

**BEHIND THE VEIL:
REPRESENTATION OF MUSLIM
WOMAN IN INDIAN WRITINGS IN
ENGLISH 1950-2000**

Edited by
A.R. Kidwai

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With gratitude

to

Professor Kapil Kapoor

Professor of English and concurrent Professor of Sanskrit
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

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A.R. Kidwai

Contributors

Masoodul Hasan, formerly Professor and Chairman, Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh

A.R. Kidwai, Professor, Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University; Commonwealth Fellow/Visiting Professor, Department of English, University of Leicester, UK

Md. Mahmudul Hasan, Ph.D. Student, Department of English, University of Portsmouth, UK

Seemin Hasan, Reader, Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University

Asim Siddiqui, Reader, Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University

Sami Rafiq, Lecturer, Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University

Humera Khatoon, Project Fellow, UGC Major Research Project, Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University

Sabina Kidwai, UGC Academic Staff College Course Participant, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

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Chapter - 4

The Trope of Home and the Representation of Muslim Women in Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and in Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*

Md. Mahmudul Hasan

Abstract: The trope of home has received a perennial interest in both the writings of colonialist writers and in the works of those from colonised society. Whereas the colonialists are keen on expanding their "home" in foreign territories, the colonised remain culturally dislocated in their own homeland and engage in ideological debates to regain it. In the patriarchal discourse, women are relegated to the private world of home and family. In recent feminist theory, women, especially from subaltern societies, seek for a space to have a sense of belonging. The issue of multiple meanings of home and of multiple modes of homelessness finds symbolic representation in Rokeya's feminist works and in Attia's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961). In the light of their treatment of the trope of home, this paper touches upon its re-readings in the feminist ideology of "being home and non-being home" (Martin & Mohanty, 1988, p.196). Occasional references are made to Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), which also deals with women's longing for home and for belongingness. I propose to subvert the binarism of private and public, and of male and female associated with the received notion of the home. The homelessness of the colonised because of colonial dispossession, and women's homeless condition because of their gender orientation constitute the central thesis of this paper. Whereas the gendered, domestic norms of *izzat* (honour) and *sharum* (modesty) restrict women's independence and impede their individual fulfilment, colonial structures and education policy render the colonised

culturally dislocated and spiritually homeless. In this regard, I endorse Sahgal's (1993) assertion that "[...] migration can take place without even leaving one's soil" (p.119). Even after the decolonisation, the legacy of the colonial cultural and education policy continues to culturally displace indigenous peoples. It has created an ambivalence among the colonised of adopting western value systems (especially "individualism") and preserving their cultural rootedness. This difficult predicament is a palpable consequence of colonialism.]

The issue of home is of lasting significance in world literatures. Expanding the home-space by the colonisers at the expense of the loss of it for the colonised made it a generic subject matter in the writings of both colonialist writers, and in those of the writers from colonised lands as well as diasporic writers. Whereas "the novel of the Empire" characteristically concerns itself with the "adventures of the open spaces" (Kaul & Jain, 2001, p.141) and of unconquered lands, the feminist anti-colonial novel explores the internal home-space for the warmth of human relationship and for a shared place for both men and women. In recent critical discourses, 'home' gets an eclectic attention. The concern for the location where the self can feel "at home", the search for home, the discovery of home and the "return to home" permeate political, ethnic and nationalist, cultural and feminist studies. More precisely, the issue of linking up the self to an emotionally comfortable location has been a primary project of modern literature.

Given the fact that "there is a great deal of regional variation in social structure, values and customs and problems in different parts of India" (Mukherjee, 1971, p.26), there are not many generic themes in the works of Indian writers from different regions. But "home" is one of the predominant themes, as women's *not being home* and the colonial dispossession of indigenous peoples from their home are common experiences in all Indian regions. A shared sense of homelessness was lurking in the consciousness of the writers of that time, as they were desperate to find a place which they could call their home. So, no matter that Rokeya wrote from Calcutta, and Attia lived in Lucknow and then migrated to Britain where she wrote most of her works, a longing for

home and a sense of rootlessness runs through their writings. Rokeya's and Attia's treatment of loss and nostalgia is diametrically opposed to the male nationalist perception, which is primarily concerned about certain interests and agendas that relegate women to a privatised domestic sphere and exclude them from the public domain. In opposition to this hegemonic, patriarchal view of women's space in the home and in nation, Rokeya's and Attia's feminist view challenges the classical distinction between the public and the private. In *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, Attia represents the disintegration of the home and the troubled period of the Partition through the consciousness of a young Muslim woman, Laila, whose reading of the events carries its own feminist value judgements.

Rokeya's and Attia's personal experiences about homelife are divergent to some extent. For Rokeya home was everything in her early life; she was secretly educated by her elder brother at home and was never trained in any institution outside her domestic setting. Rokeya's homelife can be compared with that of Jane Austen who had to cover "her manuscripts" with a "piece of blotting-paper" (Woolf, 1929, p.61). The metaphor of "attic" has a concrete relevance to Rokeya's life. Rokeya (1931b) recounts her own internment in an attic in the following way:

Once, when I was five, I was staying in Calcutta in the residence of my second sister-in-law's aunt's residence. Two maidservants from Bihar came to see my sister-in-law; they had 'free passport' to walk around the home. For the fear of life, I had to hide myself here and there like a fawn – sometimes behind a door-panel or under a table. There was a desolate attic on the third floor. The aunt used to take me up in her arms and keep me there, where I had to stay and nothing was there to eat almost the whole day. (p.387)

Rokeya's female psyche during the formative period of her life was closer to Gilbert's and Gubar's representation of women in their *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Conversely, Attia enjoyed the opportunity of having an English governess for her education at home. She studied outside

her domestic environment, first at the elite La Martiniere School and, later, at the Isabella Thoburn College in Lucknow. Attia had the honour of being the first woman from the feudalistic Taluqdar family to graduate from Lucknow University. Moreover, in Attia's family tradition, women's education and 'voyage out' were not unprecedented. Her mother Nisar Fatima received home education in Arabic, Persian and Urdu. Nisar's younger sister Inam Fatima, a social worker and Muslim League activist, "wrote a travel journal *Safar-e-Europe* [Travel to Europe] about her trip to England in 1924" and "was elected to the UP Legislative Assembly in 1937" (Shamsie, 2004). A similar 'voyage out' for Rokeya was next to impossible. She had to resort to her imagination to come out of the home through her feminist utopia *Sultana's Dream*. This divergence in their experiences was because of the time as well as the place to which they belonged.

Rokeya wrote in the early twentieth-century, when a popular movement for an independent India from the colonial rule was gaining ground. So an all-pervasive emotional experience of the loss of the homeland and of the struggle to regain it, and the search for one's identity find an eloquent expression in her writings. But what is special in her treatment of home is that, she links women's marginality in their own home with the homelessness of men in their own country. Attia also registers women's peripheralised condition in the home through the very autobiographical nature of her novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column*.

Born in India in a respectable Kidwai Taluqdari family of Lucknow, Attia Hosain moved to Britain in "1946 when [her] husband [...] was posted to the Indian High Commission" in London (Bhuchar, 1998, p.43). She stayed on in the metropole after the independence and the Partition of India; hence she belongs to the early period of the formation of an Asian diaspora in Britain. Attia experienced homelessness from dual perspectives: her experiences with colonial culture in India, and her exilic life in London later on. Being one of the early immigrants, emotionally Attia had the whole brunt of the anguish of a diasporic life, as she states, "My background made me belong to a class that does not, and never has, taken me into itself" (quoted in Shamsie, 2004); and "what it means being here then and

what it means here, being an Asian, now are two different things" (quoted in Bhuchar, 1998, p.44). Attia's ambivalences between India where she grew up, and Britain, her adopted home, remain irreconcilable. So her writing and broadcasting with the BBC, and her involvement with the world of theatre and the arts were attempts on her part to create a world of her own and to capture the phantom of her lost home that is India. Her self-exilic and diasporic condition can be compared with Edward Said's dislocated past and denial of identities as a Palestinian living in the West, as it finds a symbolic representation in his *After the Last Sky* (1986), a prototypical work that articulates the features of the émigré genre. Like Said, Attia faced the same ordeal of not being able to "belong exclusively to one country" (Said, 1991, p.116). In fact, this caught-between-two-worlds status is not exclusively a condition of exile. Attia, like many of her colonised compatriots, experienced the same situation of in-betweenness while in India, as Anand (1978) observes, "And the alienation caused by her schooling in English language, had made her grow up between the proverbial two worlds, the one not quite yet dead and the other refusing to be born" (p.4). Nadira in *SBC* touches upon the same ambivalence when she remarks that, she along with Laila and the like "are paying for being the product of two cultures [...]" (p.211). Actually, Attia's homelessness while in India was a direct result of the cultural dislocation caused by colonial education policies in India. I will take up this issue of cultural rootlessness later in this essay.

Attia's alienation both in India and in Britain has more to do with her "loss of an identity [...] a wrenching away from all things dear and familiar – family, home, language, country" (Kaul & Jain, 2001, p.112), a world she knew. Her essential homelessness and her longing for home are largely represented in her portrayal of Laila in *SBC*, a novel that typifies émigré literature. Like her creator, Laila also suffers from her situatedness in two worlds: one is her domestic life, and the other is her life in the outer world. She is sandwiched between the traditional values and mores of her home life, and the exclusionary, masculinist outside world. Laila voices:

I used to forget that the world was in reality very different, and the voices that controlled it had once been those of

Baba Jan, Aunt Abida, Ustaniji, and now belonged to Uncle Hamid, Aunt Saira, and their friends. Always I lived in two worlds, and I grew to resent the 'real' world. (p.128)

Attia's outsiderhood was caused by her migrant situation whereas Laila's strangerhood in her own homeland is caused by her gender orientation. No matter Attia was in London and Laila in Lucknow, the essential sense of unbelongingness and an intense longing for *being home* are common in both of them. Woolf (1938) passionately touches upon this universal condition of women when she states, "As a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country" (p.234). Woolf is particularly concerned about the relegation of women to the private world of home and about the exclusion of women from the external world, a destiny common to women in global perspective. The Partition saga reinforces the homeless condition of Indian women. During the communal riots and the mass massacre of the Partition, many women were subjected to abduction and forced marriage with men from their "enemy" community. After a few years when both the Governments of India and the newly created Pakistan had an agreement to return those women to their families, women were not easily accepted. In this regard, Butalia (1998) points towards a difference in the attitude of Muslims and Hindus in accepting their women back: "Apparently, abducted Muslim women were more easily accepted back into their families" (p.161). Among Hindus and Sikhs, the concept of purity was stronger, hence Hindu and Sikh women's reinstatement in their family was tougher. By sleeping with men of 'other' community, women supposedly lost their 'purity' and acted beyond the premise of *izzat* and *sharum*. Thus women's belonging to their family and home is defined by scores of social customs and mythologies, whereas men enjoy an assured sense of belonging.

Laila in *SBC* struggles against her class and social conditioning, and is in the search for a home to belong to. An acute nostalgic sense and an urge to return to her roots haunt her throughout the novel. On her visit to Lucknow fourteen years after the Partition, Laila notices that the "town has changed beyond recognition – arches, domes, the mall, almost everything" (Kidwai, 2005, p.63). The same feeling of loss grips her when

she revisits her ancestral home Ashiana (the nest): "Patches of damp and peeling plaster disfigured the house like the skin of a once beautiful woman struck by leprosy" (*SBC*, p.271). While the *SBC* is Attia's nostalgic commemoration of home, Ashiana brings Laila back to her past and reminds her of her present homelessness. Upon her entering Ashiana, now in a deserted condition, fragments of her past burst through her present. Through the character portrayal of Laila, Attia actually tries to divulge her own sense of longing for home, which is also a predominant theme of her collection of short stories *Phoenix Fled*. Muneeza Shamsie (2004) terms Attia's *Phoenix Fled* as an attempt on her part to recapture "the India she had left behind". Away from home, Attia remained true to her Indian identity and cultural heritage; hence we notice a sensibility of an exile, a constant to-and-fro-movement between the past and the present in the novel *SBC*.

Though Rokeya did not migrate to any foreign country, she could not escape the fate of being homeless. As it is a common destiny for all women in traditional Indian society, Rokeya had to leave her natal home for the marital household in Bhagalpur¹. After her husband's death, she had to leave Bhagalpur because of the ill-treatment she received from some of her in-laws. Rokeya finally moved to Calcutta. Although Rokeya remained within her own country and was shrouded by her own culture, she also feels dislocated, as if she was in a foreign land. An acute sense of homelessness and of nostalgia is transmitted in many of her letters she wrote to her relatives and colleagues about her life in Calcutta. The following letter she wrote to one Mr. Yasin sharply describes the anguish of her exilic life in Calcutta:

You need not feel so keenly about me, I do not repent for leaving Bhagalpur, but at times I feel some sort of yearning to see the grave of my husband and the tiny graves of my babies. But never mind. I am brave enough to bear my grief. (Rokeya, 1913, p. 504).

Both Rokeya's and Attia's dislocation disrupted their lives and destroyed their earlier support structures. This fatality is common to any

exilic situation. It is like a transplanted plant that requires massive efforts for cultivation in the new soil. A strong sense of outsidership and of fringe dwelling runs through the writings of Rokeya and Attia, for their being women writers and for their essential diasporic situation.

Rokeya had, among other things, two agendas before her: to struggle for the regaining of her homeland from the colonisers, and to give women a space to feel at home in her culture. In the context of colonial dispossession by the British in India, Rokeya examines the state of her homeless community vis-à-vis the condition of women. According to Rokeya, the colonial condition of belonging and unbelonging, place and displacement, territorialization and deterritorialization is closely linked with the condition of women in her society. She articulates the notion of the home through the ideological determinant of gender. Rokeya relates the issue of reclaiming the colonised homeland to the independence of women from domestic incarceration. Similarly, in *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, two struggles go along side each other: struggle for the independence of India from the colonial grip; and Laila's struggles to free herself from the shackles of patriarchal familial cords, her longing for freedom and for agency.

Rokeya is a visionary in her demand for liberating women from domestic seclusion. She wants men to free women so that they can take part in activities outside the home; at the same time, she does not undermine the potentially enabling and enhancing activities of the home. To be more precise, Rokeya urges men to end their authoritarian rule in the home in order that women can have a congenial home-life free from patriarchal oppression. Conversely, she directs women to do their best to turn their domestic space into an inclusive place for men and women to live in, a place where both will receive equal treatment. Rokeya rejects the notion of confinement and harem² fantasies associated with the home; rather she believes in its possibilities as a source of security and stability for both men and women. Against dominant gendered concepts of home conceived by patriarchy, Rokeya provides an alternative notion that engages the debates of modern feminist struggle of reclaiming the home. She subverts the binarisms of private and public, and of male and female associated with

the notion of home. Rokeya shifts away from the patriarchal definition of women's position in the home in order to enforce women's belongingness at home.

Rokeya does not exclusively relate women's emancipation to their freedom from domestic condition. She states, "Do women of all societies remain confined in seclusion? Or have I called them progressive because they are not *pardanashin* (confined in seclusion)? I basically talked about their 'enslaved' mind" (Rokeya, 1904, p.25). She hints at the fact that by just living outside seclusion women do not become liberated. True liberation comes when they make the best of their private and public spheres; and this will happen only when women earn a strong sense of belonging in both the worlds. Through the character of Zahra, Attia shows how women's just crossing out of the domestic thresholds does not suggest their liberation. Before her marriage with Naseer, she was perfectly "a dutiful *pardah* girl". Soon after her marriage, she seems to have earned some liberty and starts attending "social functions morning, afternoon and evening". Despite her supposed "mannerisms" and "sophistication", Laila casts doubt on her actual aptitude to live a truly liberated life: "I knew she had not changed within herself. She was now playing the part of the perfect modern wife as she had once played the part of a dutiful *pardah* girl" (p.140). Like Woolf's (1938) construction of women's conscious "earned money influence" (p.152), Rokeya and Attia want women to earn their conscious liberty and to use it productively.

Like Rokeya, Virginia Woolf (1938) also points towards women's responsibility to enhance their new home, to beautify it as an inclusive place, as she puts, "Light up the windows of the new house, daughters! Let them blaze!" (p. 208). Woolf (1929) rejects the binarism of private and public, associated with the notion of home, as she puts, "[...] I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in [...]" (p.21). Like Rokeya, Woolf also does not think that by just freeing women from domestic incarceration, their equitable share in society can be established. In Rokeya and Woolf, both private and public worlds are intertwined. Women have to have a comfortable existence or homelife in both the worlds, as Woolf (1938) argues, "the public and

the private worlds are inseparably connected [...] the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the others" (p.270). What is needed is a strong sense of belonging for women within the home and without. Both Rokeya and Woolf want women, to quote Woolf (1929), "to live in the presence of reality, an invigorating life" (p.99). Similarly Attia also proposes that women should live a down-to-earth, pragmatic life. In the character of Aunt Saira, Attia provides a vivid example of a woman who does not live a realistic life. Having lived an unrealistic life, Saira knew "only the fruits of possession, not the mechanics" (*SBC*, p.276) of family, hence became totally lost when the feudalistic family structure broke down because of the Partition.

Both Rokeya and Woolf maintain their reservations about the relegation of women to the private world of home and family, which causes their social isolation and denies them direct experiences of the real world. They want to free women from the ideological burdens associated with the metaphor of "a frog in a well" (Rokeya, 1905, p.466). Through the character of Rani Sahiba in *SBC*, Attia makes a social protest against such deadening confinement of women. Once brought out from domestic confinement for her to cast vote, the Rani (Queen) looks "a frightened animal in unfamiliar surroundings" (*SBC*, p.257); she even does not know how and who to vote, as her conversation with Laila adequately shows:

I said slowly, "You have to vote for four out of the eight whose names are on the paper."

"Vote? I do not understand. And I cannot read. Manager Sahib knows." (*SBC* p.258).

Attia represents home as an ideological battleground where contending ideas clash with each other. Laila, being "an observer in an outside world", feels "solitary" in her own private world (*SBC* p.124). In the domestic condition of Abida's marital home, Laila is looked at as "someone from another world" (*ibid.*, p.250). Home in *SBC* is multiply divided; there are many homes within the home, separated by ideological boundaries. In

Laila's world, there is one rule for men and another for women, one standard for married women and another for unmarried ones. Even though girls have limited or "controlled freedom" (*ibid.*, p.202), a married young woman enjoys a degree of advantage over a non-married one. After Zahra's marriage she receives relatively a greater freedom, as Laila states, "You are different now that you are married" (*ibid.*, p.141). A plethora of patriarchal norms were employed to restrict "an unmarried girl's freedom" (*ibid.*, p.210).

In the character of Baba Jan, who maintains a haunting presence in the consciousness of the characters in the story and readers alike (though we never meet him in the text), Attia gives a symbolic representation of the unquestioned authority of patriarchal domestic norms. In the ageing figure of Baba Jan, Attia presents a composite of the coercing power of patriarchal regulations that "reduced" the inmates of his home "to fearing automatons" (*ibid.*, p.31). Failing to abide by these value systems by a woman leads to her inevitable homelessness.

Attia shows how "a Muslim girl, from a strict purdah family" (*ibid.*, p.132) is rendered homeless and is compelled to commit suicide because of her non-compliance with the feudalistic patriarchal norms. But society's disapproval of the "boy" who equally disregards such norms is milder; he does not become homeless and is readily accepted by his family once "he yielded to pressure and abandoned the girl" (*ibid.*, p.133). This gendered discrepancy is governed by society's received notion that a woman should show "more *sharum* than a man and failure to do so risks damaging the honour of herself, her family and her caste" (Gomis, 2002, p.106). The twin concepts of *izzat* (honour) and *sharum* (modesty) are presumed to be embodied in women, whereas these values are applied in a relaxed mode to men. Family honour is "defined in relation to a woman's body and a man's authority" (Kaul & Jain, 2001, p.169). Through Laila's protest against this patriarchal ideology, Attia expresses her disapproval of such strict gendered norms. Attia herself defied "the demands of family loyalty and 'honour' (*izzat*)" (Nabar, 2000, p.123) by marrying her first cousin Ali Bahadur Habibullah (Sonny) against her mother's wishes. In *SBC*,

Laila becomes homeless for her non-compliance with *izzat* and for her marrying Ameer against the family expectations.

In order to attain her personal fulfilment, Laila adheres to western individualistic ideals. In so doing, she has to compromise with her family loyalty and, eventually, to leave her home. Her defiance against family norms terribly angers her most beloved aunt Abida, as Laila puts, "She [Aunt Abida] refused to see me or reply to my letters once I had told her I could not obey her, nor my family, and deny Ameer" (*SBC* p.312). In a fiery exchange of words Abida reprimands Laila, "You have been defiant and disobedient. You have put yourself above your duty to your family" (*ibid.*). Laila tries to reconcile her "purity of love" for Ameer with her loyalty to family. But in Indian context, such contending loyalties are un-negotiable, as it is a concrete experience for Laila in *SBC*. Laila defies family demands and marries Ameer. Her shifting loyalty from family to personal fulfilment ends her marriage with Ameer "with the blessings of not one of my [Laila's] elders" (*ibid.*).

Conversely, in Rokeya's *Padmaraga*, Latif, an England-returned barrister, gives in to the pressures of his elders, and agrees to marry Saleha, a choice of his Uncle Habib Alam. Like Laila, Latif also encounters a difficult predicament of personal choice and family loyalty. Laila disregards family expectations; Latif surrenders to his family demands and marries Saleha. But interestingly, whereas Laila becomes homeless because of her non-compliance, Latif encounters the same destiny because of his compliance. Having Saleha as a wife at home, Latif virtually loses his homelife in the home and becomes a spiritual vagabond, who hunts for emotional comfort and for homelife away from his domestic circumstances. After his marriage with Saleha, Latif cannot stay at his home for more than six months. He has to stay away from his home most of the time. Though sometimes he comes home, he never finds the comfort he expects from Saleha; there has always been a void in his heart, his psyche has always remained *asroihi*n (shelterless) even though at times he appears physically to be at home (p.288). Thus, given the concrete experiences of Laila and Latif, it can be correctly argued that the traditional Indian family norms of unquestioned family loyalty can potentially render a person, man or woman,

homeless if they pursue personal fulfilment in opposition to family demands. And in this case, I endorse Vrinda Nabar's (2000) assertion that in the Indian context, "constraint[s] on individual freedom" (p.124) apply equally to both men and women. This shared destiny of man and woman is largely true when individuals' choices clash with family's in selecting spouses. But in general, it is women who have to bear the brunt of family demands and domestic regulations.

Different rules apply to the dwellers of the home on the basis of gender orientation. Men can breach the "code of feudal honour" they build with impunity, by visiting courtesans and by living a life of sexual profligacy, while they confine "their daughters in purdah or semi-purdah" (Anand, 1978, p.3). The clear division of the home between *zenana* (women's quarters) and *mardana* (men's quarters) makes it easier for men to impose their will "on the females, especially the daughters and the nieces" (Kaul & Jain (2001, p.58). Men want their women to stay in the zenana quarters and not to interact with the outside world. Nandi is beaten by her father Jumman because, to use Jumman's words, "the wretch [Nandi] was found by the driver with the cleaner in the garage" (*SBC* p.27). Nandi's whining self-defence that she "went to give him a shirt that he had forgotten" (*ibid.*) was not accepted for the obvious reason that she defies the feudalistic rule of gender segregation, and thus offends against family norms.

This home regimentation of women also works as a big hurdle against female education. Laila faces a stiff resistance in her pursuance of learning from Hakimman Bua, a senior female servant. In traditional Indian society, household maidservants are usually picked from poor relatives or from distant connections; and they are treated as second-grade family members. Many domestic servants spend their whole life in the service of the family, and their long service in return earned them some sort of authority, which they sometimes exercise to discipline the younger generation of the family. It is because of her long-service, Hakimman Bua works as a natural instrument of patriarchal will, hence she dares to remonstrate:

Your books will eat you. They will dim the light of your lovely eyes, my moon princess, and then who will marry

you, owl-eyed, peering through glasses? Why are you not like Zahra, your father's—God rest his soul—own sister's child, yet so different from you? Pull your head out of your books and look at the world, my child. (*SBC* p.14)

Thus, in the Indian context, female education became an antithesis of the established norms of homelife. Education for girls was looked at as a defiant challenge to the dynamics of social system, as Rokeya (1931c) puts, "Education for women has therefore become anonymous with us for breaking the barrier of ancient custom which shut them from learning" (p.481). Laila's existence within her home is constrained by various types of home norms, and is "guarded by a thousand taboos fiercer than the most fiery dragons" (*SBC*, p.191).

Throughout the novel *SBC*, Laila has to remain as a passive onlooker of the tumultuous happenings around her: the popular movement against the colonisers, the partition of the country and the consequent animosity between and the polarisation of Hindus and Muslims³. Whereas the male members of the family are acting as players in these upheavals, Laila, having lived "a cocooned life", has to watch "silently and passively all that happens to and around her" (Kidwai, 2005, p.60). This compulsory silence and conditioned passivity in Attia's fictional world can be compared with Butalia's real post-independence world, where Butalia notices an internalised tongue-tiedness among women who suffered the traumas of the Partition. In her recounting of women's stories, Butalia (1998) observes, "Women almost never spoke about themselves, indeed they denied they had anything 'worthwhile' to say, a stance that was often corroborated by their men. Or, quite often, they simply weren't there to speak to" (p.126).

Against the patriarchal notion of the home, both Rokeya and Attia present a utopian home space where women do not have to encounter familial and social regimentations. Rokeya's representations of the "Ladyland" in *Sultana's Dream* (1905) and of Tarini Bhaban in *Padmaraga* (1924) are two striking examples of utopian and semi-utopian homeland and domestic space. In the "Ladyland" men are conditioned to

stay in domestic seclusion, and they are happy to give the franchise to women to accomplish all public activities, including statecraft and military affairs. In Tarini Bhaban, women enjoy full liberty. It is an antithesis of the social order where women are repressed by patriarchal home rules. While in the domestic condition in Indian society, women are denied any voice in their personal affairs, in Tarini Bhaban women exercise full control over their lives. In the realistic world, Zaynab had little role in the fixation of her marriage with Latif, as it was arranged by her family; but here in Tarini Bhaban, it is Zaynab who is to decide about the course of her future life. Rafiya, one of the residents of Tarini Bhaban, states, "Who can dare to marry off Siddiqa [Zaynab]? If she does not agree, nobody can force her to marry" (*Padmaraga*, p.327). In *SBC*, Laila makes a utopian "home" in the concluding section of the novel (p.307); this home is different from Baba Jan's patriarchal home that "does not welcome" her (*SBC* p.313). Under the tutelage of authoritarian male guardians, Laila has "never been allowed to make decisions; they are always made for" her (*SBC* p.265). By making her utopian home, Laila realises her dream of living her own life; and she has been "able to break from traditional customs [...]" (*ibid.*, p.316).

Laila's first utopian home is Ameer's residence where she moved as his wife, and thus realised her personal fulfilment. On her arrival at Ameer's home Laila says, "I was happy to have a home of my very own, to live in it as I pleased without dictation, though it was small and simple, and without scores of servants as in Hasanpur and Ashiana" (*SBC* p.315). After Ameer's death, Laila makes her second utopian home, which is an all-female home where she lives with Shahla, Laila's daughter by Ameer, and with Nandi. Sita and Romana are frequent visitors to this feminist home. Laila's utopian home disregards the patriarchal notions of *izzat* and *sharum*; here Nandi remains unscathed even though she has become pregnant through extramarital sex. Nandi says to Laila:

If I had stayed at home, even if *he* [Nandi's "old dotard" husband] had not dared, my father would have thrown

me out. Or the old fool might have fancied his youth had returned and claimed the child, and I would have been tied to him for ever. I could not endure him any longer, and I wanted the child. So I came to you, knowing I would be safe here. (SBC, p.291)

Through the representation of Laila's home, Attia presents an alternative home, where women are not subject to inhibiting patriarchal measures and have control over their own life. Laila's journey from Ashiana to the hill-station where she makes her own home can be compared with Lily Briscoe's voyage from Ramsay house to the Lighthouse in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Through her escape from the realistic world of the Ramsays to her visionary utopian world, Lily creates a different home where she is not governed by patriarchal demands. Thus, for the realisation of a woman's fullest independence, the need for a home of her own, or "a room of her own" (Woolf, 1929, p.3), that will give her a strong sense of belonging, is strongly felt across the feminist works of Rokeya, Woolf and Attia.

Together with the homeless condition of women in the social order, Rokeya and Attia also touch upon the cultural rootlessness of both men and women in the colonised social space. They deal with the cultural displacement from home, in other words, homelessness within the home, which has been an essential colonial condition. In the discussion that follows, I will endorse the following two assertions:

[...] migration can take place without even leaving one's soil. Where does one culture begin and another end when they are housed in the same person? (Sahgal, 1993, p.119).

Home is also the imagined location that can be more readily fixed in a mental landscape than in actual geography. (George, 1996, p.11)

According to Sahgal and George, being home and not being home have the undercurrent meaning of belonging and estrangement, not merely

residing in any geographical location or out of it. They emphasise the cultural formulations of the concept of home. Home is a sign of difference and is deeply involved in the politics of inclusion and exclusion. A careful look at Rokeya's and Attia's works will establish these contentions. In their views, homelessness or migration is not something peculiar to leaving one's native land; it can happen in one's one home, or land.

In Rokeya's *Gyanphal*, the females of Kanaka Dipa (the isle of gold) have made an affinity with the [English] fairies, and started to imitate their outfits and ornaments. What was left was copying their wings (Rokeya, 1922, p.136). Rokeya points towards this cultural mimicry, and demonstrates it as one of the reasons for losing their country to the English fairies (the colonisers). In "Nurse Nelly", she relates Noyeema's homelessness to her alienation from her own culture, which forces her out of her home. In Noyeema's character, Rokeya exposes one consequence of women's domestic incarceration and of keeping them away from the light of education and intellectual exercise. Having lived her life in women's private sphere of stagnation and intellectual dereliction (except for her receiving of governess education), Noyeema could not develop her mental ability to discriminate between her cultural belongingness and the foreign, glittering way of life. Her situation becomes like "someone who has never seen light, hence the glow of the firefly seems to have appeared miraculous" (Rokeya, 1922, p.148). Being admitted in a hospital, Noyeema meets some Christian missionaries. As it is her first encounter with the outside world, she becomes mesmerised by their religious and cultural beliefs. With 17,000 takas in cash and massive amount of ornaments worth 25,000 takas⁴, Noyeema leaves her home to join the nuns in a "mission house" (Rokeya, 1922, p.149). Noyeema receives privileged treatment from the missionaries until her money comes to an end. Finally when all her money and jewellery are spent, Noyeema ends up as a nurse in a hospital where she takes her new name "Nelly". And thus Noyeema essentially becomes homeless.

Noyeema's living a sheltered life, and her coming out of it, can be compared with Bimala's pull of the home and that of the world in Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare Baire (The Home and the World)* (1916).

Bimala's fidelity to her own culture and her fascination with the Western lifestyle is represented by her love-relationships with her husband Nikhil, a product of indigenous tradition, and with her seducer Sandip, a cultural surrogate of colonised India. Noyeema has to go through awful traumas and tribulations to acquire the discrimination to see the difference between her own cultural value system and imported foreign ideals and beliefs. Likewise, Bimala also undergoes similar dreadful experiences before she realises the difference between "gold [Nikhil] and tinsel [Sandip]" (Iyengar, 1983, p.107). Both Noyeema and Bimala encounter the external world before they earn a deep and conscious rootedness in their culture. After living a secluded life in the private sphere of home or, to use Woolf's (1929) phrase, after suffering "from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation" (p.63), they suddenly found themselves face to face with a complex world, but lacked the experience and social context necessary to use this freedom effectively. Both Noyeema and Bimala suffer the same destiny of being homeless because of the lack of strong affiliation with their native cultural values.

In her essay "Dhangswar Pathey Bongiyi Mussalman" (Bengal Muslims on the Way to Decline), Rokeya gives a vivid description of how this cultural homelessness occurs in colonial context. Rokeya does not consider just going out of private life as any sign of liberty for women. Without a strong sense of belongingness and without a strong pull of one's home culture, women may not be able to achieve true independence. She draws the example of Parsi women of her time who adopted British culture without a proper appreciation of its value in their different social setting. They also used to remain in seclusion, and later on they came out of it. If this change in Parsi community happened just to imitate a foreign culture, and without proper realisation of women's liberty then, Rokeya argues, such unconscious liberty is another form of mental enslavement. For such manifestation of liberty, Rokeya (1904) is reluctant to give women any tribute because "when men wanted them to be inside seclusion they were there; now men dragged them out of it so they have come out" (p.25). Attia also touches upon this issue when she says that some women's minds

"remained smothered in the *burqas* they had outwardly discarded" (SBC 207).

Chew and Rutherford (1993) in their *Unbecoming Daughters of the Empire* bring together personal reminiscences of some postcolonial writers who themselves suffered from cultural homelessness in their own lands. All articulate a sense of inbetweenness and their beingness in a culturally hollow space. Deshpande (1993) relates her story of cultural homelessness:

To go to an English school, to speak English, to passionately devour books like *Alice in Wonderland* and *Treasure Island* was not, it seemed, enough to save one from being inferior. Worse – children who went to nationalist schools and shunned the touch of anything English, jeered at us who went to the 'Padre's school' as traitors. Which meant that one did not belong to that world either. Did we belong nowhere? (p.105)

Deshpande's vain childhood struggle to affiliate herself to a foreign culture, through the induction of imported colonial education, supposedly displaced and disaffiliated her from home. Her nowhere-ness is paradigmatic of the cultural homelessness, a common fate of her generation. Mukherjee (1993) senses the same "trauma of cultural displacement that the British system of education allegedly caused" (p.110) to render her generation, who went to elite schools, homeless. This cultural inbetweenness, which Mukherjee terms as "biculturalism", creates a "daffodilized" generation who remain oblivious about their soil and about whatever they have to call theirs. Sahgal comments (1993) on "the East-West encounter" in the colonised social space, and regards the culturally displaced population, who absorbed western values, as the "brown carriers of the white culture they admired and adopted" (p.115). Sahgal recounts her personal encounter with this situatedness as well as her grappling with foreign lifestyle and her struggle to stick to home culture. Even after the independence of India, the legacy of cultural vagrancy that occurred during colonial period remains unabated. Introduction to foreign culture and oblivion to one's

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own belongingness generated some "mimic men", as "the experience of the Raj" robbed the displaced population of the pride in their own cultural identity (Lindblad 1993, p.125). Lindblad adds:

We had memorized reams of English literature and learnt all about British history and the climate of the British Isles but not a word about our own country. It was virtually impossible for us to enter the vernacular school system and matriculate. (*ibid.*, p.126)

Rokeya was particularly aware of this danger of cultural dislocation when pursuing her agenda of female education. She compares a person that houses elements of different cultures with a disfigured animal (Rokeya, 1931a, p.246), who discards their beautiful local culture to embrace foreign lifestyle. She wants women to be educated on a full par with men, and at the same time does not want them to be divorced from their home culture and everything that India can feel proud of. Rokeya (1931c) states,

When we advocated [*sic*] the education of girls we generally imply the adoption of western methods and ideals in their training to the exclusion of all that is Indian. This mistake on our part cannot be too strongly guarded against. We should not fail to set before the Indian girl the great and noble ideals of womanhood which our tradition has developed. This ideal was narrow and circumscribed in the past. We may enlarge and widen it thus increasing its excellence but what we should avoid is its total neglect and a tendency to slavish imitations of Western custom and tradition. (pp.481-482)

In her emphasis on indigenous traditions, Rokeya maintains a unique balance. While she proposes to protect her native culture, she also recommends a thorough refinement in order to protect it from the curse of unjust social customs. In her disapproval of foreign (Western) culture also, Rokeya does not suffer from any anti-West bias. She highly recommends women to selectively pick Western values without losing their own. She praises certain English "etiquette" such as "bedroom privacy" (Rokeya, 1904, p.41), which her compatriots can emulate without any qualms. Similarly, Attia is also above any anti-West bias in her effort to link Indian

people to their cultural roots. When Aunt Majida tries to point towards a harsh reality of western individualism, Mrs Martin in *SBC* says, "'Majida dear, our customs are hard for you to understand. I must go back to my own people. I love you all, I love your country, but my bones must rest in my own land'" (pp.48-49). The reason why Rokeya and Attia underwent a cultural shock was a slavish tendency they noticed among many of their compatriots to mimic western ethos, at the expense of irreparable ravages to their indigenous traditional values. They tried to guard especially women against this cultural vagrancy and homelessness. An attempt to reconcile superior western education and the need for attachment to one's home is common in their literary works. Western education and freedom for women must be acknowledged for the good and harm they can potentially bring to the people of India. Attia strikes a good balance through the voice of Aunt Abida, who addresses Laila, "'My child, there are certain rules of conduct that must be observed in this world without question. You have a great responsibility. You must never forget the traditions of your family no matter to what outside influences you may be exposed'" (*SBC* p.28). During her conversation with Mrs Wadia and Begum Waheed, Abida proudly pronounces that "my dear niece Laila is being educated to fit into the new world, but our old traditions and culture are always kept in mind" (*ibid.*, p.131). In the character of Abida, Attia also brings about a balance between two generations: one is Laila's, and the other is her aunts'. Although there remains an unbridgeable gap between Laila and her aunts, she enjoys a spiritual affinity with Abida, who "was the only one of my [Laila's] aunts whom I [Laila] had seen with a book in her hand" (*ibid.*, p.139). So Abida epitomises the cultural balance that Attia espouses in her novel.

Although Abida is inculcated in education and enlightenment, she does not discard the Indian ideal of feminine self-abnegation. In her father's household, she remains "overwhelmingly conscious of her duty to her family and the family tradition" (Kaul & Jain, 2001, p.156). She dedicates herself to looking after her aged, ailing father Baba Jan. After Baba Jan's death, she was married off to an elderly man Sheikh Ejaz Ali. Even though Abida's uneven union with Ejaz has been a loveless marriage, she remains perfectly devoted to her husband. On her first visit to Abida's marital home, Laila

notices that Abida "centered all attention on his [Ejaz's] care and comfort, as if everyone and everything else was secondary" (*ibid.*, p.138). Thus Attia tries to present her balanced model of Indian womanhood through the character of Abida.

Laila, Attia's spokesperson in the novel, is in a deep ambivalence. Attia depicts her heroine as a new woman who defies the harmful traditions of her society, and as someone who absorbs the western ideals of enlightenment. On the contrary, she represents Zahra as a tradition-bound girl who uncritically clings to her domestic norms. But, Laila becomes culturally dispossessed whereas Zahra has a stronger claim on cultural belongingness, as shown in Laila's statement below: "When we were small Ustaniji⁵ made us recite the names of our ancestors. Zahra remembered many more than I ever did who found it difficult to name even my great-grand-father" (*ibid.*, p.39). In Indian joint family system, a distant male relative can exercise clear influence. For example, Uncle Mohsin is the son of Laila's "grandfather's father's sister's daughter"; but he is considered a "close" relative and his power and authority is felt across the family. He even rebukes Laila for her failure to "remember such close relationships" (*ibid.*, p.18). In the decision making process of Zahra's marriage, in the absence of closer male relations (as Uncle Hamid was in England at that time), Uncle Mohsin exercises his weight. Perceiving a sense of "bewilderment" among Laila and Zahra about the way he was handling Zahra's marriage, that is without Zahra's consent, he explodes in anger, "Is the girl to pass judgement on her elders? Doubt their capability to choose? Question their decision? Choose her own husband?" (*ibid.*, p.20). In an integrated joint family system in India, one's attachment with the linearity of family tree is highly valued. Laila's failure to remember her ancestors' names points towards her cultural homelessness, a supposed by-product of her induction in western education and value system.

Laila, being aware of cultural displacement, feels embarrassed in her "borrowed clothes, and with [her] false face" (*ibid.*, p.152). Attia represents feudal taluqdars as culturally a comprador class who can be termed as native carriers of a foreign culture. The un-negotiable differences between Laila and Zahra happen for two obvious reasons: they are colonials

and they receive governess education. Both these factors render them culturally divided. In the end of *SBC*, Laila recounts her cultural split-up with Zahra and the family integration in the following way: "In the end, inevitably, we quarrelled, and though we made up before we parted I realised that the ties which had kept families together for centuries had been loosened beyond repair" (p.303). The physical disintegration of the family and of the country was sparked off by a subtler breakdown in the cultural fabric of the home.

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Notes and References

1. Woolf (1938) touches upon this alien status of a woman in her homeland when she says in *Three Guineas* that "by law she becomes a foreigner if she marries a foreigner" (p.233).
2. The word *harem* in its original sense connotes sacredness, as the Muslim holy place in Makkah is called Masjidul Harem (the Sacred Mosque). But down the ages, it was corrupted and became associated with the secluded domestic space, to which wives and concubines were relegated.
3. The plot of the novel covers also most of 1930s, which Srinivas Iyengar (1983) calls "a packed decade" with many political events of modern independent India, such as: "the Gandhian salt satyagraha movements of 1930 and 1932, the three Round Table Conferences, the passing of the Government of India Act of 1935, the introduction of Provincial Autonomy in 1937, the Gandhian movements for Harijan uplift and Basic Education, the organization of Marxist parties of diverse hues (the Congress Socialists, the Royalists, the Communists), the involvement in the War in 1939, the schism in the Congress leading to the expulsion of Subhas Chandra Bose and his eventual escape to Germany and Japan" (p.332).
4. Such figures in Rokeya's time were big amounts of money.
5. Female family teacher; an Indian counterpart of English governess.

Chapter - 5

Feminism and Feminist Utopia in Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream*

Seemin Hasan

'Woman' is a crucial feminist term. Concepts of femininity and how to conceptualize the feminist subject have been the focus of scholars like Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Miller and Julia Kristeva. Others, like Chandra Mohanty, have identified race, location and ethnicity as their central viewpoint.¹ Western feminist discourse has traditionally been very patronizing to the third world woman. The typical third world woman has been defined as family oriented, domestic, religious, semi-literate and indecisive. The third world 'other' is contrasted with the white woman who is depicted as sexually liberated, educated, secular and always in control of her life. This attitude has its roots in the western belief that the third world woman has not 'evolved' as much as her white counterpart and will be able to do so only when she adopts Western definitions and specifications. In such contexts, the significance of the local gender relations and cultural specifications is ignored altogether. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's short story, 'Sultana's Dream', when read in this perspective, reveals that Western perceptions are not always universally applicable. Even early literary works by third world women, when judged in their own historical, political and ethnic contexts, prove that the third world woman was not always a powerless victim of the patriarchy but was educated, aware and secular in her own way.

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain is one of the earliest women writers of the Indian subcontinent who sought self-development and also attempted to critique the inequalities of the social conditions. She is grouped with other women writers, also of Bengali origin, like Khairunnisa Khatun, Girindramohini and Krishnabhabhini. While Rokeya Hossain also wrote