



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

ESSAY

Rokeya’s relevance to
PALESTINIAN FEMINISM

Rokeya’s oeuvre contains many other comparable statements that show that her actual goal was to bring about comprehensive development of her society, not only the emancipation of women. Since dominant attitudes of misogyny stood in the way of this effort, she challenged patriarchal dogmas and practices.

MD. MAHMUDUL HASAN

According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary (online), the first known use of the term ‘feminism’—meaning promoting women’s rights and opportunities—was in 1893; and the first known use of the word ‘feminist’—as an adjective meaning “supporting, or compatible with feminism”—was in 1852. The word was first used as a noun in 1887—defined as “a person who supports or engages in feminism.” The word ‘feminist’ entered the Oxford English Dictionary in 1895.

The above discussion suggests that the term feminism didn’t exist in its current sense during the time of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97), who wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). But, while Wollstonecraft is regarded as a feminist and her book as a “feminist manifesto,” as I mentioned in “Rokeya’s feminism and cultural affiliation” (2016), the term ‘feminism’ (feminisme) was coined by the “founder of suffragism in France Hubertine Auclert (1848–1914) [only] in the 1880s.”

Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) on the other hand, was active as a writer during the height of the suffrage campaign in Britain but distanced herself from the movement. In *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), she even blames it for men’s “extraordinary desire for self-assertion.” In *Three Guineas* (1938), Woolf is unenthusiastic about feminism and regards it as an “inexpressive and corrupt” term.

Given this oxymoronic relationship between feminism and “feminist” writers, it is perhaps safe to observe that the word feminism was both little-known and negative before second-wave feminism in the 1960s and ‘70s. Unsurprisingly, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932) is not known to have been identified as a feminist during her lifetime.

In an essay titled “What Is Feminism?”, Rosalind Delmar defines feminism as “a concern with issues affecting women, a concern to advance women’s interests.” According to Delmar, this definition makes “anyone who shares this concern...a feminist, whether they acknowledge it or not.” This meaning of the term ‘feminist’ is convincing and consistent with reality. It is in this sense that we prefix writers like Wollstonecraft, Rokeya, and Woolf with ‘feminist’ because of their “concern to advance women’s interests” even though they did not necessarily “acknowledge” the term.

But what kind of feminist was Rokeya? Was championing the causes of women her primary concern? In my decades-long study of her work, Rokeya appears somewhat different from how she is routinely represented (as a feminist writer). Rokeya’s central interest was not the promotion of the rights of women. She was concerned about issues even larger than that. She fought for the progress of the entire community,

and in her view the advancement of women was a precondition for this higher, all-encompassing goal.

In her presidential speech at the conference of the Bengal Women’s Education League in 1926, Rokeya regarded woman and man as two organs of the large body of society. She approvingly quoted Sheikh Abdullah of Aligarh: “How can a community, that locks half of its population in the prison of ignorance and seclusion, compete in the life struggle with other communities that have introduced women’s education on an equal footing with men’s?”

Rokeya tied the emancipation of women to the ultimate liberation of her society from colonialism and challenged patriarchal authority, stating: “It is insane for men to want liberation keeping their better halves confined in the house... So long our Muslim brothers do not attend to our [Muslim women’s] condition, the other 220 million people of India will not listen to them, and so long those 220 million people ignore 80 million Muslims, their cries will not be heard by the British government.”

She added: “Brothers think that they will achieve salvation in the hereafter for establishing

Since dominant attitudes of misogyny stood in the way of this effort, she challenged patriarchal dogmas and practices.

Crucially, a similar philosophy runs through the vein of Palestinian feminism. As Rokeya’s target was to liberate her country from colonialism and to ensure progress of the total community, Palestinian feminist activists pursue a similar goal of freeing their land from the vicious grip of Israeli occupation and thus to emancipate all, not only women.

In an article titled “Fighting on Two Fronts: Conversations with Palestinian Women” (1979), feminist scholar Soraya Antonius brings to the forefront experiences and voices of Palestinian women whose concern transcends a mere preoccupation with gender dualism. As Antonius argues: “[A]mong Palestinians there has never been a broadly-based grassroots movement for women’s rights; the major efforts have been devoted to political, national ends, and the emancipation of women has come as an accidental consequence of their determination to carry out some political action.”

Rokeya said again and again that women are half of society and cannot afford to lag behind.

[T]he mother is no longer just generous, making coffee and baking bread, but has become the strong one who celebrates her son’s death in battle by songs and who goes side by side with him through the nights of terror.... I feel the Palestine cause is mine and the work is mine...There’s no birth control programme in the [Palestinian refugee] camps because women want to replace the heavy Palestinian losses.”

As the Israeli occupation contributes to the systematic denial of the rights of Palestinian men and women, colonialism dispossessed and impoverished members of Rokeya’s society irrespective of gender. Accordingly, Rokeya referred to the colonial subjugation and underdevelopment of her society and argued for equal opportunities for women so that they could participate in public life to ameliorate the condition of all. Likewise, anti-apartheid and anti-occupation resistance offered Palestinian women equal space in public life. Um Samir—probably the same Um Samir who together with her husband Abu Samir was killed by an Israeli airstrike in Gaza in November 2023—said to Soraya Antonius: “There’s no doubt that the Resistance has improved the lot of women... I spent the battles of 1970 at a military base, sleeping there—at that stage families didn’t protest against this. But before it was different.”

Rokeya’s land was under British colonialism and Palestinian women’s is under Israeli occupation. During Rokeya’s time the anticolonial struggle in Bengal was gaining strength; and for many decades Palestinian women have rejected Israeli land confiscation policies through mass resistance and struggle. Therefore, Rokeya’s and Palestinian feminisms have resonances and cannot be compared to conventional, Western feminist discourses.

In *In Search of Islamic Feminism* (1998), Elizabeth Warnock Fernea quotes a Palestinian woman who said that Palestinian women remain busy with things like “getting their teenage children out of jail” which most of their American counterparts do not have to face or even imagine. Similarly, Rokeya’s contemporary Western women didn’t have to face the socio-political challenges from which Rokeya and other women in British India were suffering. This brings Rokeya’s feminist ideas much closer to the experiences of Palestinian women and their feminist thinking.

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POETRY

Cleaner of dawn

FATIUL HUQ SUJOY

She doesn’t need an alarm
For the last hour of the night.
She listens to the light snore
Of a city fast asleep:
A drop of drool from a dozing darwan
A thief mid climb behind,
The deadline dash of late night learners
Now enrolled in the grind.
A canine cry for far off loss
Heart-piercing yet tender,
Asphalt hum to the heavy haulers
Finally free to enter.
Tap tap go the remote romantics
Sleepless in shut-off rooms,
Flip flap runs the nocturn drunkard
From a wrong turn through the plumes.
Her weapon of a broom in hand
She strides, the cleaner of dawn.
She rolls her cart, two creaks in silence,
In search of last day’s rot:
They’re littered by the sidewalk
In the hollow built for flood,
They’re remains of a city bustling,
Echoes of a day passed.
They are the textbook excerpts
To feed jhalmuri and peanuts.
They’re the see-through plastic wrappers,
A shared kulfi between it.
They’re the high rise concrete flakes
Of a city under construction.
They’re the false fog, dust in disguise
Hiding their pale complexion.
They piled up here, under footsteps and tire marks
These corpses, clumped together,
Breathless in death, heedless of thought
They lie in wait for her.
She shakes her head to lessons unlearned
To find them here once again.
She passes by their sorry forms
To pass on their tales
To no one:

This one’s a poet, by the look of its frown
Etched by realities that don’t rhyme.
That one’s a writer, that gap by its head
Spilling stories of new divine.
Here lies the scholar, with a pen stabbed through,
Ink that never ran to impress.
There rests the humorist, tooth pulled from its grin,
Eyes scratched up as a jest.
The rebel and the leader sleep clasping their hands
Their voices a whisper to the ghosts;
Their heart aches to reach their lips,
The pathway seized,
Long gone to friends and foe.
With one sweep of her trusted broom,
With one sigh that lingered,
She turned them to dust, grey stars in the night
Pushed by an early gust
No witness in sight.
She doesn’t need an alarm
For the first hour of the day.
She listens to the tight stretch
Of a city stirring awake:
Of jogging boots fleeing sickness,
Of a chirping-a-dancing in the air,
Of heckler howls for the freshly farmed,
In rhythm to calls for prayer.
Through the sizzle of fried egg, on a drizzle of oil,
She leaves her post determined.
She let forget all that she cleaned
All behind the crimson curtain.
“Cleaner of dawn” was originally recited at SHOUTxDS Slam Poetry Nights that took place earlier this year at Dhaka Lit Fest.

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Olives

HIMU IRENE HARNEY

Through seven layers,
Without Anesthesia—
While I respire;
Conditioned air,
In ignorance blissful.
Seven feet of mud swept water,
Bodies under rubble.
My Glory intertwined vision
Goes no further than the glitter—
While you suffocate under olives, fallen.
In your exile,
I’m exiled.

Himu Irene Harney is a prospective Economics graduate from North South University.



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