

## A Not So Banal Evil: Rokeya in Confrontation with Patriarchy<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This essay addresses Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's evaluation of the causes of women's misfortunes in early twentieth century India even as it underscores her invaluable contributions to the improvement of women's predicament in the public sphere. It shows how unnecessary vilification of activist women, in order to situate them within the limits of a prescriptive patriarchal vision, intensifies the difficulty of their work. Rokeya's interrogation of such limits remains exemplary in a historical context in which gendered, binary ways of thinking were the norm. The essay also focuses on Rokeya's strategy of combined exposure of patriarchal ills – both through direct address in her non-fiction and through deployment of artistic tropes in her fiction. In this regard, it locates and analyses a “trope of excess” in her work, a trope that often operates together with more specific themes of illness, entombment and homelessness.

### Keywords

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, social activism, public sphere and discrimination, trope of excess, patriarchy, evil

We are fortunate that in recent years, some critical work has been done to address Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's contributions as a feminist writer, educator and social activist. This work situates Rokeya as an early twentieth century thinker focused on ameliorating the conditions of underprivileged and unfortunate young girls and women in India and what is now Bangladesh.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I am, of course, indebted to Hannah Arendt's title *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Barnita Bagchi, trans. and introd. *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag: Two Feminist Utopias*; Mohammad A. Quayum's introductions to translations of Rokeya's shorter works in *Transnational Literature* Vols. 4.1 and 5.1; and Bharati Ray's *Early Feminists of*

While appreciating the tremendous benefits to be had from a pioneering philanthropic vision such as Rokeya's, foregrounded for us by the small but forceful body of criticism on her, I want to focus in this essay on her continued perception and presentation of patriarchy as an evil that vitiates women's lives on multiple levels and detracts from the possibilities of their social contributions. Rokeya confronted this evil both in particular situations of her personal life<sup>4</sup> and in the public sphere in which she worked to help those women who were oftentimes less fortunate than her.<sup>5</sup> What particularly interests me in her canon is her fearlessness in holding up a mirror to this evil, relentlessly exposing its various aspects in both her fiction and non-fiction prose in a historical and geographical context in which such exposure was rare. Thus while always mindful and grateful for her work to improve the predicament of many South Asian women, my essay addresses Rokeya's untiring presentation and evaluation of the reasons for women's misfortunes and the malevolent forces that sometimes impeded their social activism. What I see in such unswerving presentation through much of Rokeya's career is an attempt to aggressively foster public awareness, and ultimately analysis, of the causes of women's misfortunes even as she attempts to find substantial remedies for them.

While Rokeya is unflinching in directly addressing masculinist culture in colonial India and its abuses against women as an unavoidable evil in the first two decades of the twentieth century,<sup>6</sup> this essay also focuses on her repeated mobilisation of motifs and images of open wounds and illness; notions of burial and entombment; and her elaboration of the concept of "homelessness," all three of the above prevalent both in her fiction and non-fiction, to argue how she depicts patriarchal constructs as exerting an indisputably evil impact on many women. This strategy of combined revelation – through direct address and artistic tropes and concepts scattered through her writings – intensifies the exposure, compelling the reader to confront the evil of patriarchy from many

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*Colonial India: Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain.* Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak makes an early reference to Rokeya's *Abarodhbashini* in her Columbia University lecture, "Thinking about the Humanities," in June 2007.

While Rokeya's work in social and educational improvement was mostly conducted in present day India, when referring to Bangladesh, I am also thinking of her efforts to improve the conditions of women through writing.

<sup>4</sup> In her Introduction to *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag*, Barnita Bagchi notes, "Rokeya did not get along with her stepdaughter and the latter's husband who forced her out of her home in Bhagalpur after Sakhawat Hossain's [Rokeya's husband] death" (ix).

<sup>5</sup> I will address Rokeya's confrontation with this evil in the public domain a bit further on in this essay.

<sup>6</sup> I mean that she presents these as actual facts in her non-fictional prose.

angles and consider the gravity of its impact at a time when women's rights were few and voices such as Rokeya's rare.<sup>7</sup>

### **A False Sense of Thrill, "Happiness" as Projection and Societal Buttressing**

While it is clearly an interpretive and critical fallacy to arbitrarily lump together atrocities perpetrated against human beings in different historical periods and under disparate historical circumstances, I think Hannah Arendt's astute comments on Adolf Eichmann and the Nazi regime, springing from her thoughts during Eichmann's 1961 trial at Jerusalem, seem appropriate here. Arendt observes that while Eichmann clearly recalled "turning points in his own career," somehow, they did not "coincide with the turning points in the story of Jewish extermination" (53). She also notes something rather unusual in Eichmann's character: a tendency to feel a sense of thrill or elation in the midst of the most tragic of human circumstances (Arendt 53).

Arendt gives us Eichmann's story, during a police examination, about Kommerzialrat Storfer of Vienna, a representative of the Jewish community. When Storfer was sent to the concentration camp at Auschwitz, from which, according to Himmler's orders, no one could get out, Storfer requested to see Eichmann, and the latter complied, based on their past acquaintance. Storfer was in one of the "labor gangs" in the camp and asked Eichmann if he could be let off the "heavy work." Consequently, Eichmann told Rudolf Höss, Commandant of Auschwitz, he would write out a chit so Storfer would keep "the gravel paths in order with a broom" and would have a right to sit down on a bench. He asked Storfer if this would be suitable for him (Arendt 50-51). Arendt gives us Eichmann's following reaction:

'Whereupon he [Storfer] was very pleased, and we shook hands, and then he was given the broom and sat down on his bench. It was a great inner joy to me that I could at least see the man with whom I had worked for so many long years, and that we could speak with each other.' (51)

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, I do not mean to say that women were not actively fighting for their rights. Many were. Bharati Ray, for instance, addresses the movement in Bengal for women's right to vote led by the Bangiya Nari Samaj (Association of Women in Bengal) in the first quarter of the twentieth century (25-26). She also traces the growth of women's associations in Bengal from the mid-nineteenth century onwards – associations devoted to women's issues such as education and abolition of child marriage – although she notes that in most cases, these were "spearheaded" by men (Ray 78). Barnita Bagchi, in "Towards Ladyland: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and the Movement for Women's Education in Bengal, c. 1900-c. 1932," also refers to the "mass mobilization of Indian women in the nationalist movement" under Mahatma Gandhi, but from the "1920s onwards" (745).

Arendt concludes this section with, “Six weeks after this normal human encounter, Storfer was dead – not gassed, apparently, but shot” (51).

Arendt goes on to observe that whether this was a “textbook case of bad faith, of lying self-deception combined with outrageous stupidity... or simply the case of the eternally unrepentant criminal... who cannot afford to face reality because his crime has become part and parcel of it” (51-52), such delusion was solidified and supported by the German society Eichmann had lived in. “And that German society of eighty million people had been shielded against reality and factuality by exactly the same means, the same self-deception, lies, and stupidity that had now become ingrained in Eichmann’s mentality” (Arendt 52).

While I reiterate that I am not indiscriminately yoking together crimes of the Nazi regime with patriarchal oppression in colonial India, Arendt’s points on Eichmann’s misplaced sense of “thrill”; his impression that Storfer “was very pleased”; and his delusion buttressed by the society he lived in have relevance for my argument and connect to Rokeya’s thoughts in an early twentieth century essay she wrote. In this essay, Rokeya comments on men feeling “joy” in bringing things for women to “make them happy.” While Eichmann’s “emotions” undoubtedly have far graver implications from a psychoanalytic perspective, what is similar in these two situations is the sense of feeling joy in doing something for a recipient whose emotions might not be equivalent to the giver’s. What Rokeya questions is a blind patriarchal assumption of this equivalence. Some women in colonial India may have appreciated such benevolence, but others may have felt stifled. Yet, in general, men would have been socially validated in this thought, or shall I say delusion, and women who stepped out of the bounds of such “benevolence” would be attacked as I discuss below.

Rokeya is quite explicit in addressing her awareness of evil in an early essay “Istrijatir Abanati”/“Woman’s Downfall” (1903), the piece I refer to above.<sup>8</sup> In reference to men wanting to prevent sorrow and make women happy, she says, “We thank these people for such generous thoughts, but brother, this wretched world is not merely a delightful fancy of poets – it is intricate, wicked and evil. Reality is not poetry” (9).<sup>9</sup> She notes that men are unrealistic, reductive and paternalistic when they say of women “We’ll bring everything for them with joy to make them happy” (9). Such “protection,”

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<sup>8</sup> Bharati Ray alerts us to the fact that when this essay “first appeared, it came as a shock to most readers, and some paragraphs had to be deleted or replaced before it was reprinted” (109).

<sup>9</sup> Dipesh Chakravorty, in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, notes that Rabindranath Tagore made a distinction “between prose and poetry in the 1890s” (166). He observes that in Tagore’s work, the “prosaic element” often addressed, among other things, “factionalism, ignorance... ‘feudal’ oppression,” in other words, things that were a part of the real, material world (Chakravorty 153), whereas the poetic helped us move beyond the real. It is possible that as a thinker and writer, Rokeya was aware of this contemporary Tagorean distinction.

Rokeya argues, fosters unnecessary dependence and has proven harmful for women.

Further, in contrast to such male idealism, we are presented with the hard facts of Rokeya's work in the public domain. Mohammad Quayum's introduction to the translation of her above essay alerts us that Rokeya started the "Bengal chapter of Anjuman-e-Khawatin-i-Islam (Muslim Women's Association) in 1916" (3), and one of its activities, as quoted from Roushan Jahan, was that it "rescued and sheltered battered wives" (3). Another critic on Rokeya, Barnita Bagchi, notes that Rokeya's Association helped widows in distress; encouraged educated women to teach in slums; and train residents for "income-generating work" (x). Yet Bagchi points out that when women from Anjuman-e-Khawatin-i-Islam went to work with women in the slums of Kolkata, "[s]ometimes, hostile men would try to prevent them from entering the area" (x). She further notes that, "Many alleged that her [Rokeya's] companions were prostitutes and the scum of society. Some even branded her a woman of loose morals" (Bagchi x).

Of course, one thing such critical observations underscore is the oppressed conditions of certain wives and widows, an undeniable evil in itself, but what I wish to focus on here is the deliberate, active vilification of women who work in the public sphere to improve the life conditions of other women. Such vicious and false allegations against female subjects engaged in social work sets up a dimension of difficulty that is entirely unnecessary and clearly a product of a masculinist cultural vision that wishes to position women in certain stipulated spaces and roles. Such charges (and acts) illustrate for us precisely what Rokeya notes: that reality is non-poetic and can tend towards evil. My 2009 interview with female social activists in Kolkata for a different project revealed that such attitudes and denigration still prevailed in certain conservative groups within India. For instance, Rajashri Dasgupta noted that whenever the female activist finds something to discredit in the cultural fabric, and especially if she mobilises forces to help the victim of patriarchal abuse, it is entirely possible that she can be subjected to character assassination.<sup>10</sup>

### **An Additional and Unnecessary Layer of Difficulty**

What is also particularly disturbing is that such allegations, as faced by Rokeya and her companions in the early twentieth century, present them in a light which is the exact reverse of the kinds of work they were trying to do. Why would social agents aiming to uplift the personal, economic, or educational condition of other women be categorised as "scum of society" or lacking in morals? A part of this distorted representation no doubt stemmed from anger at

<sup>10</sup> Dasgupta was responding specifically to my questions on female intervention and action in cases of abuse and assault of women.

the fact that these activist women's work revealed patriarchal evils such as those faced by some wives and widows. Such revelation was undesirable and especially undesirable if effected by women. If we go back to Rokeya's comments in "Istrijatir Abanati" on the world/reality being "intricate, wicked and evil," we understand that even in 1903, before she actively started work in the public sphere, Rokeya was thinking of a broader reality, the collective predicament of several unfortunate women in her society and culture rather than individual situations, romantic or otherwise, in which men showered women with their benevolence. What her and her companions' work in the public domain confirmed was the existence and impact of another form of patriarchal evil: pernicious allegations against women who worked against masculinist injustice and representations of them that were, in fact, the exact reverse of the kinds of work they did, in the hopes that such representation would undercut, if possible, the exposure of patriarchal ills.

My conversations with feminist activists in Kolkata<sup>11</sup> approximately a hundred years after Rokeya started her work in the public domain clarify for me that such allegations remain a well-entrenched patriarchal construct. As I have just argued in this essay, over and above the hard material work that activists such as Rokeya do in the public realm, this is an unneeded dimension that they must also tussle with, adding as it were an inimical ideological superstructure pervaded by the false.

In this regard, Bharati Ray makes in-depth observations as she discusses the spread of women's education in Bengal in the late eighteen hundreds:

It has to be mentioned here that although men like Rammohan Roy, Vidyasagar, and Vivekananda dedicated themselves to the cause of educating women and upgrading their life-situations out of genuine concern and idealism, the middle class was with them from a desire to make their private life conform to their public and professional life. (37)

Ray remarks that for the middle class, the objective of such reformist endeavours was not women's autonomy or to make them "equal partners of men" in the private or public sphere. On the other hand, it was to prepare them better to be conventional "wives and mothers in the colonial setting" (37).

Ray also makes the point that from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, a majority of female contributors to women's journals showed an internalisation of "male concepts of the new womanhood" and focused on women's nurturing abilities, spiritual and emotional dimensions, and "the basic difference between

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<sup>11</sup> Other than Dasgupta, I also talked with social workers such as Madhuchhanda Karlekar and Soma Marik.

men's and women's natures and roles" (41).<sup>12</sup> It should be clear from my discussion above that not only did Rokeya not internalise such gendered binaries, but that her commitment to consistently help women outside of the boundaries of family life was an early example of women's autonomy in the public sphere.

To go back to Ray, in a discussion of *Sultana's Dream* she notes, "Rokeya's courage of conviction was transparent in every part of her work. She made no secret of the fact that she considered men primarily responsible for the abject subjection of women" (62). In a comparative analysis of Rokeya and her contemporary activist Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, Ray further observes that Sarala felt women were mainly responsible for their lack of progress, and she exhibited no special anger against men. On the other hand, even as Rokeya criticised women for their predicament, she felt men deserved the real blame for they had "planned the strategies and systematically transformed those into social rules for dominating women" and "had punished any woman who had tried to resist" (76). Barnita Bagchi speaks in a similar vein when she notes that when Rokeya's essays

first appeared in periodicals that were read by educated Muslims and Hindus [they] realized how remorseless she could be in exposing women's oppression and the machinations of a patriarchal society that indoctrinated them into defending and justifying their own subjugation. (ix)

### **Rokeya's Trope of Excess**

In my reading of Rokeya's canon, her unease and sorrow at the prevailing injustices of patriarchy as also this imposed and uncalled for layer of difficulty comprising false allegations manifest themselves in three figurative ways. She reiteratively uses ideas of disease, entombment and homelessness to dramatise a keenly felt sense of repression and non-belonging. In both her fiction and non-fiction, the reader notices, of course, a heavy scattering of images of illness, a "festering ulcer," sores, wounds, blood, pus, surgery and death. Clearly, these help mobilise thoughts of something seriously wrong and rotten in the state/condition of masculinist oppression. A case in point is her essay "Griha"/"Home," with publication dates of 1904, 1905 and 1907, in which Rokeya addresses the "ailment in the body of our society" (4), but also says that if her "attempt to expose the inner life of the zenana" "causes pain for the patient, he will have to endure it" (4). Here, the "patient" of course is the oppressive agent of patriarchy, signified as ill because he is instrumental in causing the "inner life of the zenana" to be as it is, and Rokeya does not hesitate to strike out at him through her writing, bringing together cause and deserved

<sup>12</sup> See Ray also for a specific discussion of Muslim nationalism and the role of women's education in it in this period. See especially page 52.

effect. We see similar images of festering wounds, discharges, disease and a string of deaths in her short story "Nurse Nelly," published in 1919/1922.

In "Nurse Nelly," the narrator says of a female character, "She was confined to her bed and had to depend on nurses to change her and to dress the ulcer wound on her arm" ("Nurse Nelly" 3).<sup>13</sup> And referring to a nurse, in fact the title character Nurse Nelly who tends this patient, the narrator observes, "But the one who took away the bucket full of discharges of blood and pus from her body... her face struck me as somewhat familiar" ("Nurse Nelly" 3). While such images point to the incapacitation of women and the "sickening" stagnation of women's potential under the several constraints of male hegemony, I believe that Rokeya goes further in foregrounding a particular trope of "excess." In other words, what strikes the reader not just in her use of images of ailment and bodily discharges, but also in her sustained deployment of concepts of entombment and homelessness, is a dramatic feeling of exaggeration. The reader comes away from her texts with an understanding of a deliberate reiteration, of almost a disproportionate driving home of these images and metaphors, so that the ultimate effect is of them spilling over beyond the boundaries of the texts themselves.

I argue that this embedding of imagistic and metaphoric excess is Rokeya's writerly manifestation, together with other forms of direct address, of her sense of additional, "excessive," grossly unnecessary and almost unbearable layers of difficulty in the lives of women who worked in the public sphere in colonial India in the early twentieth century. I wish to remind the reader here that I am thinking not of more conformist women who upheld patriarchal constructs of femininity even as they worked in the public domain, but women such as Rokeya who fearlessly challenged masculinist oppression and gendered constructions. However, the expression of an unbearable excess also sometimes appears as she discusses women's predicament in the private sphere. I will address this in the paragraphs immediately following. Thus, Rokeya brings into play this trope of something more than bearable to address women's condition in the private sphere, but in my reading, also to signify more implicitly their difficulties in the public realm.

In both the fictional "Nurse Nelly" and the essay "Griha," Rokeya uses the concepts of burial/entombment and homelessness within this overarching trope of excess. I will limit my analysis to these two works by Rokeya to discuss her use of these concepts within the governing trope. Mohammad Quayum's notes to his translation of "Nurse Nelly" elaborate on Rokeya's references to Anarkali's tomb in this story. As Quayum reminds us, in early seventeenth century India, Emperor Akbar ordered his concubine Anarkali buried alive

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<sup>13</sup> Here, Rokeya skilfully shifts gears from "patient" as oppressive subject to "patient" as object of oppression.



because of his suspicion of her relationship with his son, Selim/Jahangir. The notion of something more than bearable for woman is mobilised in the reader's mind through the reference to Anarkali's tomb in the story and Rokeya's mention of her live burial in a footnote. The metaphor of burial serves a different purpose in the story with reference to the Taj Mahal (built by Shah Jahan in 1631) and Mumtaz Mahal. As Rokeya says, Shah Jahan's memorial to his wife is "renowned worldwide," "[y]et, how many have heard about Mumtaz Mahal, the woman who lies buried in that far-famed mausoleum?" (11). Here, the trope of excess works in two directions, emphasising the world-renown of the architectural wonder built by the male monarch and the appalling obscurity of the woman it memorialises. The reality and metaphor of burial and entombment serve to reinforce the major theme of woman's marginalisation and decimation in "Nurse Nelly."

The concept of homelessness, as it applies to the central character Nayeema or Nurse Nelly, works right through the story following her conversion to Christianity.<sup>14</sup> However, Rokeya dramatises it quite brilliantly in conjunction with the idea of burial, and within her broader trope of excess, at the close of the story. The powerful impact of this dramatisation is preceded by a raising and then quick dimming of hope both in her reading audience and the narrator of the story – Nayeema's sister-in-law. The narrator is hopeful when her brother, Nayeema's husband, says that despite his humiliation at what happened and subsequent deaths of his mother, daughter, Jamila, and son, Jafar (presented in the story as very likely results of Nayeema's "abandonment"), he is alive only to see Nayeema once more. Yet, this hope is categorically erased by Rokeya's non-sentimental narrativisation in the conclusion of the story. The husband quickly adds that he wishes to see Nayeema because of his desire to kill her, specifically to shoot her, "firing six bullets one at a time" into her ("Nurse Nelly" 13). The only thing that would stop him from executing this desire is that "Nayeema has reaffirmed her faith in Islam and become a Muslim again," and "[i]t is forbidden to kill a fellow Muslim" ("Nurse Nelly" 13). The story closes with a telegram delivered to the family saying they should have a grave ready as Nayeema has died in Lucknow where she worked as a nurse, and her body is being sent.

The metaphor of burial returns, but for Nayeema, the once "aberrant," self-willed woman, burial works not together with coming home, but a haunting state of homelessness. Rokeya deliberately activates a sense of unease and non-resolution in her readers by providing no closure for the female corpse being returned "home." For the image of the corpse is conceptually framed within excessive and long-sustained masculine anger, Rokeya adding to this the

<sup>14</sup> It is not possible for me to address this issue of conversion within the scope of this essay. Mohammad Quayum's comments in this regard in his translation of the story are most helpful.

obvious phallic symbol of the gun. Her trope of excess to underscore dimensions of patriarchal evil and its effects on women is particularly explicit at the end of “Nurse Nelly.” It is as if the woman, presented in the story as ravaged by guilt and grief because of her “sin” and dead at its closing, has neither a resting place nor an exit. We come away from the story not only with the image of the corpse of the marginalised and decimated woman, but this corpse followed out of life and yet contained as it were by overwhelming and unrelenting masculinist anger. In her dramatisation of these notions of pursuit and containment, together with the death of the woman, Rokeya brings into play most effectively her trope of excess, signifying not just Nayeema’s predicament but that of other women, such as Anarkali, who live and die within such patriarchal domination.

It is commendable that other than the deployment of these concepts of illness, burial and homelessness within the broader trope of excess in her fiction, Rokeya also uses these in her non-fictional writings, such as in the essay “Griha”/“Home.” The image of the “festering ulcer” appears here to indicate woman’s discomfort and her sense of not belonging within the home. In fact, Rokeya extends this idea of non-belonging to claim that for many “[d]aughters, wives, widows,” “home is like a prison” (4). The metaphor of the tomb also figures in this essay – “Bride-chamber is called ‘khwabgah’ in this part of the world, but it should actually be called a ‘tomb’” (5) – as Rokeya develops the idea of women’s confinement within the precincts of the home and their lack of familiarity with a carriage and other forms of transportation.

Although both the image of the non-remediable ulcer and the metaphor of the tomb used in connection with an inescapable and interminable confinement for women work within the governing trope of excess, the trope is most forceful in its effect when Rokeya addresses property inheritance issues for women. She details the ways in which a patriarchal culture manipulates and bars women’s access to property they should rightfully inherit.<sup>15</sup> According to Rokeya, in many instances, dominant males within the family, and even “brothers,” strategically arranged marriage for their female kin with “opium-addicts, ganja-addicts, illiterates, the sick elderly – people who are incapable of claiming their share of the inheritance legally” (“Home” 9). At times, sisters were made to sign a statement before marriage relinquishing their rights to the property (“Home” 9). Through the mention of such deliberate self-interested planning by which men violated basic codes of love, responsibility and ethical behaviour within kinship networks, Rokeya squarely foregrounds for us the

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<sup>15</sup> Rokeya clarifies that according to Mohammedan law women can inherit paternal property and even be home-owners. In reality/practice however, the owner was always a male of the family, and in the absence of any males, a “government officer” or “attorney” took over, with the “female proprietor” becoming a “puppet” in his hands (8).

concept of patriarchal evil in early twentieth century India.<sup>16</sup> The idea of women's non-belonging within the home because of masculinist restrictions and controls, introduced early in the essay through the image of the "festering ulcer," is intensified here as Rokeya discusses how women are rendered "property-less" or "homeless" in a very real sense. The addressing of such deprivation and dispossession because of the machinations of men brings into play the notion of an additional and unnecessary layer of difficulty for women in the private sphere.

### Conclusions

In between the publication of "Griha" and "Nurse Nelly," Rokeya had become a widow, been forced out of her home, and also actively taken up humanitarian work in the public sphere. Through this work, she had formed connections with other women committed to like endeavours. While "Griha" mostly focuses on women's issues within the private sphere and presents the writer as observer and one who classifies and documents, "Nurse Nelly" shifts woman into the public domain of service and traces the narrator's bond with the protagonist. What remains unsettling about this story, however (or at least for the twentieth/twenty-first century feminist), is Nelly's "uncontrollable" grief and "overwhelming" need to return to the private sphere. Yet, if hypothetically, such a return were to happen, it would only be for her extinction via the apparatus of a disproportionate male anger as the story indicates.

It would be a simplistic and reductive reading if I were to see these works as only carrying autobiographical echoes and charting the trajectory of Rokeya's own life. I would like to return, therefore, to my discussion of Rokeya's trope of excess and suggest that in "Nurse Nelly," this trope works to signify the "unbearable" for woman not just within the private sphere or the public, but also when she is situated in a transitional space between both. What I want to emphasise here is more the conceptual space in the woman's mind as she makes this shift. Rokeya mobilises the trope of excess in this story, other than what I discuss earlier in this essay, also through Nayeema's ceaseless crying, falling to the ground, and fainting, to mark her predicament in that transitional space between the private and the public. Rokeya's own position on whether such transition is necessary and beneficial for women is evident to me both from her conclusion to the story (i.e. the portrayal of male anger in the private domain) and the fact that she titles it not "Nayeema," but "Nurse Nelly." However, it is not just an individual authorial perspective that she wants to convey through the story, as also the movement through and negotiation of this space by many women who make this transition. Her use of the trope of excess in this other

<sup>16</sup> Interestingly enough, Rokeya says towards the end of this essay that she has not attacked men as "diabolic or heartless," but simply "documented" women's misfortunes. She notes that this documentation "has somehow become a vilification of the men" (10).

sense that I discuss here indicates that she understands how difficult such movement can be for some women. Thus, “Nurse Nelly” also brings us a developing connection between women, albeit nascent, a connection that Rokeya addresses more fully in *Padmarag*. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak reminds us in “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” “the possibility of collectivity itself is persistently foreclosed through the manipulation of female agency” (283).<sup>17</sup> In her own work in the public sphere as also in her literary productions such as “Istrijatir Abanati” and “Nurse Nelly,” Rokeya shows us again and again her understanding of the collective predicament of certain groups of oppressed women rather than foregrounding merely a relatively privileged individual vision.<sup>18</sup> I believe that through her lifework and art, Rokeya underscores the vital need of understanding such predicaments and the urgency of women’s collective action in the face of the not so banal evil of patriarchy.

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<sup>17</sup> In this by now canonical text, Spivak, of course, is addressing the European tendency to speak for the colonised subject as also the “silence” of the (female) subaltern subject in the face of preferred forms of subject construction within national elitist and patriarchal contexts.

<sup>18</sup> As I argue above, although “Nurse Nelly” primarily focuses on Nayeema, the trope of excess indicates more than an individual and moves us to consider a collective state of transition.

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