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South Asia Research 2012 32: 179
DOI: 10.1177/0262728012469303

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MARGINALISATION OF MUSLIM WRITERS IN SOUTH ASIAN LITERATURE: ROKEYA SAKHAWAT HOSSAIN'S ENGLISH WORKS

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ABSTRACT This article argues that there appears to be a pattern of disregarding the literary contributions of South Asian Muslim writers who produced English texts on a variety of topics. It then mainly contextualises Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's English works in the tradition of South Asian writing in English to identify a continuous trend of undervaluing Muslim literary contributions in English in the region. The article thus argues for a re-assessment of the evaluation of this literary tradition, so that the many forgotten South Asian Muslim writers in English, including Rokeya, regain their long overdue recognition.

KEYWORDS: *Anglicists, education, gender, Islamic feminism, language education, Muslims, Orientalists, postcolonial literature, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, South Asian Literature in English*

Introduction

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932),¹ the foremost 'feminist' writer, educationalist and activist of colonial Muslim Bengal,² has been presented as 'a passionate advocate of change' (Hossain, 1992: 1) who saw education as the principal means to bring about shifts in people's perception of gender roles.³ Although Calcutta was the centre of her literary, educational and political activism, she is regarded as an iconic figure in what is now Bangladesh, where she is best recognised and indisputably exerts a posthumous public influence (Murshid, 1993). All subsequent feminist writers and literary practitioners of the country owe an enormous debt to her relentless and pioneering intellectual work and leadership. Rokeya's literary inauguration occurred in 1902 when her essay 'Pipasha' ('Thirst') was published in the Calcutta-based periodical *Nabaprabha*. Her *Sultana's Dream* (Hossain, 2006 [1905]) is arguably the first significant piece of literature in English written by a Muslim author, followed by

Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1994 [1940]). Apart from this superb feminist fantasy novel and a number of newspaper letters to her credit, Rokeya's two other important English pieces are 'God Gives, Man Robs' (Hossain, 2006 [1927]) and 'Education Ideals for the Modern Indian Girl' (Hossain, 2006 [1931]).

Although in literary and feminist studies Rokeya is highly discussed, in anthologies of South Asian writing in English, her work is largely neglected and underrated. Hence, she and her work have not yet been given a rightful place in the canon of this literary tradition. Although *Sultana's Dream* has received huge critical acclaim and is taught at universities around the world as a feminist utopian text, its author is not hailed as a significant writer in the canon of South Asian literature in English.

The present article contextualises Rokeya's English works and argues for her long overdue recognition in the tradition of South Asian writing in English. To foreground this, the article identifies a continuous trend of Muslim literary practices in English in the region, beginning from Sheikh Deen Muhammad (1759–1851) in the late eighteenth century down to the present.⁴ This overview indicates a pattern of disregard for Muslim writing on all kinds of topics in English, going much beyond the failure to appreciate certain literary works or specific authors.

Locating South Asian Muslim Women's Writing

Muslim reformist movements in British India, feminist and otherwise, had mainly two pivotal centres, North India and Muslim Bengal. While the Muslim feminist tradition of the former, stands on its own as an established intellectual tradition (Minault, 1998), that of the latter seems still overwhelmed and pushed to the edge by the dominant representation of Hindu writers. While generally the representation of Muslim women writers has been marginal and inadequate, Akhtar (2008: xxiv) notes in the context of Bangla literature:

Histories of literature usually dedicate a chapter on Muslim writers [...]. This chapter would be slim in the books published in West Bengal and comparatively thicker in those published in Bangladesh, although Bengali literature in this period was enriched by the contributions of both Hindu and Muslim writers [...]. Muslim writers, irrespective of whether they were male or female, it goes without saying, have been largely ignored by most literary histories.

Sarkar (2008) argues that Muslim women in colonial Bengal have been more undervalued than their Hindu sisters in nationalist discourses and in subsequent historical accounts. An analysis of the existing literary studies indeed suggests that the representation of Muslim women writers of the past and present, compared to that of their Hindu sisters, has been limited. For example, though the history of Muslim women's literary production in Bengal is as old as that of their Hindu counterparts, Jayawardena (2003 [1986]) includes no Muslim feminist writers of Bengal in her well-known book, while she covers several Bengali Hindu women writers. Rokeya

is the only Bengali Muslim woman writer given some importance in Gail Minault's *Secluded Scholars* (1998). Minault's omission of other Muslim women writers from former Bengal is pardonable, as her work focuses on North Indian Muslim women's scholarship. What seems odd, however, is that literary histories and anthologies that focus exclusively on Bengali women's writings mention the solitary Rokeya among a dozen or so Hindu women writers. Previously, even Rokeya was not adequately discussed and Jahan (1981: x) observes that Rokeya 'has been neglected by students and researchers alike'. However, after a long period of neglect, Rokeya is today a prominent figure in discussions of women's studies and social reform in South Asia, especially based on her daring (and funny) role reversal in the female utopia of Lady Land (Hossain, 1992: 1). Yet, even in recent works on South Asian literature in English, she is still not sufficiently recognised or represented. This article intends to elaborate the importance of Rokeya's work which is now collected in Qadir (2006) and discusses the possible reasons for its remarkable neglect.

During the colonial period, while Muslim leaders like Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898) in North India and Nawab Abdul Latif (1828–1893) and Syed Ameer Ali (1849–1928) in Bengal were prominently advancing Muslim causes, there was a feminist 'subculture' in these regions—on both literary and political fronts—that espoused Muslim women's education and advancement (see also Tundawala, 2012). Rokeya arguably belongs to this early Muslim feminist tradition. Social reform being her main agenda, she became active mainly in Bangla for the benefit of her primary audience, as she wanted to communicate her reformist, revolutionary ideas to the Muslims of Bengal. However, she also produced a number of English pieces, most important and well known among which is her feminist utopian novel, *Sultana's Dream*. Her literary practice in English is particularly remarkable as, unlike many of her contemporaries, she did not have the opportunity to earn institutional education in general and English learning in particular. While this article ultimately focuses on the assessment of the literary products and practices of Rokeya, it also briefly covers a range of other Muslim authors and provides first a wider contextual picture.

South Asian Literature in English in the Wider Political Context

The arrival of the English language in South Asia followed the British imperial occupation of the region, as 'linguistic colonialism' (Alam, 2006a: xv) was indelibly linked with colonial rule. Rahman (1991: 5) states that 'Indian literature in English [...] began as a consequence of the confrontation of India with the West'. As France's Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821) took a host of 'savants' with him when he invaded Egypt in 1798, the British colonisers brought academics and intellectuals to India whose initial task was mainly to formulate policies for the East India Company. Gradually, these mostly British men of letters became sharply divided into two camps: Orientalists and Anglicists.⁵ While the former argued that the British government should continue to foster instruction in Sanskrit and Arabic as well as in English for students in

institutions of higher learning, the latter strongly believed that government education funds should be spent ‘exclusively for the teaching of English’ (Harlow & Carter, 2003: 227). The former found their precursor in Sir William Jones (1746–1794), while the latter won the support of Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800–1859) who went to Calcutta in 1834 to serve in the Supreme Council of India until 1838. Eventually, the Anglicists won the day, largely owing to Macaulay’s arguments in the famous Minute of 2 February 1835 on Indian Education (cited in Harlow & Carter, 2003: 237), arguing that:

We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population.

At a time of heated debate between the two groups, Macaulay’s capable political persuasion of the Governor General of India and the British parliament facilitated the formal introduction of English education in British India and the consequent emergence of a yet more plurilingual culture in the entire region. Because of demand of the local elite, English education had actually been in vogue in India long before Macaulay’s persuasion and before the Hindu College was founded in 1817.⁶ Years before Macaulay spoke in the British parliament in favour of English education, Raja Rammohan Roy (1772–1833) had written to Lord Amherst in 1823 for the discontinuation of funds for Sanskrit in the interests of Western sciences. However, with Macaulay, English education took a new dimension and became more comprehensive, especially at the tertiary level.

The triumph of the Anglicists made room for the great irony that English as a subject of study was introduced in educational institutions in India about 90 years before this was done in England, only during the 1920s (Eaglestone, 2009). Considering the size of the student population, it can safely be surmised that today there are more English literature students in South Asia than in all the English-speaking countries put together. Moreover, the number of students studying English literature in South Asia is rising. Loomba (1992: 28) cites the example of Delhi University, ‘every one of whose 140,000 odd students must study English literature for at least one year during their undergraduation’.⁷ In literary production, too, the preponderance of South Asian writing in English suggests increasing trends. As Rushdie (1997: xiv) argues, the superior merit of English-language Indian writing has begun to outshine British writers who presumably lack ‘Indian-style ambition and verve’. Rushdie’s (1997: x) other highly controversial large claim, that the prose writing between 1947 and 1997 by Indian writers working in English is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the 16 official languages of India, points to the immense viability and exponential growth of this literary tradition.

However, like English education, intellectual culture and literary practice in English in colonial India had started much earlier than the debate between the Orientalists and Anglicists in the 1830s. Many Indians had willingly learnt English to facilitate better communication with the colonisers. Though many Indian Muslims were reluctant to receive English education for a long time, it will be wrong to presume that all Muslims maintained that stance of detachment. Notably, Sayyid Ahmad Khan launched a powerful socio-cultural movement among Muslims to introduce English and Western education, for the lack of which they were lagging behind other indigenous communities (Sevea, 2011). This urge and campaign for more English education for Muslims continued down to Rokeya's time, and she also argued for English education, though she was careful not to demand co-education (Hossain, 1992: 8). While Rokeya is mainly known as a feminist intellectual, this aspect of her reformist agenda is sometimes forgotten. Promoting English education among the Muslims, Rokeya (Hossain, 2006 [1927]: 491) states:

About sixty years ago, [our Muslim brothers] were opposed to the study of English even for males; now they are reaping the harvest of their bitter experience. In India almost all the doors to wealth, health, and wisdom are shut against Muslims on the plea of inefficiency. Some papers conducted by Muslims may not admit this—but fact is fact—the *Inefficiency* exists and stares us in the face!

Even before Sayyid's and then Rokeya's pragmatic campaign for English education, however, there had been Muslims with good command over English, especially because of interactions with Europeans or employment with the East India Company. Needless to say, the earliest Indian writer in English so far discovered by literary historians is a Muslim, Sheikh Deen Muhammad (see note 4). His two volumes of writing in a series of letters to a friend (Muhammad, 1794) describe his position as a colonised subject in India and then as a marginalised immigrant in Britain. The next significant Indian writer in English was Raja Rammohan Roy, the Hindu religious reformer and founder of the Brahma Samaj. While Deen Muhammad's work is an autobiography, Roy's English writings are mainly prose polemics. Indian writing in English actually took off much later with the novel genre. As Iyer (2003: i) states:

Starting as an offshoot of English literature, [Indian writing in English] soon shed its derivative mantle and established itself as a *sui generis* literature. Indians have experimented with the English language to mould it, to give an Indian flavor to suit the Indian mode of feeling and expression. Writers have successfully attempted all major literary genres—poetry, prose, drama and novel [...]. Though [novel] made a late beginning, it remains the forte of Indian writers in English, it is here that they have by their genius highlighted the Indian achievement in English.

The first major fictional work in English by an Indian was Kylas Chunder Dutt's *A Journal of Forty-Eight Hours of the Year 1945* in 1835. The earliest significant Indian novel in English was Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864), which

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Rushdie (1997: xvii) regards as ‘a dud’ and a ‘poor melodramatic thing’, while the first fiction written by a Muslim was Rokeya’s *Sultana’s Dream* in 1905. While literary practice in the English language in India had begun in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, ‘Indo-Anglian’ literature earned critical recognition as a separate literary tradition with the emergence of some giant novelists from the 1930s onwards, particularly Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004), R.K. Narayan (1906–2001), Raja Rao (1908–2006) and Ahmed Ali (1908–1994). At present, South Asian writing in English claims many more great names both at home and in the South Asian diaspora.

At its early stage, Indian writing in English was at the mercy of and approval from the literati of the colonial metropolis. For example, after it was turned down by 19 publishers (Sood, 2009), Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* (1935) needed the good word of E.M. Foster (1879–1970) to be published by a small, left-wing publisher in London, Lawrence and Wishart. R.K. Narayan’s *Swami and Friends* (1935) ‘had to wait for Graham Greene’s recommendation’ (Nawale, 2009). The original publication of Ahmed Ali’s nostalgic novel *Twilight in Delhi* (1994 [1940]) was thwarted in India because of its explicit references to the ‘highly pronounced scenes of the 1857 revolt’, so that ‘the printer found the book too politically subversive to be in circulation’ (Malak, 2005: 20). Later on, E.M. Forster and Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) intervened and had the book published in England (Anderson, 1975: 439–40). Despite this initial struggle for recognition from the publishing world in Britain, today South Asian literature in English is an independent, powerful literary tradition in its own right and is gaining steady ground as a formidable entity in world literature. Under the rubric of postcolonial literature, it has been receiving enormous critical attention from literary scholars.

South Asian Literature in English and Muslims

In this growing mass of critical appreciation, however, many South Asian Muslim writers in English are somehow missed out and/or not given adequate recognition. I consulted dozens of books on this literary tradition but regrettably, most of them do not even mention Rokeya, or the many other important South Asian Muslim writers who made great contributions to the bulk of Indo-Anglian literature. Their omission from critical work on this literary tradition is highly surprising. From what I have come across, the only notable critical work that has given significant research attention to Rokeya as a writer in English is Malak (2005). De Souza and Pereira (2002) is the only anthology on South Asian writing in English that includes Rokeya. Strangely, even a recent large literary biography on *South Asian Writers in English* (Alam, 2006b) makes no mention at all of Rokeya and many other important Indo-Anglian Muslim writers. Altogether biographies of 48 writers are included in this particular work. In his introduction, the editor (Alam, 2006a) acknowledges dozens of other writers whom he could not cover for lack of space, but there is no mention of Rokeya, who simply does not exist in Alam’s literary biography.

Rokeya is not the only Indo-Anglian Muslim writer neglected by literary scholars. A host of other Muslim writers are mostly absent in critical studies on South Asian writing in English, perhaps mainly because of Hindu writers' dominance and literary historians' neglect of Muslim writers. Muslim writers like Ahmed Ali, Saadat Hassan Manto, Ismat Chughtai and Qurrutallain Hyder have received some attention, while some diasporic authors like Salman Rushdie, Hanif Qureshi and Adib Khan are adequately discussed by literary critics. However there is a large list of early South Asian Muslim writers in English who are almost forgotten in literary studies, maybe because they did not produce literary genre like poetry, drama and novel. But they contributed important writings in English which do not necessarily fall under 'pure literature'. Some of these notable, widely omitted names are Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898), Chirag Ali (1844–1895),⁸ Syed Ameer Ali (1849–1928),⁹ Sultan Jahan Begum (1858–1930),¹⁰ Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938),¹¹ Zeenuth Futehally (1903–1992),¹² Humayun Kabir (1906–1969),¹³ Iqbalunnisa Hussain (n. d.),¹⁴ Noor Inayat Khan (1914–1944)¹⁵ and Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah (1915–2000).¹⁶

Arguably, as 'the greatest educationist of the late nineteenth century' (de Souza, 2004b: 169), Sayyid Ahmad Khan deserves special mention here because of the far-reaching consequences of the powerful movement he launched to introduce English education among the Muslims of India. He opened the Muhammedan Anglo-Oriental College in 1875, which later became Aligarh Muslim University. Thus he facilitated the emergence of many future modern, English-educated Muslim intellectuals.

Given the sheer bulk of Indian writing in English and its increasing volume, one appreciates the difficulty for a critical work or an anthology to be inclusive. While there are also sub-continental writers from other religious denominations who are not discussed by literary historians, the list of the neglected Muslim writers is simply so overwhelming, and the omission of some significant ones seems rather too obvious to take no notice of this fact. Some literary historians allocate only a sub-section to cover a handful of South Asian Muslim writers in English, leaving out many more Muslim writers who are clearly too numerous to be covered in such marginal sections. Whether this is deliberate or unwitting omission, or to what extent this treatment relates simply to difficulties of taxonomy regarding the admittedly large category of 'literature' remains to be further researched. After providing an overview of other neglected South Asian Muslim writers in English, the remainder of this article now focuses mainly on Rokeya, whose contribution to South Asian writing in English has clearly been marginalised.

Rokeya's English Works

To reiterate, the main contention of this article is that Rokeya's English pieces constitute a strong ground for literary scholars to include her in the canon of major South Asian writing in English. Rokeya composed a masterpiece, the feminist utopia *Sultana's Dream*, to pass her time alone at home when her husband Sakhawat Hossain, a Deputy

Magistrate, was away on an official tour. About 25 years after its publication, Rokeya recalled the condition of its production (Hossain, 2006 [1932]: 252–53):

My adorable late husband was on a tour; I was totally alone in the house and wrote something to pass my time. After coming back, he asked me what I was doing during those two days. In reply to his query, I showed him the draft of 'Sultana's Dream'. He read the whole piece in one go while standing and exclaimed: 'A Terrible Revenge.' Then he sent the draft to the then Commissioner [of Bhagalpur] Mr. McPherson for possible [language] correction. When the writing came back from McPherson, it was noticed that he did not make any pen-mark on the draft. Rather he sent a note attached that read: 'The ideas expressed in it are quite delightful and full of originality and they are written in perfect English [...]. I wonder if she has foretold here the manner in which we may be able to move about in the air at some future time. Her suggestions on this point are most ingenious.'¹⁷

McPherson's rave review of the content and language of the manuscript counters Roushan Jahan's (1988b: 3) argument that Rokeya did not continue to write in English because 'perhaps she was not confident when using' the language. In my opinion, the important reason why Rokeya prioritised Bangla over English is what Jahan (1988: 3) also believes, namely that '[s]ince her main concern was to raise the consciousness of the men and women of her own class of Muslim Bengal, her own language was the most appropriate medium for achieving her purpose'. A critical appreciation and evaluation of Rokeya's English work simply does not substantiate claims that she was not confident in that language.

Sakhawat persuaded Rokeya to send the piece to the Madras-based *Indian Ladies' Magazine* for publication, which she did. It was published there without delay in 1905. In 1908, the Calcutta-based S.K. Lahiri and Company reprinted it in the book form. For the sake of readers, whose knowledge of English was not very good but who were keen to know the content of the fantasy novel, Rokeya subsequently translated it into Bangla. This piece was published in 1922 in *Motichur-II* (Pearl-dust) (see Hossain, 2006 [1922a]).

Interestingly, this marks a contrast between Rokeya's and Rabindranath Tagore's literary practice in English. While her English works are original, some of Tagore's English works are his own translation from the original Bangla version. For example, *Gitanjali* (Song Offerings) of 1912, for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, is 'a volume of his own translations of his Bengali-language lyrics' into English (Alam, 2006a: xvi). Conversely, Rokeya wrote *Sultana's Dream* first in English and then translated it into Bangla to meet the demand of readers. While women were incarcerated in the home enclosure in the real world of Rokeya's India, in the utopian world (Lady Land) of *Sultana's Dream*, men are secluded and conditioned to look after household work and domestic chores. As Hossain (1992: 1) notes:

In *Sultana's Dream*, a satirical fantasy of role reversal, Rokeya exposed the depressed condition of women and pictured an ideal world where they were able, after suitable education, to take responsibility for their own lives. In this way she ridiculed the situation

in the Muslim community as she saw it, where one half of the population kept the other out of sight in conditions of purdah and powerlessness.

Rokeya envisioned women's fullest participation in the wider spectrum of life in this feminist utopia 10 years before the American novelist Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935) wrote *Herland* (1915). However, while Rokeya's feminist strategy in *Sultana's Dream* is role reversal, Gilman's in *Herland* is parthenogenesis, reproduction without male intervention. In the Western literary canon, feminist utopias such as Christine De Pizan's *La Cite des Dames* (1405), Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666) and Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall* (1762) predate Rokeya's description of a feminist utopian society. While *Sultana's Dream* is 'probably the first feminist utopian fiction in Indian literature' (Tharu, 1991: 340), in terms of literary strategy and the plenitude of women's agency and political freedom and their involvement in the world of work, it stands unique and unsurpassed in the utopian feminist tradition. In this story, men stay indoors and 'tended to domestic chores while women belonged to the public world of politics and state management' (Hossain, 1992: 1). As Pereira (2002: 162) puts it:

Never before had anyone created fiction where women controlled the state and men stayed confined to the 'murdana'. A Utopia without war or crime, it is a place where horticulture is serious business, cooking is a pleasure, and science is used to serve humanity.

Even if not a 'terrible revenge' on men in the strict sense of the term, *Sultana's Dream* is a 'shock therapy' (Jahan, 1981: 17) for men who are oppressive to women and constitutes a 'symbolic [...] protest' (Ray, 2002: 2) against the domestic incarceration of women in Rokeya's India. Rokeya's dissenting feminist voice finds its best expression in the following conversation between Sister Sara and Sultana of the story (Hossain, 2006 [1905]: 478):

'Where are the men?' I asked her.
 'In their proper places, where they ought to be.'
 'Pray let me know what you mean by "their proper places".'
 'Oh, I see my mistake, you cannot know our customs, as you were never here before. We shut our men indoors.'
 'Just as we are kept in the zenana?'
 'Exactly so.'
 'How funny,' I burst into a laugh. Sister Sara laughed too.
 'But, dear Sultana, how unfair it is to shut in the harmless women and let loose the men.'

The bitterness of ridicule and the bewildering role reversal for men are mitigated by Rokeya's capable use of a combination of literary devices such as wit, humour, irony and satire, which make the piece a pleasure to read.

While *Sultana's Dream* represents Rokeya's powerful indictment on the unethical and un-Islamic Indian style of *purdah*, it also expounds her philosophy of female

education. In Indian society at that time, ‘girls with education were regarded as being as abominable and shameless as those without purdah’ (Hossain, 1992: 6), while in *Sultana’s Dream*, ‘education was spread far and wide among women’ (Hossain, 2006 [1905]: 480). In real life, Rokeya fought for women’s access to all branches of knowledge in a cultural context where even the forward-looking Brahmins did not teach women much beyond socially accepted subjects. For example, the Hindu reformer Keshub Chandra Sen (1838–1884) was of the opinion that education was meant ‘to make the woman more adept at running the household’ (de Souza, 2002: xiii). According to his daughter Sunity Devee (1921: 21), he believed that,

for a woman to be a good wife and a good mother was far more important than to be able to write MA or BA after her name. Therefore only those things that were likely to be useful in running a household better were taught to the girls who attended [his] Victoria College.

Conversely, Rokeya campaigned to make chemistry, botany, horticulture, personal hygiene, health care, nutrition, physical education, gymnastics and painting and other fine arts open to women. In *Sultana’s Dream*, she portrays Sister Sara as someone who is proficient in a number of modern branches of knowledge such as history, politics, military strategy, education and science. While men in the short novel are busy with masculine vanity, greed, boastfulness and war-making, women ‘do not covet other people’s land, do not fight for a piece of diamond though it may be thousand-fold brighter than Koh-i-Noor, nor do [they] grudge a ruler his Peacock Throne’ (Hossain, 2006 [1905]: 487). In *Lady Land*, women devote themselves to education and scientific research at two female universities. While men failed to protect their country from the impending invasion of enemy troops, women protected it through their brainpower. Rokeya’s ideas about women’s education and employment as explicated in *Sultana’s Dream* are revolutionary even by modern standards when, as Abu-Lughod (1998: 243) observes, many Islamic people ‘barely question women’s education’, but ‘much more gingerly challenge women’s rights to work’.

Sultana’s Dream is also a brilliant work of science fiction. Rokeya does not rely on supernatural elements for extraordinary things in the story to happen. Though utopian, it has a touch of realism, as all these developments are ‘explained in terms of advanced technology’ (Jahan, 1988b: 4). Living in an India of horse-drawn carriages, Rokeya (Hossain, 2006 [1905]: 480–81) imagined a utopian world of marvellous scientific inventions:

In the capital, where our Queen lives, there are two Universities. One of these invented a wonderful balloon, to which they attached a number of pipes. By means of this captive balloon, which they managed to keep afloat above the cloud-land, they could draw as much water from the atmosphere as they pleased. As the water was incessantly being drawn by the University people no cloud gathered and the ingenious Lady Principal stopped rain and storms thereby.

When the other University came to know of this, they became exceedingly jealous and tried to do something still more extraordinary and invented an instrument by which they could collect as much sun-heat as they wanted. They kept the heat stored up to be distributed among others as required (Hossain, 2006 [1905]: 481). Amazingly, the women in Lady Land do not use chimneys or ordinary fuel to cook. They use solar heat instead! As McPherson's enthusiastic review comment (cited above) suggests, Rokeya also foresaw the invention of airplanes. Her mention of 'captive balloon' afloat in the air and of stored-up sun-heat constitutes striking elements of science fiction, which have meanwhile become reality.

Rokeya still had the luck of flying in an aeroplane during her lifetime in 1930. She reminisces: 'When I wrote "Sultana's Dream", aero-plane or zeppelin did not exist. Even there was no motorcar in India. Electric light and fan were beyond imagination. At least I didn't see any of these at that time' (Hossain, 2006 [1932]: 253). While today such technologies are pretty ordinary, when Rokeya anticipated air vehicles and the storage of sun heat, as well as the provision of limitless scientific education for women at universities, these were really ingenious thoughts and this flight was a dream come true (Hossain, 2006 [1932]).

While *Sultana's Dream* spells out Rokeya's educational philosophy, her 'God Gives, Man Robs' (Hossain, 2006 [1927]) explains the most important aspect of her feminist philosophy, Islamic feminism. Struggling for women's education and engagement in public life and for an enlarged political role for women, she did not go against her religion or cultural values, however. Hossain (1992: 4) notes: 'When Rokeya looked for role models to show that emancipation was possible, she turned not to Western women but those of the subcontinent or the Muslim world'. In her denigration of the oppressive patriarchal social structure, she critiques a host of Indian socio-cultural inflections mixed with Islam, not religion itself. She promotes 'idealised Islamic values' (Hossain, 1992: 8) and highlights Islam's emancipatory aspects by looking at Qur'an and Hadith through the prism of gender justice. Rokeya (Hossain, 2006 [1927]: 491) begins the essay thus:

There is a saying, 'Man proposes, God disposes,' but my bitter experience shows that God gives, Man Robs. That is, 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 so on.

Thus she touches on the core of Islamic teachings that, according to her, leave no room for gender injustices which were clearly prevalent in her society. Rokeya 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. She did not simply take the prevalent patriarchal

notions of Islam as the norm. Her overly critical view of Islam was directed against its malpractices. 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. In an earlier piece of her writing (Hossain, 2006 [1904]: 30–31), Rokeya campaigns for the revival of the true values of Islam:

In Arab society, where women were being oppressed and female infanticide was widespread, the Prophet Muhammad came to their rescue. He not only promulgated some precepts but also set an example how to treat women with respect. He showed how to love one's daughter by demonstrating his love to Fatima [his daughter]. That love and affection for one's daughter is rare on earth. Alas! It is because of his absence among us that we [women] are in such a despicable plight!

The corpus of Rokeya's writings is directed towards regaining women's rights which, she argues, are accorded to them in Islamic law. Like latter-day Islamic feminists, she made a clarion call to Muslim males to restore the actual teachings of Islam and to follow Islamic principles of justice to ensure women's equal status in society. Such a pragmatic approach earned her the support and patronage of many Muslim intellectuals and political leaders of her time, as she spoke to her Muslim community in a language they understood and respected.

Rokeya's other English essay 'Educational Ideals for the Modern Indian Girl' (Hossain, 2006 [1931]) further illustrates her home-grown, indigenous feminist philosophy that takes into account the cultural specificity of her society and hence is more conducive to a local articulation of women's rights. Her foregrounding of feminist ideas in indigenous culture reflects, among other things, the nationalist fervour of her time. She was against the adoption of Western culture without understanding its value in a different social setting. She compares a person who relinquishes her own cultural belonging and houses elements of different cultures within herself with a disfigured, strange animal (Hossain, 2006 [1931]: 249). She wants women to be educated at par with men, yet at the same time does not want them to be divorced from their native cultural values. She argues that Western education and feminist ideas must be acknowledged for the good and harm they can potentially bring to the people of India. Rokeya (Hossain, 2006 [1931]: 494–95) states:

When we advocate 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 [...]. 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.

In this respect, then, Rokeya maintains a unique balance. While she proposes to protect her native culture, she also recommends its thorough refinement to get rid

of unjust social customs. In her disapproval of Western culture, she does not suffer from anti-Western bias, however. For example, she praises certain English 'etiquette' such as 'bedroom privacy'—which her compatriots could emulate without any qualms—and recommends women to pick similar Western values without losing their own. Her balanced approach to Western influence may become clearer through a brief comparative analysis of her Bangla short story 'Nurse Nelly' (Hossain, 2006 [1922b]) and *Sultana's Dream*.

In 'Nurse Nelly', Noyeema is mesmerised by the message of the Christian missionaries and leaves her religion, Islam, to stay with the Western nuns and embrace Christianity. Soon she finds all the money and jewelry that she brought with her used up and after that the nuns stop giving her any more special treatment. A woman from a rich family background, Noyeema thus ends up being merely a nurse in a hospital and is given a new name, Nelly. Her encounter with European Christian missionaries and her subsequent religious metamorphosis constitute the main plot of the story, which contains a warning message of significant loss and deprivation. Conversely, in *Sultana's Dream*, Sultana's acquaintance with a European, Sister Sara and their journey together to Lady Land introduces a new feminist world of possibility and agency against a cultural context where women are disenfranchised. This is clearly an empowering experience. Demonstrating the unintended consequence (conversion to Christianity and subsequent sufferings) of Noyeema's interaction with Europeans on the one hand and bridging a strong sense of feminist sisterhood between Sultana and Sister Sara on the other, Rokeya strikes a remarkable balance of cultural communication between the Indian and European life worlds. Whereas the secluded and ill-informed Noyeema goes through untold predicaments because of her inter-cultural and inter-religious contact with Europeans, the free-spirited Sultana greatly benefits from her open inter-racial and cross-cultural exchange with Sara.

Thus Rokeya constructs a polyphonic approach to Western influences on women's rights movements in her country. Doing so, it leaves a candid message for women of her culture who are increasingly coming out of their domestic enclosures to become engaged in public life, namely that they should become involved in such public life with self-knowledge and confidence, otherwise this experience may result in disappointment and cultural vagrancy. For incidents of Muslims converting to Christianity, which Rokeya clearly feared (Hossain, 1992: 8), she does not blame people like Noyeema and their ignorance of the worth of Islam. Rather, she criticises 'the educationalists and guardians who allow non-Islamic education for their girls' and thus she makes 'a strong case for strictly Islamic education for girls' (Hossain, 1992: 8).

The scope of the present article does not allow detailed discussion of Rokeya's other English pieces which she wrote for English newspapers mainly run by Muslims and many of her acquaintances. In further discussions of Rokeya's English works, it should be mentioned that she also translated and commented on Marie Corelli's (1896) novel *The Murder of Delicia* (Hossain, 2006 [1922c]). Her interpretive Bangla rendering of the novel further demonstrates her familiarity with English literature and

her understanding of English culture as well as her awareness of the woman question, as Rokeya refers to and quotes from many Western writers. Rokeya did not simply translate this novel in a conventional literal way. Instead she interpreted the text, creatively transforming its messages to locate commonalities in women's plight in England and Muslim Bengal. She argues that 'English women apparently have equal status with men, and a greater degree of personal freedom than Indian women, but in fact they are at the mercy of male domination in much the same way as Indian women' (Hossain, 1992: 4). Intriguingly, in 1904 she even discussed the role of Japanese women (Hossain, 1992: 3).

Conclusion

It is true that many of the Muslim writers mentioned above are prominent in works on history, Islamic thought, social reform, Bangla, Urdu and Persian literature and so forth. However, this should not be a reason for not including them in the canon of South Asian writing in English. M.K. Gandhi (1869–1948) and Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964) are not primarily well known as literary practitioners, but figure prominently in anthologies of South Asian English literature. Significantly, both of them are prominently included in the anthology of Fakrul Alam (2006b) and also Rushdie and West (1997) begin their anthology with Nehru. In the same way, many South Asian Muslim writers in English who are already renowned in other areas of literary production or in reform movements should not be excluded from or rendered invisible in this literary tradition. Equally, the fact that Rokeya is well known in women's studies and her *Sultana's Dream* is widely taught makes her exclusion from discussions of South Asian writing in English tradition puzzling, to say the least.

Obviously, the volume of Rokeya's English work is not as large as that of some widely researched Indo-Anglian writers. However, the worth of a writer does not merely depend on the amount of literary production. Rokeya's literary practice in English is particularly remarkable because she did not have any institutional support to get Western education, while many of her contemporary and preceding litterateurs and proponents of women's rights in the subcontinent both male and female, both Muslim and Hindu were more privileged than her, having had formal education and often experience of visiting Europe for education. For example, Rokeya's contemporary feminist and poet writer Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949) attended famous British seats of learning such as King's College and Girton College and came into contact with the suffragette campaign. Although there 'remained a longing in her for formal recognition as an accomplished scholar' (Hossain, 1992: 8), Rokeya did not gain any exposure to institutional learning. While she benefitted from her interactions with many Europeans residing in India and with many local reformist scholars, her interaction with men of letters and literati with sympathy for women's liberation was limited. The scope of communication was seriously hampered by restrictive notions of Indian style *pardah* prevalent in Muslim Bengal at that time (Amin, 1996).

Rokeya was mainly self-educated and home-taught. Her learned father Zahiruddin Saber was very particular about his sons' education,¹⁸ but did not give his daughters any formal education, mainly fearing social obloquy and the concern that learning Bengali and English would contaminate his daughters' mind (Pereira, 2002: 162).

Despite all these impediments, Rokeya knew at least five languages: Bangla, English, Urdu, Persian and Arabic. Initially, she learned Bangla mainly from her elder sister Karimunnesa in whom she 'found a role model who inspired and encouraged her at every step' (Hossain, 1992: 7) and English from her brother Ibrahim Saber. Mahmud (1935: 11) states that once Ibrahim held a big, illustrated English book before Rokeya and said: 'Little sister, if you can learn this language, all the doors to the treasures of the world will be open for you'. Sometimes Ibrahim and Rokeya had to stay up late at night to allow other members of the family enough time to go to bed so that they could start their 'tutorial session' (Jahan, 1988a: 39). After her marriage in 1896, Rokeya benefitted from the scholarship of her widower husband Sakhawat Hossain, who had been to England for higher studies. The liberal and progressive Sakhawat encouraged his wife to study both Bangla and English and to read literary works from home and abroad.

In addition to the patriarchal opposition to female education during Rokeya's time, Muslim women did not have the support of the colonial government to have modern education. While Bethune College in Calcutta was established in 1849 exclusively for Hindu women, the founding of Lady Brabourne College exactly after 90 years in 1939 marked the beginning of Muslim women's equal access to public education. In such a restrictive cultural context, Rokeya's creative English works deserve commemoration and proper recognition. However, though she is highlighted in works on social reform and gender studies in South Asia, in anthologies and critical studies of South Asian writing in English, her contribution to this literary tradition is generally either neglected or underemphasised and underrated by literary scholars. Discussing Indian women writers in English, de Souza (2002: xiii) suggests 're-assessments of reputations', which seems very pertinent in relation to the present article. A re-evaluation of the canon of Indo-Anglian literature may yet institute Rokeya as an important early South Asian writer in English, and put many other forgotten South Asian literary practitioners in English in their rightful places.

Notes

1. The author is known to have written her name as Roqyiah Khatun in English. In critical writings of her work, various names are used: Begum Rokeya, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, or simply Hossain and Hussein. I primarily use Rokeya here, following 'the Bangla convention of referring to the author [...] by first name' (Tickell, 2005: 7), while for reasons of consistency bibliographical details are entered under 'Hossain'.
2. The term 'feminism', coined in France in the 1880s by Hubertine Auclert and the word 'feminist', included in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1895, started to be used widely only in the 1970s, marking the second wave of feminism in the West. Calling Rokeya a feminist may sound arbitrary, as during her lifetime she was not described by this word. However, in critical studies, she has been characterised as a feminist writer.

3. I gratefully acknowledge research funding and other support from the Cluster of Excellence of the University of Heidelberg while working on an earlier draft of this article, which also benefited from comments of participants in the conference on *Mapping Emergent Arab and Muslim Literatures in English* (12–15 December 2009) at the University of Nizwa in Oman.
4. Commonly spelt as Sake Dean Mahomet, he was born in Patna and worked for the East India Company. Along with his friend, Captain Godfrey Baker, he went to Britain in 1784. He married an Irish woman named Jane Daly and started living in Ireland. Later he moved to England and died there.
5. For detailed analysis of this topic, see the Special Issue of *South Asia Research*, 31.1 (February 2011).
6. For details see Viswanathan (1990) and Chaudhuri (2002).
7. Other universities in South Asia show a similar scenario, though the quality of English may not always be of high standard.
8. A polyglot scholar, Chirag Ali, a *maulvi* who also wrote a book in English on *jihad* in 1885, was deeply involved with the Aligarh movement and promoted women's rights within it. His most important English work, published in 1883, is probably *The Proposed Political, Constitutional, and Legal Reforms in the Ottoman Empire and Other Mohammedan States*.
9. The omission from the canon of Indo-Anglian literature of Syed Ameer Ali, perhaps the most brilliant and most prolific Indian writer in English of his time, is most astonishing. In 1873, he wrote *A Critical Examination of the Life and Teachings of Mohammed*, an earlier version of *The Spirit of Islam* (Ali, 1922), when he was only 24 years old. His other foundational work, of 1899, is *A Short History of the Saracens*.
10. The last Muslim woman ruler of Bhopal and the 'only woman ever to be Chancellor of Aligarh Muslim University' (de Souza, 2004a: 365), Sultan Jahan Begum was a prolific writer with fifty titles to her credit. Her most important English works are *An Account of My Life* (Begum, 1910) and *Al Hijab or the Necessity of Purdah* (Begum, 1922).
11. Shaer-e-Mashriq (Poet of the East) Muhammad Iqbal's *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia: A Contribution to the History of Muslim Philosophy* of 1908 and *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* of 1930 demonstrate his mastery over the English language. In addition, he wrote innumerable letters and like Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), delivered many lectures in English.
12. Zeenuth Futehally's mildly feminist novel *Zobra* was first published in 1951.
13. Educationalist, politician and writer Humayun Kabir wrote Congress President Maulana Abul Kalam Azad's biography *India Wins Freedom* in 1959 in English, which the latter had dictated in Urdu. While studying at Oxford, he edited two journals: *Sis* and *Cherwell*. His most remarkable English fictional work, in 1945, is *Men and Rivers*, which he later translated into Bangla as *Nari O Nadi*.
14. Iqbalunnisa Hussain's fictional work of 1944, *Purdah and Polygamy: Life in an Indian Muslim House*, provides an insider's view of Muslim women's life in *purdah* and its psychological impact on them.
15. The intrepid, daredevil and heroic Noor Inayat Khan (GC, MBE) produced as her most important book in 1939 *Twenty Jataka Tales*. In 1940, she joined the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) to help defeat the Nazis and in 1942 was recruited to join the Special Operations Executive (SOE), a British World War II covert military organisation. She was captured and later shot dead by the Gestapo in Dachau Concentration Camp in Germany.

- on 13 September 1944. She was posthumously awarded the George Cross in 1949 as well as the French Croix de Guerre.
16. Begum Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah's most important work in 1963 is her autobiography *From Purdah to Parliament*.
 17. All English translations from Rokeya's Bangla works (Qadir, 2006) are mine.
 18. His two older sons, Mohammad Ibrahim Abul Asad Saber and Khalilur Rahman Abu Zaigam Saber, after receiving privileged education at a local school, studied at the elitist St. Xavier's College in Calcutta, which subsequently facilitated their entry into the civil service.

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