

A Feminist Critique of Patriarchy: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932)

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Abstract

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was one of the most brilliant thinkers of colonial India in the twentieth century. She addressed women, primarily Muslim women, and censured them for their degraded condition in society and loss of self-respect. She ascribed women's subjection to men to the patriarchal social structure that gave hegemony of men over women. She also blamed men for their selfishness and condemned the prevalent social and religious customs, formulated by men, which perpetuated women's dependence. If women were in a position to frame them, these unfair customs would certainly have been different. Her call was to women to wake up, to acquire fruitful education instead of useless ornaments and go in for gainful employment that would establish equality with men. Extremely brave and radical seen in the backdrop of her time, she was a champion of gender equality and a precursor of the women's movement in South Asia in the modern period.

Keywords

Patriarchy, slave, wake up, education, employment, equality

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was arguably the earliest and most original woman critique of patriarchy in colonial Bengal. Brought up in the strictest seclusion and denied formal education, she emerged as one of the most prominent litterateurs of her time. I have written on her in another volume.² Here I want to focus exclusively on one article in order to pinpoint my contention that she was one of the most daring thinkers of her time. She wrote *Sultana's Dream* in English, and that is her only book that has attracted some attention from

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² Bharati Ray, *Early Feminists of Colonial India: Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain*, Delhi: Oxford UP, 2002.

scholars at the international level. Her other works written in Bengali, however, are much more eloquent in terms of both content and language. I will in this paper cite one article written by her – “Strijatir Abanati” (Degradation of Women), published in her book *Motichoor*, volume one, in 1905. This article had been earlier published in the periodical *Mabila* (1903) and also in *Nabanoor*, in 1904 (*Bhadra*, 1311 BS) under different titles. The piece aroused such stormy protests that five sections of the original article were deleted from the volume *Motichoor*.³ It is easy to understand the strong protests that the original article had raised. It was a daring and ruthless criticism of the ruling anti-women customs in contemporary Muslim society. The Hindu women of the time were not any better off than their Muslim sisters. Kailasbasini Devi (b.1837) in *Hindumabilaganer Hinabashtha* (The Degraded Condition of Hindu Women) published in 1863, gave a graphic description of contemporary low status of Hindu women.⁴ But Rokeya’s main concern was the women of her community, and so in this article my focus is limited to that community, and since Rokeya addressed mainly the middle class, I will also confine myself only to the middle class women. Rokeya as an activist through her activist organisation, the Anjuman, worked for economically disadvantaged Muslim women. I have discussed her contributions in that area in my volume on her. Here my concentration is on “Strijatir Abanati.” The article encapsulates her critique of the prevalent system of patriarchy. Needless to say that most of her main arguments were valid and applicable to the patriarchal structure of other contemporary Indian communities as well. Let me first cite the article at full length in translation,⁵ and then discuss the messages Rokeya imparted through it.

I

Here is an extract from Rokeya’s “Strijatir Abanati,” translated by Sukhendu Ray:

Let me begin by asking a question of my women readers. Have you ever stopped to ponder why women of our country have been reduced to such pathetic plight? Where, indeed, do we women stand in this advanced day and age of the twentieth century? The answer is crystal clear. We still continue to be *slaves*. We are told that the practice of slavery has now been universally abolished, but does that mean that we, women, have gained freedom? No, we have not, but why? There are good reasons.

³ Abdul Quadir, ed. *Rokeya Rachanabali*. Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1973. 11.

⁴ Of great historical value, being the earliest work of the genre, this book was stunningly forceful and forthright.

⁵ Translated by Sukhendu Ray (unpublished) from the original, Mrs R.S. Hossain, *Motichoor*, Vol 1, Calcutta: Gurudas Chattopadhyay, 1314 BS, Second Edition, 14-35.

True, no one knows how it was like in prehistoric times, in those days when there was no civilization, no social bonds, women's condition was perhaps not so tragic. For some reasons which cannot be explained, men apparently made rapid progress in many fields, but women could not keep pace with the men and fell behind. So, instead of becoming equal partners of men as friends and wives, women were reduced to the status of humble subjects.

Does anybody really know why women throughout the world are in such despicable situation? Lack of opportunities for women could be one reason. Denied any scope, women gradually lapsed into doing practically nothing, and men concluded that women by nature are incapable of doing any useful work and, therefore, needed to be looked after by men. The more men came to their aid, the more ineffective women became. One can perhaps draw a parallel with beggars. It has been said that the number of beggars goes on multiplying in direct proportion to the increasing contributions of rich and bountiful persons to charities. As a result, begging is now almost a profession for the indolent and the work-shies, so much so that no sense of shame now attaches to the act of begging.

In a similar fashion, we women, having lost our self-respect, do not scruple in accepting favours from our men. Thus we have fallen prey to our apathy, or in other words, have become slaves of men. With passing days, even our mind became 'enslaved,' and being used to subjugation for ages, we are now used to slavery. In the process we lost our spirit of self-reliance and courage, and our mental faculties rusted to the point of being paralysed beyond resurrection. No wonder men had the temerity to remark, 'The five worst maladies that afflict the female mind are indocility, discontent, slander, jealousy and silliness.... Such is the stupidity of her character that it is incumbent on her, in every particular to distrust herself and to obey her husband.'

Remarks, such as 'to exaggerate and tell lies are the natural gifts of women's tongues,' or that women are 'unreasonable,' are often heard. Because of this so-called 'failings,' men consider woman as inferior creatures. Perhaps this is not unnatural. Take for instance the case of sons-in-law; in our country they are highly regarded – even, it is said, by witches, but as soon as a son-in-law becomes a resident dependant on his wife's home, the shine goes off. So, when women lost the capacity to distinguish between freedom and bondage, between progress and decline, men seized their opportunities and gradually became masters of their homes, masters of their estates, and finally masters of their wives. And in due course, women came to be regarded as something akin to domestic animals. Or, at best some valuable chattels.

With the advent of civilisation and recognition of social laws, regulations were framed according to the will of the lords of society. Which was perhaps not unusual? After all, might is right. So then, I ask once again, 'who is responsible for the degradation of women?'

Our jewelleryes, our dearly cherished ornaments – but what are these other than symbols of our bondage? Yes, ornaments are used in the belief that

they enhance our looks, yet many distinguished persons have said that jewelleries were 'originally badges of slavery!' Iron hoops are fastened to prisoners' legs to restrain them, and here we delightfully put round our feet gold or silver hoops and call them anklets. Handcuffs for prisoners are made of steel; ours are made of gold or silver, and we call them bangles. Perhaps in imitation of dog collars we have fashioned our neckbands, strung with jewels. Horses and elephants are tethered with iron chains, and we happily put gold chains round our necks. Very often cows are seen with rings put through their nose for the purpose of attaching a towrope. Our lords and masters have also provided us with nose rings, often considered as symbols of married woman proclaiming the existence of a husband. So, my sisters, are you convinced now that our so-called precious ornaments are nothing but tokens of servitude? And is it not rather amusing that more such emblems of slavery a woman possesses, the more weightage is attached to her standing in the society?

And yet, look at the intense passion women continue to have for jewelleries as if all their happiness and fortune depend on these trinkets. Women who cannot afford gold or silver bangles will use glass ones instead in euphoric acknowledgment of their state of servitude. Is there a more wretched creature on this earth than a widow who by taboo is debarred from wearing bangles?

The all-pervasive dominance of compulsive addiction is truly stupefying. Conditioned to slavery, women now cherish the badges of bondage, namely, their jewelleries. Opium may taste bitter but not to an addict, and regardless of the ruinous effects of alcohol, an alcoholic will not reform by giving it up. Women display their symbols of bondage with pride.

From my observation on ornaments some women may probably infer that I am a secret agent of men. They may assume that by disparaging the craze for ornaments I am in some way trying to save money for men – money which would have otherwise gone into the pockets of goldsmiths. This is not true; whatever I have said is in the absolute interest of the women. There are many ways of squandering money away if that be the main purpose of heedless expenditure on jewelleries. Let me air some ideas.

Put the pearl neckband of yours round the neck of your dearly beloved dog! Hang your priceless gold chain as a halter for your horse who draws your carriage! And use your bangles and bracelets as curtain rings! In this way the man, whom you call your husband, will be truly and unmistakably squandering away his money for your gratification! Use of jewelleries is a show off, nothing but a vulgar display of one's opulence. Then why not do so in some other fashion, in the manner I have just suggested? Why must you reinforce your status of servitude by loading yourself with ornaments? I know people will call you crazy, if, indeed, you did implement my ideas, but let them, you just ignore them. Nothing has been achieved in this world without hurdles. Think of Galileo – he was incarcerated for daring to declare that our earth goes round the sun. No wise man has been able to make his mark without opposition. Let us not take too much to heart what other people say; a good man or a good deed seldom receives due appreciation.

Yes, as I have said before, ornaments are nothing but marks of bondage, but to use them in the belief that they help in enhancing one's looks is no less reprehensible. The desire to improve one's looks is a mental frailty. Men do not have this complex; they regard ornaments as effeminate. When they get into an argument men often say, 'Well, if I cannot prove my point then I will take to putting on bangles like a woman.' The poet Saadi exhorted men to be brave and victorious but warned them against donning women's clothes. To dress like a woman is most ignominious for men. Yes, indeed, but what is this form of dress we are talking about? Is there any difference between the length and width of a dhoti – men's apparel – and the length and width of a sari – women's apparel? In countries where the traditional leg-wear is the pajamas, do not both men and women use the same form of dress? There can be 'ladies' jackets' as well as 'gentlemen's jackets.' Of course, the poet Saadi may have symbolically meant feminine weakness rather than feminine dress.

Men proudly proclaim that they offer us all manners of protection with their body and soul. They often try to unsettle us by protestations that nowhere else shall we find so much love and adoration as given to us by men. And we, weak as we are, get carried away by such sentiments. It is this seeming indulgence of men, almost in an attitude of charity that has led us to our downfall. Keeping us caged in some dark corner of their hearts and denying us the freedom of knowledge and exposure to the fresh air of the outside world men are actually suffocating us to a form of slow death. Men delude us by affirming, 'We are here to look after your comfort and happiness, we shall get you what you need, and you should have no worry.' Thank you, men, for nothing.

I wish to remind our men that this world of ours is not a colourful imagination of a poet. It is complex, hard and cruel. It is a reality.

Not a book of verse
 Not a tale of romance
 Not a stage for play-acting
 My life is real and solid.

That is the problem. Otherwise we would have lacked for nothing through the kind courtesy of our men. Men in the world of fantasy perceive us women as 'delicately formed creatures, light of body, weak and helpless, timorous by nature,' etc. And from there it is but a short step for us to melt away and vaporise into the thin air like an 'aerial body!' But in truth it is not all that charming. We, therefore, beseech our men – please have mercy on us by being not so kind to us.

Much too much care can be destructive. A garment long unused but carefully preserved ends up as food for the moths. To quote our poet again:

Why did my lamp go out?
 With all the protection I gave it?
 Sleepless on my wedding night

Alas! Still out went my light.

There is no question that we have been ruined by our over protective men. Sheltered and shielded in an unsafe world we have lost all pretensions of courage, of self-confidence, of will power, and in the process we have become utterly dependent upon our husbands. At the slightest sign of any trouble we run to our rooms and let out ear-splitting shrieks. No wonder men mock us for our maudlin tears, and we silently digest their ridicule. I almost die of shame every time I think of the pathetic cowardice of women.

Let alone tigers or other wild beasts, we take fright at the very sight of the lowly cockroaches and other insects. Indeed some of us go into a fainting fit. Young boys often find it a great fun running around in the house with a captured leech in a glass bottle and scaring the life out of the women in the family. If the women try to run away the boys chase them grinning with impish joy. Such pranks are not uncommon, and I was once at the receiving end the thought of which causes me considerable mortification. Perhaps on that occasion I may have been somewhat amused, but my blood now boils when I recall those silly terrified women. I still cannot fathom how and when did we forfeit our physical grit and mental spirit. It seems we have lost the capacity even to contemplate our woefully miserable plight.

I have given you some examples of faint-heartedness. Let me now tell you about our physical infirmities. We have been reduced to such passive inanimate objects that we are nothing but show pieces in our husbands' drawing rooms. Have you ever come across a lifeless bundle known as the daughter-in-law in a wealthy Muslim home of the State of Bihar? To exhibit her as a museum piece would be a more faithful appreciation of her status. There she is, in a dark room, with two doors one of which is shut and the other open and the dictates of purdah do not permit either fresh air or sunlight to enter that room. There is a divan, covered with a red fabric, and on this divan you can see a reclining figure, much bejewelled, with a contentedly glowing face, she is the daughter-in-law. Let me give you an idea of the approximate gold content of each piece of ornament that this girl has on.

Head Piece	400 grams
Ears	250 "
Neck	1200 "
Two arms	1500 "
Waist	650 "
Two feet	2400 "

The diameter of the ring, which is suspended from her nose, is four inches. The heavy robe she has on is laden with sequins and many stitched on decorative pieces which, with the weight of her ornaments, is not unsurprisingly wearing her down. Understandably, she is hardly mobile. The poor daughter-in-law is no better than an inert and inanimate object. She suffers from continuous headaches, and not without reason. A cluster of

ornamental pieces adorns her hair, and she has a heavy gold chain resting on the parting of her hair. Glued on sequins and silver dust cover half her head, her eyebrows are generously sprinkled with silver dust, many coloured shapes of stars and moon are pasted on the forehead. If her body is a lump of flesh, her mind is equally leaden.

Dull and spiritless – a life of utter tedium is the fate of the daughter-in-law. Lack of physical exercise has ruined her health, and she feels exhausted even by the slightest effort she has to make to move from one room to another. Her legs get tired, her feet ache, and her arms become stiff. Dyspepsia, loss of appetite and many other ailments afflict her body. You cannot have a sound mind in a sick body. One can readily see what a miserable existence this girl has.

What are the lessons that we learn from this girl's life? The best education one can have is, undoubtedly, from one's own experience and from the lives of others. Even birds and beasts can teach us which knowledge can often be superior to what we learn from books. What Newton discovered from a falling apple could certainly not have been available in any books of his time.

You will perhaps now have some idea of our social condition from the picture I have drawn of the poor Muslim daughter-in-law's life. Hers is an unfortunate and wasteful life in both temporal and spiritual sense. If the good God asks her at the end of the day – to what proper use have you put your faculties: your brain, your eyes, your mind – what can the poor girl say in reply? When I asked a girl of the same family, 'You do not appear to do any work, so what will be your plea to God when the time comes?' She agreed with my observation but protested that she was not exactly inactive as she did, indeed, move around in the house! My comment that it was not good enough as exercise and that she should go in for, say, jogging, was met with derisive mirth. I realised that they will never learn, which made me very sad. They did not even have the capacity to learn. Our redemption, I felt, was far away, and meanwhile the good Lord will perhaps look after us!

If sunlight is not allowed to enter our bedroom, light of knowledge is equally debarred from invading our mind. Women have hardly any suitable schools and colleges. Men have no such problems; frontiers of knowledge are wide open to them. But will such facilities be ever available to women? Sad to say, if any liberal person comes forward to champion women's causes, there will be thousand others to put obstacles to frustrate such efforts.

It is just not possible to fight single-handedly an opposition of a large body of people. That is why where even a faint ray of hope appears on the horizon, it gets immediately doused, and darkness returns. Most people have mental blockage of unfounded superstitions associated with women's education. They shudder at the many imaginary evil consequences that must inevitably follow if women receive education. The society will treat leniently many failings of an illiterate woman, but not so for a woman who has no more than a modicum of education. The society will discover a myriad of sins of which she is totally innocent, and shout that it is all because of the evil effect of education!

Education for men is considered essential as passport to gainful employment, but since women are not allowed to go out and work for a living, education for them is regarded as unimportant.

Merely for the sake of idle argument, many Indian Christians will tell you that the downfall of men is due to women's access to knowledge because, according to the Book of Genesis, both Adam and Eve were dislodged from the Heaven as a result of Eve's sin in consuming the forbidden fruit of knowledge.

Blind imitation of any particular country or community is not what education is about. We are born with certain mental faculties, gifted by God, and to 'develop' these faculties through rigorous training is real education. To cultivate these faculties should be our aim; misuse will be sinful. By God's grace we are born with arms and legs, eyes and ears, brain and ability to think. What we must do with disciplined application is to add muscles to our arms and legs, to put our hands to good use, to observe carefully with our eyes, to use our thought powers analytically. That will be the mark of our true education. Education is not just merely the tools to gain success at examinations. Let me give you an example of how the gift of eyesight can be used.

What our untrained eyes see as plain dirt or mud, trained eyes of scientists perceive many spectacular things. What we dismiss as just muck or sand or coal-dust, scientists through analysis discover valuable articles from such sources. From these they extract white opals; certain forms of clay are used to manufacture porcelain goods; diamonds are derived from coal, and ice crystals from water. There you are, my friends, where our untutored eyes only notice mundane objects like muck and dirt, disciplined eyes discern precious stones and diamonds. Yet we continue to remain blind in spite of the precious gift of eyes. How are we going to account for this to the good God?

Assume for instance that you gave a sweeping broom to your maid with the instruction to clean your home. The maid, instead, believing it to be a gift from you wrapped the thing up carefully and preserved it. She never used it, and meanwhile your home was collecting dust and filth making it uninhabitable. What would be your reaction when you see the wretched state of your home? Would you not have preferred that the maid had used the broom and cleaned your home, or would you rather admire her sense of respect and reverence?

Our own conscience will indicate when we are going down and warn us that we need to take steps to recover. What we must do is to seize initiative in our own hands. I know I had said earlier that God only could help us, but we must remember that God will not pull us up unless we raise our hands. God helps those who help themselves, so goes the saying. Therefore, if we do not think for ourselves nobody else will. Even if somebody does, that will be of scant use to us.

Economic reasons, it is believed, compel women to submit to men, for men are the breadwinners. This is true up to a point. Because disallowed to work for a living, women are obliged to defer to men who provide for them.

But now women are mentally so conditioned to slavery that even where a woman supports a family by working as a maid or by needlework, her useless husband still remains the 'master.' Even when a man marries an heiress and lives on her money, he is the master, and the wife does not protest her husband's supremacy over her. But why is it so? Because for ages women have been rendered incapable by crushing their skills and talents. And the upshot? Women find themselves reduced to a state of servitude in all aspects – externally, internally – in their heart, in their mind. They have lost their spirit, their freedom, there are hardly any signs to set things right. So I repeat my call,

‘Wake up, wake up my sisters!’

It will not be easy, I know. I also realise that there will be a great uproar in our society. Muslims will condemn us to capital punishment, and Hindus will prescribe death by slow fire. The pity of it all is that our women lack the will to rise and protest. But this they must do for the greater good of our society. As I have said before nothing can be gained smoothly. When released from prison, Galileo was bold enough to re-assert that ‘the earth goes round.’ We need to take courage and be prepared to accept hardship. Let me tell you about the transformation of Parsee ladies, and I quote (translated) from an Urdu language journal:

During the last half-century considerable changes have occurred in the life style of ladies of the Parsee community. Though westernised now, fifty years ago they had no inkling of western culture. Like Muslim women, they also observed purdah and were, by and large, confined indoors. They were denied the use of umbrellas for cover against the sun and rain, and on a hot baking day they have been seen to hold up their shoes above their heads as protection. Their carriage was curtained, and they were not allowed to converse with their husbands in the presence of other people. Now the Parsee ladies are free from such restrictions. They travel in open carriages, talk with men, some even run their own business enterprises. When Parsee ladies first discarded the purdah, there was much clamour and protest. White-haired elders agonised – this is the end of the world!

Well, our world is still there, and that is why I ask. Let us all march together to fight for our liberty. Acceptance will eventually come with passing time. And by liberty I mean equality with men in all respects.

The key question is how to go about to regain our lost position. What must we do to stand up and be counted as worthy daughters of our country? To start with, we need to take a firm resolve that in our daily life we shall be on equal footing with men, and that we must have intense self-confidence not to feel bounden in any way to men. We shall do whatever is necessary to achieve the same status as men, and if that entails that we must go out and

earn our living, then so be it. From office workers to lawyers and magistrates, even judges, we shall gain entry to all jobs and professions, presently the privileged precincts of men. Perhaps fifty years down the road, we may see installed a woman as the Viceroy, thus elevating the status of all women. Why should we not have access to gainful employment? What do we lack? Are we not able-bodied, and are we not endowed with intelligence? In fact, why should we not apply the labour and energy that we expend on domestic chores in our husbands' homes to run our own enterprises?

If we are denied entry into civic services we might opt for agricultural ventures. Why must parents of young girls bemoan the fate of their daughters just because they have difficulty in finding suitable husbands for them? Educate them, let them go out and fend for themselves. It is a fact that female labour is cheaper than male's. Where a domestic male servant is paid Rs. 2 a month, a maid servant will receive only R.1 for the same job. If the cost to feed a man servant is Rs.3 a month, it is half that amount for a maid. There are, of course, instances where a woman worker earns more than a man.

It is said that women are weak, illiterate and of low intelligence. Then, who is responsible for this? None but ourselves! We have become weak and disabled as we never make any use of our faculties. Let us hone our intellect through application, let our weak bodies gain strength by hard labour, let us ensure that we bring to fruition our potential through acquisition of knowledge

One final observation. We women constitute half the population, and if we are left behind, how can our society thrive? How far can a man, who is lame of one leg, travel just by limping on? Interests of men and women cannot be conflicting. The aims and aspirations of women are the same as the aims and aspirations of men. A child needs both its parents. We must ensure that men and women work together standing side by side for the good of our worldly life as well as our spiritual needs.

Men advanced rapidly leaving women far behind, but men discovered on their road to success that it was a very lonely journey without a wife as a companion. So they had to turn back. In countries where men share their journey with their wives, they achieve the height of success. It should be our aim that instead of being a burden on our husbands, we must be just not wives but also companions and partners of our husbands in their work. We are not born to play the role of puppet dolls.

I do trust my distinguished sisters will debate these issues and that they will give some serious thoughts to this problem even if they wish to avoid the path of agitation.

II

I have quoted almost the entire article. Going through it, I find a few key points. Let me turn to them one by one. I have said at the very beginning, indeed in the title itself, that this was a critique of patriarchy. Since Rokeya mainly addressed women of her own community, this piece should be

considered as a critique of Muslim patriarchy. The unequal gender relationship in Muslim society – which was equally present in Hindu society – was brought to her sharply when she was only a child. As a girl, she had to observe purdah not only in relation to men but also regarding all unrelated women. Rokeya recalls:

Once while we were in residence in Calcutta and I was about five years of age, two maidservants came to visit my sister-in-law, wife of my second brother (step-brother) from her home in Bihar. Those two maidservants appeared to have unrestricted freedom to move at will anywhere and everywhere in our house. Poor me, I had to run away like a scared young fawn to hide myself from them – be it behind a door or under a table. There was an attic, hardly used, on the second floor of the house, and very early each morning I was taken there by my ayah, where I passed the whole day, often unfed and hungry. The maidservants from Bihar, after thoroughly exploring the whole house, tumbled on to the existence of the attic. Halu, a nephew and almost of the same age as mine, rushed to tell me of this dreadful discovery. Fortunately there was a bed in that room, and I quickly slipped under it, scared even to breathe in case those heartless women suspiciously looked under the bed! There were a few empty steel trunks, wickerwork chairs and the like, which poor Halu, with all the strength of a six-year-old, tried to arrange around me. Hardly anyone bothered to ask if I had any food or drink. Occasionally when Halu chanced upon me there during his games, I would ask him to get me some food and drink. He would sometimes fetch me a glass of water, maybe some puffed rice, but very often he would forget. After all, he was just a child. I had to spend four days in that attic in such distressing conditions. (“Aborodhbasini,” *Rokeya Rachanabali* 47)

While little Halu was free to move as he wished, Rokeya had to conceal herself for days under a bed. She must have resented this ignominy even as a child. Nor was she permitted to go to school. Reading beyond rudimentary Arabic just enough to learn the Quran by rote – without understanding – was forbidden to girls. Rokeya’s father, Zahiruddin Muhammad Abu Ali Saber (?-1913), was the landlord of Pairaband, a village in the district of Rangpur in northern Bengal – now in Bangladesh – and belonged to the upper class Muslim Saber family. While he encouraged his sons to go in for higher education, and also western education, his norms for his daughters’ education were quite different. They were not to have careers for themselves, but were to grow up as ideal women, appropriate products of a highly elite background. Rokeya was taught secretly by her elder brother, Ibrahim Saber. Shamsunnahar Mahmud, Rokeya’s biographer, writes:

Their father was utterly opposed to her learning Bengali or English. There was hardly any opportunity for her to study during the day, so the brother and the sister would wait eagerly for nightfall. After dinner, when their father had gone to bed, the two of them would sit down with their books. In the depth of night, with the world plunged into darkness, a faint light would flicker in their room. The two of them would commence their lessons in the silence of the night. (*Rokeya Jiboni* 20)

Obviously, the experience of deprivation and discrimination since childhood made Rokeya comprehend the depth of women's social degradation. After her marriage at the young age of sixteen with Sakhawat Hossain, a liberal Muslim, who supported her love of learning, she pursued a career of reading and writing, and the condition of Muslim women in family and society became her central theme. Because of the burden of *aborodh* – of stifling silence – that Rokeya struggled to discard and destroy, her writings have an energy and an anguish that are voiced through biting sarcasm and overt rebelliousness.

In the article cited above, Rokeya's main contention was that women had become the slaves of men. "We are told that slavery has been abolished in the world, but does that mean that we, women, have gained freedom?" In this twentieth century, what are women? Female slaves. Rokeya diagnosed two causes for such pathetic plight of women – the selfishness of men, and the apathy of women themselves. Although she first turned to women, upbraiding them for their mental slavery, for their cowardice, lack of physical and mental courage and love of ornaments, it was men who were her real target. Why had women sunk so low? Because men had planned it that way. They had seized all power and denied women opportunities. In the same volume (*Motichoor*), in another article, she asked Muslim men why even though Islam had given some rights to women, they were denied such rights. "If the Prophet Muhammad asks you when the day of reckoning comes, how have you treated your daughters, what would you say?" (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 33).

III

Rokeya blamed men, and also women. How could they let themselves sink so low? Why had they lost all self-respect? They needed to wake up, and in order to wake up they had to be educated and get organised.

Education was the first priority. I must mention that Rokeya was not the path-breaker in this arena. Education had been introduced among the Hindu-Brahmo middle class women, thanks to the nineteenth century social reform movement and the leadership of men like Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-91) and Madanmohan Tarkalankar (1817-58). Among the Muslim women, too, education was spreading, though slowly. Emdad Ali (1880-1956), a distinguished poet and the editor of the reputed

journal *Nabanoor*, Ismail Hossain Shirazi (1880-1931), a poet, a politician and a social reformer, and Kazi Imdadul Huq (1882-1926), an educationist and an author, were champions of the cause. It is a great tribute to Muslim women that they were no passive recipients. Many of them took active part in the process of change, and came forward to assist other women. The credit for being the pioneer of formal education for Muslim girls goes to Nawab Faizunnessa Chaudhurani (1834-1903) of Comilla who, though a woman, was granted the title of Nawab. Like Rokeya, she was also born in an aristocratic family and forced to live in purdah. She founded in Comilla in 1873 a free madrasa for girls, which later became the Faizunnessa Girls' College. In 1878, Eden School for girls, modelled on the Bethune School of Calcutta was set up.

What distinguished Rokeya from her predecessors was her ideas, extremely "radical" judged by contemporary standards. She, like them, strove for women's education with the important difference in its aim. What was the aim of education for Women? For Rokeya, it was gaining equality with men. If educated, women would no longer be the victims of the biased patriarchal system that kept women subjugated as slaves to men. When other advocates of women's education, men or women, Muslim or Hindu, urged education for women, they had envisioned an educated woman in the role of a competent mother and wife. For them, education was the tool for making a good homemaker of a woman. To grant her equality with men in the family or society was outside the purview of their agenda. Ghulam Murshid is right when he comments that no other contemporary woman, whether Hindu or Muslim, had staked a claim to equality (145). In order to elucidate her concept of equality, Rokeya mentioned in a foot note to the essay "Strijatir Abanati" that I quoted above:

In defining the goal of women's advancement, I have spoken of equality with men. Otherwise, how shall I describe what I want? Men's condition has to be perforce our model. The equality that should prevail among a son and a daughter in a family is what we want to establish in the larger society. Men are sons and we daughters of the same society.... (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 33)⁶

Education, to Rokeya, involved discipline and led to a broadening of the mind. Blind imitation of any particular country or community or memorising a book was not its aim. "We are born with certain natural faculties, gifted by God, and to hone these faculties through rigorous training is real education." One

⁶ In elaborating her argument, Rokeya says that equality does not mean that if a son wears a cap, a daughter has to wear a cap, too. The point is that the amount of money and care spent on the son, should be the same for the daughter. Rejecting the notion of equality in a mechanical and verbatim sense, she was advocating equality in real and essential terms.

must aim at both physical and mental efflorescence, and learn how to put to effective use all the organs gifted by God. One had to strengthen one's hands and legs, observe carefully with one's eyes, listen attentively with one's ears, and think intelligently with one's brains. Rokeya placed particular emphasis on women's physical strength, and advised parents and teachers to give physical training to girls both at home and at school.

Education for men was considered important because it was a passport to gainful employment. Women were not allowed even to go out, and so the question of their gainful employment did not arise at all. Even those "progressive" men who favoured some education for women were opposed to their higher education. According to most of them, a woman should be able to cook, should know how to sew, should be hard-working in order to run the household, and might be allowed to read a book or two as that was more than enough. Rokeya did not believe that women's education should abjure the element of economic function; on the contrary, one of her main arguments was the need for economic independence for women. Educated women should join the labour force. Why must parents of young girls bemoan the birth of their daughters, just because it was difficult to find suitable matches? "Educate the daughters properly and let them go out and fend for themselves," she advised, questioning the orthodox view about indispensability of marriage for girls.

In this, Rokeya was more radical than her contemporaries. At a time when Muslim women were under purdah, and "progressive" Brahmo women like Swarnaprabha Basu (1869-1918) and Hemalata Sarkar (1868-1943) were defining educated women's dutiful role at home,⁷ Rokeya talked of the right to employment. In 1905, when Rokeya was advocating this point of view some women had already taken up paid jobs, like Kamini Roy (1864-1933) and Kadambini Ganguli (1861-1923), but from them, too, no ideological assertion had come. Nor had society accepted gainful employment as desirable. Rokeya, almost alone, dared to say that marriage was not the ultimate goal, family was not the ultimate end. Career was important, and one day women would be able to adorn the highest post in the country.⁸

In order to translate some of these ideas, she established a school first in Patna and later transferred it to Calcutta – the Sakhawat Memorial Girls'

⁷ Swarnaprabha and Hemalata asked only widows to work. For their views, see *Bharatamahila*, June 1907 and *Bamabodhini Patrika*, November 1915.

⁸ In one footnote Rokeya cites an Urdu journal which mentions that Turkish women had requested their Sultan to give them military training so that they could protect themselves and their cities with ammunitions. Indeed, Turkish women as well as Muslim women of India had taken part in warfare in the past. But present day Muslim leaders would faint at the very thought of women clerks, not to mention women warriors! (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 23-24). With great regret, Rokeya continues that among the Muslims, there had appeared women poets, philosophers, scientists, orators, physicians and politicians, only Bengali Muslims had never had such wonderful women among them (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 34).

School. I have written extensively on the school in my published work mentioned above. The school continues to flourish till today in central Calcutta, and has become a Government sponsored school for girls.

IV

It is obvious from the essay that Rokeya did not consider marriage indispensable for women. However, customarily the huge majority of women were married off by their parents. For Rokeya, marriage was an equal partnership, and husband and wife were to be companions. In a number of footnotes attached to the essay she elaborated some of her arguments. In the first foot note she said that some readers might argue that it was god's will to keep women under men's control, and that He created men first and then made women for service to men. Rokeya did not wish to entertain any argument on the point. She would state what was "clear" to "reason." And she would assert her "own opinion." And that opinion – without mincing words – was that women were slaves of men. Well, one could object to the word "slave" – so went her second footnote (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 16-17)¹⁰ – but

I ask: what is the meaning of the word 'swami' (literally, master)? If one is a donor, the person who accepts the donation is a client. Similarly, if one is described as the master, what can you call his servant but a servant? If you still say that the wife serves her husband out of love, I will not object to the noble mission. But I will ask: has not the husband, too, accepted that mission of love?

I should explain here that since the mid-nineteenth century, the Victorian concept of "companionate marriage" had made an effective inroad in the area of Bengali emotions.¹¹ Rokeya seems to have imbibed these ideas. To her, the husband was a partner, not a master. Equality should be substituted for subordination in conjugal relationship.¹²

⁹ See her footnote to the essay in *Rokeya Rachanabali* 14.

¹⁰ In this foot note, Rokeya also makes a dig at contemporary Hindu social customs. Those women who object to wives being called slaves, and cite the examples of Sita and Savitri as models, don't they know that the Kulins among the Hindus buy wives? What is one, who is "bought" with money, but a "slave"? A respectable Brahmin lady had told her that "buying and selling of daughters is a custom" among the Kulins. Rokeya adds, 'I did not wish to name any particular community or custom. But in order to stop distorted arguments, I am compelled to give proof of 'SLAVES,' called goddesses. I am sorry for this. However, duty must be done.'

¹¹ For an elaborate discussion, see Tapan Ray Chaudhuri, *Perceptions, Emotions, Sensibilities*, New Delhi, Oxford UP, 89

¹² Rokeya also complains that the "liberation" some Bengali women were asking for was not true liberation, but an empty slogan. See her footnote in *Motichoore* 31. Perhaps this is Rokeya's

V

Rokeya did not believe that men were by and large supportive of women's changing status or roles – certainly they had not been so in the past. She believed that women had to organise themselves in order to assert themselves in a patriarchal society. Women, in short, had to fight for themselves. That would not be easy, but then every noble work had to encounter social or familial opposition. The first step was to get every woman to believe that women did not belong to the class of slaves; the goal was equality with men. The metaphor she used often was that of awakening from a deep sleep, of moving from darkness to light, from night to day, forsaking of the comfort of the bed.

In the nineteenth century, a number of “progressive” men had formed associations for women's advancement. A realisation was emerging among women, both Hindu and Muslim, that it was time for women to take the initiative to form their own associations. Women's organisations by women, however, took some more years to materialise. Bharat Stree Mahamandal (1910), the Women's India Association (1913) and the All India Women's Conference (1927) were women's organisations set up by women. The All India Women's Conference claimed to represent all Indian women regardless of religion or class, and many Muslim women joined it,¹³ but many Muslim women also built up an organisation that addressed issues that specially affected them. This was the Anjuman-i-Khawatin-i-Islam (All India Muslim Ladies' Conference). The national Anjuman was founded in February 1914. Rokeya founded the Calcutta branch of the Anjuman in 1916. Under her leadership, the Bengal Anjuman, later known as Anjuman-i-Khawatin-i-Islam Bangla, attempted to raise among Muslim women a sense of awareness about the various issues that concerned them, like marriage, divorce, education and income generation.

VI

The most interesting part of the above cited article is the portion that was expunged from it. As I said earlier, the essay had first appeared in the Brahmo journal *Mahila* in 1903 under the title “Alankar Na Badge of Slavery.” It was published again in *Nabanoor* in 1904 and was entitled “Amader Abanati” (Our Degradation). As a result of a storm of protest, when the article was re-published under a slightly altered title, “Strijatir Abanati” (Degradation of Women) in *Motichoor*, the following portion was expunged:

indirect criticism of the Hindu-Brahmo women, who made advances in many areas, but were not demanding equal conjugal relations.

¹³ For details about these organisations, see Aparna Basu and Bharati Ray, *Women's Struggle: A History of the All India Women's Conference*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1990, Chapter 1 in particular.

Whenever a woman has tried to raise her head, she has been brought down to her knees on the grounds of either religious impiety or scriptural taboo. Of course it cannot be ascertained with certainty, but this appears to have been the case. What we could not accept as correct, we had to concede later in the belief that it had the authority of a religious dictum.... Men have always propagated such religious texts as edicts of God to keep us women in the dark. It is not my intention to open a debate on the mysteries and spiritual aspects of any particular religion. I will merely restrict myself to discussing the social laws and regulations enshrined in religious texts.... One can clearly understand that the scriptures are nothing but a set of regulating systems prescribed by men. We hear that the prescriptions were laid down by saints. If a woman could have become a saint, perhaps she would have prescribed opposite regulations.... We must not allow ourselves to bow down to the undue authority exercised by men in the name of religion. It has been seen time and again that the stricter the religious restriction, the more severe is the women's victimization.... Some may ask me, "Why do you bring in religion when you are only discussing social conditions?" To which my reply is, "Restrictions imposed by religion are responsible for tightening the chains of our slavery. Men are ruling over women under the pretext of laws prescribed by religion. That is why I am obliged to bring the question of religion into my discussion.

Clearly in this section Rokeya challenges religious scriptures as being simply male motivated, not divinely inspired. This is only what the words articulate. What they imply is of far greater importance than what they say. This, I argue, is a feminist critique of applied Islamic principles, though not of the theoretical religion. This is announcing to the world that scriptures are not prescribed by God, but they are man-made. Thus her words are particularly threatening. For if scriptures are revealed as being written on behalf of the powerful and not on behalf of all of God's creation, then they lose their FULL legitimacy. The word is no longer divine but vulnerable to challenge and rejection. And that is what Rokeya is doing. She is challenging and rejecting them, and is also asking other women to do the same. Taking to its logical conclusion, her writing means that even the Shariat is not sacred, nor divine. Written by men in their vested interests, it aims at keeping women down – *as slaves*. Little short of blasphemy, Rokeya's words are meant to turn religion as practiced by the Islamic leaders upside down. She ventures to suggest that had women had the opportunity to become religious leaders, a different form of religion would have evolved. In practice though, throughout her life Rokeya conformed to Islam. In every talk she delivered, in each essay she penned, she took care to declare herself as a loyal Muslim. When she set up her school, she used to read out from the Koran before the school assembly each morning. She was in point of fact a devout Muslim. She was therefore a critic of Islamic practices from within.

This point becomes clear when we read the “Preface” of her semi-autobiographical novel *Padmarag*. She conceived of Tarini Bhavan, where Hindu, Muslim and Christian women lived like sisters, enjoying a deep bond of mutual respect and love under the headship of a Hindu woman. In her Preface to the novel, Rokeya uses a metaphor to show that for the truly devoted there was no difference between one religion and another:

Religion is like a three-storied mansion. The ground floor has many chambers housing Hindus with their many factions, such as Brahmins, Sudras, etc., Muslims in their many communities, like Shia, Sunni, Hanafi, Sufi, etc, and similarly, many Christians in their different denominations, Roman Catholics, Protestants, and the like. Go to the first floor; there are only Muslims, only Hindus, with no divisions into factions. On the second floor there is just one chamber inhabited by only people, all the same; there are no Hindus, no Muslims; all are worshipping only one God. In the final analysis, there is nothing – except the great God. (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 291)

In this passage, Rokeya was certainly sending a message of secularism. What she was also doing amounted to an indirect renunciation of all intermediaries between God – she uses the word Allah, which I translated as God – and human beings. The division among Muslim Shias and Sunnis or Hindu Brahmins and Sudras were man-made. More importantly, the distinction between Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Parsees and so on were also meaningless. Because the only reality, the only truth, in the final analysis was the one supreme God – call him by whatever name you will. Nothing else mattered. Certainly not the Mullas or the male-dictated scriptures. No wonder the orthodox community hated her. To quote her own words from the Preface of her book *Abarodhbasini* (Women Confined), published in 1931,

When visiting Kurseong and Madhupur, I picked up beautiful attractive pebbles. From the sea-beaches of Madras and Orissa, I gathered sea shells of many colours. And during my twenty years of service to the society, I collected only curses from our die-hard Mullahs. (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 431)

There is another very interesting point for our consideration. *Padmarag* was published in 1924. Rokeya says in her Preface that it was written “about 22 years ago.” For various reasons she could not revise and write the final draft. Now she “altered, enlarged and deleted” parts of the original manuscript and published it. Published in 1924, and written almost 22 years ago. That makes the date of the first draft 1902-3, almost the same time when “Amader Abanati” was written and published. Were the two pieces articulating the same view on religion? Did the sharp criticism of the essay come in the way of publication of the novel? Was the preface added 22 years after the first draft? We do not

know. Rokeya left no clue for us. All that we can say on the basis of her written proclamations is that her basic views had not altered in 22 years and that this daring woman was questioning orthodox Islam, orthodox Mullahs as well as the contemporary expositions of Islam. She may have been a critic from within the fold – she never went outside – but she was certainly not satisfied with the structural and institutional Islam, as understood during her time. Moreover, though Islam is an egalitarian religion compared to many other religions – certainly Hinduism – it regarded a woman only as half of a man. One wonders how Rokeya with her primary concern with gender equality regarded that concept. She could not have approved. It is more than possible – indeed certain – that at heart she questioned it. However, she mentioned that Islam gave some rights to women which men denied them, and stopped short of saying anything more blasphemous. That Rokeya questioned institutional religion and male control of religion is obvious. I sometimes wonder on the basis of what she said and what she did not say (but it seems to me she would have liked to say) whether in her heart of hearts she questioned religion itself (not only Islam, *religion per se*). However, without any concrete evidence to corroborate my surmise, I cannot impose my early twenty-first century notions/interpretations on an early twentieth century woman, however brilliant she might have been. So, I shall stop short of doing that.

VII

During her lifetime Rokeya was criticised as being influenced by western thoughts. Abdul Karim *Sabitya Bisbarad* (1869-1953) and Emdad Ali, the two contemporary “progressive” authors and literary critics thought so. In their review of *Motichoor* in the reputed journal *Nabanoor*, they said that

The author of *Motichoor* had one great fault that deserves special mention. We think that her work was influenced by the books published on Indian Reform by the Christian Tract Society of Madras. The Christian clergies came with the purpose of propagating their religion. Whatever they said or wrote about us, this author has accepted as infallible truth. In her opinion, all that we have is ‘bad’, and all that Europe and America have is ‘good.’
(*Rokeya Rachanabali* 13)

I fail to agree with the learned critics, although both of them belonged to the erudite “progressive” section in the community who supported the education of women. As I said, earlier, the “progressive” reformers – both Hindu and Muslim – advocated education for women in the hope that educated women would make more competent and companionable wives and mothers. They did not bargain for educated female social rebels. And this one did not even go to a school! Yet she dared to throw a challenge to all the messages and speeches and

beliefs and prescriptions made by those who controlled social norms and behaviour!

The bogey of the proselytising endeavours of the Christian clergy worried Indian reformers. It is not my intention to argue on that score. I only intend to say that I do not think Rokeya was so proficient in English as to have read in original the books that had just come out in Madras. Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-99) had published her *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), and John Stuart Mill had brought out his path-making work *The Subjection of Women* in 1869. By the late nineteenth century, the Suffragist Movement had broken out in Britain, and Emmeline Pankhurst was fighting for man-woman equality. Pankhurst formed her celebrated Women's Social and Political Union only in 1903 – the same year when Rokeya's article made its appearance in *Mahila*. Seneca Falls had occurred in the USA in 1848, but it had not had much impact in India. It is possible that Rokeya was familiar with some of their ideas, and may have borrowed a few from them, but I strongly contend that most of these she had worked out herself. Her bitter personal experiences enforced by her brilliant mind led her to reach conclusions that were mostly her own. To blame her for unquestionably accepting the Christian missionaries' allegations about the "uncivilized" and "uncultured" women of India can merely indicate deep resentment at the powerful criticism of an age-old social structure. Rokeya herself later explained in her Preface to the second edition of *Motichoor*:

From the critical reviews of *Motichoor* by a few readers, it appears that they believe that the language and ideas of *Motichoor* were taken from the books of other famous writers. It is not unlikely that some similarities with some earlier works made them feel as they did.

I do not have the courage or the skill required to assimilate the ideas and language of other people. So it is not possible for me even to attempt to do so. I have not seen Kaliprasanna Babu's *Bhrantibinod*, nor have I had the opportunity of going through the entire works of Bankimchandra. If *Motichoor* resembles any other work, that is entirely accidental.

Often I have marvelled at several articles in Urdu monthly periodicals, a few portions of which seemed to be exact translations of *Motichoor*. But I believe that the authors of these essays do not know Bengali at all.

I had not seen *The Murder of Delicia* written by the English lady, Mary Correlli, before I wrote *Motichoor*. Yet there are a few resemblances in ideas in the two books.

Now the question is: why does it happen so? In Bengal, the Punjab, the Deccan (Hyderabad), Bombay, England – why do the same thoughts appear everywhere? In answer to the query, I say – the reason perhaps is the spiritual oneness of women under the British Empire? (*Motichoor* 1)¹⁴

¹⁴ The first edition of the volume was dedicated with much affection and gratitude to her brother Ibrahim Saber, the second edition to his memory.

So Rokeya denied her debt to other works, Bengali or English. She also does not sound to be at all influenced by the vanguards of the British colonial rule or their apologists. On the other hand, she universalised women's "abanati" or degradation under the British rule. Whether in "free" England or in colonised India, all over the Empire, indeed, "throughout the world," women were in a "despicable situation." This was unquestionably a feminist perspective, taking in its sweep both the national and the international situation. It is also in tune with modern feminist thinking.

To conclude, Rokeya's was a feminist critique on two fronts. She threw her almost audacious challenge at the two pillars of patriarchy – the institutions of the family and religion. I must explain that she did not ask for the dissolution of the institution of the family – she demanded its restructuring on the basis of man-woman equality. Nor did she condemn Islam; she asked for proper recognition of women as full human beings within its fold. Her rebellion was against the control of women by men, in all areas, the spiritual and the temporal. Today the feminist movement worldwide is still grappling with the twin problems, and has not yet been able to reach a conclusive agenda or offer an alternative model. Rokeya's solution was clear. To men, she said: give women equality and recognise their contributions. To women her call was: "wake up." If women woke up, and if gender equality was established, patriarchy would come to its deserved end – extinction.

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