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Envisioning equality: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's legacy of feminist ideology and women's empowerment through education

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Abstract

This paper examines the contributions of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* in awakening the consciousness of women. Also, this paper explores how Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's feminist ideology has led to the development and transformation of women and enabled women to achieve education and become independent and successful. By challenging the existing norms and practices that had hindered the progress and growth of women, she came forward by establishing schools and organizations to promote women's education and their participation in the public sphere. However, these actions and practices made Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain a visionary feminist who foresaw the need for education and empowerment for women.

Keywords: Feminism, feminist-consciousness, utopia, emancipation, education, novella

Introduction

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was a well known educator, writer and feminist activist of pre independence India and present day Bangladesh who worked towards women's liberation in India and Bangladesh. She was one of the first women to come forward with progressive ideas and movement for the liberation of women and gender equality. Her actions and activism towards women's empowerment and equality made her one of the most influential women in the history of feminist activism. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was born in the 1880s in a village called Pariabad in the Rangpur district. Her father, a strict practicing Muslim, believed in the purdah system and did not allow his daughters to attend school. However, her brother, Ibrahim Saber, secretly taught her Bangla and English. During those times, reading for Muslim women was limited to religious texts, but Rokeya had a strong desire to study. As per the cultural norms of that era, her parents arranged her marriage at a young age to Khan Bahadur Sakhawat Hossain, a deputy magistrate of Bhagalpur. Her husband believed in educating women and granting them freedom. He encouraged Rokeya to read and write. After her husband's death, she faced significant hardships. Despite these challenges, in 1911, she opened the first school for girls. She firmly believed that women could break free from patriarchal suppression only through education. She famously stated at the Bengal Women's Education Conference in 1926: "The opponents of female education say that women will be unruly... Fie! They call themselves Muslim and yet go against the basic tenet of Islam, which gives equal rights to education. If men are not led astray once educated, why should women be?"

Feminism

According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, feminism is "the belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men." The term feminism originated from the French word *féminisme*, coined by Charles Fourier in 1837, and was first used in English in the 1890s. Feminism started with the idea that both men and women need to be treated equally. Mary Bucholtz, in her essay, *The Feminist Foundations of Language, Gender, and Sexuality*, defines feminism as "a diverse and sometimes conflicting set of theoretical, methodological, and political perspectives that have in common a commitment to understanding and challenging social inequalities related to gender and sexuality".

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Feminists have attempted to remove all the barriers created by patriarchal society through both writing back and fighting back. "I raise up my voice not so that I can shout, but so that those without a voice can be heard. We cannot all succeed when half of us are held back," said Malala Yousafzai at the Youth Talk Over of the U.N.

Through women's movements, feminists address issues such as women's legal and political rights, violence against women, reproductive choice and abortion, sexual freedom, employment opportunities, discrimination, and women's political participation. Mary Wollstonecraft, in her famous book *A Vindication of the Rights of Women: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792), argues that women are human beings and deserve the same fundamental rights as men. She asserts: "There must be equality established in society, or morality will never gain ground, and this virtuous equality will not rest firmly even when founded on a rock, if one half of mankind are chained to its bottom by fate, for they will be continually undermining it through ignorance or pride" (342).

She believed that education is the best way to make women equal to men. Challenging the patriarchal society that rejected women as rational beings, she urged that children of both sexes be taught to "begin to think" at the same level. Her work underscores that women's status can be improved through changes in political and educational systems. "Men and women must be educated in a great degree by the opinion and manners of the society they live in" (54).

Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), argues that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (3). Literature represents everything that happens in society, yet male writers have traditionally written from their own perspectives, leaving women's voices unheard. Over time, women writers have also begun to write about their feelings and emotions. Woolf believed that women writers had the ability, creativity, and power to write as effectively as men. However, the patriarchal society often silenced their voices. "Literature is open to everybody. I refuse to allow you, Beadle though you are, to turn me off the grass. Lock up your libraries if you like, but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind" (122).

Initially, women collectively struggled for rights such as education, voting, and property ownership. Over time, their demands expanded to include freedom in all spheres, including social, political, and economic fields. While women in the United States were fighting for equal social, political, and economic rights, women in the Indian subcontinent were largely unaware of these movements happening around the world. This unawareness was due to patriarchy. Women were not allowed to attain education; they were confined within the four walls of the house and restricted to household duties. Without education and empowerment, no development is possible—be it in the family, society, or the country. "The lack of learning is nothing but gross bestiality. It is through the acquisition of knowledge that (he) loses his lower status and achieves the higher one." (The Embodiment of Truth, My Lord Jyotiba, by Savitribai Phule).

In India, particularly in Bengal during the 18th century, the movement for female education was initiated by Christian missionaries. Through their continuous efforts, the Western idea of educating women began to penetrate Indian society. Girls' schools were established by English missionaries, and

Hindu families gradually started sending their daughters to these schools. However, the social reform movements of the time did not radically challenge the existing patriarchal structure or question gender relations. The education of women was not aimed at making them self-sufficient or independent; rather, it was intended to train them to be good daughters, wives, and mothers.

In this context, the contributions of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Maharishi Karve, and others are truly commendable. They fought against social evils like sati, child marriage, and the prohibition of widow remarriage. These reformers campaigned for equal rights for women and laid particular emphasis on their education.

The condition of Muslim women during this period was no different. They were largely illiterate and unaware of the teachings of the Quran. Muslim patriarchy interpreted the Quran from its own perspective and used it as a tool to suppress and dominate women. "I think Islam is, in a sense, in crisis. It needs to question and re-question itself" (Azar Nafisi). Muslim women were not allowed to attend school or read any texts. They were bound to the purdah system and confined to the four walls of their homes. The misinterpretation of Quranic verses and Hadiths by Muslim patriarchs created a distorted image of women in Islam: "That people will take aspects of Quranic statements and disregard overall Quranic intent with regard to justice and equality is one of the problems we are grappling with in modernity" (Amina Wadud). At that time, Muslim women were unfamiliar with concepts like "feminism" or "Islamic feminism." A few Muslim women did raise their voices, but they were largely unheard. Nevertheless, some persisted in writing and advocating against the subjugation of Muslim women.

It was only in the 1990s that the term "Islamic feminism" was coined by the Iranian activist Ziba Mir-Hosseini. In her essay *The Challenges of Islamic Feminism*, she argues:

The Muslim legal tradition does not treat men and women equally. At the heart of its unequal construction of gender rights lie two key assumptions: one theological, that God has given men authority over women; the other sociological, reflecting an ancient premise—men are strong; they protect and provide, while women are weak and obey. (108)

She contends that the problems faced by Muslim women arise from the misinterpretation of the Quran. Islam and the Quran do not restrict women from gaining knowledge or education. "I never fail to reward any worker among you for any work you do, be you male or female, you are one another" (Quran 3:195).

Islamic feminists like Fatima Mernissi, Assia Djebar, Margot Badran, and Asma Barlas focus on the rights of Muslim women and their roles in both public and private spaces. As Prophet Muhammad stated: "Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim" (Book 1, Hadith 224). This demonstrates that Islam does not discriminate between men and women. However, Muslim patriarchy has created binaries to serve its own interests.

Feminist Consciousness

Feminist consciousness is comprised of two words, 'feminist' and 'consciousness.' According to the Oxford Learner's Dictionary, the word 'feminist' means "a person who supports the belief that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men," and the word 'consciousness' means "state of being aware of something."

Gerda Lerner, in her book *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* (1993), defines feminist consciousness as: the awareness of women that they belong to a subordinate group; that they have suffered wrongs as a group; that their condition of subordination is not natural, but is societally determined; that they must join with other women to remedy these wrongs; and finally, that they must and can provide an alternate vision of societal organization in which women as well as men enjoy autonomy and self-determination^[14].

Feminist consciousness is awareness among women regarding their marginalization in a male dominated society. Women raised their consciousness to gain access to education and economic independence, which would ultimately lead to their empowerment. Many feminist writers began advocating for women's education. Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), argues that in order to lead a successful life, women must have access to the same quality of education as men.

Although feminist consciousness gained momentum in the mid-20th century, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a Bengali Muslim feminist writer from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, exhibited this awareness much earlier. She championed women's education and economic independence in Bengal.

Ladyland's Legacy: *Sultana's Dream*

Sultana's Dream (1905), written by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, was published in the Indian Ladies' Magazine in Madras. In this novella, she creates a female world where women "dive deep into the ocean of knowledge and try to find out the precious gems, which nature has kept in store" (pg. 14). The story begins with the narrator walking the streets of Ladyland with Sister Sara. She is fascinated by this country, entirely different from the outside world. Here, men perform domestic work, while women take up roles in public spheres. Rokeya's feminist consciousness is evident as she envisions a world where gender roles are completely inverted.

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain challenges patriarchal norms that portray women as inefficient and suited only for household work. She empowers her female characters to break boundaries and free themselves from the shackles of patriarchal society. During the 18th century, education, reasoning, science, and knowledge were considered domains exclusive to men. She writes:

"We have no hand or voice in the management of our social affairs. In India, man is lord and master. He has taken to himself all powers and privileges and shut up the women in the zenana"^[5].

In this novella, Rokeya inverts gender roles, presenting women as professors, queens, and scientists. This reflects her awareness that women, too, can gain knowledge and perform the roles traditionally reserved for men.

'Why do you allow yourselves to be shut up?

'Because it cannot be helped, as they are stronger than women.'

'A lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race. You have neglected the duty you owe yourselves and have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interest'^[5].

Rokeya emphasizes the importance of equality, women's freedom, and education. In *Sultana's Dream*, education becomes the driving force for women's emancipation. The women in Ladyland are empowered because of their access

to education. They have control over their sexuality and can freely roam the country without fear of men. Ladyland is a place devoid of violence, corruption, and crime. There are no barriers or purdah for women, while men are confined to the "mardana," paralleling the "zenana" of the real world.

Our good Queen liked science very much. She circulated an order that all the women in her country should be educated. Accordingly, a number of girls' schools were founded and supported by the government. Education was spread far and wide among women. And early marriage also was stopped. No woman was to be allowed to marry before she was twenty-one. I must tell you that, before this change, we had been kept in strict purdah^[7].

Conclusion

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, through her exposure to education, developed her creativity and personality. In her fictional works, she sought to create awareness among women, emphasizing that they are equal to men and have the right to education, empowerment, freedom, and knowledge. Rokeya aimed to motivate women to overcome the obstacles imposed by patriarchal society. Although she raised feminist consciousness among women in general, and Muslim women in particular, her writings from 1905 remain highly relevant today. Even now, society struggles to embrace the progressive ideas that she envisioned in the early 20th century.

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