

From Islamic Feminism to Radical Feminism: Roquiah Sakhawat Hossein¹ to Taslima Nasrin

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Abstract

This paper examines four women writers who have contributed through their writings and actions to the awakening of women in Bangladesh: Roquiah Sakhawat Hossein, Sufia Kamal, Jahanara Imam and Taslima Nasrin. The first three succeeded in making a space for themselves in the Bangladesh tradition and carved a special niche in Bangladesh. All three of them were writers in different genres – poetry, prose, fiction – with the last best known for her diary about 1971. While these iconic figures contributed towards women’s empowerment or people’s rights in general, Taslima Nasrin is the most radically feminist of the group. However, while her voice largely echoes in the voices of young Bangladeshi women today – often unacknowledged – she has been shunned by her own country. The paper attempts to explain why, while other women writers have also said what Taslima Nasrin has, she alone is ostracised.

Keywords

Islamic feminism, radical feminism, gynocritics, purdah, 1971, Shahbagh protests

In this paper, I wish to examine four women writers who have contributed through their writings and actions to the awakening of women in Bangladesh. Beginning with Roquiah Sakhawat Hossein (1880-1932), I will also discuss the roles played by Sufia Kamal (1911-99), Jahanara Imam (1929-94) and Taslima Nasrin (1962-). The first three succeeded in making a space for themselves in the Bangladesh tradition and carved a special niche in Bangladesh. All three of them were writers: Roquiah wrote poems, short stories, a novel, as well as prose pieces; Sufia Kamal was primarily a poet but also wrote a number of short

¹ There is some confusion over the spelling of her name. Her first name is generally spelled “Rokeya,” but she spelled it as “Roquiah.” Her surname is often spelled “Hossain.” However, she signed her name R.S. Hossein or (Mrs.) R.S. Hossein in the many letters she wrote. See *Rokeya Rahanabali* 501-27. Her given name was Roquiah Khatun.

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stories; Jahanara Imam was also a writer, but perhaps is best known for her *Ekattorer Diary* (Diary of '71), an account of her life in Bangladesh in 1971.

Roquia, well known in departments of Women's Studies for her feminist writing, is better known to Bangladeshis for the girls' school she started, which helped young Muslim girls go to school when schooling was more or less forbidden to them. Her writing was inspired by the single purpose of making the world a better place for women.³ Sufia Kamal was a poet, but is perhaps better known in Bangladesh for her support and presence in many political and cultural movements. Lovingly called "Khalamma" in deference to her age, she was the catalyst for many movements, sitting beside men and women, voicing by her very presence both her protest and her support. For example, she joined the protests against H.M. Ershad in the late nineteen-eighties and, in the early nineteen-nineties, the protests to try the "collaborators" of 1971. As Mofidul Hoque points out, "Ever since the early days of Pakistan, Sufia Kamal continued to be at the forefront of almost all the major protest movements and over time, the short and frail lady turned into the tallest and the boldest woman in the movements" ("Sufia Kamal: Her Journey Towards Freedom").⁴

Jahanara Imam, like Sufia Kamal, became the rallying point for protests – not against the Pakistani government but against the successive Bangladesh governments which did not act against those who had collaborated with the Pakistanis in 1971. An iconic picture shows a policeman, part of a contingent sent to prevent the protest she was leading on the first anniversary of the movement against the collaborators of 1971, kneeling before her feet and asking for forgiveness.⁵

Roquia, the earliest of this triumvirate, is perhaps the only openly feminist writer, angry at the discrimination and deprivation women suffered from during her time. If we want to find another woman writer who is aware of this discrimination against women, we have to wait for several decades till we come to Taslima Nasrin, who, through her columns, autobiographical writings, poems and fiction, waxed loudly against patriarchy and, for the first time, spoke openly about sexual harassment and sexuality. However, while the earlier three women did not cause such vehement antipathy – even being respected and admired, the sobriquet "Begum" being attached to both Roquia Sakhawat Hossein and

³ For recent studies on Rokeya's contributions to women's education and women's emancipation in colonial Bengal, see: Sarkar, "Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and the Debate over Gender Relations among Muslim Intellectuals in Late Colonial Bengal"; Dutta Gupta, "From Sakhawat Memorial School to Rokeya Hall: A Journey Towards Language as Self-Respect"; Hasan, "Commemorating Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Contextualising Her Work in South Asian Muslim Feminism"; Ray, "A Feminist Critique of Patriarchy: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932)"; and Quayum, "Gender and Education: The Vision and Activism of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain."

⁴ For early cultural and political movements with which she was involved or spearheaded, see *Banglapedia* entry on Begum Sufia Kamal.

⁵ The picture is in the archive of the Liberation War Museum, Dhaka.

Sufia Kamal, and Jahanara Imam always referred to in independent Bangladesh as “Shaheed Janani,” mother of a martyr, in recognition of the son she had lost to the Pakistani forces – Taslima Nasrin has few sympathisers within the country. While Kabir Chowdhury took up her cause as well as Ali Riaz, few women openly took her side, not to speak of the several women’s organisations that had worked actively in Bangladesh for women’s rights.

My paper will examine what the earlier iconic figures contributed towards women’s empowerment or people’s rights in general and why Taslima Nasrin, whose voice largely echoes in the voices of young women today – often unacknowledged – has been shunned by her own country. Have no other women writers said what Taslima Nasrin said so loudly and so often? And if they have, why is it that Taslima Nasrin alone is ostracised?

In “Toward a Feminist Poetics,” Elaine Showalter traces the history of women’s literature, suggesting that it can be divided into three phases:

1. Feminine: “During the Feminine phase, dating from about 1840 to 1880, women wrote in an effort to equal the intellectual achievements of the male culture, and internalized its assumptions about female nature.” (153)
2. Feminist: “In the Feminist phase, from about 1880 to 1920... women used literature to dramatize the ordeals of wronged womanhood. (153-54)
3. Female: “In the Female phase, ongoing since 1920, women reject both imitation and protest – two forms of dependency – and turn instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art, extending the feminist analysis of culture to the forms and techniques of literature.” (154)

While Showalter describes successive stages, we can sometimes see this division in women writers themselves, who begin by writing “like men” but through a period of protest turn to female experience. Nor is Showalter’s division of women’s literature wholly applicable to Bangladesh. Nevertheless, I would like to examine the four writers I have mentioned according to this schema.

Roquiah Sakhawat Hossein, the earliest of these writers, is clearly feminist. However, as Showalter notes, initially women writers “internalized... assumptions of female nature.” This Roquiah appears to do in one of her earliest writings on “Borka” (1904).⁶ She justifies seclusion and the donning of this enveloping garment – though she also suggests changes in the strict and harsh forms veiling had taken. However, almost immediately after, in “Sultana’s Dream” (1905) she dramatises “the ordeals of wronged womanhood” at a time when Muslim women were supposed to remain in seclusion.

⁶ I have transliterated that term as spelled in the essay. However, I have used the generally accepted spelling “burqa” when I am not quoting Roquiah.

Roquiah was born and brought up in a conservative, Urdu-speaking Muslim family of Pairaband, Rangpur (in present-day Bangladesh). Forbidden to read and write Bangla or English as a child, she managed to learn both so well that she could write fluently in both. For women of her generation she was a beacon of light, extolling the importance of education in improving the lives of women. The one oft-reproduced photograph of her that most of us are familiar with shows a pleasant-faced woman, modestly clad in a long-sleeved blouse, socks and closed shoes, her head neatly covered by her sari *anchal*. In her right hand she holds a voluminous tome – perhaps the register of the school which she built after her husband’s death in his name and with his money. There are at least two other known pictures of Roquiah Sakhawat Hossein: seated with two other women at a niece’s wedding in Dhaka and an earlier one, of a younger Roquiah, her head uncovered, standing on one side behind her husband with a hand on his shoulder. This picture was printed in a local newspaper a few years ago by Roquiah Sakhawat Hossein’s grandniece, Majeda Saber. Afterwards, Majeda Saber told me how upset people had been that she had seemingly dishonoured Roquiah Sakhawat Hossein by publishing this picture. If, after her death, people could have been angry at her non-observance of purdah, one must try to imagine what it was like in her lifetime when she tried to rationalise about purdah. While she herself was always modestly dressed and while she promised the families of her pupils that purdah would be observed in her school, she was not blind to the problems of this system. In an age when all respectable Muslim women from the age of seven were expected to be in purdah, Roquiah Sakhawat Hossein enunciated the importance of education outside the home – in school and later, if it ever happened, in a university for women. Purdah hampered progress, not in itself, but in what had happened to it.

The Quran emphasises modesty for both men and women.⁷ The section dealing with women’s modesty is longer because it enjoins women not to disclose their hidden ornaments. Here one may imagine necklaces and chains round a woman’s neck which would ordinarily be hidden under the veil, or bracelets and bangles that would jingle and jangle on physical movement. In public the Quran enjoins an outer covering as is clear in *Surah Al-Ahzab* (The Armies):

Those who harass believing men and believing women undeservedly, bear (on themselves) a calumny and a grievous sin. O Prophet! Enjoin your wives, your daughters, and the wives of true believers that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): That is most convenient, that they may be distinguished and not be harassed.... (33: 58-59)

⁷ See *Surah Al-Noor*, verse 31, where modesty is prescribed for both men and women.

Outer garments in public have not only been enjoined on Muslim women, they were also customary with Hindu women; even today in Rajasthan, non-Muslim women walk several yards behind their husbands, with their veils lowered down to their waists (Spurling 337). However, what happened to what became known as purdah – veil – in the Indian subcontinent was a whole set of rules that put women in seclusion and relegated them to the inner quarters: the *zenana*, women's quarters, or the *andarmahal*, the inner house. Of course, seclusion in India was, in all cases, for respectable women, women who belonged to aristocratic, land-owning or wealthy families. Roquiah Sakhawat Hossein's earliest piece of writing on purdah, "Borka," included in *Motichur* (Vol. 1, 1904) stresses that purdah does not stand in the way of women's development. If purdah alone were the barrier to development, then, Roquiah says, women outside purdah should be developed. But they aren't.

I have heard people say that it is the 'disgusting system of seclusion' that is behind our lack of progress. When I meet highly educated women they often tell me to discard the 'borka.' I ask them, What is progress? Does it only dwell outside the borka? If that is so, then am I to understand that the fisherwoman, the wife of the cobbler and the woman belonging to the caste who look after the burning ghat have progressed more than we have?³

Roquiah Sakhawat Hossein was born at a time when class differences existed, but the point that she was making is clear. It is not purdah alone that hinders women's progress. This is where education enters. What women needed was education. However, Roquiah realised that in a world where there were no educational institutions for women, women would have to be satisfied with informal education.

It is true, she goes on to say, that purdah is not natural. Animals do not observe purdah. But it is moral. Using logical arguments she goes on to say that there are many things that are not natural but which have improved the lives of human beings. People can walk, but human beings have invented modes of transport. Similarly, people can swim across water bodies, but human beings have invented forms of water transport.

She goes on to provide several arguments in support of purdah: uncivilised people wear fewer clothes, therefore more civilised people wear more clothes; it is better to be well-covered in public than to walk around half-naked at home in front of male servants. It is true that Europeans do not have the purdah system, she noted, but they have notions of privacy that Indians lack. Europeans do not invite guests into their bedrooms but Indians do not have the separation of private space and public space inside their homes. It is true that the burqa is an

³ "Borka" 43. The translation is mine as are the other translations unless otherwise noted.

ugly dress, but women who need to be in public would rather wear this all-enveloping garb than be happy to be ogled by passersby. The young Muslim woman of today who dons the *hijab* willingly wears an all-enveloping garb but has made it fashionable – doing what Roquiah had suggested: improved upon the coarse garment.

Despite her arguments in support of purdah in this essay, Roquiah Sakhawat Hossein decried the extremes of the system. She pointed out that the extreme restriction that purdah imposed was detrimental to the mental and physical health of women. Unmarried girls had to observe purdah from outside women as well. They could not step out into the courtyard for fear of unknown women. Furthermore, as most women among their permitted acquaintances were not highly educated, girls were deprived of education as well. The lives of newly married women were no better. For the first few months of their married life, they had to live like dolls. In *Abarodhbashini*, she gives the example of a newly married woman who was bitten by a scorpion but bore the pain silently. It was only three days later that the bite was discovered by women who came in to give her a ritual bath.

Roquiah Sakhawat Hossein disapproved of the restrictions placed on women meeting people of different classes and religions. She pointed out that, while men were free to meet people of different religions, women were not. She believed that this must be changed so that Muslim women could meet people of different religions: Jews, Christians, Hindus or Buddhists. It was the freedom with which men could interact with different types of people that made them enlightened and broadminded.

Though in “Borka,” Roquiah pointed out that purdah alone did not hamper progress, a year later, in “Sultana’s Dream,” published in *Indian Ladies Magazine* (Madras) in 1905, Roquiah noted the absurdity of keeping women in seclusion.⁸ The narrator, whom we later learn is Sultana, wakes from a nap to find a woman whom she at first thinks to be her friend Sister Sara beside her. Later she realises that the woman is not Sister Sara, but she continues to call her Sister Sara throughout the narrative. The land they are in, Sister Sara tells Sultana, is “Ladyland,” a world where women rule and men are locked away in the *murdana* – by analogy with *zenana*, the women’s quarters. Sultana is surprised that men, who are stronger than women, would allow themselves to be locked up. Sara explains that this happened as a result of their failure in battle.

While the men of the country had been busy increasing their military power and fighting, the women had been engaged in scientific research. The women realised that something had to be done to save the country and preserve the Queen’s honour. The lady Principal of one of the two women’s universities

⁸ Three years later, her Bangla translation of this story, “Sultanar Swapna,” came out in book form from S.K. Lahiri and Co., Kolkata. The same year, the original English story was published in book form by the same publisher.

in the country offered to do something, but, before she did anything, she asked that the men retire into the *zenana*. The men were wounded and tired and agreed to do so. After the enemy was vanquished, some of the men tried to protest, but, by the time Sultana visits Ladyland, they are quite happy with their lot. The *zenana* has accordingly been renamed *murdana*. With the men in the *murdana* – doing the things that women were supposed to – Ladyland is a much better place than Calcutta. Thanks to the research undertaken by the two women's universities, cooking is done through solar heat, the climate is controlled, and the entire place is a garden. Towards the end of her visit, Sultana is taken by an air-car to see the Queen whom she sees strolling in the garden with her daughter. Shortly afterwards, as Sultana gets into the air-car again, the dream comes to an abrupt end and Sultana finds herself in her bedroom once more.

During the course of the story, the reader is exposed to the absurdity of purdah, of keeping women in seclusion. As Sultana walks through the streets of Ladyland, she realises that there are no men around. She asks where they are and learns that they are kept locked up in the *murdana*. "Just as we are kept in the *zenana*?" Yes, replies Sister Sara. Sultana finds it amusing. Sister Sara points out that the way women are locked up in Sultana's world is absurd. Sultana protests. Women are naturally weak and therefore it is unsafe for them to come out of the *zenana*. Using a series of questions, however, Sister Sara proves the absurdity of a world where dangerous creatures are allowed to roam about freely and harmless ones are locked up.

"Suppose, some lunatics escape from the asylum and begin to do all sorts of mischief to men, horses and other creatures; in that case what will your countrymen do?"

"They will try to capture them and put them back into their asylum."

"Thank you! And you do not think it wise to keep sane people inside an asylum and let loose the insane?"

"Of course not!" said I laughing lightly.

"As a matter of fact, in your country this very thing is done! Men, who do or at least are capable of doing no end of mischief, are let loose and the innocent women, shut up in the *zenana*! How can you trust those untrained men out of doors?" (465)

In "Sultana's Dream," apart from showing the absurdity of purdah, Roquiah also stresses the importance of education for women. There are two women's universities where women students conduct scientific research. The two

universities compete with one another to invent things which would better the lives of people. Thus while one university invents a means for harvesting rain and using it when required, the other invents “an instrument by which they could collect as much sun-heat as possible” (268). It is the women who save the country when the men fail. There were no women’s universities in India at the time. In the earlier “Borka,” Roquiah had expressed the hope that one day there would be women’s universities where Muslim women could study under female teachers. In “Sultana’s Dream” she suggests that, given the opportunity for higher studies, women would not only conduct practical research but also get rid of enemies. Was Roquiah hinting here of the failure of Indian men to get rid of foreign invaders?

The humour with which Roquiah tackles the question of purdah, showing how ridiculous it is to have men, the perpetrators of evil, roaming about freely while innocent women are locked up, is clear to any reader. However, Roquiah was not always so humorous in her critique of seclusion. *Aborodbbashini*, translated as *Inside Seclusion* by Roushan Jahan, is a far angrier account of how purdah deprives and endangers women. While some of the stories are funny in *Aborodbbashini*, some are tragic. Among the humorous accounts is episode 3 about some women accompanying their husbands on haj. The women have to wait on the platform, huddled in their burqas and under a rug. A passing Englishman takes the bundles to be baggage and asks them to be removed. When his command is not complied with, he kicks the bundles. Another, more horrendous story is episode 14 which narrates the story of a distant aunt-in-law who falls on to the train track. Strictures of purdah prevent her being rescued by the men present, and she is run over by the train. Women were not only forbidden to appear in the presence of men; they were also forbidden to appear before strange women. Thus Roquiah recounts how even little girls were forced to hide under beds when strange, that is, unrelated women, came to visit.

Though the concept of Ladyland in “Sultana’s Dream” seems to border on the radical, and though the women in Ladyland do what the men have failed to do, the Queen of Ladyland is, in keeping with the traditional role of women, also a mother. While Roquiah did not perhaps give much thought to this discrepancy, it is significant for two reasons: first, women can enjoy the traditional role of women as mothers even without men in the picture and second, as a mother, the Queen is not opposed to the conventional concepts of motherhood.

Roquiah herself was obliged to abide by the dictates of conservative Muslim society. She wore a long-sleeved blouse and socks with a body-enveloping sari; she promised the parents of the pupils she coaxed to come to the school she had set up, Sakhawat Memorial Girls’ School, that purdah would be maintained in the school; she did not allow her photograph to be used by Mohammad Nasiruddin (1887-1994) for the magazine *Saogat*, telling him that

she had no objection to her picture being printed, but that the parents of her pupils would stop sending their children to school.⁹ Above all, Roquiah wanted woman to be educated – but not at the price of discarding the institution of modesty as laid down in the Quran. In a letter to the *Musulman* dated February 10, 1911, she announced the opening of a school for Muslim girls: “Permit the liberty of asking the courtesy of your paper to inform the Mohamedan public that I intend to start a Girls’ school in Calcutta in strict observance of Purda...” (499). Roquiah Sakhawat Hossein did indeed observe purdah in her school – with many former students revealing how claustrophobic they felt going to school with the heavy curtains on the windows of the horse carriage so that strangers might not look upon them.¹⁰

A constant in Roquiah’s writings was her belief in the importance of education for women. In an essay titled “God Gives, Man Robs,” she notes that while Islam had given a lot of freedom to women – even the freedom not to marry if she did not wish to – crimes were committed against women, forcing them to marry old men and depriving them of education.

However, Roquiah neither vituperated against men nor did she discard the traditional roles of women. In fact, she always acknowledged the help that her brother Ibrahim Saber had given her by helping her learn to read. She was also grateful to her husband, Sakhawat Hossein, who understood her feelings and left money for starting a girls school.¹¹ When she started the girls school, she named it in honour of her husband. Roquiah believed in an all-rounded education for girls. So, apart from teaching her pupils the traditional school subjects, she also organised cultural programmes for them. However, she believed that education was necessary to make girls fulfil the traditional roles they were called upon by their gender to fulfil.

Thus, in “Educational Ideals for the Modern Indian Girl,” Roquiah expounds on the ancient traditions of Indian education and stresses the necessity of education for girls. However, she discourages a blind aping of western education. Instead, she stresses that India must retain what is best about its traditions. Acquiring education, however, did not mean that Indian

⁹ The picture was printed in the first issue of *Begum*, in 1947. But this was after Roquiah had passed away. This journal for women was founded by Mohammad Nasiruddin in Calcutta. It is still being published, from Dhaka, and edited by Nurjahan Begum, Mohammad Nasiruddin’s daughter.

¹⁰ Nurunnahar Fyzenessa, who taught at the University of Dhaka and was Provost of Rokeya Hall, often described how claustrophobic she felt in a closed horse carriage which had the curtains drawn so that the girls could neither look out nor be seen from outside.

¹¹ Sakhawat Hossein passed away on May 3, 1909. On October 1, four months after the death of her husband, Roquiah Sakhawat Hossein started a school in his name at Bhagalpur where she was residing at the time. She was, however, unable to continue the school at Bhagalpur and moved to Calcutta and restarted Sakhawat Memorial Girls’ School there in 1911.

women should discard their familial roles. In fact, she emphasised that better education would make women better wives and mothers.

In short, our girls would not only obtain University degrees, but must be ideal daughters, wives and mothers – or I may say obedient daughters, loving sisters, dutiful wives and instructive mothers. (483)

Though in this essay Roquiah emphasises the traditional roles for women, in a letter to the *Mussalman*, dated December 6, 1921, she noted that four of the Muslim girls' schools in Calcutta had headmistresses who had studied at Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School.

Roquiah has been an icon for both the generation of early feminists in East Pakistan/Bangladesh, many of whom had studied at Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School, and who, in their turn, became associated with schools and colleges in East Pakistan, as well as the generation of the 1970's who recognised in her work the call for gender equality that became their rallying cry. Women for Women, a research and study group, has a poster which quotes lines from Roquiah's essay, "Subeh Sadek": "*Buk thukiya bolo ma! Amra poshunoi. Bolo bbogini! Amra Asbabnoi.... Shokole shomobeshe bolo, amra manusb*" [Proclaim confidently, daughter, we are not animals. Say, sister, we are not inanimate objects.... Say it together, we are human beings] (239).

Though Roquiah was a feminist, she was not what we would call a radical feminist or a lesbian feminist. She was an Islamic feminist, as Mahmud Hasan has suggested, seeing the positive side of Islam and decrying the absurdity of extremes created by society. Though Roquiah would not have gone to the lengths of the contemporary woman, though she would not have radically changed gender-relationships, in "Sultana's Dream," as in her novel *Padmarag* (1924), she does suggest that women have identities without relationship to men. However, she does not stress the lone woman. She looks upon the community of women who share – or can be taught to share – the same values. Woman, as sister, mother, daughter, is a positive figure.

Many of the women who later in East Pakistan/Bangladesh became educationists and leaders had gone to Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School or had met Roquiah at a young, impressionable age. Thus Sufia Kamal met Roquiah Sakhawat Hossein in 1918, when her mother took her family to Calcutta to meet some relations. Though the young Sufia returned to their family home in Shayestabad, it is possible that the inspiration continued to grow and in 1929, after she had moved to Calcutta to be with her husband, she joined Roquiah Sakhawat Hossein's Anjuman-i-Khwateen-i-Islam. This association was not only a forum for consciousness-raising, it also actively promoted education and social reform for women. This experience helped Sufia to gain experience in social work as well as to become more closely acquainted with the ideals of

Roquiah Sakhawat Hossein. As Sajed Kamal, her son and editor, notes, she came “to be regarded as the ‘torch-bearer’ for the social ideals of Begum Rokeya” (22). Sufia not only wrote a number of poems on Roquiah, such as “Amrita Kanya,” translated as “The Ambrosial Maid,” but also dedicated one of her books of poems, *Mrittikar Gbraan* (Fragrance of the Earth, 1970) to her. In 1960, after her family had moved to Dhaka, she led the formation of the Rokeya Sakhawat Smriti Committee, which proposed that the first women’s hall of the University of Dhaka be named after her.

Like Roquiah Sakhawat Hossein, Sufia was born into an aristocratic and prosperous landowning family. Like Roquiah too, Sufia did not go to school. However, unlike Roquiah, who had no formal teaching, Sufia studied with tutors who came to her house. Again, like Roquiah, the family spoke Urdu at home and Sufia learned Urdu and Persian as well as Arabic – to read the Quran. She was not taught Bangla, but, like Roquiah again, she learned Bangla from her brother, as well as a maternal uncle, Syed Mohammad Hossain.

Sufia was married in 1923, at the age of twelve, to a maternal cousin, Syed Nehal Hossain. Like Roquiah’s husband, Sufia’s husband too encouraged her to read and write as well as to engage in welfare work among the poor local women – though of course, enveloped in a burqa. The same year, Sufia published her first short story, “Sainik Badhu,” in *Taroon*, published from Calcutta.

Two years later, she met Mahatma Gandhi when he visited Barisal, and, inspired by him, stopped wearing the rich, ornamental Mughal garments that she used to wear. Instead, she started wearing simple handloom saris. In honour of Gandhi’s visit, she also spun some thread on a small spinning wheel. Sajed Kamal notes how she met Gandhi dressed as a Hindu married woman, with *sindur*, the vermilion worn by Hindu married women in the parting of their hair (21).

Shortly afterwards, Sufia moved to Calcutta. Apart from a growing acquaintance with Roquiah Sakhawat Hossein, she also met important Bengali literary figures, including Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam. Nehal Hossain showed some of his wife’s poems to Nazrul, who encouraged their publication. Her first poem, “Basanti” (Of Spring) was published in *Saogat* in 1926. The owner-editor of *Saogat*, Mohammad Nasiruddin, supported her through the next two decades.

In 1932, Nehal Hossain died of tuberculosis. However, Sufia did not return to her family home of Shayestabad in Barisal, but, like Roquiah, stayed on in Calcutta. She started teaching at the Calcutta Free Primary School for girls while also pursuing her literary life and social welfare work. In 1939, Sufia remarried. Her second husband was Kamaluddin Ahmad Khan (1907-77), a writer belonging to the *Bulbul* literary group in Calcutta. Kamaluddin Ahmad

supported Sufia in all her activities, and also helped to translate some of her poems into English.

During the 1940's Sufia was involved with the Indian independence movement and also helped, with other leading women of the time, to set up a shelter for riot victims at Lady Brabourne College. While the independence movement was going on, Mohammad Nasiruddin started *Begum*, a women's weekly magazine where the gradually increasing number of women could write. Sufia Kamal – as she became known after her second marriage – became its first editor. However, in October that year the Kamal family moved to Dhaka, where she would become involved with new literary, social and political activities. In 1949, she became founding co-editor – with the poet Jahanara Arzoo, of a women's weekly magazine, *Sultana*, named after the principal character of Roquiah's *Sultana's Dream*.

In 1951, Sufia became involved with the Bangla Language Movement, protesting the imposition of Urdu as the state language of Pakistan. In 1952, when the movement gathered steam, Sufia was one of the women leading demonstrations in the city. This was perhaps the beginning of her active political role – which in East Pakistan and later Bangladesh, has often been closely linked to the cultural. Thus in 1961 – Tagore's centennial year – she led the Sanskritik Swadhikar Andolon (Movement for Cultural Autonomy). In 1969, Mahila Sangram Parishad (Women's Revolutionary Society) was founded and Sufia became its founding chair. After 1971, it became Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (Bangladesh Women's Society) and has grown to be the largest women's organisation in Bangladesh. It gives awards to women for their work, not necessarily literary but in different fields, attesting to the fact that Sufia Kamal was not just a literary personage but an activist in different areas. While many of these activities were related to women – as some of her poems suggest – they were also protests against all sorts of political impositions and discriminations.

In 1971, when her two younger daughters left occupied Bangladesh and started working as nurses in Mukti Bahini field hospitals, Sajed Kamal notes how Sufia and her husband, along with Shahed, her elder son, made their house “an underground clearing-house for liberation war activities” (30). During the war, Sufia kept two diaries, *Ekaattorer Diary* and *Mor Jaduder Samadhi* (Where My Darlings Lie Buried), a poetic diary in which she wrote poems responding to what was happening around her.

After the liberation of Bangladesh, Sufia continued to head a number of organisations, but perhaps, even more importantly, she was found wherever a protest was being staged. Well into her advanced years, she could be seen seated

on the steps of the Shaheed Minar.⁸ People were always welcome in her house. The novelist Philip Hensher in *Scenes from Early Life* has a brief account of one of these gatherings. Mahfuz Anam, the editor of *The Daily Star*, also notes the significance of Sufia Kamal and her home: “It may not be an exaggeration to say that anybody who has been linked to some sort of democratic, cultural, social or progressive movement, has sat in that verandah at some point of time” (10).

In deference to her age, Sufia Kamal started being lovingly called “Khalamma” (aunt) and was part of many movements and protests, sitting beside men and women, voicing by her very presence her protest – and her support for the movement. However, she never forgot her role of wife and mother – or hostess – and beside all her social, political and literary activities, she continued to do what a woman is supposed to do. Her daughter Sultana Kamal, a human rights activist, notes that her mother never neglected her duties to her family. “We hardly used to have ordinary or commonplace food, because mother had a keen interest in cooking. She liked to prepare special dishes. She used to cook different types of food every day” (qtd. in “Sufia Kamal”).

Similarly, Nurjahan Begum, editor of *Begum*, also describes her excellent cooking skills: “Often on Sundays she came and cooked at our house in Kolkata. She used to tell my mother ‘Nuru’s mother you do the cutting and preparing of the spices, I will do the cooking.’ My mother tried but her dishes were never as delicious as Sufia Khala’s” (qtd. in “Sufia Kamal”). Her piety is also attested to when Dr Sarwar Ali, one of the trustees of the Liberation War Museum, notes that her secular identity never conflicted with her piety: “Every December 16 at the Savar National Monument, after singing the national anthem with us, she would say a prayer for the martyrs” (“Sufia Kamal”).

Sufia’s poems such as “Shukti,” translated as “Mother of Pearls” and “Bhoy Ki Tomar Shaharzadi,” translated as “You Have Nothing to Fear, Scheherzadi” are feminist poems testifying to woman’s strength. But in 1971 she could call upon women to join the war against Pakistan in “Benibinyasher Somoy To Aar Nei,” translated as “No More Time for Braiding Your Hair.”

“Khalamma” means mother’s sister in Bangla and this term of endearment plus the “womanly” skills attributed to her suggest that woman’s traditional role must be present, no matter what else a woman is. The significance of woman as mother also comes into play if we consider why Jahanara Imam was also so readily accepted as a catalytic figure.

Jahanara Imam, like Roquiah Sakhawat Hussein and Sufia Kamal, was a writer and an activist. Like Roquiah and Sufia Kamal, she also taught school for some time. Unlike Roquiah and Sufia Kamal, however, she not only went to

⁸ Set up to commemorate the language martyrs of 1952, this memorial monument has become the centre of political and cultural protests and activities in the country.

school, but also college and university – completing her BA at Lady Brabourne College, Calcutta and MA at the University of Dhaka. In 1964-65, she went to the US as a Fulbright scholar. She did some writing and was also the first editor of the now defunct women's monthly journal, *Khwateen*.

In 1971, like other Bengalis of East Pakistan, she was caught up in the excitement of Shekih Mujibur Rahman's party winning the majority of seats in the general election of Pakistan. However, the Pakistan government was not willing to allow Mujib to become the Prime Minister and, on March 1, President Yahya announced the postponement of the National Assembly. This set in motion a series of events that culminated on December 16 in the surrender of the Pakistani forces in what was then East Pakistan and the independence of Bangladesh.

Jahanara Imam had two sons, Rumi and Jami. Rumi, a brilliant student, was supposed to leave for higher studies abroad, but when Bengalis started a guerrilla force to withstand the army action and fight for the liberation of Bangladesh, Rumi, like many other young men of his age, joined the Mukti Bahini. In *Ekattorer Dinguli* (1986), translated as *Of Blood and Fire* (1990), Jahanara Imam describes the announcement of the postponement, her driving her son the day he leaves to join the Mukti Bahini, how he and his friends returned to carry out guerrilla operations in Dhaka and how he was picked up by the army along with his father. Mr. Sharif Imam was able to return home – though the experience was too much for him. He had to be hospitalised but passed away on December 13. Jahanara Imam waited in vain for Rumi to return. Jahanara Imam and her younger son were left alone to raise the Bangladesh flag on December 17 – a flag they had raised earlier in March but had to bring down on March 25 after the army action. In addition to the story of Rumi, *Ekattorer Dinguli* recounts what daily life was like in Dhaka, the shortage of daily essentials, the curfews, the attempts by the government to prove that everything was normal in East Pakistan, the heroism of ordinary people who could not leave Dhaka but supported the freedom fighters despite danger to themselves. The book – the Bangla title of which translates as “Days of Seventy-One” – is a vivid account of what life was like in Dhaka during 1971.

Jahanara Imam's account of 1971 begins quietly enough, on March 1. However, though the day is seemingly ordinary, the reference to anti-government demonstrations suggests that things were not all right. The nationalistic fervour that had galvanised the Bengali nation is evidenced by Jahanara Imam's looking for toilet goods manufactured in East Pakistan. When she returns home after shopping, her husband calls and asks her to stock up. She isn't surprised: “Anti-government demonstrations have become the routine for the past two months. The city is like a hot frying pan” (*Of Blood and Fire* 9). A little later she calls her husband and learns that President Yahya Khan had

announced the postponement of the parliament session. The on-going Pakistan-MCC cricket match at the stadium had been abandoned. Hadn't she noticed anything unusual when she went shopping?

I was somewhat taken aback and replied: 'At that particular time I was in the shops at the rear of the New Market and I didn't notice anything. Maybe the news had not reached there by then.' Then I screamed, 'What about Rumi and Jami? They are at the stadium!' (9)

Initially not worried, she grows terrified, remembering that both her sons – the older, Rumi, and the younger, Jami, are watching the cricket match. For the present both sons are safe, but Rumi would soon leave home to join the Mukti Bahini, the Bengali guerrilla forces.

The scene of the night before Rumi departs for war is also poignantly described. Rumi saw himself as another Khudiram Bose (1889-1908), who was hanged for his nationalistic actions against the British. Rumi whistled the song immortalising Khudiram who asks his mother to let him go – suggesting that he was willingly courting danger.

Thursday, 6th March, 1971

Rumi will leave tomorrow. I sewed in a few hundred rupee notes into the folds of the waist of his trousers. I told him not to carry much money in his wallet because the Pakistani troops might take it away....

Last night, at bedtime, he said: 'Mother, would you run your fingers through my hair tonight?' When Rumi and Jami were children I used to do it to put them to sleep. Even now when they are grown up they demand it every night.

As I was running my fingers through his hair, Rumi whistled the tune of the famous song; 'Don't hold me back Mother, I would go smiling to the gallows.' This song immortalised the renowned freedom fighter Khudiram, who had to go to the gallows for opposing British colonial rule in the forties. (79)

Jahanara Imam's detailed and moving account of 1971 would help a younger generation born after the war or too young at the time of the war to understand what had happened in Dhaka in 1971. Though Jahanara Imam does not describe field actions by the Mukti Bahini, her account of how these young freedom fighters carried out operations within the city, never letting the government and Pakistan military relax, describes not just the actions themselves but also the pride the young freedom fighters felt.

Among the younger generation who were inspired by her book – specifically the English translation – was Tahmima Anam, who, born in 1975, had not experienced 1971. Though the debt has not been acknowledged in the book, it is clear that the debt is there. *A Golden Age* (2007) begins, as does Jahanara Imam’s book, on March 1, 1971, when the cricket match between Pakistan and MCC had to be postponed. Anam also quotes the same poem from Kahlil Gibran – “Your Children Are Not Your Children” – quoted by Jahanara Imam.

Unlike Roquiah Sakhawat Hossein, Sufia Kamal and Jahanara Imam, Taslima Nasrin rejected the accepted role of women. She also pointed out loudly, and in unmistakable ways, how women had been deprived and discriminated against. Born in 1962, Taslima began writing poetry but came to public notice with her columns, which recounted the sexual harassment that women and girls suffered in Bangladesh society. She invited a lot of controversy with her book *Lajja* (1993; later translated as *Shame*) – written in the aftermath of communal troubles following the Babri Mosque incident in India – and consequently had to leave Bangladesh. She lived for several years in Sweden, then moved to New Delhi. India too has not been safe for her. She was attacked in Hyderabad at the launch of the Telugu translation of her novel, *Shodh*, on August 9, 2007. In 2015, she was threatened by Al-Qaeda-linked extremists. The Center for Inquiry helped her to travel to the United States where she lives at present.

In 1989 Taslima Nasrin was invited by the editor Naimul Islam Khan (who later became her third husband) to write columns for the popular newspaper *Ajker Kagoj*. Taslima Nasrin was hesitant but then started writing about a personal incident that had left both a physical and psychic scar on her. Her first column describes her experience of being burned by a young man who pressed a half-smoked cigarette on her hand. Though every young woman was wary of what were called Romeos or Eve-teasers, this was perhaps the first time that someone had written in a newspaper column about a personal attack on her. On May 2, 2015 the historian Mandira Bhattacharya was speaking at an event organised by the Itihash Gobeshona Kendra (The Centre for Historical Research), describing her days in Dhaka in the mid-1950’s. She mentioned that as a young girl, who did not dress like the other girls and who used to walk about freely, she also suffered adverse comments. Though her parents were very enlightened, she recalled how those remarks had caused her to reduce her moving about as freely as she did. However, when she was growing up, girls did not speak about these things, blaming themselves for how they were treated. Though Mandira Bhattacharya didn’t say so, it was Taslima Nasrin who freed women to talk about sexual abuse.

In her columns Nasrin noted how women have always been treated as objects in a patriarchal society and how religion has been used to chain them

further. She noted the unequal relationships between men and women and the discrimination women suffer from. Her question why it was that there was no male Bengali equivalent for the word “patita” – fallen woman – made people aware of the discrimination that women suffered from.

Nirbachito Kolum (Selected Columns) was published as a book, containing her columns written between 1989 and 1990 – and immediately became a best seller. Taslima Nasreen revelled in being a “bad woman,” titling one of her books *Noshto Meyer Noshto Goddo* (Fallen Prose of a Fallen Girl, 1992). Her refusal to abide by the morés of society is also obvious in the title of another book of essays: *Jabo Na Keno? Jabo* (Why Won’t I Go? I Will Go, 1991).

Taslima Nasrin’s ideas created a tremendous impact on young women studying in colleges and universities. At the University of Dhaka, for instance, women students staying in the women’s halls of residence were expected to return to their halls by sunset. Male students were allowed to stay out till 9.¹² Agitating women students inspired by Nasrin were able to get the rules changed. The fight, however, continues. Women students at the Jahanara Imam Hall of Jahangirnagar University, for example, are now demanding that they be allowed to stay out beyond 10 pm.

While inspiring young women, Taslima’s writings angered many Muslims. An interview which appeared in Indian newspapers after she had won the Ananda Purushkar quoted her as saying that the Quran should be revised. Though afterwards she claimed to have been misquoted, this brought down the anger of fundamentalists. Her freely talking about sex also created controversy. Perhaps no one since Roquiah had spoken out so boldly about women’s rights. However, there is one big difference: Roquiah did not talk about sexuality.

Apart from writing columns, Taslima also published half a dozen collections of poetry between 1982 and 1993, often with female oppression as a theme, and often containing very graphic descriptions. In addition, she wrote novels, but came to public attention with her 1993 novel *Lajja*, in which a Hindu family is persecuted by Muslims. This novel created a great deal of controversy, with many Bangladeshi Muslims calling for a ban. In October 1993, an Islamic fundamentalist group, called the Council of Islamic Soldiers, offered a bounty for her death. After her May 1994 interview in *The Statesman*, increasing agitation led to her going into hiding and then to escaping to Sweden.

Taslima Nasrin has continued to write – poems, novels, essays, memoirs. She has seven volumes of memoirs, beginning with *Amar Meyebela* (My Girlhood, 2002) – for which she received her second Ananda Purushkar. Both this volume and three subsequent volumes, *Utal Hawa* (Wild Wind), *Ka* (Speak up), *Sei Sob Ondbokar* (Those Dark Days), have been banned by the Bangladesh government. Under pressure from Indian Muslims, *Ka*, published in West

¹² Though they often managed to stay out till much later.

Bengal as *Dwikhandita*, was banned in India as well, but, after the ban was criticised by West Bengal authors, it was lifted in 2005. Her other volumes of memoirs are *Ami Bhalo Nei Tumi Bhalo Theko Priyo Desh* (I Am Not Well, You Stay Well, Beloved Country), *Nei Kichu Nei* (No, There Is Nothing) and *Nirbashon* (Exile). Her increasing candidness as well as her disclosing the sexual escapades of well-known writers in Bangladesh and India have alienated her from many. Though her books are being published, publishers run the risk of angering many Muslims. Agami Prakashan, which published *Nirbashon* in 2012, ran into problems earlier in 2015 with the publication of her book at the February Book Fair.¹³ The publisher, Osman Gani, quietly withdrew it from circulation. According to him, his contacts in significant places prevented him from getting into trouble.

Many of Taslima's poems and autobiographical writings are painfully graphic, often filled with considerable hate towards men, but some of her early poems describe not only how men oppress women, but how women have accepted this oppression. In "Things Cheaply Had," for example, she notes how easy it is for men to buy women and how these bought women remain silent about their oppression.

Even a mangy cur of the house barks now and then,
But over the mouths of women cheaply had
there's a lock,
a golden lock. (366)

Elaine Showalter coined the term "gynocritics" to describe literary criticism based on a female perspective. In *Toward a Feminist Poetics* Showalter explains that instead of focusing angrily or admiringly on men's writings, women should construct a female framework to analyse or create their own writing.

In contrast to [an] angry or loving fixation on male literature, the programme of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories. Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture. (149)

Showalter thus stresses that gynocritics is not meant to erase the differences between male and female writing. Rather gynocritics is creative, leading to an exploration of female reality. It is self-discovery.

¹³ The Ekushey Book Fair, commemorating the Bangla Language Movement, is a month-long book fair in February. Most publishers of Bangla books try to publish in time for this fair.

In Taslima Nasrin we do not find this exploration of female culture but a raging anger. She is still in Showalter's second phase, what Showalter terms "feminist." Taslima Nasrin is a radical feminist with much of her writing a scathing criticism of patriarchal society. However, there are occasions when she can be inspiring. Thus, in another early poem of hers – while she is acutely aware of the patriarchal world that stands ever ready to smother a woman who claims equal rights – she gives a positive message to women.

Character

You're a girl
and you'd better not forget
that when you cross the threshold of your house
men will look askance at you.

When you keep on walking down the lane
men will follow you and whistle.

When you cross the lane and step onto the main road
men will revile you, call you a loose woman.

If you've no character
you'll turn back,
and if you have
you'll keep on going
as you're going now. (365)

Though Taslima spoke of topics that are being spoken today in Bangladesh, no government has allowed her to return. Sadly, PEN Bangladesh was unable to support her, though PEN supports writers in exile. Nor did women's organisations support her – partly because she summarily dismissed everyone else who had worked for women's rights and partly perhaps they were afraid of siding with her and inviting the wrath of extremists. The support she got was from Kabir Chowdhury, who has since passed away, and Ali Riaz, who has published *(Re)-Reading Taslima Nasrin* (2009), a collection of pieces on her.

Taslima Nasrin seems almost forgotten today. At the Dhaka Hay Festival 2014, John Ralston Saul, President of PEN International, did not once mention Taslima Nasrin. However, many women writers in Bangladesh quietly talk about topics that Taslima Nasrin talks about. Thus Selina Hossain in her stories "Motijaner Meyera" (Motijan's Daughters) and "Paruler Ma Howa" (Parul Becomes a Mother) talks about a woman's right to bear a child outside the marital bonds. In "Behesti Kancha" (Caged in Paradise) Rizia Rahman talks about how religion is used to control women. Both Selina Hossain and Rizia Rahman are respected senior writers. A major difference between them and

Taslima Nasrin perhaps is that they also fulfil the traditional roles of wives and mothers. The things they write about are not what happened to them in their own persons, but to characters in their writings. By contrast, many of the incidents that Taslima writes about happened to her. Another of the reasons Taslima has alienated many is perhaps because she insists that she alone has spoken about taboo subjects, that she alone has tried to improve the lot of women.

However, as Shabnam Nadiya points out in “Woman Alone,” there were women other than Nasrin who taught her what it meant to be female. The difference was in the manner in which Taslima broached her subject.

There were others who helped, other writers, other activists, other women – women who worked, walked the streets, who cooked, cleaned, and taught us what it meant to be female, what potential that word had. And there was Taslima. Who stormed the barricades of bhodro feminist discourse, with her graphic detailing of abuse, her unflinching depiction of the eternal exile of being an articulate, affirmative woman, who suffered no injustice gladly.

Writing about Taslima Nasrin in “Woman Alone,” Nadiya begins her essay with a personal experience of being touched improperly when she was six. She then talks about another incident on a bus when she was fourteen. These were experiences that Nasrin’s columns inspired her to speak about. She could connect to Taslima’s writings as she couldn’t to western feminists. A teenager when *Nirbachito Kolum* first came out in book form, she notes how “the book exploded her into my life.” Taslima helped her realise that what had happened to her, happened to others, and was not her fault. Nasrin freed Nadiya to talk about sexual harassment

However, for Nadiya, Taslima’s “self-preoccupation” and “the insipid regurgitation of her victimhood” were a disappointment. Taslima’s exile too, Nadiya feels, has been unproductive – isolating her from her milieu. She notes what Taslima meant for her when she was a teenager and why she is disappointed now: “Taslima opened a lot of doors for the likes of us. It’s a pity that she has become a travesty of who she used to be.” She also suggests why Taslima alienates others by wholly dismissing what other women – and men – have done for women – and for her personally, by hiding her or helping her out of the country or protesting at the injustice of her exile. Nadiya also questions Nasrin’s pandering to certain tastes and her compromising those who had helped her.

Nevertheless, in Bangladesh today when young women are assaulted on the occasion of Pahela Baisakh,¹³ one cannot help wondering at how Taslima

¹³ Women were assaulted on April 14, 2015 at Pahela Baisakh celebrations. Despite the outrage – and the presence of CCTV cameras – just a handful of arrests have been made.

had touched upon this issue in her earliest columns. However, while the young women – and men – are openly and loudly protesting these attacks, no one seems to recall Taslima Nasrin – though it was Taslima who made it possible for women to speak openly about sexual abuse.

Today's young Bangladeshi women talk about discrimination, they talk about sexual harassment – as, for example, at a session at the Hay Festival Dhaka 2014. However, none of them remember her. Though freeing women to speak, Taslima herself has been forgotten. What answer do I have to this? Perhaps, it is because Taslima has been forced to become the symbol of the exiled writer. Forced into this mould, she has not been able to rise. Anger can be the beginning of something, but it cannot go on being the inspiration of all one's writing. Though Taslima mentions Roquiah as one of her inspirations, Roquiah did not allow anger to dominate her writings. In "Sultana's Dream," she used humour to write about the irrationality of locking up innocent women, realising perhaps that anger might only repel readers. However, when she wanted to ensure that Muslim girls got education in the school she founded in her husband's name, she also ensured that they came to school in horse-driven carriages, the windows of which were suitably draped with veils so that no one could look inside. Sufia Kamal was inspired by female themes, but could write about Nelson Mandela or Gorky, could participate in political movements where gender did not come to the fore. Jahanara Imam, though a widow, who had also lost a son the same year she lost a husband, could lead a movement of men and women to protest the rehabilitation of those who had actively participated against the country's liberation movement. Though each of these writers felt anger, they were able to channel their anger – and grief – to positive ends. Nasrin's militant feminism alienates her, although perhaps she is the most well-known of these women writers and activists internationally.

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