

The New Age, Dhaka

<http://newagebd.net/186067/rokeyas-anti-colonial-ideas-corporate-exploitation-of-women-in-bangladesh/>

ROKEYA'S ANTI-COLONIAL IDEAS: Corporate exploitation of women in Bangladesh

December 21, 2015

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ROKEYA Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932) did not maintain any sense of hostility or prejudice against any particular group of people. Despite the fact that European colonisers were ravaging her country politically, economically and culturally, she did not demonstrate any anti-west bias in her work. She was targeting high. She was working persistently to create awareness of gender inequity and to equip her society so that it could get rid of the colonial yoke. The best way to decolonise India was, in her opinion, to establish gender justice in society so that both men and women could feel equally empowered to take part in a meaningful anti-colonial struggle. In literary discussion, however, her anti-colonial ideas are not adequately highlighted.

In Bengal, through the extension of the western economy and by the transfer of manufactured goods, colonialism exploited peoples. Thus the early twentieth-century Bengal began to witness a series of symbols of modernisation, such as 'railway, tramway, steamer, aeroplane, motor lorry, telephone, telegraph [...] and jute mills' (Rokeya Rachanabali, *Bangla Academy*, Dhaka: 1999, p 211). The introduction of these impressive elements of modernisation facilitated the economic exploitation of native peoples.

As a result, colonial India produced a middle class (bourgeoisie) and urban elite (the comprador class) who benefited from colonial industrialisation. The urban people who worked for the burgeoning jute mills, for example, had a better life in comparison with the miserable life of the peasantry who actually supplied the indispensable raw materials. Transport ensured a continuous supply of the raw materials to Britain, as Mulk Raj Anand puts it: 'The village was connected by road and rail to the town and the town to the seaport, and the seaport by steamship to other continents. So that the grain that was grown in my village was sold in London, Berlin, Paris and New York' (*Letters on India*, The Labour Book Service, London: 1942, p 50).

Before the incursion of the western economy which is a complicit agent of colonialism, farmers in the agrarian India supposedly had a life of abundance and prosperity, which is routinely described through a vernacular proverb: marai bhara dhan, goyal bhara garu, uthan bhara murgi (corn-bins full of rice, cowsheds full of cattle, and courtyards full of chickens) (Rokeya Rachanabali, 212). Rokeya quotes this popular, though nostalgic, saying to indicate the replacement of the indigenous economic structure by an increasingly western economic system, which no longer reproduced in the form of the age-old, local economic framework.

This change ended the relatively better economic circumstances of the Indian peasantry. With colonial economic infiltration, the agrarian culture was destroyed to be replaced by industrialisation, which facilitated the global exploitation of cheap labour. The colonial Bengal began to see the beginning of a process of global economic exploitation facilitated by colonial occupation. The indigenous economic structure was broken apart and the sufferings of the peasantry increased.

In ‘Chashar Dukhu’ and ‘Andi Shilpa’, Rokeya describes the demise of conventional, indigenous economic activities, and the sufferings of the peasantry. She illustrates how agricultural products cultivated by poor farmers were transported to the European industries to be manufactured and used by the Europeans. She gives the example of the andi industry which took the variant name of Assam silk in European markets:

‘The silk-worm is transported from Assam to abroad; after being manufactured as thread, it comes back to Assam. Local weavers make clothing from those threads. Subsequently, that ‘Assam silk’ is sold in some shops in Calcutta. But now-a-days that situation has changed; Assam silk is not easily attainable in Calcutta.’ (Rokeya Rachanabali, p 216)

This expressly indicates that those clothes manufactured by the cheap labour of India were imported to the European market. But the impoverished Indian peasantry who produced the raw materials for capitalist industries had a miserable life. Rokeya laments that Indian farmers do not have enough to afford a minimum standard of living even though they ensure a continuous supply of raw materials that British textile and clothing industries during the colonial period used in manufacturing fabric products. This economic exploitation resulted in an Indian nationalist sentiment originating mainly in Rokeya’s Bengal — the Swadeshi movement — which advocated principally the support of indigenous industries using home produced materials, such as cotton, and the boycott of foreign goods mainly imported from Europe.

A century after Rokeya was writing, globalisation is changing the character of the world economy and is read as a new, postmodern imperialism. Colonial exploitation by powerful countries now manifests in different forms. Conscientious people around the world sometimes voice their protests against neo-colonial exploitation by multinational companies driven by corporate greed. This novel mode of capitalist exploitation is most evident in the garment sector in Bangladesh. Female garment industry workers are conditioned to work for low wages and under poor working conditions. Over the years, many of them have been burnt to death while working in factories and their charred bodies are printed in the media which apparently fails to earn sympathy of the factory owners and the overseas multinational companies that are the real beneficiaries of the hard work of the poor garment factory workers in Bangladesh.

Most people are aware of this economic exploitation of female labourers in garment factories in Bangladesh which are part of the new capitalist economic structure, constituted by the dominant world economic powers. This current affair reminds us of the anticolonial ideas Rokeya articulated a century ago. Her anticolonial message guides us and gives us an opportunity to look at the condition of women in Bangladesh at a time when globalisation and the prospect of cheap labour predominantly bring women into the urban labour force beyond the domestic domain of gender relations. The internal economic migration of female garment workers from villages to Dhaka and their subsequent sufferings have a relevance to Rokeya's treatment of the burgeoning, capitalist colonial economic structure of the early twentieth century.

Sufferings of female workers at apparel industries have two roots: one is the patriarchal structure and gender ideology and the other is the presence of a globalised economy in urban Bangladesh. Both of them put together contribute to women's subjugation. In that sense, it can be argued that Rokeya's treatment of colonial economic exploitation can potentially inform and instruct us how to address the horrors of the globalised market economy. While in Rokeya's time, women's marginalisation was caused by, in Loomba's words, 'the intermixed violence of colonialism and of patriarchy' (Colonialism/Postcolonialism. Routledge, London: 1998, p 222), in the postcolonial world of today's Bangladesh women's sufferings are caused by local patriarchy and by the global economic manipulation of the labour force.

In Rokeya's work, the internal migration of Nelly in 'Nurse Nelly' and Zaynab in Padmarag was influenced by colonialist religious missionaries and the patriarchal-colonial presence in India. However, now patriarchal repression and the exploitation of cheap labour in economic peripheries jointly contribute to women's internal migration. Moreover, the local class system has its role in subordinating and dispossessing women

socially and economically. Both colonialism and globalisation create local elite who benefit from the imported capitalist economic system and exploit indigenous people, especially women.

Gender inequalities among women in Bangladesh and beyond, in one form or another, have continued to persist. Many of women's restrictions imposed by patriarchal culture and by the prevailing gender order are still affecting women's lives and their ability to move ahead and to participate on a par with men in economic and political life. The complicit agent of patriarchy in the past was colonialism which has now been replaced by globalisation.

Most women have broken the wall of seclusion which was impregnable and impermeable during Rokeya's time. However, even though women have been able to participate in public life and enjoy employment opportunities, they are still placed in a subordinate role and receive unequal treatment and harassment. Women, whether at home or at workplace, have continued to encounter many gender discrepancies and discrimination. In the twenty-first-century Bangladesh, many women are waging a continuous battle to earn their agency and to appear and participate in public life with honour and dignity. In their continuous struggle, Rokeya still remains a beacon of guidance.

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