



Journal of Arts & Humanities

A Feminist Critical Evaluation of How Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's Language of Protest Deplored Patriarchy and Social Anachronism in the British Bengal

Mohammad Moniruzzaman Miah¹

ABSTRACT

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932), a Bengali writer and a social activist in the British Bengal during late 19th and early 20th century, is well known for her severe discontent with the ongoing suppression, oppression and deprivation of Muslim women in particular by the patriarchal family and society of the age. Her dissatisfaction amounted to pinching criticism with the language of protest when she saw women being refused to enjoy equal rights and privileges like their male counterparts in the lame excuse of religion. She found misinterpretation of Islam and social backwardness to cling to patriarchal tradition to be the root causes behind women's unspeakable misery. She also witnessed how women were falling behind with men in all spheres of life due to lack of exposure to modern education. So, she felt the urgency of lifting women out of the dungeon of ignorance to light in order to establish a balanced participatory society where women would no longer remain dependent on men. With this end in view, she kept writing profusely and campaigning selflessly for securing a dignified position for women in general within the family and society. The present paper simultaneously documents her vocal voice of protest against various social anomalies and critically evaluates her immense literary and social contribution to promoting women's general and vocational education in a formal setting.

Key words: Deprivation, Equality, Liberty, Patriarchal, Protest.

Available Online: 30th October 2014

MIR Centre for Socio-Economic Research, USA.

¹ Department of English, Lecturer, Jazan University, Saudi Arabia. E-mail: mzaman.m1014@yahoo.com

1.0 Introduction

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, commonly called Begum Rokeya, emerged in the rich spectrum of Bengali literature at the age of 22 with a Bengali essay entitled *Pipasa (Thirst)* in 1902 in the journal of *Nabaprabha* edited by Gyanendralal Ray. Later she achieved prominence as the most outspoken feminist author of the age, a devoted educationist and a dedicated women's right activist. Amidst a galaxy of literary talents and eminent social reformers during the contemporary times, her specialty almost entirely relies on her literary and social contribution to awakening the stream of feminist consciousness particularly among the voiceless Muslim woman-folk of her time. Her feminist critique against the prevailing patriarchal value systems provided an invigorating spirit to the then deprived Muslim women as well as women from other racial and ethnic groups. Her literary and social activism also amounted to an organized feminist social movement during her lifetime in order to bring about a change in the treatment and status of women in all walks of life. The language she wrote in words and spoke in public was not of silent submission to the long established patriarchal wishes to confine women within the four walls, but of vocal opposition to the anachronistic social practices perpetrated against them. To talk about the characteristic features of her writings, Bharati Ray (2005) writes, "Her principal theme was protest against the anti-woman customs of her community, and sarcasm was her principal stylistic weapon. Rokeya's language was simple and laced with bitterness." (Ray, 2005, p. 434) She persistently pursued her vision of setting women free from the clutches of male conspiracy in the name of social dogmas and the false pretext of religious jurisprudence. Her bitter sarcasm against the issues pertaining particularly to Muslim women caused widespread public outcry in the then male dominated patriarchal society, but could hardly refrain her from the mission to assert and establish the rights of women in general. Begum Rokeya's repeated invocation to the feeble women to renounce the life of slavery and dependence, her urge to men to let women to employ their own potentials, her call for modernizing women through institutional education, her demand to allow women into employment outside their homes and above all her gospel of gender equality to ascertain the rights of women hit hard on the orthodox familial, social and treacherously designed religious views towards women.

2.0 A glimpse into her life as a daughter

Though born in an aristocratic Muslim family in the village of Pairaband, Rangpur, located in the British Bengal Presidency, which now lies in the present day Bangladesh in 1880, Begum Rokeya herself had the firsthand experience of gender discrimination meted out to her and her other sisters by her father Zahiruddin Muhammad Abu Ali Hyder Saber. As daughters of an elite conservative Muslim family, Rokeya and her sisters had to observe strict *purdah* (veiling or covering of body from head to toe); even they were not allowed to speak and mix with any male persons beyond close family members. Recounts of many sad incidents of her childhood life with great sorrow and bitterness are found on various points of her writing. Because of her father's loath and insular mentality regarding women's education, she along with her sisters was barred from attending schools for studying Bengali, English and pursuing any other forms of knowledge except learning the skill to read the Qur'an in parrot-like manner to become a future ideal wife and mother. Her father's opposition to and disapproval of Rokeya's learning Bengali was mainly because of the existing ethos of upper class Muslim families almost all over India. They considered Urdu as the *lingua franca* of royal Muslims and so made it the medium of instruction in almost all Muslim-dominated schools in greater Bengal region. Although majority of people in Bengal region were speakers of Bengali, this language was looked down upon as the commoner's language, and therefore, considered to be inappropriate for the high cultured Muslim family members to master this language. Moreover, he imposed restriction on his daughters believing that girls' exposure to education at school might contaminate their minds with non-Muslim ideas.

But he did the opposite to his sons by encouraging and even patronizing them to learn English so that they could enter civil service holding respectable positions. Therefore, his son Ibrahim Saber was sent to the prestigious St. Xavier's College in Calcutta and later to England for higher studies. This exposure to modern education and society gave Ibrahim Saber an opportunity to get acquainted with a relatively

liberal societal attitude towards women, which made him progressive and supportive of female education. Later returning home from abroad, he began to give Rokeya a covert education on English secretly at night and continued doing so even under the most scornfully taunting remarks of their relatives. Prior to it, Rokeya already learnt the Bengali language under her elder sister Karimunnesa Khatun's benevolent grooming from childhood. Her childhood biography tells the story of her unbending craving for education under unfavorable circumstances. Another person who could perceive her dormant talents as a writer was her husband, Khan Bahadur Syed Sakhawat Hossain, an Urdu speaking district magistrate in Bhagalpur, presently situated in the Indian state of Bihar, who married the sixteen-year old Rokeya in 1896. Not provincial but progressive in outlook as an England-returned educated man like his brother in law Ibrahim Saber, Sakhawat Hossain actively helped in fructifying and flourishing Rokeya's nascent multifaceted genius. His support to his wife's literary activities during his lifetime extended beyond when he bequeathed her a handsome amount of money to start a school for Muslim girls. She was a promising writer when her husband was alive, but came in the spotlight as a feminist author, educationist and women's right activist after his demise in 1909. Since then, her mission to emancipate the voiceless women of Bengal never faltered, and continued with the most vigorous spirit of earnestness, sincerity and dedication.

3.0 Impact of this deprivation on her writing

The fate she suffered during her daughterhood left a lasting impact on her writing in subsequent times. She continued to produce literary piece of works prolifically highlighting the necessity of providing equal education opportunity to women to establish them as equal partners in all family, social and economic affairs. She considered certain social and religious customs such as *pardah*, *zenana* education or education at home and escorting girls under strict veiling from home to school and from school to home as major obstacles to their proper education. In fact, bitter criticism against the extreme imposition of veiling occupied a greater part of her writing. She also boldly worked throughout her life to eliminate the strict version of *pardah*, which Tharu and Lalita (1995) terms as the "pardah of ignorance" (Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, 1995, p. 340). It is to be mentioned here that Rokeya never defied Islam and its principal codes; she only questioned the male interpretation of Islamic bindings with regard to veiling, and urged men to stop the bullying imposition of it. In *Sultana's Dream* (1905), a feminist utopian science fiction, she envisioned a Ladyland where veiling had vanished for the convenience of women's work. The intensity of her language of criticism against this convention grew farther when she wrote *Abarodhbasini* (*The Woman Confined*) in 1929. Her language of protest did not spare the Islamic religious preachers for upholding and prescribing the strict form of body covering, which in Rokeya's view, was only to cocoon the girls within the inner realm of their house.

Rokeya held a practical view on *pardah* as she made a clear distinction between veiling (*pardah*) and confinement or seclusion (*abarodh*). Veiling as a means of suppression and seclusion in the name of religion and with the aim of denying women access to formal education and social interaction was completely unacceptable to her and so, this doctrine received merciless attack from her. Her language became harsher when she said in

Abarodhbasini

"the system reminds me of the lethal carbonic acid gas, which being a painless killer, its victims are never alert to its hazards. Women kept confined to the home die a slow death by the effect of this fatal gas known as *pardah*." (Hossain, 1993, p. 441)

But her real motive was not to attack and denounce this mandatory Islamic code for women; what she wanted was to show the orthodox Islamists and the secluded women how strict *pardah* restricted women from participating in activities in and outside their homes. She boldly unleashed her anger in the preface of *Abarodhbasini* by saying:

"When visiting Kurseong and Madhupur, I picked up many beautiful attractive stones. From the sea beaches of Madras and Orissa, I gathered seashells of many colours and shapes. And during

my twenty years of service to the society, I have collected only curses from our die-hard Mullas..... Every part of my body oozes sin, so I make no apology for any fault in this book.” (Hossain, 1993, p. 431)

Like a scientist, she continued to tell that this extreme form of confinement to a room or to the interior of the house was injurious to health that eventually dulled their brains and made them succumb to innocuous and worthless patterns of behavior. That is why, she, in her essay *Tin Kure (Three Idle Men)*, threw a straight question to the upholders of orthodox beliefs: “Purdah does not mean deprivation of all rights and confinement within four walls. Have you read at all the Koran Sharif? Or do you just hang it around your neck?” (Hossain, 1993, p.486) She also considered extreme veiling and early marriage for girls as two major impediments to Muslim women’s education. She defied the so called male propagation of strict *purdah* and in the essay *Bhrata-Bhagni (Brothers and Sisters)* strongly suggested that

“Removal of that artificial restriction keeping women confined to homes will lead to unrestricted spread of education among women. And it will then be impossible to arrest the progress of such education.” (Hossain, 1993, p. 476)

Though she sounded a little radical, the actual intention of her tougher language was to warn the *purdah* observing ignorant women to realize their foolishness and discard this ill-motivated patriarchal design for their own well-being.

4.0 Her invocation to women to rise

Begum Rokeya had serious disagreement with the so called male interpretation of women’s roles and position within the family and society. Because she strongly believed in what *Fatima Mernissi (1987)* says that:

“The existing inequality does not rest on an ideological or biological theory of women’s inferiority, but is the outcome of specific social institutions designed to restrain her power: namely segregation and legal subordination in the family.” (Mernissi, 1987, p. 19)

Being deprived of equal education and other rights and privileges which her other brothers enjoyed, she felt that the condition of women was nothing different from what Henrik Ibsen made Nora say to her husband in *A Doll’s House*: “Our house has been nothing but a playroom. Here I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I used to be papa’s doll-child.” (Ibsen, 2006, p. 164) She truly understood the suppressed female voice of the early 20th century Bengal in particular and that is the reason why, Rokeya, as *Shahanara Hossain (1986)* writes: “tried to repel the age-old social prejudices regarding women preaching progressive trend of thoughts through her writing” (Hossain S. , 1986, p. 226) She was totally convinced that it was not Islam but the the society’s anachronistic tradition that subjugates women often in a pretentiously loving manner only to limit their potentials and restrict their rights. In addition, the target of her criticism was not the male section of the society only; she also took a big hand to the foolish women who readily or willingly accepted their subordination and subjugation without realizing the consequence of their foolish submission. She was equally scornful and critical of her own women folk for their tendency to remain under confinement.

This tendency of women is clearly found in her essay *Istrijatir Abanati*, first published in 1903 as *‘Alankar na Badge of Slavery’ (Jewellery, or Badge of Slavery)* in *Mahila*, a monthly magazine edited by Girish Chandra Sen, or in *Woman’s Downfall*, a recent translation of the same, where she not only rebuked men for encircling women from receiving proper education, not giving them the opportunity to prove their ‘efficiency’, considering them as ‘weak’, ‘incompetent’ and ‘inferior’ and thus extending their helping hand leading them to ‘become slaves of indolence and, by extension, of men’ but categorically tried to find out the reasons behind women’s downfall as slaves devoid of any self-

identity. She is outrageously critical of men for their shielding of women with the so called armor of love and affection, which only make women lose their courage, confidence and will power altogether. Rokeya writes:

“Their compassion is the source of our ruin. By cooping us up in their emotional cage, men have deprived us from the light of knowledge and unadulterated air, which is causing our slow death.” (Hossain R. S., *Istrijatir Abanati or [Woman's Downfall]*, trans. Mohammad A. Quayum, 2011, p. 9)

She refuses to acknowledge women as inferior beings; rather she finds equal talents and potentials in them and so, wants them to be free and self-reliant to determine their future.

She at times blames women for their blind submission to the caring affection of men and asks them to renounce this treacherous favor which only makes them over dependent on men. She bitterly criticizes women for their tendency of clinging to tradition out of simplicity which ultimately diminishes their own choice and self-identity and also for considering jewelry as an instrument of adornment. A thorough reading of this essay takes Rokeya closer to Simone De Beauvoir, another eminent feminist philosopher, who in her *The Second Sex* (1956) talked about the same tendency of women:

“When man makes of woman the *other*, he may, then, expect her to manifest deep-seated tendencies toward complicity. Thus, woman may fail to lay claim to the status of subject because she lacks definite resources, because she feels the necessary bond that ties her to man regardless of reciprocity, and because she is often very well pleased with her role as the *other*.” (Beauvoir, 1956, p. 20)

For women’s over fascination towards ornaments, Rokeya’s language took a serious satirical turn when she wrote: “A cow-owner perforates the nose of a bullock to put the harness; our masters in this country have made us wear a nose ring set with a pendant. That nose-ring is the symbol of the master’s being and presence” (Hossain R. S., 2011, p. 8). That is why, she invoked all women to come over their bondage of slavery in order to pave the way for standing alone with self-identity and self-reverence: “Rise, oh sisters, rise let’s all move forward collectively to attain our freedom; the dust of anger will settle with time” (Hossain R. S., 2011, pp. 13-14). She also put forward a remarkable suggestion to men: “Do us this favour, do not do any favour to us” (Hossain R. S., 2011, p. 9). Such an invocation and a suggestion cannot but teach women to learn to leave their feeble life and live an independent life of their own.

5.0 Rokeya’s feminist distinctiveness

Rokeya was aware of the feminist wave going on in Europe and other parts of the world, and her strong belief in the European concept of free woman is clearly evident when she wrote in her novella *Padmarag* (1924) or (*Ruby*), a translation by Barnita Bagchi:

“What are we in this civilized world of the twentieth century? Slaves! I hear slavery as a trade has disappeared from this world, but has our servitude ended? No. There are reasons why we are still in bondage.” (Jahan, *Sultana's Dream: Purdah Revised in Sultana's Dream: A Feminist Utopia and Selections from the Secluded Ones*, 1988, p. 6)

Mary Wollstonecraft laid a significant milestone in the arguments around women’s rights and wrote in favor of their respectable position in the society, called for reform to ensure their equal participation in educational institution, pressed for women’s suffrage in her feminist classic *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). Later in 1869, John Stuart Mill, with the publication of *The Subjection of Women* stood out from a long misogynic tradition and andocentric western philosophy that tended more to devalue and marginalize women and issues concerning relations between the sexes. These two texts are considered as the two core texts of Enlightenment liberal feminist school of thought that outlines the argumentation for the emancipation of women. In a sharply attacking response to the humiliating

views on female education put forward by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Emile* (1762) who had explicitly argued that men and women were by nature not merely different in kind but different in "natural rank," with women being weaker physically, intellectually, and emotionally, Wollstonecraft (1792) wrote:

“that all the writers who have written on the subject of female education and manners, from Rousseau to Dr. Gregory, have contributed to render women more artificial, weak characters, than they would otherwise have been; and consequently, more useless members of society.” (Wollstonecraft, 2007, p. 18)

However, Rokeya did not point her finger of complaints to any particular man, philosopher or educationist for women’s degrading position. The target of her criticism was various familial and social practices in the name of religious bindings obsessively designed by men to establish their control over women. The leitmotif of her writings was to make women realize their foolishness of becoming a willing prey to their men’s cunning wishes of keeping them as lifelong captives. She talked about the adversity of women and expressed her utmost grievance over men; she accused men, in the most stinging words, of depriving women from receiving proper education, of not giving them opportunity to prove their ‘efficiency’, of considering them as ‘weak’, ‘incompetent’ and ‘inferior’ and of extending their helping hand leading them to ‘become slaves of indolence and, by extension, of men’. Rokeya kept saying that all these male sympathy and care only made women lose their “ability to differentiate between freedom and captivity, progress and stagnation, slowly, from being landlords and master of the house, men, in stages, have ended up being our lord and proprietor.” (Hossain R. S., 2011, 6-7) She, therefore, urged women to nurture and develop their dormant innate faculties through the cultivation of knowledge, because she regarded knowledge or education as their ‘Saviour’.

6.0 Her literary and social campaign for women’s education

Her belief that only bookish knowledge and education without vocational training cannot be the gateway to women’s true advancement and emancipation indicates her pragmatic feminist thought. She also gave special importance on women’s physical strength, and advised parents and teachers to provide physical training to girls both at home and at school. While urging women in *Istrijatir Abanati* (Women’s Downfall) to employ their body and mind, she wrote:

“We are born with certain natural faculties, gifted by God, and to hone these faculties through rigorous training is real education. One must aim at both physical and mental efflorescence, and learn how to put to effective use of all the organs gifted by God. One has to utilize usefully one’s hands and legs, observe carefully with one’s eyes, listen attentively with one’s ears, and think intelligently with one’s brain.” (Hossain, 1993, p. 18)

Her effort was not limited to giving such advice only; she tried her best to implement these ideas at Sakhawat Memorial School, first established in Bihar in 1910 and later shifted and reestablished in Calcutta in 1911. Like a modern and liberal educationist in both belief and practice, Rokeya, contrary to most of the schools for Muslim girls in the Indian sub-continent, placed more emphasis on literacy and practical subjects such as handicrafts, home science and gardening. She even included physical training in the curriculum; the girls had to wear only a head cover inside the school. This new head cover signified a new form of modest attire, suitable for the modernizing women now entering new spaces where neither the *burqah* (veil) designed as outdoor wear nor the clothes worn inside the house were suitable. Her energy, dedication and organizational skills coupled with sheer courage to confront indifferent and hostile public opinion made her a remarkable modern free thinker.

She thought the desired progress of women to be an urgent necessity for the advancement of a society, because no society could ever move forward in the real sense of the term leaving half of it at home. That is why, she spoke of women’s equal participation in the work force side by side with men,

asked women to start their independent business with the labor they employ in their master's household, and put a visible way forward for women to achieve economic emancipation:

“Firstly, we must have the will and an unwavering resolve to work alongside the men in all affairs of life. We should also have a firm conviction that we were not born as slaves. We will do all we have to in order to attain equality with the men. If earning a livelihood freely brings our freedom, then we will do that. If need be, we will begin by becoming clerks and then magistrates, barristers-at-law, judges; we will work in every profession.” (Hossain R. S., 2011, p. 14)

She knew that women's true welfare was impossible without their financial self-reliance, which was perhaps one of the most important prerequisites to get rid of their misfortune. But the society of her time considered education important only for men, and regarded it as a 'passport to gainful employment'. Rokeya opposed it and argued in favor of women's employment beyond their domestic chores. She questioned the tradition bound society for their backdated view:

“Why should we not have access to gainful employment? What do we lack? Are we not able-bodied and endowed with intelligence? In fact, why should we not employ the labour and energy that we expand on domestic chores in our husband's home to run our own enterprises?” (Hossain, 1993, p. 20)

7.0 Language of non-sectarianism

Another important aspect of her literary, social and religious standing was her belief in non-sectarianism. As far as history is concerned, all social reform activities were not going on in united manner; the Hindu and the Muslim intellectuals and reformers largely remained at two different poles on what should be the roles, responsibilities and rights of women. That is why, they had their own different versions of addressing the women issues of their own communities. But she does not fall into that group. She visited the nearby Brahmo and Hindu schools to master the techniques of administering her own school as she did not have the experience of attending a formal school, let alone running it. It should be mentioned here that though the first female students admitted in her school were Muslims, within five years from its inception with the initial number of only eight students, the number multiplied ten times along with the Muslims, a few Hindu and Parsi students. Apart from these real events, she dreamt of a racially inclusive female world where all women from all ethnic and religious backgrounds would not only receive education but also training on miscellaneous skills and craftsmanship in order to ensure economic independence. She manifested this vision in the novella *Padmarag* or *Ruby*, an extraordinarily realistic feminist utopia, the story of which revolves around an institution called Tarini Bhavan which caters to oppressed and battered women from diverse religions, regions, and ethnicities who have nowhere else to go. It is founded and run efficiently by women who have striven hard to rise above their circumstances. These are the women who have seen it all –cruel and cunning husbands and in-laws, indifferent parents who don't spare a thought for their daughters' education or welfare, and scheming relatives and landlords who have no qualms about duping women of their property and inheritance. Tarini Bhavan is a nunnery or ashram like asylum comprised of a school and a workshop or training institute where all destitute women get training on a veritable compendium of the various marketable skills such as bookbinding, sewing, spinning, sweet-making, typing, nursing and even teaching so that they can use their skills in the real life world to earn a living for themselves.

Rokeya upbringing in strict purdah convention and Islamic cultural milieu could not interfere in her belief in a secularistic society that she had shown through Tarini Bhaban where Hindu, Muslim and Christian women lived like sisters and enjoyed deep bond of mutual love and respect under the headship of a Hindu woman. In her preface to the novel *Padmarag*, dedicated to her brother, she used a remarkable metaphor to show that no difference between one religion and another ever existed for a person truly devoted to the welfare of mankind. She reaffirmed her racially non sectarian inclusive philosophy by stating:

“Religion is like a three-storied mansion. The ground floor has many chambers housing Hindus with their many factions, such as Brahmis, Sudras etc., and Muslims with their many communities, like Shia, Sunni, Hanafi, Sufi etc., and similarly, many Christians with their different denominations, Roman Catholic, Protestants and the like. Go to the first floor; there are only Muslims, only Hindus, with no divisions into factions. On the second floor, there is just one chamber inhabited by only people, all the same; there are no Hindus, no Muslims; all are worshipping only one God. In the final analysis, there is nothing-except the great God” (Hossain, 1993, p. 263)

Such a liberal and secular vision of religious harmony and ethnic reciprocity bears special significance from the viewpoint of forging a society free from the complex of religious superiority or inferiority. An ideological standing like this had a universal appeal that certainly promoted peaceful coexistence of different ethnic and religious groups in British Bengal.

Her nonsectarian view was a leading characteristic feature of her writings. Her writings, public speeches and social works were not merely meant for the emancipation of Muslim women; she spoke for the freedom of all women in general and addressed them as sisters, Indian women, and women folk etc., not as Muslim girls or sisters. It is true that Muslim women issues covered a relatively large part of her writings. This is because the Muslim community, particularly Muslim women during that time had less or almost no exposure to formal education in comparison with Hindu or Christian women who had already many schools for them to study in greater Bengal. Therefore, her main focus was of course on the ongoing misfortunes of Muslim women. But she was at times very much concerned and well aware of the indispensability of the greater well-being of all Indian women irrespective of religious and ethnic identity. This is evident in her another essay titled *Educational Ideals for the Modern Indian Girl* where she said:

“We should by all means broaden the outlook of our girls and teach them to modernize themselves... We should teach our girls if they are to fulfill their heavy duties commendably, above all to concentrate on desires and efforts which are not superficial... The future of India lies in its girls.” (Hossain, 1993, pp. 495-496)

She did not have a narrow thought of the future prospect of girls or women from any particular region or religion; hers was a universal concern for the collective welfare of all Indian women, perhaps all women of the world. She strongly believed that it was wives and mothers in the Indian family that might teach the lesson of humanity and humility in which regional, political and ethnic identity must come next. What could be a better example of her non sectarian approach when she wrote in the essay

Sugrihini (The Good Housewife)

“We ought to remember that we are not merely Hindus or Muslim; Parsis or Christians; Bengalis, Madasis, Marwaris or Punjabis; we are all Indians. We are first Indians, and Muslims or Sikhs afterwards. A good housewife will cultivate this truth in her family. This will gradually eradicate narrow selfishness, hatred and prejudice and turn her home into a shrine; help the members of her family to grow spiritually.” (Hossain, 1993, pp. 39-40)

8.0 Reasons behind Rokeya’s harsh language of protest

The harsh tone and flavour of her writings was directed to both Muslim or Hindu patriarchs who treated women in the most unlawful manner. While invoking all women to rise against the injustice done to them, she even risked an infuriatingly violent response from the whole male section of the Indian society. She wrote, “I know that Indian Muslim 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.” (Hossain R. S., 2011, p. 13) Biographically speaking, in order to translate her philanthropic vision into

realistic and gritty action, she had to confront with many odds and challenges from the tradition-bound segment of the society with parochial attitudes. Because of her relentless effort in favour of women, she became the target of tremendous hostility and slandering remarks from the conservatives. Their opposing outcry in the society went so far that she was even titled “a shameless woman, a misanthrope, a radical misguided by the proselytizing propaganda of Christian missionaries, and a sexist.” (Jahan, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *Sultana’s Dream, A Feminist Utopia and Selections from The Secluded Ones*, 1988, p. 53) Some called her fellow activists as ‘prostitutes’, ‘the scum of society’, and even branded Rokeya ‘a woman of loose morals’. But nothing could stop Rokeya from her vision and mission.

The question of why Begum Rokeya’s used bitter language to speak and work for establishing the rights of women needs to be explained so far as the slow pace, and in some cases, failure of the male initiated reform efforts are concerned. She felt furious because of the then Muslim community’s little interest to let their daughters step outside of home for whatever reasons there might be. She knew how Maulvi Abdul Hakim of the Calcutta Madrassah disagreed and summarily dismissed the idea of educating Muslim girls in an academic setting maintaining that the education provided at home was sufficient when the issue first raised at an assembly of the Bengal Social Science Association in 1867. Among many other semi-religious or semi-behavioral manuals advocating ideal role models for women that were written and published during the first three decades of the 20th century, Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi’s exemplary book *Bihishti Zawar* or *Heavenly Ornaments* (1905) in Urdu provided basic egalitarian principles for both men and women and a detailed guide for respectable Muslim women. This book got much appreciation and applause from both Bengali and non-Bengali Muslims on the ground, as Barbara Metcalf (1990) says: “it sought to do nothing less than bringing women into the high standard of Islamic conformity that has been the purview of educated religious men.” (Metcalf, 1990, p. 7) But Maulana Thanwi was questioned and criticized because of his duality in the book who, on one hand, proposed an egalitarian Islamic sanction for men and women, and on the other, propagated highly problematic patriarchal value systems. Throughout the book, he never questioned the disparity and imbalance between men and women’s social role and power dynamics. Thanawi was not radical as a Muslim theologian who, according to Seema Kazi (1999),

“Acknowledged equal mental and intellectual potential of men and women, but delineated domestic roles for women in great detail, restricted women’s participation in public life and extolled the virtue of the family.” (Kazi, 1999, p. 7)

A similar type of duality and ideological split towards women is found in Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), the paramount figure of Muslim modern education of the time who had a great influence on other Muslim reformers in Greater Bengal regions for his views of modern secular education. But surprisingly, he too did not support formal schooling and western type of education for women, and adamantly opposed to bring women out of veiling. Almost all Islamic scholars so far supported female education, but certainly within the jurisdiction of the Qur’an and its interpretations. They agreed upon and opined for only home education for women to calm down the conservative section of the Muslim community that was completely unwilling to send their daughters to school as it would be a violation of Islamic sanction. To talk about the Islamists’ puritanical views about women, Rachana Chakraborty (2011) states:

“Their consideration of women’s position in the family and plans for women’s education included discussion of household customs and rituals, of purdah, and of Islamic law as it pertained to women.” (Chakraborty, 2011, pp. 77-78)

9.0 Rokeya’s participation in social movement

Rokeya felt the urgency of a concerted movement for reform that could better and more effectively serve the cause of women’s emancipation in every sense. While talking about the Muslim women in the colonial Bengal and the Bengal Renaissance, S. N. Amin writes:

“The Women’s Awakening in the Muslim community was concretely manifest in the women’s reform movement of the early twentieth century, which mainly sought to redress perceived social ills (such as polygamy and child marriage) and advocate female education and eradication of *abarodh* (lit. “seige” – used to mean extreme purdah) and generally improve women’s status in society.” (Amin, 1996, p. 11)

To reach these goals, Rokeya initiated the Bengal chapter of Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam (Muslim Women’s Association) in 1916. Its activities were, as Jahan (1988) says:

“Related directly to disadvantaged poor women. It offered financial assistance to poor widows, rescued and sheltered battered wives, helped poor families to marry their daughters, and above all helped poor women to achieve literacy.” (Jahan, 1988, p. 42)

As far as history is concerned, such associations or *anjumans* set up by the Muslim social workers and *samitis* by Brahma/Hindu reformists were already operating from the last decades of the 19th century. For instance, two other national organisations such as Women’s Indian Organization formed in 1917 and all India Women’s Conference formed in 1927 and led by the Indian National Congress were discussing specific issues pertaining to women and their social and legal disabilities. All India Women’s Conference session of 1932 held in Lucknow passed a resolution favoring girls’, particularly Muslim girls’ education. In fact, the main goal of Indian women’s organizations was to bring about reforms in the legal status of women. The child marriage controversy caused them to view women’s legal status as an especially serious problem, and from it grew demands for improvements in women’s rights to divorce, inherit, and control property.

All through the 1930s, in order to press their demands, women’s organizations formed committees on legal status, undertook studies of the laws, talked to lawyers, published pamphlets on women’s position and encouraged various pieces of legislation to enhance women’s status. The basic arguments revolved around the need to get rid of age-old traditions, customary practices and social taboos, which were sapping the vitality of women’s role and position in familial, social and national life. In collaboration with such associations, Rokeya’s little centre played a vital role in making Muslim women’s journey from domesticity to liberty; from traditionality to modernity. Minault Gail (1998) says,

“Her writings point to the emerging views of the next generation Muslim women who gradually evolved their own viewpoints on purdah, polygamy, divorce and other social issues, distinct from those of the men in the generation of reform.” (Gail, 1998, p. 262)

9.0 Conclusion

Begum Rokeya’s unfaltering language of protest against the wrongdoings of the patriarchal society to women stirred the very root of it, and led to a growing demand for change. Her voice of disagreement never retired even under great public debates and scrutiny often posing great challenge as well as dilemma for ongoing women’s movements. Rather she moved forward with renewed spirit and reached the vantage point of feminist radicalism. Her voice to free women and her feminist doctrine of social enlightenment lived on and will live on for indefinite times to come. Along with many other women holding respectably important government and corporate positions, the present day Bangladesh has already seen women as its democratically elected leaders and the West Bengal of India has voted for a woman Chief Minister. Her legacy remains as countless women of different casts, creed and customs are now occupying a sizable portion in the total workforce in Bangladesh and West Bengal. Now, women in general have got legal and constitutional safeguard against any form of discrimination. The trail of the language of protest she blazed years ago still finds its way among the people in this part of the world.

Reference

- Amin, S. N. (1996). *The World of Women in the Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939*. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill.
- Beauvoir, S. D. (1956). *The Second Sex*, translated & edited by Harvard Madison Parshley. London: Lowe and Brydone Printers Ltd.
- Chakraborty, R. (2011). Beginnings of Muslim Women's Education in Colonial Bengal. *History Research*, Vol. 1, No. 1, ISSN- 2159-550X, 75-88.
- Gail, M. (1998). *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Hossain, S. (1986). *Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain O Bangali Muslim Nari Jagoron*. Dhaka: Shahittiki.
- Hossain, R. S. (1993). *Rokeya Rachanbali or [Collected Works of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain]*, ed. Abdul Quader. Dhaka: Bangla Academy.
- Hossain, R. S. (2005). *Padmarag or [Ruby]*. New Delhi: Penguin Publishers Ltd.
- Hossain, R. S. (2011). *Istrijatir Abanati or [Woman's Downfall]*, trans. Mohammad A. Quayum. Adelaide: Transnational Literature: Flinders Institute for Research in the Humanities.
- Ibsen, H. (2006). *A Doll's House*. Dhaka: Friends' Book Corner.
- Jahan, R. (1988). *Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Sultana's Dream, A Feminist Utopia and Selections from The Secluded Ones*. New York, USA: The Feminist Press.
- Jahan, R. (1988). *Sultana's Dream: Purdah Revised in Sultana's Dream: A Feminist Utopia and Selections from the Secluded Ones*. New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York.
- Kazi, S. (1999). *Muslim Women in India*. London, United Kingdom: Minority Rights Group (MRG).
- Mernissi, F. (1987). *Beyond the Veil: Male Female Dynamics in Muslim Society*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Metcalf, B. (1990). *Perfecting Women: Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi's Bihishti Zewar*. Berkeley : Oxford :: University of California Press.
- Ray, B. (2005). *A Voice of Protest: The Writings of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932)*. In B. R. (ed.), *Women of India: Colonial and Post Colonial Period* (pp. 427-453). New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, (. (1995). *Women Writing in India: 6000 B.C. to the Present* (Vol. 1). Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Wollstonecraft, M. (2007). *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. London, United Kingdom: W. Scott.