were no Bengali Muslim women autobiographers during the period Ghosh covers in her article. As Sarkar puts it:

Recent research, however, reveals that by the beginning of the twentieth century, a fair number of Muslim women in British India were writing. Their contributions in the form of women’s journals, articles in many leading periodicals of that time, short stories, poems, autobiographies, travel accounts... have been considerable. (“Muslim Women” 227)

Nawab Faizunnesa’s (1834-1903) autobiographical allegory *Rupjajal* was published from Dhaka in the same year (1876) when Rasasundari Devi’s *Amar Jibon (My Life)* came out from Calcutta (presently Kolkata). Many of Faizunnesa’s successors wrote autobiography, or their writings contain significant autobiographical elements. For example, much of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s work, especially *Aborodhbasini* (1931), is full of autobiographical narratives. Mrs. M. Rahman’s (1885-1926) *Ma O Meye* (serialised in *Saugat* in 1930) and Akhtar Mahal Syeda Khatun’s (1901-28) *Niyantrita* are

⁴ This article was later included in Alice Thorner and Maithreyi Krishnaraj, ed. *Ideals, Images and Real Lives: Women in Literature and History*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2000, 37-66.

autobiographical novels. Mamlukul Fatema Khanam's (1894–1957) *Soptorshi*, Nurunnesa Khatun's (1894-1974) *Swapnadrasta*, Khairunnesa Khatun's (1870-1912) "Amader Shikshar Antaray," Razia Khatun Chowdhurani's (1907-34) collection of short stories *Pathar Kabini* and Shamsunnahar Mahmud's (1908-64) *Nazrulke Jemon Dekhechi* undeniably include innumerable autobiographical sketches. However, none of these Muslim authors is given any space in the *Economic and Political Weekly* article. The scope of this essay does not allow me to undertake a full-scale discussion on Bengal Muslim women autobiographers. However, despite the fact that the representation of Muslim women in literary history is marginal and inadequate, the above examples suggest that "the history of [Bengal] Muslim women's literary production is as old as that of their Hindu counterparts" (Hasan, "Review" 66). Regrettably, this comparable Muslim tradition is not given its rightful place in dominant South Asian literary history.

Like many other Bengali Muslim women writers, Rokeya was neglected or underrated by literary scholars for a long time mainly for the following reasons. Firstly, as postcolonial feminist scholars argue, until recently feminist literary criticism celebrated western heroines and marginalised those from other cultural settings. Secondly, as discussed before, Bengal Muslim women writers are not given enough research attention because of the dominant representation of Hindu women writers by literary historians. For example, in her much circulated work *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (1986), Kumari Jayawardena does not mention Rokeya at all, even though she covers almost every major Hindu feminist writer of Bengal in the book.

Commemorating Rokeya

Given such a culture of neglect of Muslim women writers of colonial Bengal and beyond, it is important to discuss and highlight writers like Rokeya who made extraordinary contribution to the amelioration of women's position in society. In Muslim Bengal Rokeya has her predecessors and successors, but none of them challenged patriarchy on all fronts as successfully as she did.

As women in Rokeya's society were marginalised and doubly colonised because of their gender, Rokeya, like other women writers of colonial India, "was doubly 'Other' – as woman and as colonized person" (Tharu and Lalita, "Preface" xvii). Or, given the dominance of Hindu women writers, it can be said that she was triply Other: woman, colonised as well as being Muslim. In mainstream (white/western) feminist discourse, like many other feminist figures from non-western cultures, Rokeya was previously sidelined owing to her origin from a subaltern society. Barton puts the blame for this on "the prevalence of [the] English" language and the bias of "white" people against "non-white cultures" (106). But it is also true that Rokeya has not received due attention even in her own country. Jahan states: "No full-length critical evaluation of [Rokeya's] works... has appeared in Bangladesh.... So far, she has been

neglected by students and researchers alike” (*Inside Seclusion* x). Since Jahan made this remark in 1981, a number of works have been published on Rokeya’s life and works in Bangladesh and beyond, but they do not match the huge magnitude of the debt we owe to her.

In 1929 Sufia Kamal anticipated: “I have faith, however, that one day in the future society will recognize the value of [Rokeya’s] efforts, and scores of people will follow her in her footsteps” (qtd. in Akhtar 298). Indeed, Kamal’s anticipation has come true, as the following two comments explain the renewed attention Rokeya has received:

One of the editors [of *Women Writing in India*] had been teaching courses in Indian writing in English for several years, little suspecting that the... early twentieth [century] would hold such [a gem] as... Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s utopian fiction [*Sultana’s Dream*]. (Tharu and Lalita, “Preface” xv)

In an almost unplanned, random search, I immersed myself in writings by women, preferring to look at indigenous literature rather than at Anglo-Indian works. It was in this process that I encountered a somewhat slim and worn-out volume, *Motichoor*, volume 1, by R.S. Hossain. I knew of her as the founder of the Sakhawat Memorial Girls’ School in Calcutta where my sister had once studied. I picked it up, and started reading. I was certainly not prepared for what I found. In truth, I was amazed, almost shocked. How could a Bengali woman, a Muslim woman, in the first decade of the [twentieth] century have written like this? More importantly, what had made her think like this? It was revolutionary thinking even by the standards of the late twentieth century. The more I read, the more fascinated I became. (Ray ix)

Undertaking a study of Rokeya and investigating her work invariably holds critical surprises for a researcher. This is not only for the superior literary merits of her work, but also for her incredible courage and resilience to struggle for women’s emancipation against a material society that was not ready to respond to feminist concerns positively. Moreover, the long chain of collaboration between the coloniser and colonised patriarchy (Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 301) rendered Rokeya’s toil even tougher. The “intermixed violence of colonialism and of patriarchy” (Loomba 222) further enforced the “subaltern” status of women and re-enforced the customary “gender-systems” in operation, and the coloniser turned a blind eye to the oppression of women by local patriarchy (Spivak, “Diasporas Old and New” 255). Women in general were subjected to subordination by common culturally defined and enforced patterns of restrictions, transmitted by a shared – between imperialism and local patriarchy – gender ideology and by a power network that had its own gender regime. Gender ideology was to a great extent part of the more general ideology in the social formation. Hence, it was quite challenging for Rokeya to liberate

the colonially and patriarchally enslaved minds of women and to establish their rights.

A few days after Rokeya's death, a memorial service was held at Calcutta's Albert Hall where the Muslim intellectual stalwart Kazi Abdul Wadud (1894-1970) asked the audience in reference to her, "If such intelligence, culture, and independence could have been reared in a person who grew up and lived in the dark confines of the home with its many restrictions and suppressions, what have Bengali Muslims to be fearful about?" (Tharu 342). However, afterwards Rokeya's work remained largely forgotten for a long time. Critical attention to her started mainly in 1973, 41 years after her death, when the Bangla Academy in Dhaka published *Rokeya Rachanabali* (Complete Works of Rokeya), compiled and edited by the illustrious poet and critic Abdul Quadir (1906-84). This major publication facilitated research on Rokeya. Before 1973, the only remarkable works on Rokeya were Shamsunnahar Mahmud's *Rokeya Jiboni* (The Life of Rokeya [1935]) and Moshfeka Mahmud's *Potre Rokeya Porichiti* (Rokeya in Letters [1965]). These two works, produced by Rokeya's family successors, provide biographical details about her, and that too inadequately.

Today, Rokeya is an iconic figure in Bangladesh and is widely acknowledged as one of the feminist foremothers. However, as mentioned before, the tendency to neglect her in particular and other Bengal Muslim women writers in general is far from over. While she is now recognised as a Bangla writer, her English works are still not given their rightful places in South Asian literature in English. Like Rokeya, many other South Asian Muslim writers are neglected in this literary tradition.⁵ Having established the importance and need of commemorating Rokeya, in what follows, I will provide aspects of her life and work which will reveal the enormous hardships she endured, the exemplary courage she showed and the personal sacrifice she made in her struggle for women's rights and societal betterment.

Family Background and Education

It is widely believed that this leading feminist writer, political activist and educationist of Muslim Bengal of the early twentieth century was born in the village of Pairabond in Rangpur in what is now Bangladesh, on 9 December 1880. Although she is popularly known as Begum Rokeya in Bangladesh and critically as Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain in literary discussion, she mainly used (Mrs.) R.S. Hossein, Roqyiah Khatun or simply Khatoon as her name. While communicating with family members, she wrote Rokeya (in Bangla) or in some other cases, simply Ruku depending on the nearness of the relationship.

⁵ For further details, see Md. Mahmudul Hasan, "Marginalisation of Muslim Writers in South Asian Literature: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's English Works," *South Asia Research* 32.3 (November 2012): 179-97.

However, she used Roqyiah Khatun (in English) in her letter to a certain Khan Bahahur. So it can be assumed that she spelled her name as Roqyiah in English. The lack of clarity about her name is mainly because, like women their names were also thought to be *purdanasin* (secluded/private) at that time. Women's complete names were generally recorded during marriage registration (Rokeya, *Aborodbbasini* 383, 389). If her marriage registration document can be found, it may be possible to know her exact, full name, beyond doubt.

Her father, Zahiruddin Mohammad Abu Ali Haidar Saber, was a zamindar and knew seven languages. Not much is known about her mother, Rahatunnessa Sabera Chowdhurani, who maintained strict Indian-style purdah that was practiced across cultures and religions of South Asia. Rokeya⁶ had three brothers: Mohammad Ibrahim Abul Asad Saber, Khalilur Rahman Abu Zaigam Saber and Israil Abu Hafs Saber. The first two prospered in life through educational attainment and government service, while detailed information about her third brother is unavailable as he died prematurely. Rokeya's two sisters were Karimunnessa, arguably the first known modern Muslim woman poet of Bengal, and Humaira. Rokeya's uncle Abu Yousha Mohammad Saber had two daughters and one son: Maryam Rashid, Mohammad Abu Yousha Saber and Mohsena Rahman. Rokeya's earlier ancestors had migrated to India from Tabriz in Iran in the sixteenth century.

Although the learned Zahiruddin Saber was very particular about his sons' education, he did not give his daughters any formal learning chiefly for the fear of social stigma and obloquy associated with female education (Hasan, "Marginalisation of Muslim" 193). In India at that time "girls with education were regarded as being as abominable as those without purdah" (Hossain, "The Begum's Dream" 6). Social mythologies against female education, child marriage and purdah were widespread among both Muslims and Hindus, which rendered their formal institutions of learning "devoid of female students" (Srivastava 3). Moreover, Muslims were subjected to prejudices and discriminations in colonial India, which badly affected, among other things, women's education. There was no proper educational institution for Bengal Muslim women at that time. The educationalist and law member of the Governor-General's Council, John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune established an educational institution for girls, Bethune School, in Calcutta in 1849 (later developed into the Bethune College in 1879); but access for Muslim girls was restricted until 1885. Initially known as "Hindu Female School" (Ghosh 91), it was set up exclusively for educating middle-class Hindu pupils (Sarkar, *Visible Histories* 237). The first time Muslim women's education truly had government support on an equal footing with their Hindu counterparts was towards the end

⁶ As per the Bengali custom, I have referred to the author by her first name, Rokeya, throughout the article.

of British rule, in 1939, when Lady Brabourne College was established “mainly – but not exclusively – for Muslim girls” (Amin xiii). It was open to students of all religions, but some reservations were kept for Urdu-speaking girls most of whom were Muslims (Chakravartty 124).

Rokeya’s father permitted for his daughters only reading the Qur’an in Arabic. Conversely, his two older sons, “after receiving privileged education at a local school, studied at the elitist St. Xavier’s College in Calcutta, which later on helped them enter the civil service” (Hasan, “Marginalisation of Muslim” 195). Though 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 (1855-1926), and English from her brother Ibrahim Saber. Shamsunnahar Mahmud states that once Ibrahim held a big, illustrated English book before Rokeya and said, “Little sister, if you can learn this language, all the doors to the treasures of the world will be open for you” (11). Sometimes Ibrahim and Rokeya had their “tutorial session” late at night in order to maintain maximum secrecy (Jahan, “Rokeya” 39). Rokeya rightly dedicates her only novel *Padmarag* (1924) to him.

Karimunnessa’s self-education was even more arduous, as she had to study in stricter secrecy, under close monitoring and stringent conditions. Being the eldest in the family, she did not have the advantage of having any older brother who would support her education. Upon discovery of her secret personal studies on one occasion, she was married off without delay when she was not even fifteen, fearing that education would hamper her prospect of marriage and that it “would corrupt her and prevent her becoming a good housewife” (Barton 107). However, the indomitable Karimunnessa continued personal learning in her marital family mainly by reading the books of her husband’s school-going younger brothers, and encouraged Rokeya’s education in the face of opposition from close relatives. Rokeya commemorates Karimunnessa’s literary feats by penning an essay on her, “Lukano Ratan” (Hidden Gem).

After her marriage in 1896, Rokeya benefited from the scholarship of her widower husband Sakhawat Hossain, who had been to England for higher studies after being educated locally. Sakhawat’s encouragement and official connections widened her exposure to western knowledge. Moreover, he 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.

Literary, Political and Educational Activism

Rokeya had to work on three fronts simultaneously: literary, political and educational. The publication of the essay “Pipasha” in the Calcutta-based *Nabaprabha* in 1902 marked the inauguration of her literary career. Despite her tremendous creative talents, insights and energies, we notice a gap in her literary production from 1909 to 1914. During this period, she could not focus on writing, presumably because of multiple griefs caused by the deaths of her parents, children and husband. Her life was full of trials and tribulations. During her short-lived married life, she had to look after her much older, ailing husband and bear the demise of her “two baby daughters” at their early age, “one at the age of five months and the other at four months old” (Quayum xxiii). The following lines she wrote to a certain Mr. Yasin sharply describe the suffering of her life:

You need not feel so keenly about me, I do not repent for leaving Bhagalpur, but at times I feel some sort of yearning to see the grave of my husband and the tiny graves of my babies. But never mind. I am brave enough to bear my grief. (“Letter to Md. Yasin” 504)

Such agony in personal life was compounded by the misconducts she received from her step-daughter and step-son-in-law owing to family disputes over inheritance. Moreover, she had to employ utmost efforts to establish her school. These may have been the reasons why Rokeya could not produce works between 1909 and 1914. However, apart from this break of continuity in literary production, we find Rokeya relentlessly writing for a whole period of three decades beginning in 1902 and ending with her death, and producing foundational literary works of different genres and subject matters, predominantly women’s issues. Her last essay “Narir Adhikar” (Women’s Rights) was left unfinished on her table on the night she died of heart attack, and it was posthumously published in the magazine *Mabe-nau* in 1957 (25 years after her death).

In British India at that time, Muslims had some political and educational organisations like the All India Muslim League, the Central Mohammedan Association and the All India Educational Conference. All of these were chiefly run by and 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 was based in Aligarh, about 800 miles away from Rokeya’s Calcutta. With Rokeya’s initiative and tireless work, Anjuman’s Calcutta branch was launched in 1916.

It was tough for Rokeya to bring cocooned women out of seclusion, to motivate and persuade them to appreciate the importance of becoming

involved in Anjuman activities. Bengal women were very inexperienced in and unfamiliar with organisational work. Once Rokeya brought some women to an Anjuman meeting, and after its adjournment they charged her with talking them into a place where they did not see any “meeting!” Rokeya then managed to get them realise that what they had been doing and discussing in a group was called meeting (Mahmud 51).

Rokeya’s tenacious work made Muslim women aware and brought them from the darkness of their domestic prison to Anjuman meetings. Consequently, later the All India Muslim Educational Conference opened its Bengal chapter – the Bengal Women’s Education Conference – of which Rokeya was an important member. She was elected the President of one of its sessions in its 1926 conference and gave a valuable speech.⁷ Rokeya’s dream about the Anjuman finds a fictional representation in *Padmarag* in which she depicts the Tarini Bhaban (the House of the Rescuer), a refuge centre for the oppressed women that houses the Nari-Klesh Nibarani Samiti (Society for the Prevention of Women’s Sufferings). Tarini Bhaban gives shelter to a group of female social outcasts who make a world of their own on its premises.

The focus of Rokeya’s activism was the promotion of female education. In British India, the social setting was so hostile to female education that even the giant Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-98) did not dare to include it in his powerful movement for Muslims’ education, thinking that such a move would frustrate the ultimate objective of their advancement. But Rokeya did not give in; she waged a persistent battle for female education, braving the social norms and barriers that stood between women and the prevailing intellectual culture.

It is important to note that Rokeya raised the issue of female education at a turning point in the history of Muslim Bengal. After a long period of colonial oppression, Muslims realised its economic, political and cultural detriments. Under the leadership of Sayyid Ahmad Khan, they began to work to end this deplorable situation. But Rokeya detects a serious flaw in the social therapy, as Muslims were all busy setting up different organisations and launching different movements, while the most important programme – female education – was missing. She makes an unconventional, pathological analysis of Muslim society’s backwardness and questions, “Can a community, that has locked half of its population in the prison of ignorance and seclusion, keep pace with the progress of other communities that have advanced female education on a full par with men?” (Rokeya, “Bongio Nari-Shikhwa” 225).⁸ She draws the attention of the Muslim community to a historical fact that there was a time when

⁷ The speech titled “Dhongser Pathe Bongio Mussalman” (Bengal Muslims on the Way to Decline [1931]) was first published in the Calcutta-based monthly *Mohammadi*, Jaistha 1338 (Bangla year). It is included in Abdul Quadir, ed. *Rokeya Rachanabali*, 244-47.

⁸ All English translations from Rokeya’s Bangla works in the essay are by me.

Muslim religious leaders were opposed to English education, the bitter harvest of which they were currently reaping (Rokeya, "God Gives" 477). That imprudent stance of the Muslims denied them access to a vast treasure of knowledge and the resultant prosperity.

Rokeya warns the Muslim community that if they do not heed her call for female education, they will come to a similar disadvantageous end. For example, the children of other communities were being brought up by educated mothers and the Muslim children, by uneducated ones; as a result, the whole generation lagged behind. She says, "Let me also venture to say that it is so; for children born of well-educated mothers must necessarily be superior to Muslim children, who are born of illiterate and foolish mothers" (Rokeya, "God Gives" 477). She also talks about men's interest in women's educational advancement. Men want to have their sons brave, valiant and bright; but, she argues, this will not happen if the mothers remain ignorant.

Upon starting her school, she became extremely preoccupied with it mentally and physically. Towards the end of life, that hard work had a telling effect on her health. She walked around from door to door in order to collect students and persuade the guardians to send their daughters to the school. She assured them that she would personally take full responsibility of looking after and tutoring them and, what is more, they would not have to pay school fees or travel costs. In order to convince the parents and guardians, Rokeya ensured that the school carriage was fully covered, which made it look like a moving tent.

Rokeya did not believe in any disparity between the learning of men and women, which was highly revolutionary considering the material culture in which she launched her educational movement. Even the forward-looking Brahmins and Brahmos of colonial Bengal did not teach women much beyond socially accepted subjects. As Ghosh states:

Even long after women's education was accepted by the society, women were considered inferior to men in intelligence. They were not given the opportunity to study science. Perhaps it was thought what was not needed for household chores such as cooking, raising of children, knitting, writing letters or keeping daily accounts were unnecessary for them. Sarala [Devi Chawdhurani] and Shanta [Nag] were students of Bethune College which was founded in 1849 exclusively for girls. No science subject was taught there. (92)

The great Hindu social reformist philosopher Keshub Chandra Sen's (1838-84) Victoria College (also known as the Institute for the Higher Education of Native Ladies) followed the same lead and did not include science in its curriculum. He "felt that education was intended to make the woman more

adept at running the household” (de Souza xiii). Sunity Devee, Sen’s daughter, states that her father:

did not believe in the importance of university degrees; he maintained that for a woman to be a good wife and a good mother is far better than to be able to write M.A. or B.A. after her name. Therefore, only things likely to be useful to them were taught to the girls who attended the Victoria College. (21)

Rokeya did not believe in any disparity or discipline differences between male and female education and sought women’s access invariably to all branches of knowledge. She campaigned to make “chemistry, botany, horticulture, personal hygiene, health care, nutrition, physical education, gymnastics, and painting and other fine arts open to women” (Hasan, “Marginalisation of Muslim” 188). In *Sultana’s Dream*, she portrays Sister Sara as someone who is proficient in modern branches of knowledge such as history, politics, military strategy, education and science. In *Padmarag*, she depicts an ideal system of female education where almost all branches of learning – science, literature, geography, history, mathematics – are taught. Away from her imaginative world, in practical life it was not possible for her to implement all that she promoted through writing. However, for her Sakhawat Memorial Girls’ School, she formulated a “curriculum [that] included physical education, handicrafts, sewing, cooking, nursing, home economics, and gardening, in addition to regular courses such as Bangla, English, Urdu, Persian, and Arabic” (Jahan, “Rokeya” 42).

Rokeya’s Feminism

In countering patriarchal authority and in promoting women’s educational and civil rights, Rokeya does not follow an anti-male or anti-Islam stance. She satirises Muslim men, as they do not have any agenda to empower women who can potentially help them in reform and freedom movements. However, she does not demonstrate any syndrome of caricaturing all men while criticising those who are against women’s education and independence. She does not rest content with simply putting the blame on men; rather, she looks into the core of the problem to identify the areas women themselves need to address. Equally, she emphasises women’s role in the overall advancement of society. Addressing women, she writes:

In conclusion, I want to say that we are half of society. If we lag behind, how shall our society advance? If one leg of a person is fastened, how long will s/he go limping on the other? Our interest and men’s interest are one and the same.... For a child, both mother and father are equally needed. We [women] should possess comparable qualities so that we can go with them [men] abreast in both spiritual and material spheres.... In this world,

a nation whose men and women worked together reached the zenith of development. It is imperative that we [women] should be complementary partners of men, instead of being a burden for them. (Rokeya, *Motichur*, Vol. 1 21)

This is an example of Rokeya's gender-neutral approach. She is as caring for men as she is for women. She does not criticise men only for women's sufferings, as women themselves are also responsible for their plight. So they should shoulder equal or even greater responsibility to improve the status of the Muslim community. Rokeya wants to dismantle the gender binarism and proposes that both men and women should equally contribute to the advancement of society. She exposes and critiques unreservedly many extrinsic frivolities that women have acquired over time. To make women aware of their pitiable condition, Rokeya castigates them, "sometimes as a caring sister, sometimes as a well-wisher of society, and sometimes in a more detached and dispassionate way" (Hasan, "Indictment of Misogyny" 6).

Rokeya does not treat men simply as women's enemy. Instead of using disrespectful terms against men, she calls the adversaries of women's liberation "imprudent," as they want to exercise unquestioned authority over women and ignore the greater interest of society. Taking the same pragmatic, gender-neutral approach, she holds in respect sensible, gender egalitarian men who realise the cost society has to pay for the absence of female education and empowerment. She states:

I said it before that man and woman comprise one single body. So one cannot prosper leaving the other behind; and still I repeat the same truth and, if needed, will repeat a hundred times. Now my appeal to the brothers is that they should adorn their daughters with the adornment of knowledge, not simply with jewellery made of gold and gem. Reading a book can give so much pleasure that ten jewelleries can never give even one hundredth of that. So it is imperative that women be adorned with the drapery of knowledge. (*Motichur*, Vol. 1 44)

However, she is also very strong in denouncing men who regard women merely as dolls and chattels to possess and dispossess at will. In *Padmarag*, Zaynab's bold pronouncement reads:

They wanted my property, not me. Are we [women] earthen dolls that men would throw away and get back just as or when they wish? I want to show society that chance comes only once in life – not twice. You [men] spurn us and we shall lick your feet – those days are gone. I will rather devote my entire life in the service of Tarini Bhaban and thus promote women's causes. (*Padmarag* 356)

In *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya challenges the perceived superiority of men over women and exposes the hollowness of the male boastfulness of belonging to the world of work. She confines men within the four walls of the house by bringing about a role reversal in the feminist utopia. By incarcerating men in domestic seclusion, she puts women in political, military, economic, educational and scientific power, as they control all state machineries. Through this fictional "revenge,"⁹ Rokeya shows the huge potential of women and how it could be utilised for the social and political advancement of a nation. By depicting women's superior statesmanship, commitment and political judgment, she maintains that women could contribute better to the liberation of colonial India if their innate abilities and skills were developed, honed and utilised.

In the metaphorical stories "Gyanphal" and "Muktiphal," in *Motichur*, Vol. 2, Rokeya fictionalises India's colonial experience and the systematic dispossession of the indigenous people. In "Muktiphal," Kanganini – an allegory for colonised India – prioritises her sons and neglects her daughters. Her sons, though incompetent and ineffectual, evidently participate in a joint effort to restore the ailing Kanganini to health, that is, to rescue India from colonial control; whereas her daughters, though competent and effective, are not given any agency or active role. In the story, Shrimati addresses her brothers, saying: "Till you let us raise our heads, it will not be possible for you to secure strength [to liberate the country]" (Rokeya, *Motichur*, Vol. 2 163). In "Gyanphal," the colonisers are portrayed as traders who exploit the economic resources of India, allegorised as Kanaka Dwipa (the isle of gold), and violate boundaries of trust in their relations with the colonised. Kanaka Dwipa prospers only with the joint participation of men and women in administering its affairs. Rokeya leaves a moral in both the stories: in order to bring an end to the sufferings of colonised India and eventually to liberate it, men and women should work together and only then India as a nation and Muslims as a community will prosper.

Rokeya critiques the patriarchal, malestream interpretation of Islam and re-examines it in light of gender justice, and does not take the prevalent patriarchal notions of Islam as its norm. Her overly critical view of cultural Islam is actually against its malpractices not against the religion. She points her finger at those who consider themselves the custodians of Islam and abuse it to promote patriarchal authority at the expense of women's rights. She campaigns for the revival of true Islamic values:

In Arab society, where women were being oppressed and female infanticide was widespread, Prophet Muhammad came to their rescue. He not only promulgated some precepts but also set an example of how to

⁹ When Rokeya first showed the manuscript of *Sultana's Dream* to her husband, his first response after reading it in one go was that it was "A Terrible Revenge" on patriarchy.

treat women with respect. He showed how to love one's daughter by demonstrating his love to Fatima. 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, *Motichur*, Vol. 1 30)

The corpus of Rokeya's writings is directed to regaining women's rights which are accorded to them in Islamic law. Her clarion call to the Muslim male is to restore the actual teachings of Islam and to follow the Islamic principle of justice that ensures women's equal status in society. Such an approach earned her support and patronage from many Muslim intellectuals and political leaders. Some of the literary magazines and periodicals that published Rokeya's writings and supported her school in many capacities were: *The Mussalman*, *Mohammadi*, *Saugat*, *Al-Islam*, *Bangiya Mussalman Sahitya Patrika*, *Nabanoor*, *Mabe-nao*, *Dhumketu* and *The Muezzin*. These were largely owned or edited by Muslim men of her time. Rokeya's non-fictional reportage of extreme purdah practices, *Aborodbbasini* was first serialised in the Islamic scholar and political leader Mohammad Akram Khan's periodical *Mohammadi* between 1928 and 1930, and then it was published in the book form in 1931 by his son Mohammad Khairul Anam Khan. This suggests, in her reformist agendas and feminist activism, Rokeya got moral and logistic support from Islamic personalities. What is more, after she died on 9 December 1932, Mojibor Rahman's periodical *The Mussalman* (11 December 1932), and the *Mubammadi*, brought out special issues on her.

Contextualising Rokeya's Work

Rokeya had to begin her work from scratch. There was no vibrant indigenous, established feminist literary canon in Muslim Bengal to which she could relate herself. Although some Muslim women writers had written in the second half of the nineteenth century before Rokeya, they left a negligible amount of literary work, inadequate for her to follow any burgeoning female literary tradition. In Muslim Bengal, no one – before or after her – dealt with women's issues in equal or greater magnitude.

Rokeya's literary career belongs to the Rabindra Period in the history of Bangla literature. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) had a large literary following who benefited from his literary style. For example, Rokeya's junior contemporary Sufia Kamal (1911-99) attended sessions in Tagore's house and may have benefited from such interactions with him. She is also known to have written a long poem to celebrate one of his birthdays. But, unlike other Bengali writers, Rokeya is not known to have sent any writing to Rabindranath for his appreciation (Syed 91). So she was not influenced by Rabindra's imagination and spirituality. Her literary style is chiefly her own, befitting the demands of her feminist agendas. She was not predisposed towards the male-dominated

literary tradition; rather, she employed her own style to explore the female psyche and to describe its sufferings under patriarchy.

Rokeya had a number of Western acquaintances. For example, Lady Chelmsford, wife of then Governor-General and Viceroy of India, visited her school in 1917. Rokeya knew Annie Besant (1847-1933) whose speech on Islam and the Prophet Muhammad she translated into Bangla as “Noor-Islam,” included in *Motichur*, Vol. 2. Moreover, Sakhawat’s official rank provided her with wider access to Europeans, with whom she could interact and share ideas. For example, Mr. McPherson, the Commissioner of Bhagalpur and a friend of Sakhawat, read the draft of *Sultana’s Dream* and complimented it highly. Through these acquaintances and interactions, Rokeya may have been familiar with western feminist thoughts and movements. However, her feminism is very much indigenous and should be commemorated accordingly.

Rokeya and her feminist sisters in the Anjuman-i-Khawatin-i-Islam, like their Hindu counterparts in the All India Women’s Conference (AIWC), largely used their own cultural values to resist gender oppression and to right the wrongs done to women. They distanced themselves from “the movements of Western ‘feminists’ with their implied sexual antagonism” (Forbes 55). As mentioned before, the Aligarh-based Anjuman-i-Khawatin-i-Islam was founded in 1914 and Rokeya established its Calcutta branch in 1916. This strongly suggests that there were intellectual exchanges between Muslims in Bengal and those in North India. More importantly, this cue points to possible intercultural influences between the Muslim feminist writers of these two regions, which may have influenced the trajectory of Rokeya’s feminist work and ideas.

During the colonial period, as Muslim leaders including Sayyid Ahmad Khan in North India and Nawab Abdul Latif (1828-93) and Syed Amir Ali (1849-1928) in Bengal advanced Muslims’ causes, there was a feminist “subculture” in both regions – on literary and political fronts – that espoused gender egalitarianism, especially women’s education and advancement (Hasan, “Marginalisation of Muslim” 181). While in North India it was spearheaded by a host of writers and social reformers, in Bengal it took off in a real sense with the intellectual culture of Rokeya. They fought to facilitate female education and to remove women’s legal disabilities and other restrictions in family and social life. Both these feminist literary traditions put together, constitute a vibrant intellectual culture.

In North India, Nazir Ahmad (1836-1912) addressed the growing ignorance and misuse of religious doctrine and of Islam’s egalitarian message, and the neglect of Islamic laws that, far from negating them, uphold the basic rights of women. His *Mirat al-Urus* (1869) and *Banat un-Na’ash* (1872) are perhaps the earliest *qissas* (novels) in South Asian literature that promote female education. Like Ahmad, Altaf Husayn Hali (1837-1914) regards education for men and women “as necessarily simultaneous” (Minault, *Secluded Scholars* 56).

Ashraf Ali Thanawi (1863-1943) disapproves of equal educational opportunities for women and, somewhat like Hindu reformers such as Keshub Chandra Sen and the Brahmos discussed earlier, limits female education only to a set of religious behaviour. But, like Rokeya, Hali rejects any distinction between the education of men and women. His *Majalisunnissa* (1874) is an exposition of the socio-economic and religious benefits of female education. “One of the most outspoken of Muslim social reformers” (Minault, “Making invisible” 7), Sayyid Mumtaz Ali’s (1860-1935) *Huquq un-Niswan* (1898) is “an advocate of women’s rights in Islam in the late nineteenth century” (Minault, “Sayyid Mumtaz Ali” 147), a radical religious treatise on women’s rights and a quest to rectify gender inequality from an Islamic perspective.

As in Muslim Bengal, in North India there was also a vibrant journalistic tradition that promoted women’s causes and sustained the feminist movement that took root in Aligarh, Delhi, Lahore and Lucknow. Sayyed Ahmad Dehlvi’s Delhi-based *Akbbar un-Nissa*, Muhibb-I-Hussain’s Hyderabad-based *Mu’allim-i-Niswan*, Mumtaz Ali and Muhammadi Begum’s (1878?-1908) Lahore-based weekly periodical *Tehzib-e-Niswan*, Sheikh Abdullah’s Aligarh-based *Khatun*, Rashidul Khairi’s (1868-1936) Delhi-based *Ismat* helped foreground the theoretical foundation for Muslim feminism in the region. These journals nourished Muslim women’s creative life and encouraged them to express themselves, their views and concerns. Some striking similarities between Rokeya’s and these North Indian writers’ feminist concerns and strategy suggest that, her feminist ideas correspond with those articulated in the feminist literature and periodicals of North Indian Muslims. Researchers who seek to locate influences on her feminist ideas and strategies may consider the cultural link and affinity between Muslim Bengal and North India. There was also a linguistic connection between Rokeya and those North Indian Muslim writers who wrote in Urdu. Though Bangla was mainly the language of her literary expression, she used Urdu widely in family and social communication, gave speeches in the language and “even wrote articles for Urdu magazines” (Quayum xix), which may be a reason why Minault includes her in *Secluded Scholars: Women’s Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* (1998) among illustrious women writers from Urdu-speaking North India. However, Rokeya chose Bangla as the medium of most of her literary work for a pragmatic reason, as the betterment of the Bengal Muslim community was her primary concern.

Conclusion

Rokeya stands out as the greatest feminist writer of Bangladesh for the superior literary merits of her work as well as for her incredible courage and resilience to struggle for women’s emancipation against the hostile, unfavourable material conditions of her society that was not ready to receive her revolutionary

feminist ideas positively. Moreover, many of the proponents of women's rights in the subcontinent during Rokeya's time and before – both male and female, Muslim and Hindu – were more privileged than her and many of them had the opportunity to receive formal learning and visited Europe for education and experience. For example, the celebrated nationalist-feminist Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) “attended famous British seats of learning such as, King's College and Girton College in England, and came into contact with the suffragette campaign” (Hasan, “Marginalisation of Muslim” 192) and thus was imbued with the feminist spirit.

Rokeya did not have such exposure, though she benefited from her interactions with many Europeans residing in India and with many local reformers and litterateurs. Her interaction with men of literary gifts who had sympathy for women's liberation was limited, as the scope of communication was seriously hampered by extreme notions of Indian-style purdah. To a great extent, Rokeya maintained extreme purdah when interacting with men, fearing that non-compliance, and her consequent unacceptability in society, might thwart her agendas of women's advancement as well as the progress of her school. Despite these limitations, her achievements concerning women's rights have been incredible and unsurpassed.

Rokeya's feminist theory and strategy were extremely conducive, as her ideas have strong relevance to the continuing indigenous feminist struggle of the women down to the present. Her overarching influence and pertinence is strongly felt across Bangladesh and beyond. While during the nineteenth century down to Rokeya's time, the predominant concerns of feminist movements in South Asia were child marriage, women's lack of access to formal education, purdah and legal disabilities, in present-day societies, new problems have emerged such as gendered domestic violence, dowry-divorce and dowry-death, exploitation of female workers including domestic maids and sexual harassment at workplace. Addressing these social ills that directly affect women, scholars and activists can emulate Rokeya's feminist strategy. She did not turn to “Western women but those of the subcontinent or the Muslim world” (Hossain, “The Begum's Dream” 4), and this establishes a strong link between her feminism and that of contemporary North Indian Islamic feminists.

Works Cited

- Akhtar, Shaheen. “Sufia Kamal (1911-1999): Poet and Social Worker.” Trans. Adrita Mukherjee. *Women in Concert: An Anthology of Bengali Muslim Women's Writings (1904-1938)*. Eds. Shaheen Akhter and Moushumi Bhowmik. Kolkata: Stree, 2008. 298-301.

- Amin, Sonia Nishat. *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939*. Boston, Leiden: Brill, 1996.
- Barton, Mukti. "Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and the Bengali Muslim Women's Movement." *Dialogue and Alliance* 12.1 (1998): 105-16.
- Chakravartty, Gargi. *Coming Out of Partition: Refugee Women of Bengal*. New Delhi: Bluejay Books, 2005.
- De Souza, Eunice. "Introduction." *Women's Voices: Selections from Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Century Indian Writing in English*. Eds. Eunice de Souza and Lindsay Pereira. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2002. XI-XXII.
- Devee, Sunity. *The Autobiography of an Indian Princess*. London: John Murray, 1921.
- Eraly, Abraham. *The Mughal World: Life in India's Last Golden Age*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2007.
- Forbes, Geraldine. "The Indian Women's Movement: A Struggle for Women's Rights or National Liberation?" *The Extended Family: Women and Political Participation in India and Pakistan*. Ed. Gail Minault. Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1981. 49-82.
- Ghosh, Srabashi. "Birds in a Cage: Changes in Bengali Social Life as Recorded in Autobiographies by Women." *Economic and Political Weekly* 21.43 (1986): 88-96.
- Hasan, Md. Mahmudul. "Indictment of Misogyny on Mary Wollstonecraft and Rokeya Sakhawat H[o]ssain." *BRAC University Journal* 1.2 (2004): 1-12.
- . Review of Fayeza S. Hasanat, *Navab Faiẓunnesa's Rupjajal*. *Muslim World Book Review* 30.2 (2010): 65-69.
- . "Marginalisation of Muslim Writers in South Asian Literature: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's English Works." *South Asia Research* 32.3 (2012): 179-97.
- Hasanat, Fayeza S. *Navab Faiẓunnesa's Rupjajal*. Boston, Leiden: Brill, 2009.
- Hossain, Yasmin. "The Begum's Dream: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and the Broadening of Muslim Women's Aspirations in Bengal." *South Asia Research* 12.1 (1992): 1-19.
- Jahan, Roushan, ed. and trans. *Inside Seclusion: The Avarodhbasini of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain*. Dhaka: Women for Women, 1981.
- . "Rokeya: An Introduction to Her Life." *Sultana's Dream: A Feminist Utopia and Selections from The Secluded Ones*. Ed. Roushan Jahan. New York: The Feminist Press, 1988. 37-57.
- Jayawardena, Kumari. *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* [1986]. Colombo: Sanjiva Books, 2003.
- Krishnaraj, Maithreyi. "Preamble: Boundaries." *Ideals, Images and Real Lives: Women in Literature and History*. Eds. Alice Thorner and Maithreyi Krishnaraj. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2000. 1-36.
- Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. London: Routledge, 1998.

- Mahmud, Shamsunnahar. *Rokeya Jibani*. Calcutta: Noya Udwoj, 1935.
- Minault, Gail. "Making Invisible Women Visible: Studying the History of Muslim Women in South Asia." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 9.1 (1986): 1-13.
- . "Sayyid Mumtaz Ali and 'Huquq un-Niswan': An Advocate of Women's Rights in Islam in the Late Nineteenth Century." *Modern Asian Studies* 24.1 (1990): 147-72.
- . *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India*. Delhi: Oxford UP, 1998.
- Mukherjee, Soma. *Royal Mughal Ladies and Their Contributions*. New Delhi: Gyan, 2001.
- Quayum, Mohammad A. "Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain: A Biographical Essay." *The Essential Rokeya: Selected Works of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932)*. Ed. Mohammad A. Quayum. Boston, Leiden: Brill, 2013.
- Ray, Bharati. *Early Feminists of Colonial India: Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain*. Delhi: Oxford UP, 2002.
- Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. *Motichur*, Vol. 1. [1904]. *Rokeya Rachanabali* [1973]. 2nd ed. Ed. Abdul Quadir. Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1999. 1-54.
- . "Letter to Md. Yasin" [1913, September 30]. *Rokeya Rachanabali* [1973]. 2nd ed. Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1999. 504.
- . *Motichur*, Vol. 2 [1922]. *Rokeya Rachanabali* [1973]. 2nd ed. Ed. Abdul Quadir. Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1999. 55-182.
- . *Padmarag* [1924]. *Rokeya Rachanabali* [1973]. 2nd ed. Ed. Abdul Quadir. Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1999. 255-368.
- . "Bongio Nari-Shikhwa Samiti: Sobhanetrir Obhithation" [1926]. *Rokeya Rachanabali* [1973]. 2nd ed. Ed. Abdul Quadir. Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1999. 223-28.
- . "God Gives, Man Robs" [1927]. *Rokeya Rachanabali* [1973]. 2nd ed. Ed. Abdul Quadir. Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1999. 477-78.
- . *Abarodhbasini* [1931]. *Rokeya Rachanabali* [1973]. 2nd ed. Ed. Abdul Quadir. Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1999. 371-405.
- Sarkar, Mahua. "Muslim Women and the Politics of (In)visibility in Late Colonial Bengal." *Journal of Historical Sociology* 14.2 (2001): 226-50.
- . *Visible Histories, Disappearing Women: Producing Muslim Womanhood in Late Colonial Bengal*. Durham: Duke UP, 2008.
- Shehabuddin, Elora. Review of Mahua Sarkar, *Visible Histories, Disappearing Women: Producing Muslim Womanhood in Late Colonial Bengal*. *H-Asia, H-Net Reviews* September 2011. 10 June 2013.
<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=30873>.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Eds. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988. 271-313.

- . "Diasporas Old and New: Women in the Transnational World." *Textual Practice* 10.2 (1996): 245-69.
- Srivastava, Gouri. *The Legend Makers: Some Prominent Muslim Women of India*. New Delhi: Concept, 2003.
- Syed, Abdul Mannan. *Begum Rokeya*. Dhaka: Abosar, 1996.
- Tharu, Susie. "Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain." *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*, Vol. 1. Eds. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita. London: Pandora, 1991. 340-43.
- Tharu, Susie and K. Lalita. "Preface." *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*, Vol. 2. Eds. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita. London: Pandora, 1993. xv-xxiii.