

BEGUM ROKEYA

Tale of a visionary

MOHAMMAD A. QUAYUM

Writer, educationist and feminist activist, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932), affectionately known as Begum Rokeya, was a multifaceted genius. She is often considered to be Bengal's earliest and boldest feminist, as well as the earliest and best of the female and Muslim writers of the Bengal Renaissance. Rokeya's contemporary, Mohitlal Majumdar (1888-1952), once described her as the embodiment of the soul and conscience of her age. Her biographer and close associate, Shamsun Nahar Mahmud (1908-64), dubbed her a "spider mother," who sacrificed her life to nurture future generations of Bengali women, and added, "The fate of the Bengali Muslim women has changed radically within the space of half a century, and there is no way to deny that this benevolent woman played the most significant role behind it."

However, astonishingly, Rokeya never had a formal education. Her parents never sent her to school. Her father, Zahiruddin Muhammad Abu Ali Hyder Saber, was the zamindar of Pairaband, a village in the district of Rangpur. Her mother also came from a zamindar family, from a place called Baliadi, in the district of Dhaka. This aristocratic birth, instead of being a boon, turned out a blight for Rokeya, as Muslim aristocrats in those days lived a cocooned life. They were extremely insular and provincial in outlook. In keeping with the sentiments of his time, Rokeya's father resisted women's education, and did not want his daughters to attend school or pursue knowledge in any form, except for the skills to read the Qur'an by rote, without knowing or understanding its meaning.

Abu Ali Saber was even loath to let his daughters learn Bengali or English. He didn't want them to learn Bengali because expatriate ashraf Muslims, such as Rokeya's family who had come from Iran and settled in Pairaband in the sixteenth century, preferred to speak Arabic, Persian or Urdu at home. They considered Bengali to be "non-Islamic," used by "low-born" araf Muslims, who had converted from Hinduism. Rokeya's father had four wives, one of them a European; yet he didn't want Rokeya and her sisters to learn English, because as a language of "non-believers" it was considered morally corrupting and detrimental to Islamic culture.

Moreover, Rokeya was brought up in the strictest form of purdah as practiced by elite Muslims of the time. From the age of five, she was prohibited from interacting with men or even women outside her family circle. In several episodes of her book, *The Zenana Women* (Aporodhasini), Rokeya sarcastically describes how she had to go into hiding in her own home whenever an unknown woman walked into their courtyard or came to visit them. A victim of the system, Rokeya became its fiercest critic in later years. In a vituperative remark in her essay, "Bengal Women's Educational Conference" (Bongiyonari-Shikkha Samiti), for example, she states:

Although Islam has successfully prevented the physical killing of baby girls, yet Muslims have been glibly and frantically wrecking the mind, intellect and judgement of their daughters till the present day. Many consider it a mark of honour to keep their daughters ignorant and deprive them of knowledge and understanding of the world by cooping them up within the four walls of the house.

In another passage in the same essay, comparing the excessive purdah of elite Bengali Muslims to the carbonic acid gas which kills its victims silently, without causing any physical pain, Rokeya remarked caustically:

The purdah practice can be compared more accurately with the deadly carbonic acid gas. Since it kills without any pain, people get no opportunity to take precaution against it. Likewise, women in purdah are dying bit by bit in silence from this seclusion 'gas,' without experiencing pain.

Brought up in such an enclosed and segregated family environment, and without any formal education, Rokeya's life was meant for another ordinary Muslim housewife. But defying all odds, she grew up to become a writer in both Bengali and English. She was also a pioneering educationist who set up a school for Muslim girls, Sakhawat Memorial School for Girls, in Calcutta in March 1911. When Rokeya embarked on her mission of setting up the school, there were only two other schools for Muslim girls in Calcutta: one established in 1897 under the patronage of Begum Ferrous Mahal, the Begum of the Nawab of Murshidabad, and the other in 1909, under the patronage of Khojesta Akhtar Banu, mother of the well-known Bengali Muslim leader, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy (1892-1963). This speaks volumes on how Rokeya, who had never stepped into a school compound in childhood, became a trailblazer in her adult life in the education and modernisation of Bengali Muslim women.

Rokeya learnt the Bengali language from her elder sister, Karimunnesa Khatun (1855-1926). In her essay, "The Hidden Jewel" (Lukano Ratan), Rokeya recalls how Karimunnesa learnt to write the Bengali alphabets by drawing marks on the ground in their courtyard, under the keen supervision of their elder brother, Ibrahim Saber. Later, Karimunnesa became a Bengali poet, and by many accounts she was the first female Muslim poet in the language.

These creative aspirations of Karimunnesa and her love for Bengali created a lasting impression on the young Rokeya, and she too began to follow in her sister's footsteps. In "The Hidden Jewel," Rokeya acknowledges that without the motivation and affectionate incitement from Karimunnesa, she would never have learnt Bengali or become a writer in the language. As a mark of her gratitude for this salutary contribution in her life, Rokeya dedicated the second volume of her book, *Motichur* (Sweet Globules), published in 1922, to her elder sister.

If Karimunnesa's benevolent grooming made Rokeya a writer in Bengali, it was her elder brother, Ibrahim Saber, who initiated her into the world of English. Rokeya's father enforced no restrictions on the education of his sons. Rather, he encouraged them to learn English so that they could enter the civil service. Therefore, Ibrahim Saber was sent to the prestigious St. Xavier's College in Calcutta and later to England for studies. This exposure to modern education made Ibrahim Saber supportive of female education, and he began to teach English to his little sister, Rokeya. But since their father was

opposed to it, their lessons could take place only in secret, after the family had gone to sleep. In this regard, Shamsun Nahar Mahmud recalls that only after the family had gone to bed, the brother and sister would sit with their books under a candle and while the brother would teach, the sister would drink the nectar of knowledge to her fill.

It is remarkable that Rokeya, who learnt English under such trying circumstances, later took it up as a creative medium and wrote her most famous piece, *Sultana's Dream*, as well as several other prose pieces and letters, in it. It was made possible only due to the warm-hearted tutoring of her brother, whom she acknowledges in several places in her writing. In an appreciation of her brother's benevolent role in her life, she once commented:

I have never stepped inside a girls' school or any school or college; whatever education I have acquired is owing to my brother's infinite love and mercy. All my other relatives, instead of giving any encouragement, would taunt and ridicule my efforts for education. Yet I never gave up. Brother too never felt disappointed by the scornful remarks from others and stopped teaching me.

Another person who actively helped in fructifying Rokeya's nascent talents as a writer was her husband, Khan Bahadur Syed Sakhawat Hossain, who married the sixteen-year old Rokeya as his second wife in 1896. Sakhawat Hossain was England-returned like Ibrahim Saber, and progressive like him. Although Sakhawat Hossain was from Bihar, he learnt Bengali when he came to Hoogly College for his undergraduate studies, and supported his wife's literary activities in the language. After her marriage, Rokeya moved to Bhagalpur, Bihar and lived there with Sakhawat and his family for fourteen years. It was during this period that her literary career began to flourish. She began to publish in various magazines and periodicals, and also brought out her first two books, *Motichur*, Vol.



I (1904) and *Sultana's Dream* (1908), while still in Bhagalpur.

Rokeya's marriage with Sakhawat was a happy one, as the latter actively supported her literary activities and even became her ardent champion. However, Rokeya never found fulfilment as a wife and mother, as the two baby daughters she gave birth to both died early, one at the age of five months and the other at four months. An acute diabetic, Sakhawat's health also began to fail. He realised that after his death the motherless Rokeya would become extremely lonely in life, and knowing that Rokeya's heart was in women's education, he bequeathed her Rs. 10,000 to start a school for Muslim girls after his death. Sakhawat passed away at a hospital in Calcutta in 1909, and Rokeya began the school in Bhagalpur with only five students. But since things didn't work out with Sakhawat's daughter by his first marriage, with whom she shared Sakhawat's ancestral home, she moved to Calcutta in 1910 and began the school there anew in 1911.

Rokeya has left behind five books and scores of uncollected essays, stories, poems and letters, both in Bengali and English. Her books are: *Motichur*, Vols. I (1904) and II (1922); *Sultana's Dream* (1908); *Padmarag* (The Ruby, 1924) and *Aporodhasini* (1931). The recurrent theme in her writing is women's education, women's empowerment and women's emancipation. Rokeya believed that women were as good as men, if not better. However, being protracted victims of a vile and vicious Indian patriarchy that harkened back to the days of Laws of Manu or Manava Dharma Shastra, or even before that, they had been systematically deprived of all opportunities in life, and rendered ignorant, timid and subservient to men. Being "swines" and "yahoos" (Rokeya's expressions), and having the attributes of snake, donkey and panther in them, men liked to rule over women by brutal force, cunning and coercion, and had slowly and gradually reduced women to the state of animals, even worse than animals.

Rokeya makes this point in essays such as "Woman's Downfall" (IstrijatirAbanati), "The Female-half" (Aradhangi), "Home" (Griha), "The Creation of Woman" (Nari-srishti), "The Theory of Creation" (Srishti-twatho), "Bengal Women's Educational Conference," "Woman Worship" (Nari-puja), as well as in her book *The Zenana Women*. In "Home," for example, she argues that even animals had homes but Indian women had none, because they had to live at the whim and mercy of men even in their own households. "The house belongs to Sharafat, and as it has a drove of sheep, flocks of ducks and hens, so also is there a group of women," Rokeya writes caustically at one point in the essay, and adds scornfully later on, "We do not even have a little hut to call our own. No other creature in the animal world is destitute like us. Everyone has a home, only we don't."

In "Woman Worship," again, Rokeya continues with her angry comparison of women with animals as a consequence of their prolonged victimisation by men. Narrating the incident of a dying Hindu widow who receives no attention from the men in her family in spite of her dire condition, she comments tantalisingly, "Perhaps the master of the house wouldn't be without a worry even when the family's cow was sick.... Perhaps even a pet dog or a cat doesn't die without treatment." In "Bengal Women's Educational Conference," Rokeya adds in her argument, in a similarly vexed tone:

I have been crying for the lowliest creature in India for the last twenty years. Do you know who that lowliest creature in India is? It is the Indian women.... There are people also who feel for animals, so we see animals' rights groups everywhere.

If a dog is hit by a car, we hear an outcry in the Anglo-Indian media. But there is not a single soul in the whole of the subcontinent to mourn for incarcerated women like us.

The only solution to this abysmal condition of women was for women to rise up and vigorously resist their social entrapment and enslavement. "Rise up we must for the sake of society," Rokeya urges Indian women in "Woman's Downfall." In "The Dawn" (Subhosadeq), using the religious metaphor of prayer and the Muslim call to prayer, Rokeya adjures and admonishes the women of Bengal in a vociferous tone, "Wake up, mothers, sisters, daughters; rise, leave your bed and march forward... wake up, the night has ended; the Muezzin is calling for prayer... we, the women of Bengal are still sleeping profoundly on the damp floors of our homes, where we are being held captives, and dying in thousands as victims of consumption."

Rokeya believed that women should continue to strive for their rightful place in society and attain equality with the men. They should not compromise for anything less than equality, because men and women are like two sides of the body of society, like the two wheels of a carriage, and if they are not in sync with one another, the society will cease to move forward, and the carriage will collapse from a lack of balance. Besides, women are mothers, and if the mothers have no education or self-esteem, how can their children be strong and intelligent? "The courage or cowardice of the 'masters' [i.e. men] lies in the volition of the mother," Rokeya snaps in "The Female-half," and adds, sniggering at Muslim men, that one of the reasons why Muslims outstrip all others in the number of beggars is because they quash their women by keeping them ignorant and confined within the four walls of the house.

In *Sultana's Dream*, a feminist utopia, Rokeya takes a leap forward to show what might happen in future when the playing field is more even for women. In this story, Sultana visits a Ladyland in her dream, where women rule and men are confined in the inner quarters of the house called the "mardana." Sultana finds the place neat and clean and most efficiently maintained. It is also morally and intellectually advanced, with no crime, violence, warfare, or hideous oppression of women in the name of religion. In fact, the people of this dreamland care for no religion; their only guiding principles are love and truth.

In a way, the story is very entertaining and reads like a pleasant fantasy. But it is like sugar-coated quinine: sugary outside but bitter underneath. In it, Rokeya has cleverly turned the tables against men and made them suffer the same sorrows and indignities that they have inflicted on Indian women for centuries. After reading the story, Rokeya's husband had mumbled admiringly, "A terrible revenge!" What better way to take revenge than to beat the men in their own game and shove down their throats a dose of their own medicine! In India women were seen as useless and forced into a life of seclusion; in Rokeya's Ladyland, men are deemed useless and tricked into a mardana. As Sister Sara, who takes Sultana around to show the place, says sneeringly to the latter, "[Men] should not do anything, excuse me; they are fit for nothing. Only catch them and put them into the zenana." In India, men saw themselves intellectually superior to women; in the Ladyland, it is the women who are superior; they have trapped the men into their present confinement not by brawn but by brain. This role reversal in the story and Rokeya's clever empowerment of women is humorous and funny, but it is also her most lethal, albeit astutely disguised, attack against male dominance and male supremacy in the Indian (subcontinental) patriarchal system.

Rokeya was a dreamer-doer; she dreamt of a fair and more equitable future for Indian women, but she also had a practical side to her character. Therefore, she was not satisfied with merely dreaming. She knew that to overcome their current oppression and exploitation, women would need to overcome their inertia and wimpiness, and restore their pride, dignity and courage. But this was not possible by hoping or thinking only. What women needed was education. Education could buttress their sense of self and bring them economic emancipation. It is with this view that Rokeya opened the school in Calcutta, which slowly became the centrepiece of her life.

Furthermore, in 1916 Rokeya opened an association for Muslim women, Anjuman-i-Khawteen Islam. She knew that uniting the women was important to enliven and sustain their cause. It also helped to extend Rokeya's sphere of activity, as it brought her in closer contact with the less fortunate society. Rokeya's literary works and the school were basically meant for the upper and middle classes in society, but the activities of the Anjuman took her farther afield to the homeless and slum populations in Calcutta. The objectives of the Association were to offer financial assistance to the poor widows, to rescue and provide shelter to the physically and sexually abused wives, and to help the poor families to marry off their daughters but, above all, to equip and empower impoverished women with education through a literacy programme run by a team of volunteers.

This multi-pronged approach to assist and uplift the condition of Bengali/Indian women, and bring them a better and brighter future through giving them education and an organisational structure, was what has made Rokeya an extraordinary figure in the annals of Bengali/Indian literature and culture. But perhaps what makes her even more extraordinary is that she had no formal education to start with, was not allowed to freely acquire the two languages that she later used as her creative mediums, and had to battle through much of her life in a lonely state, as her husband passed away when she was only twenty-nine years old. After the death of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-91), Rabindranath Tagore wrote reverentially of him: "One wonders how God, in the process of producing millions of Bengalis, produced a man!" Perhaps it would be a fitting tribute to Rokeya to say in conclusion, echoing Tagore's words, "One wonders how God, in the process of producing millions of Bengalis, produced a woman!"

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THOUGHTS
When friendship is the finest steel...

SYED NADEEM AHSAN

The finest of friendships are like the finest of steel. It begins as an iron ore and is shaped by the blacksmith of time, in this case into its strongest form. As more time passes it is molded into perfection, just like the blacksmith making a shiny blade or the shipbuilder building his heaviest ship. Yet once the ship is built it glides through the rough waves like a dinghy in a small stream.

The journey usually begins when we can sense there is someone else in the room who has a toothless smile or can do even more and crawl across. Values of friendship are installed early as well with very simple words from someone older who is trying to resolve a conflict of interest by saying that he/she is your friend. One thing is that it can never be orchestrated. Sometimes it's the kid who kept your favorite pencil box that you forgot to take with you on the last day of school before vacation started and brings it back to you the first day when school begins. At times it's the guy who calls you something that was written on the back of your tee shirt that you thought was cool for years until he finds something else. The person you went jogging with. There comes a point when you cannot remember where you first met or when you had become friends or if it was a friend of a friend. What is amazing is every single friend you make enriches your life in so many ways, when you pause to think about it. Life's journeys almost always take you along different paths. However, the finest friends, as one friend commented recently, will always occupy a part of your mind in some way. Strange as life always is the paths often cross and at other times when the initial struggle to chase our dreams is over we slow down to reconnect. Other times you find ways to reconnect as it is important for you.

The thing about having great friends is there are so many defining moments that you treasure for the rest of your life. You may have a number of suits in the closet now, but you always remember the friend who brought his blazer for you for your graduation because you were too careless to plan ahead for it. The friend who would wait for you any time of the day half way on the way to somewhere on something you had to do to give you company on the rickshaw ride. The ones that helped you align your internship report and print it and then accompany you on the last day of submission to your university although it had nothing to do with them. The friends who put your name in their music album not for anything but just that you are a friend. Friends who wait outside with you while someone in your family is having a

surgery in the hospital. The friends (and everyone in your class) in fact showing up the next morning on learning that your father has passed away. Not to mention all the good times that you have shared, going to the beach, hiking, playing sports; even staying up all night putting up posters for some election that you can't even remember why you were part of it too. Of course, it is not that you make friends only at a certain point in your life. There are always new friends that you make. In fact, by this time you all know the norms that go with it but still it takes time for the roots to grow deeper.

For my generation the technology advances of the last decade or so have made it possible for us to feel like we still live next door. As I have mentioned life flings us all over the globe. Even if you are still living in the same town it still becomes impossible to find the time to sit around a tea stall or in a burger place with no care for time. I will mention again, my friends, words about occupying the heart and mind. I believe this so because now all it takes is a click of the "Like" button to say that you like the photo or the thought or anything else for that matter. That is how effortless it has become. We still share the most inconsequential of thoughts on a message or some other application even though one may be waking up while the other is about to go to sleep. Still you debate, disagree on a thought or opinion and on a public platform where everyone can voice his or her own views. Sometimes you learn from the friend who has some interesting thing to share or a point of view he shares through a comment he made on your post. Most of my generation use the platform to essentially strengthen the steel. At the risk of being judgmental, I cannot fathom how the present generation send out requests first and then become friends. I doubt seriously, though, if that kind of friendship would be defined by the kind of selfless acts that we have experienced at some point or the other. I do strongly believe we have gained much more from social networks and instant messaging systems.

Only because we have learnt to pace it just right. By that I mean using it without disrupting our lives. We have learnt to connect to more people, in time zones different from ours while not halting the activity in your current physical environment. The way we connect has evolved so much that we could not have imagined just a decade ago. In the next decade it will evolve even further. But basic premise will always be the same: the ore will always mold into the finest of steel for the rest of our lives.

SYED NADEEM AHSAN WRITES FROM WASHINGTON DC.

MUSINGS

Reasoning nothingness...

AINON N.

It was one of those days. Sitting on the patio looking at the blue sky through autumn's worn-out brown leaves, I drew a complete blank. Nothing came to mind. Well, I decided if my mind can think of *nothing* then perhaps I need to write about it. That became even more challenging. My mind couldn't conjure up *nothing* as my brain experienced no such thing. Ah, the magical will! I became more determined to understand what my mind refused to understand. The concept in question evoked several words: void, nonexistent, nothingness, blank, oblivion, naught. None resolved the dilemma. As a starting point I asked whether *nothing* should be treated as a value, an ideal in pursuit of knowledge. But again, that knowledge is relative to something. Or is it more tangible? As ascetics who denounce everything material in search of that void called nothing? I hungered for a clearer answer.

How about if I reason from a different angle? Following is a set of expressed emotions of two characters about whom I write often.

"Come join me in reaching for the stars. I need to start with smiles."
"After smiles let there be your sunshine laughter! You always give me a reason to love life as a metaphor for poetry."
"Then life must be beautiful."
"Yes, life is beautiful... for you are life, sustained by the poetry it contains."

These two characters have created a world for themselves; tangible in the sense that they laugh together, embrace each other without intimacy, feel the intensity of each other's presence, living on the edge between desire and memory. They have no precise story to begin with. For them the meaning of life is beyond fixed notions, to be alive in the unstable existence of freedom. They are aware of life in its totality of beauty and pain. Tomorrow for them does not exist unless I create the tomorrows. Can it be that if I stop writing about these two personalities it will wipe out their beings into nothing? But is it not true that even though my story begins from nothing it really is a combination of events encountered by my consciousness at some point, while I have moved beyond it. My motive to write as such is therefore found in the makeup of my consciousness, which is the desire to persevere. It indeed is of consequence. Thus by creating the story have I not experienced something of

nothingness? This mode of reasoning is somehow beginning to take a meaningful shape!

The question now is whether *nothing* is a beginning or an end. Only time is the connector of nothingness linking birth and death, in between is life. The human mind at birth is a clean slate, *tabula rasa*: born into nothing. It is only after others sculpt the foundation of life that its content is developed by the person. In which case, then, the predetermined experience of others and later the person's own arrangements of experiences create the independent self. If so, this would indeed refute Pascal's saying of man being "incapable of seeing the nothingness from which he emerges."

Or does it mean that everything that ends results in nothing, like that final death? That inexplicable notion of nothing(ness) after death has compelled us to reach for the abstract heavens. We have even made it apprehensible to our senses - the ultimate place of beauty and peace, sublime and serene, just and right. A reachable world that becomes for us a source of continuity. The threshold of the unknown blurs in longing for a perfect hereafter!

In this effort to describe *nothing* I certainly did not wish to stir up the Epic of Gilgamesh, the very first recorded poem in history, in which the 'god-human' hero from Mesopotamia viewed life as empty upon realizing that he too would die like his friend Enkidu:

"The river rises, flows over its banks and carries us all away, like mayflies floating downstream: they stare at the sun, then all at once there is nothing."

His is the millennia-old story of deciphering mortality, which dissolves into the ultimate nothing. Throughout time, art, science, literature, philosophy all have dabbled in explaining nothing(ness), and certainly all have given us a treasure trove of thoughts to contemplate on.

As for me, this whole attempt at searching for this suspended meaning left a deep longing for a warm embrace, to feel the real. But as I turned around there was no one. Ironically, at that moment I realized I was indeed face to face with the real nothing.

And I heard Shakespeare sarcastically whisper, "Much ado about ...!"

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