

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain: Tireless Fighter of Female Education and their Independence – A Textual Analysis

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Abstract: *Bengal's first Muslim feminist thinker, writer and educationist Rokeya is a legendary figure for her efforts in support of women's independence and female education. With a modern, liberal and scientific outlook she envisioned that through education women, particularly Muslim women, would reach their fullest potentials as human beings and pursue their own interests without depending on men. Before or during her lifetime, though some persons took initiatives for educating Muslim women, in the Bengali Muslim society, Rokeya is the first to link up the expansion of education with emancipation and progress of women. Her main goal was the emancipation of women. Her devotion was to expand female education in the Bengali Muslim society. She believed that education, if imparted properly, would enlighten women and liberate their selves from the barriers of rigid patriarchal and sexist norms. But though Rokeya advocated female education, astonishingly enough, she had no formal education. In an era when women's education was frowned upon, her brother and sister secretly taught her to read and write Bangla and English. Never having the opportunity of going to school, Rokeya's auto didacticism lent her character, from her childhood days, a spark of independence. The paper examines how Rokeya, through her bitter experiences of life, diagnosed the difficulties women faced in a patriarchal society and how she offered solutions to see women empowered in affairs of the family, society and the state.*

Keywords: *Rokeya, Seclusion, Subjugation, Awakening, Female Education, Economic Independence*

1. INTRODUCTION

Rokeya is a much discussed and highly esteemed name in Bangladesh now. The more the women's liberation is getting relevance, breaking barriers the more the womankind are progressing to achieve their rights, the more Rokeya's name is being uttered. As it is seen, more than hundred years have passed since Rokeya was born, yet her greatness did not tarnish; rather is becoming brighter day by day and her significance is getting brightened up anew. No time-winning talent as Rokeya was noticeable in the women population of colonial India. The main reason of this invisibility is the totality of Rokeya's views of life which is variously reflected in her works and literature. What Rokeya contributed is really tough to frame up within a particular aspect. Her prime concern was to bring the Muslim women within the circle of education; but if she is identified as a precursor of female education only, one portion of her contribution is acknowledged. Again it is tough to identify her as a litterateur; because she never thought of devoting herself in literary pursuits totally. Yet there is no option for overlooking her literary writings, rather any compilation of feminist writings will be incomplete without her. Rokeya had no qualification of institutional education; yet what skills she showed in the composition of Bengali literature, not to speak of English writings, is really a matter of envy to the highly educated women. To raise women's awareness, she established an association and that association was active within the downtrodden women in such way that the society had to wait for long to establish any such organization equivalent to the previous one. Yet Rokeya's role on organizing remains unnoticed to the posterity. No researcher or critic has been utterly successful to understand the length and breadth of Rokeya's outlook and efforts. One reason is that everyone has tried to judge Rokeya through respective viewpoint and agenda, and Rokeya's aspect which they try to focus is so vast that there is much to enquire and say; for this reason the tendency to judge the part as a whole encompasses them and the complete whole remains unspoken. Therefore, in spite of the abundant writings on Rokeya, we don't have any authentic and detailed biography about her.

2. LIFE

Born in 1880, in a village in the northern part of Bangladesh (Pairabondh, Rangpur), Rokeya came from an aristocratic background. Her father Zahiruddin Muhammad Abu Ali Saber was a wealthy landlord. Her mother was Rahatunnessa. Their family home stood in the middle of a vast estate of about 120 acres, surrounded by dense woods, frequented by wild animals. She grew up there with her two elder brothers, an elder and a younger sister. She remembered two of them with immense gratitude: an elder brother, Ibrahim Saber (to whom *Padmarag* is dedicated), and an elder sister, Karimunnessa (to whom she dedicated the 1908 book version of *Sultana's Dream*).

Like all female members of the Saber family, Rokeya also had to live behind the curtain from the age of five. The Saber women had to observe *purdah* even in front of the women who were not their relatives. In her own writings she quotes that when she was five, she was not allowed to be seen by any male non-member of the family. It was not only restricted to that, she even had to hide from women who were outsiders. (Joarder, 6)

It was in such environment that Rokeya was born. She belonged to a very conservative family of landed aristocracy which, following the trend of the contemporary Bengali Muslim society, did not favour female education. At the dead of night when the entire household was fast asleep, Rokeya's brother would teach her Bangla and English secretly under the glow of candles. Rokeya could learn Bangla due to the assistance and encouragement that she received from her elder sister Karimunnessa, a lady of great qualities and extraordinary courage. (Murshid 172) In an era when women's education was frowned upon, Rokeya's brothers secretly taught her to read and write English and Bangla. Never having the opportunity to go to school Rokeya's auto didacticism lent her character, from her childhood days, a spark of independence. (Bagchi viii)

Ibrahim Saber arranged Rokeya's marriage, when she was sixteen, to Khan Bahadur Syed Sakhawat Hossain, a widower. Nearly forty years old at the time of their marriage, Sakhawat Hossain was a deputy magistrate in Bhagalpur, Bihar. Educated from the west, he was a man of liberal and progressive ideas and he helped Rokeya in her pursuit of knowledge by giving opportunities to study. With his help and encouragement within a short period of time she became proficient in English. It was during her husband's lifetime that Rokeya's literary output, published in the Indian periodicals of the time, brought her into the limelight as a daring writer— Mrs. R. S. Hossain. Rokeya acknowledges her husband's positive contributions to her writing career, "If my dear husband had not been so supportive, I might never have written or published anything". (qtd. In Jahan 40)

But Rokeya's happy days did not last long. Her husband suffered from acute diabetes. It led to his loss of eyesight and eventually took his life. More problems were waiting for her. She did not get along with her step-daughter and the latter's husband who forced her out of home in Bhagalpur after Sakhawat Hossain's death. But she did not lead an idle life. She devoted her whole life from 1909 for the cause of Bengali Muslim women's emancipation. In her later life she founded a school and a ladies' association to translate her feminist ideas into reality.

Rokeya witnessed the sufferings of women within the Bengali Muslim community and believed that it was her duty as a practicing Muslim woman to right the wrongs of society. One of the major wrongs that Rokeya identified was the lack of education offered to Bengali Muslim women of her age. She was determined that all women should have education. She started writing various articles, essays, books, short pieces and social-critical essays where she again and again motivated women to receive education. In this way Rokeya started the movement for the emancipation of the Bengali Muslim women. She was the first among the Bengali Muslims who publicly raised the question of equal status for women, and thus she started a new era in the history of Bengali Muslim society.

3. SOURCES OF INSPIRATIONS

Rokeya was born at a time when women's education was looked down upon. She secretly learnt how to read and write from her elder brother Ibrahim Saber. Ibrahim had been educated in the Western system, under the auspices of men such as Syed Ameer Ali, who were pioneers of Western education amongst the Bengali Muslims. Due to such tutelage, Ibrahim knew that women's education was necessary to progress the society, and influenced by such ideas, Ibrahim taught Rokeya English. His influence inspired her to remove prejudices and cherish modern thoughts. (Mir 5) Her elder sister Karimunnessa's role was also a great source of inspiration for her. (Ibid 6) She taught Rokeya Bangla alongside Urdu, Persian and Arabic language. (Murshid 172) Rokeya remained grateful all through

her life to her brother and sister who inspired and helped her in education. Rokeya's second phase of inspiration came from her husband Sakhawat Hossain. He was highly educated, progressive and a real gentleman who believed in the education of women. He always inspired her and opened a wider world to apply her dream with courageous steps. Under Sakhawat's influence Rokeya began to write about her thoughts on social issues of womanhood and women's degradation. (Hossain 79)

4. LITERARY WORKS

Rokeya's writings are not voluminous but full of significance. Her literary career starts in 1902. The first composition is "Pipasa" (The Thirst). Most of her writings are in Bengali. These include two anthologies of essays, satires, short stories which are entitled *Motichur* and divided into two volumes—*Motichur- I* (1904) and *Motichur- II* (1922), a novel—*Padmarag* (1924), *Avarodhbasini* (1931), a narration of 47 historical and true events of the miserable plight and indignities which women have suffered in the name of *pardah*. She also wrote a few works in English. The most famous of those is *Sultana's Dream* (1908). Other than *Sultana's Dream*, she also wrote two essays— "God Gives, Man Robs" (1927) and "Educational Ideals for the Indian Girls" (1931) which were published in *The Mussalman* magazine. Besides, she has some unpublished essays, short stories and comic strips. She also wrote several poems in various magazines.

5. ROKEYA SAKHAWAT HOSSAIN: TIRELESS FIGHTER OF FEMALE EDUCATION AND THEIR INDEPENDENCE

Rokeya was a self-educated woman with progressive thoughts and ideas. Through her insightful eyes she not only observed the miseries of women but also saw how they were deprived of education. As she was an intelligent woman, these aspects helped her to define her future activities. She understood that awakening of women was a must to set them free from their miseries. Thereby, she took vow of female education and held pen to write against the inhuman position of women in the society. These two aspects were both complementary to each other. Because, the prior condition of female education is women's self-awareness, and self-awareness persuades women for education.

In today's world it cannot be imagined to what extent women were lagging behind in Rokeya's time. At that time, in one side the society had conservative influence, and in another side the women lacked self-awareness, they had the mentality to push out the opportunities to develop themselves as real human beings. In some cases, women themselves were against female education. So, their awakening was not possible without triumphing over the religious orthodoxy and social obstacles.

Rokeya understood that education is the power which can show women the way, help to be self-reliant, conquer the groundless fear of false prejudicial belief and establish them in the society as proper human beings. With that vision in mind she set up school (Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School) and organization for women (Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam). She composed several books in both Bangla and English. In her writings she depicted the wretched condition of women in the family and in the society as well. And side by side she showed how acute the suppression of women was at that time. Her speech at "Bengal Women's Educational Conference" can be worth mentioning in this respect:

I have been crying for the lowliest creature in India for the last twenty years. Do you know who that lowliest creature in India is? It is the Indian women . . . There are people also who feel for animals, so we see animals' rights groups everywhere. 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. (qtd. in Quayum)

As mentioned earlier, in Rokeya's time, women's movement was limited to the four walls of the *zenana* (inner house) and they were secluded from the outside world. Their education was limited to the study of the holy Quran in the name of religious studies and it was not taught in the *maktab* or *madrasha*. The instructors were appointed as house tutors who were the *maulavis* of the nearby mosques. Women had to receive education in confinement and had no idea about the outside world. Because the whole Muslim society at that time did not feel the necessity of education for men, let alone for women. And to confine women within four walls was the custom of the time. The persons who set these customs were of the belief that what they had done was the only way to secure the safety of women. As a result of the overmuchness of these customs, the life of women was at stake.

The custom was practiced so strictly that the secluded women could not even meet their elder brothers when they pleased. So, for women who could not even see the light of the outside world, it was a mockery for them to think of the light of education.

If Rokeya's writings are examined, two major aspects come out. In one aspect, she shows how the patriarchal society is depriving women from their due rights and talks about the education through which women can get rid of their misery and indignity as well as retain their rightful position in the society. And in the other, in her novels and stories she depicts the picture of that imaginative land where women have been equal to men in knowledge, intelligence, vision, thinking, etc. and in achievements sometimes excels men and these women are established on respective positions for their merits.

In "Istrijatir Abanati" (Woman's Downfall), Rokeya discusses the inferior status of women and cause of that degradation. "What are we in this civilised world of the twentieth century?" (6) Nothing but slaves; even if it is said that slavery as a trade has disappeared from this world but women's servitude has never ended. Rokeya then searches for the cause of such world-wide degradation of women. Possibly the lack of opportunities is the main cause behind it. Unable to get along, the women have come back from all affairs of life and, considering them to be weak and vulnerable, men began to help them. Gradually, the more the womenfolk received support from men, the more incompetent they became. The condition was such that their minds have become enslaved:

Slowly, even our minds have become enslaved. Being serfs for centuries, we have now become used to our serfdom. In this way, our higher mental faculties of self-reliance and courage, having been nipped in the bud over and over again for lack of cultivation, have probably stopped sprouting altogether. (Ibid 6)

Rokeya explains, man first becomes lord of property, then of the home and gradually acknowledged as lord of the womenfolk. The men possess women as if they were domestic animals. Such domestication permanently spoils women's souls and as a result they accept their inferiority to men. Thus, servitude becomes acceptable to them in the long run. "Woman's higher faculties being stymied for a long time, her body, soul, head and heart have all become accustomed to slavery. Now there is nothing called autonomy and strength in her soul, or even the desire to accomplish them." (Ibid 13) The inability to practice their mental faculties has led to the deterioration of women.

Rokeya also sees women's ornaments as a badge of slavery. She ridicules women's love for ornaments and in her attack she expresses the deep sorrow of an aggrieved soul. She writes:

And our most cherished jewellerys are the markers of our slavery . . . In reality, jewellery is nothing but an insignia of slavery. But if, instead of taking it as a symbol of servitude, one considers it as a method of adornment, would that be less humiliating? Isn't the attempt to augment one's physical charm an expression of mental weakness? (Ibid 7-8)

She says that the women-folk should not wear ornaments to adorn themselves. They should rather adorn their dogs and animals with their ornaments seeing that their ornaments are symbols of their servitude. The bangles women wear are nothing but handcuffs, the chains they wear around their waist are chains of bondage. To attain freedom, women should first free themselves from these bondages. Then they should develop their capacity of reasoning through education.

Rokeya gives a clarion call to women. "Wake up mother, sister, daughter— wake up, leaving the bed; wake up. Listen there, 'muezzin' is calling for prayer. Can't you listen up the sound of *Aajan*, sound in the name of Allah? Don't sleep more; wake up, the night is no more now, now it's dawn— the muezzin is calling for prayer." ("Subeh Sadek" 220) In her essay "Subeh Sadek" (The Dawn), Rokeya urges women to wake up and prepare themselves. It is proper time to claim their rightful position in the society. "Dare say, mother! We are not animals; speak up sister. We are not furniture; speak out daughter. We are not any object like bejeweled ornaments to be confined into the iron chest; everyone speak out altogether, we are human beings! And show that actually we are the half of the best part of the whole creation. Indeed, we are the mother of the whole creation." (Ibid 221)

Rokeya was a practical woman. So, after calling up, she says:

I know that it is not easy to rise at the beginning. I know too that society will create a huge fuss about it. I know that Indian Muslims will be inclined to 'slaughter' us (i.e. condemn us to capital punishment) and Hindus will drag us to the funeral pyre or to a fire of eternal affliction. (I also know that our sisters have no intention to rise.) But rise we must for the sake of society. ("Istrijatir Abanati" 13-14)

In spite of living in that time Rokeya realized that to attain freedom, women themselves had to work for it. In her words, “. . . unless we think for ourselves, no one else will think for us. Even if they do, it will not be altogether propitious for us.” (Ibid 13-14) She uttered the precious words of women’s liberation – “Educate the girls and leave them in the work field, they will earn their own livelihood.” (*Begum Rokeya Rachanabali* 28, my translation)

Rokeya identified two key points of women’s subjugation– physical weakness and economic dependence. “Many people think that since women live on the income of men, they must therefore accept their authority . . . Perhaps woman, first being incapacitated of physical work, was obliged to subsist on the wealth of another”. (“*Istrijatir Abanati*” 13) With physical power men have first defeated women and then made them subservient; after that banished from the economic zone and left powerless. The first condition of freedom is economic independence. Rokeya perceived that in a society where a woman is dependent on man for mere food, clothing and shelter, in that society the dream of women’s liberation is complete imagination. In her various writings, she heralded the message of economic independence. The society where financially women are completely dependent on men, it is useless to speak of women’s liberation in that society. In her various writings, she heralded the message of economic independence– “*Istrijatir Abanati*”, “*Delicia Hatta*” and *Padmarag*. The main theme of the novel *Padmarag* is economic independence.

Keeping women’s liberation at the centre, in her writings, Rokeya continuously struggled against patriarchy to establish women’s rights and privilege. The aim of that liberation was equal rights with men. There were three objectives– a. abolishing the seclusion system, b. eradicating the darkness of ignorance, and c. achieving economic independence. And the means of achieving these objectives was education; for their self-establishment, women need self-motivating education. Rokeya says, “Owing to the lack of education we have been unfit for gaining freedom. For being unfit we have lost our freedom. The imprudent men have so far deprived us of education for their self interest.” (“*Borka*” 51, my translation)

Hence, education is essential. But how will that education be? Rokeya explains:

By education I refer to the real education; being able to read some books or write few verses of poem is not education. I wish for that education– which will permit them to gain citizen rights . . . Education– should be both mental and physical. They should know that they have not come to this world for being puppets with lovely saris, clips and valuable ornaments; . . . Their life is not an object to be sacrificed for the amusement of the venerable husbands! For food and clothing they should not be parasites on other. (“*Subeh Sadek*” 221)

So, Rokeya urges for true education, the education which makes woman good citizens and helps them to contribute to the society; and which also helps them become financially solvent and self-reliant without being parasites on others for food, clothing and shelter.

To show how education can change the subjugated position of women, Rokeya writes two utopias. At the root of utopian thoughts, there remains an exclusive society where the writers try to refine the deformed society which becomes corrupted. Utopia originated and developed in the West, no one wrote utopia in the East; Rokeya is the only exception. (Azad 293) Though lots of utopias have been written but in literature this genre achieved its name from Thomas More’s *Utopia*. (Abrahams 337) Rokeya outlines her utopian thoughts in *Sultana’s Dream* and *Padmarag*. In the former one, Rokeya imagines a country where women excel men in every affair of the state. In the latter, she applies her utopian ideas in a small frame. There she elaborates her idea of women’s leadership and shows the way through which women can become whole persons.

If women are educated properly, they are sure to prosper. They can even excel men in restoring peace and harmony in the society. This idea is clearly explained in *Sultana’s Dream* (1905). *Sultana’s Dream* is a story of reversed *purdah* (the seclusion of women). It depicts a Ladyland where peace-loving women overpower aggressive men through the power of their brains. The female narrator of *Sultana’s Dream* wanders into a dream city that shuns war and violence. In this utopian world, women rule and men are content with their places in the kitchen. Sister Sara of this kingdom explains how women won and kept their peace against men and their war-like ways. As men are confined to *mardana* (men’s secluded place) in the Ladyland, society no longer needs lawyers in the courts and there is also no warfare and bloodshed. Women look after the official duties and manage the home as

naturally better time managers. It needs a woman only two hours to finish office chores as she is seldom a habitual smoker like men— “Suppose one choroot takes half an hour to burn off, and a man smokes twelve choroots daily; then you see, he wastes six hours every day in sheer smoking”. (Bagchi 7)

Coming to know about the stunning blossom of female knowledge and talent Sultana feels enthusiasm and inspiration inside her heart and becomes surprised at hearing about the imprisonment of men. That the real, egalitarian and peaceful society can only be formed if women are allowed to bloom their mind and brain properly— is the core theme of *Sultana's Dream*. The piece is perhaps composed in order to increase the confidence of women.

The driving force behind the success of the utopian feminist country of Ladyland is women's education. Rokeya lays particular emphasis on the importance of women familiarizing themselves with the world of science and is explicit in her condemnation of male militarism. Ladyland symbolizes the victory of the righteous, enquiring, scientific, enlightened and welfare-oriented spirit in women. And its heroines are women educators. (Bagchi xii-xiii)

In *Padmarag*, Rokeya just increases the canvas of *Sultana's Dream*. She describes a women-founded and women-administered community where women of diverse religions and ethnicities with unhappy histories of patriarchal oppression improve their lot by concrete social action. Both *Padmarag* and *Sultana's Dream* discuss in lighthearted, charming, and intelligent ways the question of female education. Siddika, the protagonist of *Padmarag*, is advised by her brother to receive education. He says, “Get ready for the awaiting life-struggle! With proper education I will prepare you so that you need not depend on any mischievous man for mere foodstuffs.” (Rokeya, *Padmarag* 335, my translation) This Siddika is the embodiment of Rokeya. Siddika fights against the patriarchy— on behalf of past, present and the future women. Through her life, Siddika has shown that married life is not the only life for women. “Are we clay-dolls that men will dump us on their whims and receive when they wish? I want to show the society that opportunity never comes twice; – You will kick us and we will lick your boots, the day is no more.” (Ibid 335, my translation) Every statement of Siddika indicates that she has become conscious of her rights. Obviously, though expressed in a different form, these are Rokeya's own arguments too. Siddika goes on to say:

If I submit to society ignoring the injustice of neglect, then the grandmothers, maternal and paternal, would be able to allude to my example and would say to the bold lively girls of the future, “Do not think much of your great resolve and strength— see, after suffering so much affliction even Zainab eventually had to make the welfare of her husband the meaning of her whole self.” And the men would boast, saying, “Woman, however highly educated, high-minded, lively, noble, proud she might be— she is bound eventually to fall beneath our feet for their salvation.” Instead, I want to show the society that married life alone is not the ultimate end of a woman's life; family responsibilities do not cover all the aspects of life. (Rokeya, *Collected Works*, 452-53)

Siddika is not willing to return; she wants to lead an independent life. But where does she get this strength from? The strength comes from her education. She is educated; she has economic freedom— because, “She earns Rs. 200 every month for the place she holds at her work.” (Ibid 413) She does not have to depend on a man for her living. She can reject her husband's proposal with firm determination. She can challenge the society. “I want to show people . . . there are paths open to us other than ‘keeping house’. ‘Keeping house’ for a husband is not the prime factor of women's lives. A human life is a precious gift from God— it is not to be wasted by blowing on the cooking oven and crying! We must declare war against society.” (Rokeya, *Padmarag* 313, my translation) Siddika wants to declare war against the society. She wants to dedicate her life to uproot seclusion: “By serving Tarini-Bhavan, for the rest of my life, I will try to work for the welfare of women and uproot the seclusion system.” (Ibid 355, my translation)

We get a clear idea about the nature of Rokeya's feminist views from the words of Siddika. In her *Padmarag*, she prepares Siddika to claim her own rights. With pragmatic education, Siddika only becomes independent but also takes vows to work for the benefit of her fellow women. In real life Rokeya, in Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School which is the center of her dedication, she made this vow true in her life. The women who contributed for the awakening of women afterwards, all were the students of this school founded by Rokeya.

Rokeya wanted women's liberation, their improvement; and questioned, "How will society move forward if we remain inert?" ("Istrijatir Abanati" 13) The interests of men and women are not different, but the same. "Whatever their aim or purpose in life is, so is ours . . . We ought to have such qualities in us so that we can walk side by side with men in both the material and spiritual spheres of life." (Ibid 15) To Rokeya, men and women are two parts of the same body. Just as a car becomes complete with two wheels or a person with two hands, similarly a society is complete with both men and women. So, the original development of society means the development of both the male and female. Neglecting one, the other cannot progress. A car cannot move on one wheel. So, the society will tilt if women are secluded from the mainstream. To help society run smoothly, Rokeya wants both men and women stand side by side– "Our obligation is to abjure being a terrible burden on society and become the companions, co-workers and lovers of men and support them in whatever way we can." (Ibid 15)

However, for ages the persons who have sacrificed their lives for reformation and welfare of the society, they have to go through severe criticism, slander and censure. Rokeya is not an exception from it. The social orthodox and religious bigots were enraged at her uncompromising reproaches and opinions about the secluded women. Some of them tried to dishearten Rokeya through their writings. Nausar Ali Khan Yusufji (1864-1924), a well-known Muslim writer, publishes an issue in the magazine *Nabanur* and criticizes Rokeya:

What is the necessity of saying these uncalled for and detestable words? Would there have been any obstacle in the investigation of the causes of your degradation if these irrelevant utterances had not been written? . . . you become free, that is well and good. But we only ask that you do not misuse your freedom. (qtd. in Hossain 126)

In the subsequent issue of the same magazine, S. A. Musabhi protests Rokeya's feminist criticism of society and writes, "Women can never be equal to men in all aspects . . . if that happens it will be against nature." (Ibid 127) Nausar Ali Khan Yusufji again writes in objectionable words, "Can't the development be made unless you tear away the clothes and become naked?" (qtd. in Ahmad Rafik 313, my translation) The liberal magazine like *Nabanur* also did not stand beside Rokeya. According to them, "The authoress should think that, what is achievable for her is not possible for all womenfolk of our country." (Ibid 313) Even Girish Chandra Sen (1835-1910), editor of the same monthly *Mahila* where Rokeya published several of her works, in spite of sometimes praising her writings, writes in the editorial page, "Coming out from the seclusion if they move here and there, women doesn't become independent; even then in many cases there increase willfulness, danger and nuisance." (Ibid 313) In another of its issue, *Nabanur* writes:

To reform the society is one thing and to whip the society incessantly is another thing. Wounds may emerge in the society on account of continuous whipping. But nothing happens to the society with this thrashing. The authoress of *Motichur* is only whipping the society incessantly, nothing positive can be expected from it. (qtd. in Sufi 78, my translation)

But Rokeya was not in a position to lose her heart. She did not do anything for her self-interest. In depicting the wretched conditions of women she just pointed the wounds of the society. The society comes to its sense and thereby gets awakened- is what she aimed at.

Rokeya was also misunderstood to have spoken against veil. The conservative Muslims accused her of insulting veil. But their blame was baseless. In fact, she did not reject veiling altogether as she herself wore a veil. Her views on veil were as follows: "By purdah I mean covering the body well, not staying confined." (Joarder) She advocated modesty and said that veiling should not be in a manner that would hinder education for women. She said that veil and seclusion are not the same. Veil is decency, modesty. Every woman must be decent. At that time seclusion meant to confine women within four walls. This seclusion system was prevalent in that society in the name of veil. Women could not enjoy the open air, light and wind of Nature. Veil system is usual and thereby acceptable, but the seclusion system is unusual and unacceptable.

Rokeya had profound faith in the messages and ideals of Islam. But she did not see Islam through the eyes of men. Through bitter experiences of her life Rokeya observed that men have established themselves in the place of the Lord. She said that men have subjugated women manipulating the messages of Islam. To keep control over women they have wrongly interpreted and corrupted the teaching of Islam. Imposing their fabricated interpretation they have dominated, exploited and suppressed women. Rokeya addressed to the audience of Bengal Women's Educational Conference:

The opponents of female education say that women will be unruly . . . fie! They call themselves Muslims and yet go against the basic tenet of Islam which gives equal right to education. If men are not led astray once educated, why should women? (qtd. in Wikipedia)

Whenever women raised their voice against these injustices and oppression, men foiled their cause using religion. But actually Islam has given women due respect, the dignity to stand upright. Rokeya preached and preserved, in the approved manner, the rights and responsibilities that Islam has given to women. Even in some cases, she insisted on accepting the teaching and ideals of Islam to abolish the injustices and discriminations done to the Bengali Muslim women. Being devoted to the awakening of women, she never offended the teachings of Islam.

6. CONCLUSION

From the first decade of the twentieth century to her death, Rokeya worked for the society without any break. During the time, she felt that, leaving half of the population uneducated and secluded, the development of the country or the nation is not possible. Therefore, she dedicated herself for the cause of women's liberation. She believed that education is the means which can eradicate women's ignorance and make them aware of their subjugation. Her ultimate goal was the emancipation of women and education was the gateway to achieve that independence. To her, the purpose of education was not memorizing books, writing verses or making ideal housewives or mothers. She wanted that education which would help women attain citizen rights, earn their livelihood and become equal with men. She faced many obstacles and criticism but these could not obstruct her aim and goals. Sacrificing her pleasure, luxury and free time, with much patience and devotion she continued her long cherished goal of women's liberation movement— which did stop after her death. Afterwards, being inspired with her ideals, many of her followers became able to play great roles in the movement— herein lies the achievements of Rokeya as a successful feminist, educationist and social worker.

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