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Critical Reception: A Comparison between Rokeya and Woolf



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In a previous article titled “Rokeya and Woolf: Souls That Have Lived” (*Daily Star*, 8 Dec 2018), I discussed similarities and differences between Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) and Virginia Woolf (1882-1941). The current one aims to point to the incommensurate critical reception that Rokeya is given in literary studies in comparison to a contemporary British writer, Woolf.

It is true that the volume of Woolf's writing is larger than that of Rokeya's. However, it is also true that the worth of a writer does not solely depend on the volume of their oeuvre. Material context, artistic ability and the forcefulness of arguments, among other things, are also considered when determining a writer's literary value and significance.

Rokeya worked in a very difficult material condition and faced stiff opposition in her educational and literary persuasions, campaign for women's rights and other reformist activities. Since the feminist tradition in Rokeya's Bengal was not well-established, she had to begin from scratch. Conversely, Woolf had circumstantial advantages, as feminist consciousness raising activities in her society had a longer history and a stronger footing.

Even though Woolf was denied formal education, she was benefited by, and free to use, the rich library of her father. On the contrary, Rokeya's self-education occurred surreptitiously, as most family members and relatives were opposed to female education. Sometimes she and her brother Ibrahim Saber had to stay up at night to allow other family members enough time to go to bed so that they could start their “tutorial session.”

Before Woolf started her literary career, many women writers had appeared in the English literary canon. Although she made an original contribution to the form of the novel, she was by no means the first woman writer in English literature to advance feminist causes. In “Professions for Women,” Woolf says, “For the road was cut many years ago – by Fanny Burney, by Aphra Behn, by Harriet Martineau, by Jane Austen, by George Eliot – many famous women, and many more unknown and forgotten, have been before me, making the path smooth, and regulating my steps.”

Similarly, in “Women and Fiction,” Woolf mentions that there was already an “extraordinary outburst of fiction in the beginning of the nineteenth century in England.” Many great women writers had appeared in the English literary arena before her; and she was a significant addition to that canon. As Elaine Showalter discusses in her book *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), Woolf was not unreceptive to the “century old” female aesthetics, rather she culled the essence of that heritage; and “no woman writer has ever been more in touch with – even obsessed by – this tradition than she.” However, as mentioned earlier, Rokeya launched women's writing and facilitated the emergence of feminist literature in Muslim Bengal almost all on her own.

It is true that, during the pre-colonial era and the colonial period, there were many established Muslim women writers and social reformers in the Indian subcontinent, which I discussed in an earlier work titled “Commemorating Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Contextualising her Work in South Asian Muslim Feminism” (2013). However, they sank into oblivion and were hardly mentioned in literary histories because of what Elora Shehabuddin terms “a manufactured blindness to Muslim women's own writings and thoughts.”

According to Mahua Sarkar, in the colonial narrative, Muslim women were portrayed as “invisible” and “the backward other” while their Hindu counterparts, as “liberated and

modern.” What is more, as Barbara Metcalf argues, in colonial historiography “British historians imagined Hindus as the original inhabitants and Muslims rather as they, the British, imagined themselves: as foreign rulers, as imperial rulers, who arrived as successful conquerors.”

Mahua Sarkar reaches the conclusion that the contributions of Muslim women “simply disappear from public discourse” partly because of the preponderance of focus on their Hindu sisters in “debates between the Hindu orthodoxy, the British government, the reformists, and later the nationalists throughout the nineteenth century.” So unlike Woolf, Rokeya had little canonical as well as institutional support to derive inspiration from the cultural traditions of her predecessors.

In Britain, feminist consciousness raising activities and women's involvement in various literary and political organisations had been in vogue before Woolf's emergence as a great feminist writer and theorist. Conversely, in Rokeya's Bengal, the education movement for Muslim women started mainly with her ideas and initiatives. More importantly, it suffered from colonial control and from a socio-politically underdog status among other indigenous communities, whereas Woolf's England – though under the threat of fascism and militarism – was the dominant colonial power of the time.

Therefore, the sociocultural hurdles Rokeya faced in pursuit of her literary career and in the promotion of female education and other feminist agendas were more challenging than those Woolf faced. So while assessing Rokeya's standing among global feminist writers, her courage, dogged determination and relentless struggle against multiple forces need to be taken into account.

However, the amount of critical work that has been done so far to introduce Rokeya's life and, more especially, literature to a wide-ranging readership extending beyond the borders of Bengal is not commensurate with her unrivalled stature as a public intellectual, eminent educationalist and early feminist writer of Bengal. That Rokeya was for a long time neglected in the global discourse of the women's rights movement prompted Mukti Barton to begin her essay “Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and the Bengali Muslim Women's Movement” thus: “FROM THE MARGINS of history I bring to you Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain [...] whose writings and example continue to influence and inspire the women's movement and the Muslim community in Bengal.”

Since Barton made this statement in 1998, books and articles on Rokeya's life and work have appeared in Bangladesh and beyond. In my doctoral research completed at the University of Portsmouth in 2007, I compared Rokeya's feminist works with those of four writers of

different spatiotemporal locations – Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97), Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), Attia Hosain (1913-98) and Monica Ali (1967-). I co-edited (with Mohammad A. Quayum) *A Feminist Foremother: Critical Essays on Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain* (2017) which concerns analysing her works and discussing their literary merits in a true literary criticism tradition. A number of other scholarly works including books and articles have made important contributions to the analysis of her life and writings critically and from a feminist comparative perspective. Some of her writings are also taught at different levels of education in Bangladesh and internationally.

These constitute part of the remedy of what Raushan Jahan and Hanna Papanek call “a long period of neglect” of Rokeya in global feminist discourses. Recent works on her also represent critical efforts to introduce her to a global readership. Although Rokeya's primary target audience was the Muslim society of Bengal, on a number of occasions, she expressed concerns about the worldwide peripheralisation of women and for awakening and uniting women of all societies towards liberation.

However, many literary and feminist scholars tend to neglect Muslim writers like Rokeya. For example, Kumari Jayawardena does not mention Rokeya at all in *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (1986) even though she does refer to a number of Bengali Hindu women writers of Rokeya's time. Despite that, compared to other Bengal Muslim women writers, Rokeya has obviously received greater research and pedagogical attention. But, as opposed to the critical reception of many of her counterparts like Woolf from other cultural backgrounds, that is far below the threshold of literary canon formation and incommensurate with her literary pre-eminence and unique standing as a feminist writer. This inadequate attention to Rokeya is partly due to her subaltern status which limits the deserved critical reception of her work.

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