

Inspired by the Bengal Renaissance: Rokeya's Role in the Education and Emancipation of Bengali (Muslim) Women

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Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) is often considered as one of the most significant figures in the education and emancipation of Bengali (Muslim) women, especially during the early decades of the twentieth century. A contemporary of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay (1876-1938) and Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976), she was not only a brilliant writer but also one who passionately fought for the rights and dignity of women, as well as for women's social, economic, and intellectual empowerment. Here I would like to argue that Rokeya's efforts in educating and emancipating Indian women in general, and Bengali Muslim women in particular, were part of a larger social reform program or movement which began in Bengal in the early decades of the nineteenth century and lasted through the first half of the twentieth century, eventually resulting in a change in the course of Bengal's history, as well as in the fate and circumstances of Bengali (Muslim) women. In other words, I contend that Rokeya was influenced and inspired by this movement in taking up the gauntlet against the deeply entrenched patriarchy that shaped the mind and habits of her society.

The movement I am talking about is generally known as the Bengal Renaissance or Bengal Awakening, or, more appropriately, *nabajagaran*, a "new awakening." It was led by a group of mostly English-educated, upper-class, Brahmo/Hindu *bhadralok*, which included prominent reformist figures such as Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891), and Rabindranath Tagore. They aspired to modernize India, and in their efforts to do so, they found it necessary to educate and modernize the Indian woman as well. In fact, the "woman question" was the front and center of this movement because much of the effort of these social reformers was directed towards "rescuing, reviving and refashioning women" (Chaudhuri 164). As the Young Bengal spokesman Kailashchandra Basu put it in 1846, "she must be refined, reorganised, recast, regenerated" (Chaudhuri 164). To achieve this, and to accord women subjecthood/agency, education and economic empowerment through access to property and the political process were considered to be of utmost importance. Only education and economic freedom, these reformists believed, could liberate Indian women from the age-old institutions of *sati*, male polygamy, child marriage, and prohibitions on widow remarriage, and subsequently make them "better companions to their husbands, better mothers to their children and better homemakers, in short, as expressed by the contemporary



Brahmo reformers, as, *sakhi*, *sumata* and *sugrihini*” (Chakraborty 79) – or more importantly, perhaps, as better and more complete human beings. This would also help to bring about *samya* or equality between the sexes.

As a result of this concerted effort and “intense debate and questioning with regard to the position of women” (Chaudhuri 166), a moral climate was created in which *strishiksha* or women’s education was no longer viewed with disdain, and institutions for the education of girls slowly started to appear in Calcutta and elsewhere. For example, John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune (1801-1851), a barrister and Law Member of the Governor-General’s council, in his “pioneering zeal to promote women’s education” (“Bethune College”) founded a school for girls in Calcutta in 1849, which was upgraded to a college in 1879. According to the Hunter Commission Report, by 1882, there were as many as 1,015 girls’ schools in Bengal alone, with a student population of 41,349 (Chakraborty 81). These numbers increased to 2,238 schools and 78,865 students in 1891 (Chakraborty 45). With this new space and opportunities created for women, women themselves gradually started to enter the modernizing movement and participate in the debate on their future. For example, in 1861, Bamasundari Debi published a treatise on the pitiable condition of women, *Ki Ki Kusamaskar Tirahita Haile Ei Desher Shribiddhi Haite Pare* (What Superstitions Need to be Removed for the Betterment of this Country), and Kailashbashini Debi, wife of the Brahmo reformer Durgacharan Gupta, published a book of essays on the subject, *Hindu Mahilaganer Hinabastha* (The Degraded Condition of Hindu Women) in 1863.

However, the main limitation of this movement was that since it was initiated and led by the Brahmo/Hindu *bhadralok*, Muslims and other subaltern groups were at first not willing to participate in it. They came into the picture rather late: “By all accounts, Muslims had little to do with this so-called renaissance in the first half of the 19th century” (Chakraborty 76). Muslims were indifferent to this reform program at the beginning because they were more interested in preserving their separate religious identity. With their loss of power to the British, and particularly with the replacement of Persian with English as the official language of administration in 1837 (King 54), the Muslims started feeling isolated and marginalized, and found themselves on the brink of ruin. The elite Brahmos and Hindus, on the other hand, welcomed British rule because they saw it as “a deliverance” from “Muslim tyranny or medieval dark age” (Chakraborty 76). They were also eager to learn English and take up all the jobs available to non-Europeans in the colonial administration. With this new material empowerment and emerging social and economic leadership, the Hindu middle class came to view the Muslims as “the inferior dissolute other” (Chakraborty 77). This further aggravated the relationship between the two groups and pushed the Muslims away from their broader national identity into their religious shells.

With this changed circumstance in the public domain, Muslims did not want to take the risk of educating their women as that would also threaten the status quo at home, the private domain. Having lost control over the public domain, they came to see the home/private realm as the last bastion of defence. They felt that since women were “the core of family life and potential purveyors of ethical values and religious ideals” (Chakraborty 77), women symbolized everything worth preserving if their religion and religious identity were to be upheld. Therefore, women could not be allowed to come into contact with the outer world. Any attempt to educate the women would require relaxation of the purdah rules, which would, in their opinion, go against the teachings of the Qur’an and the Hadith (religious traditions based on the Prophet’s sayings). Besides, Western education “would corrupt [woman] and prevent her [from] becoming a good housewife” (Barton 107). Thus, for example, when the issue of women’s education was raised at an assembly of the Bengal Social Science Association in 1867, Maulvi Abdul Karim (1863-1943)¹ of the Calcutta Madrasa quickly dismissed it arguing that the education provided to Muslim girls at home was sufficient (Chakraborty 78). In fact, the issue of women’s education was so sensitive at this time throughout the whole of India that even Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan (1817-1898), founder of the Aligarh College in 1875, “did not dare to include it in his powerful movement for Muslims’ education, thinking that such a move would frustrate the ultimate objective of their advancement” (Hasan 48).

However, things began to change in the late nineteenth century when several Muslim leaders, as well as several magazines and periodicals edited by Muslim writers and intellectuals, began to adopt a liberal attitude towards women’s education. They realised that education would help Muslim women to better interpret and appreciate the message of Islam, and therefore not only make them superior Muslims but also equip them to bring up their children according to the true teachings of the religion, ridding it of its superstitious practices and cultural deformities. After all, it was the women who were in charge of bringing up the younger generation, so if they were trained intellectually and morally, they could impart those values to their offspring and thereby push the whole community forward. With this awareness, Syed Amir Ali (1849-1928)² expressed at the annual meeting of the All-India Muhammadan Educational Conference³ in 1891 that female education should advance at the same pace as male education (Chakraborty 78). It was also resolved at the same conference that all efforts should be made towards educating Muslim women (Chakraborty 78).

This changed attitude, focusing as it did on regenerating and recasting Muslim women, created an environment in which schools for girls started to appear in Calcutta and other parts of Bengal. The first known school for Muslim girls during the period was set up in 1873, not in Calcutta but Comilla (a district town in present day Bangladesh), by Nawab Faizunnessa Choudhurani (1834-1903), who was awarded the title “Nawab” by Queen Victoria and was the only female Nawab in British India. The second school was established in Calcutta in 1897 with the

patronage of Begum Ferdous Mahal, wife of the Nawab of Murshidabad. In 1909, Khojesta Akhtar Banu, mother of the well-known Bengali leader, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy (1892-1963), took the initiative to start a school for Muslim girls in Calcutta. In the same year, Rokeya also began her school in her husband's hometown of Bhagalpur, Bihar, but owing to increasing disputes with her stepdaughter and stepson-in-law for familial and ideological reasons, she felt compelled to move the school to Calcutta in 1911.

Thus the school that Rokeya set up in Calcutta was only the fourth school for Bengali Muslim girls in the whole of Bengal. It would not be an exaggeration to think that the socio-cultural developments around her inspired Rokeya to take up the cause, and the political and moral milieu created by this reform movement helped her to find a measure of success. It is quite possible that had the Renaissance not opened up the environment and made education for women, and Muslim women in particular, acceptable, even if to a minimal degree, the idea of opening up a school for girls and taking up other activities to champion the cause of women, would not have occurred to Rokeya, or to her fellow women educationists and activists, as strongly. In this sense, she took up the mantle from her male counterparts rather efficiently and effectively.

In what follows, I will discuss Rokeya's vision for Indian women in general, and Bengali Muslim women in particular, as crystallized in her writings and the various initiatives she undertook, including setting up the school and a woman's association, to fulfil that vision.

Rokeya's Feminist Vision

Rokeya was a prolific and dedicated writer who wrote on women's issues for almost three decades, and in different genres – from poetry, polemical essays, fiction, and allegorical narratives to social satire, burlesque, letters, and journalistic vignettes. Altogether, she has left behind five books and scores of uncollected essays, stories, poems, and letters. Her books include *Motichur (A String of Sweet Pearls)*, Volumes I (1904) and II (1922); *Sultana's Dream* (1908); *Padmarag (Ruby)*; 1924), and *Aborodhbashini (The Zenana Women)*; 1931). It is because of the depth and breadth of her writing that her early critics often came to consider her as one of the best women writers of her time. In a review of *Motichur*, soon after the book was published, the reviewer commented, "The book is written in chaste Bengali.... [Rokeya's] ideas about nation and nationality as expressed in the book have not been approached even by a minute fraction of the male members of the community ..." (Quadir 628). Another reviewer observed in the context of *Sultana's Dream*, "It seems to us that Mrs. R.S. Hossain, the able authoress, is a lady of whom any nation may be proud" (Quadir 628). Her contemporary, writer and critic Mohital Majumdar dubbed Rokeya as the "soul and consciousness of her age" (Syed 17), and Abdul Hye, a literary historian, affirmed, "Of all the Muslim women who became famous as Bengali writers during the Tagore period, Begum Rokeya was the first and the best" (Syed 36).

As stated earlier, Rokeya fought for women's self-reliance, dignity, agency, and empowerment all her life. Her feminist vision could be summed up in the following basic arguments: men and women were equal at the beginning of civilization, but as time passed, men took control over society and began to deprive women of their rights to education, work, and property; now women have been reduced to a deplorable state and are often treated like slaves and animals, sometimes even worse than animals; although women are supposed to be in control of the inner domain, in India all women, regardless of their class, caste or religion, are essentially homeless; religion has often been abused by men to reduce women to their present subservience; purdah, women's segregation, and child marriage are the customs used for keeping women ignorant and enslaved to men; although men are mainly to blame for women's misfortune, women, too, are complicit as they have internalized patriarchal values without questioning them; women must wake up from their present slumber and fight for their equal rights, at least for the sake of society; it is customary to see women as inferior to men, but in reality women are equal and better than men, both morally and intellectually; so, if women are given the opportunity, they could turn this world of "sin and harm" (Quayum 160) into one of peace, prosperity and virtue; India's future lies in its women, so instead of "robbing" them of their rights, it is urgent that women become empowered through education and economic freedom so that the country can move ahead freely and find its rightful place among the commonwealth of nations.

Rokeya begins in a direct, forceful and provocative style. In one of her earliest essays, "Woman's Downfall" ("Streejatir Abanati"), she explains why women are in a "fallen" state; what has led to their current degradation; why they are treated like "slaves," "beggars," and "prisoners"; what has made them so indolent, ignorant, and weak (in body and mind); why they have lost all courage, dignity, and self-reliance; and what could be a possible remedy to all these issues. She has one finger pointed at men because it is they who have tactfully diminished women to the state of "their domesticated animals, or some kind of a prized property" (Quayum 23). They deprive women of all opportunities in society and yet deceive them into thinking that they are their best protectors. With such elaborate trickeries for centuries, men have now occupied the place of "lord" and "master" over their wives, instead of being their lovers and companions. However, Rokeya also considers women culpable because they have unmindfully embraced all androcentric values and accepted their subservience deliberately. They have become so "stupid" that they tend to distrust themselves in every regard and just obey their husbands (Quayum 22). They even fail to see that their cherished pieces of jewellery are the "markers of [their] slavery" (Quayum 23) and signify their husbands' authority over them. The bangles women wear, Rokeya writes sarcastically, are no better than the shackles worn by prisoners; their expensive chokers are like dog collars; women's gold necklaces are like the iron chains put around the necks of "Horses, elephants and other animals" (Quayum

23); and their prized nose-rings are like a harness, which allows the master to keep his wife on a tight leash.

Rokeya continues in a similar vein in her subsequent work. In “Home” (“Griha”), she strikes a furious blow at both men and women, arguing that in India, women are homeless: “we do not have a little hut to call our home. No other creature in the animal world is destitute like us. Everyone has a home – only we don’t” (Quayum 50). Challenging the myth that while men rule the world, women command the home, she says this is just a tall tale to deceive women. In reality, every woman in India, regardless of her caste, class or religion, lives at the whim and mercy of men; if a man permits her, she may be happy, but if he abuses and exploits her she has no choice but to live a life of misery and subservience. Rokeya gives several examples from different social and religious communities to show how helpless women are even inside the inner quarters of their house, which is what their whole world has been reduced to. She shows how a queen lives unhappily inside her palace because she is neglected by her husband, who spends time away from home in the company of other women; how a brother robs his sister of her only inheritance from her husband when she comes to live with him after her husband’s death; how a woman is forced to live with her husband’s co-wives in the house which she inherited from her father. This is how women live in their “keeper’s” house as their subjects – helpless, luckless, illiterate, ignorant, and in subhuman conditions. In the context of a visit to a family in Bihar, Rokeya caustically writes, “The house belongs to Sharafat, and as it has a drove of sheep, flocks of ducks and hens, so also there is a group of women” (Quayum 43).

Animal imagery abounds in Rokeya’s writing as she repeatedly demonstrates how Indian women are forced to live in conditions comparable to those of animals, or worse. In her story “Woman Worship” (“Nari-puja”), she recounts how renowned scholar Pratap Chandra Majumdar’s widowed mother passed away unattended and neglected without the slightest care or concern from the men of the house, except her son, who also failed to get any medical help for her in her dying moments, because she was only a woman and a widow to boot. Following this, Rokeya trenchantly reflects:

Perhaps the master of the house wouldn’t be without worry even when the family’s cow was sick.... Maybe even a pet dog or cat doesn’t die without treatment, and here was the best of God’s creations, a wife in a family who was mortally ill, but no one bothered to take a look at her. (Quayum 122)

If this comment is meant for men of a particular family who were negligent towards a particular woman, in “Bengal Women’s Educational Conference,” she censures men across the subcontinent for their total apathy towards women, once again using animal imagery: “If a dog is hit by a car, we hear an outcry in the Anglo-Indian media. But there is not a single soul in the whole of the subcontinent to mourn for incarcerated women like us” (Quayum 127).

Rokeya believes that this deplorable state of women is a relatively “modern” phenomenon and that this was not so “in the ancient age” (Quayum 21). She further believes that male-centred religious tradition and knowledge have a central role to play in this because it is men who interpret religion. In the first version of her essay “Woman’s Downfall,” published as “Amader Abanati” (Our Downfall), Rokeya unequivocally states: “I have to say that ultimately ‘religion’ has strengthened the bonds of our enslavement; men are lording over women under the pretext of religion” (qtd. in Sarkar 13). This outspoken remark created such a row that Rokeya had to retract it from all subsequent publications of the essay, but the point was made.

Rokeya uses the word “religion” here in the abstract, so we do not know whether she was thinking of all religions or of any one particular religion. My understanding is that she was referring to the changing status of women in Indian society over the course of its history, under the combined auspices of politics and religion. As we know, women were viewed with respect during the pre-Vedic period, and even during the early years of the Vedic era when people believed in the “feminine ultimacy” (Mookerjee 16); that women embodied the primal energy of the universe. Since every woman was endowed with some “divine power,” known as *shakti*, women were generally seen to “carry the spirit of the goddess in them” (Reese 7). Society at the time was “to a great extent, female-oriented” and goddesses were viewed widely “as the Ultimate Reality” (Mookerjee 16). Women enjoyed “some inheritance rights” and had access to education (Reese 45). They could also take part in religious activities and perform “the required sacrifices by themselves” (Reese 45). It is also believed that “Three women – Ghosha, Apala, and Vishvavara – [were] among the composers of many hymns in the Rigveda,” and that “About 600 BCE, a female named Gargi Vachaknav publicly debated Vedic philosophy at King Janaka’s court” (Reese 45).

However, all this began to change as the male-centric Aryan culture with its powerful male gods and caste system slowly overtook the pre-Vedic practices. According to Reese, “By 500 BCE women increasingly were assigned the same low status as the *sudras*.... By the end of the late Vedic period, a well-known warning stated that ‘a teacher should not look at the woman, the *sudra*, the dog, and the blackbird, because they are untruth” (46). Circumstances further deteriorated for women during the Maurya (322-183 BCE) and Gupta (320-367 CE) periods, which are also known as “the classical era of Hindu culture” (Reese 47). This was when women’s rights were further curtailed, and “motherhood was [seen as] the ideal of women” (Reese 47). Polygamy, child marriage, and *sati* were also introduced. Besides, since India’s economy was flourishing and many foreign traders and rulers came to visit the country, to protect women from foreign influences, “Upper caste women were placed in the inner apartments of their houses and used the veil when they went out” (Reese 47). In other words, this was when the veiling and segregation of women were first introduced into Indian culture, long before the arrival of the Muslims or

even the birth of Islam (although now veiling is more frequently associated with Islam and the identity of Muslim women than with any other religion or culture). This was also when Manu's Laws were introduced to consolidate the practices of Hindu society, which not only further curbed women's rights and status in society but also helped establish men's absolute authority over women. At various points in this legal code, this is what the *Manusmriti* has to say about women:

In childhood a female must be subject to the father, in youth to her husband, and when her lord is dead, to her sons; a woman must never be independent.

A father sins unless he marries his daughter off when she reaches puberty.

A husband should be worshiped as a God.

A wife, a daughter, and a slave, these three are declared to have no property. The wealth which they earn is acquired for him to whom they belong.

If a woman should happen to merely to overhear recitations of Vedic mantras by chance, hot molten glass should be poured into their ears. (Reese 57-58)

This might explain why Rokeya was so blunt in accusing "religion" as being responsible for women's degradation in society. She perceived the religious establishment of the time to be in collusion with the political establishment in introducing reforms which reduced women from being embodiments of divinity and the primal energy of the universe to creatures comparable to slaves, Sudras, and dogs. Rokeya's use of the slave metaphor and recurrent animal imagery to describe women in her writing possibly contain a sarcastic reference to Manu's Laws and other socio-religious tracts of the time.

Although she spared no opportunity in pouring scorn over what she saw as Muslim cultural practices inimical to women, Rokeya was understandably more cautious when it came to discussing issues of Islam. Being a practising Muslim herself who prayed five times a day, perhaps it was natural for her not to question teachings of the faith. It could also be that as a lone widow running a school for Muslim girls, she knew it would be impossible for her to earn the community's confidence and convince parents to send their daughters to her school if she herself became embroiled in controversies on that level. That she was discreet is evident in her following comment in a personal letter, "My late husband advised me not to discuss religion with anybody" (Quadir 534). Moreover, in "Woman Worship," one of her fictional Muslim characters says during a conversation on the rights of women in Hinduism and Islam, "I am not ready yet to rile the Islamic clerics. Leave out the clergies, Mrs. Chatterjee" (Quayum 126).

Notwithstanding this, Rokeya was most unforgiving towards her fellow Muslims, especially men, for their selective use of the religion and distorted readings of the teachings of the Qur'an and the Hadith so as to deprive women of many of their rights and privileges enshrined in the faith. In essays such as "The Female-half" ("Ardhangini") and "God Gives, Man Robs," Rokeya repeatedly asks: Why are

Muslim women denied the education opportunities when Prophet Muhammad had made education compulsory for both men and women? Why are Muslim women disallowed the right to inherit property and act as witnesses when such provisions are there in the tradition? She believed it was the misguided fanatics and sanctimonious groups, whom she condemned as pseudo-religious hotheads, who twisted religion for their own profit and power.

Rokeya was also virulent in her attacks on purdah, polygamy and child marriage, which, she believed, were the main stumbling blocks to individual growth as well as to the progress of women at large. But, much to her dismay, such practices were generally approved and even encouraged by the socio-cultural-religious establishments of the time. As mentioned earlier, Rokeya was herself a “victim” (her expression) of the purdah practise, being forced to live in isolation not only from men but also from women outside her close family circle from the age of five.⁴ It is also because of her father's belief in the custom that she was not allowed to attend school in childhood.

In *The Zenana Women (Aborodhbashini)*, which provides a series of anecdotal narratives about the practice of purdah among Hindus and Muslims in both Bengal and Bihar at the time, she graphically and trenchantly shows how bizarre and barbaric the custom was; how it was so laughable on the one hand, and yet so deadly and devastating for women on the another; how it reduced women to invisible and inert objects living under the thumb of men. For example, when we read how small girls are forced to live in a *myakhana* (secluded girls' quarters) for months before their marriage so they can get accustomed to a life of seclusion after marriage; or when thieves break into a house and rob the women of all their jewellery without any resistance as the women are more concerned about their purdah than their possessions; or when women are made to walk inside a mosquito net on a railway platform, a paddy farm, or in their own courtyard, so that no other men can see them; or when a doctor has to check a patient's tongue and pulse sitting behind a curtain or a mosquito net just because the patient is a woman – we laugh at the absurdity of the situation, but we also understand how mordant Rokeya's attack is on an institution that she saw as a root cause of women's degradation in society.

Rokeya saw child marriage and polygamy as nothing more than deplorable ways of fulfilling male lust. In her short story “Marriage-crazy Old Men” (“Biya-Pagla Buro”) she exposes and ridicules three septuagenarian men who have married multiple times and have grandchildren of marriageable age, but are so given to lecherous ways that they want to marry yet again and marry virgin girls similar in age to their grandchildren. Rokeya punishes all three men by putting them in an embarrassing situation where the villagers trick them into a sham marriage either with a boy or with a hired dancing girl. This is the writer's way of condemning sly old men with no moral compunction in exploiting vulnerable young girls by treating them as mere sex objects.

In Rokeya's time, it was customary to view women as inferior to men. Men were thought to be stronger and more intelligent while women were considered shallow, weak, and emotional. She wanted to debunk this perception by showing that women were not only equal but could be even better than men, provided they were given the same opportunities traditionally enjoyed by men. In stories such as "The Creation of Woman" ("Nari-srishti"), "The Theory of Creation" ("Srishti-twatho") and *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya uses wit as a weapon to establish this. In the two reciprocally related stories, "The Creation of Woman" and "The Theory of Creation," for example, using humor she shows how women are superior and more engaging in character than men, who tend to be flat, overbearing, and one-dimensional. In telling the story of the creation of woman and man through the Hindu fable of Tvastri's creation of the universe, the narrator explains that since the divine architect of the universe used so many ingredients to create woman, she can be confusing and complex, but at the same time she is rich and rounded in her personality. Thus, while she is tart, salty, and pungent, she is also sweet, beautiful, and gentle; being timid, vain, and cunning, she also has the "beauty of the flower," "the brightness of the sun," and the "pleasant taste of honey" (Quayum 59). In "The Creation of Woman," Rokeya argues that since the woman is Tvastri's last creation, she is also his best:

When people strain their brains the most to make something, they come up with a complete product; but when someone gains the expertise by making something again and again, the last item of the product is also the best. (Quayum 60)

Men, however, are not so lucky because when Tvastri created man, he had neither the expertise nor any scarcity of material; so he simply created according to his fancy with whatever he could lay his hands on. Thus, in "The Theory of Creation," which narrates the making of man, Tvastri explains: "For example, in creating teeth I took the snake's poison-fang root and branch; in making hands, feet and fingernails, I took the whole of the panther's paw; to fill in the cells of the brain, I used the donkey's brain intact..." (Quayum 76). This explains why, within the context of the story, women are moderate, balanced, and multi-layered, while men are vile, cruel, and stupid. Throughout her writing, women are variously compared to domestic animals like cows, sheep, and hens. In contrast, in "The Creation of Woman" and "The Theory of Creation," men are associated with swine, snakes, and donkeys – creatures which are full of negative attributes and perceived to be much lower in the hierarchical order of beings.

In *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya artfully turns the patriarchal world upside down by creating a "Ladyland" in which women run the state and men are confined indoors. The whole situation is hilarious because in Rokeya's utopia, women not only do everything men do in the real world, but they do it much better. To begin with, women of Ladyland trap all the men into the mardana, the male version of the

zenana, not by brawn but by brain. They are highly educated and scientifically advanced because their queen has made education compulsory for all women; she has also prohibited child marriage. Rokeya is merely making the point that women can easily excel if given the right opportunities. Women in Ladyland are also morally superior; since they have taken over the state affairs there has been no crime; therefore, they have done away with magistrates and the police as they are no longer required.

Moreover, they keep the country beautiful and orderly, like a garden. This shows that women of Ladyland are not only intelligent and virtuous but also have an artistic sense. When asked by Sultana, who is visiting the land in her dream, what kind of work is entrusted to men, Sister Sarah, who is showing her around, promptly replies, "They should not do anything, excuse me; they are fit for nothing. Only catch them and put them into the zenana" (Quayum 161). Later, the queen adds that her country is open for trade with any country except where women are not allowed to do business, because, she adds, "Men, we find, are rather of lower morals, and so we do not like dealing with them" (Quayum 168).

By the end of the story, it becomes obvious that Rokeya is trying to inspire and motivate Bengali/Indian women to stand up for their rights, assuring them through her utopian fantasy that a glorious future lies ahead for them provided that they shun their slave mentality and regain their self-trust, will, conviction, and courage. They must forsake self-doubt and fear, and truly believe in their hearts that they "were not born to live the life of a feckless mannequin" (Quayum 32) or "just to gratify their husband-lords" (Quayum 137) – only then will they be able to march forward and seize the destiny that appears in Sultana's dream and turn it into reality. As a first step, they must rise from their present slumber and step out of the nightmare that continues to enshroud them. Thus, goading her fellow sisters, Rokeya writes in her essay "The Dawn" ("Subah Sadiq"):

Wake up, mothers, sisters, daughters; rise, leave your bed and march forward Do not sleep any more; wake up, the night has ended Whilst women of the rest of the world have awoken and declared war against all kinds of social injustices ... we, the women of Bengal are still sleeping profoundly on the damp floors of our own homes, where we are being held captives, and dying in thousands as victims of consumption. (Quayum 136)

Her clarion call is meant for all Bengali women, because she knows that only if *all* women rise together and stand up against their current injustices will there be a meaningful change in society, according women the honor and dignity they rightfully deserve and which they previously enjoyed during the pre-Vedic period in Indian history.

Rokeya as an Educationist: Founding of Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School

Rokeya was not just a visionary but also an activist. She did everything she could to

reify her vision and turn it into reality. First and foremost, she believed in the value and significance of education; that, without removing the “purdah of ignorance,” Indian women could not fight back against their current misery and misfortune or find their true worth as human beings. It was with this in mind that she opened the school for Muslim girls, Sakhawat Memorial Girls’ School, with the legacy of Rs. 10,000 that her husband had left behind for this purpose; appropriately, the school was named after him.

It was extremely risky for her to take such an initiative in an environment when women’s education, in particular that of Muslim girls, was still a novelty and questionable and controversial at best. It was frowned upon also because Rokeya herself was a woman and a widow. As mentioned earlier, she had to face all kinds of vicious slander, including being branded “a whore and an embezzler of funds” (Gupta 28). But nothing could shake Rokeya’s resolve. In addition to such daily persecution by orthodox segments of society, she also had to face many practical challenges of running a school because she had no knowledge of classroom teaching or managing a school administration. However, Rokeya’s biggest hurdle was to get students for her school. She had begun the school in Calcutta in 1911 with only eight students. Her recurrent concern was how to increase that number and expand the school, given the social environment and apathy of Muslims towards women’s education and especially their fear of violating the purdah. She went from door to door, campaigning for students and to convince the parents that education would not turn their daughters into Christians,⁵ but instead, make them better individuals and citizens. She also assured parents that the purdah norm would not be violated, and their girls would be transported to and from school in fully curtained vehicles. With such sustained efforts, the number of students steadily grew. By 1915, the number had increased to eighty-four, and the school was upgraded to an upper primary school. By 1927, this number had further grown to 149 and the school was elevated to a high school with all ten grades. Rokeya also opened a boarding house for her school at this time to accommodate students who came from remote rural districts of Bengal. She also moved campus several times to adapt to the increasing number of students. When she began the school in 1911, she had rented a small room at Walliullah Lane, but in 1931, a year before Rokeya’s death, the school moved to a larger rented accommodation on Lower Circular Road. After her death, the school became a fully-aided government school in 1936, and moved to its present location at Lord Sinha Road in 1937, where it still stands proudly as a testimony to all that Rokeya did for the education of Muslim women, at a time when they were hapless, luckless, tyrannized, and to use her own metaphor, utterly “ship-wrecked” (Quadir 537).

Rokeya believed that the purpose of education should not be merely to get a degree and find a job, nor should it be for the cultivation of the mind alone. Education should be wholesome and holistic so that it aids the development of all faculties of the individual, “physical, moral and mental” (Quayum 171). In “Woman’s

Downfall,” she states that education is not about pursuing “academic degrees,” or “blindly imitat[ing] a community or a race,” but for cultivating “the innate faculties of the individual” (Quayum 29). In “The Dawn,” she adds,

By education, I mean wholesome education; the skill to read a few books or write a few lines of verse is not true education. I want that education which will enable them to earn their rights as citizens Education should cultivate both the body and mind. (Quayum 137)

In “Educational Ideals for Indian Girls,” she proffers that since education is meant as “preparation for life” and “for complete living,” students should be trained intellectually, physically as well as morally; “moral education [should] not be neglected” (Quayum 171), she advised. Moreover, education should harness both the modern and the ancient, the material and the spiritual, so that students develop a balanced awareness of the various competing forces in life and not lose their sense of identity as Indians while acquiring Western knowledge. In this context, she wrote:

We must assimilate the old while holding to the new Our aim should be to harmonise in due proportion the two purposes, spiritual and secular, in the education we impart We should by all means broaden the outlook of our girls and teach them to modernise themselves ... [but we should not sacrifice] the elements of good in [India's] age-old traditions of thought and method ... [so that] a new educational practice and tradition may be evolved which will transcend both that of the East and West. (Quayum 171-175)

It is with these ideals in mind that Rokeya followed an inclusive curriculum at her school, where traditional and modern, religious as well as science courses, were taught side by side. English was a compulsory subject. In addition, “maths ... science, geography, history and public administration” were taught; even “Extra-curricular activities like music and sports were included ... and the girls were exposed to a diverse range of literary and cultural activities” (Gupta 28). Rokeya's involvement with the school outstripped her love for writing, and we notice a protracted gap between the publication of *Sultana's Dream* in 1908 and the second volume of *Motichur* in 1922, with nothing of significance published during these fourteen years.

Rokeya's Social Activism: Starting a Muslim Women's Association

In “The Dawn,” Rokeya advised women, “Form your own associations to protect your rights and privileges” (Quayum 137). She always placed emphasis on the collective identity of women because she believed that only through a united and organized effort could women fight prejudice, oppression, and illiteracy, and encourage public opinion in favor of their education and empowerment. With this in mind, she formed the Anjuman-i-Khawatin-i-Islam in 1916, an association for Muslim women which aimed to provide financial assistance to poor widows, assist low-income families in marrying off their daughters, and, above all, implement literacy programs among slum women. In 1919, Rokeya also tried to organize a

session of the All India Muslim Ladies' Conference in Calcutta to boost the standing of the Anjuman, but it did not go well due to factional politics within the group and ended in "a fiasco" (Quadir 526). Her efforts resulted in an exchange of letters in the media between Rokeya and Nafis Dulhan Saheba, who was then the Secretary of the All India Ladies' Conference; and although these letters document Rokeya's sharp wit and writerly talent, they also demonstrate the kind of challenges she often had to encounter, sometimes even from within her inner circles, in carrying out her mission.⁶

Conclusion

A "feminist foremother" (Jahan vii), Rokeya worked heart and soul to alleviate the plight of Indian/Bengali (Muslim) women. She began as a writer to inspire and motivate her fellow "sisters" to rise above their "incarceration" and misery and stand up for their rights and freedom. At times she did this by prodding and provoking them with harsh and caustic satire, and at times with witty and gentle encouragement to search within themselves for their true potential as human beings. In every instance, she emphasized education because Rokeya believed that education was the only way for women to overcome their present misfortune and find their subjectivity and selfhood. Her efforts, however, were not limited to her writings. She stepped out of the world of imagination into that of practicality and praxis by opening up a school especially for the education of Muslim girls, who were the most backward segment of society at the time, and also by founding an association for Muslim women to create a sense of sorority and collective identity in them as well as to serve those living in the slums through various financial and literacy programs. Her vision and her work make Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain the most significant woman Muslim Renaissance figure in Bengal, the movement which inspired and prepared her to take up the role of the savior of Bengali (Muslim) women, such that, in the view of Roushan Jahan, "every educated [Bengali] woman is a living memorial to this remarkable woman" (Jahan 55).

Notes

1. Maulvi Abdul Karim was an influential Muslim educationist of his time. He was appointed Assistant Inspector of Schools for Mohammedan Education in 1889, and subsequently became a School Inspector. He was one of the few Muslims to hold such important posts under the British rule.
2. A leading Muslim scholar, lawyer, and politician of his time, who was appointed professor of law at Calcutta University in 1881 and judge of the Calcutta High Court in 1890. He played a significant role in modernizing Indian Muslims, and was a founding member of the All India Muslim League in 1906.
3. This organization was set up by Sayyid Ahmad Khan in 1886, and it remained the main common political and intellectual platform for Muslims until the founding of the Muslim League in 1906 (Ikram).
4. For a detailed biographical discussion on Rokeya, see my introductory chapter in *The Essential Rokeya*, "Rokeya Sakhwat Hossain: A Biographical Essay."

5. It was common at that time to think that education would make Muslim girls into Christians. In Rokeya's short story "Souro Jagat" ("The Solar System"), when Gauhar, an enlightened father of nine daughters, shows eagerness to send his girls to school, his brother-in-law, Jafar, vehemently opposes the idea, fearing that this would turn his nieces into Christians. Rokeya herself was accused by her detractors of being overly Western and Christian in her thinking. One critic wrote, "[To her] everything Indian is bad and everything Euro-American good" (Tharu and Lalita 342); another complained that Rokeya's works were influenced by the Madras-based Christian Tract Society and their publications on Indian reform (Sufi 79).
6. Some of these letters, published in *The Mussalman*, are available in Quadir (526-534) and Quayum (183-192).

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