

Rokeya's feminism and cultural affiliation

by Md. Mahmudul Hasan

ROKEYA Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) was a multi-tasker, as she combined her role as a social reformer with those of an outstanding litterateur, enthusiastic educationist and capable organiser. However, her goal was one that is the liberation of women which she thought was a precursor to the effective transformation and comprehensive wellbeing of her society.

Rokeya devoted her time, money and energy to establishing and sustaining Sakhawati Memorial Girls' School in Calcutta which is still running in a different fashion than what she wanted. The Bengal chapter of Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam that she established in 1916 became extinct long ago. What continues to glow and give light and will conceivably palpitate through many generations to come is her literary production.

Her finest literary works include *Matichur I* (1904), *Sultana's Dream* (1905), *Matichur II* (1922), *Padmarag* (1924), 'God Gives, Man Robs' (1927), *Abarodhbasini* (1931) and 'Educational Ideals for the Modern Indian Girl' (1931). The recurrent motif that runs through her oeuvre and demands our attention as a concern of abiding importance is women's emancipation which is now commonly known as feminism.

Although Rokeya is mainly known as a feminist writer, she did not identify herself as such and, during her lifetime, was never associated with the term 'feminism'. Nor was it widely known or used in literary studies. There are different opinions on the origin of the word 'feminism'. The more prominent view is: The term was first

coined as *féminisme* by the activist and founder of suffragism in France Hubertine Auclert (1846-1914) in the 1880s (femme: woman; isme: socio-political ideology or movement), and the word 'feminist' entered *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1895.

Another opinion goes as follows: The French socialist philosopher Charles Fourier (1772-1837) first invented the term 'feminism' in 1837 and the word 'feminist' first appeared in 1872. If Mary Wollstonecraft (the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* [1792]) is considered the earliest significant western feminist writer, it is obvious that, the term 'feminism' came into being long after the women's rights movement began.

The first institutional recognition of the term 'feminism' happened in the 1910s when a segment of the US suffrage movement adopted it. It started to be widely used only in 1960s and '70s that saw the emergence of second wave feminism in the west. Many early advocates of women's rights whom we now know as 'feminist' maintained distance from, or had reservations about, the term.

For example, Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), who is considered the most influential feminist writer in English literature, was opposed to an organised feminist movement. As she says in *A Room of One's Own* (1929): 'No age can ever have been as stridently sex-conscious as our own; those innumerable books by men about women in the British Museum are a proof of it. The Suffrage campaign was no doubt to blame. It must have roused in men an extraordinary desire for self-assertion; it must have made them lay an emphasis upon their own sex and its charac-

teristics which they would not have troubled to think about had they not been challenged.' What is more, in her book *Three Guineas* (1938), Woolf regards the terms 'feminism' and 'emancipation of women' as 'inexpressive and corrupt.' However, paradoxically, nowadays 'Woolf' and 'feminism' seem inseparable.

Rokeya is not known to have made any negative comment on the term 'feminism'. Nor was it a usual item in the corpus of her vocabulary. However, we identify her as a feminist scholar mainly for our own academic convenience, which perhaps does not do her much harm. However, given the genealogy of the term, if we associate her with 'feminism' with all its western cultural connotations, then we may wrongly render a disservice to her feminist thoughts.

While Rokeya maintained no prejudice against any religious, cultural or geographical groups, she did not support mimicry of western modernity or approaches to women's liberation. Her feminism was very much indigenous and, at the same time, equally forward-looking and revolutionary.

During Rokeya's time, Parsi women in British India seemed to have broken out of domestic confinement and adopted western dress code. But Rokeya does not consider this true liberation. She states in 'Ardhangini,'

'The Parsi women have now come out of seclusion; but have they done away with their mental enslavement? Of course not. Though they have got out of purdah, there is no sign that they have done so with proper realisation. In pursuance of imitating British culture, men brought them out of purdah. But there is no sign that they [Parsi

women] have got their lifeblood back. They have remained inanimate objects as they were before. When men wanted them to be inside seclusion they were there; now men dragged them out of it, so they have come out.'

Rokeya did not want to achieve women's liberation in the western sense. In her campaign for female education also, she maintained strong affiliation with indigenous culture. In her essay, 'Educational Ideals for the Modern Indian Girl' she says:

'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. This mistake on our part cannot be too strongly guarded against. We should not fail to set before the Indian girl the great and noble ideals of womanhood which our tradition has developed. This ideal was narrow and circumscribed in the past. We may enlarge and widen it thus increasing its excellence but what we should avoid is its total neglect and a tendency to slavish imitations of western custom and tradition.'

Thus, in her feminist thinking, Rokeya like Muslim modernists in other parts of the world of her time does not lose her grounding in indigenous culture. So when discussing Rokeya's feminist thoughts and ideas and her campaign for female education, we should evaluate them accordingly.

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