

A Feminist Foremother: Critical Essays on Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain

REVISED BY NIAZ ZAMAN
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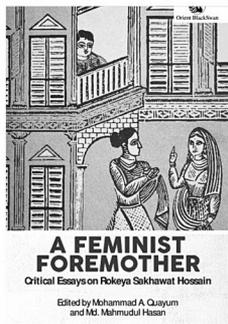
Mohammad A. Quayum and Md. Mahmudul Hossain, the editors of *A Feminist Foremother: Critical Essays on Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain*, published by Orient Black Swan (2016), have solid credentials. Professor Quayum has edited and translated *The Essential Rokeya: Selected Works of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain 1880-1932* (Brill, 2013) and Dr. Hasan's doctoral work was a comparative study of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and other feminist writers. Both of them have been consistently writing on her - with three of the essays in this volume, all previously published, by Professor Quayum and three by Dr. Hasan, two of them published earlier. In fact, of the three essays included in *A Feminist Foremother*, only two have not been previously published. Apart from "Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain: A Biographical Essay," which was included in *The Literary Encyclopedia* (2012), the majority of the essays were earlier published in *Asiatic: IJLM Journal of English Language and Literature* and two in different volumes of *South Asia Research*. *Asiatic* is an online journal, so these essays would be available to any researcher interested in Rokeya, but *A Feminist Foremother* makes it convenient for others who prefer hard copies of material and in one place. As the editors note in their Introduction, interest in Rokeya has grown since the late 1970s with the Bangla Academy, Dhaka, publication of Abdul Quader's edited volume *Rokeya Rachanabali* (1973). However, apart from the book that was originally written in English, the book is in Bangla and therefore not available to non-Bangla readers. Rokeya has been the subject of critical essays, book chapters and graduate theses. There have also been a number of "authoritative translations" of her work into English, published by leading publishers such as Brill, OUP, and Penguin. All these have helped spread her work further and brought her more attention. However, the editors note that there was no book-length study or edited collection of critical essays in English on Rokeya's life and work. Their volume "is intended to address that gap, and to pay tribute to a veritable reformist who is often credited with changing the circumstances of Bangla Muslim women and fittingly described as a feminist foremother" (xxi).

Apartment from Professor Quayum and Dr. Hasan, the other writers include Mahua Sarkar, Sarmistha Dutta Gupta, Bharati Ray, Smiti Mukherjee, Fayeza Haque, Barnita Bhagat and Md Rezaul Haq. The volume would have been more inclusive if two Bangladeshi writers who have written in English on Rokeya could have been included in this book: Roushan Jahan and Sonia Nishat Amin. Roushan Jahan was perhaps the earliest Bangladeshi writer to translate Rokeya's writings into English in *Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain: Sultan's Dream, A Feminist Utopia and Selections from The Secluded Ones* (The Feminist Press, 1988). The phrase "feminist foremother," as the co-editors acknowledge, has been taken from her introduction. Professor Amin, who has written brilliantly about the world of Muslim women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal 1876-1939* (Brill, 1996), would also have been a valuable addition. Nevertheless, *A Feminist Foremother* is a valuable volume, providing essays on different aspects of Rokeya. In "A Biographical Essay," Quayum describes Rokeya's personal life and her setting up of her school in her husband's name. Drawing from Rokeya's letters and essays, he gives a brief but succinct picture of the struggle of this brave Muslim woman to ensure education for Muslim girls. There has been some confusion about Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's name. In Bangladesh, she is usually referred to as Begum Rokeya - the honorific "Begum" added as a mark of respect. In scholarly essays in English written by Bangladeshis, she is referred to by her first name - in the manner that Rabindranath and Nazrul are. However, there is also a confusion about the English spelling of her name. In an end note, Professor Quayum explains the spelling of Rokeya's name that the book has used - as did his earlier book *The Essential Rokeya: Selected Works of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain 1880-1932*. Rokeya herself rarely wrote her full name. In much of her correspondence, she used just her initials: R. S. Hossain. She also occasionally spelled her surname "Hossein." When she wrote in Bangla, she spelled her first name "Rokeya." In one letter in English, which is reproduced in Abdul Quader's book, the name is spelled "Roqiyah Khatun." Unfortunately, there is a typographical error. The name in the original letter is spelled "Roqiyah," corresponding with the Urdu pronunciation. Though "Rokeya" has become the generally acknowledged spelling, I believe that this should have been corrected in a volume that brings together so many valuable essays on her.

The confusion over the spelling of Rokeya's name is also evident in the naming of a Dhaka University women's hall. In 1964, in recognition of Rokeya's contribution to women's education and emancipation, Dhaka University named the sole women's hall at the time after her. In an attempt to keep to the Urdu pronunciation of her name, the name in English was spelled "Roqayyah Hall," not "Rokeya Hall." The university authorities were not perhaps aware at the time of how she spelled her name in English. Should the spelling not be changed now? Several of the essays in the book mark new territory. Thus, Mahua Sarkar in "Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and the Gender Debate among Muslim Intellectuals in Late Colonial Bengal," notes that it is commonly believed that there was little material on Muslim women in the literature of colonial Bengal because very few of them wrote or did anything meriting attention. She refutes this misconception and points out that, by the third quarter of the nineteenth century, middle-class Bengali Muslims were taking to the print media and even writing in Bangla, despite the opposition of the Muslim orthodoxy. She notes the growth of Muslim periodicals that encouraged women to write. She points out that by the first decade of the twentieth century, many Muslim women in Bengal were writing in both Muslim and Hindu journals. "Their contributions in the form of articles, short stories, poems, autobiographies and travel accounts - all of which went into changing women's roles within the home and outside - have been considerable" (26). Despite this, she notes, the contributions of Muslim women have been overlooked: "The recorded history of women in pre-Partition Bengal... continues to be overwhelmingly a narrative of the reformist experiments of a small minority of Hindu/Brahmo women, who actively participated in the modernising projects of the new 'liberal elite'" (26). It is not only Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's work that should be included, she stresses, but also that of other Muslim women writers who made significant literary and critical contributions in pre-Partition Bengal (28).

Both Muhammad A. Quayum's piece, "Inspired by the Bengal Renaissance: Rokeya's Role in the Education and Emancipation of Bengali (Muslim) Women," and Sarmistha Dutta Gupta's essay, "From Sakhawat Memorial School to Rokeya Hall: A Journey Towards Language as Self-Respect," explore the mantle from her male counterparts rather efficiently and effectively" (59). Sarmistha Dutta Gupta notes that, in 1964, the first women's hall of Dhaka University was renamed in Rokeya's honour. Thus, "Bengali women - whether they were from Sakhawat Memorial or not - had formally managed to acknowledge Rokeya as a pioneer in girls' education" (81). But, more importantly, Gupta stresses, the education that Rokeya pioneered paved the way for an emancipation of the mind. She would like to recognize Rokeya and the Sakhawat Memorial School as precursors of the secular nationalist movement that saw the birth of a new nation in 1971" (81).

Hossain's Work in South Asian Muslim Feminism," Md. Mahmudul Hasan analyzes Rokeya's feminism in the context of the South Asian Muslim milieu. He traces the feminist background in the South Asian Muslim context to the reign of Razia Sultana (1205-1240) and then notes the spectacular rise in the role and status of Muslim women during the Mughal period (1556-1707). However, the contribution of Muslim women in colonial Bengal tends to be ignored. He notes that though things have changed, with Rokeya recognized as "an iconic figure in Bangladesh" and "acknowledged as one of the feminist foremothers," there is a continued tendency to neglect her. The purpose of Hasan's essay is to establish the importance of and need for commemorating Rokeya by providing aspects of her life and work "which will reveal the enormous hardships she endured, the exemplary courage she showed and the personal sacrifice she made in her struggle for women's rights and societal betterment" (91). In "A Feminist Critique of Patriarchy: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain," Bharati Ray concentrates on Rokeya's essay, "Sreetrijit Abanati," as encapsulating Rokeya's critique of patriarchy. Though this criticism was in the context of her Muslim milieu, Rokeya's arguments were applicable to the patriarchal structure of Hindu society as well. Ray ends by noting how, in the early twentieth century, Rokeya gave a clear call for the end of patriarchy, noting not only the duties of men but also of women. "To men, she said: give women equality and recognize their contribution. To women, her call was: 'wake up.' If women woke up, and if gender equality was established, patriarchy would come to its deserved end - extinction" (124). Among the minor problems that may be noted is the repetition of biographical details. However, this is to be expected in a volume of this nature. Nevertheless, *A Feminist Foremother: Critical Essays on Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain* is a valuable book for anyone interested in knowing about the different aspects of Rokeya's life, her writings and her contribution to the emancipation of the Muslim Bengali woman. Niaz Zaman has retired as Professor of English from the University of Dhaka and is at present Adviser, Department of English, Independent University, Bangladesh.

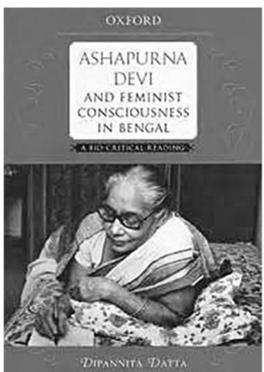


Ashapura Devi and the Feminist Consciousness in Bengal A Biocritical Reading

REVISED BY MALASHRI LAL
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The book engages with a critical discussion on feminist consciousness in India, perhaps in South Asia, as to the attributes of feminist challenge and success, and the facilitators of the process. Ashapura Devi (1909-1995), author of more than 300 books, writing continuously for 70 years in Bengali, never attended school, married at the age of fifteen, lived as an indentured labourer, mother and householder and wrote her fascinating novels and stories using whatever time she could find. During an interview with Partha Chatterjee, cited in the volume, Ashapura Devi says her writing was encouraged by her husband and in laws even when she attended, gladly, to the demands of a large household. In fact, according to Devi, "I wrote in between my domestic chores. I stopped my writing to find out what item would be cooked for the day... How can one finish saying everything? Life moves on without a pause. Times are also changing... So I continue writing, while she [at] cannot talk about politics, offices, or the judiciary." No complaints from Devi - only reflections on how regional and domestic experience yielded the substance of her world-view.

Dipamita Datta, writer, translator and feminist scholar in her own right, probes the multiplicities in the life of Ashapura Devi to show that traditional roles are not incompatible with women's creativity, and that Devi's novels, essays, letters and interviews illustrate a forceful sense of identity and selfhood. Articulate and thoughtful, Devi is quoted as saying "Women need a special kind of self-sufficiency [and] this can come only with the consolidation of female power." Datta's 'bio-critical reading' gives an unusual structure to the book. It opens with three insightful chapters by Datta placing Ashapura in the context of the social changes unfolding in Bengal during her lifetime, including the reform movement and the national uprising, then Datta moves into the more intimate biography of a young woman's evolution in domestic space, and she finally elaborates upon Devi's unique ways of challenging hegemony. The opening sections take up about 140 pages and are followed by one section containing news by Ashapura Devi and letters written by and to her, and another section comprising of important



interviews with Devi by eminent writers and critics. Altogether, the book combines impressive research and perspectives, and valuable archival and analysis. For those enquiring into Ashapura Devi, Indian literature, issues of feminism in South Asia, this is a commendable source book and more.

Dipamita Datta's chapter "A Critical Overview" shows feminist awareness of the contradictions that Ashapura Devi may exemplify. Devi may seem to be caught in the silencing projects of imperialism and patriarchy in accepting her domestic priorities in which her only complaint is that she could not receive formal education but learned to read Bengali from her book-loving mother. Through a phrase often referred to, "Jadehi, tai likhi" (I write what I see) Devi appears to favour the normative realism framing women's writing in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Moreover, living in Calcutta

under the sway of an imperial government, Devi seems to accept the principles of colonial modernity. Where, then, can we find the resisting writer, the woman whose novels and magazine serials were eagerly awaited by hundreds of readers; an author who was avidly pursued by beseeching publishers? Datta's comment is worth pondering over: "In trying to adopt an alternative strategy to be heard, Ashapura Devi chose to explore her marginalised position and voice it in her writings. Her agenda was to create a space for women where their plight would be voiced and consequently be transmitted in order to be heard" (10).

How does this 'alternative strategy' work? Ashapura Devi's magnum opus, the trilogy, *Pratham Pratishruti* (1964), *Subarnalata* (1967) and *Bakul Katha* (1974), captures the narratives of three generations of women. Beginning with feminist subjugations during the colonial period, Devi gives details of the *amtaipur* culture that "prevented women from becoming visible to the public," but speaks firmly through the woman's voice. If such writing is compared to women's fiction in English literature, about which Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic* the classic feminist interpretation, one can see the contrast. In the British writing cited, the stereotypical images are of women as angels or as monsters; in Ashapura Devi's strategy, the systems of patriarchy are exposed by using the collective voice of the women of the *amtaipur*. Yet Ashapura Devi said she was not a social reformer but a mere witness to social change. The essays in the book are startling for their adherence to ground level reality while Devi dreams of women's emancipation. As Datta explains, "Ashapura's essays delve deep into the tensions, conflict, ambiguity, and tragedy that had been naturalized in the historical process and show that women can get past 'the grueling grind of their working world, and fulfill the demands of the

changing times and public life" (145). Far ahead of her times, Devi is talking about women's right, to property, to equity and justice. Education and self-sufficiency are the keys to a dignified identity, and laws will not deliver what women need in social practice, she says. On may recall that Devi's *Subarnalata* articulates some of these issues, but it is left to Rakul of the new generation to project the possibilities of the future.

Another section contains the rare material of letters that are gentle, personal, and sometimes merely functional. The charm of old-time epistles lies in the unselfconscious revelation of the author in multiple roles. As a mother to Sushanta, she sends loving advice on her birthday, as a writer to a scholar-researcher in Prague she sends her books, as a contributor to a journal editor in Calcutta she enquires about the publication date of her work. Happily reproduced is a letter from a young Jhuma Lahiri, aged 26, to Respected Ashapura Devi's seeking permission to translate seven short stories and discuss them critically. (One may add a footnote that Lahiri expressed her admiration for Ashapura Devi as recently as 2014).

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