

# Rokeya Stands Tall

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Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's (1880-1932) ancestors came from Tabriz in Iran to settle down in this region. During her lifetime, Bangladesh as an independent country did not exist. We call her a Bangladeshi writer because she was born in Pairaband, Rangpur, in what is now Bangladesh. However, the site of her activism was Calcutta.

In 1772, the British coloniser had shifted the region's capital from Murshidabad to Calcutta. Since then, Calcutta had been the capital of British India until 1912 when the coloniser moved its administrative centre to Delhi after consolidating its colonial grip on the city. By the way, Delhi was the last stronghold of Muslim rule in the subcontinent and the heart of Indo-Islamic culture for several centuries. However, Calcutta remained the cultural capital of the British Raj long after the city had lost its political edge.

Calcutta offered Rokeya the opportunity to interact with a wide variety of local and European scholars and to expand her sphere of influence intellectually, culturally and institutionally. She sought to awaken and illuminate Bengal's Muslims who were her primary audience. Although Rokeya spoke primarily Urdu at home



detested it, saying: "The old names as we have seen are futile and false. 'Feminism' we have had to destroy. The emancipation of women' is equally inexpressive and corrupt."

Conversely, Rokeya worked on multiple dimensions at once and left no stone unturned to liberate women. Hence, in the annals of feminist literary history, she occupies a special place owing to her great and many-sided contribution to women's causes and the tenacity and intensity of her focus on feminist concerns.

In today's Bangladesh, Rokeya's iconic status is reflected among others in the fact that, 9 December, which marks her birth and death anniversaries, is a national day. It is commemorated by the government and various literary and cultural organisations, as newspapers and periodicals publish essays on her life and works on this day. However, all these commemorations should not blind us to the difficult path Rokeya had to traverse, and the oppositions she had to overcome, to promote female education and reformist causes.

In what follows, I mention two anecdotes to describe the hostility to female education that existed in the inner consciousness of the Indian psyche around Rokeya's time.

In "Sayyid Mumtaz Ali and 'Huquq un-Niswan': An Advocate of Women's Rights in Islam in the Late Nineteenth Century" (1990), Gail Minault mentions that in the late 1890s, the great advocate of women's rights Sayyid Mumtaz Ali met Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan in Aligarh which was the centre of the latter's educational activities. Mumtaz Ali showed Sir Sayyid the manuscript of his book *Huquq un-Niswan* (Rights of Women) which he wrote to advocate women's educational opportunities and other rights within the framework of Islam. As he opened the work and began reading "Sir Sayyid looked shocked. He then opened it to a second place and his face turned red. As he read it at a third place, his hands started to tremble. Finally, he tore up the manuscript and threw it into the wastepaper basket." At that time Sir Sayyid had to leave for lunch. In his absence, Mumtaz Ali managed to salvage the "mutilated manuscript from the trash." He

published it only after Sir Sayyid's death in 1898.

The above incident should not be read as an example of Sir Sayyid's lack of support for female education. In an article titled "Sir Syed's Views on Female Education" (1996), Fatima Z. Bilgrami defends Sir Sayyid and argues that he was "aware of the need of women's education." However, the social setting was so hostile to it that he did not dare to include it in his widespread movement for Muslim education, thinking that "the movement would die if girls' education was taken up along with the boys."

Rokeya's eldest sister Karimunnisa once stealthily got hold of a book of her brother's and began to read, on discovery of which her father became alarmed and dreaded public obloquy and vilification. It was feared that her reading habit might spoil her and keep her from becoming a good housewife. She was hastily married off at fourteen. Karimunnisa continued clandestine reading in her in-laws' house. Her thirst for learning was so acute that she started learning Arabic at sixty-seven when the opportunity arrived.

Despite such hostility to female education all around the subcontinent, Rokeya did not give in. She waged a persistent struggle for female education braving the social norms and barriers that dictated an all-male presence in education and stood between women and intellectual culture. She did not believe in any disparity or discipline differences between male and female education and sought women's access invariably to all branches of knowledge.

For these and many other reasons, Rokeya's greatness as a social thinker and advocate of women's rights may remain unsurpassed for a long period to come. People who use feminism to vent their prejudices and to satisfy their predilections may come and go, but Rokeya's sincerity, courage, hard work and sense of purpose will stand tall and long.

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mainly for reasons of marriage and respectability, she wrote most of her works in her native tongue, Bangla. All these make her relevant to the entire region of Bengal which includes today's Bangladesh and West Bengal of India. It was in this sense that a 2004 BBC Bangla Service survey on the greatest Bengalis of all time put Rokeya at number six. She was the only woman to make it in its list of top 20.

Rokeya is rightly celebrated as a literary scholar, social reformer and social justice activist who fought for women's rights on multiple fronts

- educational, literary and political (arguably in that order of priorities). She poured all her blood, sweat and tears into the school that she established in Calcutta and campaigned for female education throughout her active life. For three decades, spanning from 1902 till the last breath of her life in 1932, she continued writing to effect social reform, especially that which concerned women. In 1916, Rokeya established the Bengal branch of Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam (Islamic Sisters' Group) which was originally founded in Aligarh in 1914. She became its Secretary General and Ayesha Khatun (wife of the writer and educationist Moulvi Abdul Karim), its President. In an essay titled "Rokeya's Dream: Feminist Interventions and Utopias" (2017), Somdatta Bhattacharya states: "In 1922, Rokeya became the president of two organizations, Narishilpa Vidyalaya (Women's Arts and Industry School) and Naritirtha (Women's Institution) to rehabilitate

destitute women and prostitutes." All these indicate that Rokeya was deeply engaged in socio-political activities and assumed leadership roles within the community.

In my earlier research, I compared Rokeya with two illustrious British feminist writers - Mary Wollstonecraft and Virginia Woolf. These two women were primarily writers and, unlike Rokeya, did not work on all these three fronts (educational, literary and political). Wollstonecraft and her sister Eliza did set up a school for women at Newington Green in London in 1784, however, the principal motivation was economic. Woolf was a kind of ivory tower intellectual and is often accused of having notoriously antisocial propensities. Even though her active literary career coincided with the height of suffragist activism in Britain, she remained totally detached from any organised feminist movement. What is more, in *Three Guineas* (1938), she

Remembering Emily Brontë on her death anniversary

## Romancing *Wuthering Heights*

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In popular culture, if not in criticism, *Wuthering Heights* stands as the tale of love lost in betrayal and a grand reunion in the afterworld. The credit of such interpretation largely goes to the Hollywood movie versions of Emily Brontë's novel, most of which primarily follow the classic 1939 *Wuthering Heights* with Laurence Olivier and Merle Oberon presenting Heathcliff and Catherine as star-crossed lovers, claiming it as the "greatest love-story of our time, or any time." William Wyler, the director, was obviously more interested in making his own version of a great love-story. The title of *Wuthering Heights* was used to bait the audience and dupe them into believing that they were watching the famous and intriguing story of Heathcliff and Catherine. The movie earned nominations in different categories and won many awards, but it failed miserably to arrest the complexity of the Brontë novel.

Another classic movie version of the novel is *Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights* (1992) starring Ralph Fiennes and Juliette Binoche. Even though this is one of those versions in which the characters of second generation appear to play their role of hapless victims, and the story loosely follows the main narrative, this film adaptation is yet another meretricious version of *Wuthering Heights*. The movie begins with a solitary young woman, presumably the author herself, walking across the moors on a dark and windy day until she reaches a deserted old house, and thinking out loud about the people of bygone times. The obvious idea behind such a beginning is possibly the theory that the house on which *Wuthering Heights* was modeled is Top Withens, an Elizabethan farm house not far from the Brontës' parish. However, the story that this hooded woman begins is still very different from the novel. There is no other narrator except the lady in blue, and the character of Lockwood is reduced to a luckless middle-aged tenant who stumbles into Heathcliff's household to witness a strange ending of an even stranger story. Moreover, *Wuthering Heights*, which is also about childhood bonding and adolescent attachment, turns into a movie of triangle love story and reunion of estranged lovers in death—just as it is in most of the other movie versions. Interestingly enough, most movie

versions of *Wuthering Heights* emphasize Catherine and Heathcliff's union in a life after death, which is never really shown in the book. Both Nelly and Lockwood allude to these "ghost-sightings" by the old servant Joseph, and some shepherd boy and these intimations add a deep and rich pathos to the story. Even though Nelly claims that they are "idle tales," her avoiding of a straightforward answer and Heathcliff's mysterious death suggest that there might be more to the eye than her dismissal and the bland inference drawn by Lockwood. The display of the romanticized ghosts in the movies is perhaps more conclusive but it strips off that poignancy crafted by the author.

The long and short of the matter is that *Wuthering Heights* as it is romanticized and idolized by most audiences today is not the *Wuthering Heights* of Emily Brontë—not even the 2011 movie version, which critics find closest to the dreary ambience of the novel. Heathcliff being black brings in racial tension; such adaptations, however, can also make one wonder why all these movies need to focus so much on ghosts, or incorporate foreign elements and delete the childhood of

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Catherine and Heathcliff.

Some might wince, but in more recent times, the name of *Wuthering Heights* has been idolized by some young readers for its connection to Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series as the two protagonists discuss the undying love of Catherine and Heathcliff. The novel surely involves a great love story as a central plot; but to summarize it as disgruntled romance and adulterous affair, or a story of revenge, would be overly simplifying of a complex portrayal of life. David Cecil recognizes in Emily Brontë



an aptitude totally different from that of her contemporaries: "She stands outside the main current of nineteenth-century fiction as markedly as Blake stands outside the main current of eighteenth-century poetry." Another critic, Hillis Miller named *Wuthering Heights* as one of those texts that cannot be read with the assumption that there is only a single truth to be found.

In some strange ways, Brontë touches on the themes and styles celebrated in the first decades of the twentieth century even though she lived and wrote half a century before any of the modernists. The ending, the theme and narrative structure of *Wuthering Heights* attempt to explain some of the fundamental complexities of life. The fifteen-year-old girl who recognizes the truth about her bond with Heathcliff in spite of the pressures of society that make her choose otherwise; the man who realizes the futility of his revenge mission; the pain and devastations caused and suffered by each of the characters are complex and inconclusive. Along with the rugged beauty and the wuthering of the wind in Yorkshire moors project a strangely intricate world where not all riddles can be



those around her.

Even the future generation is drawn into the vehemence of this betrayal. Accordingly, the difference of classes is not so much of an issue here as is Catherine's disloyalty to something more important, perhaps one's own self. Heathcliff's accumulation of wealth is not so much for crossing over to a better class, as Nelly confides to Lockwood that he does so for money. Throughout the novel there is no substantial evidence that Heathcliff cares for monetary benefit in itself. Even after he gains possession of Thrushcross Grange, he chooses to dwell at *Wuthering Heights* because that was his home with Catherine. Significantly, Lockwood encounters Catherine's ghost at the Heights, and not at Thrushcross Grange where she had died. Brontë's tale evidently involves issues that are more complex than social or moral engagements, questions that are more concerned with one's very existence. Above all, it indicates a significant shift from the orderly and meaningful world represented in Victorian literature.

Referring to the soulful utterances of Catherine Earnshaw as she confesses her love for Heathcliff to Nelly, Virginia Woolf once said that the love she speaks of is not the love between a man and a woman: "Emily was inspired by some more general conception... She looked out upon a world cleft into gigantic disorder and felt within her the power to unite it in a book." Woolf speaks of a "power" beneath the trivial activities of human beings, a power that lifts them "up into the presence of greatness" (131), and she concludes that Emily Brontë's work conveys that very trait. The "gigantic disorder" actually heralds the advancement of a new kind of writing that would be the benchmark of twentieth-century literature. She is indeed a forerunner of the Modernist writers who would explore the essential differences between men and women: biologically, socially and temperamentally. Also, she shifted away from the typical linear narrative of her time and produced such a riddle of a story that continues to remain elusive.

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