POETRY

In the Halls of the Mughal Kings

ARYAN SHAFAT

A fading comet trail of snippets from the halls of the Mughal Kings remain immortally enshrined in memory's space.

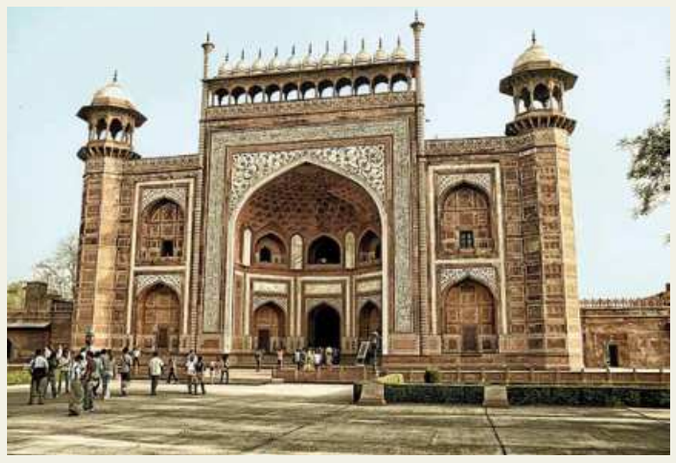
Former capital, you Stand tallunder the continuous canter of the seasons.
Impregnable against time's infantry,
with erect and smooth sandstone walls, bathed red by the beating sun for centuries.

Inside the Kingdom, lay smooth lawns: glossy green sheets with an emerald hue, maintained impeccably,
guarded by lustrous bushes in lemon coloured helmets.
Inside, lay the Jama Masjid resting on infinite arches, embellished with infinite domes.
Inside, rests Salim Chisty's tomb of dazzling, spotless, pearl white marble, effortlessly reflecting the tepid winter sun.
Strings, of rainbows, dance to the congregation of followers: a sea of people with an ocean of prayers.
Amidst an eternal storm,
dreams and thoughts, long buried in time's graveyard, appear as apparitions.
Tansen's songs rise like waves, his tunes of silk, weave through the air like an aurora.
They reach for and enthrall the winds ceaselessly.

Settled at the centre, the imposing palace.
A five-tiered pyramid, tinted dusty red.
Neat, patterned columns raise up one another,
supporting the Dome-
The Dome of perpetual youth.

Echoes of Greatness ring throughout the city, they usher forth from the grandiose BulandDarwaza,
pour out from the palace gates.
Knocking on walls, resonating from the chirps of birds, the Grandness is omnipresent,
in every breath,
splendour immerses the Kingdom.

Looming on the banks of the Yamuna,
Slithering trails ominously course through the brown, desolate and dismal fields, ravaged by Winter, to:
A city
Adorned with amulets bearing inscriptions of false promises,
Showered upon by a mellow, tropical sun in winter's foggy cloak,
the skyline is invisible.
The numerous, quaint sweetshops are drenched with scents of syrup.



Sounds of sizzling sweets waft through the dense night air,
While on display, are sweets, in assortments of colours, embroidered with history.
Aromas of incense and flower petals emanate from the temples,
the tintinnabulationfrom the bells isa swarm,hidden in the distance.

Once daylight's head juts out from the horizon,
embraces all the nooks and alleys,
sets alight the city
there,
standing majestically beside Yamuna's bank
shrouded in a thick smog coat,
Almost unaffected by time's abrasion,
surrounded by lanky, leaning minarets,
turbaned with a gargantuan bulbous dome, glazed in shimmering white,
composed of the world's stones and sun's corona,
the tip dipped in gold:
the Shining tomb of cold marble, with a beating heart.
Winter is absent here.
Only a floating, warm aura.
Spring flowers in eternal bloom, are etched in the stones and granite.
Mere, enchanted dwarves converge at the tomb: cupid's pilgrimage site.

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FLASH FICTION

The House You Cannot Put Colours on

MARZIA RAHMAN

It was a big window, like an arched doorway. It creaked loudly the first time I opened it. It sounded angry, upset. I wondered why?

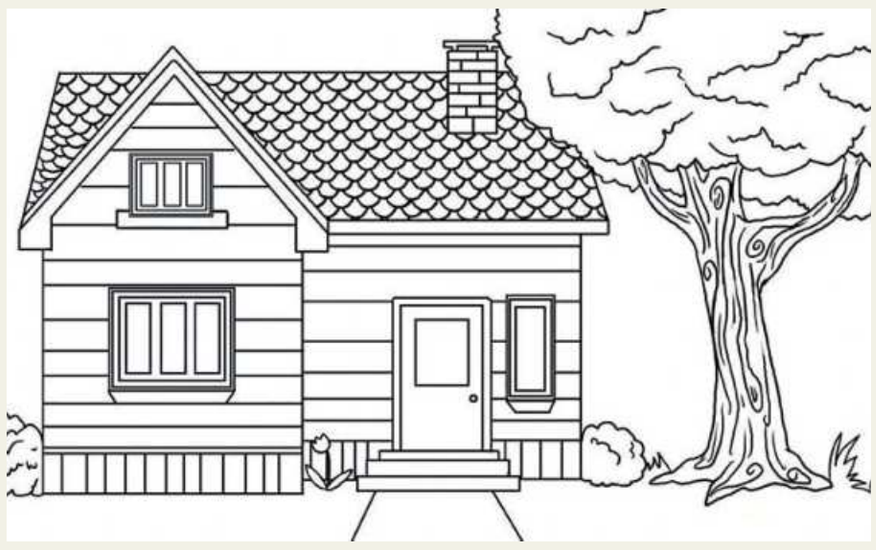
I placed a couch in front of the window. Often, I sat here with a book in my hand and gazed outside. There was a mango tree, a banyan and a wall green with moss and weed in the backyard garden. I watched sparrows, ants, rain, sunshine, stars and a lone moon on lonely nights. Sometimes, a white cat sat under the banyan tree.

The cat reminded me of Mini, the white furry one I had when I was little. It reminded me of anther life. And whenever those thoughts came rushing back, I shook my head hard. I didn't want to remember anything, whether good or bad. It unsettled me. I needed to get overhimto move on. To fall in love with my husband, Akram.He was a good man. It made me feel sad, sometimes a bit guilty, too.

I tried to focus on the house we moved in here right after our marriage. It had high ceilings andmosaic floor and the walls looked dull and drab. I wanted to give it a fresh look.I put colourful curtains on the windows, painted the walls, put roses in the vase, sprinkled jasmine scents here and there.

A year passed by. Akram was happy and on rainy nights, he whispered in my ear words of love. He'd often ask me if I were happy! His gentle voice, kind words seemed assuring. The little dimple that played at the corner of his mouth every time he grinned, looked cute and I wanted to love them. I ran my fingers on his chin and kissed him hard because I did not want to lie. I did not want him to know that no matter how many colours I put on the walls; the house still looked ridiculously blank.

Marzia Rahman is a writer and translator currently based in Dhaka.



Begum Rokeya's Non-sectarian, Pluralist-Inclusivist Imagination

MOHAMMAD A. QUAYUM

Bengali writer, educationist and pioneering feminist activist, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932), popularly known as Begum Rokeya, was born at a critical juncture in South Asian history when hostility and bloodshed between Hindus and Muslims was a recurrent experience. It was the time of *Swadeshi* movement in Bengal (1905-1911) and later Gandhi's *Swaraj* (1919-1947), which although meant to overthrow the Raj and find India's independence, seized by the fanatics on both sides of the religious divide, often resulted in inter-religious strife and sectarian violence. Rokeya lived through the communal riots in Dhaka (1930), Kanpur (1931), Kashmir (1931) and Vellore (1930-31), to name a few, but her faith in the importance of Hindu-Muslim fellowship for building a modern, progressive, peaceful and prosperous India (and by extension, present-day Bangladesh) was not shaken by such dreadful incidents.

Rokeya was a practising Muslim, who recited the Qur'an regularly and prayed five times a day. Besides, she wrote primarily for Muslim women and set up a school in Calcutta in 1911 for the education of Muslim girls. Her foremost intention was to emancipate Muslim women from the clutch of repressive patriarchy that abused and exploited them by keeping them utterly ignorant as well as socially segregated and financially dependent on men. However, in attaining this goal, Rokeya never lost sight of the larger objective of the emancipation of all women, or the necessity of uniting all Indians for creating a holistic national identity.

When Rokeya opened her school in Calcutta, she had no clue about how to run a school as she had no opportunity of attending school in childhood. To gain experience in school administration, she used to visit several *Brahmo* and Hindu schools in Calcutta, where she came in close contact with leading Hindu Bengali educationists of the time, such as Mrs P.K. Roy and Mrs Rajkumari Das, who became her life-long friends. After Rokeya's sudden and premature death on 9 December 1932, a memorial was held at Calcutta's Albert Hall, where Indians of all faiths gathered to pay tribute to this remarkable woman. This commemorative event was chaired by none other than Rokeya's long-time friend Mrs P.K. Roy, who made the following remarks about Rokeya's cross-border cultural imagination in her presidential address (my translation from Bengali):

The more I saw her, the more I was impressed by her broad outlook. She knew that mere customs and rituals couldn't make a true faith; that which can elevate the human condition to a higher level was the only true and lasting religion.

. . . .

I always revered her, because she embodied the image of a true Indian woman in every sense – whatever that is truly India, is what she cultivated all her life.

Indeed, Rokeya was a patriotic Indian who cultivated Indic values throughout her life. She considered herself first and foremost an Indian national. Thus, in her essay "Sugrihini" she explained, placing her national identity over and above her religious and ethnic identities (my translation):

We ought to remember that we are not merely Hindus or Muslims; Parsis or Christians; Bengalis, Madrasis, Marwaris or Punjabis; we are all Indians. We are first Indians, and Muslims or Sikhs afterwards. A good housewife will cultivate this truth in her family. This will gradually eradicate narrow selfishness, hatred and prejudice and turn her home into a shrine; help the members of her family to grow spiritually.

As aforementioned by Mrs P.K. Roy, Rokeya also believed that all religions were in essence one, as the objectives of all religions were to elevate the human condition and to establish harmony in society. In "Educational Ideals for the Modern Indian Girl," Rokeya cites the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, arguing that it is important for all Indians, despite their respective religions, to be aware of the Indian heritage of education and to assimilate the old while holding to the new. She explains:

India must retain the elements of good in her age-oldtraditions of thought and methods. It must retain her social inheritance of ideas and emotions, while at the same time by incorporating that which is useful from the West a new educational practice and tradition may be evolved which will transcend both that of the East and the West.

This statement is a clear evidence of Rokeya's syncretic imagination on two levels. First, she is asking all Indians to acknowledge their Indian identity and accept whatever is good in its indigenous education system. Second, she is advising them to look to the West for elements that would be of help to modernise the education system. Through this two-way process, India will retain its identity and yet become a modern society.

Rokeya also shows familiarity with Hindu myths and Puranic tales through Durga, Kali, Shitala and other Hindu goddesses in her work. Two of her essays, "Nari-srishti" and "Srishti-tawtho" are built on the Hindu Puranic tale of Tvastri's creation of the universe, in particular the creation of man and woman. The second essay has Hindu and Muslim characters, such as Jaheda Begum, Shirin Begum, Nonibala Dutta and Binapani Ghosh living under one roof, or at least spending the night together as friends. In "Nurse Nelly," again, we are told that the narrator, Jobeda, has a good friend, Bimala Devi, a Hindu woman, whom she goes to visit at the hospital every day when she goes to Lucknow with Khuki, her younger sister-in-law, for the latter's treatment. All these are reflections of how much Rokeya valued the unity of Hindus and Muslims for the creation of an interactive and shared Indian society.

In her essay "Griha," Rokeya gives examples from both Hindu and Muslim societies to show that all women in India are

essentially "homeless," because no matter what caste, class or religion they belong to, they all have to live at the whim and mercy of men. Again, this shows that Rokeya was not concerned solely about Muslim women and their condition in society, but about all Indian women, no matter what community or religion they belonged to. She argued that Hindu women like Saudamini, Prativa and Rama are as much exploited and oppressed by males as are Muslim women like Hasina, Jamila, Mohsena, Hamida and Jobeda.

In "Nari Puja," Rokeya has four women conversing on the purdah system, two Muslims and two Hindus: Mrs Chatterjee, Kusum Kumari, Amena and Jamila. The women discuss how the purdah practice has plagued women for centuries in both religious communities, giving examples from both to show that men have treated women like animals, sometimes even worse than animals. When Mrs Chatterjee naïvely suggests that women enjoy the status of deity in Hindu society, Amena retorts, summing up the author's view in the piece: "Excuse me… the position of woman in this country is no better than a slave's" (my translation). Here, Rokeya's emphasis is not on women of any particular group, rather on all Indian women, which reaffirms her non-sectarian, non-communal, inclusivist outlook.

In her book *Aborodhbashini*, again Rokeya draws examples from both Hindu and Muslim communities to indicate that women in India have been dehumanised and commodified by a patriarchal system that has spread its roots through all Indian religious traditions. Thus, if Muslim women have to live a mute, abased, obedient and invisible life, with no control over their minds and bodies, remaining utterly dependent on their male counterparts for every business of life, this is also the condition of Hindu women, who are equally deprived of their selfhood and dignity. Forced to live an often abject and ignoble life, they exist totally at the caprice and clemency of their men. The book has 47 episodes, in most of which Rokeya ridicules the excesses of the purdah practice in the Bengali and Bihari Muslim communities which deprived women of all opportunities of life, including education, personal and social freedom, as well as rights to work, wealth and inheritance, reducing them to subhuman creatures.

In "Prem-rahasho," an autobiographical story, Rokeya declares: "I have loved people of all religions – Hindu, Christian, Muslim – but why, I am not sure of it myself" (my translation). Although human nature is to instinctively love something attractive and beautiful, sometimes things not so beautiful can also fascinate us. Love cannot be circumscribed or compartmentalised based on race, language or creed. It crosses all borders. We are capable of loving another human being no matter what his or her cultural or religious identity is, whatever class or caste s/he belongs to, or how old or young s/he might be. To bear out this argument, Rokeya narrates three experiences of "sisterhood" from her own life: Her "love" relationship with Champa, an untouchable girl in Orissa; with Ms D, an English woman; and with an elderly woman from northern India, whom she describes as "my patient." The story documents how each of them came close to the narrator and meant so much to her, though Champa and Ms D were from different cultural-religious groups, and the elderly woman came from a different language and age group. These examples show that Rokeya not only advocated cross-cultural unity and inclusivity in her writings but also experienced and practised them in her personal life.

Rokeya wrote about a century ago, but her message remains as potent and pertinent now as ever. We know that the world has made significant strides in science and technology, but in matters of race, religion and gender we are still trapped in a "tribal" state. It has become a Sisyphean struggle for us to rid ourselves of chauvinism, parochialism and xenophobia, as is evident, among so many other recent incidents, in the brutal killing of a black man, George Floyd, by a white police officer in the US. However, Rokeya, in her prescience, imagined a pluralist-inclusivist world of cross-cultural amity, notwithstanding the adversities she lived through in her personal life; her worldview was characterised by the *Upanishadic* spirit of "VasudhaivaKutumbakam" (the world is one family), or a touch of cosmopolitanism.

Professor Mohammad A. Quayum has published 34 books and more than 140 articles in different areas of literature.His books on Rokeya include The Essential Rokeya*(Brill, 2013) and* A Feminist Foremother *(Orient Longman, 2017).*