

INDICTMENT OF MISOGYNY ON MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT AND ROKEYA SAKHAWAT HUSSAIN

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ABSTRACT

Wollstonecraft's supreme honour of being the mother of western feminism has been questioned by an indictment of misogyny by Susan Gubar; a similar charge of misogyny could potentially be made against the proto-feminist standing of Rokeya if her polemical works are eyed through Gubar's lens. Taylor, in her article Misogyny and Feminism: The Case of Mary Wollstonecraft, comes to Wollstonecraft's rescue while the author of this article intends to apply an antidote before such an indictment is registered against Rokeya. The misreading of Wollstonecraft's *The Rights of Woman* is prompted by her criticisms of women for their excessive attention to vocations that render them more subservient to men's desires and an easy prey to their inhibiting measures. What differentiates Wollstonecraft as well as Rokeya from Gubar's paradigmatic feminists is their atypical approach to righting the wrongs done to women. Their feminist campaign does not end with making some disparaging remarks against men; rather, they want to sanitise women from the frivolities that they have internalised and that have appeared as their characteristic traits. They pit their atypical approach against a long masculinist tradition of mesmerising women by applauding their weaknesses. They take an unconventional tactic and criticise the feminine attributes that men find pleasing in women. Both Wollstonecraft and Rokeya argue that the apparent frivolities that seem inherent components of women's selves are actually social constructions. Although it may seem that Wollstonecraft and Rokeya castigate women, the underhand criticism is actually aimed against men who systematically deny women their right to engage in worthier activities. Both Wollstonecraft and Rokeya call upon women to assume full responsibility as human beings and to end their abject dependence on men, which they think is the way to bring about a revolution in the masculine perception of women. The similarity in tone and in the coinage of their diction points towards the universal sisterhood that modern postcolonial feminists champion. Both Wollstonecraft and Rokeya perceive a systematic masculinist manoeuvring in keeping women fascinated with frivolous activities. Their agendas include disaffected women from such vocations. Beer's concept of the presentism of past may counteract misreading of early feminist texts as they evolved in the cases of Wollstonecraft and Rokeya.

Key words: Indictment, Misogyny, Susan Gubar, Rokeya.

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) are two important revolutionary writers of great consequence in the history of women's rights movement of their respective societies. The intellectual productions they left for subsequent generations and the intense influence they claim on the thinking of feminist concerns of later times put them in a dignified position of proto-feminists or mothers of modern feminism. Both fought for women's rights in a time and social setting that believed in scores of societal mythologies about the role and status of women and hence was not ready to give women their proper dues. The similitude in the social

milieu of eighteenth-century England and late-nineteenth - and - early - twentieth - century British India, where women were not given many basic human and civil rights on a par with men, on the one hand, and the homogeneity of the voices of Wollstonecraft and Rokeya against oppression on women by the social order on the other, provide sufficient ground to bring these two writers under a study of comparison and contrast despite a clear gap in the periods, to which they belong. The way Wollstonecraft and Rokeya deal with the problems of women of their respective societies and the diagnoses they make amply suggests that the history of women's sufferings of the said societies

and the efforts they put forward to help women out share many common areas adequate to form a bridge between their feminist thoughts.

Though there is a clear gap of time between Wollstonecraft and Rokeya, the reasons of accommodating them in one discussion are many, the most remarkable of them being their radicalism and their being first women in their respective societies to advance the causes of women defying multiplicitous social constructions of femininity and multifarious gender stereotypes. This article discusses one contentious aspect of Mary Wollstonecraft's writing and how the same debate can potentially make inroads into the intellectual culture of Rokeya's writings.

The very foundation of the image of Mary Wollstonecraft in particular and her contribution to the development of feminist thinking and philosophy in general came under serious scrutiny when Susan Gubar squarely branded Wollstonecraft as a misogynist in her article 'Feminist Misogyny: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Paradoxes of "It Takes One to Know One"'(1994). Gubar takes an "irreverent" posture to Wollstonecraft and to her relentless struggle for female emancipation. She states that Wollstonecraft leaves for her succeeding feminists not only some theories for "righting the wrongs done to women", but also an inheritance of "feminist misogyny" (Gubar, 1994, p.454). Gubar summarily positions Wollstonecraft among "women's most fervent adversaries" (*ibid.*, p.457).

An indictment, to such an extent, against a feminist philosopher like Wollstonecraft incited a number of subsequent discussions on the issue. The reason why such a sticky argument has appeared in the feminist literary discourse a propos Wollstonecraft's attitude to her own sex is the intensity and amount of censure against women in the course of her campaign of, to use her own phrase, "a REVOLUTION in female manners" (Wollstonecraft, 1995, p.220). Apparently her expressions of disapproval against women of her time, if taken and assessed in isolation, give ample grounds to put such blame on her. Gubar (1994) categorically presents a list of Wollstonecraft's hypercritical descriptions:

Repeatedly and disconcertingly, Wollstonecraft associates the feminine with weakness, childishness, deceitfulness,

cunning, superficiality, an overvaluation of love, frivolity, dilettantism, irrationality, flattery, servility, prostitution, coquetry, sentimentality, ignorance, indolence, intolerance, slavish conformity, fickle passion, despotism, bigotry, and "spaniel-like affection". The feminine principle, so defined, threatens—like a virus—to contaminate and destroy men and their culture. (p.456)

Like a virus spreading corruption; like an illness condemning its victim to madness; like gangrene contaminating the healthy; like a jingling toy distracting irrational pleasure seekers: because femininity figures as, at best, frivolity and, at worst, fatality, the principle character emerging from the pages of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is the female fatale. (p.457)

By a way of clarification, Taylor (1999) adds, to what Gubar already mentions, some more supposedly negative traits of women discussed in the *Rights of Woman*:

...denunciations of women's fanatical piety and superstition; contemptuous dismissals of their passions for shopping, lap-dogs, and romantic novels; fierce tirades against their exploitation of sexual charm to trap and tyrannize men in private life, and to obtain illicit influence over public affairs; and so on and so forth. (p.500)

Smith (1992) recounts Wollstonecraft's pejorative remarks about women in the following manner: 'Wollstonecraft directly likens women, in their present condition, to slaves—"slaves to their bodies", "slave of opinion"; in their present system, woman is made "the salve of her own feelings" and "the slave of sensibility"' (p.567).

To quote directly from Wollstonecraft (1995), some of her criticisms read as follows:

...she [woman] is anxiously intent on the care of the finery that she carries with her, which is more than ever a part of herself.... (p.68)

All their [women's] thoughts turn on things calculated to excite emotion; and feeling, when they should reason, their conduct is unstable, and their opinions are wavering. (p.69)

O ye foolish women! which throws an odium on your sex! And these reflections should make you shudder at your thoughtlessness, and irrational devotion. (p.207)

These are just few extracts from many occasions where Wollstonecraft severely criticises her own sex, sometimes distancing herself from them, sometimes as one of them, and sometimes in both a detached and an antagonistic way. A dispassionate study of her text and “the historical moment in which Wollstonecraft was writing” will show that “matters appear more complex than Gubar indicates” (Taylor, 1999, pp.501, 503). It will establish that Gubar’s reading of Wollstonecraft emanates from misconstructions of her text. Wollstonecraft’s critical stance in the *Rights of Woman* against women cannot be denied. However, what is missed in Gubar’s reading of Wollstonecraft is her love and good wish for women obliquely intermingled with those criticisms, as her rectifying rebukes have been taken for hate and hostility. Wollstonecraft’s belittling remarks against women are directed to make them aware of their deplorable situation in order that they can shake off their drawbacks and become fully eligible to enjoy all legitimate rights on a par with men.

What Wollstonecraft criticises is not the person of a woman or her being, rather she examines and criticises the cultural constructs that women have internalised. Women have neglected the exercise of their intellectual faculties and have paid an excessive attention to subsidiary and superfluous issues like physical allurements and sartorial embellishments only to appear pleasing before men or to satisfy their voyeuristic demands. Such frivolous fascinations are not intrinsic in women, as she believes that “there is” no “sex in souls” (Wollstonecraft, 1995, p.68), but are results of a generational social conditioning that denies women the proper use of their talents. All drawbacks that women demonstrate are something *external* to them. Therefore, Wollstonecraft thinks it is “time to separate unchangeable morals from local manners” (*ibid.*, p.51), that is, to liberate women from artificial frailties in order that they can reclaim their innate human characteristics.

Finding no opportunity to exercise their faculties women employ maximum efforts in superficial activities. Wollstonecraft argues that if women are given proper education they can become useful

members of society on a par with men. In her attempt to purge women from the socially received codes of feminine conduct, Wollstonecraft sometimes distances herself from her fellow-women only to become more effective. Conversely, she calls the women “who strive for modesty and virtue” her “sisters” (Smith, 1992, p.559). The reason why she dissociates herself from the socially constructed femininity is to “establish herself as above the present ignorant condition of most women if she is to be their champion” (*ibid.*, p.560). For example Wollstonecraft (1995) says:

Truly the creature of sensibility was surprised by her sensibility into folly—into vice; and the dreadful reckoning falls heavily on her own weak head, when reason wakes. For where art thou to find comfort, forlorn and disconsolate one? He who ought to have directed thy reason, and supported thy weakness, has betrayed thee. In a dream of passion thou consented to wander through flowery lawns, and heedlessly stepping over the precipice to which thy guide, instead guarding, lured thee, thou started from thy dream only to face a sneering, frowning world, and to find thyself alone in a waste, for he that triumphed in thy weakness is now pursuing new conquests; but for thee—there is no redemption on this side the grave! (p.142)

Such depreciatory remark against and distance from her sex does not mean that Wollstonecraft wants to conciliate with her male audience. This is her strategic stance for “the furtherance of her revolutionary plans” (Smith, 1992, p.561) and for liberating women from male tyranny as well as *from their own follies*. Moreover, her criticism is not directed against women in general. Instead, it is against “eroticized femininity” (Taylor, 1999, p.503) that wastes human potentials and resources by cultivating socially dictated feminine graces only to render women as mistresses of men, one example is, as Wollstonecraft mentions in the *Rights of Women*, “the Kingsborough women” (*ibid.*, 506).

The burden of the *Rights of Woman* is to bring about “a revolution in female manners” in order to enable women to “labour by reforming themselves to reform the world” (Wollstonecraft, 1995, p.51). Wollstonecraft wants women themselves to come forward to change their lot, and they can never do

that if they do not start the “revolution” from their own persons. In order to stir up that purgatory revolution among women, Wollstonecraft deems it necessary to uncover the accumulated drawbacks in their actions and thoughts. Wollstonecraft wants to “set the ideal of a rational womanhood dedicated to knowledge of truth and performance of duty” (Taylor, 1999, p.504). If she leaves the problems within women themselves unexposed, the rights she talks about would appear unbefitting for women hence would not be realised. Women need to prove themselves fit for the rights, which they can never demonstrate if they do not get rid of the shortcomings within and do not do away with the internalised codes of conduct. To explore and identify those deficiencies constitutes the beginning of the said “revolution”. So criticisms against women are a part of the campaign for revolution within women themselves, which would lead to the broader revolution to establish their rights.

Wollstonecraft argues that women have been duped by the machinations of men who kept women from engaging in mainstream activities and discouraged the proper use of their mental faculties. To put it more succinctly, she criticises the socially received feminine attributes that male chauvinists praise in women just to render them hopelessly vulnerable and dependent on men. Wollstonecraft (1995) starts the *Rights of Woman* with a hint that she would treat her sex in a different and unconventional way: “My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their *fascinating graces*, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone” (p.11). This very pronouncement at the outset of her seminal work adequately redeems her from the supposed indictment of misogyny.

Before Wollstonecraft, great writers from Rousseau to Pope upheld the “fascinating graces,” “delicacy,” “refinement,” “leisure,” “sensibility,” “weakness,” “folly,” “sickly fancy,” “enfeebled mind,” and “affection of languor,” in women. These flattering representations ultimately cost women their very human personality to an extent that they were “plunged by the prevailing opinion, that they were created rather to feel than reason, and that all the power they obtain, must be obtained by their charms and weakness” (Wollstonecraft, p.70). Such depictions caused women to be more and more dependent on men.

Shanley (1998) argues, “*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* attempted to show that men deliberately encouraged certain characteristics in women (and discouraged others) which kept women subordinate to them” (p.152). Wollstonecraft (1995) discerns this double standard in men’s attitude towards women that they find fault with “follies and caprices” of female sex but maintain a mysterious silence about women’s “headstrong passion and groveling vices” (p.22). Perhaps she is the first feminist theorist who deeply realises that male writers use “the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste” only to calcify the “slavish dependence” of women and “to soften their [men’s] insults” directed to women (*ibid.*, pp.11, 39). Wollstonecraft disaffiliates her literary vocation from such logos of male tradition by dismissing with the very “epithets” men use to hypnotise women. She is at odds with the attributes that male chauvinists use to subjugate women and to bolster “their own superiority” (*Rights of Woman* 64).

The reason Wollstonecraft cannot put up with those attributes is her literary compulsion to liberate women from those flaws so that they can regain their status as human beings equal to men. Even if her criticism appears *misogynistic*, the purpose is to give women “an inspiration of self-improvement”, as she says right at the beginning, “... anxious to render my sex more respectable members of society, I shall try to avoid that flowery diction which has滑ed from essays into novels, and from novels into familiar letters and conversation” (Wollstonecraft, 1995, p.12). In other words, she criticises exactly what misogynists, at least according to Wollstonecraft, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, James Fordyce, Dr. Gregory and Edmund Burke find agreeable in women. Masculinist writers are busy with inflaming women’s “senses” neglecting their “understandings” (*ibid.*, p.69) in order to render them “alluring objects for a moment” and “sweeter companion[s]” (29) to men (*ibid.*, pp.10, 29). They set up a mythological edifice of giving more importance to female body by not taking any care of “unfold[ing] their [women’s] faculties” (*ibid.*, p.10). Wollstonecraft regards this tradition as most disadvantageous for women as it keeps women from exercising their “talents and virtues” (*ibid.*). She is well aware of the disastrous consequences of such gender culture as she says, “Men are not aware of the misery they cause, and the vicious

weakness they cherish, by only inciting women to render themselves pleasing..." (ibid., pp.161-62). She disapproves of the "soft bewitching beauty" that many male authors find pleasing in women; instead she wants women to acquire "strength of body and mind" (ibid., p.196) by keeping the socially constructed feminine attributes at bay.

Wollstonecraft strongly criticises women's fondness of dress, which she thinks something external in the female frame of mind. By doing so, she actually opposes the misogynist premises of rendering women a plaything and doll for the pleasure of men, and also she draws a clear line of demarcation between her perception of womanhood and that of masculinist writers. The quote that follows will make it evident: "Dress is an important article in female life. The love of dress is natural to you [women], and therefore it is proper and reasonable.... A fine woman shews her charms to most advantage, when she seems most to conceal them" (Gregory, 1995, p.280). Gregory (1995) goes even further when he addresses women, "You will not believe how much we [men] consider your dress expressive of your characters" (p.281). In reality, all such constructs of "dress, manners, custom, and chivalrous gallantry" are complicit with the masculinist project of "enslaving women" as they "render women equivocal, ambiguous, irresolvably oxymoronic" (Furniss, 1993, p.194). Fondness of dress is not something inherent in women. Such "propensity has grown in women because of the absence of any serious occupation like reasoning exercise before them" (Gunther-Canada, 1996, p.74) as it is a by-product of, what Wollstonecraft (1995) says, "want of cultivation of [female] mind" (p.214). Although Wollstonecraft keenly criticises women's excessive fondness for dress and other redundant inclinations towards outward embellishments, the undercurrent message the *Rights of Woman* carries is that if the female mind is taken care of and if her talents are given the fullest opportunity to thrive then woman will recover from all frivolities and will employ their abilities for worthy purposes.

Wollstonecraft establishes that indolence and inactivity is not something innate or natural in women, rather this is something superimposed on them. Being in domestic confines, women have nothing important to do and are denied exercises of their mental faculties. Conversely, men have the

fullest access to employ their abilities that earn them the upper hand. Wollstonecraft (1995) puts,

Men have various employments and pursuits which engage their attention, and give a character to the opening mind; but women, confined to one, and having their thoughts constantly directed to the most insignificant part of themselves, seldom extend their views beyond the triumph of the hour. (p.50)

Indolence of women is a natural consequence of the mental proscription and the denial of intellectual exercise. Men would have shared the same kismet with women, if they were subject to social conditioning which women's most common fate. Barker-Benfield (1989) draws an analogy, "Women, like rich, hereditarily defined men, are proscribed from work, from life, and corrupted by idleness and wealth" (p.109). In reality, being indolent or idle is not peculiar to women. This can be even men's destiny, if they are put in the same circumstances as women. Negligence of women's talents and the ensuing inactivity start right from the beginning:

That a girl, condemned to sit for hours together listening to the idle chat of weak nurses, or to attend at her mother's toilet, will endeavour to join the conversation, is, indeed, very natural; and that she will imitate her mother or aunts, and amuse herself by adorning her lifeless doll, as they do in dressing her, poor innocent babe! (Wollstonecraft, 1995, pp.47-48)

Refuting the predominant notion of men's intellectual superiority, Wollstonecraft throws her gauntlet and says that, if not contaminated by such unhealthy environment, a girl will always be active and full of life. She argues, "... I will venture to affirm, that a girl, whose spirits have not been damped by inactivity, or innocence tainted by false shame, will always be a romp, and the doll will never excite attention unless confinement allows her no alternative" (ibid., p.49). She sums up the root cause why women become indolent and lack experience of practical life, and gives contrary representations: "Happy is it when people have the cares of life to struggle with; for these struggles prevent their becoming a prey to enervating vices, merely from idleness!" (ibid., p.62)

Wollstonecraft argues that if women are put in the practical life of trials and tribulations and are not

dependent on men, they will definitely improve their aptitude. She says:

Men have thus, in one station, at least, an opportunity of exerting themselves with dignity, and of rising by the exertions which really improve a rational creature; but the whole female sex are, till their character is formed, in the same condition as the rich.... (ibid., 65)

Alongside women whose talents are rendered useless and their persons indolent, Wollstonecraft sets the example of women who make use of their talents and become equal partners of men, especially in familial sphere. She puts, “Besides, the woman who strengthens her body and exercises her mind, by managing her family and practising various virtues, becomes the friend, and not the humble dependent of her husband...” (ibid., pp.33-4). Categorically she wants all women to encounter the trials, tribulations and adversities of practical life and only then they can be her “friends” in her struggle to liberate women. She says, “Beware then, my friends, of suffering the heart to be moved by every trivial incident: the reed is shaken by a breeze, and annually dies, but the oak stands firm, and for ages braves the storm!” (ibid., p.104).

Laying the sum total blame on male chauvinists who deny women experience of practical life, Wollstonecraft (1995) puts a question: “Considering the length of time that women have been dependent, is it surprising that some of them hug their chains, and fawn like the spaniel?” (p.93), and arrives at some firm conclusions: “This being who patiently endures injustice, and silently bears insults, will soon become unjust, or unable to discern right from wrong”; “till men are more chaste women will be immodest”; “all the causes of female weakness, as well as depravity, which I have already enlarged on, branch out of one grand cause—want of chastity in men” (ibid., pp.94, 143, 157). “From the tyranny of men, I firmly believe, the greater number of female follies proceed; and the cunning, which I allow makes at present a part of their character, I likewise have repeatedly endeavoured to prove, is produced by oppression” (ibid., p.221). Wollstonecraft’s thoughts on the depraved condition of women is consistent with those of her feminist predecessor Macaulay (1995) who makes similar assertion, “... all those vices and imperfections which have been generally

regarded as inseparable from female character, do not in any manner proceed from sexual causes, but are entirely the effects of situation and education” (p.257).

By talking about women’s deficiencies and weaknesses, Wollstonecraft in reality delves deep into the root causes of female flaws, that is, the social manoeuvrings set by men to keep women in subjugation by a policy of intellectual proscription of denying them intellectual pursuits. Society sets some paradigms of female excellence that have little or nothing to do with women’s mental development, and women, ensnared in the trap, have lost the necessary aptitude to employ themselves in mainstream productive activities. So Wollstonecraft’s exposition of female flaws and her criticism of women go mainly against the male chauvinist society.

Like Wollstonecraft, Rokeya goes all-out for the same strategy to right the wrongs of women. She does not fully depend on men’s good wish to ameliorate women’s position; instead she wants women, first of all, to wake up and to remedy their faulty conditions to keep pace with men. In pursuit of this agenda, like Wollstonecraft, she also needs to expose and criticise unreservedly many extrinsic frailties and frivolities that women have incorporated in themselves. Therefore, as it is true in the case of Wollstonecraft, an isolated reading of Rokeya’s writings, especially of her disapproval of female manners, can potentially question Rokeya’s attitude to her sex.

Rokeya’s unquestioned sincerity and persistent devotion for women’s causes are self-evident. Perhaps, this is one reason why the brand of misogyny or arraignment of women-hate on her feminist thoughts has remained inconceivable, even though many incidents in her works risk such misreading of her works if looked at through Gubar’s lens. When trying to create awareness among women about their pitiable condition in Bengal society, like Wollstonecraft, Rokeya animadverts upon women in many capacities, sometimes as their caring sister, sometimes as a well-wisher of her society, and sometimes in a more detached and dispassionate way. Following the tradition of Gubar, an attempt to register the negative epithets Rokeya (1999) ascribes to women can potentially bring out a catalogue as mentioned below:

Indolent; incapable; shameless beggars; slaves of laziness and of men; prone to indocility, discontent, slander, jealousy, silliness... such is the stupidity of her character....; deficient in intellect; ‘unreasonable’; domestic animals; valuable property; fond of ornaments and dress; ‘ornament’ for ‘drawing room’; inanimate object of house; lifeless idol; inert mind; ‘enslaved’ in mind; lacking in good qualities like self-respect, self-reliance, self-confidence, aptitude and courage; powerless; ignorant; dim-witted; harebrained; timid and defenceless; ‘dull head’; embodiment of idleness; lacking in sympathy for husbands; whiling away time in backbiting and quarrelling; artificially blind and dumb; lifeless, mean-minded, timorous; valuable(?) paraphernalia for home decoration; at fault with ignorance, inability and powerlessness; plaything of men (11, 12, 13, 16, 17, 19, 21, 24, 34, 38, 42, 43, 44, 48, 50); unnecessarily howling and wailing (142); the meanest creatures in India; life ‘luggage’; idol in ‘sari, clip’ and costly ornaments; unclean; wooden doll (223, 239, 240, 241, 246).

Rokeya’s description of the timidity of women sounds almost identical to Wollstonecraft’s representation of women’s abject timorous mental condition. Wollstonecraft (1995) says:

Fragile in every sense of the word, they are obliged to look up to man for every comfort. In the most trifling dangers they cling to their support, with parasitical tenacity, piteously demanding succour; and their *natural* protector [man] extends his arm, or lifts up his voice, to guard the lovely trembler—from what? Perhaps the frown of an old cow, or the jump of a mouse; a rat, would be a serious danger. In the name of reason, and even common sense, what can save such beings from contempt; even though they be soft and fair? (p.70)

It is interesting to note that Rokeya (1999), when talking about timidity of women, also uses the same animal imagery:

Let alone tiger and bear, we [women] become scared seeing a harmless *Jolauka* (water snake) and similar creatures; even some of us turn to be fainted. A boy of 9 or 10 enjoys frightening women with *Jolauka* in a bottle

and the defenseless women run around the home scared whereas the boy chase them in cheerfulness with the bottle in his hand. Have you not seen such funny joke? I have seen such scenes and feel very much ashamed now. If truth be told, I also had a sense of joyfulness at that moment; but now feel incensed with shame. Alas! How have we resigned ourselves and lost all our courage and bravery? Even we have lost any aptitude to think about our dilapidated situation! (p.16)

If women suffer from such cowardliness, according to Wollstonecraft and Rokeya, the hope for restoring their rights would remain a figment in the feminist imagination. Therefore, to bring about a real change in the lot of women, they want women to clean themselves from all such extraneous failings. Their denunciations of women’s flaws are directed to one unified goal, that is, a revolution within women themselves in order to effect the same in society for bringing about women’s emancipation. Like Wollstonecraft, Rokeya wants to start the revolution from women themselves. She says, “‘God helps those that help themselves.’¹ So I tell you [women] that if we [women] do not ponder over our own situation, no one will ever care about us. Even if they [men] are bothered about us, it will not bring us the fullest benefit” (Rokeya, 1999, p.19). Finally she calls upon women,

Wake up, wake up sisters! I know it is not easy to wake up at the beginning, as the society will incite big chaos and turmoil.... But we have to wake up for the betterment of society. (ibid., pp.19-20)

They [women] should know that they have not come to this earth to behave like dolls by wearing beautiful sari, clip and expensive ornaments; rather they have been born as women to perform certain duties. (p.240).

Rokeya does not wait for any miracle to be accomplished by men as far as women’s liberation is concerned. Women need to examine their condition in society in order that they can explore the root causes of their sufferings to do away with

1. In fact, Rokeya here refers to the verse 13:11 of the Qur'an: ‘.... Verily never will God change the condition of a people until they change it themselves....’ (trans. Ali, 1983, p.606)

their shortcomings. Only then, women will become equal partners with men in bringing about change to the lot of whole society. Rokeya is not one to finish her duty by simply putting the blame on men, rather she wants to delve deep into the core of the problem and identify the areas women themselves need to address for their emancipation. She puts her appeal to her female audience:

Dear female readers! Have you ever thought about the despicable situation of yourselves? What is our status in this twentieth-century? Slave! We hear that slavery has been abolished from the earth, but has our slavery vanished? No. Why are we slaves? Definitely there are reasons.

It is true that the actual history of ancient times is not fully known. Nevertheless, it seems that in old times when there was no civilization and no society, our situation was not like that. For an unknown reason one half [men] of humanity started making progress in different fields; but the other half [women], as it could not cope with the progress of men, became slaves instead of being life-partners. (Rokeya, 1999, p.11)

The way Rokeya lays bare the ignoble situation of women is full of love and good wish for her sex. She addresses women, as mentioned above, as one of them even though she exposes the harsh reality of women's slavish status in society. Women have become slave of men in a logical way. Men engage themselves in outside activities and undertake almost all important jobs from earning money to exploring new areas of progress and prosperity. Absence of women from these pursuits gives men a sense of superiority as it give them an unpromising impression about women, which gradually earn men a position of lordship over women. The root cause of this slavish position of women is their indolence and absence from mainstream activities.

According to Rokeya, the reason for women's indolence and lack of aptitude is the same as which Wollstonecraft mentions, that is, lack of experience of the practical world. As men are reluctant to allow women access to social activities, women become engaged in domestic drudgeries and then gradually internalise such domestic preoccupations, which finally disaffiliates them from the down-to-earth facts of life. What

happens next, finding women confined in the house totally dependent, men start helping them; the more help they receive the more dependent they become on men. Rokeya compares women's situation with that of beggars as she puts, "They can be better compared with the beggars. The more the generous people, on religious plea, give alms, the bigger the number of beggars becomes. Eventually, begging becomes their means of livelihood, and they don't feel shy to take alms" (Rokeya, 1999, p.11). She thinks that the excessive help and care from men renders women lethargic and isolated from the experience of the practical life. Rokeya (1999) says:

Men say that they have kept us in high esteem in the core of their hearts and warn us that we will never get such affection anywhere on the earth. As a result, we [women] become melted away in their fondness. Actually our ruin lies in their clemency towards us. They get us locked in the walls of their hearts and as consequence we are being deprived from the sunlight of knowledge and pure air; thus we are fading away day by day. They also say, 'We [men] will bring home all the good things carrying on our shoulders for them [women]; why should they [women] suffer any pain when we are alive?' We express our deeper thanks for such brothers for their generous pronouncements. But brothers, this world is not a pleasant imagination of poets—rather it is full of trials and tribulations. (p.14)

Men are responsible for keeping women away from the experiences of practical life as they keep women in their houses like relics denying them opportunities to make the most of their abilities. Rokeya, like Wollstonecraft, wants women to go for the hard option of facing the *trials and tribulations* of life, which is the proper way to exercise their talents and develop their potentials. Unless and until women are fully independent of men, both Wollstonecraft and Rokeya maintain, there is little prospect of their emancipation. Rokeya (1999) puts,

So it is proved that their [men's] excessive care for us [women] is the root cause of our ruin. As we are detached and well fortified from the practical world, which is full of perils and problems, we have lost mettle, self-confidence, etc all together and are fully dependent on our husbands. If we face even a

slightest trouble, we hide in the corner of the house and start crying in a sky-shuddering loud scream. (p.15)

The reason of this dependent and inferior status of women, Rokeya argues, is the fact that “men deliberately deprive women of equal opportunities to cultivate their minds and to engage in gainful employment” that, in the end, makes “women deficient in reasoning, ignorant, and physically weak, thus rendering them unfit for properly executing their socially ascribed roles as housewives and mothers” (Jahan, 1988, p. 47). The root cause has little to do with women themselves; rather, as Wollstonecraft establishes also, it is men who block the ways for women to earn mental and physical ability to fully take part in social and civil activities.

Rokeya, almost in the same terms as Wollstonecraft, seriously criticises women’s fondness for ornaments and calls them “originally badges of slavery”² (Rokeya, 1999, p.13). Wollstonecraft shows, as discussed earlier, almost a similar attitude towards women’s fondness for dress and outward embellishments. The coinage of their diction is most remarkable. What Rokeya says in denouncing women’s keenness for ornament, Wollstonecraft says the same in disapproving of “fashion” and outward ornamentations of women. Wollstonecraft (1995) says, “An air of fashion, which is but a badge of slavery, and proves that the soul has not a strong individual character...” (*Rights of Woman* 19). This identicalness of the coinage of their diction demonstrates, among other things, the homogeneity of Wollstonecraft’s and Rokeya’s thinking regarding women’s liberation and presages the universal feminist sisterhood that postcolonial feminists champion in the recent feminist discourses.

Like Wollstonecraft, Rokeya argues that by making ornaments, jewelries and other physical adornments appealing to women, men actually enchain them in the illusive prison of their hearts. Consequently, women find neither encouragement nor access to dig out their innate faculties to become full human beings on a par with men. Rokeya (1999) compares women’s ornaments with

prisoners’ handcuffs, the only difference being that the former are made of gold and silver and the latter of iron (p.13). She puts her argument in the following manner:

Female readers, have you ever seen inanimate objects with the tags of daughters or daughters-in-law of a rich Muslim family of Bihar? Let me present one picture. It would be a proper respect to women-folk if she could have been put in a reputed “museum”. She is obliged to stay in a dark room with two doors, one of them being shut in perpetuity. Daylight and the current of air are not permitted, on the plea of seclusion, to enter into that room.... But she is adorned with ornaments of Tk. 10,240.³ (Rokeya, 1999, p.16)

Interestingly, Wollstonecraft gives almost a similar picture of women who are treated as men’s valued properties decorated with costly clothing and ornaments and conserved in domestic confinement. She puts, “Confined then in cages like the feathered race, they have nothing to do but to plume themselves, and stalk with food and raiment, for which they neither toil nor spin; but health, liberty, and virtue, are given in exchange” (Wollstonecraft, 1995, p.63). In Rokeya’s Bengal as well, women did not have to suffer from any dearth of, to use Wollstonecraft’s phrases, “food or raiment”, but they needed to earn it in exchange of “liberty, and virtue”. Thus, Rokeya’s representation of idle women inside the house corresponds with Wollstonecraft’s account of her sex. Women in both Wollstonecraft and Rokeya are restrained in the house with physical ornamentations and sartorial embellishments, which eventually render them “mere dolls” (Wollstonecraft, 1995, p.165). Rokeya’s women are also nothing less than dolls, as they are kept confined inside houses only to augment domestic beautifications.

Detailing weaknesses and disadvantages of women, Rokeya arrives at the same conclusion as Wollstonecraft: the root cause of all these female absurdities lies in the fact that men have imposed an intellectual proscription on women by impeding their access to cultivate mental faculties. Unenlightened by the gift of knowledge, women have lost their aptitude to take part with men in the

2. Even Rokeya wrote an essay entitled ‘Ornament or “badge of slavery”’ that was published in the periodical *Mohila* [Women].

3. Such sum was a huge amount of money at Rokeya’s time.

practical activities of human life and, in consequence, become involved in frivolities. Finally, she puts her question almost in the same way as Wollstonecraft, “We have lagged behind owing to the lack of privilege of appropriate education and mental cultivation (given to men). Couldn’t we attain superiority if given equal opportunities?” (Rokeya, 1999, p.30) In the same way, locating the reasons of female inferiority and backwardness, Wollstonecraft arrives at almost the same conclusion “...that the neglected education of my fellow-creatures [women] is the grand source of the misery I deplore...” (Wollstonecraft, p.9). Wollstonecraft argues that “the weakness and sensuality attributed to a certain class of women in eighteenth-century Europe are not part of their biological nature but the inevitable results of their education and social conditioning” (Furniss, 1993, pp.179-80). Women’s lesser ability is the outcome of their subjugated status, as Wollstonecraft (1995) throws her gauntlet and says, “Let woman share the rights and she will emulate the virtues of man; for she must grow more perfect when emancipated...” (p.222). The most significant right of women, according to both Wollstonecraft and Rokeya, is the right to education, absence of which is the root cause of women’s miseries. Both Wollstonecraft and Rokeya maintain unequivocally that the lack of opportunity for women to employ their fullest potentials by education is the root cause of their apparent immature conducts. As men began to peripheralise women and confine them to auxiliary and subordinate duties, women simply complied with the social standard and kept themselves away from mainstream activities. Finally, the marginalisation of women became the social norm and most of the gender theories and myths developed on presuming the social reality as ultimate truth. Rokeya pronounces the same truth in *Motichur 1st part* when she says that as men started doing all arduous tasks for women and offering them generous assistance, women became lazy and kept themselves away from mainstream activities. Finding women most unproductive and lazy, men formed a poor impression of women, which at last developed into social paradigms. So the linkage of women with weakness, laziness, inactivity, and other human flaws is the result of this type of social conditioning.

Despite their commenting critically on women for their frivolities and for their being easy preys to men’s manoeuvrings, both Wollstonecraft and

Rokeya have their “wakening up” programmes that will finally liberate women from their abject reliant and disadvantaged condition. The agenda Wollstonecraft recommends is that all women “should forego vanity and self-indulgence” as they should take the “silken fetters” off their neck (Ferguson, 1997, p.99). Addressing women as her “sisters” and “friends,” Wollstonecraft makes a passionate appeal that they should not be immersed in the trivialities of life, rather they should be aware of the supreme cause of their creation on earth and become involved in the serious and middle-of-the-road activities of life. She tries to make women conscious about their actual situation, “Hapless woman! What can be expected from thee when the beings on whom thou art said naturally to depend for reason and support, have all an interest in deceiving thee!” (Wollstonecraft, 1995, p.109) This is Wollstonecraft’s most revealing statement about women’s status in society. She condemns men’s machinations of keeping women in perennial subjugation. Men control the fate of women through a deceitful trap of setting up some artificial standards of modesty as the crown of feminine qualities. Wollstonecraft warns women against this false notion of modesty devoid of “knowledge” and suggests them to come out of ignorance sugar-coated by appealing epithets:

Would ye, O my sisters, really possess modesty, ye must remember that the possession of virtue, of any denomination, is incompatible with ignorance and vanity! ye must acquire that soberness of mind, which the exercise of duties, and the pursuit of knowledge, alone inspire, or ye will still remain in a doubtful dependent situation, and only be loved whilst ye are fair! (Wollstonecraft, 1995, p.148)

Rokeya’s programme of waking up and her call for female awareness is even more caring and full of affection for her sex as it is an expression of her strong patriotism and full of good wish for her society. In fact, this waking up programme is “the real significance” of Rokeya’s works (Papanek, 1988, p.82). Rokeya comes up with two agenda to effect this programme of awareness: “a call for women to reconsider their self-interest and a demonstration of women’s competence in the world outside the home” (*ibid.*, p.83). Rokeya’s criticisms against women are principally directed to formulate methods in order to promote and

further these two important agendas.

In her essay *Subhe Sadeq* (Dawn), Rokeya calls upon women to wake up and look around them that there has been an awareness among women themselves in many parts of the world. The title of this essay is symbolic. Dawn is the beginning of day as it terminates the darkness of night. By choosing this title, Rokeya informs her female audience about a worldwide regeneration among women to make them realise that it is high time to shake their laziness and to “keep pace with the rapidity of time”:

Wake up mother! Wake up sister! Wake up daughter! Leave your bed and go ahead. Listen! Muezzin⁴ is giving Azan⁵. Do you not hear the voices of Azan? No more slumber, leave your bed. Night has ended and it is dawn—Muezzin is giving Azan. When women of the world have woken up and are fighting against all social injustices—they are becoming education ministers, generals, writers, poets, etc, we the women of Bengal are pining away in home prison and sleeping in wet floor and are dying in thousands from bronchitis.

We have piled up all curses on ourselves and are determined not to keep pace with the rapidity of time. We have sworn that we will not wake up even if we hear the voice of Azan. Sisters! Peep through the narrow crack of your prison and have a look at the outside world. (Rokeya, 1999, p.239)

This widespread female awareness is not only for the interest of women themselves; rather, it is for the benefit of the wider society as Rokeya (1999) puts,

We are half of the social body. So if we lag behind how will society wake up? ... Our interest and men's interest are one and undivided; we both have one single goal before us. A child needs both father and mother. We have to be eligible to be men's proper companions in every sphere of life (p.21).

4. The person who pronounces the call for Muslim daily prayer is called a Muezzin.

5. The call for routinely prayer pronounced from mosque. Here it is the azan for *Fajr* (dawn) prayer.

Precisely, the same tone of “affection for the whole human race” (Wollstonecraft, 1995, p.3) runs through Wollstonecraft’s *Rights of Woman* that the “traditional childlike role” women were playing “was precisely what was impeding their progress as a sex, and indeed, all humanity’s progress” (Smith, 1992, p.561).

The love and affection, cloaked in censure, that Wollstonecraft and Rokeya show to women runs through to men as well, as, by correcting women, they want to provide men with eligible companions. When both men and women become compatible companions to each other, men will not have to live an unpleasant life with a less competent being. Moreover, when both of them take part in the advancement of society with complete moral and intellectual equivalence, only then the society will progress. As regards the feminist altruistic philosophy of Wollstonecraft and Rokeya, the former is more concerned with the wider world. Conversely, as her India was under a foreign rule and was suffering from its attendant disadvantages including economic backwardness, Rokeya was more concerned with her colonised society though we see many expressions of her anxiety about the whole humanity in her oeuvre. This divergence of focus is more to do with the question of colonial tensions, which is a recurrent aspect of Rokeya’s writings.

Indictment of misogyny on Wollstonecraft or Rokeya emanates from a presentist penchant to, as Beer (1997) puts, “colonise” past texts “with our meaning or meanings” (p.81). When Wollstonecraft and Rokeya put forward their feminist arguments, their minds were influenced by a different social setting that demanded such necessary censures to materialise their wake-up call. What they did was dictated by their cultural conditions which may not agree with our “our own assumptions”. Therefore, Wollstonecraft’s and Rokeya’s critical comments on women may seem misogyny to the present day readers who suffer from their “own cultural baggage”; but it was not so to the first readers. What they emphasise needed to be emphasised given the “conditions of production”, as Beer (1997) maintains, “Things mean differently at different historical moments, and different things need to be asserted at different times” (p.83). So a possible antidote against misreading a past text and against colonising it is to, as Beer (1997) suggests, “re-learn lost skills” and to establish the presentism of past, which will

bring us into direct contact with the past social milieu that have a strong bearing upon the authorial perspective of the past writers. We need to appreciate the “dormant signification of past literature” to the people of that time who read it with their contextual awareness and cultural literary, as any canonical literary text involves “semantics, plot, formal and generic properties, conditions of production” that we need to take into consideration when analysing a past text (Beer, 1997, p.82).

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