

Rokeya from a comparative literary perspective

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IN MY doctoral study titled *Introducing Rokeya's Plural Feminism* (University of Portsmouth, 2007), I sought to unearth the rich treasure of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's (1880–1932) feminist writing and to compare it with that of two established English feminist writers, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) and Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), and two postcolonial ones Attia Hosain (1913-98) and Monica Ali (1967). My comparative study aimed at introducing Rokeya and her work to a wide-ranging readership and at revealing the relevance of her overarching feminist ideas to international feminisms beyond the borders of the South Asian subcontinent. My findings of similar contents between Rokeya's work and that of the four feminist writers of different

spatio-temporal locations indicate her importance in international feminist perspectives. My comparative analysis has dismantled the notion of ‘provincialism’ in relation to intellectual productions of subaltern societies, as I have established clear links of Rokeya’s feminist thinking to plural/international feminisms. Conversely, it has also subverted the constructed idea of ‘universalism’ of metropolitan feminist scholarship and has foregrounded the cultural specificity of feminist movements of various social-historical settings. There are striking similarities in Rokeya’s and Mary Wollstonecraft’s social contexts, and in their ideas, beliefs and methodologies. The most salient similarity in their thinking is their arrival at a common conclusion about women’s marginalisation and their minority status, and about gender differences in their societies. As Rokeya does in much of her oeuvre, Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) identifies the lack of female education as the root cause of women’s subordinate place and of the gendered power relations, which support it, in the patriarchal culture of their societies. Though born in different social and historical contexts, they encountered almost identical cultural resistance in their struggle for female education. They dispel the social mythology of women’s lesser cerebral capabilities, and maintain that intellectual inferiority or backwardness is not an essential condition of being a woman; and if women suffer from an unhealthy state of mind, it is because they are denied access to exercise their mental faculties. Otherwise, women would have shown equal excellence – if not more than men — both in the realms of intellect and social activities. My comparative study of Rokeya’s and Wollstonecraft’s works revealed another striking similarity in their feminist approach: their religious leanings in addressing gender issues. Despite a tendency among critics to portray Rokeya and Wollstonecraft as secular feminists and to locate their feminist arguments outside religious frameworks, my study shows that religion is at the centre of their feminist struggles. In Rokeya’s case, the supposed disaffiliation between her and Islam is compounded by an assumed binary relationship between the religion and feminism. Confusing the Islamic dress code of hijab with the culturally-inflected Indian style purdah, and Rokeya’s revolutionary stance against it, is another reason for misunderstanding Rokeya’s religious standpoint. Moreover, isolated readings of some of Rokeya’s statements tend to define her as a secular feminist, as her arguments are assessed by western standards of feminism. However, I put Rokeya’s arguments in context and analysed her feminist position from the perspective of Islamic feminism to show that she takes Islam, not secular western feminist ideas, as the framework for her struggle. Like later Islamic feminists, Rokeya makes a comeback call to the Muslims of Bengal to adhere to the actual teachings of Islam, especially to those related to women’s issues. Interestingly, as Rokeya makes use of the Islamic feminist tradition in Urdu literature, Wollstonecraft appropriates the eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophy of reason and represents a synchronisation between the Enlightenment idea of human rights and her religious beliefs to promote the cause of women. Like Rokeya, Wollstonecraft dismantles the idea of women’s dependency on men and upholds the idea of men’s and women’s equal reliance on God.

Then I analysed the socio-cultural and literary contexts of Rokeya's and Virginia Woolf's contemporary societies. I showed how difficult it was for Rokeya to launch her feminist activities on various fronts — literary, political and educational. Before Woolf started her writing career, many women writers appeared in the English literary canon. However, Rokeya had to begin from scratch to launch women's writing in Muslim Bengal and to herald the emergence of feminist literature in the region. In Rokeya's Bengal, the education movement for Muslim women started mainly with her ideas and initiatives.

In an essay titled 'Feminist, Female, Feminine,' Toril Moi of Duke University argues that 'feminists can in a sense afford to be tolerantly pluralistic in their choice of literary methods and theories, precisely because any approach that can be successfully appropriated to their political ends must be welcome.' This theory of 'feminist appropriation' has clear relevance to Rokeya's and Woolf's feminist approach. Rokeya's Muslim Bengal suffered from both colonial control and from its political underdog status among other indigenous communities. These particular societal specificities had a momentous bearing upon shaping the worldview of Rokeya, as she links the broader liberation of her colonised society with the liberation of women. As Rokeya does in the context of colonialism, in *Three Guineas* (1938) Woolf capitalises on the helplessness of men in the face of the multiplicity of threats from fascism and militarism, and seeks to win her male audience by her feminist prescription of deliverance from the menaces of right-wing authoritarianism and of war.

Rokeya's and Woolf's creative appropriation of their literary cultures also manifests itself in their literary styles. In a material context influenced by the discourse of psychoanalysis, in her fictional works especially *To the Lighthouse* (1927) Woolf conducted her exploration of the female psyche through her experiment with the modernist technique of stream of consciousness. This corresponds to the literary techniques Rokeya uses in *Padmarag* (1924) to define women's position in patriarchy. The techniques Rokeya and Woolf employ to express the soul-searching of their heroines bring about a synthesis of their art and their feminist politics. Unlike Woolf, Rokeya did not expound any creative theory, but her unconventional style marks a clear distinction between her writings and those of her contemporary Indian male literary counterparts, while Woolf's style represents a literary insurgency against her Victorian predecessors. Their stylistic similarities resonate, to a great extent, with the notion of the female aesthetic experience; what Woolf achieves through her stream of consciousness technique, Rokeya also does by employing the metaphor of dream and by exploring the inner psyche of her heroines.

In my discussion of Rokeya's and Attia Hosain's work, I have detailed the concept of 'home' in its various ramifications: home as a site of patriarchal and colonial oppression, as a space of cultural belonging, and as a place for women's liberation. Rokeya witnessed the beginning of an anti-colonial, nationalist movement in India, while Attia in *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) depicts the ambivalence among the peoples, especially the Muslim elite, of India at the height of the nationalist movement and identity crises afterwards. It has been interesting to note how Rokeya's feminist arguments have pertinence to the debate on women and

nationhood, and how both Rokeya and Attia use the nationalist context to promote women's rights especially their national belonging as equal citizens with men.

While examining Rokeya's and Monica Ali's treatment of women's condition in the inner sphere of domesticity, both in their country of origin and in diaspora, I have located complicity between patriarchy and globalisation. As in Rokeya's time patriarchy had implicit endorsement from the colonial administration, in the postcolonial international order of globalisation and migration, the globalised economy buttresses it to the marginalisation of women. A most remarkable common feature in Rokeya's work and in Ali's Brick Lane is the representation of women's domestic confinement in their homeland and its transplantation in the diaspora. The masculine practice of maintaining affiliation with the cultural mores of the country of origin has a bearing upon women's life, as the continuation of this cultural practice is predominantly measured by their cultural and behavioural ties with home culture, which is – in the context of Bangladeshi society – predominantly patriarchal. However, the framework for Rokeya's heroines' feminist bildungsroman from passivity to agency is drawn within the structure of their religious-cultural values, whereas Ali's Nazneen achieves self-fulfilment and independence through her pursuance of western culture. This constitutes a remarkable contrast between Rokeya's and Ali's feminist ideals.

That Rokeya's ideas cross spatial and temporal boundaries and have clear relevance to global feminist movements points to the immense importance of bringing her to the forefront of mainstream feminist discourse. Her (pluralist) feminist viewpoint is consistent with intercultural communication within feminisms. It has been amazing to notice how Rokeya's feminist thinking is pertinent to a range of perspectives within feminist movements. So it is hugely important to discover the rich feminist scholarship contained in the works of subaltern writers like Rokeya, which will facilitate a variety of different feminisms instead of a singular/western feminism. While Rokeya's is a plural feminism that has its usefulness and overarching relevance to gender issues of other cultures, it is also important to analyse her ideas in relation to the fragmentation of internationalism and of monolithic western feminist ideals in a climate of growing emphasis on local over global context of feminist struggle.

Despite mainstream/western feminism's reservations about Islamic feminism, a feminist movement based on Islamic ideals is getting strong theoretical foundations in feminist discourses. Being indigenous in its nature, Islamic feminism is progressing in Muslim countries and making a huge impact on postcolonial feminist criticism. To better appreciate Rokeya's feminism, it is crucial to contextualise her ideas within the paradigms of Islamic feminism, as they have their roots in an Islamic culture. This particular aspect of Rokeya's oeuvre is missing in much of existing critical work on her.

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