Understanding the Discursive Context: Production of Muslim Women as Invisible in the Written History of Colonial Bengal

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing degree at BRAC University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.

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Abstract

This paper studies the social milieu that produced Muslim women as “invisible” and “backward” in the written history, shaped by Hindu/Brahmo dominated nationalist discourse in Bengal. It questions the political atmosphere, social context, religious factors, and the literature published in different periodicals that put Muslim women’s identity in a gray area. With the emergence of anti-colonial nationalist movement, the construction of ideal Indian womanhood unfolded multiple aspects of women’s lives in patriarchal families.It also talks about gender and communal identities that denied Muslim women’s agency, even though they spoke and wrote publicly.To identify the relationship between historical invisibility of Muslim women and the overwhelming visibility of Hindu women, I looked at novels written by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein. Rokeya created female characters that were beyond the time yet to born. This paper is concerned with the formation of those women and the social context that necessitated that formation.

Keywords: Hindu-Muslim women; 19th century Bengal; secularism; colonialism; invisibility; religion; patriarchy

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“One is not born, but becomes a woman.”

----Simone de Beauvoir

“Women, we endure those cuts in so many ways that we don’t even notice we’re cut. We are living with small tiny cuts, and we are bleeding every single day. And we’re still getting up.”

----Michelle Obama

Chapter I

Introduction

This paper studies the production of Muslim women as "invisible" and "oppressed" in the written history of colonial Bengal, which in fact, if we scrutinize their gradual uprising, is not true. Instead of correcting the problem of their invisibility, my intention is to understand the political and social affairs of 19th century Bengal in the light of secularism, which of course will remain incomplete if I do not address the woman question. In the process of doing so, I will try and explain the discursive context which historically labelled Muslim women as victimized, inferior and silenced. The ample documentation of phallocentric tendencies by feminist scholarship has made us aware that normative historiographies typically ignore women as historical subjects. Also, Muslim women's visibility was overshadowed by the intersection of two prominent "discourses of modernity- nationalism and liberal feminism."[1] Nationalism engulfs a larger part of modern history and treats nations as the rightful subject of it. Liberal feminism, on the other hand, privileges a certain structure of womanhood which unfortunately fails to include women with differences within their edifice. By doing this, they do not take other forms as the proper markers of feminism. Along with these two discourses, I believe a very different model of secularism, at least for 19th century Bengal, was persistently dispersed in the lives of Hindus and Muslims by the British colonial government in order to make Indians the pillars of their (British) success.

[1]Mahua Sarkar. *Visible Histories, Disappearing Women: Producing Muslim Womanhood in Late Colonial Bengal* (Durham: Duke University Press), 2008, p 02.

In my paper, I will be talking about the state formation of 19th century Bengal and stretch this debate to a point where I will show how the British colonizers used secularism in a unique way to form the lives of two large communities- Hindus and Muslims. Here I would like to mention that the colonizers used a certain model of secularism which was completely different from the American, French, European or even the Gandhian model. They followed two doctrines to rule—political secularism and principle distance—which involved the use of the category of "Self" and the "Other". In this narrative, religious heterogenization came in the wake of a deep, persistent and pervasive anxiety about the other, about both the other outside of the religion and potentially within. According to Rajeev Bhargava's theory of secularism this "other" is an existential threat.[2] So the doctrinal differences were not mere intellectual disagreements but were cast in order to undermine the basic trust that existed in the "other". In this paper, the "self" and the "other" is not only the Hindus and Muslim of Bengal but also the colonizers and the colonized and men and women of Muslim families who used confinement and purdah to shed light on evident silencing of Muslim women. To explain the colonizers' process of structuring the state, I will be using the theory of principled distance from "The Distinctiveness of Indian Secularism" by Rajeev Bhargava and to shed light on the lives of Muslim women I will use excerpts from *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag* by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein.

Illiteracy or the backwardness of Muslim women is assumed to be the underlying factor behind their silence. Existing scholarship and research confirm Muslim women's lack of visibility/ absence in the field of literature in colonial India. The dominant issues like widow immolation, widow remarriage, Sanskritization of Bengali were the concerns of a new emerging Hindu middle class, now known as *bhadralok* in Bangla. The term *bhadralok* comprised predominantly

[2]Rajeev Bhargava. "Secularism in India: The Recent Debate" *Secularism and Its Critics* (Delhi: Oxford University Press), 1998, p 494.

of urban Hindus who described themselves as a separate group. They were distinct, on the one hand from the feudal lords and peasants of the rural areas, and on the other hand from the English administrators and urban poor of Calcutta. Their self-image was largely shaped by their cultural inheritance and was backed by their proficiency in English (qtd in Amin 5)[3]. By all accounts, Muslims in Bengal were marginal to this early process of *bhadralok* formation. However, throughout the 19th century, a small but growing body of Middle class Bengali Muslims gradually developed and made their way to the print media and started cultivating Bengali as a language.[4] It was in stark opposition of the Muslim orthodoxy. As Mahua has Sarkar pointed out, it was a form of protest by the Muslim writers against British rulers who labelled them as fanatics and low caste Hindu converts. They gradually started emerging as a distinct community with a steady vision of "questioning, developing and honing their identity as a community."[5]

In Bengal, this attempt resulted in the publication of various periodicals and magazines which started to appear sporadically, mostly out of Calcutta, by the end of the 19th century. These publications served two purposes simultaneously- one, it provided a discursive space where the educated Muslim community started expressing what they felt about their identity and two, Muslim women found an independent space where they could call into question their gender specific oppression, education, and the purdah system. After coming to India, British colonizers brought changes in political and legal systems but they did not reform the religious and personal laws. They appointed erudite Bhahmin Pandits and Moulanas to set rules for religious laws. They

[3]S. N. Mukherjee, "Class Caste and Politics in Calcutta 1815-38" *Calcutta: Myths and History* (Calcutta: Subarnarekha), 1977, p 26
[4]Sonia Nishat Amin. *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939*. New York, 1996, p. 17
[5]ibid. p. 4

never banned on the publication of any religious scriptures or periodicals written by Hindu or Muslim scholars. Even the periodicals that comprised stories written by Muslim and Hindu women, British administration never thought of scrutinizing them. However, they implicitly tried to encourage the *bhadrashampraday* to indulge themselves in the process of hybridity. They built schools and universities with scholarly English teachers to modernize the Indian "other" so that they can rationalize their rule over India with their intellectual apparatuses. Their "self" and "other" strategy of secularism was strictly restricted within their domain which they propagated at times to enable people with different faiths as well as believers not merely to co-exist but to live together well. They knew that in an orthodox country like India, talking about secularism would be a bolt from the blue. Instead they maintained a principled distance from both the religions and tried to grow a sense of community between the Hindus and Muslims. Directing this, Bhargava said, "By forcing people to think of their religion as a matter of private preference, it uncouples the link between religion and community, and deprives people of their sense of identity."[6]

By the end of the 19th century, the atmosphere of Bengal was politically charged and forces from different streams were in confrontation with each other. This confrontation gradually brought re-formed Muslims to the forefront who, with their writing, were gaining social ground to classify themselves as *bhadralok* as well. The literature of that period, both fictional and non-fictional, contained issues that paved the path for a Muslim Awakening. Of course, the path was full of thorns. Women like Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein, Nurunnessa Khatun, Fazilatun Nesa, Fatema Khanam, Syeda Jahanara Hyder and other esteemed writers were pioneers of that path. Now if we go back to the question of Muslim women's historiographical invisibility, we will see that

[6]Rajeev Bhargava. "Secularism in India: The Recent Debate" *Secularism and Its Critics* (Delhi: Oxford University Press), 1998, p 487.

Begum Rokeya, Shamsun Nahar, Faizunnesa, Nawab Fazilatunnesa–these are the names that are being pronounced repeatedly. Apart from research on Rokeya, short biographies of some other well-known women, and a couple of some M.phill research on Shamsun Nahar and Faizunnessa, that particular age of transition in Bengal's history remains under-researched. Sometimes these women, only some of who we know, worked in silence, as what one writer has termed "*Nepathya Charini*" (lit. she who walks behind the scene).[7]These women lived and fought alongside the men of their household (Muslim *bhadralok*), wrote and struggled for greater rights. They were the boons of the Women's Awakening of the Muslim community who sought to redress issues like polygamy, child marriage, female education, eradication of *abarodh* (extreme purdah) and generally improve women's status in society. The debate of self and the other can be linked to this situation as well. Women who remained at the backdrop of the scene, were the "other" who could not become the self because the "self" was already their male counterparts who viewed their women as the potential existential threat to their male ego.

If we examine the contemporary women of Hindu and Muslim communities side by side, we do not see much of a difference in their practices. They look the same, share the same language, wear the same dress (saree) and share many other vital concerns; but if we scrutinize their lifestyle, only then the differences emerge- in religious belief and rituals, in mythology and political stand.[8]

The emergence of *bhadra shampraday*in Muslim community gave birth to a bulk of mediators who accelerated the growth of a new powerful cultural and economic class. The traditional Muslim elite class was exposed to a new "upwardly mobile *atraf* class and converged into the

[7]Sonia Nishat Amin. *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939*. New York, 1996, p. 11
[8]ibid. p 49

Muslim middle class, the *bhadra shampraday.*"[9] writes Amin. Out of this *shamparaday*, 19th century Bengal received two main groups who had strong faith in their ideology and its proponents- the syncretics and the separatists or the fundamentalists. The syncretics was the group that advocated change and reform in the social, political and cultural air of Calcutta, and the fundamentalist was the Muslim intelligentsia who whole heartedly wanted Pakistan to be their homeland. A. H. K. Yusufzai in her novel *Udasi* wrote, "[t]hey (Muslims) were not much interested in the Bengali or Sanskrit languages. On the contrary, they show hatred, malice, indifference and ignorance regarding these" (qtd in Amin 20)[10]. This is how the problem of Bengali Muslim "identity" rose and resolved with time, as it was to be reborn and resolved time and again, said Amin[11]. The debate has arisen from this tension between the religious and the secular in the land of Bengal.

The specific ethno class composition of the woman question was hidden behind a language of universalism. Women in 19th century Bengal were seen as a homogenous category, as "woman", based on a single axis of identification, without considering the diversity of race, community, class, or sexuality. This labelling somehow, made the Hindu middle class women "visible" and the Muslim women nearly "invisible". Muslim women's persistent representation as "backward" within normative historical accounts, is perhaps best exemplified in an assertion by Gail Minault, "These invisible (Muslim) women… needed to be rendered visible" (qtd. in Sarkar 13)[12]. Echoing her, Mahua Sarkar writes, ""[t]o the extent that this, "writing back" and "making

[9]ibid. p 18.
[10]A. H. K. Yusufzai. *Udasi* (Tangail, Khondker Bashiruddin Mia, 1901), cited in Sonia Nishat Amin, p. 20
[11]Sonia Nishat Amin. *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939*. New York, 1996, p. 122
[12]Mahua Sarkar. *Visible Histories, Disappearing Women: Producing Muslim Womanhood in Late Colonial Bengal* (Durham: Duke University Press), 2008, p 13.

visible" is reactive and moored to a project of recovery, it is often beset by some typical problems."[13] Sarkar further pointed out two major difficulties behind this predicament. One is labelling categorical differences as "simple", and another, putting these differences under one category, as in Hindu and Muslim women are somehow similar or comparable.[14]

To explain the first difficulty, we have to dig deep into the process of historiography. Our historians or researchers took Hindu and Muslim as two simple categories. They failed to give these a relational reading, a reading of "how such differences, and specially the specific content with which we imbue these categories today, came to be constructed in the first place and to what end. Consequently, the descriptive labels that mark different women also typically end up naturalizing such differences. These, in turn, form the basis of separate, typically additive histories of Muslim women."[15]

The second difficulty deals with the question of comparison. Were Hindu and Muslim women comparable? Could they take each other's place? No, they could not. Their early experiences and philosophies were completely different. But history says otherwise. Our history tried to fit Muslim women in a position where they were always at the receiving end. They were labeled as modern, liberal or feminists but their actions were being partially recognized within the dominant historiographical tradition. As Joan Scott has argued, "The effect is precisely to flatten the very difference that apparently mandated this "new" history in the first place, and to represent Muslim women as "just like" or rather "almost like", the fabled subject positions "liberal" or "feminist""

[13]ibid. p 13.
[14]ibid. p 14
[15]ibid. p 110

(qtd. in Sarkar 110)[16]. As a result, what could become a rich and multifaceted history of negotiation for Muslim women, became an exercise in the service of producing sameness.

One big difference between the Zenana Mahal of Hindu and Muslim women was, Hindu women were privileged to have the support of their male counterparts. Hindu/ Brahmo progressive men received their women in the nation building process with more positivity than the Muslim men did. For example, two revolutionary women of late 19th century, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain struggled for women's education and their position in society. One of them came from a relatively progressive background and the other from a more stifling atmosphere. They belonged to two different communities- one from Hindu- Brahmo and the other from a Muslim society. Even though both of them fought for the same cause, their differences lay in their early experiences. The preaching and practices were completely different in their houses. The binaries here- "progressive" and "stifling"- represent a more significant message. These two religions were neither the same nor unchangeable, they had entirely different social ideologies which gave birth to radically different experiences. Hindu women were seen to live in an enabling environment, whereas Muslim women did not. Moreover, Muslim women's thirst for support from liberal Muslim male intellectuals remained unmet.[17] Here, the state played a neutral role in terms of scrutinizing differences. It did not propagate any strategy exceptionally for the advancement of women keeping religious affiliation in mind. They built schools and missionary institutions for both Muslim and Hindu men. Muslims, in fear of losing their faith, were less visible in those schools. They preferred their religious schools that preached Islam in a conservative manner. On the other hand, Hindus, especially Hindu men, took the advantage of the new education system, which eventually made them aware of themselves as

[16]ibid. p 110
[17]ibid. p 14

a nationalist individual and built a modern consciousness. They understood the value of collective participation in a nation building process, which they knew would remain incomplete if they refuse to assimilate their female counterparts with them. This is where Muslim women lagged behind. They remained behind the religious norms which made them less important in creating "spaces" of their own because their men did not allow them to come out of the purdah. The women question, within the Muslim society, was negatively formulated in the latter half of the 19th century because the ongoing process of modernization was subverted by colonization. The British rulers brought changes in the economic infrastructure through the introduction of a new form of land ownership, commercial agriculture, business enterprises along with changes in the legal, administrative and education system.[18] Their economic and administrative policies displaced Muslims (men) from their traditional status, which consequently had divested them of political power. Being marginalized from their traditional legacy, they fostered an antagonistic attitude towards the British. The power that was snatched away from Muslim men, was seen exercised over their women (by those Muslim men).

However, this perceived "lag" that Muslim women suffered from can be seen to their advantage. Keeping in mind Partha Chatterjee's essay 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Woman Question' the resolution that Chatterjee talks of does not seem to apply to the Muslim women in Bengal.[19] This left them relatively free to pursue their own path, forge their autonomous path to freedom, leaving writers such as Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein to be bold and militant in her writings. The famous formulation for the 'new woman for the new patriarchy' does not apply to the Muslim women writers, who are then relatively free to forge their own path.

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[18]Sonia Nishat Amin. *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939*. New York, 1996, p. 167

[19]Partha Chatterjee. "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question" *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (New Delhi: Kali for Women), 1989.

The oppression and stigma of women being an 'inferior creature' has been explained through a series of anecdotal narratives in Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein's book *Oborodhbashini(The Secluded Ones*).[20] The early 20th century construction of modernity had to deal with a complex amalgamation of nationhood and women's participation in the nation building process. Muslim women's empowerment and greater subjectivity/agency was constantly being negotiated with the debate on purdah. Their class, religion and language were the determining factors in terms of their mobility and public participation. Satirizing this practice, in 'Bengal Women's Educational Conference' Rokeya writes, "Although Islam has successfully prevented the physical killing of baby girls, yet Muslims have been glibly and frantically wrecking the mind, intellect and judgment of their daughters till the present day" (qtd. in Quayum 227).[21] Rokeya's short stories in *The Secluded Ones* delineate the intellectuals and challenges of that period where women's voice or their demands do not fall into a clear category. Resonating this, Firdous Azim writes, "It is at times reconciliatory, at others challenging and constantly seeking for ways and means by which women's demands can be heard and met."[22]Women's demands, specially of the Muslims, somehow was lost under the imposed politics of seclusion. Different periodicals claim that only the Hindus were considered to be *bhadra* since Muslims were still "covered in a burka". The scenario was quite like this,

> A wealthy man from Bihar was travelling to Darjeeling. He had a dozen of "human- luggage" with him; seven adult women- maternal and paternal aunts and five girls from the age of six to thirteen. They had the palanquins pre-arranged every time the women had to move from the train to the steamer or vice

[20] Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. *Oborodhbashini*. 1931.
[21] Mohammad A. Quayum, *The EssentialRokeya.* 2013, p. 227
[22] Co-written with Parween Hasan, "The Construction of Women in Late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century Bengal: the writings of Nawab Faizunnesa Chaudhurani and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein" in edited Leela Fernandez, *Routledge Handbook on Gender in South Asia*, 2014

> versa. The women were packed in a palanquin and placed on the deck of the steamer. In the train, they were placed with their palanquins in a luggage van… but no palanquin bearers were available at the Siliguri (West Bengal) station. What a predicament! At last, four men held up the end of two bed sheets to make a screen, and the women began to walk inside it. But he pathetic men were having difficulties synchronizing with one another on hilly road. Since the women were also inept at walking-sometimes they would move ahead of the screen and sometimes fall behind. Some lost their shoes on the way; some had their shawls blown away by the wind, and so forth.[23]

The above story from the translated version of Rokeya's *Oborodhbashini*, is not a story merely; this is a mirror of the way Muslim society was dealing with their women. If a woman is always behind the purdah, how can she contribute to the nation building process? Under such circumstances, text like *Oborodhbashini* were fulfilling the task of delineating the imbalance between the two large religious sects. Right at the emergence of the nationalist self-conception, a substantial part of the leading religious group was kept behind the curtain. If we go back to the study of the historical emergence of the idea of secularism in 20th century India, we have to erase the western/American idea of secularism from our head. We will need to see through the lenses of Rajeev Bhargava and agree to the fact that in the early 20th century British rulers adopted a new kind of model that handled both the inter and intra religious complexities of Islam and Hinduism, maintaining a "principle distance" from both the religions. In terms of inter communal intricacies, they maintained a principle distance by staying out of religion. All the family and religious laws were constituted by the eminent Pandits and Moulanas of Bengal. Hindu laws remained unchanged for years but what changed the contours of society was the use of language and the education system. On the other hand, Muslim laws were intact in terms of

[23]Mohammad A. Quayum, *The EssentialRokeya.* 2013, p. 249

practice and observance, but what needed to be resettled was the position of women in the public presence of religion. This is where the above mentioned story and Bhargava's intra religious complications meet one another. British rulers did not intervene in a Muslim household to scrutinize the position of women, they never passed any law that forbade women to stay behind the purdah. Instead, what they did was, in Muslim society they snatched the economic and administrative power from the Muslim men and in Hindu society introduced caste based strict Hindu laws to create a hierarchical culture. These Muslim men, losing all the power became extremely religious in their practice and forced their women to remain in purdah, turning them into a vulnerable creature who would act just as their men would want them to. On the other hand, In Hinduism, they kept the lower castes under the subordination of the higher castes so that the chances of riots (against government) would decelerate.

Secularism in the subcontinent was an inextricable part of the nationalist conception and it signified all that was enlightened and integrative within a modern society. The British rulers propagated freedom of religion as one of its core principles but made the practice of religion to be personal and private.[24]Closely tied to the definition of nationalism, communalism was secularism's opposite, but by proliferating communalism amongst the natives, they upheld their form of secularism in Bengal. In this hazy setting, where/how do we scrutiny the subject hood of women? By the early 20th century, women were writing not only about themselves or their domestic issues but also about issues concerning the Muslim polity. In *Nabanoor*, aMuslim-edited journalof that period, Rokeya wrote an essay named "Amader Obonoti"which created much chaos for her bold assertion of women's condition. Seeing the depth of the outcome, she

[24] Shabnum Tejani. *Indian Secularism: A Social and Intellectual History, 1890-1950*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 2008, p. 2.

herself edited the essay and retitled it as "Strijatir Abanati"[25] or "The Downfall of Women" for its contemporary anthologization in *Motichu*r (1904). The passages that she had to edit and rewrite referred to religion, be it Hinduism, Islam or Christianity.[26] Rokeya had thus maintained a principle distance from all the religion and fought for the creation of a secular self-conscious individual.

"Amader Abanati" was a call to women to wake up and realize the sources of their oppression. Though orthodox quarters attacked Rokeya whenever they could, she never lacked supporters. After getting supports from both Hindu, Muslim and Brahmo community, she wrote *Oborodhbashini* where she put forth pragmatism and secularism in place of spiritualism. Her spirit for critical enquiry rather than accepting traditions without questions made her the seminal secular revolutionist. Her school in Calcutta linked, however fragile, between the city based "Bengal Renaissance" and the Muslim community.[27] In the first phase of the *NariJagaran*, Rokeya's school produced a bunch of Muslim *mahila* who emerged out of the cocoons of purdah and stood beside their men to build a modern nation. In our effort to revising colonial history we have to remember that Bengali Muslim women did not appear only as silent or invisible or objects of discourses in this paper, they appeared as intellectuals in their own right beginning in the early 20th century and "as members of a class with considerable influence on the cultural life

[25]Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. "Strijatir Abanati" *Motichur*, 1904.
[26]Co-written with Parween Hasan, "The Construction of Women in Late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century Bengal: the writings of Nawab Faizunnesa Chaudhurani and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein" in edited Leela Fernandez, *Routledge Handbook on Gender in South Asia*, 2014, p. 16
[27]Sonia Nishat Amin. *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939*. New York, 1996, p. 158

of that time, especially among Muslims… they were certainly present as subjects with both voice and visibility, even if limited, in the public world."[28]

This paper is an attempt to identify the relationship between historical invisibility of Muslim women and the overwhelming visibility of Hindu (middle class/upper caste) women as the embodiment of "ideal womanhood" in normative accounts of nation's transition to modernity. History says that during the Bengal Renaissance, Muslim women, unlike Brahmo/ Hindu upper caste/middle class women, were largely unwilling (and sometimes unable) to take part in the 19th century reforms initiated by the Brahmo/Hindu bhadralok. Muslim women's appearance in the then nation building process is rarely seen even though they were an integral part of the process. But a closer look at the literature of that time—produced by Muslim women, specially by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and her contemporaries—yields a considerably complex picture. By the end of this century, members of a slowly emerging Muslim middle class, including women, started writing in the periodicals run by both Brahmos and Hindus. In the following chapters, I investigate the ways in which gender and communal ideologies worked simultaneously to deny Muslim women their agency, even though they wrote and spoke publicly, but gave Hindu/Brahmo women their deserved attention in a Hindu-Brahmo dominated nationalist discourse. In order to do so, I will be looking at two novels–*Sultana's Dream* and *Padmaraag*–written by seminal writer and social activist Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. I also want to explore the daily lives of contemporary Muslim women to unearth the history and (re)inscription of women both as they were written about and as they wrote themselves.

[28]Mahua Sarkar. *Visible Histories, Disappearing Women: Producing Muslim Womanhood in Late Colonial Bengal* (Durham: Duke University Press), 2008, p 21.

Chapter II

Sultana's Dream: a free reign of imagination with uncompromising gender roles

Literary writing in nineteenth-century Bengal is seen as reflective of the growing sense of nation and associated with concepts like freedom and equality. When these concepts get adapted and advocated by women, new dimensions are added. Just as the modern Bengali man was involved in configuring the main features of a new and modern nation, the woman was being addressed as Bengali, Muslim and modern. The context in which women's voices found public space is thus of great significance.Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) had boldly asserted her views on the critical issues which had determined the position of women in the then emerging nation/s. Early twentieth century nation building process dealt with modernity, nationhood, and women's position in a society and produced a complex diagram where women's empowerment with their agency was being negotiated. This negotiations and compromises led the nation forward keeping gender inequality and subjugation of women intact. The progress of Muslim women encountered differentiating factors like class struggle, discrimination, religion, and social norms. The contemporary societal customs can be traced down by the literature they produced. The politics of that era were reflected in the stories, essays and poems written by women. The way women wrote about their social and intellectual concerns, tells us that their position and voice do not necessarily fall in to a clear pattern. One of the most influential essays on the issue of the positioning of women in nationalist debates is Partha Chatterjee's "The Nationalist Resolution of the Woman Question."[29]

[29]Partha Chatterjee. "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question" *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (New Delhi: Kali for Women), 1989.

This revision of women's positioning in national history had taken many strands into consideration, especially that of class, and critiqued the notions of modernity and progress as being class-based and incomplete. A gap in this revision can be seen in its neglect of the place of the Muslim women.[30]

The myth of Muslim women being invisible and subordinate to Hindu/Brahmo upper caste middle class women can be deflated if we see how a Muslim woman participated in the nation building process, the ongoing discourse that framed her to participate and what strategies she applied to make a room for herself amid all the differentiating factors. Women's direct participation around the gender and nation building debate came about through the new Muslim-edited journals of the period. At this point, let us take a few examples from one of the journals. The editorial of the inaugural issue of *Nabanoor* (1903), invited women to write:

> Today we call upon all our womenfolk, who are within the *antapur*, (the private living quarters), to participate in our literary activities and contribute to the glow of *Nabanoor*. Within the family, they nurture us with their motherly care, sisterly affection and tender wifely love. Will they not similarly assist us in our literary efforts and lead the nation to greater development?" (Translated by Parween Hasan and Firdous Azim)[31]

Writers of the stature of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, considered to be the ideal feminist writer and activist in Bengal, along with other lesser-known women writers responded to this call. Gradually some of these journals such as *Saugat* (first published in 1918) decided to have a

[30]Co-written with Parween Hasan, "The Construction of Women in Late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century Bengal: the writings of Nawab Faizunnesa Chaudhurani and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein" in edited Leela Fernandez, *Routledge Handbook on Gender in South Asia*, 2014.
[31]ibid. p. 109

special journal for women, named *Mahila Saugat* (first edition 1930)[32]. These articles show how women spontaneously wrote not only about themselves and so-called domestic issues, but engaged in the wider debate and issues concerning the Bengali Muslim polity.

Starting from "Amader Abanati" to the last piece she wrote, Rokeya always labelled education as the remedy to break through every societal ill. While propagating the advantage of women's education, she never tried to signify education as a tool to create the *new woman* for the *new man*, rather, for her, education was the means to amplify the human potential that every woman had. She never considered only Muslim women as her subject matter, for her every woman in Bengal, be she Hindu, Muslim or Christian, needed education to become aware of her worth and therefore, exercise mental and physical freedom. She encouraged women to make the best use of their God-given intelligence through education and real life experiences.

We can hear echoes of a similar call in Rokeya's memorable piece, *Sultana's Dream* too. It is a story of a woman who was taken a land where women ruled and men were confined in the inner quarters of the house called the *mardana.* This land was free from violence, crime, and corruption and was both intellectually and ethically thriving. People there tamed nature and tapped its energy for the good of the community. Child marriage was banned in the land and female education was actively encouraged. This novella took us to a land where everything that was frowned upon in emerging Bengali modern society, was encouraged, especially by women across religion and culture. At one point asked by Sultana, who was visiting the *Ladyland*, what their religion was, the resident who was guiding her, Sister Sara explained, "Our religion is based on love and truth. It is our religious duty to love one another and be absolutely truthful."[33]

[32]ibid. p 112.
[33] Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. *Sultana's Dream*, 1905, p 8.

Therefore, people of this land did not exercise any extra-terrestrial power or did not adhere to a set of meaningless rituals, rather they practiced the values that were directly beneficial to the human community and to the human soul.

This well-crafted story has an easy to understand plot, so amazingly written that sometimes it is read like a pleasant fantasy. The plot and content of the novella reflect how women were seen as useless creatures and forced into a life of seclusion, which Rokeya fantastically portrayed by turning the table against men and made them suffer the same way that they have inflicted on the Bengali women for centuries. This was one of the most incredibly written feminist utopias which is very sweet and sugary on the outside but bitterly pungent underneath.[34] After reading the story, Rokeya's husband, Syed Sakhawat Hossein, had admiringly uttered, "A terrible revenge!"[35] Men are given the same social status that women were given, as Sister Sara critically says, "[Men] should not do anything, excuse me; they are fit for nothing. Only catch them and put them into the Zenana."[36] Men, who considered themselves intellectually superior to women, had been tricked by women and trapped into confinement. This reflects Rokeya's vision of empowerment and her fight against male supremacy and against the Indian patriarchal system.

Rokeya believed that women of all religions and castes were essentially as good as men, if not better. She never vouched for Muslim women only, awakening of women across the world was her boon for writing. Women of the *Ladyland* never followed any specific religion, they were not secluded in the name of tradition. They were educated, knowledge was their power. Rokeya's vision of a woman was more than a person who could read Qur'an and do whatever she had been told to do. For her, a woman's identity should not be set byreligion, for which she believed

[34]Mohammad A. Quayum, *The EssentialRokeya.* 2013, p. 9.
[35] ibid
[36]Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. *Sultana's Dream,* 1905, p 12.

distancing of religion in identity creation was necessary. Bhargava in his "Distinctiveness of Indian Secularism" mentions the principle of distancing religion is a pre requisite for a state to be secular.[37]The same distance between religion and identity formation was also required for women to come out of seclusion and invisibility. Rokeya understood that only education could protect the individual woman from her own oppressive religiously sanctioned social custom. A number of feminist research and scholarship on Rokeya had called her a secular figure. But no one really explained why only Rokeya, not the other contemporary female writers who were writing about the same issues, were called secular. In some of the following paragraphs, I will try to explain why Rokeya, being born and brought up in a religious Muslim family was essentially a secular figure.

Refocusing on Bhargava's essay called "Distinctiveness of Indian Secularism," we see how at different levels Indian secularism was totally different than that of the western ones. Here, I will talk about the same reasons, but instead of showing how 19th century Bengal upheld those features, I will try to personify the same understanding and experiences in Rokeya's life.

According to Bhargava, a secular state separates itself not merely from one but from all religions. Official status is not given to any religion. However, this does not mean a secular state is anti-religious but it does imply that it exists and survives only when religion is no longer hegemonic.[38] Rokeya personified these values in her practice. She was never anti-religious; she brought about references of religion time to time. Her version of feminism did not try to generate women who were fit for modern men, rather she encouraged women to be a better human being who could differentiate between right and wrong, could justify her worth by sharpening her potentials. Women should be responsible for her own action, as she mentioned in "Strijatir

[37]Rajeev Bhargava. "The Distinctiveness of Indian Secularism." Delhi University Press. 2007.
[38] ibid.

Abanati," "If God does a stock-taking and asks her, have you used your mind, brain, eyes, etc. well? What will the *begum* say in reply?"[39]

Criticizing extremism in religion which citizens are born into is another dimension of secular society. In *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya lays particular emphasis on the importance of women familiarizing themselves with science and education while men remain confined in the *mardana*. It was a response to the ongoing oppression in the name of purdah/seclusion. She criticized every religion that refrained women from going to school and learn.

Another distinguish feature of a secular state is, regardless of which religion is one born into, he or she should get the value of equal citizenship. As Bhargava says that this lies at the root of the idea of the right to life, liberty, material welfare and education—crucial elements if ordinary people are to lead their ordinary life with dignity. The benefits of citizenship–things that are required to live everyday life, should be available to everyone without discriminating on the ground of religion.[40] Bhargava has written this essay in 2007. But Rokeya fought for the same demand—equal citizenship for women, years ago. Her take on education is evident in every literary piece she wrote. Despite being a Muslim, she urged all the women across Bengal to nurture their innate talents through education. One good example of this invocation is *Sultana's Dream.* History has repeatedly told us that compared to Bengali Muslim women, middle class upper caste Hindu/Brahmo women were more literate and aware of their surroundings. One major reason for history being aligned to Hindu/Brahmo women was the constitutive and dominant hegemonic narratives i.e. ideal feminism, middle class womanhood, authorized by prominent historians and scholarships.

[39]Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. "Strijatir Abanati" *Motichur*, 1904.
[40]Rajeev Bhargava. "The Distinctiveness of Indian Secularism." Delhi University Press. 2007.

At the turn of the 20th century, when Indian nationalism was deconstructing its previous frame to take new shapes, it was unsure about the position of women within the new discourse. The literature produced by Rokeya and her contemporaries clearly showed that there was no such thing as "Muslim thought." It was a literary movement to awaken the conscience of both men and women. The politics of (in)visibility is carefully outlined in Mahua Sarkar's book where she shows how Muslims and Muslim women became an unmarked other against Hindus in the discourse about who is the ultimate modern Indian.[41]

The representation of Muslim women as "backward" and "victimized" was produced in relation to the category "modern, ideal, Indian woman" as Hindu, Brahmo, upper caste and middle class, and Muslim was categorized as predominantly male, hypersexual, violent, medieval within *bhadralok* nationalist discourse in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Bengal.[42] Around this time, the nationalist discourse was looking for a perfect definition for *adarshiya bharatiya nari* (ideal Indian woman), as the modern *bhadralok* requires a *bhadramahila*. As the Hindu upper caste and middle class women were (pseudo) conscious about their position and were voicing their rights through literature, staying at home under their husband or fathers' supervision—both Hindu and Muslimmen thought this was the ideal picture of a modern Indian woman. Besides forming the narrative of womanhood, the dominant nationalist discourse produced the category Muslim as violent and predominantly male and occluded the presence and work of Muslim women in colonial Bengal. In other words, they gendered Muslim-ness on the one hand, and solidified the category "ideal Indian woman" Hindu on the other.

[41]Mahua Sarkar. *Visible Histories, Disappearing Women: Producing Muslim Womanhood in Late Colonial Bengal* (Durham: Duke University Press), 2008.
[42]ibid. p 75

This tendency to categorize people according to religion or caste was a silent but persistent aspect of colonial administration. Even though they maintained principle distance from both Hinduism and Islam, they cunningly appointed *pandits* and *purohits* to propagate the values of Hinduism. These *pandits* taught people to categorize themselves on the basis of class, race, caste, religious groups, education—a newly homogenized modern construct. Since Hindu *bhadralok* thought they were more modern and educated, hence more preferred to the colonial rulers, they deliberately represented Muslims as the "inferior other" and retained more power and status to themselves. However, at the end of the nineteenth century, when Muslims started representing their "self" consciousness through writing, "it produced tremendous anxiety among the Hindu *bhadralok* over their ability to maintain their social and economic advantages and their attempts to establish their legitimacy as leaders of the emergent nation."[43]

In the final decade of the nineteenth century Bengali women showed explicit interest in women's issues and started writing about their lives, sufferings, achievements, religion, education, and other issues that marked their presence in nationalist discourse. Some of the monthly or weekly magazines even had women editors. The objective of these writings was to address the absence of reading material particularly suitable for Bengali women, something that was not religious scripture or romantic poetry written in subtle language for women. It was a call for women, both Hindu and Muslim, to educate themselves in Bengali, history, science, religion and housekeeping and many other interesting subjects.*Sultana's Dream* was such a piece where Rokeya pointed out how the world would look like if women educate themselves in science and technology. This would not only bring them liberty but also inculcate an adequate sense of dignity and confidence in them. This novella explicitly shows the importance of women's participation in the public

[43]ibid. p 61.

domain and what good can bring this participation to society. When a woman is educated, she should be willing to share her social space and privileges with other women no matter what religion or caste they come from.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Hindu and Brahmo women had a common tendency to portray Muslims as unscrupulous and abusive *jat* (caste/community) through their writing.[44] The traces can be found in periodicals like *Antahpur, Mahila, Bharat Mahila, Bamabodhini Patrika, Antahpur Shiksha* and many more.[45] Articles published in these periodicals also show that Muslims were introduced as the agents behind the fall of Hindu civilization from its glorious days to somewhat "medieval backwardness." In addition to this, the authors who were mostly "liberal" in their thoughts, picked on specific institutions such as purdah system, polygamy—the most challenging debate of nineteenth century—and blamed Muslims for having introduced them to India.[46] These were some implicit efforts made by Hindu authors to vindicate the humanist side of Hinduism and portray the uncivilized, backwardness of Islam to British rulers. For instance, in one of the articles published in *Bamabodhini Patrika*, one of the writers made an argument that says the institution of purdah was unknown and needless to India before the arrival of the Muslims. To save the Hindu woman from the reckless exploitation of Muslim rulers, "Hindus gradually adopted the practice."[47]

Amid these propaganda and clear hatred for Muslims, *Sultana's Dream* was a revolutionary piece that debunked the contemporary narratives of judging men and women based on their religion. The theme of political and social degeneration under Muslim rule had been particularly widespread in the discourse of the *bhadralok* in nineteenth century. And for Hindus, Muslims

[44] ibid. p 63.
[45] ibid. p 75.
[46] ibid. p 62.
[47] ibid. p 62

were predominantly male, who were responsible for the invisibility of the whole community. Under such circumstance, *Sultana's Dream* was Rokeya's take to demystify this myth. She showed that a female Muslim writer had the capacity to put the debouched men in *mardana*, defend her country from invasion, turn the society into a place where everyone has the same rights free of any religious narrative—if women were given access to education. As a utopia, this novella simply reflects upon the ill treatment of men. The women of Ladyland were confident, educated, self-assured, ambitious and have all the qualities of leadership. This novella told us that the identity crisis, one of the major predicaments, that women were subjected to could be solved if they could exercise self-worth in social and political spheres of life.

Rokeya had a different concept about the "purity" of women. Through the character of Sister Sara, she raised her voice against the "enslaved mind" that most of Bengali women had. This piece stands as a wonderful fantasy as well as a revenge on the male dominated society. Through the character of Sultana, she tried to ridicule the perception of men and women in Bengal. Rokeya intentionally portrayed men as the weaker section of the society. The patriarchal role is reversed in this piece; another way of saying that men and women both have the similar caliber and capacity given that women are getting equal opportunities like men.

Another factor that Rokeya raised her voice against was the male gaze and surveillance over women. She kept the men in the *mardana* to comprehend how it feels to stay out of men's gaze for a while, how it feels to be free and experience a personal space. This emotion hits us when we realize that this basic need to have own space for women was only available in their imagination. Her writing style depicts layers of emotion containing anger, fear and a constant urge to challenge male authority. This was her attempt to engage the female readers of Bengal reminding them their worth and questioning the legitimacy of patriarchal power that confined

women to the domestic realm. Women were shown as more rationale and powerful in the story, as Sister Sara comments, "Women's brain are more quicker than men's."[48]

This story constantly reminds us the social and religious customs that stand between women and emancipation. She focused on women's necessity to learn science and technology and challenged customs like child marriage and seclusion. Many people mistake seclusion for purdah system. Rokeya was never against purdah, rather she encouraged women to break the chain of seclusion, come out of the domestic realm and maintain her chastity with her veil and burqa on.[49] What she voiced through this story was neither Muslim nor Hindu women were free from male subjugation and surveillance. Men of both the religions suppressed women in the inner quarters of the home in the name of security, custom and religious norms. So the literature produced by Hindu/Brahmo women where they make Muslims look like the "other," uncivilized, lowly part of the society, forget about the negotiation they had to make to be recognized.

"Indian womanhood," the most contested theory of that century, for so many reasons became synonymous of women's oppression in Bengal. Women's oppression and *zenana* had a connection for most of the depravities that was sanctioned to it. That is why it was not very difficult to understand why self-proclaimed Hindu/Brahmo writers distanced themselves from institutions like polygamy and seclusion that symbolized*zenana*. Instead of addressing any social ill, these writers wrote and published articles that pin the existence of such social ills on others, namely Muslims. For instance, in the closing years of the century *Bamabodhini Patrika* carried the following translation of a speech given by Lord Bethune almost fifty years earlier at the inauguration ceremony of the Bethune School, ostensibly in support of the claims made by

[48]Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. *Sultana's Dream*, 1905, p 10.
[49]Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. "The Burqa." *Nabanoor*, 1904

contemporary Hindu authors in its pages, "The practice of secluding your women and their present ignorant state are not sanctioned by your ancient [Aryan/Hindu] society. I believe that it is in emulation of the conquering Muslims that this practice started here…The women of your sages and of the nobility enjoyed considerable freedom."[50]

It was quite acceptable to openly air negative opinions about Muslims in the late nineteenth century without providing any supporting evidence. Through stories like *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya conveyed the message that women are not always sexualized and products of male oppression. If they are portrayed in the writings like this—as hopeless victims of subjugation and responsible for their own moral and sexual ignorance—it would facilitate their oppression at the first place. That is why she thought it was her responsibility to address the ongoing social ill and give a timely answer to Hindu/Brahmo writers for the narratives they were constructing against Muslims.

Another argument that Sarkar makes to illustrate how Hindu/Brahmo women highlighted their chastity was grounded on their visibility outside their home. For them visibility outside the home was widely understood to be the indicator of class status, "denouncing the *zenana* as medieval and backward" and hence distancing themselves from it allowed them to be labelled as "new ideal women.""[51] This served two purposes for them. Firstly, their appearance in the public sphere alongside their men made them "modern" and "progressive" without compromising their class status. Secondly, it made the Muslim women, who were still in the *zenana*, look victimized and backward. What this "modern" women failed to comprehend was they were part of the dominant community from the beginning, so they did not have to compromise their class status

[50]Mahua Sarkar. *Visible Histories, Disappearing Women: Producing Muslim Womanhood in Late Colonial Bengal* (Durham: Duke University Press), 2008, p 64.
[51] ibid. p 64

and instead of confronting/resisting Hindu/Brahmo men's subjugation over them, they were busy criticizing the Muslim community. It gave the Hindu/Brahmo men more space and authority to hegemonies their women.

In this context, we can read *Sultana's Dream* as Rokeya's attempt to bring the women of Bengal outside their *zenana*—as it was one of the pointers for women to be progressive—and confine the educated modern men in the *mardana*. By doing this she not only raised her voice against male oppression but also categorized women as self-asserted, confident, and free of men.

ChapterIII

Padmarag: a home beyond domestic ideology

Like *Sultana's Dream, Padmarag* (written in 1903 and published in 1924) is a work of utopian fiction. However, unlike the former, the latter isno dream vision, nor it is set in an imaginary land. This novel unfolds the problems of Rokeya's own time and place. This utopia is a "realm of highly syncretic spiritualism" with images drawn from various religions with a special focus on women's social status, their suffering, their need for education and enlightenment.[52]*Padmarag* introduces us to Brahmo and Hindu women of Tarini Bhavan where our protagonist Siddika seeks refuge. This novel questions the very domesticity that had been described in other contemporary novels and could be considered as a counter-discourse to those. At the beginning *Padmarag* seems to be just another household where women's lives revolve around household chores. But as we keep on reading, it exposes us to a very unusual nature of household. It also gives us a taste of Christian influenced notions of sisterhood and depicts a part of Rokeya's contemporary social reality. Besides showing the forfeit of women's lives in seclusion, this novel upholds a distinct essence of spirituality. *Padmarag* is highly spiritual in its own terms. Rokeya's notion of spirituality is different as it is not based on one specific religion, it upholds "non-sectarian welfare-oriented activities," which is a core value of religion.[53]

For Tarini Bhavan where the main actions unfolded, appeared to be an *ashram*or home peopled only by women. Men were absent from the home, except some rare visitors or occasional patients. The sisters worked in different sections of the complex: the school, the hospital, the

[52]Barnita Bagchi, translator. *Padmarag*. By Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Penguin Books, 2005.
[53] ibid. p 14.

society for prevention of cruelty to women, the widow's home. It was Rokeya's projection of a model institution where oppression in the name of class, creed, religion or caste was put to rest. The setting of the home went far beyond the "middle class home," gave it almost a timeless quality.[54]

*Padmarag*portrays a life that Rokeya, in reality, wanted to establish for the women of her time and beyond. Women going to office, preparing reports for official purposes, teaching, dealing with work-life stress, and most importantly understanding the sufferings and grief of other women was the image of ideal womanhood in Rokeya's eyes. Rokeya built her protagonist Siddika as someone who appeared to be secretive and melancholic at the beginning but became confident, self-assured and competent as the novel proceeded. Her true identity was hidden behind other identities; her real name was concealed within other names. Rokeya's motive to give Siddika multiple names was to imply the fact that to be a new woman of emerging modern discourse, one had to travel through multiple layers, bear qualities of multiple women. Siddika in the first scene was presented in the figure of a man—in coat, boot, hat, in the dress of an English man, resembling the "new man" of colonial Bengal. Rokeya took time to transform the character from a weak oppressed woman to a self-dependent one because that was how Muslim women were raising their voices amongst dominant Hindu nationalist discourse, slowly but significantly.

Siddika soon became a part of Tarini Bhavan. As the story unfolded, we found the male protagonist, barrister Latif Almas, caught in a polygamous relationship. Even though Latif was married to Siddika first, Latif's uncle intervened in the scenario and dismissed the marriage before the groom could set eyes on the bride. This uncle also convinced him that Siddika and her

[54]Sonia Nishat Amin. *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939*. New York, 1996, p. 265.

family did not want him and compelled him to take a second wife–Saleha. Siddika felt rejected but eventually braced herself for a life of independence. She emerged as a new woman–educated, capable, chaste and independent of spirit. However, after several months, fate brought Siddika and Latif under the same roof in Tarini Bhavan. They fell in love.

After knowing Siddika (still not about their marriage), Latif started to compare his wife Saleha with Siddika. Siddika scored on every count. Rokeya had dismissed Saleha in few lines, "Sleha knew her fortune had fetched her an eligible husband and thought it unnecessary to cultivate any other grace or virtue. She was quarrelsome and ill tempered" (qtd. in Amin 108)[55]. Siddika on the other hand was the epitome of kindness and grace, her English poem brought in prizes, management of her brother's estate made her a laudable woman. She was feminine, yet independent of her spirit, apparently destitute but proud in her adversity, romantic but utterly restrained, modern but virtuous.[56] In a nutshell, she was the kind of woman every *bhadralok*wanted as a wife, as the mother of their children. *Padmarag* would have become a popular novel of romance and domesticity if Rokeya ended it there, with Siddika and Latif's reunion. However, two things set the novel apart. One, the nature of Tarini Bhavan and two, Siddika's renunciation at the end. When Latif asked her to return to him and start a life together, Siddika declined the offer even though this was what she had cherished all along.

Latif Almas was a product of Bengali "Renaissance"—educated, enlightened, romantic—quite the image of Muslim *bhadralok* who were marking their appearance at the turn of the century. Siddika also was the image of new woman but her renunciation to the domestic subjugation set her much beyond, somewhat against the creed of *bhadramohila*.

[55] ibid. p 108.
[56] ibid. p 266.

The image of a new *bhadramohila*, be Hindu or Muslim, was centered around the image of "home," preserving the home and establishing order was her sacred duty. This duty was not considered to be oppressive or burden imposed by men, rather, to the women it seemed to be an integral part of matrimony. Women willingly spread and cherished this ideology of domesticity. Even though it was consistently accepted, Siddika stuck with her decision to remain alone. She wanted the world to know that some women chose otherwise, they valued their worth more than what the society inscribed them to.

Rokeya knew that fiction allows certain liberty which reality does not. She made Siddika take a rare decision to overthrow the set attributes of *bhadramohila* by the society and show a different path where they had voice and freedom to choose what being a woman with self-worth looked like.

Life in Tarnini Bhavan for Siddika had not been very easy at the beginning. When she requested other women of the Bhavan to give her some work, with utter disappointment she discovered that she had no skills that could help the institution grow. Having been born and raised in a typical Bengali family, she only knew how to stay in the inner quarters of the home and be a "lady of leisure," as Bagchi wrote it in the introduction of the novel.[57] Through perseverance and practice, she acquired skills and became a competent care giver of the community. By portraying a character like this, Rokeya criticized non-functional skills that most of the Bengali parents taught their daughters. The persistent dichotomy between the functional and ornamental aspects of education continues to pose a serious problem even today. Imparting useful skills besides conventional studies is essential as this would make women empowered, turn them to useful members of society—envisioned Rokeya. If we look around today, our education system is yet to

[57]Barnita Bagchi, translator. *Padmarag*. By Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Penguin Books, 2005.

reach that height. This is where I feel Bengali Muslim history needs to be revisited. If a woman could foresee this major flaw in our current education system from around hundred years back, we certainly cannot call them backdated or unaware of societal ills.

Rokeya had always tried to stand beside women who suffered under institutions such as marriage and seclusion. She had raised her voice to establish gender equality. Her essay "Alankar or the Badge of Slavery"[58] indicated the fact that Rokeya as a person and Rokeya as a writer had the same groundbreaking voice to bring parity for women. In this essay she compared the gift of jewelry from a husband to his wife with chains of bondage. Indeed, other "enlightened" Hindu women were infuriated by this, and wrote in response, "Accepting one's subordination to one's husband is not slavery… A woman must always be subordinated to her husband, there is nothing wrong with that" (qtd. in Sarkar 70)[59]. These kinds of criticisms came from women who frequently wrote about emancipation in magazines and periodicals. They argued that too much freedom was not good for women; if they want to exercise liberty, they should do it with their husband or father's consent.

I believe *Padmarag*, even though it was written much later than the essay "Alankar," was published, was a brutal response to those Hindu/Brahmo writers. It portrayed the picture of society where institutionalized familial, marital and sexual practices drove women to madness, even sometimes to the brink of suicide; consider the case of Siddika/Zainab/Padmarag. After making herself comfortable in Tarini Bhavan, Siddika realized that other residents have the same tragic past as her. Many characters represented the tragedy of "Biye Fail" or Failure of marriage in the novel. "Biye Fail" is an example of Rokeya's comic play with the word "Biye," having

[58]Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. "Alnkar." *Motichur*, 1904.
[59]Mahua Sarkar. *Visible Histories, Disappearing Women: Producing Muslim Womanhood in Late Colonial Bengal* (Durham: Duke University Press), 2008, p 70.

different meaning in two different languages–one meant the pathos of failed marriage, a very common problem of Bengali household, another meant the failure of obtaining a B. A. degree. Every elderly character of Tarini Bhavan is an example of "Biye Fail," be it Tarini Sen, Saudamini, Siddika, Sakina, Helen Horace or Usha. Usha was the reason for which Rokeya used this particular term as after being rejected by her in laws, she came to the Bhavan and Tarini Sen welcomed her. Mrs. Sen sponsored her higher education and once it was completed, the "Biye Fail" Usha literally failed in her B. A. exam for three marks only.

Again, this fail was an intentional attempt. By this fail she tried to imply that not every Hindu or Muslim woman was "aware" or "awakened." Women were becoming conscious about their rights, true, but the poor and underprivileged ones were not as lucky as the upper class ones. They could feel the sore but their voices were unheard. That was why after hearing about the matrimonial despotism and familial oppression the residents of Tarini Bhavan had gone through, Siddika said, "Is there no treatment for these suppurating sores of society? You either have to remain tied for life to a raving lunatic or endure being abandoned for no fault of your own… is there no redress for these injustices?"[60]To this Saudamini replied, "There is! That redress is the Society for the Upliftment of Downtrodden Women in the Tarini Bhavan. Come, all you abandoned, destitute, neglected, helpless, oppressed women—come together. Then we will declare war against society! And Tarini Bhavan will serve as our fortress."[61]

Some important issues were discussed and debated in different publications at the beginning of the twentieth century. The need to create a distinct identity that was both Bengali and Muslim through the cultivation of Bengali language was number one. And for this, the Muslim

[60]Barnita Bagchi, translator. *Padmarag*. By Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Penguin Books, 2005, p 127.
[61]ibid. p 127.

intellectuals emphasized the importance of promoting non-Islamic education for Muslim along with a good knowledge of the basic doctrines of Islam. Since Hindus were already learning Bengali, literature, history, geography, Muslims felt the need too. They felt the urgency to eradicate caste like divisions from both Hinduism and Islam because by then they understood why colonial rulers never intended to remove caste system from the society. The relationship between all the religion in terms of social intercourse and political mingling was essential to construct a society that was less divisive and more plural. While the Muslim men were writing to have a more diversified society, they deliberately missed out the presence of Muslim women writers and activists who were struggling to make themselves heard.

Padmarag narrates a complex and not so talked about predicaments of a patriarchal society. The education of young girls, residents' emotional dependence on each other, the empathy they developed by sharing their past, learning new skills and acquiring life lessons every day—make this novel a huge canvas for Rokeya to talk about the familial and sexual oppression that women went through. The importance of functional education for self-reliance and freedom was expressed throughout this major literary piece. Another fact about the residents of Tarini Bhavan was that they were in constant touch with the outer world through their welfare-oriented activities but were completely isolated from the mainstream society. Rumors were being spread that the residents of Tarini Bhavan were prostitutes, lepers and orphans with no known backgrounds; the same way as Hindu/Brahmo female writers were addressing Muslims/low caste women in their writing. The Hindu *bhadra shampraday* claimed to find similarities between Muslims and low caste Hindu women in terms of their early experiences. What they forgot or intentionally missed out was that they were privileging a certain notion of womanhood while discounting others as the proper markers of feminism or any other specific criterion. This is

where *Padmarag* is significant. It talks about women who have been ostracized by families, who bear hope and resolute optimism but at the same time are aware of anger, pain, loss.

During the time Rokeya was writing, there was considerable amount of tension among Muslims in the subcontinent. British intervention in administrative regulations shaped relationships both among Muslims and between Hindus and Muslims. This intervention formed the basis for Muslim identity formation, specially the ways the Muslim middle class was identifying and speaking for themselves. After 1870, British colonizers concentrated on promoting Muslims as a single religious political community–a community that would be identified in official discourse as the "lagging behind" Hindus who could not include themselves in the *bhadrashampraday*, therefore, converted to Islam to build some form of identity.[62] Since Hindus were supposedly more advanced in knowledge and culture than Muslims, the administration took advantage of this and earned legitimacy for special government assistance.

To explain the following paragraph on why this special assistance for only Muslim community, we have to go back to what Rajeev Bhargava said in his essay on Indian secularism. He mentions that when a state practices doctrines like principle distance, "[t]he state may interfere in one religion more than in others…depending on the historical and social condition of all relevant religions. For the promotion of particular value constitutive of secularism some religions…may require more interference from the state."[63] The colonial rulers at the end of the nineteenth century took some specific steps to bring changes in the education system for Muslims. According to the report of the Moslem Education Advisory Committee, the government took a number of steps to encourage secular education for Muslims. They incorporated financial

[62]Mahua Sarkar. *Visible Histories, Disappearing Women: Producing Muslim Womanhood in Late Colonial Bengal* (Durham: Duke University Press), 2008, p 97.
[63]Rajeev Bhargava. "The Distinctiveness of Indian Secularism." Delhi University Press, 2007, p 28

assistance, grants and special scholarships for Muslim students. They also instructed the madrassahs and maktabs to integrate the study of rational subjects in addition to religious texts. They even set up some hostels for Muslim students and appointed more Muslims in educational positions in administration.

It is worth noting that the narrative of erasing differences between Hindus and Muslims by the administrative power was "lackadaisical, convoluted and internally inconsistent," says Sarkar.[64] Because even after 40 years of the declaration that rational subjects should be added to the curriculum of the madrassahs and maktabs, the members of the Madrassah Reform Committee were deliberating on the matter. Secondly, the committee prepared a curriculum based on the requirement of *Moslem children* only. Thirdly, the curriculum was prepared only with the aim to make it understandable and helpful for Muslim boys (qtd. In Sarkar 95)[65]. Such disparity in curriculum for Muslim and Hindu students along with gender specific syllabus did not help to place Muslims on par with Hindus in terms of educational qualification, rather highlighted the reasons why Hindus considered Muslims, especially Muslim women inferior to them.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the number and proportion of Muslims students in school began to rise slowly. As a matter of fact, a heightened awareness among Muslim peasants about the importance of education was observed at that time. They understood that to have individual and collective economic improvement, their "sons" needed to be educated. The dream of having economic prosperity at home, expansion of education institutions, working under British administration made the rural household parents send their sons to the cities for a "profitable" education. This a gradual revolution in the thought process among the middle and

[64]Mahua Sarkar. *Visible Histories, Disappearing Women: Producing Muslim Womanhood in Late Colonial Bengal* (Durham: Duke University Press), 2008, p 118.
[65]ibid. p 95.

lower class Muslims brought two changes in the society. Firstly, a new educated Muslim class had emerged that strove for the lower and mid-level professional opportunities under colonial administration (that had previously been preserved for Hindus). And secondly, this new educated class was replacing, sometimes seizing, positions in society and politics that was conserved for urban elites and upper class Muslims previously. In their journey to middle-class gentility, Bengali Muslims were effectively distancing themselves from the source of their social and political strength. As a matter of fact, a new class of middle class Muslim *bhadralok* was forming by creating their own others in the form of rural and 'uneducated' Muslim brothers and forebears. So the competition between Hindus and Muslims, of all castes and race, to prove their worth in the nationalist discourse reached the highest peak at that time.

Against this backdrop, if we read *Padmarag* as a conventional novel, we understand why Rokeya constructed the idea of Tarini Bhavan and made a Brahmo women its founder. When madrassahs and maktabs failed to come up with a rational curriculum for both "sons" and "daughters," Rokeya built an entire "Bhavan" (residential building/training center/shelter/school) for women where they learnt, trained, and taught all the rational subjects to women and made them employable. The kind of work women learnt and attained there—typing, preparing reports for administration works, handling everyday problems for running an institution, dealing with pupils and their parents for instance—were the kinds the new educated Muslim sons were doing in colonial administration. By portraying a picture like this, Rokeya passed on the information that if women were educated and was given access to the basic resources of life, they could be as good as men in any arena of work.

Rokeya was always committed to the idea of a unified and plural Bengal—free of racial segregation, gender discrimination and religious exclusion. *Padmarag*, besides this commitment,

hinted at the complexity of the situation where both Hindu and Muslims were dealing with colonial administration. British administration also intervened in formation of Bengali language. As they tried to maintain principle distance from both the religious community, they thought a secular approach towards the language of education should be implemented. Therefore, they opted for English to be that language. However, on the other side, education in Bengal necessitated the development of Bengali as the medium of instruction as it was the modern written language. Having colonial supervision at the background, Bengali language was amalgamated with Sanskrit and made it a part of civilizing discourse. Its morphology was analyzed and structured by Sanskrit *pandits* and British linguists. Muslims remained outside of the discussion of this modern version of Bengali language which presumably affected both the *ashraf* and *atraf* class. *Ashraf* could not identify with this language because they always associated themselves with Urdu, Arabic and Persian language. The bizarre practice of living in Bengal but not learning Bengali language, even considering it as an inferior un-Islamic language made them look unconcerned about their identity.[66] The other more rooted Bengali Muslim *atraf* could not accept it as it was too Sanskritised. This new language bore no resemblance to what language they were speaking, *punthis* could be the best example to identify this.

Being born and raised in an aristocrat tradition bound Muslim family, Rokeya too had a hard time learning Bengali and English language. She learnt Bengali from her elder sister Karimunnesa, who learnt it entirely through her own effort, challenging custom and tradition. Much later, in 1911 when Rokeya established the Sakhawat Memorial School in Calcutta, she kept Bengali alongside English, Urdu, Persian, Qur'an recitation, home nursing, first aid, cooking, sewing and whatever else subjects were essential for Muslim girls to learn (qtd. in

[66]Mohammad A. Quayum, *The EssentialRokeya.* 2013, p 13.

Quayum 25)[67]. The medium of instruction in her school was Urdu, despite her commitment to writing in Bangla, she had to recognize the fact that her urban Calcutta school had to cater the *ashraf* class of the city. In a letter written to well-known Bengali writer Abul Fazal, Rokeya mentioned that out of 114 students, only two were Bengalis who had no interest in learning Bengali whatsoever. In 1917, six years after the inauguration of the school, the number of Bengali students increased to three.[68] Despite this, she continued offering the subject until she was eventually forced to abolish it in 1919.[69]

Rokeya was the most prominent contributors of the Bengali Muslim renaissance as she passionately inscribed Bengali language and writing but the time she started her school, it did not allow her to extend Bengali into the halls of her school. That is why, in 1924, when she wrote *Padmarag*, she portrayed a school that teaches all rational and standard subjects like Mathematics, Geography, History, Bangla, Physical and Life Sciences. Rokeya's nationalist agenda was also revealed through the point when she mentioned Tarini Bhavan did not teach the students British influenced Indian history or accept any financial aid from the British administration or any states pledging allegiances to the ruling colonial government.

A significant part of the novel deals with the everyday problems of a woman running a girls' school. The problems she mentioned was based on Rokeya's own experiences of setting up a girls' schools for the first time in Bhagalpur, Bihar and later in Calcutta. She had to close down her first school in Bhagalpur because Rokeya's step daughter and her chauvinistic husband could not stand the fact that Rokeya inherited money from her husband, which was not common in

[67]ibid. p 25.
[68]Motahar Hossain Sufi, *Begum Rokeya: Jibon O Shahitya [Begum Rokeya: Life and Works]* (Dhaka: Subarna), 2001, p 47.
[69]Mohammad A. Quayum, *The EssentialRokeya.* 2013, p. 26.

those days, as she explains in her essay "Griha,"[70] and was audacious enough to spend it on women's education, another unthought-of thing for Muslim community. The daughter and the husband became very hostile towards her, they started to spread rumors about Rokeya's character which eventually led Rokeya to close down the school and move to Calcutta permanently in 1910. The similar resentment later was found in *Padmarag*, against Tarini Sen and other school teachers. The only difference lay in the early experiences was in fiction Mrs. Sen had the courage to overcome, sometimes overlook external barriers while in reality Rokeya had to think about her future and close down the school there.

Coming back to Calcutta, on 13th March, 1911, Rokeya again set up the school in 13 Waliullah Lane only with eight female students. It was a daring move for a recently widowed, single woman. Still young in her twenties when she could easily think of remarriage, Rokeya chose to devote herself to alleviate the situation of women in her society. She knew that lack of education was the root cause of women's suffering. If women wanted to claim even half of the rights of what their counterpart were enjoying, they had to venture into the world of knowledge and remove their purdah of ignorance—quite similar to how Tarini Sen outlined her life after her husband's death. Like Rokeya, she too was the second wife of a much older lawyer, widowed early in life. After her husband's demise, at the age of twenty-one she founded Tarini Bhavan in defiance of the wishes of her relatives.

Rokeya's husband, Khan Bahadur Syed Sakhawat Hossain had a benevolent influence on Rokeya's life. He actively supported Rokeya to infect work after their marriage and encouraged her to publish essays and stories on women's issues. Even though she was happily married, Rokeya did not find fulfillment as a wife and a mother. She gave birth to two daughters but

[70]Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. "Griha" *Motichur* (Vol.1), 1904.

neither of them lived for more than five months. Her husband also passed away a few years after he was diagnosed with diabetes. His death left childless Rokeya utterly lonely in the wilderness of life. To fight her loneliness and to make her dream of working for Bengali women come true, she set up the school the following year. This phase of Rokeya's life was quite similar to the life of Saudamini in *Padmarag*. Saudamini also was the second wife of her husband. She was unfairly burdened with the reputation of being a cruel step mother. She unknowingly fell into traps laid by her husband's sister-in-law from his first wife couple of times. The scheming sister-in-law, the death of her stepdaughter by drowning, failure to rescue the daughter despite her best efforts, rumors and threats to leave her in laws repeatedly take us back to the struggling life of Rokeya herself.

Rokeya's own experience of administrating a school, visiting Hindu and Brahmo teachers to learn how to teach several students together and at the same time, gaining firsthand experience in classroom teaching, getting female students and retaining them, receiving resentments from parents at the slightest opportunity made her work quite difficult. Her school did not prepare girls just to be a *bhadramohila* or a perfect housewife of the newly-emerging *bhadralok*. Rather it aimed to prepare educated liberated women, just like teachers and students in Tarini Bhavan: independent in thought and movement, willing to take on any job and not confined only within ascribed feminine roles.*Padmarag* embodied a call for women to come out of their confines, take up and participate in the discourse of modernity that was right in front of them. Her call drew a world that stretched far beyond the border of Bengal, a call to characters like Koreshabi and Mrs. Helen Horace fairly resembled that.

Rokeya knew that to find emancipation for women it was important to address issues of oppression and education collectively. To have an organization where women could have public

opinion about their rights, she founded the Anjuman-i-Khawateen Islam (also known as Calcutta Mohamedan Ladies Association) in 1916. This organization extended her sphere of work, brought her in closer contact with underprivileged women. Like Tarini Bhavan, the objective of this organization was to offer financial assistance to the homeless poor widows, rescue and provide shelter to the physically or sexually abused wives, help the poor families to marry off their daughters and most importantly, run literacy programs among the slum women, including Hindu, Muslims and Christians.[71]

All her life Rokeya maintained consistency in her work; specially the way she linked male privilege with women's subordination made much more sense when we analyzed her essays and novels in the light of social and political context of her time. Her works, be they essays, short stories, novels or poems, brooked no cultural, religious or gender related barriers and upheld non-sectarian ethos that fostered development and equality. They were intended to break the shackles of wrongful imposition on women and restore their space for exercising choice, dignity and honor. Another dimension for composing such harsh but concrete literary pieces on women's life in seclusion was to help society realize women's full potential. She wrote what she observed, impartially and objectively, without any attempt to glorify tradition or religion. Rokeya's writing bore the spirit to criticize the flaws of society, she wrote more for the edification of her readers than for any literary purpose—and *Padmarag* wan essentially a testament to this.

[71]Mohammad A. Quayum, *The EssentialRokeya.* 2013, p. 63.

Chapter IV

Conclusion:Rokeya's counter effort to produce independent human beings, notbhadramohila

The traditional role of Muslim women changed greatly with the emergence of twentieth century. It gave their identity a new shape, therefore, their social personality transformed. Starting from the time of Faizunnessa (1834–1903) to Fazilatun Nessa (1905–1976), this transformation occurred in a wider cultural and political process. Bengal saw the rise of Muslim *bhadramohila,* a new class from Muslim community making their way to *bhadrashampraday*, a complex change in the social structure of colonial Bengal in terms of economic, religious and political ramifications.

The world of Muslim women during this time changed visibly. Rather than correcting the image that produced them as backward and silent in nationalist discourse and its historiography, women in this century located the discursive context in which this discourses were embedded. Their efforts to negotiate with the contemporary literature produced by Hindu and Bhahmo men and women to tell what it meant to be Bengali and Muslim at the same time, gave them the space that had been kept-up for dominant Hindu and Brahmo community earlier. They were no longer the "voiceless" dwellers of *andarmahal* (inner quarters of the house), their literary expressions published in different magazines and periodicals gave them new voices. They had now access to formal education, their role as a wife, as a mother and as an aware self, had new forms. The perception of domesticity and motherhood underwent modifications too, as did the ideology defining marriage, love and romantic relationship. As they were able to articulate better now, they started to express themselves through various literary expressions. This paved their way, in

limited measure though, to jobs and careers but only for the respectable ones at the beginning. The historical context that affected the lives of modern Muslim *bhadramohila* started to make shift from this era.

From the beginning of the twentieth century, the family structure of both upper and middle class started to break down. This alteration took place due to the advent of new sets of economic and ideological factors. From 1850s onwards, the social reformers of Bengal—Brahmo communities especially—deemed improving the condition of women a central feature of their reformist program. The change in their thought process about the woman question was the result of hegemonic acculturation. The enlightened men of Bengal who had received western education and absorbed the spirit of post enlightenment era, initiated the reform movement to establish new sets of values and social structures.[72] The wave of change also affected the way of controlling women's sexuality, as the structure of the traditional family in the *andarmahal* had by then took a new course. This new familial arrangement could be the result of the development of educated Muslim middle class that had prepared itself through "western" education and mid-level professionals under the colonial administration. However, neither upper class nor middle class women got access to economic or social role in public domain yet. Hence the separation between public and private sphere remained intact.

Muslim gentry of this era nurtured a desire to appear "modern," "aware," and "enlightened" with regards to the status of women. This awareness made them question existing familial structures and relationships—child marriage, polygamy, sexuality of women and subservience to their in laws, etc. These reforms brought changes to the set ideologies of women's role in family and

[72]Sonia Nishat Amin. *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939*. New York, 1996, p. 80.

outside the purview of their home. As family was the most important domain in a woman's life (perhaps the only one for the upper strata), the changes affected women profoundly and acted as the catalyst in producing the new *bhadramohila* who gradually replaced the traditional mistress of the upper class home.[73]Many families adjusted with the new settings and cultural order and eventually became a "home" for great transformation.

By the second decade, the society had somewhat accepted the fact that women would go out of the home for education. Many journals and periodicals indicated that female education started gaining popularity around or after 1911-12. Unlike the home, the colonial administration intervened in education and played a well-defined role to promote its politics of indifference. The secular apparatus of maintaining principle distance from all dominant religions was a major strategy for instituting this. And why the need for such strategy? For self-aggrandizement, to be politically correct. A state exercises policies like this when they wish to maximize their wealth and power. According to Bhargava, this kind of state is not motivated by values such as peace, liberty or equality, they are usually imperial and autocratic.[74] By practicing a policy of tolerance and neutrality towards different religious communities, British administration in fact extracted wealth, sanctioned power for themselves and created social order.[75]

Setting up schools, colleges, funds, scholarships for slowly developing local population was one good way of implementing such governmental policy. By 1939, they also recognized and managed two schools set up by Rokeya and Faizunnessa, they were recognized as full-fledged high schools open to female students of all religion.[76]Amin also mentioned that in those schools,

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[73]ibid. p 271.
[74] Rajeev Bhargava. "The Distinctiveness of Indian Secularism." (Delhi University Press), 2007, p 14.
[75] ibid. p 14
[76] Sonia Nishat Amin. *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939*. New York, 1996, p. 271.

vernacular education for Muslim girls meant Urdu as the medium of instruction, "but Bengali assumed importance as "*Sharif Hindustani Bibiyan*" (courteous Indian women) were transformed into Muslim *bhadramohila.*"[77] In a few number of schools like Bethune, Bidyamoyee, Eden, Khastagir, Bengali was the medium but English was given sufficient emphasis.[78] Daughters from respectable families came to study in those schools, that too according to their class and religion. In this situation, some of the Bengalicized Muslim women finally recognized themselves as the *bhadramohila* and soon became the stereotype of the middle class. Reviewing this situation, Shamsun Nahar in her *Rokeya Jibani* mentioned that a *bhadramohila* in 1937 wrote in *Jagaran*: "Those who were confined within walls even 20 years back, and thought in great sin to step outside are now tripping off to England in search of political rights…Wherever one turns one finds a quickened pulse coursing through the veins of Muslim women. We have arrived at the age of change" (qtd. in Amin 274).[79]

Brahmo Samaj (community) saw a major split in 1878, after which one of its renowned pastor Keshub Chanda Sen started to redefine the traditional Hindu ideals of womanhood in accordance with middle class Victorian values.[80] Many of the female writers of that time were in favor of those values and wanted to establish those for Bengali women too. Hence a rise of new ideology with its emphasis on companionship and efficient household management was expressed through their writing. This new ideology in Bengali context brought changes in the structures of family and in the image of *bhadramohila*. Scholars like Sonia Nishat Amin in her book has demonstrated this change with comments that reads, "The Hindu/Brahmo *bhadramohila* in her

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[77] ibid. p 272
[78] ibid. p 272
[79] ibid. p 274
[80] ibid. p 84

turn served as a model for the later Muslim *bhadramohila*. When the new generation of Bengal Muslims came upon the scene they found a model of women's reform already in existence."[81]

A statement like this coming from a scholar like her, startles us. Her book *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939* advocated the dominant narrative of Bengali Muslim women following the footsteps of Hindu/Brahmo women, because she narrated, Muslim women were not as much concerned as the Hindu or Brahmos were. This is why writing this paper seemed important to me. It is my very personal, small effort to identify what it was that made Muslim women exclusive from the nationalist discourse. Another important underlying concern of this study, therefore, is to read history from a different angel that illustrates difference/dissimilarities not as "lac" or "lag," but as indicative of the "complex genealogy of modern."[82]

With the turn of twentieth century, education generated a huge discourse. This discourse was carried out through different periodicals from 1903 onwards, but it deepened around 20s and 30s with the debate around female education. If going to school was the symbol of being a *bhadramohila*, literature was her medium of expression. At the later part of their literary journey Muslim female writers started writing in Bangla, modernized it in a manner that reflected their class, culture and heritage. Issues of religion and class complicated the divide between private and public and added more layers to the idea of modernity, or to be more specific, the idea of modern educated woman. The image of this specific woman was blurred with expressions like who could be the ideal Indian woman, how should she look like?

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[81] ibid. p 84

[82] Mahua Sarkar. *Visible Histories, Disappearing Women: Producing Muslim Womanhood in Late Colonial Bengal* (Durham: Duke University Press), 2008, p 2.

In the process of writing, women left behind important evidences of their social context. Their writing helped us understand the critical social issues that affected their lives. Through literature they could explore in an imaginary world, outside the realm of domestic life. So, the women who could not attend school for religious restrictions, were free to indulge themselves in writing. Many of the Muslim female writers were as prolific as the contemporary Hindu/Brahmo writers. Through literature women gained access to the formation of Bengal Renaissance.

If the non-fiction literature made us aware of the social and political history of nineteenth and twentieth century, fictions introduced us to the social psyche of the *bhadramohila* reflected in different literary expressions. Therefore, along with identifying the differences, as mentioned above, this paper also aimed to trace the simultaneous process of how *bhadramohila*, from both Hindu and Muslim communities, came into being and how she was constructed.

In a sharp departure from most reformist agendas, the widely respected and strongly criticized at the same time, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, one of the most cited reformers of her time firmly believed that in order to have emancipation and stand up to male oppression women needed to be educated and economically independent. She faced criticisms for writing essays and novels that questioned what it meant to be a woman, Muslim and Bengali at the same time. In her early works she brutally criticized contemporary social practices and religious dicta especially as they were related to women's position in society, in the later part of her career she seemed to rely on satire, even humor, to give voice to her criticism and to focus more on the substance of the needed reform.[83] Recently scholars have searched her works for signs of sympathy with the nationalist cause and commented on her commitment to a united approach to religious

[83] ibid. p 119.

communities.[84]Some people also tend to read her works as coming from a "genuine daughter" of Bengal or "an inheritor of the legacy of Bengali Renaissance" (qtd. in Sarkar 118).[85]

In her effort to prioritize women's issues, Rokeya criticized contemporary social system where religion framed some of the deepest interest of people. And to break through those interests she developed concerns that opposed unjust restrictions on morally indefensible inequalities and intercommunal domination and exploitation—features of political secularism in a nutshell. Going back to our understanding and Bhargava's theory, secularism has taught us that secularism is never anti-religious. The broad idea of secularism viewed the state in a positive role in the sense that it was intended to promote and benefit all religion equally. The main difference that Indian secularism possessed from other foreign models was, in India, it embodied a principle of critical respect for all religion. When I read Rokeya, I find the same nature of respect making its way to eliminate "differences due to religion."

She took this idea of secularism to pertain to the position of women precisely becauseshe cared for the values that secularism preached. She intervened, identified the filthiness that religion sanctioned for women, raised voice against them, interpreted according to her critical understanding of women's liberation, and finally expressed through literature. Bhargava's idea of distancing oneself from the subject and analyzing it from a neutral position had been reflected through Rokeya's journey of creating a society free of religious tyranny. With her religious tone intact, Rokeya time and again distanced herself from all religions and noticed the "wrongs" carefully. With her distant critical attitude, she understood that no "true" religion has the right to force it down the throats of others who do not believe it, nor does it give a ground to discriminate in the distribution of liberties and resources. If a state wants to be politically aware of its secular

[84] ibid. p 118.
[85] ibid. p 118.

implications, it has to distant itself from all religion and hold a critical understanding of respect for all.

To criticize any social or political system, "allegory" had been a popular genre for writers. It allowed them to criticize the system containing some form of subversive cover-up. A nation that was bursting with anticolonial sentiment, made allegory a famous form of writing naturally. It is noteworthy in this respects that Rokeya added the epithet "A fairy tale" under the title *Muktiphal* just as she titled Sultana's vision as "dream" in *Sultana's Dream.*[86] This novella tells us how Rokeya was different from her contemporaries in her thoughts and actions. While other contemporary writers were forming the outlook of a *bhadramohila* for their future, Rokeya was constructing the idea of a "*Mohila*," or "*Nari*," or just "*human beings*" who were aware of their potentials. The dominant historical narrative of the emergence of Muslim Bengali saw women as figures who came in the style of Hindu or Brahmo women. But Rokeya did not envision women like this. The attributes that every *bhadramohila* carried out were nothing like the characters similar to *Sister Sara*, *Siddika*, or essays like "Strijatir Abanati" and "Alankar or the Badges of Slavery". Nowhere in her essays, short stories or novels she talked about women involved in house work, nowhere she made them perfect partners for perfect men. The limitation that the new women dealt with, as an active agent of the nationalist discourse, was evident in Rokeya's writings as well.

The time when Rokeya published *Sultana's Dream* was of great significance. That was the time when on the one hand Muslim *bhadrashampraday* began to think of its own future through articles published in literary magazines, and on the other hand the discourse of forming Muslim

[86]Sonia Nishat Amin. *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939*. New York, 1996, p 223.

league on the basis of communal identity was going on. During that period Rokeya gave us the boundless image of how Bengali *nari* should look like, women who were not confined within any subscribed roles of gender or religion. Through this novella she showed us how a utopian world run by women would look like. A literary piece like this launched a fundamental attack on the sanctioned logic of gender roles structured by institutions like marriage, family and religion. In many of her essays, she referred "religion" as the universal tool to oppress women and foster gender inequality. To her surprise, Rokeya found out that Muslim intellectuals in their reform debate for quite a long time was unwilling to go beyond the customary claim that Islam granted enough rights to women.[87]

The theme of discrimination around gender roles and religion continued to shape her understanding of social and political structure of nineteenth century. Where Rokeya departed from other contemporary female writers was women's subordination never seemed to get less priority even during discussions about community and nation building—the timeliest issues of that era. She emphasized both the subjects with the same level of seriousness and made each other complementary for independence.

One of Rokeya's most cited essays, "Amader Abanati," had startled the liberal thinkers of that time regardless of class, community and gender after its publication. In 1905, when the essay was finally printed as part of Rokeya's first anthology *Matichur* (vol. I), it had already changed its title to "Strijatir Abanati" and lost first five paragraphs that attacked male agency for supporting women's subordination in the name of social construction of religion. She tackled difficult issues like differential rights of men and women supported by religious laws till her

[87]Mahua Sarkar. *Visible Histories, Disappearing Women: Producing Muslim Womanhood in Late Colonial Bengal* (Durham: Duke University Press), 2008, p 119.

final creation named "Narir Adhikar" (Women's Rights) but nowhere she talked about how a woman should become *bhadramohila* in her attitude just to fit in the contemporary narrative of ideal womanhood. Because where the image of *bhadramohila* characterized someone who is genteel, does not go out of home, always accompanied by their husbands, Rokeya built female characters who were who were self-reliant in their thoughts and actions, had economic independence; someone who was not "bhadra" to be specific.

After reading Rokeya one might think that she had a tendency to retreat herself from controversies created for critiquing male agency and religious laws at the beginning of her career. One good reason for not going into direct confrontation was she sensed the unpreparedness of liberal men of that time to confront either male implication in the social origins of norms or the challenges of legally reforming religious laws.[88]A reference to this assumption could be found in her essay "Griha":

> The male head of the family thinks that the house belongs to him, and the rest of the family are his dependents. We have visited a family in Malda several times, but we have never seen the head of the household, Kamil's wife happy. Her sad appearance attracts our quite sympathy. She is unhappy because her husband has been in a dispute with her sister's husband for several years. That's why Kamil's wife is not allowed to visit her sister…The house belongs to Kalim. Therefore, it is for him to decide who can or cannot enter there.[89]

To condemn characters like Kalim, in her writing she extensively focused on the problems of women's own liability to subordination to men. She developed female characters who were

[88]ibid. p 121.
[89]Mohammad A. Quayum, *The EssentialRokeya.* 2013, p. 116.

motivated and cherished desires for self-reliance. She realized that the lack of opportunity to engage in meaningful activity "produced a permanent state of idleness" among women and fed their independence on men.[90]In her words:

> Having lost all self-esteem, we no longer feel embarrassed to accept charity…Gradually, our minds even have become enslaved…The higher faculties of our minds, such as self-reliance, courage etc. have been nipped in the bud so often…that they no longer seem to germinate…Since we have lost the ability to differentiate between freedom and slavery…men have graduated from being landlords…to our "masters."[91]

Rokeya's critique of the image of *bhadramohila*—even of those who were educated but subservient to their husbands and liked to confined themselves within the four walls of homes—was particularly sharp in her discussion about the importance of jewelry in a woman's life. She wrote:

> And our beloved jewelry…these are [nothing but] …badges of slavery. Prisoners wear iron shackles… [and] we [lovingly] wear chains made of gold and silver… And how eager women are for [these signs of bondage]! As if life's happiness and enrichment depend solely on them… No matter how destructive alcohol is, the alcoholic does not want to give it up. Likewise, we feel proud when we bear these marks of slavery on our bodies.[92]

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[90]Mahua Sarkar. *Visible Histories, Disappearing Women: Producing Muslim Womanhood in Late Colonial Bengal* (Durham: Duke University Press), 2008, p 125.
[91]Mohammad A. Quayum, *The EssentialRokeya.* 2013, p. 213.
[92]ibid. p 277

Rokeya's comments produced an absolute furor, therefore, drew angry responses from educated women who characterized her as misguided, almost anti-feminine.[93]However, what they missed out was, Rokeya was trying to demystify the image of "ideal womanhood" which fostered narratives to compel women stuck in zenana, ignore their self-esteem and aspirations, and wear jewelry as a sign of devotion to their husband in the name of love. Through this, she was making an effort to communicate the idea that women's willing submission to male domination yields to loss of control over their own body and sexuality.

To understand what it meant to have self-reliance and aspirations, Rokeya emphasized female education all along. She never saw education as an end in itself, or only as a way to develop women's familial role, but as a path to open the doors for economic independence. The path that was blocked for women all along as a means to wage work. There were two arenas—the economic and sexual—where liberal Muslim *bhadralok* could not change their outlook. They held on to the well spread traditional narrative.

In her effort to popularize female education, in *Sultana's Dream* Rokeya reiterated this invariably linking prosperous society to good education. While validating the need for education in order to produce an enlightened woman, she promoted the study of agriculture, science and horticulture, which indicated how Rokeya envisioned her "home" in her mind and how far the reality stood.

Female education strengthened the debate between purdah and public participation, for instance school attendance for girls. The subject of education was thus tied to sexuality. Contemporary orthodox discourse affirmed that female education outside the house would bring in western

[93]Mahua Sarkar. *Visible Histories, Disappearing Women: Producing Muslim Womanhood in Late Colonial Bengal* (Durham: Duke University Press), 2008, p 125.

ideology at home and would threaten the order of domestic environment.[94] Among public discourses like this, *Sultana's Dream* drew a different picture. This novella voiced out the possibilities educated women could bring in public life, making not just her community but the whole nation free of disorder.

Now if we look at Rokeys's only novel *Padmarag*, we would find discussions taking new molds. *Padmarag* contained a narration of daily life in Tarini Bhavan where women of all creeds have found refuge and a life of dignity. Even though many of her writings were concerned with the role of women in the domestic sphere, *Padmarag* exposed a life outside their home that gave them economic independence. This "bhavan" was the utopia for many women who read the novel after its publication. The contemporary periodical *Samyabadi* reviewed *Padmarag* and praised Rokeya's vision, the harmony she portrayed among Hindu, Muslim, Brahmo and Christian community (qtd. in Amin 224).[95] The editor requested every men and women to read the book.

The changing notion of companionship, women's search for "home" and differences between husband and wife in terms of mentality were the main themes of this novel. A wide spread notion of only Muslim women being the subject of oppression, specially by their father and husband was deflated here.It was not a problem of only one community, Muslim, Hindu, Cristian women of all class and caste went through this. This novel also illustrated that although a woman may live in a household, expend most of her life working for the people living in it and provide the labor required for its upkeep, not always the home belongs to her forever.

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[94]Sonia Nishat Amin. *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939*. New York, 1996, p. 176.

[95]ibid. p 224

Anyone who thought Rokeya was only a modest liberal in her words and actions, will have to do some rethinking and read her harsh critique about the liberal ideology demonstrated by Bengali *bhadralok*. However, this does not mean she was in favor of conservative or took anti-liberal stand. Her criticism of orthodoxy was ruthless. But her thoughts and vision could identify the patriarchal loopholes hidden in liberalism. That is why she could create characters like Saudamini, Mrs. Horace or Usha's husbands in *Padmarag*—middle class, literate but egoistic subjugators. *Padmarag* was Rokeya's attack on the unattractive qualities that men of all religion possess.

This novel was a harsh criticism of the image of *bhadramohila*. She did not create characters who came in the style of Brahmo or Hindu women to make perfect households. However, they were large in number and comprised a significant part of the society. They overcame the barriers of religion and community and worked for the uplift of other women. Their images were the personification of the limitations that Partha Chatterjee mentions in his essay—a misfit between new woman and new patriarchy.[96] Note also that this novel condemned the easy life of upper and middle class women who had the luxury to idle in seclusion. In other words, her criticism was at a certain normative vision of femininity—docile, inactive and ultimately serving to strengthen male dominance at home and in the world…may be even internalized…but was in fact underwritten by middle and upper class privileges.[97]

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[96]Partha Chatterjee. "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question" *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (New Delhi: Kali for Women), 1989.

[97]Mahua Sarkar. *Visible Histories, Disappearing Women: Producing Muslim Womanhood in Late Colonial Bengal* (Durham: Duke University Press), 2008, p 123.

Within the context of colonial rule and anti-colonial nationalist discourse at its peak, the binary of tradition and modernity created their own space where the women of Bengal stepped in with multiple guise. They assumed new identities and new roles every day. The new space was not composed of only one dominant class or community; it was comprised of British administration, Hindu and Brahmo reformers, Muslim intelligentsia, and most importantly the women of the nation—all contributed in creating a society that was trying to bring in progressive discourses to legitimize their motive. The colonial government maintained principle distance from all religion yet, very strategically, they penetrated in politics, economy, religion and literature. They also breached in the body and mind of middle class households, therefore, Bengal saw the emergence of *bhadrashampraday*. The Hindu and Brahmo reformers took the responsibility to improve their women's condition, raised their prestige in the colonial eyes by facilitating in their works and took most of the opportunities that the administration provided them. They were almost successful in leaving a history that makes Muslim community look weak, backward and invisible. Just when they thought they were being successful in their motive, emerged Muslim intelligentsia, to be more specific—reformers like Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain.

No other Muslim writers before or after Rokeya addressed these issues as boldly as she did. Indeed, as one commentator pointed out fifty years after Rokeya's death, no contemporary Hindu or Brahmo woman is known to have written such powerfully critical essays (qtd. in Sarkar 126).[98] She took her pen to identify the pseudo-progressive outlook of the Hindu and Brahmo construction of the term *bhadramohila*. Instead of trying to rectify the "victim image," she wrote within the discursive context that made Muslims look submissive, only religious, and silent. Other authors who were committed to the idea of women's liberation and their awakening, could

[98]ibid. p 126.

not be courageous enough to attain the critical consciousness that Rokeya embodied. Thus she wrote, "We have to establish that [we are not slaves]. To achieve equality with men we will do whatever is needed of us. If we have to earn [our own] … livelihood… we will do that also… why should we not earn? Do we lack hands, or feet, or intelligence? What don't we have?"[99]Rokeya often linked women's independence with their equality with men. She desired to see women as self-reliant, confident and an economically independent part of a society. Her writings aimed to encourage women to embrace a new image of womanhood and prepare themselves for the coming of age.

[99]Mohammad A. Quayum, *The EssentialRokeya.* 2013, p. 251.

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