

Feminist Thoughts of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Sufia Kamal: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Sufia Kamal are two pioneering and revolutionary writers in the history of women's rights movement of Bangladesh. They wrote and fought for women's rights at such a time and social setting when women had no rights and opinions of their own, when they were not granted many basic human and civil rights with regard to men, when they had subjugated social status and for that reason the society was not willing to give them proper respect. Both of Rokeya and Sufia believed that through education, women would utilize their entire potentialities as human beings and reach their success without relying on men. However, even though Rokeya and Sufia advocated women's education, they had no institutional education. Never having the scope for going to school, their self-education kindled their characters, from their childhood days, a spark of independence. The way Rokeya and Sufia dealt with the problems of women of their respective times and the diagnoses they made imply that they have many common areas enough to form a connection between their feminist thoughts. For this reason, in spite of having a clear gap in the times to which they belonged, the similarity of their thoughts and writings provides sufficient rationale to bring them under a study of comparison and contrast. The article attempts to make a comparative study on Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Sufia Kamal with special emphasis on their thoughts on society and female education, contributions on the emancipation and empowerment of women, voice against communalism, role on the abolition of religious orthodoxy, and above all, their influence on the women's rights movement of Bangladesh.

Keywords: Awareness, Female Education, Emancipation, Empowerment, Women's Rights Movement

Introduction

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Sufia Kamal are much discussed and highly esteemed names in Bangladesh nowadays. The more the question of women's liberation is coming to the limelight, overcoming obstacles the more women are advancing to attain their rights, the more their names are being uttered. They were far advanced in their progressive ideas among

the contemporaries of their society and played a significant role to free women from the age-old social bonds. As close observers of the society, they witnessed the untold sufferings of women and took pen to right the wrongs of the society.

Rokeya was born in 1880 in a village called Pairabondh, Rangpur. From the first decade of the twentieth century till her death, she worked for the society without any break. To free women from ignorance, illiteracy, suffering, disgrace, prejudices, narrow-mindedness, and seclusion, she appeared with courageous and progressive measures and with the messages of renaissance and regeneration. But in her short life, she could not complete her long cherished goal of women's liberation. Yet the progress of women did not stop. After her death, being inspired with her ideals, many of her followers became able to play great roles in the emancipation movement. Among them, Sufia Kamal was the most distinguished one to take an active part to carry out Rokeya's unfinished works. Some have called her "the successor of Begum Rokeya" (Begum 87). Sufia was born in 1911 at Shayestabad, Barisal.

Even though Rokeya and Sufia lived and wrote in different times, their motto was identical— to awaken and emancipate women through education and economic independence. With this vision in minds, they established schools, founded social organizations for the oppressed women, authored several literary pieces in which they showed the miserable condition of women. Through their writings and activities, they urged women to be aware of their follies and frivolities that they have accepted as their characteristic traits. As women could not forsake their follies and frivolities, men considered them as naturally substandard. Therefore, they reasoned that women were emotional being and did not require education. But Rokeya and Sufia explained that the follies and frivolities ascribed to women were not natural but social constructions. The patriarchal society imputed these attributes to women to subjugate them. They argued that, like women, if men were denied the opportunities to develop their rational powers, to grow into intelligent persons, they would also become very emotional. Through their writings and activities, Rokeya and Sufia criticized the patriarchal society for denying women's education and exercising their rational power. Alongside, they also rebuked women to accept the suppressed status and, in this way, having some share in the subjugation process. They advised women to get aware of their rights, receive the long-denied education, join the workforce, become economically solvent, assume full responsibilities as human beings and abolish their reliance on men, and thereby change the patriarchal notion of women.

Family and Surrounding Environment

Rokeya hailed from a very conservative family of landed aristocracy. Like other female members of the family, she had to live in seclusion from the age of five. The female members of the family had to maintain strict purdah even in front of the women who were not their relatives. As Rokeya writes:

I had to observe purdah even from woman from the age of five. I did not understand why it was improper to meet somebody, but I had to observe purdah. The inner side of the house was out of bounds for the menfolk; so, I did not have to suffer by their presence. However, women freely entered the house, and I had to hide myself before they could see me.” (qtd. in Joarder 6)

Rokeya shares that when she was five, she had to maintain strict purdah. Besides, in her time, the society was entangled in superstitions. Women’s movement was limited, and they were isolated from the external world. So, the women who could not even see the glow of the outer world, it was a mockery for them to think of the light of education.

Living in that superstitious and conservative society, Rokeya closely observed the plight of women and determined that it was her duty as an aware woman to right the wrongs of the society and do something to uplift the subjugated status of the downtrodden women. She realized that women must be awakened to claim their rightful position in the society. Therefore, in her writings, she repeatedly persuaded women to receive education. In this way, she began her activities for the liberation of the Muslim women of Bengal. She was the first among the Bengali Muslims who publicly raised the question of equal status for women, and thus she started a new era in the history of Bengali Muslim society (Hossain 108).

Like Rokeya, Sufia was born into a noble and affluent landowning family. She was brought up in her maternal uncle’s house where she had to observe purdah strictly. Similar to Rokeya’s family, women’s education was prohibited in Sufia’s maternal uncle’s house and therefore she could not receive institutional education. Like other girls of the family, she was allowed to learn only the religious texts.

In spite of having aristocracy, wealth and education, Sufia’s maternal uncle’s family was very conservative. The women could not meet any male person outside the family. Sufia had to live in seclusion maintaining the rules and regulations of the *nawab* family. In her own words:

My childhood and adolescent days were confined to the boundaries of our family house. It was a large building surrounded by a huge wall . . . Men had no access to the inner house. Our family language was Urdu . . . My first maternal uncle did not support female education at all. (qtd. in Baidya 21)**

This *nawab* family was educated, cultured, and showed much interest to send their male children to schools, but was vehemently against female education. Sufia’s maternal uncles were highly educated; they were barristers, magistrates and top-ranking police officers, but they did not support female education. The little boys and girls of the *nawab*

My translation. All double star marks () that follow refer to the same.

family could learn Arabic in the family mosque-cum-*maktab*, but when a bit grown up, the girls could not continue their education. The family would opine– the girl has grown up, she should not move out of the inner house. The girls could learn Arabic and Persian at the inner house but there was no scope to learn Bangla. At that time, Bangla was not counted as a dignified language in those families.

Both of Rokeya and Sufia were brought up in very conservative families. Their two families maintained strict purdah and men’s entry into the inner house was firmly prohibited. Their family language was also similar– Urdu, and Bangla was neglected in both the families. The families provided institutional education to their males but were indifferent to the education of their females. And these two families lost their *zamindari* almost at the same time, and with that lost their glories of tradition and opulence as well.

Formative Years and Sources of Inspirations

Like the trend of the times, Rokeya’s father permitted his sons to receive formal education and neglected the education of his daughters. During that time, the females were only taught to read the Quran, Urdu and Persian. But Rokeya had an insatiable thirst for knowledge. Her brother Ibrahim, who was educated in the Western system, realized that female education was essential to progress the society and therefore he taught Rokeya Bangla and English secretly. His encouragement inspired her to remove superstitions and embrace modern thoughts (Mir 5). Rokeya also learnt Bangla from her elder sister Karimunnessa, a woman of grand qualities and outstanding resilience (Murshid 172).

Rokeya’s second phase of inspiration emanated from her husband Sakhawat Hossain who was a deputy magistrate in Bhagalpur. He was very cultured, progressive and a real gentleman who advocated female education. He always encouraged Rokeya to explore her potentials and provided sufficient facilities to apply her dream with valiant efforts. Under her husband’s influence, Rokeya started to write about her thoughts on social issues of womanhood and women’s degradation (Hossain 79).

Rokeya was also deeply moved by the reformations of Brahma reformers. The abolition of sati by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the establishment of the custom of widow remarriage by Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and their supports for female education, were definitely examples of initial reforms that stimulated the society to progress. Rokeya was also enthused by the stories of Islamic women in history, such as Ayesha, who had been an erudite scholar and an energetic woman leader. In addition to upholding her piety within Islam, Rokeya read the stories of Turkish women, who joined the First World War along with men, and who proved that being Muslim women in the modern century did not obstruct them from engaging equally alongside their husbands in society (Sen). Other than these, Rokeya’s keen observation of the problems of her own society and her conscience urged her to work hard for uplifting the status of women.

Similar to Rokeya, Sufia's family was against female education. But, unlike Rokeya, who had no institutional education, Sufia could go to a *maktab*, a mosque based learning centre, where she could learn Arabic. Like Rokeya's family, the family also spoke Urdu at home and Sufia learnt Urdu and Persian as well as Arabic. At that time, Bangla was not taught in the *maktabs*, so like Rokeya, she secretly learnt Bangla from her mother and brother. She also learnt Bangla by reading different books behind everybody's back from her maternal uncle's family library which presented a new world before her to satiate her unquenchable thirst for knowledge.

Like Rokeya, Sufia also got inspired by her husband, Syed Nehal Hossain. Nehal was an aspiring writer connected with a literary periodical. He took Sufia with him to Calcutta and thus gave her a scope to step out of home and engage herself in different social works. During this time, encouraged by her husband, she also wrote a short story titled "Sainik Badhu" (Wife of a Soldier) and several verses that were published in a literary magazine.

Sufia was also inspired and encouraged by Mohammad Nasiruddin, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Kazi Nazrul Islam and Rabindranath Tagore. Nasiruddin, a great benefactor of Muslim writers and the editor-cum-publisher of the literary journal *Saogat*, encouraged Sufia to engage herself in literary activities. When in Calcutta, Sufia could come in close association with Rokeya from 1927 to 1932. This time she worked with Rokeya and her "Anjuman-e-Khawateen-e-Islam". For working in the organization, she closely observed Rokeya and was inspired by her thoughts and works. Apart from Nasiruddin and Rokeya, Sufia was inspired by Kazi Nazrul Islam who persuaded her to continue writing and wrote the preface of "Sanjher Maya" (The Evening Enchantment) where he admired Sufia as "a new star on the horizon of Bangla poetry" (qtd. in Kabir). Sufia was moved by the poems of Rabindranath Tagore from an early age. Tagore read "Sanjher Maya" and appreciated Sufia saying, "You have a high place in Bangla literature, as constant and fixed as the Pole Star" (qtd. in Kabir). All these luminary personalities and their thoughts had profound influences on the life and works of Sufia Kamal who, all through her life, tirelessly worked to improve the degraded status of women.

Thoughts on Society and Female Education

In Rokeya's time, the patriarchy did not realize the significance of female education. Education, in general, was restricted to a particular section of the society. Rokeya dreamt about the emancipation of women and regarded education as the way of obtaining that emancipation. She wrote:

The spread of education is the only panacea of this oppression! At least, the girls must be provided with primary education! By education I refer to the real education; being able to read some books or write few verses of poem is not education. I wish for that education— which will permit them to gain citizen rights. ("Subeh Sadek" 221)**

Rokeya opined to provide women that education which will increase awareness, self-assurance and self-respect in them regarding their rights, will make them enthusiastic about freedom. “The purpose of education,” stated Rokeya, “is not to blindly imitate a community or a race” (“Istrijatir Abanati” 12). “It is,” she added, “to develop the innate faculties of the individual . . . through cultivation” (12). Rokeya furthered her ideas and thoughts on education in her novel *Padmarag* (Essence of the Lotus), where she detailed the education system of Tarini Bhavan’s school:

Teaching students to read several pages and moulding them in university form, they are not made puppets for luxury. Science, literature, geography, astronomy, history, mathematics– they are taught every subject, but the methods of education are different. By teaching to memorize fake history they are not taught to hate the country and its people. Special care is taken to teach ethics, religion, virtues, etc. The girls are trained to be ideal woman, good housewives, and good mother; they are instructed to love their country and religion more than their lives. They are specially supervised so that they become self-reliant, and like wooden puppets, they do not become dependent on their fathers, brothers, husbands or sons in future. (270)**

In social aspects, on several issues Rokeya’s view was enough progressive with respect to modern times. The prerequisite of emancipation is financial solvency or self-reliance. If women remain economically dependent on men, it will be pointless to think of their emancipation. Rokeya writes about this financial solvency in “Delicia Hatta” (The Murder of Delicia). The prime concern of *Padmarag* is also the financial solvency of women. Rokeya was also shocked at the suffering of farmers and social malpractices prevalent in the society and expressed these in her “Endi Shilpa” (Silk Craft).

Rokeya passed a large portion of her life for the expansion of education amongst the Bengali Muslim women and established a girls’ school to implement that; she formed an association called “Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam” or Muslim Ladies’ Association to make women capable so that they can play significant role in the society and the state.

Like Rokeya, Sufia’s struggle was for education and against the conservative society. She could not receive institutional education owing to the conservative society, which she regretted throughout her life. In her “Ekale Amader Kal” (In This Time, Our Time), she wrote:

Today, it seems that if I could receive education, if I could roam in the free world, I could write so wonderfully as the mind desires. I could have left behind the best contribution of my life to all. But I could not. In spite of having a wish to offer something, I have failed to afford it. (Kamal 52)**

This regret is the result of her profound concern for education. She opined that unless the society changes its conservative mentality, it cannot move forward. She believed that only education could help progress the society and education is the only instrument for social development. Therefore, she devoted her life to social work and to the expansion of female education.

Sufia urged women to avoid bookish knowledge and receive that education which can be implemented in real life. In her view of education, she was greatly influenced by Tagore who emphasized on receiving education from nature (Mallick 117). Sufia believed that one's learning cannot be complete unless he or she comes close to nature. Besides, she also emphasized on vocational education. She talked about providing scopes for female education, and alongside, she was aware of the fact that women can utilize that education.

In her early life, Sufia was associated with Rokeya's "Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam" that imparted education to the slum women and organized the oppressed women to claim their rights. In 1946, after the communal riot, Sufia established a school named "Rokeya Memorial School" in the Park Circus of Calcutta. In the subsequent years she involved herself in making women aware of their education and other rights. In her later life, Sufia's experiences in *Anjuman* helped her preside and lead various social and cultural organizations that worked for the welfare of the vulnerable and helpless women.

Throughout her life, Rokeya dreamt about the progress of women. But for some limitations, she could not carry out all her dreams. Sufia took Rokeya's thoughts to the street and turned those into movement. She was a self-educated woman who untiringly worked to make women aware of their rights and claim their rightful position in the society.

Role on the Emancipation and the Empowerment of Women

The prerequisite of women's emancipation is the financial solvency and decision-making power of women. To assert the rights of women, Rokeya stressed on women's financial solvency and explained that the achieved financial solvency would bring about the empowerment of women. She illustrated that if women acquire knowledge, join the workforce and get financially independent, they can be aware of their rights. This awareness will facilitate women to make decisions in different matters the family and the state.

Rokeya thought about improving the social, political and economic condition of women and stressed on female education that can help women secure financial solvency and ensure their empowerment. To eliminate women's plight, Rokeya opined to ensure three things—women must be awakened through education, they should be made economically solvent, and they should be empowered through ensuring equal rights with men. In her writings, she depicted how women are deprived of their due rights and talked about education that can illuminate them and secure their rights in the society. She depicted the images of a utopia and imaginative land where women have received education and thereby attained

equal status with men, and these women are superior to men in terms of knowledge and intellect, and they are well established in respective fields for their intelligence.¹

In Rokeya's *Motichur I*, all the essays are aimed at awakening the secluded women. In that compilation, she depicts illiteracy, lack of knowledge, superstitions and subjugated status of women. She shows how the merciless seclusion has impaired the females and shares her views on the role of women for the advancement of the society. In *Motichur II*, Rokeya shows how in every society and country women are suppressed by the male dominated society, and urges women to acquire knowledge, enter professional life and raise their voices against the exploitation of women.

Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* shows the changes that the educated women can make. Here she depicts a "Ladyland" where women have flourished their brain power so fittingly that in their country peace and harmony reigns and where women get all basic human rights. The "driving force behind the success of the utopian feminist country of Ladyland is women's education. Rokeya lays particular emphasis on the importance of women familiarizing themselves with the world of science and is unconventional in her condemnation of male militarism" (Bagchi, xii). The females of the Ladyland which Rokeya envisaged, are emancipated in every aspect, they are liberated from seclusion.

In *Padmarag*, Rokeya merely expands the plot of "Sultana's Dream". She portrays a community established and run by women. In that community, the oppressed and abused women of different faiths, localities and cultures improve their fate by tangible social works. In the narrative, Rokeya delineates her ideology, methods of operating schools, and her thoughts on education which are faultless and which methods should be the principles of human life. Both *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag* explore in optimistic, attractive, and smart ways the theme of female education and sing the glory of educated women.

Likewise, to Sufia, the emancipation of women meant to be free from prejudices, ignorance and illiteracy. In fact, her real life experiences helped her realize the importance of female education. Being widowed at the age of 21, she had to live in Calcutta with her little daughter and mother alone. She urgently required a job; but as she had no institutional education and any certificate, and any previous job experience as well, she did not get any satisfactory job. With great difficulty, she managed a job in Calcutta Corporation School with fifty taka salary. Despite lacking any institutional education, with her sincere efforts she made herself fit for teaching profession. However, the difficulties that she faced for lacking education worked as a driving force behind her fight for female education.

Sufia realized that women have to face immense hardships unless they receive education. Therefore, she urged the guardians to send their female children to schools. She

¹See *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag*.

also worked for the expansion of female education and social development. She viewed education as the way of survival and an emblem of self-respect and social dignity. She expressed her view of uneducated women in an interview: “In the then time women had no social dignity because they were not educated. They were not in a position to speak before the society. They did not even realize the fact that– I have to speak, I have to protest” (Kamal, “Interview” 150).** As a result, women had to undergo patriarchal persecution and social injustices constantly. Sufia urged women to be aware of their rights and protest against those injustices and oppression. Alongside, she also urged men to change their conservative attitude and help improve the status of women. She said, “To get rid of the oppression women need to be courageous. Laws have been made to stop the oppression of women. But making laws is not enough. If men become aware of the problems and come forward, it will safeguard women’s dignity and thus oppression will decrease” (qtd. in Baidya 76).**

Sufia understood it well that unless women are aware of their rights and think for themselves, no one else will think for them, and even if they do, that will not be entirely favorable for them. So, she said: “No one will allow women their freedom, women will have to achieve it. Conscious struggle is required to break up the shackles which the patriarchal society has put on women for centuries. Freedom does not mean willfulness; it is to establish one’s rights, to upgrade one’s self to a dignified position” (qtd. in Baidya 76).**

Throughout her life, Sufia protested against every form of social oppression, injustices and discrimination against women without any break. In order to eliminate the discrimination between men and women and to fight against social oppression of women, she founded and led different associations. At the back of the establishment of those associations, there was motivation, encouragement and blessing of Rokeya. Rokeya and her ideals were constant source of inspiration for her.

Voice against Communalism

Though Rokeya was born and brought up in a conservative family, she was never affected by conservatism. The way she was devoted to Islam, similarly she showed her respect to other religions. Irrespective of caste, creed, race, and religion, she was a non-communal and an enlightened lady.

In her “Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam”, along with other members of the association, she extended her helping hands to the poor widows, battered wives and the poor women of all religions and ethnicities to achieve literacy and overcome their problems. Though the organization was differently named as Muslim Ladies’ Association, the association did not make any discriminatory treatment against the members or the beneficiaries in terms of religions. Its main purpose was to facilitate the helpless and subjugated women regardless of the background they come from. The activities of the organization clearly shows Rokeya’s non-communal standpoint.

In *Padmarag*, Rokeya treats every character with equal importance. She treats the unhappy and sordid histories of Saudamini with similar importance as she treats the character of the protagonist Siddika. She does not present any Muslim or Hindu character with different lights. In the novel, the writer comments: “What a luminous harmony! –Muslims, Hindus, Brahmins, Christians, all are working jointly like siblings of the same mother” (Rokeya 269).** In her speech at the “Bengal Women’s Educational Conference”, she urges the Muslim guardians to teach their daughters the holy Quran in the primary level’s education so that the religion and society remain concurrently functional. But at the same time, she addresses the women of other religions and says, “My sisters from other religions! Please don’t interpret my suggestion of teaching the Quran alongside primary education as my orthodox opinion. It is not true; I am far away from orthodoxy” (Rokeya 210).**

Besides, the Sakhawat Memorial Girls’ School that Rokeya set up and administered admitted the girls not only from Islamic background, but also from other religions including Hindus and Christians. It shows Rokeya’s non-communal standpoint and serves as a luminous example of her liberal and non-communal spirit.

Sufia’s family was conservative, but it was not so conservative as Rokeya’s family. With the passage of time, and for various reasons including the changes in education, politics and values, the *nawab* family of Shayestabad could come out of conservatism in many aspects. From her childhood, Sufia observed liberalism practiced in her family. As she reminisces:

There was enjoyable atmosphere everywhere– in the *maktab*, mosque and almshouse, in the school-library, and in the *puja* ceremonies and festivals of the Hindu workers. There was no restriction to attend those delightful ceremonies and festivals . . . The clerks, employees, doctors and *kabiraj*– they all were Hindus. Their ceremonies and festivals were financed by the *zamindari* fund. Therefore, they entertained the *zamindar* with proper honour. Many a time I have consumed *payesh*, *laddu*, *manda*, and sweetmeats that they provided. (qtd. in Baidya 58)**

Sufia was brought up amidst such religious harmony and non-communal ambience. Besides, from 1926 to 1932, she worked as a member of *Anjuman* for six years. The non-communal spirit that she nurtured through working for the poor and helpless Hindu-Muslim slum women during these times has been reflected in her later life and works. In 1946, she, along with other women, tirelessly worked to put down the communal riots between the Hindus and Muslims in Calcutta and serve the riot victims with a non-communal spirit. In the following year, returning to Dhaka she formed the ‘Peace Committee’ with Leela Roy to safeguard the communal harmony.

Sufia loved and mixed with people impartially. Whether Muslims or Hindus, to her, people were human beings first. In a literary conference in London, Sufia said, “I don’t believe in the discrimination based on class, caste, creed and religion. To me, above everyone is the truth of humans, and above that there is nothing” (qtd. in Baidya 58).**

Overcoming the narrowness of caste distinction, rather than being a Muslim, Rokeya wanted to be an Indian. Similarly, coming out of the narrowness of caste difference, Sufia firstly wanted to be ‘a human being above everything else’ and then a Bengali. Both of them loved people considering them as human beings. To them, no other identity was as great as human identity. Therefore, they tried to help the distressed women irrespective of their religious or ethnic backgrounds throughout their lives.

Role on the Elimination of Religious Orthodoxy

Religious bigotry and superstitions play a pivotal role in the subjugation of women. In the patriarchal society, women are subjugated by misusing religion. Rokeya and Sufia reasoned that religion does not distinguish between men and women; rather, men create and prolong the distinction for their own interests. Both of them blamed religious orthodoxy and superstitions for the subjugation of women. In their writings and activities, they emphasized that if religious fanaticism and prejudices are abolished from the society, women can enjoy their due rights.

In her literary works, Rokeya frequently talked about religious orthodoxy, superstitions, vileness of purdah, early marriages, polygamy, and separation that left lots of helpless women in misery and hardship. She remarked that men have dominated women misinterpreting the doctrines of religion. To continue their supremacy over females they have misconstrued the instruction of Islam. In her own words:

Men have established their supremacy over women using religions and misinterpreting the scriptures. Being lord of the male-dominated society, to sustain their interest and dominance men have interpreted religions in their own way. This fabricated explanation of religions has imposed exploitation, torture and oppression on women. Whenever women have tried to raise their voices against this patriarchal persecution, their attempts have been thwarted in the name of religion. (qtd in Sufi 265)**

The male-dominated society has constantly misinterpreted religion for their own benefits. To ruin the free spirit of women, they argued that if women acquire knowledge, they will be disruptive and that will damage the social order. But Rokeya spoke against this propaganda and said:

The opponents of female education say that women will be unruly . . . fie!
They call themselves Muslims and yet go against the basic tenet of Islam

which gives equal right to education. If men are not led astray once educated, why should women? (Hossein 694-95)

Rokeya reasoned that about learning there is no distinction between men and women in Islam; rather, acquiring knowledge is mandatory for both of them. Besides, the men who deny women education, they act against the precept of Islam. Therefore, in her writings, Rokeya urged and encouraged women to receive education, become self-reliant and attain independence. In *Padmarag*, and *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya projected what the enlightened women can do when they have access to education.

In her early days, Sufia could not go to school in spite of having keen interest to receive education; and while in Calcutta, though an opportunity came to secure admission to Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School, she could not avail that of. Her family's conservatism is held responsible for this miss of opportunity. Besides, she had to undergo untold criticism and censure by her family as her photo was published along with her poems in the literary magazine *Saogat* and as she joined a flight with a male pilot in 1929. All these unexpected things happened due to the conservatism and religious orthodoxy of the then society.

A sufferer of conservatism and religious orthodoxy, Sufia realized that the main barrier of women's liberation is education. The patriarchy secluded women and denied them education misinterpreting the messages of religion. In her times, the Muslim women were allowed only to learn the holy Quran. Yet, it was to be learnt staying within the four walls, not going outside the house. As Sufia explained, "For the Muslim women, receiving education is the main obstacle. Women were not allowed to receive education. They could not read anything other than the Quran, they could not go outside the house" (Kamal, "Interview" 153).** Sufia was not against learning the Quran but she was against the process that did not teach the meaning. She questioned the use of such learning where the learners cannot comprehend what they read. Education gives us knowledge and awareness, and the lifestyle becomes improved with the use of that knowledge. Sufia realized the vacuity of such learning process and commented, "Shariah has allowed us many things, other than listening to the spoken words of the religious hypocrites: women have to know about their rights offered by Shariah" (qtd. in Mallick 105).**

Sufia blamed that in the patriarchal society, men use religions as tools of satisfying their intended interests and in so doing hinder the progress of society. She said in an interview, "Still today, the progress of our nation is being obstructed by perpetuating the discrimination in the name of religion. Without applying religion for the prescribed welfare purposes, it is being used to satisfy malicious intentions (qtd. in Baidya 62).** Sufia led every movement, struggle, protest and resistance of her life against injustices, evils, falsehood, bigotry, narrow-mindedness, fundamentalism, communalism, oppression of women, and the wartime criminals. Every time when the existence of the Bengalis was endangered, or when the fundamentalists put the life and existence of women at the risk of obliteration with

different fatwas, Sufia, with her raised head, urged everyone to protest against these evils and gave shelter to the oppressed.

From early days till their death, Rokeya and Sufia wrote and fought against prejudices, religious orthodoxy and fundamentalism. Both of them had to face various obstacles by the conservative atmosphere of their families. In their later days, whenever they worked for the downtrodden women and the progress of the society, they were obstructed by the religious bigots and fundamentalists. With indomitable spirit and courage, they protested against those obstacles of the bigots and fundamentalists and overcame the hurdles.

Influence on the Women's Rights Movement of Bangladesh

Even though in the Western world, the feminist writings began to make its impact in the eighteenth century, in the Indian subcontinent, the feminist writings started to make its impact in the later decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century. After the division of India and the tenure of Pakistan, in Bangladesh, the feminist writings of the earlier times began to make its impact. Through her writings and works, Rokeya urged women to pursue education, become cognizant of their rights and claim their rightful position in the society. But in her short life, she could not fulfill her long cherished dream of women's emancipation. Yet the progress of women did not stop. Her influence continued after her death; being influenced and inspired with her ideals, many of her followers dedicated themselves to work for the downtrodden women of the country. As competent disciples, they stuck to their role model's ideals and put their efforts to improve the status of Bangladeshi women from their relevant fields.

In today's Bangladesh, Rokeya's influence is visible in the family, society and the state level. In every family, almost all the parents try to provide education to their daughters who after pursuing proper education play prominent role in the society. The majority of the parents encourage their daughters to follow the ideology of Rokeya. As Rokeya's followers continued their activities by bringing her thoughts to the streets and led to the feminist movement, the importance of female education has increased to a satisfactory level in the present Bangladesh. To further increase and boost up the progress of women's education, the government has adopted various measures to lessen female dropout ratio and made female education fees less. To motivate the girls to pursue education, the government is also giving stipends to the female students. However, Rokeya not only called for elementary education but also demanded for higher education for the females. In today's Bangladesh, women are pursuing higher education, joining the first ranking jobs, holding leading positions, and keeping significant contributions to the state.

In her writings, Rokeya urged women to change their dependent attitudes and claim their rights by themselves. To assemble women for asserting their own rights, she founded *Anjuman* which helped the poor and helpless women to overcome their problems and achieve literacy. In the current Bangladesh, many women's platforms have been formed following

Rokeya's *Anjuman*. From these platforms the feminist activists demand to secure women's rights and try to pressurize the government in an organized way. For executing various protests, they arrange seminars, symposiums, conferences and write placards taking the key quotes from Rokeya. These are the manifestation of Rokeya's thoughts.

Rokeya believed that the precondition of women's emancipation is financial independence. In her writings, she repeatedly talked about the financial independence of women. She urged the parents to educate their daughters and said, "Groom them to enter professional life and let them earn their own livelihood" ("Istrijatir Abanati" 12). At present, in Bangladesh, almost half of the entire population is women. Nowadays, the country is giving special attention to the advancement of women. It is seen that almost in all families, both the spouses are working outside the house. These days, women's inclination to enter the profession is not a trend; rather, it is a responsibility to add economic security to the family. These instances clarify the fact that Rokeya's efforts to eliminate the seclusion system have been fruitful and her dream of women to work outside the house has come true. Today's free-thinking women evidently manifest Rokeya's dream of a progressive society where women enjoy similar rights like men.

Rokeya also talked about the empowerment of women. She maintained that if women attain political power through proper education and economic independence, they can keep significant contributions to the society as well as the state. She also dreamt of women to be 'Lady Viceroy'. In today's Bangladesh, Rokeya's dream of 'Lady Viceroy' is not an imagination, but a reality. Currently, the country is producing not only lady magistrates, barristers, judges; it is producing lady Members of Parliament, Ministers, and even the Prime Minister. In the present Bangladesh, the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, and even the Speaker of the National Parliament are women. They are the manifestation of the vision that Rokeya envisaged of the emancipation and empowerment of woman.

Similar to Rokeya, Sufia also dreamt of an improved society where women can enjoy equal rights like men, receive proper education, join the workforce, occupy important positions, and contribute to the affairs of the society and the state. Her experiences in Rokeya's *Anjuman* helped her form and lead different social and cultural organizations that worked for the betterment of the downtrodden women. In 1954, Sufia, along with Leela Roy, founded "Wari Women Samity" where she worked as the Founder-President. In 1960, Sufia formed "Begum Rokeya Smriti Committee" and recommended naming the first ladies' Hall of Dhaka University after Begum Rokeya. The motto of the naming was to promote female education by glorifying the life and ideals of Rokeya. Throughout her life, Sufia regarded women's rights as her first priority and in 1970, she led "Bangladesh Mahila Parishad", the largest women's association in Bangladesh. The association is playing a dynamic role to eliminate all forms of injustices, oppression and discrimination against women and keeping a significant contribution to upgrade the status of the downtrodden women of Bangladesh. The association has been running for almost fifty years and advocating the feminist movement

with the catchphrase, ‘Women’s Rights are Human Rights’. As Nasima Haque observes, “From the inception of this organization till her death, for about three decades (29 years) Sufia Kamal, as a President of Mahila Parishad, has led women’s liberation movement in this country. She was very shocked at the oppression, negligence and discrimination of women in the society. She was deeply concerned about the rise of rape, murder and oppression of women in the society. For this reason, she has moved from one corner of the country to the other to make women and all people aware of the problems. She repeatedly urged women to raise their heads to safeguard their rights . . . She said, the struggle of women’s liberation and the liberation of humankind are interrelated” (qtd. in Baidya 80).**

Sufia also made significant contributions to the various mass movements of Bangladesh. In the times of crises, she always extended her support and cooperation. For her works and interactions with the mass people, she turned into a familiar figure in the society. She led people staying at the frontline of various struggles and demonstrations of the mass people, took the role of a defender of the agitators in the time of the Language Movement of Bangladesh, and assisted and encouraged the freedom fighters during the Liberation War in 1971. In brief, she demonstrated her utmost intrepidity in the times of crises.

In Bangladesh, Rokeya’s dreams and visions got implemented by the activities of Sufia. Rokeya could not take her thoughts to the streets and go for demonstrations. This was done by Sufia. Sufia took Rokeya’s thoughts to the streets and turned those into demonstrations and movements. Following the aims, objectives and ideals of Rokeya, Sufia tirelessly worked for the emancipation and empowerment of the subjugated women till her last breath. The torch of protest that Sufia carried for the emancipation of women, that torch was set ablaze by Rokeya herself. Sufia accelerated Rokeya’s spirit of women’s emancipation and took it to the streets to implement women’s rights as well as human rights.

Criticism

Both of Rokeya and Sufia had to undergo severe slander, criticism and censure. The social dogmatists and religious bigots were infuriated at their inexorable accusation and views concerning the plight and emancipation of women. Rokeya was labeled as “a shameless woman, a misanthrope, a radical misguided by the proselytizing propaganda of Christian missionaries, and a sexist” (Jahan 53). One detractor misconstrued that to Rokeya “everything Indian is bad and everything Euro-American good” (Tharu 342). Many even accused that “her companions were prostitutes and the scum of society. Some branded her a woman of loose morals” (Bagchi x). Not only that; she could not escape patriarchal persecution even after her death. A number of orthodox people opposed Rokeya’s burial in Kolkata. After her death, her funeral ceremony was arranged in Kolkata but owing to the pressure of the orthodox people, it was not possible to bury her in Kolkata. So, one of her relatives secretly buried her in Sodepur, near Kolkata (Aksam 119). As Sufia spoke against the religious hypocrites, wartime criminals, collaborators and the fundamentalists with an uncompromising attitude, many a time they termed her ‘Murtad’, the traitor of faith or

apostate. In one of her speeches addressed at Jatiya Rabindra Sangeet Sammelan Parishad (JRSSP), Sufia said that to her Tagore's song was a kind of worship. This statement enraged the fundamentalists who raised a storm of criticism against her as a reaction to the statement (Haque 67). They also threatened her to death over telephone. But Sufia boldly tackled this incidence. She never compromised with anyone and always stuck to the path of the truth.

Conclusion

For the liberation and progress of women, Rokeya and Sufia's thoughts and contributions can be compared with two sides of the same coin. Both of them considered women's lack of education a major obstacle to the emancipation and progress of women. For lacking education, women could not claim their rightful position in the society and became dependent on men for food and shelter. As they were not allowed to think freely and engage in any work outside the house independently, they had to go through domination, discrimination, exploitation, oppression and deprivation. Rokeya and Sufia opined that unless women receive education and overcome these problems, the society cannot step forward smoothly. Therefore, they urged women to pursue education, join the workforce, attain financial solvency, occupy important positions, claim their rights and contribute to the affairs of the family, society and the state. They held very positive attitudes and, in their writings, works and activities, they did never discriminate against anyone with regard to caste, creed, race and religions. They also urged men to change their conservative attitude and stop the abuse of religion. In doing so, they had to endure severe criticism, slander, and censure. But they did not lose their hearts. With indomitable spirit and courage, they protested against the injustices against women and tackled the problems courageously. Being inspired by the thoughts and ideals of Rokeya, Sufia accelerated Rokeya's spirit of women's emancipation and took it to the streets to implement the women's rights as well as human rights.

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