

# 136TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY OF BEGUM ROKEYA

# Rokeya's wake-up call to women

MD. MAHMUDUL HASAN

IN terms of the volume of literary production, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880 – 1932) may not be placed among the most prolific writers of world literature. The great upsurge in the amount of secondary work on her life and writing may have already exceeded the bulk of her oeuvre. However, what makes her great is the tenacity of her belief in gender justice, her intellectual rigour and selfless urge to work for the amelioration of the condition of women, and her argumentative flair and futuristic perspective on women's rights. She was much ahead of her time and society in understanding the causes of its degradation and in setting up a correct approach to address them. She rightly realised that without empowering women, a society can never flourish. Hence, the thematic thread that runs through all her intellectual efforts is a concern for equitable gender relations – feminism. One key aspect of Rokeya's feminist consciousness is that she does not put the entire blame of gender injustices on men only. While her primary target audience was men who were mainly responsible for women's subordination, she believes that women are also to blame for many of their challenges and difficulties. For instance, in *Strijatir Obonati* she addresses fellow women thus: "Dear female readers! Have you ever thought about your predicament? What

is our status in the civilised world of this twentieth century? Slave! We hear that slavery has been abolished from the earth, but has our slavery ended? No. Why are we slaves? Definitely, there are reasons."

In the same essay, Rokeya states: "Is there anyone who can explain the reasons for our degradation [and lack of self-confidence]? Maybe lack of opportunity is the main reason. Getting no prospect, women took leave from all sorts of social activities. Consequently, having them inactive and passively submissive, men started to help them. Day by day the more assistance they received from men, the lazier they became. ... So we have become slaves of laziness and, indirectly, of men."

During Rokeya's time, women were not given equal opportunities to explore and demonstrate their God-given potential and talents. They were treated like showpieces in domestic enclosures and relegated to the four walls of the house only to take care of family members and household chores. Denied equal opportunities for personal growth and having lost abilities to access resources, women seemed to have persisted in illiteracy and deprivation.

However, roughly a century on, women in Bangladesh now have access to many resources and services denied to their predecessors. Their educational aspirations and achievements are almost on par with those of men. In a number of departments at universities in Bangladesh, with increasing



PHOTO: STAR

exposure and opportunities, female students are demonstrating better performances than those of their male counterparts. Women's increasing presence in public life – even if not without difficulties and glass ceiling – has gained a spectacular development in the last few decades.

Despite all the newly gained access to equal schooling and related

resources, are women in today's Bangladesh reaping the harvest of their education and relatively undeterred participation in public life? Are they making the best of the various opportunities and attaining their true potentials? If satisfactory answers to such questions are not readily available, then we have to concede that Rokeya's successors are far away from her ideals and priorities.

Most women in rural Bangladesh are struggling hard for survival and are helping the male members of the family to make ends meet. Though marginalised, weakened and subordinated in significant ways, they remain dutiful and devoted in the familial sphere and responsible for the wellbeing of other family members. They cannot afford to be lethargic or complacent, and luxury is not a way of life to them. They are the heroines of many unwritten pastoral tales.

But what about women in affluent families, most of whom are educated and based in urban areas? What are their usual pursuits and pastimes day in and day out? Depending on domestic helps for taking care of children and household work, many educated housewives waste their time watching drama serials and movies, sometimes until late night hours. Many others are addicted to the opium of smartphones and similar devices, and thus squandering time, money and resources which otherwise could be used for more productive purposes and useful daily activities. It is true that there are

many honourable women who are using their education and experience to benefit them and those around them. However, in respect to many others, perhaps, Rokeya's wake-up call is still very appropriate and relevant:

"Wake up mother! Wake up sister! Wake up daughter! Leave your bed and go ahead. Listen! Muezzin is giving Azan. Do you not hear the voices of Azan? No more slumber, leave your bed. Night has ended and it is dawn—Muezzin is giving Azan.... We have piled up all curses on ourselves and are determined not to keep pace with the rapidity of time. We have sworn that we will not wake up even if we hear the voice of Azan." ("Subeh Sadeq")

Rokeya's wake-up call to women by no means suggests that they are more responsible for gender oppressive practices, or that they need to shoulder greater responsibility to attain a gender egalitarian society. In her writing, she makes it clear that men, who have denied women equal opportunities, should take a greater role in establishing gender justice. However, she wants women to play their part and to avoid the various wrong attitudes, habits and lifestyle practices that many of them may have adopted.

The writer co-edited *A Feminist Foremother: Critical Essays on Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2016) with Mohammad A. Quayum. He works at the Department of English Language and Literature, International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur.

*In her writing, she makes it clear that men, who have denied women equal opportunities, should take a greater role in establishing gender justice.*

## The Far-right's rising tide

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

*The psychology of the "other" creates and nurtures distance, and consequently sustains mistrust. While technology has bridged physical distances, in filling the vast void in psychological spaces, communication is our best bet.*

It has to be benchmarked to Donald Trump, although changes on both sides of the Atlantic had been incubating for a good length of time to hit the road with a bang! A new milestone around our neck?

The widely read British columnist Rod Riddle had relied on quotes from *The Guardian* to explain the Trump factor as it impacted the US presidential election. Joan Cook, Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Yale attributed it to 'traumatic bonding,' like the Stockholm syndrome—an emotional dependency forged through abuse. In other words, it is likened to 'capture-bonding', first described in 1973, pegged to Stockholm, in which hostages tended to express empathy with their captors.

Jonathon Sheddler, Professor of Psychiatry, University of Colorado was quoted as saying, "In times of stress, people revert to a childhood desire for an omnipotent protector." Trump was said to be 'benefiting from a childhood fantasy of being rescued by...a father figure.'

Well, one doesn't have to agree to such highly subjective imputations but can only underline a certain unexpectedness of the Trump victory which perhaps lent itself to equally unexpected psychiatric interpretations.

But to think that 'a father figure' has arrived in America to 'rescue' his people is not just naively premature, more importantly, it is also contrary to the impressions he has given so far about his predilections, commitments and priorities. He is yet to lighten his Far-right baggage; curb his huge appetite for brinkmanship; and robustly promote affirmative multilateralism in his foreign policy directions.

As if to emphasise the leadership bankruptcy at the world stage, British



Marine Le Pen with her supporters

PHOTO: AFP

newspaper *The Independent* captioned a G-summit picture thus: "Last world leader standing" (meaning perhaps Merkel still in position, and seeking another term in office next year in a litmus test of her staying power).

The intro summed up a compelling scenario. It read "An image of German chancellor Angela Merkel, French president Francois Hollande, American outgoing president Barack Obama, Italy's newly resigned prime minister Matteo Renzi and former British prime minister David Cameron speaks volumes about the turmoil seen in world politics over the course of this year."

From the UK voting to leave the EU to Italy voting against constitutional reforms, two European prime ministers resigned in the space of six months.

Renzi's crashing defeat with 60 percent voting against his constitutional proposals led to a sharp fall in the value of Euro. The results

bear complications for the country's struggling banks and have raised questions over its membership of the EU.

People tweeted the picture with comments such as "Three pro-EU globalists down, one more pro-EU globalist to go," and "four down, Merkel to go."

A guide to nationalist parties' challenges in Europe opens our eyes to a rather bleak but not necessarily irredeemable overall outlook. The percentages of votes tallied by the nationalist/Far-right parties speak of their support baselines with considerable dent made in a good number of countries. With multi-party systems and a track record of coalition governments, even a small rise in percentage of votes for a Far-right party may be considered an inroad made by fringe extremist groups.

Here is how it looks now: Sweden

Democrats—13 percent; Finns Party in Finland—18 percent; Denmark's People's Party—21 percent; Germany's Alternative for Germany—4.7 percent; Netherlands' Party for Freedom—10 percent; France's National Front—14 percent; Slovakia's Our Slovakia—8 percent; Swiss People's Party—29 percent; Hungary's Jobbik—21 percent (the party lately reversed its position on delinking from the EU); Italy's Northern League—4 percent; Cyprus' ELAM—3.7 percent; and Golden Dawn in Greece—7 percent.

It is also noteworthy that in many countries, nationalists got higher scores in European parliament elections and opinion polls.

Elections next year in France and Germany, as well as possibly a snap poll in Italy could reshape the future of the European Union for the remainder of the present decade. After Trump, 'a parallel path' is seen for Marine Le Pen of France's

Far-right. But limitations of Trump tailwinds on the European Continent were exposed in Austria through the decisive victory of Green Party's Alexander Van der Bellen—by 6.6 voting margin—over his Far-right rival Hofer Norbert. Hofer's Freedom Party was founded by former Nazis in 1952. The mild mannered Van Bellen's campaign was run on the slogan: "Beware of another Trump—don't vote for Hofer."

Away in Down-Under—Australia—where many Bangladeshis live, the news is hardly inspiring! The UN special rapporteur on human rights of migrants, François Crépeau, at the end of his 18-day visit to Australia said, "Hate speech and xenophobia had increased in the country despite the nation's rich migration history" (*The Guardian*, November 18). The UN rapporteur without mincing words pointed out, "Politicians who have engaged in this negative discourse seem to have given permission to people on the street to act in xenophobic ways and to allow for the rise of nationalist populist groups."

Politicians are cuddling up to 'Hansonite rhetoric' pushing for a cut to or end of immigration to Australia. Hanson, MP has even called for a ban on Muslim migration.

In this context, it is vitally important that Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act which 'sets the tone for an inclusive Australia' be maintained in letter and spirit.

The psychology of the "other" creates and nurtures distance, and consequently sustains mistrust. While technology has bridged physical distances, in filling the vast void in psychological spaces, communication is our best bet. But we have to use its tools navigating away from disinformation or misinformation campaigns topped up by planting 'fake news' to drive wedges in communities.

The writer is a contributor of *The Daily Star*. Email: shahhusainimam@gmail.com

## Quotable Quote

**BENJAMIN FRANKLIN**  
Founding Father of the United States

*Without freedom of thought, there can be no such thing as wisdom - and no such thing as public liberty without freedom of speech.*

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

**ACROSS**

- Rudiments
- Kin of PDQ
- Artemis' twin
- Valentine trim
- Brown fruit spread
- One of the Obama daughters
- Checkout act
- Top Ten records
- Not at home
- Made into mush
- Floral garland
- Scrooge cry
- Role for Keanu
- Weasel's kin
- Igloo shape
- Hammer or hacksaw
- Broadcasts
- Fire
- Tanning oil ingredient
- Oodles
- Bayou cooking style
- Chapel seating
- Director Leone

**DOWN**

- Sheep cry
- Phone download
- Soak up
- "Ain't that the truth!"
- Spotless
- Laments loudly
- Star in Aquila
- Plopped down
- High card
- For each
- "Yup"
- Like 13-Across
- Capital on the Nile
- Caruso, for one
- Appears
- TV alien
- Touch lightly
- Buck's mate
- "Twilight" heroine
- Metal men
- Calorie counter
- Blue hue
- Basics
- Upper limit
- Bullfight cry
- Farm grazer
- Up (dress)
- Quarterback Manning
- Early auto

11-22

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

B	A	B	A	R	F	A	C	E	T
O	P	E	R	A	I	N	A	W	E
B	E	T	T	Y	A	T	S	E	A
					C	O	T	S	
G	U	E	R	N	I	C	A		
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G	E	N	I	E		S	I	E	G
A	C	T	O	R		S	C	O	O

### BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

### BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott