

Adolescence Denied: The Life and Works of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain

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Abstract : *This essay is an attempt to examine feminine identity, contoured and marked by societal embargoes, from the standpoint of personal reflective writings. Drawing from the tenuous yet inescapably important linkages between literature and psychology, it is an attempt to draw insights from the life trajectory of a radical feminist writer of the early twentieth century Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. Her writings embody caustic criticism of religion and patriarchy for their connivance in barring women from education and employment. Strict purdah (veiling or seclusion), marriage at the age of sixteen and early widowhood surmised the early life of Rokeya. However, she emerged stronger as she set up a girls' school and also published various essays, stories and novels around the theme of women's education. This paper will seek to give a brief outline of Rokeya's own life and discuss some of her writings and the role conflicts of Rokeya's life as is apparent in the case of purdah. While Rokeya was the staunchest opponent of purdah, she continued to observe it in her life and her school. However, her writings contain sometimes a virulent criticism of the tradition. The paper will also seek exemplars for the focal areas of investigation of the volume. Thus, the paper will examine the condition of girls, especially adolescent girls, in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century India. It will examine the identity and role conflicts faced by girls and women as depicted in Rokeya's work.*

Keywords: *Adolescence, women, education, identity, voice*

“Was there ever any good work accomplished in this benighted world without someone having to take the pains for it? The great Galileo was put in a lunatic asylum for saying 'the earth moves.' Which honest man has been able to speak his mind in this world without being condemned? So I say do not listen to what society says. In this world, good words or deeds are not appreciated in the present times.” (Hossain, as cited in Akhtar & Bhowmik, 2008, p.8)

The extract here sums up the non negotiable stance of a voice offering staunch resistance to what is normative. The act of challenging the accepted standards of knowledge or the accepted societal roles is often quashed with equal virulence. The paper seeks to investigate the life trajectory and personal reflective writings of one such voice, for whom agency surfaces in life choices and in the act

of writing. Here, quite interestingly, the intersections with developmental psychology are significant: A distinguishing facet being the marked absence of adolescence as a life stage manifested in the exploration of Rokeya's personal reflective writings.

Adolescence as a life stage has been increasingly recognized in its contextual variations. Valence has been accorded to individual engagements emerging from a variety of life situations. Departing from the accepted singularity of characteristics marking adolescence, the dynamics of difference has been recognized. (Brown, Larson & Saraswathi, 2004). Deriving from this theoretical perspective the attempt in this paper is to delve into the chiaroscuro borne out of the images of silence and *purdah* at certain times in Rokeya's life and the images of subversion,



characteristic of the insurgent female characters who inhabit her *personal reflective writings*. I also seek to delve into the tensions created by social mores and typecast images of women in the analysis as it has a bearing upon forging a sense of self. Psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar's work in the area of the identity development of women in India is seminal for our understanding of the life and times of Rokeya and will be operationalized for the purpose of the analysis.

A Brief Look at the Lives of Nineteenth Century Bengali Women

If we look at Indian history, particularly the history of nineteenth century Bengali women in India, we find that adolescence as a life stage wasn't acknowledged by the society. Upper caste girls led extremely protected lives in the *antahpur* or *zenana*, the feminine private quarters of the home which were physically segregated from the public and male spaces. Limited space and poor ventilation made the *zenana* vulnerable to diseases. The distinction, however, wasn't just physical but socio-cultural as it signified distinct spheres of influence (Karlekar, 1993, p. 48) for the *antahpur* was ruled by the *ginni* or the oldest female member of the family who shouldered the responsibility of socialising every new female entrant.

The lives of girls and women revolved around cooking and keeping *bratas* for the safety of the men of the house which was geared towards inculcating in them virtues of chastity and obedience. Child marriage meant that the girls entered adulthood even before they were ready for it physically or mentally. Toiling hard in an unknown home, their only hope for relief was giving birth to the male heir of the family which meant teenage pregnancies with the inherent risk of miscarriages or the death of the young mother. Polygamy among certain Hindu Brahmins and Muslims and *sati* among the Hindus were other traditions detrimental to the status of the nineteenth century Bengali women. Thus, very early on in life these young girls were socialised into aspiring to achieve the ideal of womanhood as set by "Sita" (referred here generically to signify chaste and virtuous woman). The intersectionality of gender

and cultural practices conspired to prevent among young girls manifestation of many important features of adolescence such as development of individual thought, decision making, independence from adult (read here as male) authority or the freedom of creative expression. It also denied young girls the phase of moratorium accorded by adolescence.

Girls were also denied education on account of two fears. One, it was said that the girls who studied would become widows and second and perhaps greater fear was the fear of sexual licentiousness as an educated girls could send and receive letters to liaise with men. Educating women had no economic benefits and it was also feared that educated women would demand their rights and overthrow the shackles of patriarchy. Muslim women received rudimentary knowledge enough for reading the Koran but none to exalt or develop a critical mind. With time, educated Bengali babus in the administration felt the need for educated companionate wives. Brahmo reformers became the first to extend education to women but its nature, content and mode was decided by men who too schooled women into playing a subservient role to men.

The Life of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain

Rokeya was born in 1880 into a Zamindar family in the Rangpur district (in present day Bangladesh). Her father Zahiruddin Muhammad Abu Ali Saber (?-1913) was a learned man who knew Arabic, Persian, Urdu and English. However, he was strict and orthodox and kept the women in the family, including his four wives, one of them a European, under strict *purdah*. Nothing much is known about Rokeya's mother Rahatunessa Saber Chaudhurani. Most probably, she spent her entire life in *purdah*. Rokeya's childhood, too, was spent in strict *abarodh* (extreme form of *purdah* or seclusion). She had to conceal herself from other women too, from the age of five onwards. An incident from her childhood is sure to arouse a mix of humour and pathos in the mind of the readers. When Rokeya was five, her sister in law's maids came visiting prompting her to run about the house in order to conceal herself. She reached the attic and hid there.



Every morning, till the maids left, her *ayah* would take her to the attic and leave her there. She would ask her little cousin brother for a drink of water or food if he came to her playing. However, being small, the kid would often forget the assigned chore. Bharati Ray (2002) writes that such childhood experiences concerning *abarodh* made her bitter and “created a resentment [in her] that lasted all her life and generated her most resolute opposition to the system.” (p.20) From the standpoint of twenty first century theories in child psychology one can understand the aberrative childhood that young girls including Rokeya spent, devoid of the freedom of mobility or carefree conduct.

Having an orthodox father meant that she couldn't go to school. However, unlike her father, her brother Ibrahim Saber turned out to be progressive. He taught both Rokeya and her elder sister Karimunnessa. According to Shamsunnahar Mahmud,

“Their father disapproved highly of Rokeya's learning English or Bengali. Brother and sister would wait for nightfall...would gather their books, and as darkness engulfed the world, a dim light would be lit in the youngster's rooms. By candlelight the brother taught while the sister drank deep at the fountain of knowledge.” (as cited in Srivastava, 2003, p. 87)

Her brother got Rokeya married to Syed Sakhawat Hossain (1858-1909) in the year 1896, at the age of sixteen. She had a brief but relatively happy marriage with Hossain who supported not only her education but also valued her literary pursuits. Rokeya's babies died quite early denying her the joys of motherhood. Additionally she devoted a major part of her life nursing her diabetic husband. After the death of Sakhawat Hossain, Rokeya's step-daughter and her husband forced her out of her home. She set up a girls' school in Bhagalpur in 1909 with the money bequeathed to her by her husband and called it the Sakhawat Memorial School. To make the school a success, she studied the techniques at other schools and modified them to apply in her school. Running the school wasn't easy for her and often she ran into trouble with the conservative elements of society. Later she moved

the school to Calcutta.

Rokeya started publishing in 1902 and continued to do so till the end of her life. Her writings invariably revolved around the degraded condition of Indian women. Rokeya set up the Calcutta branch of Anjuman-i-Kahawatin-i-Islam (AKI) in 1916 which propagated Muslim girls' education. She died in 1932 while working for her school and was buried at Sodepur. Her dream of the school continuing even after she was dead has become true. The school got government aid and is today known as the Sakhawat Memorial Govt. Girls' High School with 1300 students on its rolls and a faculty of 60.

The Personal Reflective Writings of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain

The term *personal reflective writings* has been adapted from Karlekar's work (1993) and refers to the personal narratives and exhortatory literature which ensconces within it novels, short stories, diaries, letters, essays, autobiographies, poetry, memoirs and the like. Rokeya, according to Bagchi, “was a boldly controversial writer on women's emancipation” (as cited in Ray, 2002, p.75) and her essays show that she could be “Remorseless...in exposing women's oppression and the machinations of a patriarchal society that indoctrinated them into defending and justifying their own subjugation.” (Bagchi, 2005, Introduction) A case in point is Rokeya's “Sultana's Dream” (1905). Published in 1905, in the Indian Ladies' Magazine, co- edited by Sarojini Naidu, “Sultana's Dream” is a feminist utopian fiction about a fictional land which is ideal for women. Rokeya describes an interesting incident, documenting her husband's response to the draft of “Sultana's Dream.”

“We were then stationed in Bhagalpore. My husband was away on tour, and I was left alone at home. He returned after two days and asked me what I had been doing during his absence. I then showed him the draft of Sultana's Dream, which I had just written. He promptly read through the whole book without even bothering to sit down, and remarked, “A Terrible Revenge!” (Ray, 2002, p. 2)



What prompted Syed Sakhawat Hossain's remark was perhaps the subversive nature of the text wherein the protagonist Sultana visited Ladyland where women roamed openly in the streets while the men lived in the mardanas (as opposed to *zenanas* for women). Women's education was valued and they were teachers and scientists and so on. It had universities for women and no woman could marry before the age of twenty one. Ruled by a queen, the place was free of crime and used modern science and technology in order to provide comfort to its citizens with amenities like air cars, solar power to cook food, irrigation facilities etc without causing any harm to the environment. The Ladyland didn't trade with any country which kept their women in seclusion. "Men, we find, are rather of lower morals and so we do not like dealing with them." (Bagchi, 2005, p. 14) The very title of the story and its setting in the dream of the protagonist makes it apparent to the readers that the utopia would perhaps remain an unfulfilled wish. Writing in the first person, Rokeya directed virulent criticism at patriarchy inverting the gender roles completely making the readers feel the full impact of the injustice towards them. In a sharp contrast with the lives of Bengali women of the times including Rokeya's own life, the girls in Ladyland are provided with education and delayed marriage allowing them the freedom to experience and explore life choices in a state of moratorium. Moreover, in her writings we find an outlet of the adolescent dreams that her educated mind envisioned for the freedom of women.

Several other of Rokeya's shorter works such as essays and sketches on the subjugation of women contain sarcasm and unalloyed criticism directed at institutions of patriarchy responsible for the subjugation of women. In "The Creation of Man," a group of women encounter Tvasti, the God of Creation. They first mistake him to be a spy of the religious men who lived nearby, a device used by the writer to highlight the suspicion in which religious men held single women living alone. They ask him about the materials used for the creation of men. He replies, "I used the poison-fang of snakes; including the root to make teeth. To make the hand and toe nails, I used tiger claws. I used a donkey's brain, entirely to fill the brain cells

of men." and "I took heat from fire to create women, I used only a piece of burning coal to make men." (Akhtar & Bhowmik, 2008, p. 31) Such caustic writing often led to excision of passages from her writings in further publications even in progressive journals.

Rokeya is also critical of women holding them responsible for their own subjugation. First published in Nabanoor in 1904 as "Our Degradation", "The Degradation of Indian Women" is an excised version of the earlier essay. Herein Rokeya criticises women for happily wearing emblems of slavery (jewellery and ornaments) especially those who wore so much gold that restricted their mobility. For them she writes "The body is like an inert lump, the mind more so." (Akhtar & Bhowmik, 2008, p. 11) Criticizing the over protectiveness of men she writes, "They imprison us in the cages of our hearts, depriving us of the ray of knowledge and pure air, thereby pushing us towards slow death." (Akhtar & Bhowmik, 2008, p. 9)

"The Worship of Women" is a piece of writing in the form of conversation between four fictitious women namely Jamila Begum, wife of a famous lawyer, Amena Begum, a widow, Kusumkumari Ray and Prabha Chatterjee, a Brahmo. The writer takes on the role of Mrs. Chatterjee in the conversational piece on the position of women in Hindu and Muslim society. Reading a piece from the magazine she says that the Hindu religion does treat its women with honour sparking off a debate among women who cite examples from ancient texts to assert the contrary. For example, Khana was a fourth century AD astrologer whose knowledge outshone that of her husband and her father in law and she was invited to the court of King Vikramaditya. On the way, her husband cut off her tongue, "rewarding" her with death. The women also condemn the present times for the practices of child marriage and *purdah*. They can't decide on who's the creator of *purdah*, Hindu or Muslim, however, what they do know is that women can't leave *purdah* until men learn to be decent and courteous. Here Rokeya hits out at men and presents an alternative to the hitherto misogynistic representations of women.



A Brief Commentary

In order to understand the life of Rokeya for the present paper, Sudhir Kakar's examination of the psycho social matrix that informs the development of feminine identity in India is quite pertinent. Kakar (2007, 2011) asserts that Indian society exhibits a preference for the birth of a male child in the family as opposed to that of a female one for ritual and economic reasons. While there is a lot of social devaluation of girls, love by the mother helps boost their self esteem and girls are also treated as Lakshmi which are some redeeming aspects of their lives. Meanwhile, women in the family take it upon themselves to socialise the young girls into female roles and also provide them with a refuge from the patriarchal sphere of influence. It is in this situation, then, that the construction and circumscription of the identities of Indian women takes place.

Besides the social diktats there are ideals of womanhood enshrined in the mythologies and upheld by the society at large. Kakar also emphasises that "...her identity is wholly defined by her relationship to others...

First, she is a daughter to her parents.

Second, she is wife to her husband (and daughter-in-law to his parents).

Third, she is a mother to her sons (and daughters)." (Kakar, 2007, pp.56-57)

In late childhood, a deliberate inculcation of the feminine roles and virtues starts taking place and the Sita ideal of womanhood (to be obedient, chaste and virtuous) is upheld for the young girls to aspire to. Thoroughly trained in the Sita ideal at a young age, the young girl prepares to get married. However, the "...whole process of feminine adolescent development is normally incomplete at the time an Indian girl gets married and is transplanted from her home into the unfamiliar, initially forbidding environment of her in-laws..." and "...she must resolve the critical issues of feminine identity in unfamiliar surroundings without the love and support of precisely those persons whom she needs most." (Kakar, 2011) Wifehood is characterised by serving the marital family endlessly while being looked upon with

suspicion as the source of discord in the family and in the hope of giving birth to a male heir which helps raise the status of the young daughter in law. Motherhood brings about an improvement in the lives of women and provides them with a reason (the child) to centre their existence around. Thus, the psycho-social reality of Indian women and the development of feminine identity in India are circumscribed by relational identity in each phase. As far as adolescence is concerned, according to Kakar (2011) "... the identity struggle of the adolescent Indian girl is confounded by the coincidence of marriage, the abrupt and total severance of the attachments of childhood, and her removal from all that is familiar to a state of lonely dependency upon a household of strangers" (p 76). As we have seen above, the Bengali women's lives followed the same trajectory as outlined by Kakar.

If one looks at Rokeya's life then it too followed the orbit of the development of feminine identity as delineated by Kakar (2011), upto the death of her husband. What followed then was a period of intense negotiation for an identity which was more than mandated by patriarchy. It was the identity of not just a woman but that of a school teacher, a writer, a feminist and women's activist. Her works are symptomatic of the fact that the socially unacknowledged stage of adolescence found a mental outlet in the form of her writings characterised by deep rooted utopian formulations and a zeal for reformation. Adolescence is also a period of rebellion and Rokeya through her works rebels against the conservative Muslims and all religious leaders bent upon shackling the women to the hearth by fashioning utopias of real and fantastic natures.

In her works, Rokeya has argued for an identity for women which goes beyond the relational identity of daughter, wife and mother. While her contemporaries were singing paeans, in a manner of speaking, in the favour of education as it helped women run their homes better, Rokeya exhorted women to get educated in order to earn for themselves and become independent. Sister Sara of Ladyland in "Sultana's Dream" and Siddika/Zainab of *Padmarag* (Rokeya's famous and partly autobiographical novel) shun the foreclosed identity offered by nineteenth century and early

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twentieth century Bengali patriarchy. What we witness in Rokeya's works are women characters, who though victims of their circumstances, have taught themselves to rise above it and forged a deep sense of companionship with other other downtrodden women. Her female characters don't stay in the "character" prescribed by patriarchy. Rather they devote themselves to the service of humankind attaining self fulfilment along the way.

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