

Critical Reception: A Comparison between Rokeya and Woolf

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In a previous article titled "Rokeya and Woolf: Souls That Have Lived" (*Daily Star*, 8 Dec 2018), I discussed similarities and differences between Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) and Virginia Woolf (1882-1941). The current one aims to point to the incommensurate critical reception that Rokeya is given in literary studies in comparison to a contemporary British writer, Woolf.

It is true that the volume of Woolf's writing is larger than that of Rokeya's. However, it is also true that the worth of a writer does not solely depend on the volume of their oeuvre. Material context, artistic ability and the forcefulness of arguments, among other things, are also considered when determining a writer's literary value and significance.

and her brother Ibrahim Saber had to stay up at night to allow other family members enough time to go to bed so that they could start their "tutorial session."

Before Woolf started her literary career, many women writers had appeared in the English literary canon. Although she made an original contribution to the form of the novel, she was by no means the first woman writer in English literature to advance feminist causes. In "Professions for Women," Woolf says, "For the road was cut many years ago – by Fanny Burney, by Aphra Behn, by Harriet Martineau, by Jane Austen, by George Eliot – many famous women, and many more unknown and forgotten, have been before me, making the path smooth, and regulating my steps."

Similarly, in "Women and Fiction," Woolf mentions that there was already an "extraordinary outburst of fiction in the beginning of the nineteenth century in England." Many great women writers had appeared in the English literary arena before her, and she was a significant addition to that canon. As Elaine Showalter discusses in her book *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), Woolf was not unresponsive to the "century old" female aesthetics, rather she culled the essence of that heritage; and "no woman writer has ever been more in touch with – even obsessed by – this tradition than she." However, as mentioned earlier, Rokeya launched women's writing and facilitated the emergence of feminist literature in Muslim Bengal almost all on her own.

It is true that, during the pre-colonial era and the colonial period, there were many established Muslim women writers and social reformers in the Indian subcontinent, which I discussed in an earlier work titled "Commemorating Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Contextualising her Work in South Asian Muslim Feminism" (2013). However, they sank into oblivion and were hardly mentioned in literary histories because of what Elora Shehabuddin terms "a manufactured blindness to Muslim women's own writings and thoughts."

According to Mahua Sarkar, in the colonial narrative, Muslim women were portrayed as "invisible" and "the backward other" while their Hindu counterparts, as "liberated and modern." What is more, as Barbara Metcalf argues, in colonial historiography "British historians imagined Hindus as the original inhabitants and Muslims rather as they, the British, imagined themselves: as foreign rulers, as imperial rulers,

who arrived as successful conquerors."

Mahua Sarkar reaches the conclusion that the contributions of Muslim women "simply disappear from public discourse" partly because of the preponderance of focus on their Hindu sisters in "debates between the Hindu orthodoxy, the British government, the reformists, and later the nationalists throughout the nineteenth century." So unlike Woolf, Rokeya had little canonical as well as institutional support to derive inspiration from the cultural traditions of her predecessors.

In Britain, feminist consciousness raising activities and women's involvement in various literary and political organisations had been in vogue before Woolf's emergence as a great feminist writer and theorist. Conversely, in Rokeya's Bengal, the education movement for Muslim women started mainly with her ideas and initiatives. More importantly, it suffered from colonial control and from a socio-politically underdog status among other indigenous communities, whereas Woolf's England – though under the threat of fascism and militarism – was the dominant colonial power of the time.

Therefore, the sociocultural hurdles Rokeya faced in pursuit of her literary career and in the promotion of female education and other feminist agendas were more challenging than those Woolf faced. So while assessing Rokeya's standing among global feminist writers, her courage, dogged determination and relentless struggle against multiple forces need to be taken into account.

However, the amount of critical work that has been done so far to introduce Rokeya's life and, more especially, literature to a wide-ranging readership extending beyond the borders of Bengal is not commensurate with her unrivalled stature as a public intellectual, eminent educationalist and early feminist writer of Bengal. That Rokeya was for a long time neglected in the global discourse of the women's rights movement prompted Mukti Barton to begin her essay "Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and the Bengali Muslim Women's Movement" thus: "FROM THE MARGINS of history I bring to you Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain [...] whose writings and example continue to influence and inspire the women's movement and the Muslim community in Bengal."

Since Barton made this statement in 1998, books and articles on Rokeya's life and work have appeared in Bangladesh and beyond. In my

doctoral research completed at the University of Portsmouth in 2007, I compared Rokeya's feminist works with those of four writers of different spatiotemporal locations – Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97), Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), Attia Hosain (1913-98) and Monica Ali (1967-). I co-edited (with Mohammad A. Quayum) *A Feminist Foremother: Critical Essays on Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain* (2017) which concerns analysing her works and discussing their literary merits in a true literary criticism tradition. A number of other scholarly works including books and articles have made important contributions to the analysis of her life and writings critically and from a feminist comparative perspective. Some of her writings are also taught at different levels of education in Bangladesh and internationally.

These constitute part of the remedy of what Raushan Jahan and Hanna Papanek call "a long period of neglect" of Rokeya in global feminist discourses. Recent works on her also represent critical efforts to introduce her to a global readership. Although Rokeya's primary target audience was the Muslim society of Bengal, on a number of occasions, she expressed concerns about the worldwide peripheralisation of women and for awakening and uniting women of all societies towards liberation.

However, many literary and feminist scholars tend to neglect Muslim writers like Rokeya. For example, Kumari Jayawardena does not mention Rokeya at all in *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (1986) even though she does refer to a number of Bengali Hindu women writers of Rokeya's time. Despite that, compared to other Bengal Muslim women writers, Rokeya has obviously received greater research and pedagogical attention. But, as opposed to the critical reception of many of her counterparts like Woolf from other cultural backgrounds, that is far below the threshold of literary canon formation and incommensurate with her literary pre-eminence and unique standing as a feminist writer. This inadequate attention to Rokeya is partly due to her subaltern status and subordination which limits the deserved critical reception of her work.

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Rokeya worked in a very difficult material condition and faced stiff opposition in her educational and literary persuasions, campaign for women's rights and other reformist activities. Since the feminist tradition in Rokeya's Bengal was not well-established, she had to begin from scratch. Conversely, Woolf had circumstantial advantages, as feminist consciousness raising activities in her society had a longer history and a stronger footing.

Even though Woolf was denied formal education, she was benefitted by, and free to use, the rich library of her father. On the contrary, Rokeya's self-education occurred surreptitiously, as most family members and relatives were opposed to female education. Sometimes she

An Immigrant's Quest for CanLit

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To an immigrant Canadian, such questions are really very tough to comprehend: "Which are the best novels in Canadian literature?" or "Who are the most celebrated poets of the country?" or "Who are the most loved Canadian memoirists?" or, "Which playwrights overwhelmed the nation?" How is an immigrant supposed to know who the First Nation major authors are of Canada? It is not that easy to cope up with a new literature in a very short time. More than that, Canadian literature, though written in English, is possibly not on any curriculum outside Canada. So, when Canada becomes one's own land, it becomes challenging to merge with it, and also to dive into its literature. Same thing happened to me, an enthusiast of Bengali literature, when I first came to Canada.

Before leaving for the North American city in 2013, we only knew some names of Canadian fictionists. The names of the Canadian fiction writers that we came across back home included Michael Ondaatje, Rohinton Mistry and Yann Martel. The South Asian connections of the earlier two and *Life of Pi*, set in sub-continent context were possibly the components that caused some sort of interest in me and in many like us. The international reputation of Carol Shields or Margaret Atwood might climb the reading table of a Bengali reader, too. But how frequent was that? Or, before the 2013 Nobel, how many Bengali readers and writers were truly acquainted with the works of Alice Munro?

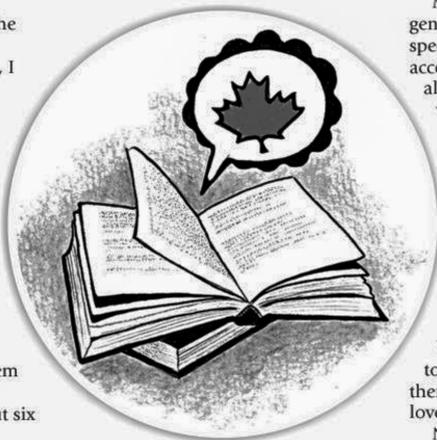
I was a more a man of novels than a man of literature, but knew little of the novel genre of my new land! I cannot think of trying at this post-fifty age. That is how the first two years of my life in Toronto passed by. By this time Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood had gained attention from the international audience. I dared to take a look at their books, but I dared not dive into their works. Hundreds of thousands books of

Canadian writers are shelved in the one hundred branches of Toronto Public Library (TPL), but I could not reach out to them. In such a dissatisfactory and unhealthy status of mind, one day I did a tremendous job. I did not know beforehand that it was going to be tremendous. The tremendousness erupted through a stoutness of the mind!

After some two years of my stay in the new land, I had started working on Canadian literature. I started because, as a man of literature I could bear my ignorance no more. The plan grew in me in such a way that I had to do something which would eradicate the obstacles on my way to penetrate Canadian literature. More than that, I wanted to write on Canadian literature, or popularly known as CanLit. As there was almost nothing in Bengali on Canadian literature, this world full of assets started waving me from a distance. I knew CanLit was unknown to me and to millions like me. I knew well that my Bengali fellow mates were aware of the literatures of England and America and even that of Russia, France, or even Germany, but Canadian literature remained to them unknown.

With this view in mind, for about six months I had been browsing on Canadian literature, especially on novels. Like a college student, I started visiting the library and began to take notes. Alongside many other social and literary activities, I was secretly enjoying the discoveries of a mere boy in a new world. But It was difficult too because there were so many writers and I had no fore-knowledge about them. Then at last that sweetest morning came in my life that I, having no significant income at all, decided to buy a bunch of books. I decided so, because I knew if the books lie before me all the time, it would be easier on my part to befriend them.

In a weekend morning I decided to visit a nearby shop where used books are sold. Standing before the shelves of fictions, I began to look at the back flaps. After some one hour I found my basket full of Canadian books, mostly novels. Now was time to be selective. I picked the award-winning ones and found that the number was almost twenty. Only books, and books written by Canadian writers. I paid at the counter, took a TTC bus. Taking a seat at a quiet corner at the back, I brought out all the books one after another. My new life with CanLit had started.



For the next few days, my only job was to google the books/their writers, take notes, and ensure cross references. Most of the books I got were in better condition than the books of the public library. Returning home, I put them with much care on my bedside table. I often sniffed them life flowers in a bouquet.

Days passed by, but those days were not like the days previously passed when I had no knowledge on CanLit. Many new insights began to embellish me with many-faced branches of knowledge regarding the literature of

my new country. I began to realise that I 'can,' and will, at one point, make it.

The collection that I have brought helped me a lot to start a new journey. It was not more than twenty in number, but it gave me enormous support to go forth. I read one or two books of an individual writer, but I studied him or her online as much as I could. Taking notes on them helped me develop my insight. I began to discover the thin invisible threads among them, connect those threads between the writers, and understand their status in the whole bulk of Canadian literature.

My thirst began to rise up, as is the general feature to put new steps. To speed up that journey, Nilima, my wife, accompanied me after some days. It was also a used bookshop. On my first visit to buy CanLit books, I was a clueless wanderer lost in a new land – almost no writers of the big shelves appeared known to me, almost no book seemed that known to me. But today, things had changed. Among the many writers shelved across the corners, I got myself acquainted with quite a many. On the previous day, only two hands were to carry, but this time four hands were ready to carry the goldmines. We carried them home, fondled them with much love, and caressed them with great care.

Now the big volumes began to glitter on my table. The glows overpowered me, my bedroom, my whole living place. The glow accompanied me all the time, all my hours and minutes, all my thoughts and moments.

Now I knew many great Canadian authors. The fat volumes by them began to give a happy feeling. But I started worrying as well. I knew I had to start. But how?

To make my way through CanLit, I began searching which books on the history of the Canadian literature were available in the TPL. Immediately I got some to enrich me, extend my horizon and to help me move forward. By now, I

have been more aware about the early Canadian literary pieces, the individual development of Canadian English and Canadian French literatures, and the ages through which Canadian literature had survived, or more accurately put, thrived.

But I felt that my attachment with the library books on the history of Canadian literature would not have an impact as much as they should. I browsed those, underlined horrendously and returned them to the library with all my observation. If that was so, then certainly reading them for my own study would not contribute when I would need those. And so, I embarked on a new way of searching.

One day, while researching on the 'used books shops,' I got another one. As per my google search, I reached there in 30 minutes. It gave me many among which was a voluminous one of twelve-hundred pages. It was *The Oxford Companion to Canadian literature*. I did not know that such a book I would ever own on CanLit. I did not know such an extensively informative book would always be one of my best companions. And the truth is, I, a poor man in Toronto, could 'afford' such an invaluable work in reality at only 12 dollars. This copy at my home had empowered me to work more precisely, more devotedly and more meticulously.

Now I gradually got aware how the literatures in Canada started. How the different provinces came up with their own literatures and thus contributed to the bulk of Canadian literature, but mostly how French literature enriched the CanLit.

And consequently one year back I felt empowered to write a Bengali manuscript on Canadian literature. Now I feel blessed that my manuscript is in the process of being a book in near future.

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