

EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN AND FEMINIST IDEAS IN BEGUM ROKEYA SAKHAWAT HOSSAIN'S UTOPIAS

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Abstract: Begum Rokeya Shakawat Hossain was a social reformer, a prolific writer, a great thinker and philosopher, a committed feminist, a determined campaigner of women's right and freedom, a leader and a path finder for Bengali Muslim women. She broke all barriers, struggled throughout her life for a better society and led the way to empowering and enlightening women. Most of her writings are in Bengali but a few works of her are written in English. This article explores the world of women in South Asia, especially in Bangladesh, in light of Begum Rokeya's utopias *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag*. The article studies the utopias to seek the emancipation of women from the shackles of patriarchy and thereafter their empowerment through education and economic freedom. As an iconic figure and celebrated feminist Rokeya emphasized on women's education and economic freedom for their emancipation from the manacle of ruthless male-dominated society. Now women are looking forward to shaping their own lives, households, communities, and nations despite the restrictive gender ideologies and practices.

Keywords: Emancipation, Empowerment, Patriarchy, Utopia.

Introduction: Some years before her death, with characteristic emotion and pardonable hyperbole, she said in her presidential address to the Bengal women's educational conference

You shall be perhaps surprised to know that for the last twenty two years I have been weeping for the most unfortunate beings of India. Do you know who they are? They are Indian women. Nobody's heart ever wept for these beings. The sorrows or the untouchable communities have moved the heart of Mahatama Gandhi ... There are even people who think about animals ... we find associations for the prevention of distress to animals here and there ... but to weep for women like you, who are captives of speculation, there is not a single person in the whole of India

Motivated to the depths of her being by identification with her fellow sufferers, Begum Rokeya spent her adult years work for their progress, a development, which she like other women's emancipationists, linked to the progress of society as whole. She has engaged issues like gender equity, education and economic freedom in her utopias: *Sultana's Dream* (1905) and *Padmarag* (1924). In the beginning of 21st century women experienced improved access to services and credit markets and education. However, despite the recent economic growth and changing social norms, women are not able to enjoy freedom as they are always under the pity of male-dominated society. The progress of a society depends on the overall progress in every sector including educational and economic sectors. Both men and women, in this respect, play their role from their own situations. But the patriarchal society has created an unseen hurdle to sideline the women from their contributory activities and so the society is not having symmetry of cooperative contributions by both men and women

as the former treat the latter in a degrading way. Observing such imbalance and having practical experiences of torments, Begum Rokeya played the bugle through her utopias to awaken the women from slumber in order to stand as individuals.

Method: This paper is developed based on the analysis of both the primary and the secondary sources. Primary source refers to the author's own writings whereas the secondary source refers to the works done on the author.

Result: This paper is expected to establish the nature and extent of women's empowerment and emancipation through education and economic freedom in the form of self reliance as Rokeya delves into in her utopias: *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag*.

Feminism: Feminism is a discourse that involves various movements, theories and philosophies which are concerned with the issue of gender difference; it also advocates equality for women and campaigns for women's rights and interests. Feminist theory is associated with the analysis and explanation of women's subordinate social situation. It seeks to analyze the condition which shapes women's lives and to explore cultural perception of what it means to be a woman. In the early twentieth century there were some important feminist thinkers: Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935), Simone de Beauvoir (1908-86) and Betty Friedan (1921-2006). Like them Rokeya also appeared as a strong voice of feminism. She raised the issues of women's rights with her strapping voice which took place in her seminal works like *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag*. The women especially in South Asian countries feel inspired and turn courageous through following their role model Begum Rokeya. They feel assured of their worth as individuals in the society.

When we explore feminism of gender-rights from the perspective of Begum Rokeya, we find that she deals with the basic issues of women in a different way than most other feminists. Rokeya has shown interest in opening up the inner world of women so that they can understand that the dogmatic patriarchal society treats them as subhuman for their own convenience. As a feminine transcendentalist, Rokeya has refuted this belief and transcended her mortal desires to elevate her “self” to an intellectual state of being where her work and philosophy of the emancipation of women will shape the world for future generations of Bangladeshi women, thereby affording her a form of immortality. In her *Sultana’s Dream* Rokeya, like the Victorian feminist Virginia Woolf, introduces the ideas of transcendence. Rokeya’s feminist stance proves that women need to be economically free through ample opportunities of achieving proper education which may ensure their self confidence. In this respect they will be able to protest against all forms of suppression designed and applied by men. Rokeya argues that the fulfillment of human potential must be judged, not in terms of happiness, but in terms of freedom. Freedom is something more than maintaining one’s existence in comfort and quietude. To be free a person must transcend the animal part of his or her life and stick to a rationalist mind-over-matter objective in life. Bangladeshi women follow the role model of Begum Rokeya as she truly advocates the sound means for the emancipation of women.

Utopia: Utopia is generally defined as a place of perfection. It is a dreamland where one wants to go and live for peace, love and security. The land of nightingale might be termed as a utopia for John Keats (1795-1821), the great poet of romanticism, as he strove to go there in order to escape the unbearable burdens of worldly life. Keats also visited the world of nightingale with help of the wings of imagination and found what he expected. The place gave him peace of mind, the unknown pleasure of living, a rare sense of beauty. Such a place where everything turns out to be pleasing and beautiful is defined as a utopia. People being tired and bored of their place reiterate their high expectations of exploring a utopia again and again. It is referred that utopia is:

A European concept and a Greek word which has been used with great richness by feminists, is most of all about embodying a dream, a dream of ‘eu-topia’, the good place, which is also ‘ou-topia’, no place, a place which has no existence until it is imagined into existence by those fired with the dream. (Bagchi 5)

Sultana’s Dream: *Sultana’s Dream* (1905) is an intriguing example of a feminist utopia – an imagined world of ladyland, “free from sin and harm. Virtue herself reigns here” (Hossain, *Sultana’s Dream* 4), where science, technology and virtue work together

in perfect harmony and where women socially and politically govern and dominate men and that supremacy is seen as natural. Rokeya’s leading objective is to demonstrate that women are able to work with the level of efficiency that men, in the form of prejudice, mark only as their own. It is clearly understood that women are capable of running a government as successfully as men. Here the driving force of the utopian feminist country of ladyland is women’s education which holds the key to women’s empowerment and progress. Here women are free in all respects. It means that Rokeya imagined women’s emancipation from ‘purdah’ through education and economic freedom, as she gathered bitter experiences in her practical life. That is why her feminist approach has been prevailed in *Sultana’s Dream*. In this utopia, Rokeya stresses that men are “accustomed to the purdah system and have ceased to grumble at their seclusion, we call the system ‘Mardana’ instead of ‘Zenana’” (11). Women are shown confident with their education and sound financial condition whereas men are accustomed to doing many services. Here lies the true spirit of a feminist author that extensively contributes to the emancipation of women through education and economic freedom. Education and sound economic condition are the integral part of freedom that a woman needs most to lead a life with honour and valour. In South Asian respect the educated women who are usually economically self dependent do not suffer the humiliation and malignance of their counterparts. Begum Rokeya works as an inspiring force behind this because she highly emphasizes on female education.

Begum Rokeya is quite corrosive about treating the men in *Sultana’s Dream* because she was the victim of a society in which men considered women incapable of producing anything significant in the world. Rokeya saw how a girl had to stop going to educational institutions, how she had to agree to marry at the earlier stage of life, how she had to believe that she was inferior to a male child of her parents. A girl had to endure many more kinds of horrible experiences like these ones which compelled her to stand in favour of women and take pens against the destructive mindset of men. However, the women at present societies of South Asian countries especially Bangladesh enjoy more freedom and it has been possible because of the fiery writings of Begum Rokeya.

Padmarag: Resonant with autobiographical hints, *Padmarag* (1924) is both a powerful reflection of male oppression and a celebration of Rokeya’s faith in a Universalist society where women reject the diktat of a tyrannical patriarchal society in favour of a life devoted to improving their status. Here the author focuses on formal education and teaching crafts to

get economic freedom and self dependence of women. *Padmarag* is a feminist utopia “delineating”, as Bagchi claims, “the thousand little details of an actual, real-life female-led reformist project” (6). As “egalitarianism” is present in Tarini Bhavan, Muslims, Christians, Brahmas and Hindus – all work in harmony. Particular care is taken to the girls so that “they become self-reliant and not lifeless puppets, burdens on their fathers, brothers, husbands or sons” (Hossain, *Padmarag* 31). They are given an idea that they are growing up as individuals to contribute to the society like all other members of the society irrespective of gender differences. They are not going to be the troubles for the world. Through the image of Tarini Bhavan, Rokeya has tried to create an impression on the minds of the readers that a society, a state and above all the whole world should be an ideal place so that everyone can live in peace and harmony breaking all forms of barriers, especially the barrier of gender discrimination.

The portrayal of office life of women engaged in professional activity is a wonderful feature of *Padmarag*. The neglect of Bangladeshi girl child comes through the graphic description. Siddika, nicknamed *Padmarag*, the ruby or the mysterious heroine, keeps the reader in suspense. The process of Siddika’s evolution, from a solitary, secretive and melancholy young girl to a competent, self-assured woman ready to face the future, begins when she enters Tarini Bhavan. The constant dichotomy between the functional or vocational aspects of education and its ornamental or “liberal” ones create a serious problem even today. *Padmarag* draws to a close that Siddika has internalized the process of self-development and the fervent quest for a useful vocation that will help her to survive well. It echoes with the triumphant notes of hope and resolute optimism, but is no less responsive to the minor keys of anger, pain, loss and desolation. It incorporates “Rokeya’s faith in women’s education as holding the key to a world where women are happy and powerful” (Bagchi 6). Siddika is the representative of a land where a girl understanding the brute picture of society struggles to grow as a successful woman. The land provides her with the opportunities of becoming a human rather than a woman. The author has the insight of building Bangladesh as a country where a girl will have the scopes to turn away from melancholy, loneliness, and agonies and build a respectable life.

Relating Education and Economic Freedom to *Sultana’s Dream* and *Padmarag*: *Sultana’s Dream* and *Padmarag* reveal Rokeya’s brand of feminism, her creativity, the focus of her intellectual musings. She illustrates her individual sympathy, humanity, humour, creativity and pragmatism in her works. It is acknowledged by all that “in the history of women’s

emancipation and education in South Asia...a figure such as Rokeya is a diamond” (Bagchi 11). Rokeya was keenly aware of the vital link between every woman’s self-development and emancipation and education of millions of young girls who, even today, lack access to schooling. The problem of education for girls in Bangladesh today is still distressingly acute. There are many places in Bangladesh where the same picture which we saw in Rokeya’s time is prevalent. The female children are still dependent on the mercy of parents, brothers, husbands and again their own male children and grand children. It is a cycle of cruel patriarchy that is still working on the minds of Bangladeshi men. Women are either servants of men or objects of sensual world; they are degraded in diverse ways. Men lay some strategic rules, with the help of prejudice, superstitions, dogmatic religious customs, that convince women to remain inferior to them staying uneducated and economically insolvent. It is unfortunate that they can not understand the cunning treatment of men because of their lack of education.

Begum Rokeya becomes a great voice in the form of a saviour to the unfortunate, helpless and disadvantaged women of South Asia especially Bangladesh. She is relevant today when we see the deplorable condition of women in the society. When we see that girl is married off in her early stage of life, we remember Rokeya; we try to study her utopias. When it is found that a girl is degraded in different ways even in the form of acid throwing, a woman falls victim of her husband’s cruelty, a woman lives an accursed, secluded life, we seek the cry of Rokeya through *Sultana’s Dream* and *Padmarag*. A woman carrying a baby does not receive proper care and if a woman gives birth to a female child, the husband and his family show anger and disrespect to the woman. The women, in these ways, suffer both physically and psychologically. In such cases, Begum Rokeya comes forward as an inspirational figure. *Sultana’s Dream* and *Padmarag*, the most discussed works of Rokeya, appear as the gateway to the emancipation of these women from the shackle of men.

Conclusion: Actually Rokeya dreamt about the very basic human rights for women. Bangladesh will soon mark its strength as a nation that will ensure equality of men and women in every sphere of life.. Rokeya is, above all, a crusader for girls’ education and economic freedom; her strong stance to ameliorate the condition of women in the society is reflected in her writings. The women will be able to recuperate from the rigorous patriarchal society, make self development, and lead a happy and valuable life when their emancipation through education and economic freedom is ensured as Rokeya’s utopias *Sultana’s Dream* and *Padmarag* address the issues for overall healthy atmosphere between men and women

in the society .Rokeya died 9th December 1932. There were memorials , people mourned privately and publicly , rich tributes were paid and articles published in the media . Rokeya had won the hearts

and minds of many people from all faiths and stratus of the community . Through her dedication and struggles, she had laid the foundations for progress and women’s freedom.

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