

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's Islamic feminism

Md. Mahmudul Hasan

International Islamic University Malaysia

I am glad that I am speaking Prof Claire Chambers' keynote on two South Asian women, as in some way she set the foundation of my talk on another Muslim South Asian woman.

Many thanks for the generous introduction, though it has set a high benchmark for me. I am grateful to the organisers, especially Dr Hasnul Insani and Dr A. Dzo'ul Milal, for putting great efforts in making this conference happen. I would actually feel much happier to meet you all in person and to relish proverbial Indonesian hospitality which I actually enjoyed in 2015 and 2018. Let me make a confession: Even though my initial reaction to this academic event had been enthusiastic, later my interest greatly increased when I saw the list of keynote speakers and other presenters.

My topic is Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's Islamic feminism. I have been studying and writing on this South Asian woman writer for decades. I don't know how much I can share in a span of 30 minutes or so, but my presentation will be followed by a strenuous but generous and compassionate question and answer session that will hopefully enable us to interact in a more engaging way.

I have some notes in front of me. But I am not very good at following notes and may stray away from them.

Before going to the main discussion, let me share with you some kind of housekeeping information. In academic writing, her name appears as Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. But, in Bangladesh, where she is regarded as a national and cultural treasure, she is popularly known as Begum Rokeya. In the South Asian sub-continental Muslim culture, the word Begum (from Turkish Bigim) is an honorific used as a prefix or suffix. It is normally a mark of dignity and nobility for a married woman.

On a separate note, during Rokeya's lifetime Bangladesh as an independent country did not exist. However, she was born in the district of Rangpur what is now in Bangladesh. What is more, most of her writings are in Bangla. That is why, she is primarily known as a Bangladeshi writer. However, the site of her activism was Calcutta of British India. Interestingly, Rokeya's forefathers had come to South Asia from Tabriz in Iran (Ray, 2002, p.17).

A 2004 BBC Bangla Service survey on the greatest Bengali of all time put Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) at number six. She was the only woman to make it in its list of top 20. Rokeya is widely revered as a literary scholar, social reformer and social justice activist who fought for women's rights on multiple fronts – literary, political and educational.

Although during her lifetime she faced opposition from many sectors, in today's Bangladesh, her iconic status is evidenced in the fact that 9 December, which marks her birth and death anniversaries, is a national day that is commemorated by the government and various literary and cultural organisations. Newspapers and periodicals publish essays on her life and works.

As a writer and activist, Rokeya worked on three fronts:

Educational

Literary

Political

Wollstonecraft and Woolf

Sometime in the late 1890s, Sayyid Mumtaz Ali visited Aligarh and happened to show Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan the manuscript of his treatise in defense of women's rights in Islamic law, *Huquq un-Niswan*. As he began to read it, Sir Sayyid looked shocked. He then opened it to a second place and his face turned red. As he read it at a third place, his hands started to tremble. Finally, he tore up the manuscript and threw it into the wastepaper basket. Fortunately, at that moment a servant arrived to announce lunch, and as Sir Sayyid left his office, Mumtaz Ali snatched his mutilated manuscript from the trash. He waited until

Sir Sayyid's death in 1898, however, to publish *Huquq un-Niswan*. (Minault 1990, 147)

The great Hindu social reformist philosopher Keshub Chandra Sen's (1838-84) Victoria College did not include science in its curriculum. He "felt that education was intended to make the woman more adept at running the household" (de Souza xiii). Rokeya did not believe in any disparity or discipline differences between male and female education and sought women's access invariably to all branches of knowledge.

She promoted female education through her writings and speeches and began a girls' school first informally in Bhagalpur in Bihar in 1909 with five students. Then formally in Calcutta in 1911 with eight students. She named it Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School partly because, before his death in 1909, her husband Syed Sakhawat Hossain had set aside a huge sum of money – Rs. 10,000 – for female education." After his death, Rokeya also received a lawful share in inheritance and an income of Rs. 6,000 annually. She spent her time, money and energy for the school. The school now named Sakhawat Memorial Govt. Girls' High School is still running though in a different fashion than what Rokeya wanted.

During Rokeya's time there were many political organisations for men, such as, All India Muslim League, Central Mohammedan Association, and All India Educational Conference. Muslim women established one for themselves in Aligarh in 1914 and named it Anjuman-e Khawatin-e Islam. Aligarh is about 800 miles away from Rokeya's Calcutta. With Rokeya's initiative and tireless work, Anjuman's Calcutta branch was established in 1916. This organisation became extinct long ago. What continues to glow and may influence many generations to come is her literary production. The recurrent motif that runs through her writings and demands our attention 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, she was never associated with ‘feminism’ or ‘Islamic feminism’. Actually, these terms were not widely known or used in her time.

According to one view, the word ‘feminism’ was first coined by the activist and founder of suffragism in France, Hubertine Auclert (1848–1914) in the 1880s. And the word ‘feminist’ entered Oxford English Dictionary in 1895. Although recent research suggests that the term ‘feminist’ was first known as early as 1852.

According to another opinion, the term ‘feminism’ was first invented in 1837 and the word ‘feminist’ first appeared in 1872. If Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* – which was published in 1792) – is considered the earliest significant western feminist document, it is obvious that, the term ‘feminism’ came into being long after the women’s rights movement began.

Many early advocates of women’s rights whom we now know as ‘feminist’ were not called feminist during their lifetime. Some even maintained distance from the term.

For example, Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) is now considered a very influential feminist writer in English literature. But she was opposed to any 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 characteristics which they would not have troubled to think about had they not been challenged.’ What is more, in a more mature 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.

The first institutional recognition of the term 'feminism' happened in the 1910s when a segment of the US suffrage movement adopted it. However, the term feminism started to be widely used only in the 1960s and '70s that saw the emergence of second wave feminism in the west.

Especially since the 1990s, the discourse of Islamic feminism has undergone rapid growth as a formidable academic discipline. American writer Elizabeth Warnock Fernea's 1998 book *In Search of Islamic Feminism: One Woman's Global Journey* is an important landmark of the academic usage of the term Islamic feminism. In the book, Fernea talks about "Early Islamic feminism in America" and states:

"And of course the laws regarding land ownership varied. Some [US] states did not allow for women's rights to land; interestingly enough, those which did were those where earlier Spanish laws prevailed, as in Texas. These were the laws, from the Moors, that granted women such rights in the seventh century."

267

In a later work, Fernea mentions that the first American states "to grant women inheritance rights were Texas, California, Arizona and New Mexico, all of which were once under Spanish control," for which Fernea (2000) credits the Islamic influences on Spain.

Among the prominent Islamic feminist scholars and activists is Zaynab al Ghazali (1917 – 2005) who in 1935 at the age of 18 broke away from Huda Sharawi's secular organisation Feminist Union to form an Islamic feminist organisation named Jamaa'at al-Sayyidaat al-Muslimaat or Muslim Women's Association.

Now, what is Islamic feminism?

Islamic feminism uses Islamic ideas and arguments in fighting for women's rights. It "clearly expresses the renewal of the place of women in Islamic

societies and an affirmation of a liberation vindicated by complete fidelity to the principles of Islam.” It is a feminist liberation within and by Islam.

Before discussing Islamic feminism in Rokeya, I would like to touch on my encounters with her works, as it may help make the discussion clearer.

Since many of us are celebrating Eid, it is perhaps relevant to say that my earliest exposure to the work of Rokeya occurred during my elementary education years when I read her essay ‘Eid Sammilon’ (Eid Gathering). It celebrates the congregational prayer, social rendezvous and get-together of Muslims during the festive season of Eid. She states:

‘On Eid-day, the young and the old, and the rich and the poor all gather together in masjid! What a wonderful scene! The act of looking at this scene has the potential to purify eyes!’

She lays great emphasis on the unity not only within the Muslim community but also among various religious groups of the region. She stresses the need for including non-Muslim neighbours while rejoicing on such religio-cultural occasions so that such happiness can extend beyond religious boundaries and thus can facilitate greater unity among people. This is just one example of Rokeya’s generosity, magnanimity and broadmindedness.

Reading her essay on Eid marked the first phase of my encounter with Rokeya’s work. However, for a long time, my view of Rokeya was imprecise. In my juvenile mind, she was the foremost feminist in Bangladesh; and the feminists that I came across in the media were known as Islamophobic. Sadly, I painted Rokeya with the same broad brushstrokes of anti-Islam and somewhat put her in the same basket as the likes of Taslima Nasrin.

Previously, Rokeya was continuously depicted as a secular, anti-Islamic writer – all based on wrong interpretation of her writings. One statement that is often quoted to portray her as critical of Islam is:

“To keep us in darkness, men have represented those religious books as if they came from God as a set of instructions [...]. These are nothing but written by men” (p.217 [emphasis added]).

Hossain (1996) argues: “[Rokeya] questioned the authority of or the merits of the Quran itself;” she “started to insist that the Quran, far from being divinely inspired literature, was in fact the product of the male brain” (p.80); and “she had declared the Qur’an to be fraud” (p.119).

In her disapproval of religious texts, Murshid (1993) argues, Rokeya does not “exclude Islam” (p.145).

In her 2003 book *On the Outside Looking In(dian): Indian Women Writers at Home and Abroad*, the American feminist scholar Phillipa Kafka contends that Rokeya “dared publicly to challenge the [...] Qur’an itself,” and “displayed awesome courage in critiquing the holiest and most sanctified of documents for Muslims – the Qur’an” (pp.45 & 52).

Rokeya was actually challenging those men who employed religious pressures and presented misogynist values as sets of divine instructions.

When Rokeya maintains that the religious books are man-made, she has in mind numerous secondary, pseudo-religious texts – such as *Bihishti Zewar* (1905) and *Rahe Najat* (1916) – full of misogynistic ideas written by less informed Islamic theologians with their culturally constructed set of beliefs. In *Matichur-I* (1904a), she refers to such a semi-religious text and quotes: “If a husband even chops the head of his wife, she should not complain or utter any discontent [...]. Husband is the Guide and the Crown for woman” (p.51).

“If God had sent any messengers for female repression, those messengers would not have been confined to Asia only. Why did not those emissaries go to Europe?” (p.217).

In this context also, she does not hint at prophets sent by God but the writers of those pseudo-sacred, misogynist books.

Rokeya's references to the Qur'an are full of reverence and devotion. She argues that people should be educated in the Arabic language so that they can have first-hand knowledge about Islamic texts and can take the fullest benefit from them (Rokeya, 1906b, p.205). In one of her letters, Rokeya (1932b) states: "I feel great peace in my mind when reading pages from the Qur'an every day in the morning. What a solace lies in this verse!" (p.498). Then she quotes the following oft-repeated verse from the Qur'an: "No reward do I ask of you for it: my reward is only from the Lord of the worlds" (26:109, 127, 145, 164 & 180). Again this tells us, apart from her deep faith in the Qur'an, about the driving spirit that inspires her to work for the betterment of her society and for women's emancipation, and that is to please God and to earn the fullest reward in the life hereafter.

Rokeya invokes divine justice and highlights God's even-handedness. Rokeya (1904a) states:

In the eyes of our mother and of our God we are not half of our brothers. If we were, when a son is carried (in the womb) for ten months, a daughter would have been carried for five months. Half of the amount of milk that flowed for a son would have flowed for a daughter. But it is not so. We enjoy as much love and affection from our mothers as our brothers do. There is no partiality in the hearts of our mothers; how can we then say that God is partial? Isn't God more compassionate than our mothers? (p.30 [trans. Barton, 1998, p.112])

This is very much an assertion of her faith in God and in the Islamic framework of gender justice. Decontextualizing Rokeya's statement, Kafka creates a wedge between Rokeya and Islam, as Kafka argues:

[Rokeya] specifically addressed the Islamic law that decreed that two women were the equivalent of one man by arguing that if this were the case then God "would have ordained it so that mothers would have given birth to daughters" in half the time that it took them to bear sons and that mothers would have been

allotted only half of their milk supply for daughters than that for sons. (Kafka, 2003, pp.52-53)

This is a glaring example of how an isolated reading of Rokeya's texts can lead to the misrepresentation of her religious belief and her notion of 'gender jihad.'¹

Contrary to what Kafka deduces from the declaration, Rokeya actually recommends Muslim men to abide by God's even-handed rulings on the treatment of women. She does not indict the general Islamic law or the Islamic law of inheritance in this particular statement. However, she touches upon the inheritance issue and women's economic empowerment in other places of her writing. But even in those instances, she never questions Islamic inheritance law. Conversely, she regrets that Muslim women do not receive even whatever inheritance share Islam grants them. Rokeya (1904a) protests:

O Father Mohammad! You gave us right to inheritance, but your cunning disciples are wreaking havoc on us by employing various ploys. Alas! The writing of the Mohammedan law is confined in the book only. Law is for those who have money and power; it is not for the ignorant and defenceless women like us! (p.51)

Islamic feminist elements in Rokeya's writings began to be clearer to me when I met a reputed scholar of Islam. He introduced me to prominent reformist scholars who seek to establish women's rights and gender equity within the framework of Islam. It was in this spirit that he familiarised to me Rokeya's works in a meaningful way. One day he discussed Rokeya's speech 'Bengal Muslims on the way to ruin', and inspired me to read her other works. In that speech, she was promoting her school, saying:

An ideal Muslim girls' school will produce ideal Muslim women whose children will be like Hazrat Omar Faruq and Hazrat Fatema Zahra. To realise this goal, the spread of the teachings of the Qur'an in a great measure is

¹ I borrow the term 'gender jihad' from Amina Wadud (2006).

necessary. That is to say, it is essential to spread extensively its translations into Bangla and Urdu languages.”

“In my childhood, I used to hear my mother say: ‘The Qur’an will protect us as a shield.’ That statement is very true. However, this is not to say that we need to fasten a big and beautifully wrapped-up Qur’an tightly on our backs. Rather, in my humble opinion, it suggests that the universal teachings of the Qur’an will guard us from the dangers of superstitions of various kinds. Religious practices according to the Qur’an will protect us from moral and social degeneration.”

My third and most meaningful encounter with Rokeya’s life and work happened during my PhD studies at the University of Portsmouth, UK, as she was the central author of my thesis titled *Introducing Rokeya’s Plural Feminism: A Comparative Study of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s Feminist Writings with Those of Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Attia Hosain and Monica Ali* (2007). This time I discussed various aspects of her life and work in my thesis and my appreciation of her thoughts and philosophy understandably reached a higher level. This encounter with her writings still continues. It made me familiar with her complete works and with a large and expanding body of secondary sources on different aspects of her life and works.

I would like to highlight one essay which can be regarded as a hallmark of Rokeya’s Islamic feminist philosophy. The title of the essay is “God gives, man robs” and it is one of her English works.

“THERE is a saying, "Man proposes, God disposes," but my bitter experience shows that God gives, Man Robs. That is, Allah has made no distinction in the general life of male and female-- both are equally bound to seek food, drink, sleep, etc. necessary for animal life. Islam also teaches that male and female are equally bound to say their daily prayers five times, and so on.”

“Our great Prophet has said "Talibul Ilm farizatu '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. About sixty years ago, they were opposed to the study of English even for males; now they are reaping the harvest to their bitter experience. In India almost all the doors to wealth, health, and wisdom are shut against Muslims on the plea of inefficiency. Some papers conducted by Muslims may or may not admit this-- but fact is fact-- the inefficiency exists and stares us in the face! Let me also venture to say that it is so; for children born of well-educated mothers must necessarily be superior to Muslim children, who are born of illiterate and foolish mothers.”

“The worst crime which our brothers commit against us is to deprive us of education. There is always some grandfather or elderly uncle who stands in the way of any poor girl who might wish to be educated. From experience we find that mothers are generally willing to educate their girls, but they are quite helpless when their husbands and other male relations will not hear of girls attending school. May we challenge such grandfathers, fathers or uncles to show the authority on which they prevent their girls from acquiring education? Can they quote from the holy Quran or Hadis any injunction prohibiting women from obtaining knowledge?”

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

In her work, Rokeya argues that we don't need to go to the religious leaders to know whether women were allowed to have an education or not; the matter was settled long before by the Prophet himself. She regarded the absence of female education in Muslim Bengal as a religious lapse. She 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

She campaigns for the revival of the true values of Islam:

In Arab society, where women were being oppressed and female infanticide was widespread, Prophet Muhammad came to their rescue. He not only promulgated some precepts but also set an example of how to treat women with respect. He showed how to love one's daughter by demonstrating his love to Fatima. That love and affection for one's daughter is rare on earth. Alas! It is because of his absence among us that we [women] are in such a despicable plight! (Rokeya, 1904a, p.30)

When Rokeya talks about the absence of the Prophet among the Muslims, she does not necessarily mean his physical absence; rather she suggests the nonapplication of his teachings among the Muslims of India. On another occasion, Rokeya (1928) says, “The people [Muslims] of this country do not obey the Prophet Muhammad in a real sense” (p.438). Thus she condemns the artificial demonstration of many Muslims’ love for the Prophet. According to her, genuine love for him demands that Muslims emulate his kind treatment of women.

In her revolutionary pursuit to establish women’s rights, she critiqued cultural prejudices and pseudo-religious mythologies against women’s rights and equal educational opportunities. Unfortunately, some critics interpret her stance against pseudo-religious structures as one against Islam. They drive a wedge between Rokeya and her religion because of her atypical, unorthodox religious views and her challenge to its patriarchal construction.

About her private religious life, Saber (1995) states:

Rokeya [...] abided by religious instructions and the teachings of the Qur’an until the last moment of her life. On 9 Dec. in 1932 she woke up early in the morning to perform Fajr [predawn prayer]. She went to the bathroom to do wudu (ablution), where she died of heart stroke. (p.26)

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.’

Aligning the veil or the Islamic dress code with patriarchal repression and Muslim women who follow it with backwardness and passive reception of patriarchal control seems to rule out the possibility of Muslim women being involved in feminist lobbies to such an extent that the very term Islamic feminism sounds oxymoronic. Wearing a particular outfit seems to constitute a distinction between a feminist proper (western) and a feminist bizarre (Muslim). Said disapproves of such damaging caricatures of Islam by feminist Orientalist discourses and commemorates the emergence of works by Muslim writers that embody “a very different sort of idea about Islam, the Arabs, and the Middle East” and that challenge “the old despotism.”³³ In fact, since he made this statement in 1993, works on women’s position in Islam and in Muslim societies have increased both in volume and variety. Especially since the 1990s, the discourse of Islamic feminism has undergone rapid growth as a formidable academic discipline. The recent International Congress on Islamic Feminism in Barcelona (27-29 October 2005) signals the climax of this new, emerging brand of Islamic feminism.