



## Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain: The Voice of Time for the Emancipation of Women

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### ABSTRACT

An unforgettable woman, a woman of dignity, a woman of dedication, a woman of devotion, a woman of diplomacy, a woman of discipline, in total, a woman of distinction. She is one of them who felt the importance of female education in the society. A legendary figure for her efforts in support of women's independence and female education. Her courage and devotion were to expand woman education in the society especially in the Bengali Muslim society. She was strong believer that if education is imparted properly, it would enlighten women and liberate their selves from the barriers of rigid patriarchal and sexist norms. Her great name was and is Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. She broke the shackles of caste and religion and came out with a strong will to be educated and educate woman. In an era when women's education was frowned upon, she stood to raise for the empowerment of woman that all can be seen in her works. This study is to see the contribution of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain in English literature especially in woman education.

**Keywords:** Rokeya, Awakening, Female Education,

### Purpose of the study

The core purpose of this study is to see and show the relevance of Rokeya's English pieces to women education. And to know about her strive and struggle be what she was and is. And also, this study is to examine the importance of her views and vision to establish woman education.

### Methodology

This paper uses an analytical method and as well as a descriptive approach to come at the purpose of the study. The resources or data are completely based on both primary and secondary sources, which are simply qualitative in nature.

## 1. Introduction

Rokeya was a woman who was full of dedication and audaciousness. She met with God more than hundred years ago but yet her greatness did not become obscure; rather is becoming brighter day by day and her significance is getting brightened up anew. She came out while breaking the shackles and barriers of the society. She was a voice of women and her voice reflected in her works and literature. And it is very hard to frame up her contributions within a particular aspect. She was aware of the society and women especially concern to bring the Muslim women within the circle of education because Muslim women were more uneducated and backwards than other women. It is undeniable fact that she is widely accepted as an iconic and a role model figure in Bangladesh other countries too for her unforgettable contributions in the women empowerment and education. She was a noticeable figure in the women population of colonial India because of her voice which reflected in her works and literature. She penned fiction and non-fiction like essays, novels, utopias, poems, humour and satirical articles on women rights and other social issues both in languages that is Bengali and English. She tried her hand in English literature and language to raise her voice through English language and produced limited number of English pieces: *Sultana's Dream*, *God Gives, Man Robs* and *Educational Ideals for the Modern Indian Girl* and wrote around twelve letters in English. In addition, she established a girl's school for Muslim women and argued with the patriarchs of the Muslim society, in pursuance of the necessity of women's education. She never thought of devoting herself in literary pursuits totally. But it would never be exaggerated if it is said that compilation of feminist writings will be incomplete without her. And it is matter of concern that in spite of having no qualification mean institutional education but her skills she showed in the composition of Bengali literature and English language and literature is really a matter of envy for the highly educated women. However, it is need of time to take learn from her life to bring empowerment of women as it is seen that still women are facing a lot of problems, especially the participation of Muslim women in education is very low.

## 2. Brief information of her life

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain opened her eyes on 9 December 1880 into a landed family of Pairaband in Rangpur. The name of her father was Zahiruddin Abu Ali Haider Saber and Rahmatun Nessa Chowdhury, was her mother's name. And father was a well-educated, influential landowner whose massive estate was a stronghold for the traditional way of life. She grew up there with her two elder brothers, an elder and a younger sister in very conservative family of landed aristocracy which, following the trend of the contemporary Bengali Muslim society, did not support female education. But her brother

used to teach her Bengali and English privately under the light of candles at night when the whole family was in deep asleep. At a time when women's education was unpopular, Rokeya's brothers secretly taught her to read and write English and Bengali. Not having the opportunity to go to school Rokeya's auto didacticism gave her character, from her childhood days, a spark of independence. She was married when she was sixteen to Khan Bahadur Syed Sakhawat Hossain, a widower who was around forty years old at the time. Her husband was a man of liberal and progressive ideas and he helped Rokeya in her pursuit of knowledge by giving opportunities to study and become proficient in English. She started Publishing her literary works and outputs in Indian periodicals of the time and make proud and famous herself as daring writer. Her helped her a lot to forward, and made her happy until his death. But it is a feeling of blue that her husband had acute diabetes because of it he became blind and eventually took his life.

After the death of her husband, she faced a lot of problems and she was not allowed to live with her step-daughter. As she was the woman of brave and courage that's why she did not lose her courage rather she devoted her entire life for the cause of Bengali Muslim women's emancipation and empowerment. She opened and founded a school and founded a ladies' association to make her ideas into reality. She saw how women were suffering and facing number of problems in the Muslim community that's is she pledged to do something for the Bengali Muslim women and took it as her prime duty. She found that the major problem is illiteracy in the in the society so, she was determined that all women should have education. She began writing various articles, essays, books, short pieces and critical-essays in which she repeatedly encouraged women to receive education. In this way, she began the movement for the liberation of Bengali Muslim women. She became the first among Bengali Muslims to raise the issue of women's equality in public, and thus began a new era in the history of the Bengali Muslim community.

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### 3. Views of Rokeya on Women Education

She was the woman of letter, woman of people, woman of women, woman of time and the voice of women. Her writings and activities express about the importance of women's education in the society to build a developed nation. She believed that women can be empowered by imparting proper education. According to her "Education does not mean to follow a particular nation or cultural norms. God has given us many faculties and education means to cultivate that natural faculty by hard work and exercise. It is our duty to ensure the proper use of our faculties. God has given us hands, legs, eyes, ears, mind and, the ability of thought. When we do good works with our hands, observe with the eyes, listen with ears and can think reasonably, that is called education". In her definition of education, it can be seen that she brings out the aims and objectives of education, its nature, scope and emergence of its uses in a wide canvas. It can also be understood that she had strong faith that it is crucial to educate women for eradicating enslaved mind of women. Her voice, her writings, her activities had boldness to educate women for the betterment of women and society. And it can be seen in her one of the most important pieces of writings that's is 'Burqa' she says: "Unless we receive higher education, society will not achieve progress. As long as we are not equal to our men in the spiritual world, the mere hope of progress is nothing but a mirage. We must cultivate all branches of knowledge". She was also against all kinds of discriminations, disparity, insanity etc. she felt that men are dominated and they always try to dominate women that's why she expressed her strong voice against patriarchal society who deprive women, especially Muslim women from receiving education. She believed that women should break all forms of socio-cultural and other shackles in order to stand out because due to lack of education women lose their ability to distinguish between freedom and captivity, progress and status. Everyone should get equal opportunity to receive education whether man or woman and it is very important for development of society, nation and world as well.

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### 4. Rokeya's literary works: Relevance to Women Education

Rokeya expressed her views and ideas in her writings and that can be clearly seen in her writings. As she wrote various works among those only three majors are analysed in detail here.

#### a. *Sultana's Dream*

*Sultana's Dream* is a utopian women's novel written by Rokeya Hussain and published in 1905 by Indian Ladies Magazine. The novel depicts a world in which women dominate the world and men are subordinate beings. Women control every aspect and are assisted by new technologies such as flying cars and solar power to help maintain their dominance. The novel describes the daily life of these women, which includes a two-hour workday, and goes on to show the progress made by women in a women-only society. The novel also explores a new aspect of religion in that the existing religion is a modern concept of love and kindness, in which purity is the most important thing. The text explores her attitude toward Muslim patriarchy and was influenced by her beliefs that "men's selfishness and women's mental slavery were/are the two factors causing the degradation of women in India." Education is also "the recurring motif and driving force of women's emancipation in *Sultana's Dream*."

*Sultana's dream-world* is one where women run universities and are great scientists. They are one and all highly educated and are also in control of the educational system of their community. Sister Sara mentions that she works in the laboratory and describes to Sultana the various scientific wonders achieved by their women.

#### *Plot of Sultana's Dream*

The story takes place in the Ladyland area, where men are excluded from society. In this fictionalized environment, women have advanced human development on a large scale, especially in technology. In addition to men, women have already developed flying cars and have fully automated agricultural and other industries. They have also learned to control the weather. Men live under six women in their sci-fi world. The women of the city continue in their paradise, realizing that the men were foolish to think that power came from the dominion. They realize that in nature, there are animals with larger brains and more powerful bodies than humans, yet nonetheless, animals do not try to gain control. Without the competition of men who unnecessarily introduce themselves, society is much better. This novel describes another difference between Ladyland and the real world. For example,

in Ladyland, all religions were simplified to bring truth and love. Since women did not smoke nearly as much cigarettes, they were able to do in two hours what men took eight hours to achieve.

### **Themes**

#### **Social reform**

The purpose of showing a fake utopia is to suggest that real life should change in the direction of that utopia, which in this case means that Rokeya believes society would improve by strengthening women instead of disenfranchising them (especially in her society). She suggests that femininity has many advantages that men don't always consider when they are competing.

#### **Sacredness and filth**

The women quickly realize that instead of highlighting the differences between their religious beliefs, they can focus on what they share in common: a commitment to truth and love. This attention to religious detail is thematic because the novelist designed the novel as an anti-purdah. The purdah is a religious practice from Islam where women are excluded from religious practice. The Ladyland religion also has 'haram' restrictions, which includes many sexual relationships. Feminism and the potential of a woman

The main theme of the novel is that women aren't stupid and uninventive; they're just busy. If women ran the society, they would rise to the task, and they would do even better than men, because men are commonly limited by competition, whereas women tend to think and operate more as a group (these are the arguments of the novel, it seems). The sci-fi futurism of the novel is an argument that women could be elite and powerful if women were more empowered socially.

### **Summary**

Sultana's is a woman's dream world where women get to be in charge for once in a futuristic society called Ladyland where men are disenfranchised and women are privileged with good educations and good jobs. This may seem like aggressive feminism, but it really isn't; in order to make sense of the confrontational tone of the novel, the reader should know about Purdah, the Muslim practice of rejecting women from religious practice. The Purdah is what Begum Rokeya is mostly criticizing, which should help to bring some of the novel's religious ideas into focus. From a more feminine perspective, religion becomes more similar. Rokeya argues in the story that men tend to focus on distinguishing themselves from the group through competition, which means that in religion, they tend to focus on dogmatic differences and who is 'right or wrong.' But in Ladyland, a more feminine mode of religion exists, one that heralds social unity across religious and ethnic divides. The women, without the masculine bent toward competition, notice the similarities of their religions and summarize all religions in two practices: be as loving as you can be, and be as forthright and honest as you can be. Another domain challenged by the novel is that of sexuality. Now, Islam already has a sexual ethic code, and from looking at the rest of the novel, the reader might assume that the women would remove that sexual code, but instead, the supplement it to prevent people from engaging in sexually manipulative or questionable behaviour.

### ***b God Gives, Man Robs***

This essay is very important to know that how she targeted Muslim patriarchal society while providence evidence from the Quran and sunnah that's Islamic perspective. In this essay, Rokeya attempted to explain the core of Islamic teachings; according to her, leave no room for gender injustices which were clearly prevalent in her society. She critiques patriarchal, mainstream interpretations of Islam and re-examines them by using the hermeneutic tool of 'ijtihad', critical thinking and reinterpretation of the Qur'an and prophetic teachings, in order to restore the egalitarian message of Islam and to get rid of misogynist elements mixed with it in her social setting. Thus, she pointed her finger at those who thought themselves the custodians of Islam and abused this position to promote patriarchal authority at the expense of women's sufferings. She asks for the true values of Islam:

In Arab society, where women were oppressed and infanticide was rampant, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) helped them. He not only proclaimed certain laws but also set an example in treating women with respect. He showed how to love a man's daughter by showing his love for Fatima [his daughter]. That love for one's daughter is rare in the world. Alas! It is her absence from us that makes us [women] miserable! The very important things to know that she was not against her religion or cultural values rather she promotes 'idealised Islamic values' and highlights Islam's emancipatory aspects by looking at Qur'an and Hadith through the prism of justice and jurisprudence of gender equality. In quoted Hadith of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) "It is the bounden duty of all Muslim males and females to acquire knowledge" So, Allah has made no distinction in the general life of male and female-- both are equally bound to seek food, drink, sleep, etc. necessary for animal life. Islam also teaches that male and female are equally bound to say their daily prayers five times. And every one has equal rights to receive education so no bar for discrimination on base of gender and so on.

### ***c. Educational Ideals for the Modern Indian Girl***

Education Ideals for the Modern Indian Girl by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain first published in 1931. Since ancient times there has been in India an education system which although distinct in its features and its views in the modern western system has produced great men and sincere seekers. After the truth. This ancient Indian education developed in early history the grammar and mathematical sciences. It has allowed India to make a mark in the field of higher philosophy and metaphysics. Living conditions have changed dramatically from what was common in those early days and working without the many important changes 'ancient ideas and practices in education are by no means a viable proposition. Yes, we should look for features of our ancient heritage. We have to imitate the old while holding on to the present. So, will it make the most of our current education system, the main

feature of which is that it is rare in a foreign country. It does not fit our needs and wants and cannot develop a different thread of our national thought and culture.

This essay reflects her feminist philosophy as domestic and individualistic that is charged with her own social construct and that is why her ideals perfectly vindicate women's rights of the society, which she was a part of. She opines that girls are being educated in the line of Western methods, which substantially expunges anything that is "Indian." She focuses on ideals of womanhood that have run in Indian society for ages, which the girls are not posed with. She goes on to say that these ideals have been narrowed down and broadly customized; it is now time to de-customize and broaden it so that its finesse can be perceived and internalized. She speaks strongly against blatant "imitations of Western custom and tradition" stating that by doing this we are enslaving ourselves neglecting our own tradition. This essay clearly reveals her intense desire for educating women. She says that girls should broaden their outlooks and modernize themselves. Girls should be taught how to carry out their duties "commendably" and focus on long term plan, which is not "superficial" but pragmatic because the future of India "lies in its girls"

She criticizes those men who have a wrong concept about women's education, as these men think that education to women will bring evil and mortified by it. While the society is prone to forgiving uneducated women, it is equally tough on persecuting those who have even a little education regardless these women do any mistake or not. It is in fact their schooling that is the target of attack. She invites all women to come forward and educate themselves to challenge this onslaught on them. She wanted to see Indian women educate through awakening their consciousness, self-confidence, and self-respect about their own right which should drive them forward. She talked about women's educational advancement in relation to men's interest in it. She argued that if the mothers remained ignorant their sons would never be brave and bright.

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## 5. Conclusion

In the aforementioned books, it has been shown that her English writings have played an important role in conveying her ideas and ideas and that is very wise and effective to promote and establish women's education. It is also seen that she played an important role in the dissemination of women's education and empowerment. She tried to correct the unnatural practices of segregation and men's view by educating women. She wanted education that would help women to achieve civic rights, livelihoods, and equality with men. He faced many challenges and criticisms but this did not thwart his intentions and motives. Sacrificing her happiness, comfort, and relaxation, she patiently and devoted herself to pursuing the important goal of the women's liberation movement which she gave up after her death. Afterwards, thanks to her ideas, many of her followers were able to play a major role in the struggle - here she has achieved as a successful, educated and social woman. 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.

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