

**Mohammad A. Quayum, ed. and trans. *The Essential Rokeya: Selected Works of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932)*. Boston, Leiden: Brill Publishing, 2013. 240 pp. ISBN 978-9004-255852.**

*The Essential Rokeya* is a collection of works by the famous Bengali feminist writer, educationist and activist, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, that has been thoughtfully put together and beautifully translated by Mohammad A. Quayum. The importance of Rokeya in Bengali and Indian literature cannot be overstated. The ninth of December is celebrated as Rokeya Day in Bangladesh. For pioneering Muslim women's education in India Rokeya broke taboos and was fiercely criticised, little would she have known that the causes she fought for would result in the widespread success of women's education in the Indian subcontinent today. Not only has the school she established grown and retained its popularity, but there is now a university in her hometown, Rangpur (in present-day Bangladesh), called Begum Rokeya University. *The Essential Rokeya* is a wonderful introduction to this amazing literary figure.

The book contains essays, short stories, excerpts and letters from some of Rokeya's most important as well as some of her less accessible publications. The variety of the content and the seeming incongruity of all the writing styles are not detrimental to the collection as a whole, instead the book is like a display of a multifaceted jewel that reflects the brightness of Rokeya's thoughts and her mastery of the written form. Although the articles are presented very formally with a certain academic fastidiousness, I thoroughly enjoyed reading it like a novel from page to page. This collection would serve as an invaluable introduction to Rokeya, but equally it would be useful to any researcher looking for an authoritative translation of her works. It is divided into three main sections. Each section is clearly marked and easily accessible. The first section contains a detailed introduction to Rokeya and her writing. The second section contains articles from Rokeya's three important works: the two volumes of *A String of Sweet Pearls* and *The Zenana Women*, plus a selection of uncollected works. The third section contains pieces that she wrote in English including her most famous *Sultana's Dream*.

Rokeya was multi-lingual; she was fluent in Arabic, Urdu, Bengali and English. As a child of an immigrant Muslim aristocratic family, she was brought up with Arabic and Urdu; her older brother and her husband, who both received higher education in Britain, encouraged her to read and write in English; but it was her older sister who encouraged her to learn the local language, Bengali. Her sister not only convinced her to learn the language and thus appreciate the native culture, she also motivated her to write and express the subjects closest to her heart. As Sarmistha Dutta Gupta writes, "A space was created in the margins for the sharing of gendered experiences which made

Rokeya realise early in life what sorority could bolster and turned her into a firm believer in female collectivities” (26).

Unsurprisingly, reading Rokeya reminded me of Mary Wollstonecraft. The work that Rokeya has done for women in India is like what Wollstonecraft did for feminism in the West. Although the two women lived centuries and continents apart – Wollstonecraft was born in England in 1759 and Rokeya was born in Rangpur in 1880 – they shared many things in common. Firstly, both Wollstonecraft and Rokeya were born into comfortable circumstances but were deeply unhappy with their lot as women. Wollstonecraft witnessed her father’s physical abuse of her subservient mother and then watched her younger sister undergo the same fate. Rokeya personally suffered under the purdah system where women were treated like property and rendered invisible, and her sister was swiftly married off at a young age because she was caught reading a book in the attempt to educate herself. Both Wollstonecraft and Rokeya were largely self-educated and learnt to read and write several languages other than their own. They were both courageous pioneers in feminism who took it upon themselves to fight for the education and emancipation of women. They wrote treatises on the rights of women and established girls’ schools in order to realise their beliefs. Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792; Rokeya was working on an essay entitled *The Rights of Women* shortly before her death in 1932.

However, Rokeya’s situation is unique in many ways. Firstly, the women that she worked to emancipate were restricted by purdah. As she reiterates in her speeches and works like *The Zenana Women*, the purdah tradition was like an “iron vault” that “incarcerated” women and cultivated a deplorable level of helplessness; women were told to shun the public eye, so much so that they would rather suffer heatstroke and be robbed than risk being seen or heard. Secondly, Rokeya began writing in 1902 when the Indian nationalist movement against colonial British rule was gathering momentum. As a writer, Rokeya had to contend with feminist as well as nationalist and ethnic issues. According to Quayum, Rokeya was “concerned about her Muslim identity, but equally concerned about her Bengali and Indian identities.... Creating a multi-racial, multi-lingual, multi-religious India that would treat all its citizens fairly and with justice, is what she envisioned in her writing” (“Two Asian Dreamers” 3). In 1916, Rokeya founded the Islamic Women’s Association because she believed that Muslim women were even more suppressed than their Hindu counterparts. She believed that the Muslim community lagged behind because its female half was kept in ignorance, and only by educating the female populace as well as the male could a nation truly be united and strong enough to overthrow colonial rule: “Those who cannot raise their own community, how can they emancipate the nation?” (*The Essential Rokeya* 129-30).

While Rokeya focused mainly on women and feminist issues, it is indisputable that much of what she did impacted on the Muslim community and India as a nation. As Quayum has called our attention to, she was a nationalist too. However, apart from her brief references to the nation and a more direct voicing of her opinion on an ethnically integrated society in “The Mysteries of Love,” where caste and customs are called into question, I am left querying to what extent Rokeya actually dealt with nationalism in her works. It is wonderful that *The Essential Rokeya* presents a broad, thematically feminist selection of articles, but it has actually made me wonder whether Rokeya had written articles that are more nation-oriented. Since that seems to be the next point of interest regarding Rokeya’s works, I would have welcomed either more essays that showed this side of her interests or maybe a few words in the introduction explaining if or why she failed to treat this issue more directly. Apart from this, I only have words of praise for the book. *The Essential Rokeya* is not only a very good read but also an academically accomplished work that would provide a novice with a great introduction to or an academic with a reliable translation of Rokeya’s works.

### **Works Cited**

- Dutta Gupta, Sarmistha. “From Sakhawat Memorial School to Rokeya Hall.” *Asiatic* 7.2 (December 2013): 22-38.
- Quayum, Mohammad A. *The Essential Rokeya*. Leiden, Boston: Brill Publishing, 2013.
- . “Two Asian Dreamers, Doers.” *Asiatic* 7.2 (December 2013): 1-6.

**Paoi Hwang**  
**Durham University, UK**