



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

BEGUM ROKEYA

A redoubtable Muslim feminist and educationist

Rokeya’s most famous story is “Sultana’s Dream”, in which a young Muslim girl, Sultana, visits Ladyland in her dream, where women run the state and men are confined indoors or in the “mardana”. In this seriocomic utopian story, Rokeya shows how beautiful and morally as well as socially prosperous a country can be when women are given their rights and opportunities, and are allowed to act according to their potential, unimpeded by male bias or misogynous policies.

MOHAMMAD A. QUAYUM

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932), fondly known as Begum Rokeya, was an autodidact who became a formidable champion of women’s rights and education when women in South Asia, especially Muslim women, were forced to live in subhuman conditions, almost like animals, or even worse than animals (Rokeya’s analogies). She was brought up in an environment that was brutally indifferent to women and often viewed them, following the teachings of the legendary first man and lawgiver in Indian mythology, Manu and his influential “laws”, as embodiments of “untruth, sin and darkness” and comparable to “dogs” and “cows.” Rokeya’s mission was to root out such primitive, pejorative, and gynophobic ideas from society and make women equal to men, or even outshine them, through their education, empowerment, and emancipation.

Born in a rich but ultraconservative Muslim family on December 9, 1880, in the village of Pairaband, Rangpur, Rokeya did not enjoy parental love or freedom in childhood, only because of her gender identity. In her dedicatory note to her novel *Padmaraag*, she admits, “I have never experienced the love of a father, mother...or a teacher” (All excerpts in the article are from my translation of Rokeya’s work in *The Essential Rokeya*). Moreover, in *Aborodhbashini*, she scornfully recounts how she had to live in an extreme purdah system from the age of five, which segregated her not only from men but also from women outside their family circle.

Her androcentric father, Zahiruddin Muhammad Abu Ali Hyder Saber, was wealthy enough to marry four times, including a European woman, and send his eldest son, Ibrahim Saber, to England for higher study. Yet, he had no interest in sending Rokeya and her elder sister, Karimunnesa, to school. He also prohibited them from learning English and Bangla, considering them “non-Islamic” languages that could corrupt the minds of young girls, but not so much of boys, as Rokeya’s two elder brothers were both brought up in English-medium schools in Calcutta (Kolkata).

However, Rokeya’s eldest brother, Ibrahim Saber, was progressive and supported women’s education. Rokeya once likened his affection for her to “Kausar”, the heavenly stream of nectar mentioned in the Quran. It was Ibrahim Saber who taught English and Bangla to Rokeya, often in the dim light of a candle after their authoritarian patriarch had retired for the night. Another significant figure in Rokeya’s emotional and intellectual growth was her husband, Khan Bahadur Syed Sakhawat Hossain. Like Ibrahim Saber, Sakhawat pursued his education in England and believed in women’s empowerment and emancipation. He inspired Rokeya, who was childless, to dedicate her life to this cause. Their unwavering support was pivotal in motivating Rokeya to challenge the regressive practices of her time and spearhead the charge of rescuing women from what she called their “shipwrecked” state.

Rokeya’s mission of bolstering the status of South Asian women, especially of her own faith community, began with her essay “Strijatir Abanati”, first published in the ladies’ magazine, *Mahila*, in 1903 and then in a Muslim magazine, *Nabanur*, the following year. This was followed by a slew of publications in several other newspapers and popular magazines, such as *Nabaprabha*, *Bharat Mahila*, *Bangeya Muslim Sahitya Patrika*, *Saugat*, *Sadhana*, *Dhumketu*, *Indian Ladies’*

Magazine, *The Mussalman*, to name a few.

In her essays, Rokeya launched stringent attacks on men for depriving women of their inherent rights and subjecting them to various forms of oppression and exploitation. However, she also expressed disdain towards women for internalising society’s male-centred values and thoughtlessly surrendering their dignity and femininity to men. She argues that men have cunningly manipulated women under the guise of love, reducing them to the status of “bonded slaves”, “domesticated animals”, and “feckless mannequins”. In turn, women have accepted their subjugation and embraced lives of passivity and ignorance in the vein of “opium addicts”.

In her essay “Subhasadeq”, she instigates women to rise from their “addictive” state of dehumanising serfhood: “Wake up, mothers, sisters, daughters; rise, leave your bed and march forward...Say, mother, pounding your chest, we are not animals! Say, sister, we are not objects for possession! Say, daughter, we are not items of ornament to be locked away in an iron safe. Say, all in unison, we are humans!” In “Griha”, Rokeya dissects the general perception that men rule the world and women command the home by showing how South Asian women, irrespective of their class, colour, cast, or creed, are all homeless, forced to live within their four walls, at the whim and mercy of men. “For those who live in subjugation and do not have the right to consider the house of their ‘keeper’ as their residence, home is like a prison,” she argues stridently and concludes in a more blistering tone, “Therefore I say, we do not even have a little hut to call our home. No other creature in the animal world is destitute like us. Everyone has a home—only we do not.”

Rokeya’s literary repertoire encompasses not only explosive essays but also a plethora of poems and short stories vehemently condemning toxic masculinity. In her work “Biye-pagla Buro”, she offers scathing criticism towards elderly men who engage in the inappropriate practice of marrying young girls, exploiting the allowance of polygamy in Islam. The way she makes fun of the selfishness and sexual obsession of septuagenarian men in the story is darkly comic and virulent.

In “Nurse Nelly”, she portrays the dire consequences that can befall an entire family due to a woman’s lack of education. The story revolves around Nayeema, an uneducated Muslim girl who succumbs to the manipulative tactics employed by a group of British Evangelical missionaries, leading her to convert to Christianity and become “Nelly”. Tragically, this decision not only results in her own demise but also claims the lives of her mother-in-law and her two children. Rokeya’s underlying message in the story foregrounds the paramount significance of educating and empowering women, as they play an indispensable role in upholding the stability of both family and society. By keeping women uninformed and susceptible to manipulation, the fabric of cultural and religious values can unravel, as Rokeya poignantly depicts in this narrative.

Rokeya’s most famous story is “Sultana’s Dream”, in which a young Muslim girl, Sultana, visits Ladyland in her dream, where women run the state and men are confined indoors or in the “mardana”. In this seriocomic utopian story, Rokeya shows how beautiful and morally as well as socially prosperous a country can be when women are given their rights and opportunities, and are allowed to act according to their potential, unimpeded by male bias or misogynous policies. Ladyland is not only neat and clean, well-maintained like a garden, but

also free from violence, corruption, and crime; people here have tamed nature and tapped its energy for the good of the community; they do not fight over ideological differences or fritter their time away smoking and chatting; child marriage is banned and female education is actively encouraged; and their only religion is adherence to Love and Truth, without the traditional rituals that divide society and induce intercommunal riots and war. This is Rokeya’s blueprint for a future when humanity learns to shun male hegemony and treat all human beings as equals.

Knowing that education was the only way forward for women, Rokeya decided to start a school for girls with the money bequeathed by her husband before he died in 1909. She began the school in Bhagalpur, Bihar, Sakhawat’s hometown, with only five students. But unable to cope with Sakhawat’s dogmatic daughter by his first marriage (Rokeya was Sakhawat’s second wife), she moved the school to Calcutta, starting with eight students this time and naming it after her husband—Sakhawat Memorial School for Girls. When Rokeya founded her school in 1911, there were only two other schools for Muslim girls in Calcutta: one established in 1897 under the patronage of Begum Ferdous Mahal, the Begum of the Nawab of Murshidabad, and the other in 1909, under the patronage of Khojesta Akhtar Banu, mother of the well-known Bangali Muslim leader, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy. This speaks volumes about how Rokeya, who had never stepped into a school compound in childhood, became a trailblazer in her adult life in the education and modernisation of South Asian Muslim women.

Rokeya struggled throughout her life to run and expand the school. Her biggest challenge came from religious chauvinists who were fiercely opposed to the education of Muslim girls despite the prophet’s injunction that education was obligatory for all Muslims. Unable to break Rokeya’s iron will, they started spreading hideous rumours that she was a “whore” whose only intention was to make money by using the school as a façade. They also accused her of being a Christian behind her purdahnashin Muslim disguise, determined to convert the Muslim girls to Christianity. Referring to her essay “Strijatir Abanati”, where Rokeya advises women to toss aside all jewellery as insignias of their slavery, one critic asked notoriously, slandering Rokeya, “But could she be truly civilised without getting rid of her clothes as well and becoming naked?”

A second problem was getting students, as Muslim girls in those days were not allowed to step out of the house without purdah. To convince the mothers, Rokeya went from door to door to explain how education would enrich their daughters’ lives and assured them of using covered transports to protect the girls from the male gaze. She also experienced untold financial hardships as rich Muslim men refused to support her mission of educating girls, which violated the norms of Islam in their view. Notwithstanding such mounting hurdles, Rokeya went ahead with her feminist-cum-educational vision and mission till the very end of her life, for which she is now regarded as one of the most admirable icons in South Asian history—deserving of a university and a university hall in Bangladesh, and two schools and a library in India named after her.

Mohammad Quayum’s books on Rokeya include *The Essential Rokeya* (Brill, 2013) and *A Feminist Foremother* (Orient Blackswan, 2017; with M.M. Hasan).

POETRY

Colours

KASHFIA NAHREEN

I see colours everywhere—
I see hues of crimson scattered across the pages
of my books,
The splashes getting darker by the second,
As if someone was bled dry right on top of it.
I see colours everywhere—
Shades of purple with a tinge of red overwhelm my
senses throughout the day,
It reminds me of flesh turning blue
Once the last breath is taken,
And all I can think of when I see it is you.
I see colours everywhere—
Bright yellow spots scattered with white splotches
Are what I see when I feel warm and happy and
content,
And god knows how long it has been
Since I watched the yellow streaks dance across
me,
Maybe I stopped seeing yellow
The day you died.
I see colours everywhere—
Streaks of grey intermingled with splashes of black
Bring to mind overcast days
Where the cloud seems to pour out everything
weighing them down,
And the thought of rain
Always reminds me of you
And how heavily it stormed the night you died.
I see colours everywhere—
Flecks of yellow waltzing amidst an ocean of green
Pulls me into its depth and showers me in a torrent
of your memories,

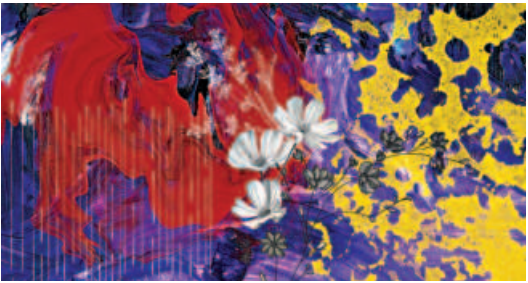


ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

And every time that happens
I am engulfed by the pain of losing you.
Echoes of your voice ring in my ears
As the world turns scarlet in front of my eyes.
Your face haunts my thoughts every goddamn day
And I can’t help but remember the smile on your
face
The last time I saw you,
You looked so peaceful in death
Like you were slumbering in the depths of the
cerulean sea,
Everyone kept telling me
How they never saw anyone looking so content
after death,
But all I could think of was how you were gone,
Suddenly stripping all the bright colours from my
life,
That no longer do I see colours everywhere.

Kashfia Nahreen is an aspiring poet and author who is doing her Masters in Creative Writing.

Monsoon osmosis

REBECCA HAQUE

Soft melody of Fazr Azaan
A pre-dawn chiaroscuro
of flashing silver sky
and dusky trees
Wafting branches wild
in the sudden Kalboishaki storm
shedding fistfuls of foliage
I inhale the luxurious scent
of squelched earth
smoking under the sodden leaves
Enraptured by shafts of electric
blue lightning bolts
I am drenched in the rushing rain
I feel the sentient plops of raindrops seeping into
the texture
of my soft brown skin
Slowly awakening the spirit within to respond
with gratitude
to the muezzin’s call to prayer

Rebecca Haque is Professor, Department of English, University of Dhaka.



PHOTO: MAISHA SYEDA