

**Mohammad A. Quayum and Md. Mahmudul Hasan, eds. *A Feminist Foremother: Critical Essays on Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2017. 284 pp. ISBN 978-93-86296-00-9.**

Like all great socio-cultural upheavals, the so-called “Bengal Renaissance” was marked by several contradictions, so much so that the term “Bengal Renaissance” itself has been subjected to scrutiny by people of various ideological dispositions. Not only did the massive churning in Bengal following the colonial ideational encounter between the East and the West result in a play of the dominant, the residual and the emergent in the domain of ideas and institutions hitherto unprecedented in this part of the world, it also led to a self-critical spirit that was operative in the project of Bengali self-fashioning at the turn of the twentieth century. On the one hand, the “Bengal Renaissance” has been understood to be an essentially exclusive experience by and large confined – in initiatives and benedictions – within the circuit of the urban (upper) middle class upper caste Hindu men. On the other hand, it has been hailed for creating the possibility of an institutional and discursive impetus that had to spill over this restrictive class-caste-gender-religious-spatial location and touch the lives of the fringe hinterlands, the “fragments” of the emergent nation over time. The subalterns, initially only spoken for, did start to speak, however stutteringly; the age-old skeletons started to tumble out of the cupboard, and there emerged a tradition of reinterpretation of traditions. This critical engagement with the inherited legacy, the romantic questioning spirit, has been central also to the culture of awakening at the individual level. Bengali modernity of the twentieth century and after – both individual and collective – is thus an ambivalent, Janus-faced phenomenon, of which Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was a wonderful example.

On the one hand, at the collective discursive level, a rural Muslim woman initially deprived of both colonial “enlightenment” and the linguistic and cultural nourishment of the local ethnic culture because of her “aristocratic” *ashraf* background, spatially and culturally she was arguably farthest away from the spirit of awakening. It is only through an exemplarily arduous journey in which she had to look up to the guidance and assistance of primarily men – first her brother and then her husband – and a woman – her sister – that she could prepare herself for her later lifelong crusade against various forms of inequities in contemporary life, most notably patriarchy, operative in various subtle and overt forms at several levels – from the long history of Indian patriarchy through the discursive hegemony of the regional (primarily Hindu and Brahmo) patriarchs of the Bengal Renaissance and the stifling patriarchal conservatism within her own religious community to the rigid paternal control within the family. Her life and struggle therefore was crucially shaped by some of the contradictions created by the exclusionist culture of the Bengal Renaissance. On the other hand, at the

individual level, like *all* other great children of the awakening, including Rabindranath Tagore, she herself embodied a series of contradictions. Unable to reconcile the opposing demands of tradition and modernity, her life and ideas at times showcase the unenviable predicament of an individual caught in the throes of transition within a modernising culture. It is only by locating this illustrious thinker and worker within the culture of contradictions that produced her and by appreciating the ambivalences within her that we in the twenty first century can truly reclaim her legacy. That can also save us from a self-defeating hagiography and help us evaluate our own tenuous and fractious modernity in the postcolonial subcontinental context today.

The volume under consideration, by shedding light on the life and works of Rokeya from diverse perspectives, seeks to capture her groundbreaking contribution to the causes of Indian women's emancipation, Bengali Muslim modernity, Bangla literature and Bengali secular identity formation in an age when the now-so-familiar Euro-American discourses of "feminism" and feminist activism were yet to make their appearance in the Indian shore. This was a time when Bengali women's cause was being upheld primarily by Kolkata-centric men largely within the framework of the (Hindu) *shastric* prescriptions and proscriptions. Only a few Brahmo enlightened women, from within their elite social location, started to take a few tentative steps towards women's self-fashioning with a secular discursive thrust, with degrees of assistance from their menfolk. The "woman question" was only beginning to make its appearance in an emergent public sphere and in discourses of Indian nationhood. However, what is so very astonishing about Rokeya's achievement is that not only did she dare to address some radically "thorny issues quite as openly as she did" unlike any of her Muslim/Hindu/Brahmo predecessor, contemporary or immediate successor (35); the terms of reference, the critical and conceptual categories that she employs in her work in exposing patriarchal ideology and exploring womanhood in the larger hegemonic institutional network involving nationhood, religion, family and so on, anticipated some of the foundational concerns of the late-twentieth century Euro-American and postcolonial feminisms.

The first three essays of the volume, two by one of the editors, Mohammad A. Quayum, and one by Mahua Sarkar, clear a space for understanding Rokeya by contextualising her within her personal familial and social background and by tracing the state of the "woman question" in late-nineteenth-early-twentieth century Bengal. In the process, Sarkar draws salutary attention to the necessity of reading Rokeya's work alongside those of several other Muslim woman intellectuals of her time, and argues that "any attempt at appreciating the works of Muslim women in early twentieth-century Bengal... ought to also foreground the discursive context in which they wrote, and the subsequent marginalisation that their work suffered within the normative [patriarchal, nationalist] history of colonial India" (40). Quayum's article "Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain: A Biographical

Essay” offers an example of such a context-sensitive reading of Rokeya’s works. However, with all its virtues, this contextualisation in the essay is somewhat incomplete, for it refuses to confront the inevitable ideological ambivalences in Rokeya, endangered by her own complex milieu, and seems to seek to create an unproblematic seamless whole out of her work. For example, the author towards the beginning of the essay speaks in no uncertain terms about “Rokeya’s seething anger against” the practice of *pardah* “that she thought was utterly deadly and which obliterated the minds of its victims slowly and silently like a lethal gas” (3). And then, at the end of the essay, he seems to take this critical edge out of the whole discourse by indirectly endorsing the custom, which Rokeya herself also did in one of her essays. Commenting on how she “defended the *pardah* as an ‘ethical’ choice for mankind and practiced it herself in her daily life,” he now claims that she only “criticised its excessiveness” (18). The other editor of the volume, Md. Mahmudul Hasan, takes a similar position on the issue in his essay “The Private-Public Dichotomy in Rokeya’s Work” (169). Excessive or not, *pardah* is to be unambiguously condemned, and we can do Rokeya’s radical critical spirit a justice only by taking a critical stance on her own ambivalence in this issue. Defending *burqa* in one of her essays in *Motichur* Vol. I, “Burqa,” Rokeya wrote: “Confinement [*abarodh*] is not much in conflict with progress.... *Burqa* is not a bad thing after all” (Quadir, in Ghosh 625).<sup>1</sup> While her protagonist in *Padmaraag*, Siddiqua, seeks to “eradicate” “the practice of confinement” altogether (Ghosh 626) and her feminist utopia *Sultana’s Dream* revengefully dreams of a *mardana* replacing the *zenana*. Modernity, especially postcolonial modernity, has always been an incomplete project that has sought to make its way through such loopholes.

Likewise, one tends to take issue with such propositions as the one in the otherwise brilliant Introduction to the book that Rokeya never questioned her religion per se, and offered a critique of only certain orthodox sections sporting the Islamic garb who used some “pseudo-sacred, misogynist texts... to endorse and perpetuate iniquitous patriarchal ideology and practices” (xix). “When Rokeya maintains that religious books are man-made,” the editors go on to argue, “she may have had in mind the numerous cheap and popular tracts written by misogynists, clad in counterfeit religious garb.” Here again, we need to highlight the inevitable play of opposing ideological forces in Rokeya’s life. For all her sincerity as a devout, practicing Muslim in her private life, she never harboured any illusion about the oppressive, patriarchal dimension of *any* institutional, organised religion. Her scathing attack on the three dominant religious denominations in India of her times in “Alangkar naa Badge of Slavery” (Ornaments or Badge of Slavery) – Hinduism, Islam and Christianity – where she

---

<sup>1</sup> Translation from Bangla to English here and on other occasions, unless otherwise mentioned, is mine.

chooses “the head of the [Hindu] gods,” “the great Isha [Jesus]” and “the great Muhammed” for special treatment (Ghosh 633-34), leaves no scope of ambiguity on that count. Her piercing insight into the politics and sociology of the making of godheads and their sons, the angels and the prophets (Ghosh 633) – no less than revolutionary in her own context – begs invocation of the Foucauldian paradigm of knowledge-power dialectic which negates the possibility of any “pure,” apolitical, non-discursive “Truth.” Quoting from her “Streejatir Abanoti” (Woman’s Downfall), Mahua Sarkar makes the point succinctly: “Rokeya argues that women’s oppression should be understood as a direct consequence of unfair, mail-centric ‘social injunctions’ embodied in *all religions*, and not merely as a by-product of the misplaced conservatism of a few orthodox mullahs” (32-33; emphasis added). Bharati Ray also argues in the same line in this volume (119-20, 121-22). Indeed, Quayum comes to concur in his second essay, “Inspired by the Bengal Renaissance: Rokeya’s Role in the Education and Emancipation of Bengali (Muslim) Women.” Well, almost! He argues here that Rokeya “believes that male-centred religious tradition and knowledge have a central role to play in [woman’s downfall] because it is men who interpret religion” (53). Let us add that religion is not only *interpreted*, but also *created* by men. We would do the great feminist foremother a disservice if we stop short of unequivocally questioning the ideological complicity between institutional religion and patriarchy, especially at a critical juncture in the life of the subcontinent today when religious fundamentalism owing allegiance to various creeds is rearing its ugly head, and threatening to rob women, among others, of their hard-earned basic human rights.

The first three essays of the volume set the stage for the rest of the articles by largely introducing and contextualising Rokeya’s variegated creative, critical and activism-oriented enterprises. Sarmistha Dutta Gupta’s piece on Rokeya’s educational ideas as embodied in her project of Sakhawat Memorial School is a fascinating exploration of her pioneering contribution to the project of secular, ethno-linguistic identity formation of the Bengali people. Rokeya, who, inspired by her truly “hidden jewel” sister Karimunnesa, braved many a familial and social odd to learn Bangla, and forged “female collectivities” (71) with other enlightened women of her time, the author shows, paved ways for the Bengali community’s post-independence struggle for an identity based on local cultural heritage rather than religion. And her school played a pivotal role in this process. Her ideas of culture, tradition, education and modernity bear striking similarities with those of another stalwart of her time, Rabindranath Tagore, who was also struggling hard to run a similar institution in another part of Bengal to shape an indigenous modernity by offering alternatives to the colonial model of history and education. Dutta Gupta points out: “Rokeya’s school educated them to interpret Islam in particular and respect elements of value in India’s heritage in general. The school also sought to modify ancient practices to suit modern conditions of life so that

it could develop the physical, moral and mental faculties of girls along modern lines and synthesise the East and West” (72). Bengali language was also central to Rabindranath’s project of regional modernity in Santiniketan, as it was to “the efforts of early Bengali Muslim intellectuals to bring out periodicals like the *Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Patrika* (1917), *Moslem Bharat* (1920) and *Saugat* (1918), which voiced the aspirations of the new middle class and engaged with the language question” (76).

Another striking similarity of Rokeya’s ideas with Rabindranath’s comes out in the next article, by Md. Mahmudul Hasan, who points out that Rokeya’s feminism, by way of underscoring women’s interpellation in the patriarchal ideology, calls for a radical self-critique on their part: “she does not rest content by simply putting the blame on men; rather, she looks to identify the areas women themselves need to address” (99). This suggestion of the necessity of awakening from within, independent of inspiration from outside, was central to Rabindranath’s notion of *atmashakti* – the force within – which for him was a crucial requirement in the postcolonial Indian nation-building project. Hasan here contextualises Rokeya’s feminist corpus within the long and robust tradition of South Asian Muslim Feminism, the existence of which, he shows through several examples, was hardly acknowledged in the dominant colonial and (Hindu) nationalist historiographies in the late-colonial Bengal. This silencing of the marginal, again, points towards the subtle and layered ways of operation of power in “Bengal Renaissance” and Indian nationalism, which reduced Rokeya (and her Muslim sisters) to a state of “triple otherness” – as colonised Muslim women (90). Hasan’s exposure of the ideological collusion of imperialism, Indian nationalism and indigenous patriarchy immensely helps us realise the magnitude of Rokeya’s achievement. He takes up the issue of the glaring omission of Muslim writers in English – feminist or otherwise – in another article of his in the anthology, “Marginalisation of Muslim writers in South Asian Literature.” He forcefully argues there for revisiting the canon through greater representation in it of Muslim writers and for reading Rokeya’s English works from this against-the-grain perspective. Bharati Ray’s article offers a comprehensive analysis of the salient aspects of Rokeya’s feminism. Particularly interesting here are Ray’s arguments on how a) in spite of all the impediments she had to face, and being a product of a milieu that advocated women’s emancipation, Rokeya was miles ahead of her feminist contemporaries – Hindu or Muslim; b) she fearlessly challenged the two most enduring “pillars of patriarchy – the institutions of family and religion” (124) and c) finally, in spite of being a devout practicing Muslim, she was an ardent advocate of secular values. India – indeed, the world – would have been a far greater place to live in, had we been able to imbibe and practice the non-sectarian spirit of Rokeya’s architectural metaphor of the three-storied mansion in her preface to *Padmaraag*. In her feminist utopia *Sultana’s Dream*, too, all the religion they believe in is that of universal humanism, one

“based on Love and Truth. It is our *religious* duty to love one another and to be absolutely truthful” (Ghosh 517; emphasis added).

Srimati Mukherjee’s perceptive essay, through an analysis of some of her literary works, shows how Rokeya countered patriarchal hegemony at both personal and collective levels, in private domain and in public sphere, in literary/creative endeavours as well as in the domain of activism. She argues that the “embedding of imagistic and metaphoric excess is Rokeya’s writerly manifestation... of her sense of additional, ‘excessive,’ grossly unnecessary and almost unbearable layers of difficulty in the lives of women who worked in the public sphere in colonial India in the early twentieth century” (146). An exploration of the ideological traffic between the private and the public through the prism of literary works is once again taken up by Md. Mahmudul Hasan. His essay “The Private-Public dichotomy in Rokeya’s Work” provides a nuanced reading of “Nurse Nelly,” *Padmaraag* and *Sultana’s Dream* to understand the complex economy of physical and psychological oppression carried out by patriarchy and the various forms of resistance offered by women against this oppression in Rokeya’s Bengal. One of the most engaging articles of the volume, Md. Rezaul Haque’s “Educating Women, (Not) Serving the Nation,” is an exposition of the various contradictions at the heart of Bengali/Indian modernity in the age of “Bengal Renaissance” and nascent nationalism, and the multidimensional, ambivalent modes of Rokeya’s own negotiation of those problems and pitfalls. It starts with the suggestion that “in India discourses as well as attendant practices of reformism, modernity, feminism and nationalism came to be produced in the same discursive environment.... 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” (174). In this non-dyadic understanding of the antinomies, nationalism, though primarily a middle class patriarchal discourse, could not grow in radical isolation from a feminist spirit. Hence the difficulty in “delinking the two agendas: feminist and national” (175). Following this argument, Haque convincingly shows that the early Rokeya assimilated the “false consciousness” engendered by the dominant nationalist discourse and her notion of women’s empowerment through education in this phase was “not conceived of as an end in itself; rather it [was] imagined as a means to an end, which is to serve the nation” (176). Through examples from her early essays like “Sugrihini” (The Good Housewife), “Burqa,” “Griha” (Home) and so on, he shows how, ironically, “Rokeya herself internalised patriarchal ideology in its newer configuration of nationalism” (177), and how she eventually grew out of it, thus learning to treat the issues of women’s rights, empowerment and emancipation as an end in itself, separate from the dominant new patriarchal nationalist agenda, in her later works like *Padmaraag* and *Sultana’s Dream*. So much so, that *Padmaraag* can be treated as a veritable critique of the discourse of nation from the feminist

perspective. Rokeya did, finally, see through the designs of the new, modern patriarchy that replaced the old one.

Fayeza Hasanat's ecofeminist critique of *Sultana's Dream* moves beyond the familiar feminist utopian reading of the piece. While Hasanat hails the ideological alliance between women, nature and science celebrated in this text, in a post-feminist fashion she also problematises its power-implications. The free women in ladyland, Hasanat suggests, do not bring any fundamental structural change in the life of the dream locale. The feminism and the residents' relationship with nature and science invoked here are only reflective of an inverse patriarchy, where power and hierarchy continue to inform all operations, with only a facile change in the guard. She talks about "Rokeya's utopian women" "abusing nature's bounty" and "strong, asexual and immensely powerful (if not oppressive) women who have taken complete control over man, science and nature" (231-32). Indeed, the idea of "revenge" against patriarchy – albeit in a flippant, tongue-in-cheek fashion – has been time and again associated with this work, right from the time of its composition. The salutary warning offered by Hasanat's reading of the text must inform all reformative and modernising ventures, if they are to save their progressive energy from the onslaught of postmodernist scepticism.

In his third article in the volume, "Hindu-Muslim Relations in the Works of Rabindranath Tagore and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain," Mohammad A. Quayum deals extensively with the works of the two luminaries of the "Bengal Renaissance" to show how they wrote and worked tirelessly to create a culture of collective self-critique in their own religious communities to foster amity, fellowship and togetherness between Hindus and Muslims, towards the making of a tolerant, inclusive and pluralistic Bengali and Indian identity. It is time we took a leaf or two out of their books in "crossing borders" (237) to embrace the "other" in our troubled subcontinental existence today. Barnita Bagchi, in another interesting comparative study, has ventured to focus on a less discussed aspect of Rokeya's work – her role as an "entertainer-educator" (258) – along with that of two other Bengali woman writers – Lila Majumdar and Nabaneeta Dev Sen. Her discussion of these writers' often strategic deployment of wit and humour in their polemical writings clearly has a Bakhtinian carnivalesque dimension. Their humour is based on the principles of "irreverence and defamiliarisation," whereby, the author argues, "pomposity, earnestness, and powers-that-be are all treated with laughter and lack of respect" (273). Such laughter was a lethal political weapon they wielded in their discursive battle against various forms of social iniquities, patriarchy in particular, fought in a non-didactic manner.

As a whole, the anthology succeeds in offering a fresh contemporary reading of the great feminist foremother from variegated interesting perspectives, which build on as well as immensely enrich the already existing body of work on her through original departures. From an informed introduction through a series of

insightful articles that contextualise Rokeya in her ideational and ideological milieu, to a group of essays that celebrate, debate and critique her contributions and positions in creative, polemical and praxis-oriented endeavours, it locates her ambivalent modernity within the multidimensional discursive context of “Bengal Renaissance” and explores their implications for posterity. In the process, it strongly makes the case for revisiting and rethinking some canons, from the canon of Indian feminism to the one pertaining to South Asian Writing in English. We can do justice to Rokeya’s work – and the present editors’ – only by remaining ever alert to operations of power and relentlessly striving towards a plural, democratic, secular and egalitarian Bengali, Indian and subcontinental identity.

### **Works Cited**

Hossain, Rokeya Sakhawat. *Rokeya Rachanaboli* [Complete Works of Rokeya]. Ed. Anil Ghosh. Kolkata: Katha, 2014.

**Saurav Dasthakur**  
**Visva-Bharati University, India**  
**Email: dasthakur.s@gmail.com**