



LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain: A Nonconformist Voice in Early Indian Feminism

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Abstract

The paper is a bi-pronged post-modernist approach to re-understand the nature of the early phase of Indian feminism. It questions the sincerity of the late nineteenth century reformist in raising the women's question. It argues that the writers deviating from the normative patriarchal framework were marginalized and forgotten. Bringing in the cross textual references and 'micronarratives', the study would question the male hegemony, while highlighting the need for the re-appraisal of marginalized body of literature that existed in early India. The researcher has cited the works of Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) to show the uniqueness of her thoughts that defies the charge of passivity on early Indian feminism. Rokeya stood for gender equality and a dignified life for women. The claims of lack of originality in the writings of early female writers stand false when one reads

Rokeya's works, mainly written in Bengali, which boldly demanded for education and equality for women.

Keywords

Early Indian Feminism; Social Reform Movement; Patriarchy; Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain.

The early phase of Indian feminism has always been fraught by charges of being acquiescent and passive and imitative of West. It is generally held that feminism in colonial India lacked feminist consciousness and followed the precepts of men (Anagol 15). But the recent post-modernist stance is questioning this assumed passivity of feminism. As we ponder over post-modernity here, I aim to discuss this normative subjectivity of our history and disrupt the passivity model of Indian feminism. The historical archive is highly selective and is structured according to the interest of the dominant ideology. Any deviant voice not conforming to the latter has been kicked into oblivion (Selden, Widdowson and Brooker 189). Also it would be relevant here to comprehend the intention of male reformists in India for voicing the women question, and delve into the practical needs that compelled them to take the issue besides the generally held enlightenment's effect of western education. Somehow the reformists seemed to be reaffirming patriarchy, of course in altogether different guise.

Indian feminism started taking shape while India was experiencing the waves of modernism through British rule over it. Remarkable women feminists like Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde, Sarala Devi Chaudharani took the cause of women and wrote emphatically for them. Yet our early feminism is looked down as lacking feminist consciousness. However the post-modernist stance questions the very framework in which this problem has been looked at. Firstly we must remember that history is not factual but a narrative discourse

under the control of dominant ideology, in this case the patriarchy (Abrams 66, 183). And as Foucault said that there are no absolutely true discourses (Selden, Widdowson and Brooker 190), so what we have is a patriarchal reflection of the history. It is indeed not objective as we mistakenly take it to be rather it is highly selective and subjective. Thus it is quite probable that only that portion remained extant in the history that was in compliance with the patriarchal ideology and the rest was forgotten. There seems to be two major problems with our archives in this concern, both intertwined with each other. Firstly, the normative nature of history propagated by the phallogentric ideology. The second one is more complex, and is regarding the genesis of women question in the reform movement.

Women's emancipation movement cannot be simplistically attributed to the zeal of the male reformists towards improving the degraded state of Indian women in that era (Sarkar, Mahua 53). It was more a reaction against the British attitude to look down upon the natives. The British held, as the imperialist historians like James Mill expostulated that the coarseness of Indians is apparent from their ill treatment of women. Geraldine Forbes in this concern writes, "The formula was simple: Among rude people women are generally degraded, among civilized people they are exalted" (qtd. in M. Sarkar 53). So Indians naturally lacked the ability to rule themselves, which in turn justified the British control over India. Thus women question took shape in modern India in a wake to what Mahua Sarkar writes, "to establish adequate manliness" of British and Indian men "asserting and justifying their respective claims to or desire for political power" (53).

Also it is useful to remember here that reformists, how so much progressive had always clearly defined and separated public and private domain, keeping the former to themselves and relegating women to the latter (Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar 5). Thus ideals and visions these reformists possessed was keeping in with this essential division. Among the plans for

women emancipation, women education ranked first. The stress the reformists laid on it was owing to the urgency they felt for countering the invasion for Christianity through missionary's educational campaigns (Kishwar 318, 322). Also, the education of women would act as a demonstration of the reformist's ideal vision of the society besides being a more convenient companion to the newly western educated Indian male. All this tends to persuade one to think that the women question was more a tool in the hands of Indian male to procure power and facilitate their own social advancement rather than women emancipation.

Madhu Kishwar in her article "The Daughters of Aryavarta" while discussing the Arya Samaj opines that the writings of Swami Dayanad Saraswati, founder of the Samaj, discussed women only in their familial roles as wives and mother. The founder of the first women's university, Dhondo Keshav Karve aimed at educating women only to train them as better housewives (Forbes 98). In Bengal too, the reformists movement in their scheme to "modernize" women was aimed but at moulding them as appropriate consorts of the "bhadralok". Women as individuals with their independent entity could not be acknowledged by the dominant ideology. Thus, as Ghulam Murshid comments men were ready to give women limited freedom till that freedom did not infringe on the ultimate male superiority over the latter" (M.Sarkar 98, 54). Thus there was "systematic blunting of female voice" that was not in compliance with the patriarchy (Tharu and Lalita 19). And then the normative study of Indian feminism generated a passivity model which in turn is taken as generalized representation of the subjugated and repressed Indian women (Anagol 15). The deviant voices breaking the normative patriarchy was bound to be derided and ignored. In fact the latter were questioned on moral grounds. The society could not accept women coming out of their domestic sphere for such women were slandered as 'deviants and prostitutes' (M.Sarkar 54).

Thus the heterogeneity of the past has been homogenized in the interest of the patriarchal domination. One can easily notice that Indian history almost obsessively focuses on male reformists ignoring the “larger horizon of gender norms and practices.” Also there is little information found in archives about reforms in Muslim or other marginalized (S.Sarkar and T.Sarkar 1, 3). Also while considering female activists, the scholarly lens has almost exclusively focused on Bengal’s bhadramahila, perhaps due to Bengal’s active role in the movements. This ideal woman was of course tailored on the male bhadralok’s needs. Naturally any study focused on them is bound to yield such passive picture of feminism (Anagol 4). The inconclusive and biased picture of the past as a result of a faulty framework adopted to study third world women was pointed out by Chandra Talpade Mohanty too in her article “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse”. So there is a need to re-read these women narratives with a new framework that would be more sensitive to their socio-cultural specificities. We need to move beyond the canonical boundaries to have a better comprehension of the indigenous feminism which is far more complicated and variable than is assumed to be.

This can be done by the inclusion of what Lyotard calls the ‘micro-narratives’, reclaiming the forgotten works that could not conform to the dominant epistemology and consequently silenced in the historical archives. Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain is one such personality who lived from 1880 to 1932. Born in a highly orthodox Bengali Muslim family where females lived under strict purdah and allowed only Persian and Urdu for education. In spite of all restrictions she managed to learn English, the key to vast knowledge and Bengali, the language of the masses. One must keep in mind while studying Rokeya that being an Indian Muslim woman in colonized nation encumbered her activities on the racial, national and gender grounds. Considering the impediments she must have faced and the contribution she made makes her a unique personality. She was an active social reformist and wrote prolifically in

English and Bengali, though the latter was her preferred language owing to its wider reach among masses. Rokeya wrote in almost every genre attacking social inequality, economic dependency of women and purdah system. She started her literary career with an essay titled “Pipasha” (The Thirst) in 1901 in *Nabaprabha*. Her literary contribution consists mainly of a story, “*Sultana’s Dream*” (1905), a novella, *Padmarag* (1924), *Motichur* (1908, 21) *Avarodhbashini* (1931) and several essays. Roushan Jahan, a well-known scholar on Rokeya from Bangladesh calls her “the first and foremost feminist of Bengali Muslim society”. One of the most popular works by Rokeya, “*Sultana’s Dream*” was published in 1905 in *The Indian Ladies Magazine* in Chennai which was co-edited by Sarojini Naidu.

Rokeya had a quite radical viewpoint towards social problems. To appreciate her writings one must understand her ideology. Born in an age of social reforms, she was filled with reformatory zeal towards the condition of Indian women, more specifically the Bengali Muslim women. She was highly influenced by the ideals of Brahma Samaj and opposed all the evil practices against the women. She was among all the roles she played, foremost a feminist activist, all her activities were devoted to one cause: women empowerment. She opened a school for Muslims, still functional in Kolkata; established Muslim women’s organization, Anjuman-e-Khawateen and wrote prolifically stories, essays etc., all with one aim, to improve the lot of women.

For Rokeya the major cause of women’s backwardness was lack of education. Like other feminists, she too placed women education foremost in her social agenda as well as her writings. But unlike the male educationists of her times, education for her was not merely to train women in household expertise. It was much beyond that, as a key to blurring this public/private division. In fact she was different from many contemporary women activists too as education, for her entailed economic independence as well besides other things (Ray 438). In “*Sultana’s Dream*”, a feminist utopia by Rokeya, the

Ladyland is run by the queen aided by the female principal's of women's activity, a vocation for women outside domestic sphere. In fact the driving force behind the success of this utopist country is women's education which has empowered them with great administrative abilities. Thus Rokeya envisioned such an education for women which would empower them in public and private spheres alike (Bagchi xiii).

The dialectic of women education is far more widely dealt in her novella *Padmarag* (1924) which was based on Rokeya's belief of women's empowerment. Women from various regional and religious background oppressed by male domination took refuge in the novella's shelter home, Tarini Bhavan which trained them in educational and philanthropic concerns. In the training institute women were trained in marketable skills from sewing, typing, book-binding to teaching and nursing. The school of this shelter home did not accept British government's scholarship nor taught colonial version of the past. Instead, the students had subjects like Mathematics, Geography, Physical Education, etc., to train their minds realistically. The novella presented a picture of the kind of women education that Rokeya envisioned for women of her times. Rokeya was evidently far more radical than many of her contemporaries. When the progressive Brahma women like Swarnaprabha Basu, Hemlata Sarkar and others were defining educated women's dutiful roles at home, Rokeya was talking of women's right to employment. She fearlessly stood up to discuss the aims of a woman's life beyond family and marriage (Ray 439).

Rokeya pointed out that the major obstacle in women education were purdah and early marriage (Ray 438). She went on to vehemently denounce both in her writings. To take again the example of "Sultana's Dream", in this feminist utopia contrary to the general practice of women observing seclusion, the men are limited to male quarters, 'murdana'. This carnivalesque treatment of private/public sphere at once questions the validity and rigidity of a long

range of gender based issues like the women's passivity: men's dynamicity, women's dull wit: men's intelligence etc. Rokeya seems to be evoking the reappraisal of gender roles, something talked frequently in feminist discussions today (Jahan 5). The reversal of the roles of men and women in her narrative seems in consonance with Judith Butler's concept of performativity of gender identity.

Her *Avarodhbashini (Secluded Women)* is a typical example of her protest against the evils of purdah system. The book is a collection of articles published in the journal *Muhammadhi* between 1928 and 1930. Tharu and Lalita calls it "a sequence of predicaments, sometimes moving, occasionally pathetic but mostly ridiculous, that the practice of purdah resulted in" (342). It consists of forty seven incidents documenting the torture of purdah on women. Rokeya wrote extensively against the ill effects of the purdah system, then prevalent in Indian society, especially among higher class of the society. As Roushan Jahan, translator of the work in English aptly points out, it is invaluable in South Asian feminist narrative on account of being written by someone who herself had lived her life in purdah. She narrates the tribulations of the practice with lively humor and wit which keeps the reader interested in it. She acquires polemic style to question the logic behind the practice of purdah system. In her essay, "Burka" (The Veil), she writes that purdah should not mean the deprivation of the rights of women and her confinement within the four walls of home. In "Three Huts" she reiterates the purpose of this seclusion but as an impediment to women's overall growth. She believed that this system was just one of the tropes among the many patriarchal practices to control the growth and movement of women, it was not a problem in itself, rather a symptom to the problem of patriarchal anarchy on women (Tharu and Lalita 167).

Rokeya of course was quite aware and realistic in her approach while denouncing the practice of purdah which so far was used by orthodoxy to be

confirmed by religion itself, thus beyond question. But she denied the tradition any scriptural authority (Dey 209). She was pragmatic in her approach, she observed strict purdah in her own life all the while exposing its hypocrisy and debasing its religion based rigidity. She favoured a moral purdah than the existent oppressive purdah which could be reconcilable with higher education.

Acknowledging the hold of religion among the masses, Rokeya extensively referred to the Qu'ran and the Hadiths to support women's education and empowerment. She cleverly used the religious texts to demonstrate to men their faults and thus persuade them to amend their ways. She referred to the Prophet as her model while championing the cause of women education (Dey 204). Her writings presented Prophet and his family's female member as models to legitimize and promote women education. And of course the ultimate aim of education for her was equality with men. In fact Ghulam Murshid calls her claim to equality unique and unheard of among her contemporaries. The women reformists like Sarala Devi Chaudharani, Krishnabhabhini Das etc., too did not stake such a claim to equality though they denounced the injustice done to women (Ray 441).

Rokeya called women to unite together to work for their own emancipation. The Tarini Bhavan of *Padmarag* exemplifies her vision of women's organization which could help them to live a meaningful and dignified life. This association among women, Rokeya was clear should be beyond the regional and communal biases to attain its goal. Women in Tarini Bhavan belonged to different religion and lived in harmony. Also in the foreword of this work Rokeya asserts to the oneness of all religion. Her writing is non sectarian and indeed aimed towards a more humane world.

Rokeya wrote vehemently against the hegemonic social structure thriving on women subjugation. The *Motichur* (1904, 1922), a collection of her essays is centered on this specific theme. In fact she simply did not accuse men for the problem, she reprimanded women as well for their culpability in cooperating in

their own suppression. For example, in her essay, “Alankar or the Badges of Slavery” she compared the practice of adorning jewellery by women to the handcuffs worn by prisoners as a sign of male’s control over women’s freedom. She could discern the real motives beneath the various movements of modernizing women, which in fact was in continuation with age old patriarchy. Due to her controversial attitude towards social realities, she faced harsh criticism from her contemporaries. She was accused of being pro-Christian and even of having loose morals. She had to face much resistance in her social activities as well. People derided and ridiculed her female education programs. So much was Rokeya’s view antagonistic with the general masses that on her demise, she was refused burial in the public burial ground.

Rokeya’s life is an example of what challenges and resistance the independent voices have to face. One might agree that her whole personality seems to resonate with feminist consciousness. Apart from feminist concern, Rokeya’s dedication for social change through women education is particularly laudable in the context of South Asia where world’s highest number of illiterate adult women resides. Her vision of a more equitable society sans cultural, religious and gender biases still remains an inspiring model. Returning to the question of lack of female agency in the light of Rokeya’s writings and the social activity, such claims easily fall flat and explain the society’s discomfort to the voices departing from the popular ideas of things and the treatment given to them.

With this revisit to Rokeya’s writing one can thus notice a discrepancy in the homogenized picture of our early feminism where as I tried to explain, all digressions were sidelined. The writers not conforming to the normative study of history have been comfortably marginalized as minor and forgotten. Thanks to the post-modernist attitude of inquisition, the evenness of the past has been questioned. Thus there is in an attempt to reclaim the lost works. Writers such as Rokeya are receiving recognition and adding to the present corpus of Indian

women writing. On a little wider perspective, study on Rokeya is an attempt of reassessing the contribution of Muslim women's narrative in South Asian literature something which has received little attention in the past (Hasan 191). A re-reading of women's narrative with new analytic framework can bring out many silenced voices that deserve attention are required to have a more comprehensive understanding of the indigenous feminism. Rokeya's writings are also valuable in understanding the rich intellectual discourse of late colonial Bengal (Mahua, Sarkar 79).

Works on writers such as Rokeya could help in "correcting the long standing lacuna in historical scholarship in India" (Mahua, Sarkar 80). In turn it would lead in re-conceptualizing the role women played across the society towards social change. It would be apt to conclude with the argument Rokeya gave for equality: "We contribute the half of the society. If we remain backward can the society move forward? Indeed the interest of women and men are not different. Their goal of life and ours are the same."

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MLA (7th Edition) Citation:

Chetna. "Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain: A Nonconformist Voice in Early Indian Feminism." *Literary Quest* 2.4 (2015): 23-36. Web. DoA.

DoA – Date of Access

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.