

ROKEYA DAY

Brilliantly rejecting the notion of inferiority

SONIA NISHAT AMIN

ROKEYA (English spelling used by her: Roquia) was born circa 1880 (alternately 1878) to a declining aristocratic land-owning family in the village of Pyrabund, Rangpur in present-day Bangladesh. Rokeya would have been a neglected child, had it not been for the care and tutoring provided by her elder brother Ibrahim Saber and sister Karimunnessa Khanum. Between them, they secretly taught Rokeya how to read and write, specially the language of the new elite, English, and that of the perceived non-aristocratic class (*atraf*), Bangla or Bengali. Later on, her husband would tutor her in English (as she would teach the Urdu-speaking Sakhawat Bengali). Her husband's untimely death in 1909 spelt tragedy for the childless Rokeya, their two infants having died in childbirth. Widowed and alone, she had to take refuge in Kolkata rather than linger on in the hostile atmosphere created by her step-daughter and her family in the Bhagalpur home. In Bhagalpur, Rokeya had embarked on her writing career with *Pipasa*, *Niraha* Bengali and *Sultana's Dream* (1908). Rokeya's writing follows in the tradition set by the nineteenth-century chaste, (modern) prose of writers such as Vidyasagar and Bankim. Much more an essayist than a novelist or poet, Rokeya's writing is characterised by what Abdul Mannan Syed has aptly termed *manoswikata* which may be loosely translated as "intellect." Logic, humour, irony and overall a clear analysis and focus on the matter at hand, are salient characteristics. In one of her earliest pieces Rokeya declares: "In ancient ages when there was civilisation, or social borders, we were not such slaves. As man became more civilised... he started to exert his domination over women through naked force and intellectual craft... the society which created monarch and subject, distinction between law enforcing and state authorities, has also subordinated woman to man ... they have subordinated woman through their physical and intellectual prowess..." (RS Hossein, *Streejatir Abanati*, in *Rokeya Rachanaboli*,

henceforth *RR*, 1973:17). It is in this piece perhaps, more than in any other, Rokeya formulates clearly her thoughts on the subordination of women, establishes, the fact of subordination in history, rather than any law of nature, religion, and even uses the term "slavery" for the state women were in. Rokeya's brilliance lies in the fact that she rejected outright any notion of natural/biological/spiritual inferiority of women. Having done this she sought the reasons of subordination in historical evolution, rather than biology or divine will. She held that centuries of subjection have led women to internalise the notion of inferiority. In the opening lines of her essay *Ardhangi* she writes: "It is necessary to study the symptoms of a disease before treatment can commence. Hence one has to depict the degraded conditions of the so called

'helpless race' before remedies may be sought. In *Streejatir Abanati* I have shown my sisters that they suffer from the disease of enslavement and dwelt on its causes and symptoms. Now it is time to trace the impact of this malady on society." (*RR*, 1973:35) Her only novel *Padmarag* which was written much earlier but published in 1924, portrays a sort of "women's commune" or *ashram* where destitute or helpless women from all of the major communities of India – Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Brahmo – seek refuge. In tracing the stories of each of the inmates of the *ashram* 'Tarini Bhaban', Rokeya depicts how each woman became a victim in her particular society. Quite deftly the author illustrates through inmates narratives - the various sites of patriarchal oppression.



structure --- gender relations. In the dream world, Ladyland, gender relations are reversed, and men stay indoors in the *mardana* and women inhabit the public space. A question that arises today is whether Rokeya may be termed a "feminist", and if so, to what extent? In recent years the term has gained currency in our part of the world as well. Though *naribadi* is a Bengali translation of an English word, if feminism basically means equal rights for women in the core societal institutions which presently operate on patriarchal or male-centred principles, it existed in South Asia even in the 19th century. The term was not there – Rokeya never called herself a feminist, nor did others label her so. But everyone knew they were dealing with the "Women's Question" and Rokeya was described as the harbinger of the women's awakening, its ambassador pilgrim (*doot, broti*). Today as we look back at the work of this pioneer, more than a hundred years after her first essay was published, we have to pause and evaluate her for the breadth and vision of her achievement and her relevance today. Many of the social ills she wrote about still exist, some new ones have been added; patriarchal oppression is alive and increasing through the new forces of religious extremism. True, as Rokeya dreamt, women have their BAs, MAs, PhDs; they grace the offices of judge and magistrate, even head of state. Nonetheless, the strength of a chain is its weakest link and no one will argue that the women of our country do not suffer from the negative impact of unequal legal and economic status, unfavourable cultural norms and gender roles. We are yet to shed the "badges of slavery." Rokeya's writings, her feminist thought, her contributions are still very relevant, her objectives still elusive. As her biographer Shamsun Nahar Mahmud wrote: "We have not yet reached the zenith. As we march on, our victory flags will tip downward in salutation to that woman who retrieved the infant and brought it into light from the cave of darkness." (*Rokeya Jibani*, 1937: 19-86).

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Sonia Nishat Amin (professor, Dept of History, University of Dhaka) specialises in the study of gender and culture in colonial Bengal .



For her own and future generations, Rokeya has also left behind alternative visions of a society in which women may seek refuge.

The Flight of the Phoenix



ONE fine morning, someone from the Embassy of Bangladesh in Washington DC decides to have a few plastic cones on the street in the front with 'No Parking' written on them. No wait, let's make it a bit more benign – 'No Standing'. 'Beng-laa-dash'? Where on earth is that? And besides, this is 3510 International Drive, Washington DC. While the word 'International', unlike in Bangladesh, draws no mass frothing, this is also not Massachusetts Avenue, the 'Embassy Row'. So, let's pick an embassy that may matter. Let's see, aha, the Embassy of Iraq on 3421 Massachusetts Avenue engaged in the same action, i.e., of placing orange cones, sponsored by the cones of Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream, displaying the same sign, 'No Parking' (though 'No Invading' would be more appropriate). These are all the wild imaginations of a comedian who always wonders "What if...". But IF that really were to happen, no matter how high up in the Iraqi administration making this vital decision, it would be counteracted and dealt with immediately. No, not by President Trump pressing the red button, but by the empowered rookie officer of Washington DC Police Department on his regular beat by having the cones removed in a jiffy, if not also by issuing citations for violating thoroughly enforced traffic laws. Such is not the case on Dhaka's Embassy Row, or rather, maze of rows, where 'traffic' signs of all types, shapes, colours pop up like playing blocks at a children's daycare centre and somehow the usually law-breaking average citizen of Bangladesh all of a sudden becomes the squeamishly obliging 'law' abiding citizen. After all, the bark from the private security guard, upgraded through affiliation (with a foreign mission), is better than its (toothless) bite. We oblige, never thinking twice about demanding to see a permit that bars access to the tax payer's side walk. Oh, and there are the concrete barricades, albeit environmentally friendly with some trees planted inside them. In DC, a lone cop takes care of the job, let alone the Mayor of the city having to show up at the embassy door like a commoner to



Annisul Huq

plead to the mission chief to 'request' that the cones be removed. But it takes a lot more in Dhaka to beat the trend while risking taking the heat. The Mayor HAS to do exactly what the lone DC cop in his Ford Crown Victoria accomplishes in a heartbeat. The Mayor of North Dhaka, with the rank of a cabinet minister, and the will of a messiah, does exactly that. Thus, gone are the 'barricades', cones, signs and so on, placed initially with the rights of inheritance. Gone are (some of) the business establishments that had mushroomed up in residential areas. Gone are the waterlogged streets. Gone are the broken sidewalks. Gone are the containers which had converted *Shaat* (seven) *Raasta* (road) to *Chhoy* (six) *Raasta* (road) in Tejgaon after the Mayor himself being 'incarcerated' for a whole day by the occupiers (Netanyahu style). Gone is the nonchalance as he bravely apologises in public for the indomitable mosquitoes. Gone is the need to look at oneself first as opposed to the city. Gone is the fear of dealing with the ingrained politics. Gone is the apathy to take on the complex racket head on. Gone is the image of this man being inaccessible. Gone is the politics replaced by vision, will, dedication and sure, charisma. Gone is the centralisation with the city split in two with two, young, dynamic men engaged in healthy competition with the city dwellers, both north and south, coming out as winners. Gone is the rhetoric "We are weak and have to be impolite" replaced by "Don't take our politeness as weakness". Gone is the concept of a place of fear now becoming a place of service. Here is a man, who goes to London in the cabin of an aircraft but returns to Dhaka in the cargo hold a much bigger man. But his last drive from the Airport to the Army Stadium and then to Banani is on the streets of a city that will never, ever, forget a man who has changed the office of the Mayor forever. Now, we either go back to BAU (Business As Usual) as we've seen for the majority of the nation's existence, or see someone brave enough to fill the huge shoes left behind. I have a positive feeling it will be the latter – and thus truly, becoming the *Flight of the Phoenix*...

The writer is an engineer at Ford & Qualcomm USA and CEO of IBM & Nokia Siemens Networks Bangladesh turned comedian (by choice), the host of ATN Bangla's *The Naveed Mahbub Show* and ABC Radio's *Good Morning Bangladesh*, the founder of *Naveed's Comedy Club*. E-mail: Naveed@NaveedMahbub.com



NORTH SOUTH UNIVERSITY

Center of Excellence in Higher Education

The North South University (NSU) is the first and a leading private University in Bangladesh with a vision to flourish as the premier academic and research University in Asia. NSU has established the NSU Genome Research Institute (NGRI) equipped with state-of- the –art high throughput genome sequencing facilities and high performance computing clusters (HPC) to facilitate genomic research in Bangladesh. NSU is seeking applications for the following posts for its newly established genome research institute, NGRI:

Research Officer: 01 position
(Bioinformatician), Genome Research Institute (NGRI)

The post holder will be responsible for developing new bioinformatics tools and pipelines in order to analyze data from emerging sequencing technologies such as Illumina MiSeq and nanopore sequencing.

Academic Qualifications: MS degree in Bioinformatics, Computer Science, Biology, Microbiology, Biochemistry or similar subject. Programming skills in one of the programming languages: Python / Perl / C++ / Java or similar programming is essential. S/he should have experience working in a Linux environment. S/he should be team oriented with excellent written and verbal communication skills.

Desired Skills:

- Demonstrated exposure to NGS data analysis.
- Experience with bacterial whole genome assembly and metagenomics a plus.
- Familiarity with basic statistical methods and experimental design.
- Proficiency with R, Matlab or similar preferred.
- Familiarity with commonly used public genomics datasets (e.g.: 1000 Genomes, TCGA, GTEx).

Age: Ideally 25 – 32 years.

Laboratory Technician: 01 position
Genome Research Institute (NGRI)

Academic Qualifications and Experience: BSc in Microbiology, Biochemistry, Chemistry, Biology or a related field. S/he should be team oriented with excellent written and verbal communication skills. At least 2 (two) years’ work experience in a microbiology/molecular biology laboratory of any research or academic institution.

Age: Ideally 22- 32 years.

Monthly Salary (for all positions): An attractive salary package & benefits will be offered to the successful candidates.

Other Benefits (for all positions): Provident Fund, Gratuity, Festival Bonuses, Group Insurance, In- house free Medical Consultation, etc.

Only short-listed candidates will be called for interview

Candidates may apply with a complete CV, two passport sized photographs, experience certificates, copies of transcripts by **December 26, 2017** through e-mail.

Director, Administration
NORTH SOUTH UNIVERSITY
Bashundhara, Dhaka – 1229
E-mail: nsuhr@northsouth.edu
www.northsouth.edu

QUOTABLE Quote

All changes, even the most longed for, have their melancholy; for what we leave behind us is a part of our-selves; we must die to one life before we can enter into another!

ANATOLE FRANCE
FRENCH POET, JOURNALIST, AND NOVELIST

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Parasol offering

6 Prudish person

10 Garden aids

11 Glider, e.g.

12 Building topper

13 Barista's creation

14 Borderline

15 Boutique patrons

16 Fellows

17 Furnish with weapons

18 Stag's mate

19 Stretch out

22 Big gulp

23 Bumpers

26 Signed agreement

29 Sauna site

32 Greek consonants

33 Glass container

34 Mr. Munster

36 Mrs. Munster

37 "Ta-tal"

38 Trio of myth

39 Bang-up

40 Before, in Paris

41 Auction cry

42 Army sites

DOWN

1 Seafood staple

2 Dancers, in slang

3 Currently

4 Stand up to

5 Twisty turn

6 DVR button

7 Appraised

8 Prologue

9 Honking birds

11 Hybrid fruits

15 Lingerie buy

17 Follower of Jason

20 Nervous habit

21 Road gunk

24 Sizzling dish

25 Triangle type

27 Convent resident

28 Secret meetings

29 Some carpets

30 Director Almodóvar

31 "The Tempest" sprite

35 Honeyed drink

36 Kilauaea flow

38 Like the Beatles

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

L	A	P	U	P	S	A	V	A	I	R
I	M	A	G	E	A	B	O	V	E	
T	I	G	H	T	F	I	S	T	E	D
U	N	E	H	U	N	E	R	R		
P	O	D	C	A	S	T	F	E	E	
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R	E	S	T	S						