

BOOK REVIEWS

A Feminist Foremother: Critical Essays on Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. Edited by Mohammad A. Quayum and Md. Mahmudul Hasan. Hyderabad: Orient Black Swan, 2017, pp. 312. ISBN 978-93-86296-00-9.

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A Feminist Foremother: Critical Essays on Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, edited by Mohammad A. Quayum and Md. Mahmudul Hasan,

each of whom contributes three chapters in the compilation, is a forthright attempt to cast a glowing light on the life and the works of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932), one of the earliest feminist writers of Muslim Bengal. It is, as the editors claim, the first such attempt in book form to bring her work to wider critical attention. The contributors to the book unanimously believe that Rokeya's works deserve much more research attention in terms of their literary merits and significance. The biographical and critical essays in the book focus on her contribution to the women's rights movement in the region. A few chapters in the book highlight the challenges and constraints that Rokeya faced in her efforts to ameliorate the condition of women through education and participation in public life. I believe this critical work on Rokeya will renew scholarly interests in her writing.

Rokeya's life was beset with multiple trials and tribulations, owing to premature deaths in her family as well as to stiff opposition to her reformist activism from various external forces. Braving all the difficulties and fighting against all threats, she carved out a career as a phenomenally successful educationist and social reformer. More importantly, her contribution as a feminist writer to emancipating women from domestic seclusion is indelible from the literary and feminist history of the South Asian subcontinent. Rokeya's courage and determination manifested most obviously in her defiance of both patriarchal and colonial structures.

Preceded by an exhaustive introduction by the editors, the 13 essays in the book broach diverse facets of Rokeya's life, activism and literary works. The book is organized in such a way that a reader even without much prior knowledge of Rokeya and her work can easily appreciate her writings and her tenacious campaign for women's education and emancipation. Some of the chapters examine her literary works and her contribution to Bangla literature as well as the feminist movement in the region. Others touch on the historical, colonial, political, literary, cultural and communal backdrop in which Rokeya waged a battle to emancipate women.

In his first two chapters, Mohammad A. Quayum offers the central and much required information and arguments about the literary and historical background of Rokeya's works and her embrace of Bengali Renaissance spirit. Rokeya was, he argues, the first Renaissance-

inspired Muslim woman in taking the gauntlet to improve women from their cloistered confinement by educating them and by writing for them. In addition, these chapters direct the reader's attention to her efforts in persuading men to give women their rightful share of freedom and education as enshrined in Islam. Quayum provides a historical picture of the Muslim community (pressed at bay by both colonial apparatuses and the Hindus' capitulation to British colonialism), the history of veiling women, and the extreme adoption of *pardah* in Muslim society. In this context, Rokeya pitched her campaign against men's subjugation of women and for women's freedom. She was not only most unforgiving towards the Muslim men who deprived women of their human rights and for unchecked practices of unbridled polygamy and child marriage, but she also critiqued women for being the silent victims of patriarchy.

In "Contextualizing Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's Work" and "Marginalization of Muslims Writers", Md. Mahmudul Hasan gives a survey of the contribution of Muslim women to various arenas of sociocultural and political life in South Asia, beginning from Razia Sultana (1205-1240) to Rokeya. At the same time he wonders how Muslim (women) writers like Rokeya were marginalized and, more shockingly, not included in anthologies like Kumari Jayawardena's *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (1986). This anti-Muslim bias is deplorable when it besmirches even an effort of producing literary anthologies. Hasan then commemorates Rokeya's intellectual battle against the male (both Hindu and Muslim) authorities who denied women education and freedom. In the same vein, he discusses her English writings and makes persuasive arguments for them to be included in literary anthologies and for their feminist merits to be recognised.

Apart from the writings on biographical, historical, colonial, communal, social and political issues pertaining to Rokeya's time and career, there is a number of chapters in *A Feminist Foremother* that vouchsafe the literary worthiness of Rokeya's works. Mahua Sarkar's "Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and the Gender Debate among Muslim Intellectuals in Late Colonial Bengal", Bharati Ray's "A Feminist Critique of Patriarchy: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain", Sarmistha Dutta Gupta's "From Sakhawat Memorial School to Rokeya Hall: A Journey Towards Language as Self-respect", Hasan's "The Private-Public Dichotomy in Rokeya's Work", Fayeza Hasanat's "Sultana's Utopian

Awakening: Ecocritical Reading of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream*" and Quayum's "Crossing Borders: Hindu-Muslim Relations in the Works of Rabindranath Tagore and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain", to mention a few, relate Rokeya's works to literary, nationalistic and theoretical contexts of her time.

Gupta takes up Rokeya's awareness of and contribution to the Bangla language and extends these to the language movement of 1952. "As Urdu was not", Rokeya realized, "the mother tongue for the majority of Muslims in Bengal, there was a crying need to educate women bound by severe purdah and other strictures in their own language" (p. 75). By giving an assessment of how from Rokeya's spirit Bengali (Muslim) women became gradually open to education, Gupta identifies the spirit of "language as self-respect" and implies the role of the spirit in the Language Movement in 1952, a spirit that finally became attuned with the spirit of freedom in 1971 (p. 66). I believe that Rokeya scholars can further work on this supposition: Rokeya's sacrifice and efforts to establish and include – in curriculum – Bangla as an academic subject and thus salvaging from the clutch of Urdu played a significant role in the emergence of Bangladesh.

In "The Private-Public Dichotomy in Rokeya's Work," Hasan discusses gender polarity, gender hierarchy, women's marginalization, alienation, domestic seclusion and extreme *purdah* practices prevalent during Rokeya's time. Rokeya's and her female characters' private experiences are detailed in the narrative technique of *Bildungsroman*. Giving a parallel comparative picture of social realism in 'Nurse Nelly' and utopian nirvana in *Sultana's Dream*, Hasan evinces how Rokeya/Nayeema, incarcerated in the patriarchal cage, wished their world to be. Then again the metaphor of journey in respect of Nayeema and Sultana is so poignant, cogent and significant that feminist writers and theorists, especially those from the sub-continent, can explicate further. His references to verses from the Qur'an are highly enlightening and can be used as convincing evidences against (extreme) *purdah*.

Hasanat's chapter "An Ecocritical Reading of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream*", though abstract at some points, explores ecocriticism in the novella. Nature is not uninterruptedly magnanimous in androgenic normativity. Men are frequently intimidated by the caprice of nature. In Ladyland, however, the whole system works as planned by

the Queen and other female politicians in harmonious collaboration with unstinting nature. Nature demands balance and justice. Its disregard of the patriarchal matrix insinuates a kind of natural retaliation against men's stricture towards women. If women take control of science and technology, nature can be harnessed in such a way as to create a world with an eco-friendly atmosphere for all. This interpretation calls for a reference to Akira Kurosawa's film *Dreams* (1990), which has somewhat a similar take on the environment. Both the novella and the film unfold themselves on dream sequences and show nature's either amicable abundance or hostile non-cooperation in keeping with men's approach to it. The film's ending, which shows the funeral procession of an old woman in which her relatives, instead of mourning, celebrate the woman's successful and happy completion of her lifespan, can be compared to the happiness and serenity of Ladyland.

The chapter "Crossing Borders: Hindu-Muslim Relations in the Works of Rabindranath Tagore and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain" contains Quayum's introspective reflections upon the works of both writers. Leaving aside the apparent differences like Tagore being "more of a romantic writer and idealist" while Rokeya "a practical thinker", their approaches to the syncretic relationship between the Hindus and Muslims, inimical to each other in all normative observance in the then social and political milieu, are, more or less, the same (p. 237). Tagore's benignant portrayal of Muslims characters, though relatively few in his oeuvre, can give off his approving attitude towards the Muslims. Tagore's syncretistic attitude, invested in a few characters like Rahamat in "Kabuliwala", the Nawab's daughter in "Durasa" and Habir Khan in "Musalmanir Golpo", is strong enough to cleanse the hidebound views of those critics who hold some misgivings about him concerning the scope of Muslim characters in his works.

Despite the inevitability of *A Feminist Foremother* as a reference work on Rokeya, one limitation of the anthology is that all contributors have unanimously used Abdul Quadir's edited compilation of Rokeya's works. In fact, there is another popular compilation, *Begum Rokeya Rachanabali* (2000), edited by Mustafa Mir with an illuminating introduction and an important essay on Abdul Quadir's effort in compiling Rokeya's works. Also, none of the authors refer to poet Golam Mostafa's "Dursahoshika" (The Undaunted), an ageless poem of more than 100 lines on Rokeya postfixed to Mustafa Mir's edited

compilation. It is perhaps the first literary acknowledgement on a grand scale by a contemporary of Rokeya.

Some of the writers refer to *Sultana's Dream* as a utopian novella. Can the novella also not be labeled as futuristic in the sense that Ladyland is being, in one way or another, a practically observed scenario where women are seen to take leadership control of amicably governing familial, political and corporate spheres? A comparative essay between Tagore's and Rokeya's works has magnified the endeavour of the complication. Another essay of that nature between the works of Rokeya and Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976), one of the greatest humanitarian, egalitarian and feminist poets of Bangla literature could suit very much with the scope of the book. In fact, Nazrul's poem 'Nari' (Woman) is arguably a direct inspiration from Rokeya's works. It is interesting that some lines of *Motichur I* and "Nari" read almost the same except for the metrical rhymes of the poem.

Feminist literary criticism and gender studies have proved to be the most durable and far-reaching in the history of literary theory. Over 50 years all genres of literature have been punctually informed and sieved by feminist theory. It is untenable that Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and her feminist works are yet to be duly recognized in feminist and gender studies. *A Feminist Foremother* is believed to make amends for the past neglect shown to Rokeya. The editors of, and contributors to, this compilation deserve profuse commendation for their collective effort to appraise critically Rokeya and her works.