

Educating Women, (Not) Serving the Nation: The Interface of Feminism and Nationalism in the Works of Rokeya Sakhwat Hossain

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Abstract

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) wrote at a transitional time in the history of India. It was a time when Indian society was fast changing under the leadership of a new patriarchy, formed by the English-educated middle class. The emerging middle class also led the anti-colonial nationalist movement. It is, therefore, important to read Rokeya not only in terms of how she approached patriarchy but also in terms of its then newer manifestation in the form of nationalism. In her early works, Rokeya appears to merge the national and woman question, regarding the liberation of the Indian women as part and parcel of the larger venture of national emancipation. The feminist agenda is actually conceptualised within a wider framework of nationalism. But midway in her writing and activist career, a shift seems to have taken place in relation to her engagement with the feminist agenda she has long been fighting to implement. For reasons elaborated in the main body of the present essay, she now came to consider the interests of Indian women as meriting independent treatment, initiating in the process a delinking of the two projects: feminist and nationalist. The separation of the two programmes finally enables her, I argue, to critique Indian nationalism in her later works.

Keywords

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, education, feminism, nationalism, critique, patriarchy

When a new discourse comes to be constructed, the first thing it does (as if by default) is to define itself by emphasising its difference from discourses antecedent to it. In India, for example, colonial history defined itself in terms of how it differed from Mughal/Muslim history. The same is true of subaltern historiography in recent times. Ranajit Guha, the undisputed guru of subaltern

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studies in general and subaltern history in particular, does not mince words as to what he and his group of followers propose to do: they aim at “rectify[ing] the elitist bias characteristic of much research and academic work” “in the field of South Asian studies” (vii). Of particular interest to the subaltern historians is “[t]he historiography of Indian nationalism” which, they claim, “has for a long time been dominated by elitism – colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism” (Guha 1). From the naming of the adversaries, one is able to infer what the subaltern historian is up to: s/he wants to bring to light “the contribution made by the people *on their own*, that is, *independently of the elite* to the making and development of [Indian] nationalism” (Guha 3, emphasis in original). So it is only by pitting itself against both colonial and bourgeois-national histories that subaltern history can claim for itself the privileged status of being a new historiography of Indian nationalism.

Yet the successor discourse is perhaps never absolutely free from the traces of what has gone before it.² The long shadows of the predecessors continue to haunt it in some way or other. Colonial India once again provides a good example. The subaltern historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has convincingly shown how M.K. Gandhi in his critique of European colonialism borrows the very terms of that critique from the European Enlightenment (Ghosh and Chakrabarty 154-55). If such is the case between discourses formed across different times (as well as cultures), it will not possibly come as a big surprise that discourses inhabiting the same spatial and temporal zone will have a lot of commonality among themselves (see Foucault 1980 and 1989). It is common knowledge that in India discourses as well as attendant practices of reformism, modernity, feminism and nationalism came to be produced in the same discursive environment – an environment that came into existence as a direct result of the colonial encounter. They all grew and flourished almost simultaneously, not only enriching one another in the process but also each bearing traces of the discourses and practices against which it self-fashioned itself (e.g. feudalism, monarchy, patriarchy, tradition and so on).

Hence arises the question of ambivalence in discourse. However hard a discourse (or an ideology) may try to present a coherent narrative, it is never able to suppress its inherent ambiguities, contradictions and tensions, which usually derive from the discourse/ideology concerned straddling two worldviews – the old and the new (see Bhabha 1989 and 1990). Despite all its modern paraphernalia, the discourse of nation, for instance, is always torn between its adherence to a glorious past (revivalism) and its commitment to a (cosmopolitan) future brighter than the present. To carry on with the example of nationalist discourse, another productive area of contradiction regularly found in it relates to the roles it ascribes to men and women. As Elleke

² In a broader sense, intertextuality is not just literary-cultural, but also discursive in general.

Boehmer so aptly puts it, “It is difficult, though not impossible, to conceive (of) the nation without the inscription of specific symbolic roles for male and female historical actors” (5). To put it the other way round, nationalism assigns different(ial) roles to men and women based on gender: men forge the destiny of the nation – hence Nehru’s “tryst with destiny” (Nehru 76), while women are “the *bearers* of national culture” (Boehmer 4, emphasis in original; see also Yuval-Davis 1997). It does not require a great deal of imagination or intelligence to see the ghost of patriarchy stalking the nationalist division of (gendered) labour. The *national* roles are, in fact, so assigned as to reproduce the old patriarchal hierarchy. Insofar as gender is concerned, nationalism is in collusion with patriarchy, a fact that Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, the subject of the present essay, like many a feminists of her time, came to realise only at a later phase of her writing and activist career.

It is, however, not so easy (at least for those actively involved as Rokeya was) to see through the unholy alliance of patriarchy and nation, especially in the colonial context of India, if only because the rise of national and feminist consciousness in India at the turn of the nineteenth century stemmed from the same reformist programme that had been launched at the beginning of the century (Jayawardena 73). There is, as a consequence, a great deal of camaraderie between the two discourses of nation and feminism in India. Both define themselves against tradition: the former against earlier, more locally/narrowly defined collectivities; the latter against traditional gender roles prescribed by patriarchy. Because both feminists and nationalists aim at bringing about a new civil society, which will be democratic, progressive and secular, the former often take the latter as selflessly working for them. It is primarily by virtue of its anti-traditional stance that the rhetoric of Indian nationalism holds such a magnetic appeal to the feminists in India. But the fact that nationalism is basically a male-centred, middle-class movement, is too palpable a fact to be kept from view for long. At some point or other, its progressive face cracks open, revealing in the process the groups (“neo-patriarchy” being chief among them) whose vested interests it serves (Mann qtd. in Kandiyoti 377). Disillusioned and embittered, advocates of female interests like Rokeya feel the need to re-examine the whole national/social question vis-à-vis the interests of women they have long been fighting for. A new course of action is adopted, re-aligning the priorities of nation and women. The process gets under way by delinking the two agendas: feminist and national. From then on, the fight for the rights of women becomes an agenda in its own merit. The delinking also blocks the re-entry of patriarchy into the woman question.

By now it should be clear that the story of feminism in India is a complex one; its trajectory is a site marked by manifold ideological negotiations, with the one with patriarchy/nation briefly touched upon above. What these

negotiations point to is the fact that feminism in the Indian context changes ideological alliance from time to time so that it can truly become a movement of the women, by the women, for the women. The delinking of feminist and national agendas in Rokeya is an example of one such negotiation. In what follows, I shall read Rokeya, paying careful attention to the tensions that mark the body of her work, with a view to seeing/showing how she emerges as a true feminist at the end of the day.

Rokeya, who wrote as Mrs R.S. Hossein in the early decades of the twentieth century in the then British India, is a well-known figure in the history of movements that have sought to change the lot of Indian women.³ In the manner of women across the globe, the woman of the Indian subcontinent has been and still is a victim of a whole array of oppressions, from legal to physical to sexual. Through her tireless activism and praxis (writing being one of its major components), Rokeya spent the greater part of her adult life in trying to emancipate the hapless women of contemporary India. Among the means she chose for women to be on a par with men is education. Rokeya believed that only education would give the Indian woman the dignity and freedom she has so often been denied by her counterpart. An interesting point to note here is that her early works tend to envisage the liberation of women as contributing to the building of a strong community of nation. Empowerment of women through education does not appear to have been conceived (of) as an end in itself; rather it is imagined as a means to an end which is to serve the nation. In other words, the woman question remains tied to the national question. The position begins to shift in her later writings which one can see as enacting a gradual delinking of the woman question from the national one. The separation of the two agendas finally enables Rokeya (especially in *Padmarag*, 1924) to envision her fight for the rights of the women of India as one meriting independent treatment. With the national issue put on hold, the question of the rights of women now becomes the number one agenda, enabling in the process a critique not only of the age-old patriarchy but also of its then newer manifestation, that is, nationalism.

Rokeya began her writing career in 1902 with the publication of a pathos-filled essay called “Pipasha” (Thirst).⁴ The first volume of *Motichur*, a collection of previously published articles, appeared two years later in 1904. Of the seven essays in this volume, all, except for the first one (mentioned above), deal with issues deeply and directly concerning women. It is in the second piece titled “Strijatir Obonoti” (Woman’s Downfall), however, that Rokeya comes to articulate the question to which she keeps returning time and again throughout

³ For a lucid overview of the life and works of Rokeya in Bengali, see Murshid (2000).

⁴ The full title of the piece is “Pipasha: Muharram.”

her life-long campaign against the manifold injustices and prejudices to which the Indian woman has been subjected for decades on a daily basis:

Dear female readers, have you ever thought about the condition of your misfortune? What are we in this civilised world of the twentieth century? Slaves! I hear slavery as a trade has disappeared from this world, but has our servitude ended? No. There are reasons why we are still in bondage. (Rokeya 11, 6)⁵

With the condition of the women of India so graphically and so poignantly drawn, Rokeya goes on to examine the “reasons” why they are “still” in such a condition. Both men (in the form of patriarchy) and women (having internalised patriarchal ideology) are to blame. (The irony is Rokeya herself internalised patriarchal ideology in its newer configuration of nationalism; but far ahead of her time as she was, she was finally able to grow out of it). Denied opportunities to cultivate higher mental faculties such as courage and self-reliance, (Indian) women “have become slaves of indolence and, by extension, of men” (11, 6). Even their minds are no longer free: “Being serfs for centuries, we have now become used to our serfdom” (11, 6).

What can be done to set the Indian woman free? Rokeya answers in unambiguous terms:

If we say that we are weak, ignorant, dull-witted women, who is to blame for it? Ourselves! We do not nurture our intellect, so it has lost its vigour. Now we will reinvigorate it through cultivation. The hands that have become delicate through lack of exertion, can't we make them strong again through utilisation? Let's try to foster knowledge once more and see whether this dull head becomes sharp again. (21, 15)

In short, education is the panacea. But when it comes to the ultimate question of why the women of India need to rise, Rokeya aligns herself with the national question and thus jumps out of the frying pan of patriarchy into the fire of nationalism. One wonders what was actually championing, feminism or nationalism. The discursive framework of patriarchy within which the ills of Indian women have so far been debated now gives way to that of the nation. It is to serve the nation that the Indian woman has to rise: “What will make us the deserving daughters of the land?” (20, 14). More importantly, the service is voluntarily offered in the hope (in fact, belief) that the nation-in-the-making will open up a space in which the women of India will be able “to work alongside the men in all affairs of life” (20, 14). Insofar as Rokeya imagines the

⁵ The second page number is of the translation used. Where there is no second page number, the translation is mine.

community of nation as making no discriminations between men (sons?) and women (daughters) as patriarchy does, there is no harm in merging the interests of the Indian women with those of the nation. The national cause remains the primary cause.

There is no scarcity of examples of the entwining of the female and national interests in the essays collected in the first volume of *Motichur*. In “Ordhangi” (The Female Half), for instance, Rokeya goes back to her earlier essay to show how the female disease of “slavery” she had discussed in that earlier piece has distorted contemporary social condition (24). To set it right, men and women of India have to work hand-in-hand, “for if ‘all the Indian women do not rise’ this India will not be able to rise anymore” (30). But will the Indian woman be allowed to work alongside her counterpart in the same social domain? In the earlier essay Rokeya (under the magic spell of nationalism) had given a more than affirmative reply:

We’ll do all we have to in order to attain equality with the men. If earning a livelihood freely brings our freedom, then we’ll do that. If need be, we’ll begin by becoming clerks and then magistrates, barristers-at-law, judges; we’ll work in every profession. Fifty years from now, we’ll have a lady viceroy in the country who will turn all the women into ‘empresses.’ (20, 14)

Although the ultimate tendency of the essay under consideration here is to accommodate the interests of Indian women within the broader framework of the interests of the nation, the extract above enacts two crucial interventions – clear signs that Rokeya would ultimately break free from the hold of the seductive rhetoric of nation-building. First, it does not envisage men and women as *destined* to perform different kinds of work in distinct social spheres. Second, the social space envisioned is porous enough to permit the Indian woman to enter the so-called male realm “freely” and do whatsoever he is capable of doing. Thus Rokeya is not only flouting the patriarchal-nationalist division of social space into male and female domains here but is also anticipating one of the most radical ideas of third-wave feminism – that of gender as nothing but a performance: the roles assigned to women are not givens, but social constructs (Butler 140).

But the answer Rokeya offers in “Sugrihini” (The Efficient Housewife) to the question above is far from subversive. It is rather pro-nationalist and, by the same token, pro-patriarchal. As the very title of the piece suggests, the sphere of female efficiency and excellence is home, not the world. Countering the popular view that women do not need intelligence (because they do not do what men do such as earning a livelihood, preparing for a course of study, or going to war to defend the country), Rokeya asks rhetorically: “Then for what

will we attain higher education (or *mental* culture)?” (32, emphasis in original). It is to become efficient housewives. A more interesting intersection of feminism, nationalism and patriarchy will be hard to come across in the early works of Rokeya. While the demand for female education is an obvious feminist agenda, the limits imposed on its operation are clearly derived from the twin discourses/ideologies of nation and patriarchy. Of the last two essays in the first volume of *Motichur*, “Borka” (The Veil) and “Griho” (Home), the former both critiques and endorses the Indian practice of *purdah*, while the latter focuses on how the Indian woman – whether a spinster, a housewife, or a widow – remains homeless (in fact, an outcast) even in the so-called female domain of home only because patriarchy never truly accepts her as a “member” of the family (45). For the women of India, “home is like a prison” (45).

Between the publication of the first part of *Motichur* and that of the second, Rokeya published a “feminist utopian narrative” titled *Sultana’s Dream* in a Madras-based journal called *Indian Ladies’ Magazine* in 1905 (Bagchi vii). *Sultana’s Dream* is the first and only fictional work in English by Rokeya. Why did Rokeya need to switch over from Bengali to English (the language of the coloniser) in a work which marks an important transition not only in her writing career but also in her conceptualisation of the function of (imaginative) literature? Also, why was it necessary to use fantasy rather than realism in *Sultana’s Dream*? The decision to write *Sultana’s Dream* in English can be explained in several ways. At a personal level, there is the possibility that Rokeya wanted to impress her husband by choosing to write the story in that language. Moving on to a broader context, it may seem, on the surface of it, that in adopting English Rokeya is moving away from the nationalist camp. But actually the opposite is true, for the national leadership in India felt no qualms about using English in its fight against British rule. The reality is that English worked as a bridge, as a *lingua franca*, that provided a political platform for Bengalis, Madrasis, Maharashtrians, Punjabis etc. to come together and debate the ways best suited for liberating the Indian nation from the shackles of an oppressive colonial regime. What in fact is happening here is that the choice of English allows Rokeya to broaden the reach of her fight against patriarchy. Now, with *Sultana’s Dream* written in English, sisters from parts of India other than Bengal will also be able to read and understand her coded message. Both literally and metaphorically, *Sultana’s Dream* aims at generating a consciousness of pan-Indian sisterhood, a sisterhood that is (ironically) nationally inclusive.

There is thus a disjuncture between the conception and execution of the feminist programme in *Sultana’s Dream* engendered by the language in which it is written. On the one hand, it constructs a utopia in which matriarchy, not patriarchy, is the established order; on the other, the kind of inclusive sisterhood it envisions (on a national, if not international, level) can only be possible in the multilingual context of India through the use of English, the

language of both colonial and national politics at the time. Even then *Sultana's Dream* can be seen as initiating the process of delinking the two agendas of educating and thus liberating the Indian woman (the feminist programme) and in the process turning her into a worthy daughter of the nation by way of giving her enfranchised citizenship (the nationalist project).

Ladyland, the physical setting of *Sultana's Dream*, is fittingly ruled by a “kin[d]-hearted Queen” (469). Here women are what they are not in India – bold, strong, punctual, intelligent, inventive, upright and capable of doing everything except for “mischief” (465). They function in the outer domain, “while gentlemen are kept in the Murdanas to mind babies, to cook and to do all sorts of domestic work” (471). But the freedom they now enjoy had to be won. It was by establishing that they could “rule over the country and control all social matters” better than men that they were able “to shut [their] men indoors” (471, 464). There are thus two obvious inversions of the socio-cultural-political dynamics that informs the operation of “the system of patriarchy” (hooks 1): the binaries of different gender roles and separate gender spheres are there, it is true, but the conventional associations have been reversed. Insofar as *Sultana's Dream* succeeds in just re-configuring the associations of patriarchal-nationalist binaries without being able to deconstruct or do away with them completely, it can be safely argued that the famous utopia is only partially successful in mounting a critique of nationalist/patriarchal discourse. For a radical take on patriarchal and nationalist ideology, one will have to wait till the publication in 1924 of *Padmarag*, the only full-length work of fiction by Rokeya.

Rokeya appears to have been prompted to abandon realism and embrace fantasy in *Sultana's Dream* in reaction to what her early commentators said about her articles as they appeared in various journals. More often than not, the responses were abusive and hostile, and the language used, contemptuous. Of the two groups of readers, the female one seemed to have been more offended by what Rokeya was trying to say than its counterpart. Below are a few examples, all about the essay “Olonkar Na Badge of Slavery” (Ornament or Badge of Slavery), which first appeared in three instalments in *Mobila* (The Woman): “The way she has drawn the image of the anarchic woman and attacked the male race is extremely deplorable on the part of a woman of noble birth [like her]” (qtd. in Alam 141). Reacting to a later, revised version of the piece published as “Amader Obonoti” (Our Downfall) in *Nobonur* (The New Light), another female reader wrote:

Sister Hossain is a notable writer of *Nobonur*. I've been carefully studying her essays for quite a long time. There is no doubt that her earnest intention is noble, but on reading the essays produced by her one strongly

doubts her neutrality and intention. It seems as if she has taken the seat of a writer with the motto of ‘oppressing brothers.’ (qtd. in Alam 142)

But the response that singles itself out by virtue of sheer rhetorical force also articulates the deep-seated anxieties that remain hidden in the racial memory of world patriarchy:

It is you who were the initiators of our fall from the garden of paradise; it is you who were the *femmes fatales* of the Trojan War; it is you who caused the Lanka affair; it is you who were the prime cause of the dreadful event at Karbala. Hence the fear, what terrible things might happen when you rise again! It’s good you become free, but it is desirable that you don’t misuse freedom. (Yousafji, qtd. in Alam 142)

Such reactions as the ones above might have led Rokeya to re-think how she was going to carry on her campaign against patriarchy which appeared not only averse to countenance any sign of female emancipation but also bent upon crushing it without any delay. The move from realism to fantasy in *Sultana’s Dream* is thus a strategic one: it cleared a space for Rokeya so that she could simultaneously hang on to the agenda closest to her heart and avoid open conflict with her old adversary. (But the brush with patriarchy might also have worked to radicalise her further, especially in her approach to its newer incarnation: nationalism). Rokeya will go back to the first category (realism) in her last work *Oborodhbasini* (The Secluded Ones) published in 1931, thus signalling the confidence she will have gained through her life-long fight for the rights of Indian women.

The article “Olonkar Na Badge of Slavery” was twice revised. In its final version, which appeared in the first book of *Motichur* as “Strijatir Obonoti” (Woman’s Downfall), Rokeya abandoned all those passages that were openly critical of patriarchy and its age-old accomplice, religious/theological discourse. On the whole, the resultant piece was far less antagonistic in tone than its original. Yet the trend of aggressive criticism did not abate. Overall the critical reception of the first part of *Motichur* was far from friendly.⁶ Dakshinaranjan Mitramajumdar, one of the early critics of the first volume of *Motichur*, for example, praises the piece titled “Pipasha” (Thirst) quite highly, though for reasons he himself is critical of at the beginning of his article (qtd. in *Rokeya Rachanabali* 545-46). He is more or less appreciative of the essay called “The Harmless Bengali” in which Rokeya delineates the character of the Bengali no less sarcastically than her nationalist precursor Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya had done of the (Bengali) Babu in his witty piece titled “Babu”

⁶ A few voices also rose in defence, but they could hardly match the volume and intensity of those of the opposition.

(*Rokeya Rachanabali* 546). But Mitramajumdar has strong reservations about the things Rokeya says in the other five (in fact, four) essays which deal with the ills the Indian woman is beset with and point to the ways she can adopt to rise from her fallen condition (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 546-56). He is alarmed that the thing Rokeya is asking for is no less than the freedom of the women of India (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 547). Mitramajumdar welcomes reform but does not think that the kind of reform Rokeya is trying to initiate, is reform at all. It is anarchy; it is so disruptive that it will alter the very fabric of society (547). Not surprisingly, the lengthy counter argument that Mitramajumdar constructs to prove Rokeya “wrong” is thoroughly embedded in discourses of patriarchy and nation (554). All the hallowed patriarchal and national binaries are there: man is physically strong, woman weak; man actively tries to acquire knowledge, woman passively believes in what man knows; man is “day,” woman “night”; man functions in the outer arena, woman in the inner; and so on (552-53). In the manner of a true nationalist, Mitramajumdar writes:

We do not say that at present we have nothing to learn from the West, but do we have to learn from the West even about true civilization and society? Our outer domain for whatever reason is plunged in the waves of the sea of Western thought. If our inner domain too follows suit, it will be a matter of great alarm then. We do not expect that. It is because there is Eastern thought in the inner domain that the sign of the East still continues to subsist in the world. We wish the woman of the East will grow in Eastern thought. (555)

Quite consistently, Mitramajumdar bestows the highest praise on the piece titled “The Efficient Housewife” (556). One can plainly see why: one of the roles that patriarchy/nation is ever so ready to grant women, is that of wife. If the wife is an efficient one (in the sense of modernised), the nation is all the more happy. In educating the Indian woman on how to become an efficient housewife, Rokeya is actively contributing to the modernising programme of the nation.

Apart from the kind of demoralising criticism that the first volume of *Motichur* drew, a couple of other factors should also be taken into consideration to be able to read the works comprising its second part in perspective. A brief outline of the context in which they came to be written is therefore worth delineation. The number of works in the second volume of *Motichur* is ten. Except for “Sourojogot” (The Solar System), most of them belong to the early 1920s. By then Rokeya had lost her husband (in 1909) and both parents (mother in 1912 and father, the next year). The death of husband rendered Rokeya a widow – a most vulnerable position for an Indian woman – more so, if childless, as Rokeya was. With the protection of husband (who was also a mentor) gone, it is very likely that Rokeya chose to mellow her attack on the norms, practices and values that worked to keep the Indian woman in chains.

The question of patronage for the school that Rokeya eventually established in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in 1911 (that is, two years after the death of her husband) could also have led her to tone down her offensive against patriarchy. Finally, in 1916 Rokeya set up an organisation called Anjuman-i-Khawatin-i-Islam (Muslim Women's Association), with a view to serving working-class women. The organisation and the school turned Rokeya into a full-time activist. She was now practically doing (in both capacities) what she had been long preaching. The new role of activist might also have had a softening effect on how Rokeya approached what she wrote about at the time. It comes as no surprise then that the Rokeya one comes across in the works in the second volume of *Motichur* is a different Rokeya. In contrast to the pieces (excepting the opening one) in the first part of *Motichur*, but in line with *Sultana's Dream*, the dominant discursive/narrative mode combines allegory with fantasy – both modes of indirect engagement. But the new role could also have radicalised Rokeya further in her engagement with the feminist agenda, paving the way for its ultimate separation from the national question.

Even then the second volume of *Motichur* is far from conservative. In fact, it has its own kind of radicalism. In “Delicia-Hatya” (The Murder of Delicia), a transcreation of Marie Corelli's *The Murder of Delicia* (1896), for example, Rokeya compares the lives of Delicia and Majluma, Delicia's Indian counterpart. Even though the two appear to have nothing in common – one is “independent, belongs to the imperial race and is not confined to the inner domain”; the other is “dependent, belongs to the subject race and is confined to strict seclusion” – there is actually little difference between them in that both are victims of male-dominated society (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 115). Male domination and patriarchal oppression are universal phenomena. By highlighting that women everywhere in the world are “powerless” (115), Rokeya gives her critique of patriarchy a much wider geopolitical validity than she has been able to before. For a related reason too, “Delicia-Hatya” is an important work. The character of Delicia anticipates that of Siddiq, the female protagonist in *Padmarag*. In addition to the qualities with which Indian writers associate women characters (“forbearance” being cardinal among them), Siddiq, like Delicia but unlike Majluma, has self-respect (116). It is self-respect that ultimately enables Siddiq to achieve what her creator held above everything else in the life of a wo/man: dignity and freedom.

As far as the second part of *Motichur* is concerned, Rokeya is at her most radical in the articles titled “Gyanfal” (The Fruit of Knowledge) and “Muktifal” (The Fruit of Freedom). Both are allegorical narratives, meant to critique not only national politics of the day but also Indian nationalism itself. Interestingly, however, they have not been so read. Rather the critical tendency is to read into them meanings contrary to the ones Rokeya herself most probably intended. In his short chapter on how Rokeya looked at (Indian) nationalism, Morshed S. Hasan, for instance, cites “Gyanfal” as allegorically representing the mixed

blessings of British colonial rule in India (25). Hasan does not appear to be the least aware of the agenda Rokeya is primarily concerned with in that work. What is at stake can be deduced from the subversive end to which Rokeya deconstructs the myth of human fall from paradise in the piece concerned. Rather than abusing Hava (Eve in the *Bible*) for being the prime cause of expulsion/fall from the Garden of Eden, Rokeya congratulates her on being the first to taste the fruit of knowledge and passing it on to Adam and thus to the human race (see Bagchi 2007). The reason why the Konok Island (representing India) has lost her old grandeur and fallen into poverty is that her daughters have long been deprived of what rightfully belongs to them. At the end of the story, the boys of the Konok Island clear a space in a garden and invite the girls to join them in sowing the seeds of the new guava tree (that is, the seeds of new knowledge gained from its contact with Fairyland, representing Britain/Europe). To decode the message, India will regain what she has lost (dignity, freedom, prosperity etc.) only when her sons stop monopolising the new knowledge and open its doors to the daughters as well. From a postcolonial-feminist perspective, it can be safely argued that “Gyanfal” enacts the central position that the question of the emancipation of the Indian woman must be given in Indian nationalist project, if it intends to be successful at all.

The critical fate of “Muktifal” is only slightly better. Hasan, whom I have quoted above with reference to “Gyanfal,” thinks Rokeya wrote “Muktifal” to poke fun at the “moderates” who formed one of the two factions (the other being that of the “extremists”) the Indian National Congress split into in 1907 (26). Hasan also cites a poem by Rokeya titled “Appeal” in support of his conclusion that Rokeya had nothing but “hatred” for those national leaders who were ever ready to flatter the white lords in order to gain favours from them (26-28). There is partial truth in what Hasan says about “Muktifal,” partial because he does not appear to have seen what I believe is at the heart of the text: the woman question in the scheme of Indian nationalism. In contrast, Sonia Amin seems more discerning. In her insightful essay on “Muktifal,” Amin reads the work as an “anti-colonial allegory,” dramatising “the women’s question in the context of the anti-colonial struggle” (86). The strength of her approach is that she engages with the text in relation to the socio-political context in which it came to be written as well as published; as a consequence, she is able to examine the woman question as it was variously debated in the arena of national politics of the day (91-98). Both building on Amin and going beyond her, I look at the work not in terms of its critique of male-dominated Indian nationalist politics of the time, as Amin does, but of the discourse/ideology of Indian nationalism itself. To do that, I need to narrate the story first.

“Muktifal” opens with Kanganini, lying sick under a tree and counting her days on earth. She had once been the Queen of Volapur. Her sons –

Darpanondo, Prabin and Nabin – approach her with different kinds of remedies. Anglicised Darpanondo asks her to eat “cheese, biscuit, marmalade” etc. to regain health and take quinine for fever (161). But Kangalini turns down his unsolicited advice. Half-anglicised, half-Indian Prabin tells her that he is prepared to do anything to end her misery. Kangalini then tells her sons what they need to do to null the curse she is under. Many years back an ascetic stayed as guest in her house. During his stay he observed that Kangalini was partial in her treatment of her children. She treated her sons better than her daughters. At the time of departure, the holy man remarked that Kangalini would reap the fruit of her partiality in time. Kangalini begged him to tell her when her curse would end. She would be free from the curse, the sadhu answered, the day she would eat the fruit from the tree of freedom which grew at the peak of the mountain Kailas.

Accompanied by Ninduk and Dhiman, the sons set out to acquire the fruit. The journey is perilous, for Kailas is situated in Mayapur, the land of the genies, guarded by eighteen thousand giants. At the foot of the mountain, Prabin writes prayers after prayers to the King of Mayapur, begging him to give him the fruit from the tree of freedom. The magical singers who have been deployed to delude the brothers assure Prabin that the King himself will give him the fruit when he deems it fit for him to get it. More desperate than his elder brother, Nabin starts building a bamboo ladder so that he can get to the top of Kailas and procure the fruit on his own. Though misled for a while, Prabin finally decides to begin work on a lasting stone stairway for which he has long been collecting materials. While working on his separate project, Prabin, under the magic spell of the magical singers, pushes Nabin so violently that both brothers lose balance and fall, thus ruining whatever progress they had so far made. The brothers return home without the fruit. Seeing the brothers returning home empty-handed, Srimati and Sumati, the two daughters of Kangalini, whom the brothers had not allowed to join them on the first expedition, now defy every objection and vow that they will not return till they have obtained the fruit from the tree of freedom. Kangalini is now confident that her days of suffering will soon end, since her daughters have joined the brothers on the second voyage for the fruit.

From the brief outline of the story “Muktifal” above, two (national) targets of criticism clearly stand out. The first and comparatively more obvious one relates to the national politics of the day. Through the characters of Prabin and Nabin, who represent half-hearted nationalist or moderate and full-fledged nationalist or extremist politics respectively, Rokeya derides the disunity and division that nationalist politics in India had plunged into at the time. At a deeper level, however, “Muktifal” critiques no less than Indian nationalism itself by way of revealing its *exclusionary* character, exclusionary along gender lines. None of the brothers appreciates the inclusion of the sisters when they first set

out for the fruit from the tree of freedom.⁷ It is only when the sisters themselves proclaim (after the failure of the first all-male attempt) that they will not sit idle until they all together have attained the fruit that the brothers relent. In critiquing Indian nationalism, “Muktifal” marks a clear advance on “Gyanfal.” The latter aligns the interests of nation and women (though entwined) differently from what one comes across in the earlier works of Rokeya: it is not women who have to rise to liberate nation; it is rather that nation must liberate women to liberate itself. But in doing so, “Gyanfal” lets the agency of women to be greatly compromised. In contrast, “Muktifal” not only exposes the exclusionary politics of Indian nationalism but also shows the way the excluded group can make itself visible in the discourse and praxis of the nation. In making itself visible on its own, the excluded group gets back agency.

No other work by Rokeya critiques the discourse of nation as thoroughly as does *Padmarag*. It is a text rich in subversion. It subverts most of the assumptions, binaries and tropes that structure patriarchal-nationalist discourse. Since it is not possible to do justice to the multi-layered texture of *Padmarag* even in one full essay, in what follows I will briefly touch upon a couple of its major interventions in the discourse of nation.

Padmarag tells the story of Siddiqā or Padmarag, as she is called by the inmates of Tarini-Bhaban, a charitable establishment where she ends up as a consequence of the manifold twists and turns in her life. In retrospect, Siddiqā recounts what compelled her to leave “home” and venture into “the world” all on her own. She was betrothed to Latif Almas and the marriage was due to be solemnised after a period of three years. Latif then went to England to become a barrister. After his return, Haji Habib Alam, uncle and later guardian of Latif, forced his nephew and ward to null his betrothal with Siddiqā and take a different wife.⁸ Though initially resistant, Latif eventually did what his uncle desired. Meanwhile, an English indigo-planter named Charles Robinson picked up a quarrel with Mohammad Soleman, a landlord in Chuadanga, and finally got him and his 19-year old son murdered. Bribing police and the servants of Soleman, Robinson plotted to lay the blame on Zainab, the only sister of the murdered landlord. (Incidentally, Zainab is none other than Siddiqā/Padmarag.) Robinson employs Latif to run his (false) case. Perceiving duplicity on the part of his client, Latif secretly sides with the distressed family of Soleman, advising them to run away. On the appointed night, Latif finds to his utter surprise that Zainab is not in the fleeing party. Annoyed, he runs back to the house to find that Zainab has shut herself in a thatched hut and is standing in the middle of a fire. Latif rescues her from the fire and urges her to accompany him in flight. But Zainab refuses to do so. In the chaos following neighbours flocking in to

⁷ Even Nabin remains silent on the subject.

⁸ Latif had lost his father in childhood.

extinguish the fire, Latif loses Zainab. The *palki* (palanquin) he had brought to take Zainab away is also missing along with the *palki*-bearers.

Years later a badly injured Latif is found lying in a bush in a valley in Kurseong. Some of the “poor sisters” of Tarini-Bhaban including Usharani, Koresha and Siddiqa (in fact, Zainab under the guise of a new name) bring him to the house they have been staying in along with Tarini. With infinite patience and tireless care, the “sisters” not only save Latif from dying but also restore him to health. It is thus that Siddiqa/Zainab and Latif happen to come together again. Out of gratitude to what the “sisters” have done for him, Latif becomes closely attached to Tarini-Bhaban and gradually comes to know that Siddiqa is in fact Zainab just as the latter comes to know that the former is the very person she was once betrothed to. Now a widower with an only son from his first marriage, Latif tries all means to win Zainab/Siddiqa back but to no avail. The novel ends with Latif and Siddiqa parting.

The social institutions that come under fire in *Padmarag* are family, home and marriage. Both patriarchy and nation invest a great deal in these institutions because they all contribute to nation-building by way of entrenching patriarchal-national values. Mostly operative in the inner domain, they are, in fact, the very locations where nation comes to be imagined, for the outer domain is represented in nationalist discourse as already occupied by the alien masters (Chatterjee 1993). In the construction of national identity, these institutions function as female spaces and hence as *others* of male, public institutions/spaces such as education, politics, law, statecraft etc., institutions/spaces that have been penetrated and thus polluted by the colonial regime. *Padmarag* vividly exposes how family, home and marriage really work for women. Let alone Siddiqa/Padmarag/Zainab, the protagonist, none of the female characters of any significance in the novel (irrespective of community, ethnicity, language, region and religion) has been happy in conjugal/married life. In some way or other, they have all been tortured by husbands and in-laws so much so that they had to flee “home” and look for an alternative home which they ultimately find in Tarini-Bhaban. Chapters twelve and fourteen reveal that home has not been “sweet home” for Saudamini, Rafia, Helen, Sakina, and Usharani. In light of what they each have personally experienced in married life, they feel obliged to warn Siddiqa not to marry.⁹ Having already been disillusioned to a great extent about marriage, Siddiqa finally decides not to go back to Latif. Whatever the symbolic value of family, home and marriage in nationalist imagination, they are just traps for the female characters in *Padmarag*, from which they must disentangle themselves (if already trapped) or keep away (if not already so), in order to be themselves.

⁹ For quite some time they did not know that Siddiqa was already betrothed to Latif.

I have already pointed out above that discourse of nation is rich in ambivalence. Being caught in between modernity and tradition, it assigns men and women roles accordingly, that is, differentially. But in the case of woman the note of contradiction is more pronounced than in the case of her counterpart. In nationalist thought women have to be both modern and modest.¹⁰ With the advent of Gandhi on the Indian political scene, however, discourse of nation took a turn with regards to the image/kind of Indian woman to be endorsed. The turn was more towards modesty than modernity. Replacing Kali/Durga, it was Sita (of the epic *Ramayana*), the ever submissive wife of Rama, who came to be promoted as the role model for the modern Indian woman (Sarkar 268-90). But Sita is not what Rokeya wants her protagonist, Siddiqa, to be, a clear evidence of her awareness of and dissociation from the politics of Indian nationalism as regards the women of India.¹¹ The role model for Siddiqa is not Sita (or the figure/image of Sita as constructed in nationalist discourse) who took the disgraceful fire ordeal to prove (to her husband at the bidding of his subjects) that she had not been violated by Ravana, while held captive in Lanka. It is the “poor sisters” of Tarini-Bhaban, especially Tarini, the head of the establishment, whom Siddiqa follows and will follow because they are women who are ready to incur the wrath of society but will never sacrifice self-esteem. The way for the modern Indian woman is not the way of (nationalist) Sita but that of Siddiqa and her “sisters.”

Structurally too, *Padmarag* marks its difference from narratives of the (Indian) nation. The teleology to be found in national narratives, as Partha Chatterjee (1986) has so powerfully shown in the case of India, is one of departure, manoeuvre and arrival. The format, to apply literary-cultural idiom, is that of a *bildungsroman* which often employs the trope of journey, charting the moral-psychological growth of the protagonist. *Padmarag* does follow the many ups and downs which Siddiqa goes through and thereby learns her lesson, but there is hardly any sense of arrival at the end of her story. Like classic realist texts, narratives of the nation usually end either on a note of reconciliation or with a gesture towards it. In contrast, *Padmarag* is an open-ended text, with no sign of reconciliation (with the society in which Siddiqa and her “sisters” live) in sight. The fight for dignity, equality and liberty is going to be a long one for them.

¹⁰ Bharati Ray gives an apt description of the nationalist image of the ideal modern Indian woman: “In effect, as a result of the double pull in two opposite directions – the Western model and the Indian ideal – Indian women were expected to combine in themselves the womanly qualities prized both in the ‘modern’ West and in the ‘ancient’ East” (180).

¹¹ Compare, for example, what Siddiqa says when Tarini asks her to go back to Latif (356) with the way Rokeya reads the character of Sita in one of her early essays “Ordhangi” (25-26). The similarity is too obvious to be missed.

Another structural divergence of *Padmarag* from narratives of the nation is to be found in the way it deploys the trope of rescue. In the representational economy of the trope, man is inevitably the rescuer; woman, rescued. National narratives represent the (national) hero/protagonist as saving his mother(land) and her children (especially, the daughters) from a range of disasters, from natural to socio-political. *Padmarag* deconstructs the trope of rescue by reversing the gender of the rescuer. There are two successful rescues in the novel. In both cases, the rescuers are women and the rescued, men. It is the “poor sisters” of Tarini-Bhaban who save the lives of Latif and Robinson. In marked contrast, Usharani is left by her husband to the mercy of the dacoits when they break in to plunder the house of her in-laws. The implication of the reversal is that it allows Rokeya not only to assign women a role that men have traditionally monopolised in patriarchal-nationalist discourse but also to shed critical light on the representational politics underlining the construction of women as “the weaker sex” in the same discourse.

Rokeya wrote at a time which is best defined as one of transition. Indian society was changing rapidly, moving fast from tradition to modernity. Things were thus all mixed up. Old patriarchy was being replaced by a new one, formed by the English-educated, urban-based professional middle class. As the very description of the class suggests, it preferred to follow a *middle* path in most of its activities. Its approach to the woman question in the context of nationalism was no exception. Hence it wanted the Indian woman to be modern and modest at the same time, promoting Sita as the role model to that end. It comes as no surprise then that Rokeya, as a member of the emerging middle class, initially regarded the emancipation of the women of India as an integral part of national liberation. At the phase in question, female and national interests remained entangled in her works. Partly due to the kind of harsh criticism that her early works had received and partly due to her real-life experience in running the two establishments she had founded after the death of her husband, Rokeya began to re-consider the woman question as an agenda in its own right, initiating in the process the delinking of the two projects: feminism and nationalism. The separation of the interests of nation from those of women also enabled her to critique Indian nationalism in her later works. The rejection of Sita as the role model for the modern Indian woman by Siddiqa in *Padmarag* is the ultimate proof that Rokeya finally came to regard feminism and nationalism as incompatible, if not downright antithetical.

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