

"My fiction explores the repressive nature of education, and its inevitable failures."

An Interview with Saikat Majumdar

Dr. Saikat Majumdar, a professor of English and Creative Writing at Ashoka University, India, is an acclaimed writer, academic, critic and commentator on current debates. Recently, he was invited to the Fall Seminar Series organized by the Department of English, ULAB. It was an honour knowing him and he kindly agreed to an exclusive interview for the readers of The Daily Star too.

Q. 1. Ours is a world where the study of humanities is facing a crisis and we have been hearing about its extinction for quite a while. These days, as we speak of Liberal Arts, it often seems to create even more confusion. As a pathbreaker educationist yourself, could you perhaps touch on the importance of "liberal Arts" education in our parts of the world and its prospects?

I think novels come from a wild and private place, but once you're done writing, you are often struck to recognize the spirit of the times in the work. I know it's a real novel when it comes to me as a ghost and demands to be written. The child-memory of a fearful moment, of watching my mother, an actress, "die" in a stage play, inspired my novel *The Firebird*.

It is true that the humanities are sometimes confused with the liberal arts. One forgets that the liberal arts includes the natural and the social sciences along with the humanities. The term "arts" evokes the memory of times when all subjects, including mathematics and astronomy, were considered "arts" – the word "science" came into existence much later. The more important differentiator here is the word "liberal" – any subject that is not harnessed to a particular professional career is a liberal art. So, biology is a liberal art while medicine is not, economics is a liberal art while accountancy is not, political science is a liberal art while law is not, physics is a liberal art while engineering is not, English is a liberal art while journalism is not. I think the humanities, especially when integrated into an interdisciplinary liberal arts curriculum, have great

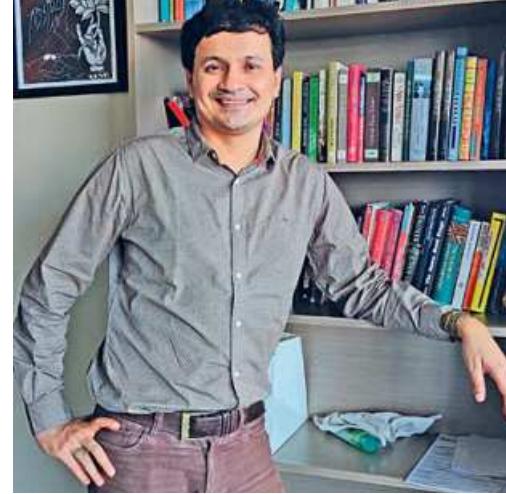


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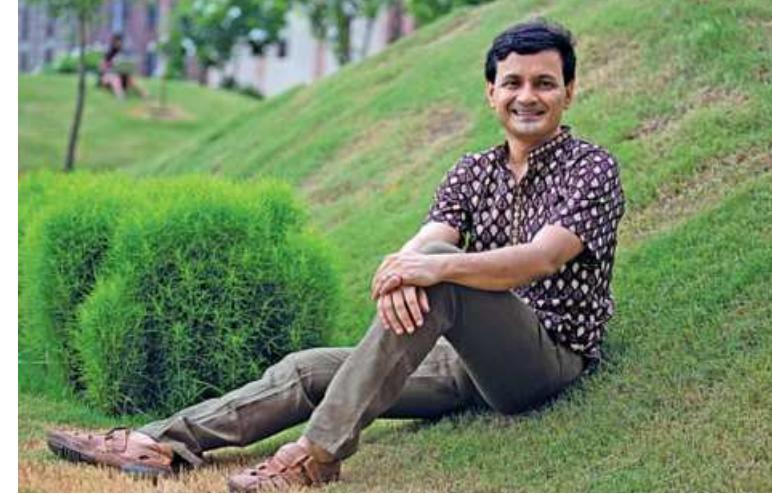


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possibilities in South Asia. The rapidly changing technologies and economy of the 21st century are making many older forms of professional training irrelevant, and the real need seems to be people who are broadly trained, with rich interpretative and communication skills, who can continue to learn and reinvent themselves. A liberal arts education does this far better than one which requires an early focus in a single professional direction.

Q.2. For creative writing, the question above is even more stark: "Do you believe that I/ my child can earn a living through creative writing?" The question I am asking here is how feasible do you think offering a degree in creative writing is at the university level? And what does it entail?

The real value of a creative writing program is not the degree. It is the experience of being in a community of writers, facilitated by some established writers – being able to seriously devote oneself to writing at least for a period, whether or not that seems worth sustaining in the long run. That time and the experience are the real fruits of the program. I think it is a wonderful thing to be offered at the university level, but never as the main academic focus. Writers need real worlds, knowledge, and experience to write about – they should not specialize too

early just as writers. They should major in literature, physics, philosophy, economics, psychology, history, computer science – whatever works for them – and devote themselves to writing classes, or a writing minor. That doesn't mean writing should be secondary or just a "hobby." It takes real passion and commitment. But when in college, one must also have an intense encounter with the world, which can only happen through the disciplines.

Q. 3. We certainly are crossing a difficult and strange time. What would be your message to millions of readers out there? And how would you counsel students during this pandemic?

I woke up today to good news about the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine, which, I hear, will offer a more affordable prevention in the subcontinent than the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines. There is light at the end of the tunnel. Readers – and those who have been able to afford to continue studying – are a fortunate group in a world where lives and livelihoods of millions have been uprooted or destroyed. I don't think we have a choice but to think of this time as a giant pause button in our lives. Obviously this is a career-setback for students – but thinking long-term, this is a time to think and contemplate, something we neglect to do when in a rush. Read too – catch up on the pending

reading – again if you're lucky enough to have some peace and good health around you.

Q. 4. You are quite an acclaimed writer. How do novels come to you?

I think novels come from a wild and private place, but once you're done writing, you are often struck to recognize the spirit of the times in the work. I know it's a real novel when it comes to me as a ghost and demands to be written. The child-memory of a fearful moment, of watching my mother, an actress, "die" in a stage play, inspired my novel *The Firebird*. When fully crafted, it became the story of a young boy's destructive relationship with theatre through the life of his artist mother. But it also became the story of a lost period, when the Communist Party in Calcutta cast a pall of suspicion over a certain tradition of urban popular theatre that traced its origins in the red light districts; suspicion especially of the women who performed in it.

Sometimes, of course, the historic spirit turns strangely to the present. My most recent novel, *The Scent of God* is a love story between two teenage boys in an all-boys' boarding school run by a Hindu monastic order in late-twentieth century India where same-sex relationships constitute a crime. Again, it comes from the memory of a place I have known, where living with religion,

learning and growing with it, becomes a strangely erotic experience. It happens especially as you hit puberty and are stirred by bodily desires, not caring whether the touch you crave belongs to a boy or a girl. But the novel came to be published in a world where Hinduism had become militarized, and saffron-clad monks could become ministers. But it was also a world that had just witnessed, just a few months ago, the decriminalization of homosexuality in the Indian Penal Code. While the novel got caught up in the celebration, the figure of the saffron Yogi, who mentored young boys, suddenly looked shadowy and enigmatic, charismatic and ominous at the same time.

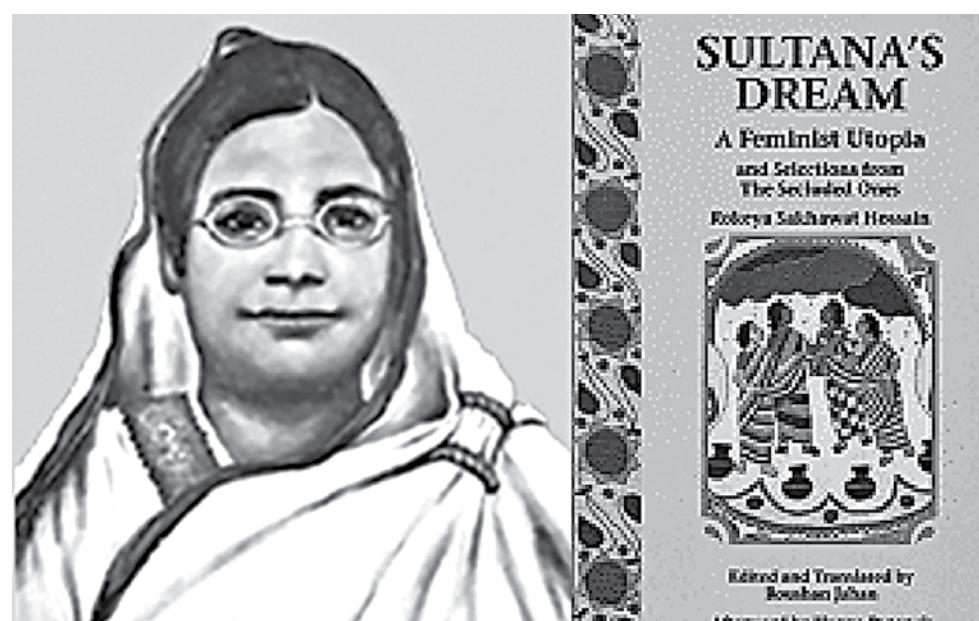
Q. 5. You have written as a creative writer, a critic and an educationist. Who do you identify with most? What would your answer be if you are asked, "Who do you see yourself as?"

A writer. That would be the truest answer. I don't think the tags – creative, critical, or academic make much difference to me. I write when I am compelled by something. The process takes a lot of planning and hard work, but the initial compulsion is mystical. Fiction is a core element of my work, as sensory evocations are very important to me, perhaps more than the abstraction of thought, but abstract thought also has its place and significance. Education, for me, is an abiding theme, in much of what I write. Both the novels I've described above have been called *Bildungsromans* – novels of growth and education. My new novel, *reimagines the story of Drona and Ekalavya in a contemporary college campus, exploring the limits of the teacher-student relationship in terms of ethics, power, and intimacy. In my work as an educationist, I try to think about viable and sustainable modes of education. My fiction explores the repressive nature of education, and its inevitable failures.*

Interviewed by Sohana Manzoor, Literary Editor, The Daily Star. She is also an Associate Professor in the Department of English & Humanities, ULAB.

Remembering and Rereading Rokeya: Patriarchy, Politics, and Praxis

AZFAR HUSSAIN



I repeat the same truth, and, if required, I will repeat it a hundred times.

— Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (translation mine)

What's the worst that could happen to me if I tell this truth?

—Audre Lorde

December 09 marks both the birth and death anniversaries of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932). The Rokeya Day in Bangladesh also falls on December 09. Indeed, Rokeya has by now been institutionalized, iconicized, and, for that matter, even reified. This means a certain misappropriation and depoliticization of her work as well. But there are now several biographies of Rokeya and scores of books and articles on her. Although I do not intend to recount Rokeya's biographical details here, I should stress the point right at the outset: Rokeya's life as a Muslim woman—lived courageously and even dangerously—illustrates nothing short of sustained struggles against religious bigotry, lack of education, shifting vectors and valences of colonialism, patriarchy affecting the practice of everyday life, and other forms and forces of oppression in colonial Bengal in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Theorist-activist, essayist, fiction-writer, poet, translator, journalist, educationist, organizer—and an *organic intellectual* in her own right—Rokeya produced a remarkable corpus of written works, making distinctive contributions to Bangla literature while articulating—with full force—the cause of women with a particular, if not exclusive, focus on their education and emancipation. Roushan Jahan already characterized Rokeya as "the perceptive feminist foremother," given the ways in which she anticipates a constellation of feminist questions and concerns broached later, although Rokeya and what a whole host of third-world feminists have called "Western, white feminism" do not go hand in hand.

Rokeya's important works include *Motichur*, vol. 1 (1904); *Motichur*, vol.2 (1921); her only novel *Padmaraag* (1924); and *Aborodhbashini* (date uncertain), among numerous others. Rokeya knew five languages—Bengali, English, Urdu, Arabic, and Persian—while she directly wrote in three of them—Bengali, Urdu, and English. Her work "Sultana's Dream"—a novella first written in English and later

translated into Bengali by the author herself—is usually described as "a feminist utopia" that, as Roushan Jahan rightly points out, "antedates by a decade the much better-known feminist utopian novel *Herland* by [the American novelist and poet] Charlotte Perkins Gilman" (1860-1935).

Yet another work in English by Rokeya is instructively titled "God Gives, Man Robs" (1927). It's a powerful essay that carries her famous words: "There is a saying, 'Man proposes, God disposes,' but my bitter experience shows that God gives, Man Robs. That is, Allah has made no distinction in the general life of male and female—both are equally bound to seek food, drink, sleep, etc., necessary for animal life. Islam also teaches that male and female are equally bound to say their daily prayers five times, and so on." Some contend that this work advances Rokeya's nuanced version of what is called "Islamic feminism" at a conjuncture that witnesses androcentric and colonialist abuses of religion itself. Rokeya of course already puts it clearly and simply: "Men dominate women in the name of religion" (translation mine).

Although it is impossible for me to characterize or summarize the entire range of Rokeya's written works, I can readily call attention to one particularly predominant concern that prompts, energizes, and constitutes the very production of her words and her

world: the woman question relating to the question of the total emancipation of humanity—of both women and men. And the woman question itself is constitutively and irreducibly a revolutionary question insofar as in the final instance it prompts us to interrogate, combat, challenge, and even destroy the historically produced system of male domination called patriarchy on the one hand, and, on the other, those systems of domination and exploitation that variously support and even enhance patriarchy itself. And Rokeya's specifically revolutionary stance decisively resides not only in raising the woman question but also in making that question integral and inevitable to the entire horizon of her work—literary, pedagogical, organizational, social, familial.

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Let me return to "Sultana's Dream" (1905), because a number of its aspects still continue to remain ignored, although these days this work often gets discussed by those who claim to do postcolonial studies. I think this work is more than just a subversive and satirical intervention in the genre of what might be called "political dream-fiction" or "political science fiction." And I read it as a work offering—through a radical reversal of the patriarchal or male-dominated order of things—a social imaginary that looks forward to, or even creates in imagination, a space and a place in which not only patriarchy

spells out its own death but in which also science, political economy, ecology, and the forces of nature and the forms of justice remain adequately responsive to one another in the best interest of not only all humans but also all living beings themselves. And, thus, this work remains opposed to the destructive and oppressive logic of colonialism, militarism, and masculinism—and even anthropocentrism—profoundly interconnected as they are. In "Sultana's Dream," Rokeya also brilliantly anticipates a version of feminist science, offering a critique of colonialism's relationship with science as a power/knowledge network. Indeed, "Sultana's Dream" is, thematically and stylistically, the first work of its kind in the entire history of literary productions in Bengal.

Rokeya is also an early but powerful theorist of women's liberation, a tireless organizer, an exemplary pedagogist of hope, and even a revolutionary in her own right. And her revolutionary moves reside in ways in which she gave voice, at the beginning of the twentieth century, to an entire generation of women

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struggling in confinement, or struggling against the purdah system itself, against the abuse of religion, against the shackles of not just double but multiple colonizations of women by patriarchy and colonialism and "feudalism," for instance.

Rokeya's work *Aborodhbashini* is often reckoned the *locus classicus* of the discourse surrounding the *purdah* system, but does Rokeya combat the system of women's seclusion and segregation a la Western feminists? No. For Rokeya, *purdah* is not just a floating signifier but heavily meaning-loaded, conjunctural, contextual; it's more than an external veil covering a face or any part of the body, but it refers to an entire system of both mental and physical imprisonment to which the questions of colonial patriarchy and patriarchal

colonialism remain relevant. Rokeya says: "The Parsi women have gotten rid of the veil but have they got rid of their mental slavery [*manosik dasatya*]?" (my translation). It's here where Rokeya not only anticipates Kazi Nazrul's own formulation of "mental slavery" (*moner golami*)—but she also accentuates—way before Frantz Fanon and Paulo Freire and Ngugi wa Thiong'o—the need for anti-colonial, emancipatory education for both women and men.

Last, Rokeya is also a politically engaged satirical poet whose apparently playful wit and sarcasm could be devastatingly subversive at times. Some of her famous poems include "Banshilif," "Nalini o Kumud," "Saugat," "Appeal," "Nirupam Bir," and "Chand." And her poetic but satirical interventions at various levels keep making the basic point about praxis itself: your silence is not going to protect you. Notice, then, a stanza in a poem she wrote as a response to those sell-outs, those middle-class *bhadralok* collaborators of the Raj who not only resorted to silence, but who were also nervous about losing their "honorific titles," in the face of the Indian nationalist movement gathering momentum in 1922:

The dumb and silent have no foes

That's how the saying goes

All of us with titled tails

Keep so quiet telling no tales

Then comes a bolt from the blue

Passes belief, but it's true

All of you who did not speak

Will lose your tails fast and quick

Come my friends and declare now

In loud and loyal vow

Listen, ye world, we are not

God's truth, a seditious lot

(quoted in Bharati Ray's *Early Feminists of Colonial India*)

I've so far quickly contoured only a few areas of Rokeya's interventions, but I've tried to convey at least the impression that honoring the legacy of her work calls for rereading, remobilizing, and even reinventing Rokeya in the interest of our struggles for destroying patriarchy and all systems of oppression.

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