

Educating Muslims Girls: A Study of Rokeya's Contribution wrt "Sultana's Dream"

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Abstract: Art and Activism always welcomes new hope and new possibilities of change in the structure and tradition, culture and value, system and politics. In the duration of the change, one or the other remains privileged or unprivileged. In the social history of India, the feminist discourse spectacularly remained silent but it was in the nascent stage and with some writers writing in Indian English and Into-English writing. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was engaged in uplifting and contributing for women through their art and activism. The paper will explore the contribution of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, (1880-1932) and her literary activism to uplift the muslim women. Her act for change may be called an Islamic Feminism because she had emphasised her project to bring change to Muslim women in culture, tradition and life style. Rokeya engaged her life for social reform, writing and education having a purposeful trajectories for Muslim girls. She founded the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' in Calcutta that inculcates modern subjects, awareness of hygiene and economically independence and primarily the dissemination of education in Muslim Girls in Bengal. She addresses her readers through her short story "Sultana's Dream" (1905) in which she critiques male chauvinist system and its hypocrisy. The short story is here an art form and symbolic dissemination of her purpose for change in the status of women in general but more specifically she had an apparent purpose for Muslim girls and community progress. She had also founded Anjuman-e-Khawateen (Islamic Women's Association) for the above purpose. The paper will delve into the literary activism of Rokeya Shakhawat Hussain and her feminist discourse in inclusive development of muslim women.

Key Words: Feminism, Purdah, Seclusion, Public sphere, women's rights, patriarchy.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Observing twentieth century, there is a notable impression regarding the status of Muslim women and girls. A scribbled notice may be spotted that muslim women are more particular about purdah and give priority to sirat, they are reported as the least interested towards education or are not given priority to achieve education. As a matter of fact, there are still some caricatures about them in the form of wearing purdah, segregated from the public sphere and the least interested for employability. Perhaps, it is the demand of the early part of 20th Century, women stand equal to men in all domains of the public spheres. By the way, it is a general impression produced by media and accepted by common people. If we take the western media in the digital platform, we still come across information about The Government of Afghanistan has imposed restriction on the education of women, it gives some liberty but does not prioritise on coeducation and attending the public sphere. Furthermore, women are treated as they are forced to stay at home and not promoted to achieve education. But the Western media does not show the perpetual war in Afghanistan and the most extended form, the Middle East. To the western media and somewhat the media of the countries as well Hijab is a form that is supposed to be a symbol of oppression. It bears a stereotyped image about Muslim women to the eyes of the Non-Muslim readers. As Muslim readers get impression that they are docile, lack freedom and never enjoy freedom. To talk about the status of the media projection, it is a matter of contextual and factual that can be understood where lies are fabricated. Who are responsible for backwardness, misrepresentation and misdescription of Muslim Women across the world. The media is of course is governed by a certain lobby which stands for the manufacturing of news and narratives to derogate Islamic religion and culture which is challenge to the West because of its sanctity and establishment. Nobody talks about the war imposed on a country and the reasons for the impact of war on civilians including women and children. Nobody dares to talk that a war leads to the past, a hundred years of underdevelopment. Ignoring some bare facts, it is still believed that sociological and economic development of Muslim women are worst. Talking about the issue of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, the subject remains different. She fights for change and gender equality in Muslim

society that is the main focus of area of research in the paper. To introduce the writer, it can be simply said that she remained an Islamist feminist against patriarchy. Rokeya published five articles titled: "Strijatir Abanati" (The Degradation of Women), "Ardhangi" (The Female Half), "Sugrihini" (The Good Housewife), "Borka" (The Cloak), and Griha (Home)—which discussed purdah and seclusion extensively. These works were later collected into a book in 1908 titled *Motichur*. Other works included "Pipasa" (Thirst), "Murder of Delicia," "Padmarag" (The Ruby), "Sultana's Dream" and "Abarodh Bashini" (Those Behind the Curtain). During her time she moves around the inside and outside society of her community and finds that the patriarchy has been imposed on Muslim women. Rokeya in her short story "The Sultana's Dream" mentions this patriarchy in her family and society as well. She finds that women are guided by the interpreted form of religion that is the main reason for the backwardness of women. In this regard Muslim women must be united and stand against the interpretation of religion and patriarchy. For this, they need to assert their identities and achieve education as an instrument of revolution. She inspires Muslim women and mobilise as well to achieve education as their primary goal.

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was born in 1880 in the district of Rangpur, a village called Pairaband. She is known as Roquiah Khatun, a daughter of a well known called Zahiruddin Mohammad Abu Ali Saber who was well educated, bilingual and landowner. Her father had four sons where Rokeya was born from Rahtunnessa Sabera Chowdhurani. Her mother had given the birth of two sons and three daughter, of which Rokeya was one. Among all her sisters, Rokeya was visionary and a good observer. She observed the social pattern of her family very subtly and found that patriarchy was fully accepted by the family and relatives. Rokeya experiences that the patriarchy affects all customs of the home and cripples down all opportunities for the sisters to grow up educated.

2. OBJECTIVE:

- To critique social and cultural hypocrisy in the name of religion
- Accentuating the ground reality of the Muslim society and striking on misguided by interpreted religious text.
- Construction of Islamic feminism mediated with rational, scientific and socially responsible theorisation.
- Iv. Educating Muslim girls and challenging all patriarchal forces.

3. METHODOLOGY:

The Method applied in the paper is qualitative research is based on the critical analysis of the text, "Sultana's Dream." The analysis of the text is mediated with the secondary sources as mentioned in the reference of the paper.

4. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS:

She poignantly strike over purdah system in her short story which directs mandatory to her community and society. Her literary voice critiques such imposition and asserts that it is nothing but guidance from the interpretation of the religious texts. She also observes that the interpretation of religious texts and social norms were wrongly handled where the family members did not have choice to think critically except giving a passive acceptance of the norms. Rokeya is meant that her critical approach is just analysis of her own community and society of the time but the place is symbolic, the similar situation may exist in different corners of the Indian society. In her worldview, she is quite sure that she is least interested in change of social norm but more particular about the fallacy imposed and hurdle made on the way of taking education and development. Joarder writes:

I had to observe purdah even from woman from the age of five. I did not understand why it was improper to meet somebody, but I had to observe purdah. The inner side of the house was out of bounds for the menfolk; so I did not have to suffer by their presence. However, women freely entered the house, and I had to hide myself before they could see me. As soon as any woman of the locality would come, somebody of our house would give a signal with the eye and I would run pell mell and hide myself anywhere—in the nook of the kitchen, within the rolled up pallet of the maid-servant and sometimes under the bedstead.

I had to run and hide myself just as the chicks do when their mother gives them the signal against a kite. But while the chicks had a definite place—their mother's wings—to hide, I had no such place. Moreover, the chicks understand their mother's signal instinctively. I had no such instinct, and if I failed to understand the signal of the eye and came across somebody, the well-wishing elders used to say "How shameless the girls have become!" (Joarder 1980 6)

She observed that gender role within was clearly defined. So far as education was concerned, girls had limited space that was only the recitation of the Quran and learning etiquettes lessons and apply in their lives. There was hardly glimpse of providing public space and getting opportunities. She also noted that her brothers were given opportunities

to go to public space and and get education while other sisters were denied for such opportunities. It can be also noted that her sister Karimunnessa, the elder sister had defied customs by learning Bangla. She was found to learn the alphabets of Bangla by father, this was accepted but after a malicious criticism by her relatives, her father sent her to the estate of her maternal grandparents and married off at the age of fifteen. But the resistance of approach of her sister left a great mark on Rokeya. She decided not to follow the customs blindly and to combat against the sociological nuances. Examining this, she observed an insatiable thirst for education. Her brother Ibrahim Saber tutored her Bangla and English at night in order to avoid the malicious criticism of his relatives. Noticing commitment and care of Ibrahim to her, Rokeya dedicates a paragraph to her brother in her work *Padmarga* in the following lines:

You have moulded me from childhood...your love is sweeter than honey which after all has a bitter after-taste; it is pure and divine like Kausar [the stream of nectar flowing in heaven mentioned in the Quran].”
(Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain 1988 39)

Continuing her education she got married to Sakhawat at the age of sixteen in 1896 where she found her husband the best companion who provided opportunity for her to read and write. Pokey's husband was a Deputy Magistrate and had inclination toward the Western thoughts and under the influences of changing phenomena of the world in the terms of the knowledge system. He gave a place to her to write for thoughts and society as whereas she can justify her writing in respect of social relevance of her writing. Being a cosmopolitan by mind he always guided her to accept a pluralistic society irrespective of caste, class and religion. Rokeya also credited her husband for inspiration and quite cooperative activities when found that the success of her writing deserves to be acknowledged for which a credit is indeed given to her husband. “If my dear husband had not been so supportive, I might never have written or published anything” (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 1988, pp. 2-3). Her husband insisted her to develop her writing and eventually she wrote an article which was published in Calcutta thematicising the issue and oppression of women in the extensive form. Though she had a deep loss when her two children could not survive, but by the support of her husband she never stagnated her intellectual pursuit. In 1905, she wrote a short, “Sultana’s Dream” published in *The Indian Ladies Magazine*. She became an acclaimed writer but soon she faced another loss of her husband’s eyesight due to diabetes and her husband became dependent on her. The lines from draw attention of the readers and show chaos in the life of Rokeya:

In childhood, I was deprived of my father’s love, while my married life was devoted to nursing my husband through his illness. Every day, I checked his urine, prepared his food and wrote to his doctor. Twice, I became a mother, but the joy of holding my babies to my breast was short-lived. One left me at the age of five months; the other died when it was four months old. And for twenty-two years, I have been suffering the torment of widowhood. (Hossain & Bagchi 2005 vii-ix)

After husband death in Calcutta, Rokeya used some assets left by her husband to open the Sakhawat Memorial School in Calcutta with merely 16 pupils and engaged her widow sister in the management of the school. After the success of this school, Rokeya opened the Begali Muslim Women’s Association which is also known as *Anjuman-e-khawatin-e-Islam*. The fundamental pursuit of the association is to call women at public place and gather for women’s issues and challenges. Behind this she had also mission to help marginalised women especially poor widows, and sheltered wives due to domestic violence and serving purpose for matrimonial and educational services. On the success of the school, Rokeya upgraded her school to high school and revised curricular in which the importance was also prioritised to the skill based subjects such as physical education, handicrafts, sewing, cooking, nursing, home economics and gardening etc. apart from the traditional courses. She believed that vocational courses might carry an immediate opportunities for girls students and they will be economically independent and independent from the financial burden defined by parents and husbands as well.

Rokeya had an ongoing project of uplifting the position of women in her society. She organised a conference on Bengal Women’s Education in Calcutta where it attained the participation of both Muslim men and women. In the conference, the most important issue was discussed on the female education and participants were made aware that the number of Muslim female graduates is low. Covering up the issue, the participants were enlightened with the fact that achieving education must at the top priority and treated as religious duty otherwise the alarming condition of women will lead children in the same proportion of poor life style and meaningless affairs of everyday life. She strongly expresses remarks in her presidential speech regarding the worst education status of Muslim in Bengal: “Why are the Muslims who are ready to sacrifice their lives for supposed insult to the prophet (or to a piece of brick of an old mosque) reluctant to obey his command (in respect of female education)?” (Rokeya 1988 40). The speech was quite resistant, dialectic and firing that addressed the male participants not to follow the interpreted religious texts which keep women lives worst and does not allow to achieve education and to do services. Her teaching through speech was delivered in order to make aware that Muslims men are responsibly for such inequality and backwardness. The interpreted texts have led women trap for felicitating the services of their women and staying for the household affairs. It is a foolish mechanism that has been imposed by the patriarchal forces to live underdeveloped. If women remain underdeveloped, children will be not be educated and impact on the development of males. She illustrates:

Had God Himself intended women to be inferior, He would have ordained it so that mothers would have given birth to daughters at the end of the fifth month of pregnancy. The supply of mother's milk would naturally have been half of that in case of a son. But that is not the case. How can it be? Is not God just and most merciful? (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 1988, p. 41)

She concluded her speech by a note: "men are using religion as an excuse to dominate us at present... Therefore we should not submit quietly to such oppression in the name of religion" (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 1988, pp. 41-42). After the completion of the speech she found that males were cowards and the larger participants did not agree due to their passive acceptance of the patriarchy. But the motive of her conference served the visions and mission of being a woman and emphasised that both the sexes are equal in all respect. Neither she is burden of the family and husband nor the burden of the society. They are creator, may be independent thinkers and march towards freedom from shallowness and darkness in their lives. The pursuit was well defined:

We shall do whatever is needed to be done to attain equality with man. If earning our livelihood independently ensures our freedom, we shall do that. If necessary, we shall be lady-clerk, lady-magistrate, lady barrister, lady-judge—everything. Fifty years from now, there will be a lady-Viceroy who would transform all the women into 'queens.' Why should we not earn? Don't we have hands, feet, intelligence? What is that we don't have? Could not we direct the labour that we give in keeping the husband's house to run an independent business? If we can not get employment in the offices of the government, we will take to agriculture. Why do you cry for not being able to find a bridegroom for your daughter? Give proper education to your daughters and let them earn their own livelihood. (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 1988)

In the text, "Sultana's Dream" (1905) published in *The Indian Ladies Magazine*, is known as a feminist utopia moves around men's practice of patriarchy against women especially Muslim Women in Bengal. She holds men accountable to subjugate women in the public space and home as well. Today, we discuss the issues of women and also find who is the responsible for the underdeveloped conditions women. In the other words, Muslim women remained deprived of education and engaged into traditional teaching and practices. Hossain & Bagchi quotes Kamala Sathianadhan's description in the editorial page of the magazine: "The main object of the magazine will be to help advance the cause of the women in India... The main influences that are at work in this land, have not appreciably affected the women, the men having benefitted more largely than the women in the matter of education and social development. If the people of India are to advance, they should realise that: 'the women's cause is man's; they rise or sink together'" (R.S. Hossain & Bagchi, 2005, p. 31). The novella has been written in a plain prose with a classical style that keeps the readers attuned to an excerpt of the canon text. She presented a finest and balanced prose as if it has been written by an English author voicing women against patriarchy prevalent in society and home as well. The story begins the story of a woman who dreams and makes a visit to an imaginative land that is called "Ladyland," where men are kept into *Mardana* just opposite of *Zanana* but women carry all responsibilities for development in society. It is supposed to be inversion of the construction of existing society where male chauvinism is practiced. On the basis of the conscious effort of women for development and proper construction of society, the land is found free from violence, corruption and crime. On this land, women are accountable to take control over law and order. The central motive of women accountability is uplift science and technology, education and eliminate corruption, child marriage, crime and other violence forces prevalent in society. Quayum, the editor of *The Essential Rokeya*, explains *Sultana's Dream* here: "In other words, the people of this land do not care about any extra-terrestrial power or adhering to a set of senseless rituals, but only the values that are directly beneficial to the human community and to the human soul" (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 1988, pp. 1-2). Rokeya in this story highlighted her crusade against prevailing oppression and vulnerability of Bengali Muslim women. She also appeals women to fight for equal rights and use education the most successful instrument of success and generator of an egalitarian society. She depicts a utopian society that is required within the present time. She has also inspired and motivated Bengali Muslim to remove whatever hurdles on their way through education.

The story begins with entry of Sultana, Sister Sara and The Queen where the first part titled "Ladyland" where the main character is found slumbering in a zenana (seclusion) and wakes up to find Sister Sara and follows her outside. The beginning part is described as follows:

Where are the men? I asked her.

In their proper places, where they ought to be.

Pray let me know what you mean by 'their proper places.'

O, I see my mistake; you cannot know our customs, as you were never here before. We shut our men indoors" (pp. 8-9).

Further, the narrative moves around the central idea of the text underlining the issue of the seclusion, freedom and the space for women. Rokeya is meant that the taboo regarding women and the construction of the knowledge system in the form of stereotyped tone is completely false and carries no meaning at all. In fact the domination of the male centric society has defined the power structure in which the female sex is accepted vulnerable and weak in all the

stratification of the society. In this text, she strongly posits the meaning of the freedom of the women to do the scholarly work and continue the knowledge system with their rationality. Rokeya hereby marks some important lines through Sister Sara:

But, dear Sultana, how unfair it is to shut in the harmless women and let loose the men. Why? It is not safe for us to come out of the zenanas [seclusion], as we are naturally weak. Yes, it is not safe so long as there are men about the streets, nor is it so when a wild animal enters a marketplace.

Of course not. 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 up into their asylum. Thank you! And you do not think it wise to keep sane people inside an asylum and let loose the insane? 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 zenanas [seclusion]! How can you trust those untrained men out of doors? We have no hand or voice in the management of our social affairs. In India man is lord and master. He has taken to himself all powers and privileges and shut up women in the zenanas [seclusion]. (2-3)

She critiques hypocrisy of culture, and meaningless practices. She tries to convince the readers that if women are kept free, educated and trained to do any job, they can deal with any affairs with a shared responsibility. The collective force of male and female will provide more lucrative and conceptual resultants with differential gender approach. She remains disappointed after her presidential speech in the conference to address males and aware them of social, and ethical misconception, she could not impress the larger audience of Muslim men to educated their daughters and give them space to the world from the relationally of Science and technology and from the world of women as well.

Rokeya wanted to construct the shape of the society where male and female should work together and under themselves equal to each other. She strongly condemns seclusion which is relevant to any situation. It means that purdah should neither be hindrance to the work nor be a misuse in theorisation of culture. The cultural formation is a root of an individual, purdah is one of the part, but it should be not a burden and burden on the way of development. Humans are eternally interlocked with the idea of better change and development and fit according to space and time. If it is ignored, one may remain unfit to the speech community inside and outside. Such segregation and backwardness may reflect the same old concept of the dominant and recessive relation.

Why do you allow yourselves to be shut up?

Because it cannot be helped as they are stronger than women.

A lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race. You have neglected the duty you owe to yourselves, and you have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interests. (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 1988, pp. 8-9)

The above words spark with some lessons for women that is muslim women need find their own way of setting themselves right. Nurturing a hope is good for mind and heart, society after a certain time span brings change; that is the rule of society. To achieve success and assert oneself, a chalked out plan remains more effective and influential. Once an individual comes out with transforming oneself into personality, he/she is always respected and given space to have dialogue and opportunities. Sister Sara provides a brief history about the creation of "Landyland."

Let me tell you a little of our past history, then. Thirty years ago, when our present Queen was thirteen years old, she inherited the throne. She was Queen in name only, the Prime Minister really ruling the country. (p. 9)

Our good Queen liked science very much. She circulated an order that all the women in her country should be educated. Accordingly a number of girls' schools were founded and supported by the Government. Education was spread far and wide among women. And early marriage also was stopped. No woman was to be allowed to marry before she was twenty-one. I must tell you that, before this change, we had been kept in strict purdah. How the tables are turned, I interposed with a laugh.

But the seclusion is the same, she said. In a few years we had separate universities, where no men were admitted. (pp. 9-10). While the women of Ladyland were engaged in scientific researches, the men of this country were busy increasing their military power. When they came to know that the female universities were able to draw water from the atmosphere and collect heat from the sun, they only laughed at the members of the universities and called the whole thing 'a sentimental nightmare'! (p. 11)

In the above paragraphs Rokeya has given emphasis on rule by women; the ruling agency would be far far better than men, might be ideal as it is heard in the list of the ideal kingdom. It is hoped that women reign could be better in response to an aged long history of rule by male have brought nothing but chaos and mess our system. It is far far better to have educated women or make each girl educated with the support of the Government rather investing the larger budget of nation in strengthening militarisation. Education, Science and Technology have always a better choice for a developed society and nation. To add more it is sociological nuances to have still practice of child marriage.

5. CONCLUSION:

Rokeya is known for an islamic feminist writer because she writes for her own community and exposes hypocrisy prevalent inside and outside of the society of her time in particular and thinks the same connection if it is with other society and community in general. In her age, she was accepted a radical figure and accused for bringing disorder and disobedience to muslim etiquettes. To Rokeya the existence of being is important rather having oneself in floatation of idealism which may differ from place to place and culture to culture. Her articulation strikes on the intricacy of purdah system and having reservation in educating girls. She makes us realise that subjugation of women is seen and deviation from the actual teaching of Islam. In an umbrella terms of islamic feminism, she plainly holds the readers to understand that women are equal to men in capacity tested at some place and need to be librated and educated to achieve the same.

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