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To cite this article: Md. Mahmudul Hasan (2018) Early defenders of women's intellectual rights: Wollstonecraft's and Rokeya's strategies to promote female education, *Paedagogica Historica*, 54:6, 766–782, DOI: [10.1080/00309230.2018.1515235](https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2018.1515235)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2018.1515235>



Published online: 08 Oct 2018.



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Early defenders of women’s intellectual rights: Wollstonecraft’s and Rokeya’s strategies to promote female education

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ABSTRACT

Given that social constructions and deeply embedded cultural misapprehensions about gender, together with conventional views of female intellectual ability, denied women entry into institutional education, Wollstonecraft and Rokeya mounted a literary campaign to promote female education in their respective societies. They argued that female education would not only advance the cause of women, it would also be conducive to the interests of men as well as the wider society. Given these cultural backgrounds, this article examines the traditional notion of gendered intellect within their respective cultural contexts, discusses their arguments against cultural mythologies of women’s cerebral capabilities, and makes an in-depth analysis of their strategies for, and philosophy of, female education. It analyses social restrictions on women’s education and pits them against Rokeya’s and Wollstonecraft’s ideas that envisage equal educational opportunities for both genders.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 3 March 2018
Accepted 17 July 2018

KEYWORDS

Mary Wollstonecraft; Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain; female education; gendered intellect; Original Sin

Introduction

As regards the condition of women, comparable material cultures existed in late eighteenth-century England and in early twentieth-century Muslim Bengal. Many citizenship rights, including educational opportunities, that women enjoy in today’s Britain were denied to their eighteenth-century predecessors. The male-breadwinner-female-homemaker family model kept women confined to a subordinate role in the private sphere. Since they were not involved in wage labour, it was deemed unnecessary for them to receive formal education and they were mainly educated at home by mothers. In such a cultural context, Elizabeth Vesey (1715–91), Elizabeth Montagu (1718–1800), Frances Boscawen (1719–1805) and other “wealthy women who invented a new kind of informal sociability and nurtured a sense of intellectual community”¹ established the cultural society known as the Bluestocking Circle in England in the early 1850s. Montagu, for example, was “strongly aware of the injustices of women’s position in the world of learning [and] believed that the pursuit of reading could substantially improve women’s quality of life”.² The emergence of a member of the next generation bluestocking writers, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97), especially with her *Thoughts on the*

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This article has been republished with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

¹Elizabeth Eger and Lucy Peltz, *Brilliant Women: 18th-century Bluestockings* (London: Yale University Press, 2008), 21.

²Elizabeth Eger, *Bluestockings: Women of Reason from Enlightenment to Romanticism* (New York: Palgrave), 80.

Education of Daughters (1787), *Mary, a Fiction* (1788) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), marked “[a] more revolutionary strain”.³

In Muslim Bengal, a comparable reform movement for women’s education occurred only in the early twentieth century with the literary and intellectual endeavours of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932). However, there is a striking difference between the literary careers of Wollstonecraft and Rokeya.⁴ Wollstonecraft’s was preceded by earlier women writers such as Aemilia B. Lanyer (1569–1645), Aphra Behn (1640–89), Mary Griffith Pix (1666–1720), Delariviere Manley (1663–1724), and Catherine Cockburn Trotter (1679–1749). Together with Wollstonecraft, “the leading female radicals of the time, the first generation of feminists in Britain” included Catharine Macaulay (1731–91) and Mary Hays (1760–1843).⁵ Conversely, in the absence of any such indigenous feminist literary model, Rokeya began from scratch. Although her predecessors⁶ like Nawab Faizunnesa (1834–1903) produced literary work, that was “inadequate for [Rokeya] to follow any burgeoning female literary tradition. In Muslim Bengal, no one – before or after her – dealt with women’s issues in equal or greater magnitude”.⁷

In colonial India, the educated gentry continued “to rehearse the dangers of women’s higher education well into” the twentieth century, as Indian and Bengali nationalism subordinated “women’s social reform . . . in the interest of the greater national good”.⁸ There were two main hurdles against female education in Muslim Bengal. Extreme purdah practices and cultural and pseudo-religious mythologies against women’s equal educational opportunities rendered seats of learning “devoid of female students”.⁹ Moreover, colonial government’s hostility to Muslims badly affected Muslim women’s education. It established Bethune School for girls in Calcutta in 1849 (upgraded to the Bethune College in 1879 and thus becoming the first women’s college in British India) but restricted Muslim girls’ access until 1885. Only in 1939, it founded Lady Brabourne College “mainly – but not exclusively – for Muslim girls”.¹⁰ Braving such obstacles, Rokeya made history by being the first significant crusader for female education in Muslim Bengal. However, this also constitutes an obvious dissimilarity between the socio-cultural and political background of Wollstonecraft and that of Rokeya in the sense that women’s issues in eighteenth-century Britain were not overwhelmed by nationalist urgencies or ignored by imperial administrators, and were rather facilitated by the doctrines of the French Revolution and Enlightenment philosophy, which I will discuss later in this article.

³Souren Melikian, “The ‘Bluestocking Circle’ and the Fight for Women’s Rights in Literary Salons,” *The New York Times*, May 29, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/31/arts/31iht-melik31.1.13311827.html> (accessed May 19, 2018).

⁴Following the Bengali convention, in the body of the text of this article, I use ‘Rokeya’ in short and, for reasons of consistency, ‘Hossain’ for bibliographical details; however, with regard to Mary Wollstonecraft, I follow the Western academic practice of using an author’s surname.

⁵Alan Grob, “William and Dorothy: A Case Study in the Hermeneutics of Disparagement,” *ELH* 65, no. 1 (1998): 187–221, 193.

⁶For a detailed discussion on Rokeya’s predecessors, see Md. Mahmudul Hasan’s review of *Nawab Faizunnesa’s Rupjalal*, in *The Muslim World Book Review* 30, no. 2 (2010): 65–9.

⁷Md. Mahmudul Hasan, “Commemorating Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Contextualising Her Work in South Asian Muslim Feminism,” *Asiatic* 7, no. 2 (2013): 39–59, 53.

⁸Judith E. Walsh, *Domesticity in Colonial India: What Women Learned when Men Gave Them Advice* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 47–48.

⁹Gouri Srivastava, *The Legend Makers: Some Prominent Muslim Women of India* (New Delhi: Concept, 2003), 3.

¹⁰Sonia Nishat Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876–1939* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), xiii.

Given the intensity of concentration they put on women's intellectual rights, Wollstonecraft and Rokeya were pioneers in major ways, defying traditional, patriarchal notions of femininity. Their societies perpetuated many cultural mythologies about female literacy, which influenced social opposition to women's equal right to education. Therefore, they had to dispel many conventional stereotypes of female intellect in order to challenge the male monopoly on education and intellectual culture and finally, to borrow Bagchi's words, "to create social change through education for women".¹¹

The fact that Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is widely considered a response to the educational philosophy of contemporary political and intellectual leaders of Europe clearly suggests the breadth and intensity of her devotion to the cause of women's equal educational opportunities. In fact, the treatise was inspired by Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord's (1754–1838) 1791 report on education to the French National Assembly. Unlike Talleyrand who believed in providing only domestic education for women, Wollstonecraft emphasised the need for women's equal educational opportunities "because education is so necessary to secure the rights of women".¹² Wollstonecraft was in agreement with Talleyrand on the points that "universal education was to bring about a more egalitarian society in virtue of children from all backgrounds being educated together" and "schools were to become a sort of training ground for citizenship and patriotism"; however, she added the gender dimension to the whole debate.¹³ As Talleyrand was in charge of "[t]he project of reforming public education" in France, she dedicated the book to him as part of an attempt to reform his and society's misgivings about female education and to show that her book was about "reforming the education of women with a view to improving their social and political standing".¹⁴ In Rokeya's society, the social setting was so hostile to female education that "the dauntless" Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–98), the champion of Muslim education and awakening in British India, though "aware of the need of women's education", did not dare to include it in his widespread movement for Muslim education, thinking that "the movement would die if girls' education was taken up along with the boys".¹⁵ Conversely, attaching great importance to female education, Rokeya challenged gendered social conventions that dictated an all-male presence in intellectual domains and barred women from institutional learning, public life, and work.

Striking convergences in Wollstonecraft's and Rokeya's feminist ideas are most salient in their remarkably consistent, overarching focus on female education.¹⁶ In order to ascertain women's basic human and civil rights and obligations on a par with men, Wollstonecraft and Rokeya accorded the utmost priority to female education. Wollstonecraft said: "[T]he neglected education of my fellow-creatures [women] is the

¹¹Barnita Bagchi, "Towards Ladyland: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and the Movement for Women's Education in Bengal, c. 1900–c. 1932," *Paedagogica Historica* 45, no. 6 (2009): 743–55, 743.

¹²Natalie Fuehrer Taylor, *The Rights of Woman as Chimera: The Political Philosophy of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Routledge, 2007), 74.

¹³Sandrine Berges, *The Routledge Guidebook to Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London: Routledge, 2013), 25–6.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 25–6.

¹⁵Fatima Z. Bilgrami, "Sir Syed's Views on Female Education," *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society* 44, no. 3 (1996): 243–57, 244.

¹⁶Mohammad A. Quayum and Md. Mahmudul Hasan, "Introduction," in *A Feminist Foremother: Critical Essays on Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain*, ed. Mohammad A. Quayum and Md. Mahmudul Hasan (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2017), xi–xxvii, xiii.

grand source of the misery I deplore”.¹⁷ Equally, Rokeya reached the same conclusion, stating: “Education is the only remedy against all repressions . . . [and] will enable them [women] to enjoy civil rights”.¹⁸ They realised that the absence of women in the realm of education gave men a head start to maintain male privileges and undermined efforts for feminist social change. There is an underlying message in their writings that once women were equipped with education and became competent, useful members of society, all other rights would follow.

Given the above background, this article examines the socio-cultural factors of late eighteenth-century Britain and early twentieth-century Muslim Bengal that determined the inferior status of women, especially in education and employment. Despite the spatiotemporal distances between societies of Wollstonecraft and Rokeya, it is intriguing to notice that their feminist activism addressed similar agendas and encountered almost the same socio-cultural mythologies, which they dismantled in order to step up their campaign for women’s equal access to education and employment. They diagnosed the marginalised, inferior status of women and arrived at an identical conclusion that lack of education was the root cause of women’s subordinate position and powerlessness across societies and cultures.

Gendered intellect

In both societies it was widely held that women were not as capable as men in intellectual endeavours and that women’s engagement in serious educational work could be detrimental to their physical and psychological health and emotional well-being. Hence, women were sternly discouraged from being involved in intellectual endeavours or competing with men in educational attainment. Thus, invented fears of female education undercut its necessity in both Britain and India. The British Presbyterian minister and moralist James Fordyce (1720–96) forbade women to engage in any serious intellectual inquiry, as he regarded meekness as “the proper consummation, and the highest finishing, of female excellence”.¹⁹ John Gregory (1724–73), a representative male writer on female conduct, is a principal target in the *Rights of Woman*, as Wollstonecraft posed a major challenge to the male tradition of constructed femininity and gendered intellectuality. Gregory advised women thus:

Be even cautious in displaying your good sense. It will be thought you assume a superiority over the rest of the company. – But if you happen to have any learning, keep it a profound secret, especially from men, who generally look with a jealous and malignant eye on a woman of great parts, and a cultivated understanding.²⁰

A husband’s life would be smooth only if he could exercise unquestioned (intellectual) authority over his wife; and if such a gender relation is disrupted because of her equal share in education and because she intends to intrude in the supposedly forbidden realm of intellect, it might ruin traditional familial and social relationships. Such

¹⁷Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London: J. Johnson, 1796 [1792]), 1.

¹⁸Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *Rokeya Rachanabali*, ed. Abdul Quadir (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 2006), 242 (English translations of all Bangla source texts used throughout this article are mine, unless otherwise stated).

¹⁹James Fordyce, *Sermons to Young Women*, vol. 2, 4th ed. (London: A Miller and T Cadell, 1767), 220.

²⁰John Gregory, *A Father’s Legacy to His Daughters* (London: Osborne and Griffin, 1789 [1774]), 31–2.

cultural values and norms were still very strong in Victorian Britain. As George Eliot put it:

There is a notion commonly entertained among men that an instructed woman, capable of having opinions, is likely to prove an impracticable yoke-fellow, always pulling one way when her husband wants to go the other, oracular in tone, and prone to give certain lectures on metaphysics. But surely, so far as obstinacy is concerned, your unreasoning animal is the most unmanageable of creatures, where you are not allowed to settle the question by a cudgel, a whip and bridle, or even a string to the leg.²¹

Evidently, negative stereotypes of intelligent women were widespread in Britain in Wollstonecraft's time and beyond, especially with respect to their marital relationships and spousal adjustment. Femininity and its associated characteristics involving domestic roles were deeply entrenched in society and women who partly or wholly rejected them "on an intellectual level were still likely to feel uneasy, or to experience some kind of guilt or shame about behaving in a way others would judge 'unfeminine'".²² As a result, the disapproval of educated women discouraged them to seek knowledge or to pursue careers at par with men.

In India also it was believed that educated women would be insolent, disobedient, and unruly; they would be indifferent to religion and less respectful to their husbands, and this could consequently destabilise gender-based power relations²³ or they could even convert to Christianity;²⁴ hence female education was associated with widowhood.²⁵ That is to say, patriarchal authority exploited women's socially constructed femininity and culturally defined roles and maintained many prejudices against educated women. As Rokeya put it:

The opponents of women's education say that if women are educated they become imprudent and obstinate. Woe to them! They call themselves Muslims but oppose the fundamental precepts of Islam. If men do not go astray when they obtain education, why should women?²⁶

In "Sourajagat", Rokeya portrays the traditionalist character Jafar, who believes that girls need not learn anything other than the recitation of the Qur'an in Arabic. He states: "If an ant becomes feathered, it flies in the sky; and if a woman is educated, she disrespects men's views".²⁷ Moreover, on hearing that the progressive Gauhar intends to admit his daughters – who are also Jafar's nieces – to school, the alarmed Jafar exclaims against the idea:

The reputation of Muslims in the Indian subcontinent has not yet been wiped out! Muslim society has not been abolished yet! Will the girls study in schools and my nieces will be the first victims of this curse [of female education]? Are we to be the prey of the first fall?²⁸

²¹George Eliot, "Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft" [1855], in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 203.

²²Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (Oxford: Routledge, 2013), 151.

²³Tahmina Alam, *Begum Roquiah Sakhawat Hossain: Chinta Chetonar Dhara O Samajkarma* [Begum Roquiah Sakhawat Hossain: Her thoughts and social work] (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1992), 32.

²⁴Mohammad A. Quayum, "Gender and Education: The Vision and Activism of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain," *Journal of Human Values* 22, no. 2 (2016): 139–50, 150.

²⁵Barnita Bagchi, "Two Lives: Voices, Resources, and Networks in the History of Female Education in Bengal and South Asia," *Women's History Review* 19, no. 1 (2010): 51–69, 53.

²⁶Hossain, *Rokeya Rachanabali*, 228; Mukti Barton, "Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and the Bengali Muslim Women's Movement," *Dialogue and Alliance* 12, no. 1 (1998): 105–16, 108.

²⁷Hossain, *Rokeya Rachanabali*, 88.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 89.

Rokeya noticed a practical application of this gendered view of education in her parental domestic space, as it denied her and her eldest sister Karimunnessa any formal learning, especially English education which was seen by Muslims as “detrimental to Islamic teachings and the Islamic way of life”.²⁹ However, being “a remarkable autodidact”, Rokeya “taught herself to read and write Bengali and English”.³⁰ Moreover, she privately received education largely from three persons: Karimunnessa, her elder brother Ibrahim Saber, and her husband Sakhawat Hossain. Karimunnessa learnt Bangla through secret personal studies, upon the discovery of which she was married off early, as it was feared that “education would corrupt her and prevent her becoming a good housewife”.³¹

The social myth of biologically based female intellectual inferiority commonly attributed to feminine fragility was widespread in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain. For example, medical treatises of the time were dominated by the gender ideology that the female body was of delicate constitution and most susceptible to mental disorder due to the monthly cycle. As Shuttleworth puts it: “Psychiatry, or as it was then known, mental science . . . focused on female hysteria and insanity and the unstable processes of the female body”.³² The monthly cycle of women was considered a reason for them to be mentally unstable; and, thus, “femininity” and “insanity” were regarded as synonymous.³³ In Britain women were denied entry into higher education, as it was feared that demanding intellectual activity would “lead to gynecological disorders and would impair women’s health in general”.³⁴ On the same ground of supposed mental deficiency and purported intellectual incapacity of women, it was thought not proper for them to be involved in creative pursuits. For example, in 1837 the Poet Laureate Robert Southey (1774–1843), in a form of avuncular advice, wrote to the junior writer Charlotte Brontë (1816–55): “Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life and it ought not to be”.³⁵

Likewise, in Rokeya’s society women were perceived to be physically frail and incapable of arduous mental exercise, and hence incompatible with rigorous intellectual pursuits. For example, Krupabai Satthianadhan (1862–94) of south India was not permitted to go to England to pursue a medical education because of the cultural assumption of women’s inherently fragile constitution and supposed inability to participate in strenuous intellectual activity. As Satthianadhan put it: “The feeling even in England is very strong against a girl learning medicine, and here [in India] it is stronger still”.³⁶ However, she belied the conventional oxymoronic notion of medical science and women by successfully pursuing a medical career. As a result, during the colonial period, her life was routinely

²⁹Mohammad A. Quayum, “Hindu–Muslim Relations in the Work of Rabindranath Tagore and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain,” *South Asia Research* 35, no. 2 (2015): 177–94, 180.

³⁰Bagchi, “Two Lives”, 53.

³¹Barton, “Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain,” 107.

³²Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 4.

³³Md. Mahmudul Hasan, “The Orientalization of Gender,” *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 22, no. 4 (2005): 26–56, 37.

³⁴John Richardson, “The Menstrual Cycle, Cognition, and Paramenstrual Symptomatology,” in John Richardson, ed., *Cognition and the Menstrual Cycle* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1992), 1–38, 25.

³⁵Quoted in Carol Bock, *Charlotte Brontë and the Storyteller’s Audience* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), 167.

³⁶Krupabai Satthianadhan, *Saguna: The First Autobiographical Novel in English by an Indian Woman* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999 [1895]), 151.

cited as an example “testifying that education or intellectual achievement did not destroy the modesty or sensitivity natural to women”.³⁷

Given such cultural biases against female education, along with dismantling the traditional myths of gender roles and women’s cerebral inferiority, Wollstonecraft and Rokeya had to fight against women’s internalised behaviour as apparently lesser intellectual beings and their complacent absorption of a life of intellectual dereliction. By embracing prevailing mores and discriminatory values that saturated almost every mode of social behaviour, consciously or subconsciously, women reinforced those stereotypes as a form of self-censorship. They neglected their roles as cerebral beings and focused more on physical aspects and emotional behaviour. As Wollstonecraft put it: “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”.³⁸ Rokeya made a similar statement and said: “They [women] should know that they have not come to this earth to behave like dolls by wearing beautiful saris, clips and expensive ornaments; rather they have been born as women to perform certain duties”.³⁹ What Rokeya argues here is that women “have unthinkingly embraced all androcentric values and accepted their [intellectual] subservience willingly”.⁴⁰ Women’s internalisation of socio-cultural norms, society’s emphasis on appearance, and their lesser status as emotional and unintellectual beings prompted Wollstonecraft to launch a campaign for “a REVOLUTION in female manners . . . to restore to them their lost dignity”,⁴¹ while Rokeya made a wake-up call to women and urged them to take charge of their affairs.⁴² It distressed both Wollstonecraft and Rokeya to notice women’s internalised understanding of their own selves and their acquiescent, submissive responses to socially constructed gender stereotypes.

Gendered education

In England, “the mere mention of teaching a girl a subject like botany, for example, was considered nothing short of ‘prurient’”.⁴³ Wollstonecraft said:

One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written . . . by men who . . . have been more anxious to make [women] alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers.⁴⁴

Similarly, Rokeya argued: “The state of the education of women in India has for long centuries been deplorable. . . . We should educate our girls if they are to fulfil their heavy duties commendably”.⁴⁵ Wollstonecraft and Rokeya did not deny that there was some sort of education available for girls in their respective societies, but there were gender disparities in curriculum and in the quality of education as well as a myriad of cultural barriers that kept girls out of school and confined indoors.

³⁷Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, *Women Writing in India: 600 BC to the Present*, vol II (London: Pandora, 1993), xx.

³⁸Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication*, 130.

³⁹Hossain, *Rokeya Rachanabali*, 242.

⁴⁰Quayum, “Gender and Education,” 141.

⁴¹Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication*, 92.

⁴²Hossain, *Rokeya Rachanabali*, 20–2.

⁴³M. J. Falco, “Introduction: Who Was Mary Wollstonecraft?” in *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. M. J. Falco (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 1–14, 3.

⁴⁴Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication*, 2.

⁴⁵Hossain, *Rokeya Rachanabali*, 494–5.

In Europe, like Gregory, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), “arguably the most influential of the Enlightenment thinkers”⁴⁶ and European educational philosophers of his time, strongly opposed equal education for women. In the *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft often alludes to Rousseau and to his fictional creation Sophie – an embodiment of traditional, stereotypical views of women’s education. Rousseau eulogises the constructed ignorance of Sophie, and celebrates: “What a pleasing ignorance! Happy is the man destined to instruct her. She will be her husband’s disciple, not his teacher”.⁴⁷ Rousseau rejected any idea of formal education for girls; the maximum education he considered allowable for them is from mothers at home. Accordingly, right from the beginning, girls were taught matters of little or no intellectual consequence such as needlework and cookery as well as decorum and etiquette, whereas boys could explore intricate branches of knowledge.

Likewise, in Rokeya’s society daughters of upper-class society were given at best some smattering of language, different kinds of needle work, knitting wool,⁴⁸ and “a few pages of Urdu primer, very simple arithmetic, and five hundred recipes for preserves and pickles, but nothing about nutrition, diet, nursing, or child psychology, not to mention other subjects”.⁴⁹ They were at best encouraged to learn a smidgen of Arabic and Urdu in domestic conditions. Patriarchal institutions upheld the view that women have a natural tendency towards obedience and therefore their education should be geared to enhance such qualities. This traditional pattern of segregated roles of womanhood paved the way for a bipolar, two-track gender-based education system. Although Ashraf Ali Thanvi (1864–1943) is often credited to be the first Islamic theologian in India to promote female education, somewhat like Talleyrand-Périgord’s, his idea of female literacy did not go beyond the conventional concept of making women obedient wives and good mothers. His widely-read conduct book for Muslim women *Bihishti Zewar* (Heavenly Ornaments) contains “popular prescriptions for feminine conduct”.⁵⁰ Equally, among Hindus there were reformers like Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856–1920) who maintained negative views about women’s intellectual abilities and opposed female education which they feared would divert women from their primary role in the house.⁵¹ The purpose of woman’s life was thought to be devotion to the needs and pleasures of man; so the subject of female education was firmly tethered to this traditional notion of femininity.

As discussed before, through their gendered education strategies, Wollstonecraft’s and Rokeya’s male contemporaries – Rousseau, Fordyce, Gregory, Tilak, and Thanvi – were concerned only about men’s interests and their need for pleasures from women. A prevailing belief was that if women acquired the “strength of body and mind” by exercising intellect or acquired knowledge, they would be “unsexed” and would suffer the loss of “soft

⁴⁶Nikki Stafford, *Finding Lost: The Unofficial Guide* (Toronto: ECW, 2006), 62.

⁴⁷Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile for Today: The Emile of Jean Jacques Rousseau*, ed. William Boyd (London: Heinemann, 1956 [1762]), 153.

⁴⁸Hossain, *Rokeya Rachanabali*, 276.

⁴⁹Roushan Jahan, *Sultana’s Dream and Selection from The Secluded Ones* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1988), 51.

⁵⁰Susie Tharu, “Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain,” in *Women Writing in India: 600 BC to the Present*, vol. I, ed. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (London: Pandora, 1991), 340–3, 340.

⁵¹Aparna Basu, “A Century and a Half’s Journey: Women’s Education in India, 1850s to 2000,” in *Women of India: Colonial and Post-colonial Periods*, ed. Bharati Ray (New Delhi: Centre for Studies in Civilizations, 2005), 183–207, 184; Barnita Bagchi, “Connected and Entangled Histories: Writing Histories of Education in the Indian Context,” *Paedagogica Historica* 50, no. 6 (2014): 813–21, 816.

bewitching beauty”⁵² – the supposed epitome of feminine excellence. It was believed that equal education would render women overbearing, intractable, and impervious to men’s wishes – such a sense of apprehension ran through the veins of male-dominated authority. So female education was considered a blemish in the female character.

Refuting ideas of gendered intellect and promoting female education

Wollstonecraft and Rokeya defied cultural perceptions of education and maintained that the objective of education is not merely to work and earn money, but to develop natural faculties and to cultivate mental capacities. Wollstonecraft stated that “the most perfect education . . . is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart”.⁵³ Rokeya also maintained that God has given humans hands, legs, eyes, ears, heart, and an intellectual capacity, and that using God-given potential is a must and abusing it is a moral and religious lapse. If they strengthen their hands and legs through exercise and use hands for good deeds, “observe” carefully through eyes, listen attentively through ears, and learn to reflect acutely by using intellectual faculty, then this is proper education.⁵⁴ The ultimate purpose of education for both men and women is the same – to achieve self-realisation and to develop God-given faculties and inherent potentials crucial to human life. Contrary to the education strategies propounded by conduct book writers such as Rousseau and Gregory in Europe and Thanvi in India, Wollstonecraft and Rokeya proposed such an education for women as would help them achieve equal intellectual standing with men.

Wollstonecraft dismissed the idea of characterising women as intellectually inferior. If they appeared so, she argued, it was because of generational social conditioning that suppressed their intellectual development and paralysed their imagination and the ability to think independently. Wollstonecraft said: “If women are in general feeble both in body and mind, it arises less from nature than from education”.⁵⁵ In this respect, her confident challenge to patriarchal authority reads as follows: “Let their [women’s] faculties have room to unfold and their virtues to gain strength, and then determine where the whole sex must stand in the intellectual scale”.⁵⁶ What Wollstonecraft’s argument illustrates is that the seeming intellectual inferiority of women was an inevitable result of intellectual proscription and of the denial of mental exercise to which they were subjected. Equally, Rokeya contended that the misconception of female intellectual inferiority was socially constructed, and that if women were given an equal gateway for intellectual development, they would definitely demonstrate their cerebral strength and intellectual stamina, and might even surpass the majority of men in educational accomplishments. She cited a contemporary education report of her time:

In education women in India are not allowed to compete with men. Otherwise, if they were given opportunity, they would demonstrate their superiority even if confined at

⁵²Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication*, 395.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 37.

⁵⁴Hossain, *Rokeya Rachanabali*, 19.

⁵⁵Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication*, 81.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 69.

home. For example, in Bombay the percentage of boys who came successful is 20–25 whereas the percentage of girls is 75.⁵⁷

According to Rokeya, what was important was men's and women's entry into intellectual exercise and equal access to all branches of knowledge; hence, she "followed an inclusive curriculum"⁵⁸ at the school she founded. If women were given equal access to knowledge and learning institutions, and to jobs previously restricted to men, they would equal, or perhaps outperform, men, as she fictionally proved in *Sultana's Dream* where women in charge of public affairs demonstrate their superior military and administrative feats.

Wollstonecraft employed religious arguments and maintained that God, the most "gracious", cannot discriminate in endowing man and woman with (intellectual) capabilities necessary to accomplish their duties. She said: "Women, I allow, may have different duties to fulfil; but they are *human* duties, and the principles that should regulate the discharge of them, I sturdily maintain, must be the same".⁵⁹ She maintained that the duties of men and women as "rational creatures" are largely the same; hence there should not be any fundamental difference between their cognitive abilities for educational attainment. She stated: "The being who discharges the duties of its station is independent; and, speaking of women at large, their first duty is to themselves as rational creatures".⁶⁰ The crux of Wollstonecraft's arguments is women's identity as rational beings and their equal capacity to receive education and instruction. By emphasising the cognitive equality of men and women, she participated in a long-standing debate about women's mental abilities, as "[f]rom Plato's Diotama onward, the figure of the woman intellectual . . . had hovered on the margins of western intellectual life".⁶¹ Keeping this genesis of the debate in mind, she related the issue to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment principles of human rights and regarded reason and rationality as the basis and apex of human intellectual achievement as well as the means to achieve female emancipation. She argued vigorously not only for women's rights to education but for the virtue of reason and rationalism above organised social norms, especially the gender-based intellectual hierarchy. But as women were thought to be "irrational beings" they "were understood not to merit the same rights, freedoms, and privileges accorded to men".⁶² So in order to make use of the discourse of the French Revolution and the ideals of Enlightenment philosophy for the benefit of women, Wollstonecraft challenged constructed attitudes and stereotypes of gender roles that refused to recognise women as rational beings.

Wollstonecraft touched on the identity of the "soul" and put this telling question to the proponents of the theory of female intellectual inferiority: "... does this prove that there is a sex in souls?"⁶³ By employing the terms "soul" and "sex", she struck at the dichotomy between human and female that was deeply ingrained in the social order and peripheralised women "on the edge of power patterns".⁶⁴ In eighteenth-century Britain, "the body–soul *querela*" remained pervasive as "a powerful way of representing

⁵⁷Hossain, *Rokeya Rachanabali*, 206.

⁵⁸Quayum, "Gender and Education," 148.

⁵⁹Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication*, 106.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 331.

⁶¹Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), 28.

⁶²D. M. Juschka, "General Introduction," in *Feminism in the Study of Religion: A Reader*, ed. D. M. Juschka (London: Continuum), 1–24, 3.

⁶³Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication*, 128.

⁶⁴Gillian Beer, "Representing Women: Re-presenting the Past [Extract]," in *Biography in Theory: Key Texts with Commentaries*, ed. Wilhelm Hemecker and Edward Saunders (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 229–37, 231.

gendered and sexual relations” by metaphorically analogising “the soul–body duo” to the husband–wife nexus, as “the body was identified with sensual Eve and the soul, or reason, with Adam”.⁶⁵ This concept of the soul–body dichotomy particularly influenced the debate on female education as well as “women’s own ontology”.⁶⁶ Wollstonecraft was opposed to this “long tradition of female objectification that facilitates, even encourages, the transformation of the female subject into mere flesh and inhibits any similar transformation of men”.⁶⁷ In the semi-autobiographical novel *Mary, a Fiction*, she “created an independent female protagonist whose grandeur is derived from the operations of [her] own faculties, not subjugated to opinion”.⁶⁸ She vehemently rejected the exclusive association of women with the body and men with the mind/soul and sought to establish women’s equal claim on the soul, stating:

EARLY marriages are, in my opinion, a stop to improvement. If we were born only “to draw nutrition, propagate and rot,” the sooner the end of creation was answered the better; but as women are here allowed to have souls, the soul ought to be attended to.⁶⁹

According to Wollstonecraft, the soul of both men and women is one and the same and is independent of gender identity. Her idea of an identical soul was perhaps also intended to counter Fordyce’s idea that “there is a sex in minds”⁷⁰ and to refute any claim that men and women have different intellectual capacities. What she sought to argue is that, even though there is a contrast between the biological and physical features of men and women and there are social differences between them, clearly they share spiritual equality and do possess the same intellectual ability.

Interestingly, Wollstonecraft’s idea that there is no innate difference between the soul of men and women is consistent with the Qur’anic notion of *nafsin-wahidah* or “a single soul”. As the Qur’an (4:1) states:

People, be mindful of your Lord, who created you from *nafsin-wahidah* (a single soul), and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them spread countless men and women far and wide; be mindful of God, in whose name you make requests of one another. Beware of severing the ties of kinship: God is always watching over you.

This Qur’anic verse explicitly declares that both men and women have originated from one single soul, one single being and one single family. What is more, Qur’an (32: 9) states that God gave the same divine breath to all humans and equally endowed both genders with the faculties of hearing, sight, and mind (ability to understand) so that they can use them and be grateful to Him. This particular convergence between Wollstonecraft’s notion of the soul and the Islamic concept of *nafsin-wahidah* as well as identical divine breath evinces another streak of similarity between Wollstonecraft’s and Rokeya’s ideas given that Rokeya repeatedly makes references to the primary

⁶⁵Roy Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason: The Modern Foundations of Body and Soul* (New York: Norton, 2003), 41.

⁶⁶Rebecca Davies, *Written Maternal Authority and Eighteenth-Century Education in Britain: Educating by the Book* (London: Routledge, 2016), 23.

⁶⁷Amelia Defalco, “Haunting Physicality: Corpses, Cannibalism, and Carnality in Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2006):771–83, 781.

⁶⁸Eger and Peltz, *Brilliant Women*, 106.

⁶⁹Mary Wollstonecraft, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: With Reflections on Female Conduct, in the more important Duties of Life* (London: Johnson, 1787), 93.

⁷⁰James Fordyce, *Sermons to Young Women*, vol. 2, 4th ed. (London: A Miller and T Cadell, 1767), 221.

sources of Islam – the Qur’an and Sunnah – and also uses the religion as the framework of her campaign for women’s rights.

In Rokeya’s society, one popular, pseudo-medical argument against women’s intellectual ability pertained to the size of men’s and women’s brains. As women’s brain is supposedly smaller in size, it was argued, they must be lesser in cerebral and mental competence. Rokeya effectively dismissed the myth of brain-size and the assumption of women’s lesser intellectual ability in a very sophisticated, striking way. In the story “Bhrata O Bhogni”, she names the character who pronounces such cultural beliefs as Kazeb – an Arabic word meaning “liar”. So Kazeb’s stereotypical pronouncements about women and femininity are semantically and stylistically proven false. Second, she used her favourite literary device – argumentative strategy – to refute such ideas. She took up this issue in the novella *Sultana’s Dream* where she delineates a feminist utopia – Ladyland. The visitor to Ladyland, Sultana opens out her mind to the resident Sister Sara and pronounces the conventional Indian beliefs about female intellectual capacities thus: “Even their [men’s] brains are bigger and heavier than women’s. Are they not?” Sister Sara, Rokeya’s fictional alter ego, replies: “Yes, but what of that? An elephant also has got a bigger and heavier brain than a man has. Yet man can enchain elephants and use them, according to his own wishes”.⁷¹ She also argues that “[a] lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race”.⁷² Thus, employing her signature animal imagery, Rokeya emphasised that physical size and brawn power were not the determinants of men’s and women’s level of intellectual ability and performance.

Against the pseudo-religious rhetoric of woman’s intellectual deficiency, Rokeya deployed a religious argument to affirm that, instead of being intellectually inferior to men, women were actually the original source of humans’ intellectual and learning abilities. She referred to the Biblical story of Adam and Eve, and argued that it was woman who first ate the fruit of knowledge, while man took only the leftovers; so how could it be credible that now women – the discoverers of knowledge and intellectuality – had to be regarded as being intellectually inferior and why could women not contribute to promoting education?⁷³ In this regard, Rokeya apparently seemed to concede the Biblical concept of Original Sin. However, it would be untenable if it is held that she muddled up the Christian doctrine of Original Sin with the Qur’anic account of the “Fall”. She rather humorously referred to the commonly held cultural belief, hinted at the uncritical reception of the Biblical version of the “Fall” in her social context, and exposed a contradiction in patriarchal ideology: if the Biblical story of Adam and Eve had some truth in it, how could woman be considered a lesser intellectual being?

Actually, Rokeya did not believe that Eve first tasted the fruit of knowledge and women are intellectually superior to men, or vice versa. Nor did she subscribe to the Biblical version of the story of Adam and Eve, as she stated on another occasion: “a ‘native Christian’ may think that women’s thirst of knowledge is the cause of the fall of humanity, as according to ‘Genesis’ foremother Eve along with Adam was driven away

⁷¹Hossain, *Rokeya Rachanabali*, 481.

⁷²Ibid., 479.

⁷³Ibid., 206.

from the blissful state as she ate the fruit of knowledge tree”.⁷⁴ Rokeya categorised the cultural reception of the story of the Fall as typically Biblical. This sense of discrimination demonstrates her profound knowledge of the Qur’an which negates that Eve first had the forbidden fruit. Nor is Eve singled out in the Qur’an for the blame of the Fall. Almost on every occasion, where the creation of Adam and Eve together with the subsequent episodes is described in the Qur’an, God uses the dual pronoun *huma* (both of them) to suggest that both Adam and Eve were misguided by Satan and were equally at fault (Qur’an, 2:36; 7:11–25). Moreover, verse 20:120 of the Qur’an singles out Adam and states that he was tempted by Satan; and verse 20:121 clearly states: “And [thus] did Adam disobey his Sustainer, and thus did he fall into grievous error”. That is to say, Islam does not regard Eve as a tempting object or as solely responsible for the Fall of humans from heavenly grace.

However, for the sake of argument, Rokeya mentioned the conventional Biblical account of Original Sin to debunk the cultural perception of women’s intellectual inferiority and thus to establish “the agency of Eve”, that is, “women’s active participation in knowledge-making”.⁷⁵ In two of her short stories – “The Theory of Creation” and “The Creation of Woman” – she also makes use of the Hindu mythology of the creation of the human race to argue that “women are more complete and engaging in their character than men, who tend to be flat, overbearing and one-dimensional”.⁷⁶ Rokeya’s reasoning is more revealing in “The Creation of Woman” where she argues, to use Quayum’s words, “that since woman is Tvastri’s last creation, it is also obviously his best”.⁷⁷ Understandably, Rokeya’s employment of Christian and Hindu accounts of the creation of human being demonstrates her argumentative rhetoric – not her belief in them – that she used to disprove the notion of women’s mental deficiency.

Rokeya’s argument for female education demonstrates her deeper knowledge of Islamic teachings. According to her, by denying women their legitimate share in education, Muslim men violated a major religious command and showed disrespect to their Prophet. She said that the person who spoke first for equal education for men and women is Prophet Muhammad who made it compulsory for both genders to acquire knowledge.⁷⁸ She added:

Our great Prophet has said “Talibul Ilm farizatun ala kulli Muslimeen-o-Muslimat” (i.e. it is the bounden duty of all Muslim males and females to acquire knowledge). But our brothers will not give us our proper share in education.⁷⁹

Though such Islamic teachings were not unknown in Rokeya’s society, they were construed from a male-centred viewpoint that contributed to the exclusion of women from mainstream education. Rokeya’s arguments resonate with what the pioneer of Islamic modernism in the Arab world, the Egyptian modernist thinker and reformer Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849–1905) maintained:

⁷⁴Ibid., 18–19.

⁷⁵Bagchi, “Towards Ladyland,” 748, 749.

⁷⁶Quayum, “Gender and Education,” 145.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Hossain, *Rokeya Rachanabali*, 227.

⁷⁹Ibid., 491.

To be sure, the Muslims have been at fault in the education and training of women, and acquainting them with their rights; and we acknowledge that we have failed to follow the guidance of our religion, so that we have become an argument against it.⁸⁰

Like 'Abduh's, Rokeya's forceful religious arguments substantiated by references to the primary texts of Islam had legitimacy in her society. Her primary audience – Muslims of colonial Bengal – could not deny on religious grounds that, in Islam, it is incumbent upon both men and women to acquire knowledge, and it is a collective responsibility of society to have both boys and girls educated in equal terms. So it is not up to the religious leaders, she affirmed, to give a verdict whether women were allowed to have an education or not; the matter was settled long before by the Prophet himself. Pointing to this religious lapse of the Muslim community, Rokeya stated:

The question is why Muslims, who are ready to sacrifice their lives for the Prophet, are reluctant to carry out his true command about education? ... Given the fact that our Prophet made female education obligatory, why are they indifferent to providing their daughters with proper education?⁸¹

Such religious arguments questioned the religious affiliation and legitimacy of the Muslim opponents of female education. She argued that they could not be good adherents of Islam until they implemented this significant Islamic injunction of education, common to both men and women. Rokeya's views with regard to female education were perhaps not alien in early twentieth-century Muslim Bengal. Some of the literary magazines and periodicals that published Rokeya's works and supported the establishment of her school in many capacities were: *The Mussalman*, *Masik Mohammadi* (the Monthly Mohammadi), *Sawgat* (lit. a gift), *Al-Islam*, *Bangiya Mussalman Sahitya Patrika* (the Literary Magazine of the Muslims of Bengal), *Nabanoor* (the New Light), *Mah-e-Nau* (the New Month), *Dhumketo* (the Comet) and *The Muezzin*. These were largely owned or edited by prominent Muslim writers and public figures who must have had sympathy for her broader goal of educational egalitarianism. All this suggests that Rokeya's feminist concerns (though revolutionary) had intellectual provenance in her society which "overwhelmed the opposition she faced, helping her to make significant headway in the establishment of women's rights".⁸²

Similarly, Wollstonecraft also had an intellectual support base for her work. Male scholars such as Thomas Paine (1737–1809) and William Godwin (1756–1836) were in favour of women's education and against their exclusion from knowledge. Moreover, her advocacy for female education resonated with that of her contemporary feminist scholar and philosopher Catharine Macaulay "whose *Letters on Education* she greatly admired" and to whom she even intended to dedicate the *Rights of Woman*.⁸³ Upon publication, the book was so well received that "[b]ooksellers hurried to supply impatient customers[,] ... [r]eviews appeared in all major magazines while across the country men and women of influence absorbed and discussed the book's message" and readers' "approbatory note ... was audible ... throughout the educated world to which the majority of [them] belonged" even though "this welcoming attitude had

⁸⁰Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 139–40.

⁸¹Hossain, *Rokeya Rachanabali*, 227.

⁸²Md. Mahmudul Hasan, "Nasrin Gone Global: A Critique of Taslima Nasrin's Criticism of Islam and Her Feminist Strategy," *South Asia Research* 36, no. 2 (2016): 167–85, 177.

⁸³Berges, *The Routledge Guidebook*, 26.

evaporated” by the end of the century for reasons extraneous to the text.⁸⁴ So both societies had intellectuals and readers with sympathies for feminist ideas, especially women’s rights to equal educational opportunities; however, what made Wollstonecraft and Rokeya stand out among others was their intensity of concern, argumentative flair, richness, and rigour of their feminist thinking.

Wollstonecraft and Rokeya presented utilitarian reasons to persuade men to remove restrictions on women’s equal educational opportunities. Men perpetuated their dominance and maintained their privileged positions, keeping women uneducated and confined to the home. At the same time, they also wanted their sons to be educated and successful in life. Wollstonecraft and Rokeya saw a serious contradiction in the male aspiration of having sons learned and capable. Wollstonecraft talked about the uneducated and “weak indolent mother” who was “unable to educate her sons, or impress them with respect”.⁸⁵ In the context of reforming education, Wollstonecraft argued that if, through a gender egalitarian education, women could become “good citizens” and “possess a good and solid grasp of the republican virtues, they [would] be able to pass them on to their children”.⁸⁶ Obviously, literate mothers are better trained in rearing and producing educated, cultured children. But if mothers are denied educational opportunities and sink down into a life of lethargy and low self-esteem, logically they cannot bring up their children as fathers would like. Similarly, Rokeya also talked about men’s interest and benefit in female education, stating:

That we [women] have recently become indolent, narrow-minded and faint-hearted ... is because of the prevailing lack of knowledge. . . . The timidity of women gradually contaminates the boys. When a boy of five finds his mother fainted after seeing an insect, does he not think that an insect is really a dreadful thing?

... Let me also venture to say that it is so; for children born of well-educated mothers [of other communities in Bengal] must necessarily be superior to Muslim children, who are born of illiterate and foolish mothers.⁸⁷

Men wanted to have their sons brave, valiant, and bright; but, Rokeya argued, this would not happen if the mothers were kept ignorant. She urged men to be pragmatic in order to realise this goal. She made a taxonomical division and called the adversaries of female education imprudent, as they wanted to exercise unquestioned authority over women and ignored the greater interest of society. On the contrary, she honoured the men as farsighted brothers who had woken up and come to realise the cost society paid for the absence of female education.

Thus Wollstonecraft's and Rokeya's struggle for female education is driven by egalitarian principles and by their concern for the wider society, as they regarded women's illiteracy as detrimental to all. Their aim was not only the welfare of women but of society as a whole. They wanted women to be educated and assume their responsibilities as human beings, and believed that this would help accelerate the progress of society. Accordingly, “affection for the whole human race”⁸⁸ ran through

⁸⁴Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft*, 25, 27.

⁸⁵Wollstonecraft, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, 157, 101.

⁸⁶Berges, *The Routledge Guidebook*, 26.

⁸⁷Hossain, *Rokeya Rachanabali*, 44, 491.

⁸⁸Wollstonecraft, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, iv.

the *Rights of Woman*, which maintained that women's traditional roles impeded their progress and eventually hindered the progress of humanity. As regards the feminist altruistic philosophy, Wollstonecraft's concern had a global and transnational dimension and was not reducible to local outcomes. In Rokeya's feminist thinking, even though British colonialism in India and its deleterious effects on her society largely inspired her, there are "expressions of anxiety about the whole of humanity in her oeuvre".⁸⁹ However, she made use of the colonial condition to enforce her ideas, as her society was in dire need of reform and transformation to be free from foreign rule.

Conclusion

Contrary to popular modes of learning that discriminated against women in educational programmes, Wollstonecraft and Rokeya proposed a gender-neutral education system, which would evenly develop the mental faculties of men and women. The strict division in education policies tended to exclude women from power structures, limiting them to being only tender and delicate, not strong and powerful – fully dependent on their husbands, fathers, and brothers. In their struggle for gender equality, Wollstonecraft and Rokeya brought the campaign for equal education and learning opportunities to the forefront. They also encouraged women to go beyond what society expected from them in order to combat opposition to, and disparities in, educational opportunities. Both of them established schools for girls;⁹⁰ however, their intellectual and literary gifts, reasoning ability, and persuasive argumentation for female education touched on in this article have remained more prominent.

Wollstonecraft was largely influenced by the liberal principles of the French Revolution and the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment. Mainly after the French Revolution, the Western world witnessed a broad public awareness of democratic values and the rights of the individual. In such a pan-European context, writers like Wollstonecraft "were able to draw on the political vocabularies and systems ... developed by white male middle classes to safeguard their interests and not intended to be applicable to women".⁹¹ Likewise, at a time when her compatriots in and beyond Bengal started making a proper diagnosis of their distinctive, deplorable situation under colonial rule and demanded "greater political liberty for Indians", Rokeya pointed to the need for including female education in the overall programme of political and social change and psychological deliverance and argued that it formed "the cornerstone for India's political emancipation as well as social emancipation".⁹² Thus Wollstonecraft and Rokeya made use of the socio-historical conditions of their respective societies and proposed the agenda of female education for comprehensive reform and egalitarian transformation of society. Their feminist readings of women's subaltern condition met at one unified point of view – the absence of equal educational opportunities for women was the root cause of their sufferings. Hence we notice the same forcefulness in their argument for female education.

⁸⁹Md. Mahmudul Hasan, "Indictment of Misogyny on Mary Wollstonecraft and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain," *BRAC University Journal* 1, no. 2 (2004): 1–12, 11.

⁹⁰Quayum and Hasan, "Introduction," xiii.

⁹¹Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 245.

⁹²Bagchi, "Towards Ladyland," 744, 754.

Cultural mythologies about female intellect and the consequent prohibition of female education contributed to the complex structure of women's vulnerability and men's gendered privileges. In such cultural contexts, Wollstonecraft and Rokeya argued that if women were given equal educational opportunities, gender discrimination and their position of inferiority would disappear; and they would demonstrate their true potential and would perform as competently as men in public life. They maintained that lack of female education or the obvious faults in its system reduced women to a condition of deficiency; and women's equal access to learning opportunities would enable them to acquire education, skill, and professional experience, and to share evenly with men the responsibilities for the advancement of society.

In their rebuttal of the myth of women's intellectual inferiority, Wollstonecraft and Rokeya refuted both social mythologies and prevalent pseudo-religious arguments against women's intellectual abilities and educational rights. In their literary and political pursuits, they dismissed a common cultural myth that women were intellectually inferior to men, on the basis of which society impeded women's entry into education. Given the temporal and social contexts in which they wrote, their philosophy of female education was quite radical. They made an undifferentiated argument that the conventional practice of relegating women to an inferior social position rendered them unfit for worthier activities. But if hindrances were removed and they were given equal opportunities, they would prove their worth in full parity with men. Such a courageous assertion may seem unimportant or even trivial to readers of the twenty-first century, but in their times it amounted to a bold defiance of the traditional patriarchal power structure.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the Research Management Centre, International Islamic University Malaysia [grant no. RIGS16-216-0380].

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