

The Muslim Society of Bengal: Reflections in the Writings of Begum Rokeya

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Abstract

Graceful in appearance, adorable greatness, memorable for excellence, widely recognised and respected Begum Rokeya, despite being a woman, was virtually a human being of par excellence, an icon for the people of Bengal. She was a role model from the point of view of literary productions, social reforms, and far-sightedness in the spread of her thoughts. Begum Rokeya was self-educated, and a creative author. She acquired mastery both in Bengali and English languages and she was equally fluent and artistically playful in expression. By way of assimilating social ideas, she reproduced them in her inimitable style.

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The contemporary Bengali Muslim society during the time of Begum Rokeya was in a state of stagnation. The rich heritage of Mughal India went into oblivion because of the historical inevitability. The socio-economic and political situation during the period under survey bred forth gloom coupled with barrenness and unproductivity in the field of education. Muslim society was steeped in prejudices and orthodox notions. Under such circumstances, she took a vow to disseminate the fruits of learning and education, the must for the awakening of a backward society, in Muslim society. Its offshoot was the margins of her cultivation of literature with that of her social work. In fact, during the period of darkness, Begum Rokeya was a torch-bearer. Begum Rokeya's creative literary genius was a revelation of herself and also the trials and tribulations of her life and not a blind imitation of others. She wrote very little, her first written essay was 'Pipasa' (1902) and the last one was 'Narir Adhikar' (1932). Besides, *Motichur Vol-I* (1904),

Sultana's Dream (1905), *Motichur Vol-II* (1922), *Padmarag* (1924), *Aborodhbashini* (1931) etc.

¹ came out successively. Her other literary productions included numerous poems, short stories, witty writings, and articles published in different journals (like those of *Nabaprabha*, *Mohila*, *Nabanur*, *Antahpur*, *Bharat Mohila*, *Al-Eslam*, *Saogat*, *Sadhana*, *Dhumketu*, *Probashi*, *Bangio Mussalman Sahitya Patrika*, *Mohammadi* etc.).² The women's society was the thrust area of her presentation. The pitiable condition of women and their exposure to assault and torture come up in her presentations through sarcasm, irony and insinuation. Throughout her lifelong pursuit of literature, she sought to vindicate that as human beings womenfolk also have the right to live.

Begum Rokeya's *Motichur Vol-I* (1904) is embellished or jammed with seven pearls viz. 'Pipasa' 'Strijatir Abonati', 'Niriho Bangali', 'Ardhangi', 'Sugrihini', 'Borkha' and 'Griha'.³ Fascinating in the style of its presentations, so also chiselled and splendiferous is its articulations too. It is a thematic study of the social problems of the contemporary epoch. With reference to *Motichur Vol-I*, scholar Saleha Begum observed: that Begum Rokeya wrote in her book *Motichur*, that women have the right to earn money as they possess hands legs and intelligence. It evokes a militant feminist tone in the women's movement.⁴ It is to be emphasized here that the subject in question is related to the Muslim society of Bengal, and its reflections in the writings of Begum Rokeya.

Begum Rokeya's article entitled 'Pipasa' has been devoted to an analytical survey of the cry of terrific application of the parched voice of the thirsty martyrs for quenching their thirst (for water) in the field of Karbala. And that cry of affliction was spread over to another country from one's motherland. The appeal for this thirst is universal and of all times, through this, the authors fell at heart the thirst of the human civilization of the World. She points it out: *Jano na a kiser pipasa? Kothai suniacho sagarer pipasa nei? Ei hridayer durdanto pipasa kemon korita dekhaibo? Amar hriday jato gavir, pipasao tatai prabal, Ei sansare kahar pipasa nei? Dhanir dhan pipasa, manir man pipasa, sansarir sansar pipasa, nalinir tapan pipasa, chakorir chandrika pipasa, Analero tibra pipasa ache.*⁵ (Do not you know what this thirst is? Where have you heard that a sea is without thirst? How shall I give vent to an intense mental agitation of my heart? My heart is in-depth as an unquenchable thirst. Who does not have a craving for earthly enjoyment? A

¹ Anil Ghosh (ed.): *Rokeya Rachanabali*. Kolkata, Katha, 2014, pp. 575-85.

² Ibid., pp. 586-92.

³ Ibid., pp. 1-58.

⁴ Saleha Begum. *Identity and Politics of Gender Muslim Women in Bengal: 1905-1947*. Kolkata, Mitram, 2014, p. 15.

⁵ Anil Ghosh (ed.). op. cit., p. 11.

wealthy man has a craving for riches, a respectable person longs for honour and dignity, a family man is ardently desirous of leading a domestic life, a water lily's hankering is always for sunrays, the Rahu is intent on devouring the moon. Even a fire also is keen to engulf everything). Therefore, the author groaning for non-fulfilment of such types of desires comes out of her defunding, and in this way, the hopes aspirations and dejections of the whole universe have been succinctly but affirmingly represented in Begum Rokeya's writings.

In her paper captioned 'Strijatir Abanati' Begum Rokeya deals with the crisis and inequality gripping contemporary society. According to her, notwithstanding the abolition of slavery from the world in the Middle Ages, women have been subjected to enslavement in the society of Bengal. For such servile dependence of women five incurable diseases are responsible. They are inefficiency, discontent, slander, violence and ignorance.⁶ These factors account for the loss of the self-confidence of the women who are under obligations to follow the dictates of their husbands, they also develop a tendency to wail even on the slightest pretexts. Its outcrop is the exposure of the ignorant and unintelligent womenfolk, shorn of liberty, to assault and humiliation and this proves to impede the gradual progress of the society. Still, then, it is also worthy of note that liberty and equality are sine qua non for the cause of the rapid growth of a society. The progress of society would be a far cry if women were denied liberty and equality. The author clarifies her stand by saying: *Kono baktir ek pa bandhia rakhile, se khoraiea khoraiea kotodur chalibe?*⁷ (If the leg of an individual is tied up, how far will he limp)? Hence, she urged the womenfolk to come forward for the establishment of liberty and equality in society.

In another write-up entitled 'Niriho Bangali,' Begum Rokeya delineates the characters of the plain and general people of Bengal. She also sheds light on the emaciated physical structure of the people of Bengal by way of looking at the food habits, the debility, the inferiority complex, the imprudence, the ignorance and above all various artistic skills for enhancing mental and physical grace since the people of Bengal are always bent upon establishing their hold in the society by dint of indolence, diplomatic manoeuvres and cleverness. In her view: *Rajya sthapan kara opekkha raja upadhi lab kara saha., Silpakarje paradarshi hawa opekkha B.Sc O D.Sc pass kara sahaj. Desher durbhikka nibaraner jannya porishram kora opekkha Americar nikot vikkhagrahan kara sahaj.*⁸ (It is easier to secure an appellation named king than establish a kingdom. It is also easy to get through B. Sc and D. Sc degree rather than becoming skilled in artistry. It is easy to take

⁶ Ibid., p. 12.

⁷ Ibid., p. 23.

⁸ Ibid., p. 25.

recourse to beg before America rather than warding off the menace of famine in our country).

In her paper entitled 'Ardhangi' Begam Rokey's focus is on the place of women within a narrow compass. According to her, a he-man enjoys much more freedom than a woman in the socio-economic sphere, and not only that, a woman is deprived of inheritance to property. 'In all places, a woman is half of the male being.'⁹ As per the holy Quran, whatever is earned by a man is his legitimate right and vice-versa also in the case of a woman.¹⁰ According to the laws of the *sariat*, the shares of the daughter and the son are 6/16 and 10/16 respectively. Therefore, a he-man has a share in a property left behind by his parents and kins and the same is the case with a woman also whether or not that property be less or vast, it is a fixed portion.¹¹ But in practice, the due of women is zero. A woman is denied of either her paternal property obtained through inheritance or otherworldly properties. It is observable in almost all cases that a woman is deprived of her legitimate rights due to the deceitful tactics of her near ones against her. Moreover, in many cases, the sisters refrain from claiming their shares in property for fear of social injunctions. The he-men again misappropriate, on flimsy pretexts, the income earned by women either in and outside their household works or from their share of the paternal property. As a result, their wretchedness continues eternally and unabated strangely enough, the men folk cannot exercise their authority over this property of women, but there is a lack of consciousness among men and women about this.

Again it also happens more often than not that in many cases, a sister was deprived of her legitimate right in her paternal property by fair means or foul in consideration of her brother's financial hardship. In cases more than one, a sister is under obligation to make a deed of agreement, before her father's death, on most of the property in favour of her brothers and by this way, her brothers deprive their sisters of proprietorship by way of resorting to trick, yet the women do have the absolute right and share in their parental property. This deprivation of women has existed since primordial times in the Muslim society of Bengal. It is also worthy of note that men folk raise the bogey of Islamic ideals but seldom hesitate to deprive their wives, daughters and sisters of their legitimate rights in the property.

But it is worth remembering that God has created men and women without making any differentiation between them and hence amelioration of the condition of one cannot be possible without bringing about the upliftment of the other part. That is so, in that case, one will be physically challenged and the other will be weak.

⁹ *The Quran*. 4:11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4:32.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4:7.

In her essay on 'Sugrihini', Begum Rokeya indicates the condition of women in the society of Bengal. The duties of an ideal wife are:

- a. Keeping spick and span house and domestic utensils.
- b. Doing housework effectively and at a nominal expense.
- c. Cooking and serving food.
- d. Needlework.
- e. Taking care of her kids.
- f. Upbringing of her children.¹²

But the proper performance of the duties in question requires an enlightened woman with a broad vision. Hence modern education should be provided to a woman. An enlightened woman must be an ideal wife. That is why Begum Rokeya points out at the time of chalking out the objectives of the Shakhawat Memorial school: 'Our girls should not only obtain university degrees, but must be ideal daughters, wives and mothers, or I may say obedient daughters, loving sisters, dutiful wives and instructive mothers.'¹³

An article on 'Borkha' of Begum Rokeya hinges on an aspect, enveloped with darkness, of Bengal Muslim womenfolk. Usually, a Muslim woman, while stepping out of doors, carries a veil which is known as *borkha*. But, in the society of the Bengal, the custom of *purdah* was very rigidly followed. Even, unmarried girls had to use veils at the time of their interaction with both he-man and unknown women. As a matter of fact, 'ever since her birth a Muslim woman became a captive within a vitiated atmosphere of a dark cell. Enlightenment turned out to be an absurd proposition for then, truth and beauty almost faded away from their lives.'¹⁴ Contrarily, in the language of Begum Rokeya, by *purdah*, we mean keeping concealed, and not merely a veil and remaining within the four walls of a *zenana*. In this connection, Mosfeka Mahmud is of the view that Begum Rokeya has demonstrated, that the custom of *purdah* as directed by the Quran is by no means related to the practice of interning Muslim women in the *zenana*.¹⁵ The lifelong struggle of Begum Rokeya was waged against the custom of the *purdah*. She was firmly convinced that progress in education would unveil the veil of the *zenana*. Hence, regarding female education, she avers: *Amra jaha chaitechi ta vikkha noi. Anugraher dan noi, Amader janmagata adhikar. Islam narike je*

¹² Anil Ghosh (ed.). op. cit., p. 35.

¹³ Anowar Hossain. *Muslim Women's Struggle for Freedom in Colonial Bengal: 1873-1940*. Kolkata, Mitram, 2003, p. 95.

¹⁴ Shamsun Nahar Mahmud. *Rokeya Jiboni*. Dhaka, Sahitya Prakash, 1996 (1 st pub.,1937), pp. 11-12.

¹⁵ Mosfeka Mahmud. *Patre Rokeya Porichiti*. Dhaka, Sahitya Prakash, 1996 (1 st pub.,1965), p. 12.

*adhikar dieche tar chea amader dabi ekbinduo besi noi.*¹⁶ (what we are clamouring for is not begging even the bestowal of favours it is our birthright. Our demand for freedom, granted to us by Islam is not much more than an inch). The ulterior object of Begum Rokeya was woman's awakening which necessitated an extension of education.¹⁷

In her treatise on 'Griha', Begum Rokeya portrays a home as an abode of peace for physical and mental relaxation a place that witnesses the fullness of development of body, mind and soul. But in reality, Begum Rokeya's homes in our country are nothing but prison cells which, despite being a place of marriage making, are devoid of the throbbing of the hearts of women. Rasa Sundari Dasi states about the houses of Bengal in these lines: *Beche thakte baddha bole bache achi, khete hoi bole khai, amader sahamaran prathai besh chilo. Government sahamaran pratha tule diea bidhobar jantrana briddhi korechen.*¹⁸ (I live because I am bound to be alive, I take food as I am to take it, the custom of our burning to death on the funeral pyre of our husbands was much better. The government aggravated the sufferings of the widows by way of abolishing this custom). That is to say, the women of different lineages were the worst victims of the hellish sufferings in their own homes since the husband's place, if found unsuitable for living, the unfortunate widows approached their parents for sheltering them in their former residences. But their hellish suffering in their father's houses which were once the places of their joys are unimaginable. Not only that, all arrangements are underway to strip them of their rights of inheritance to property in their former houses. Such residences are not wanted in every village of Bengal. It must be kept in mind here that the scenario of society, as drawn by the author in her literary production 'Griho', far from being a falsification of truth or a mere figment of the imagination is vivacious and realistic in tone and temper. Through this paper, the author fondly expects to see 'a wife a good companion and associate and a true follower of her husband'.¹⁹

Begum Rokeya's papers entitled 'Nur Islam', 'Islam', 'Souro Jagot', 'Delicia Hotya' (Murder of Delicia), 'Gyanphal' 'Narishirsti' 'Nurse Neli', 'Sishupalan' 'Srishtitvatva' etc. appeared in journals like *Nabanoor*, *Bharat Mohila*, *Al-Eslam*, *Saogat and Bangio Mussalman Sahitya Patrika* at different times. Her papers captioned 'Nur Islam' and 'Islam' are concerned with detailing the rise and growth of Islam in the desert of Arabia. The Arabian society of the sixth century AD was

¹⁶ Shamsun Nahar Mahmud. op. cit., p. 70

¹⁷ Anowar Hossain. *Begum Rokeya: Nari Jagaraner Agradut*. Kolkata, Progressive Publishers, 2006, p. 74.

¹⁸ Anil Ghosh (ed.). op. cit., p. 53.

¹⁹ Anowar Hossain. *Swadhinata sangrame Banglar Muslimm Nari: 1873-1971*. Kolkata, Progressive Publishers, 2006, p. 122.

riddled with the brutal killing of women, gambling, the dice play the injustice, the persecution, the adultery, the murder, the looting etc. This made the of life common people extremely miserable just like a domestic animal. At this critical juncture, Islam was in the ascendant. The whole world along with Arabs had been illumined by Islam. Wherever the eagles of Islam flew, things were not the same again. In those countries where Islam made a drive, the Dark Age came to an end and a modern era was ushered in. According to the author, its wave stirred up the society of Bengal also.

In her novel, *Sourajagot* Begum Rokeya's trajectory is towards characterizing a bigot and superstitious Jafar as against Gawhar Ali, a man of independent disposition. In that novel, Gawhar, in opposition to contemporary society allowed freedom to her daughters by way of providing them with modern education. Contrarily, Jafar, an obscurantist, out and out, made himself range against the activities of progressive-minded Gawhar at every step. In the end, a woman has had the taste of emancipation in this novel. The scenario of society, as drawn by the authors in this novel, is illustrative of the abolition of the *zenana* in the near future. Side by side, Rokeya has awakened a spirit of feminist consciousness through the representation of the character of Nurjahan in this novel.

Begum Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* (1905) is a fulfilment of the dream of establishing women's dominance, soft but tender, yet aimed at striking a decisive blow at male dominance by hook or by crook. Instead of throwing light on the social life of women, she kept the menfolk in confinement. In terms of lexicography, *Sultana's Dream* is a scientific utopia. She did not create any golden age of the past in this work; rather she contemplated the idea of a womenfolk of the future dependent on science since she was under the impression that it is a science which can liberate a woman from the fetters of stock notions by way of weeding out all sorts of superstitious practices and unwanted things. Hence, according to her a women's situation is oriented towards science. All traces of social ills, famine, epidemic etc. have been effaced from her imaginary positioning of women. That is why *Sultana's Dream* is a tale of both the final triumph of womenfolk and the utter rout of male dominance.²⁰

In the Bengali rendering of the novel '*Delicia Hotya*' (Murder of Delicia) Begum Rokeya says that Delicia was neither stabbed to death nor put to death by a sword. How a woman suffers death from mental torture has been narrated here. The question raised by the authoress is that if death occurs of Delicia, a litterateur, a highly qualified, an opulent, an intelligent and bold fellow, in this way, the passing away of the helpless and illiterate Muslim women of Bengal, leading a secluded

²⁰ Anwarullah Bhuiyan (ed.). *Rokeya Chintar Uttaradhikar*. Dhaka, Rodela Prokashani, 2008, p. 222.

life in *zenana* and suffering utter humiliation at the feet of their torturous husband is usually a very general happening. Delicia was completely deceived. She has adored her husband, who was a traitor and a man of abominable nature. The love and faith of Delicia have been laid in the grave. The way Lord Carlion's love for a person married to someone else appears to be heart-rending to a woman and gives a burial to a woman's love is possible only in a male-dominated society. In this context, Delicia states: *Jatkale ami param aradha debota gyane tomar upasana koritechilam, tumi amake pratarana koritechile. Tumi eirupe amake oti nrisongsovabe hotya korile.*²¹ (When I was in prayer for yourself as a god deserving to be worshipped, you were outwitting me. By this stunt you have put me to death very brutally), how many hundred thousand Muslim women in Bengal like Delicia face death with a broken heart in the solitary corners of the inner apartment is beyond our conjecture. No history of these unfortunate fellows severely afflicted with grief is yet to be put on record. As a woman litterateur Begum Rokeya presents a heartbreaking history of the then times before her readers. Herein lies the objectivity and significance of her literary productions.

'Gyanphol' a fanciful story, was modelled on the chronicle of Adam and Eve, the first men in this world and with the help of a mythological story written by a woman the author explains how a woman has been placed under the feet of he-man in a society. In this mythological narrative, he-man bemoans 'What hell, I do neither want to shoulder the responsibility of taking care of a woman (or to bank upon a profitless venture) nor reject her outright.'²² Further in her writings on 'Nurse Neli' Begum Rokeya shows a woman's impulse towards achieving a desired goal or emancipation on the one hand and the other hand social inhibitions on womanhood leading to a woman's confinement in a dungeon with no light at all wherefrom a woman has no chance at all for escape. Over and above, Begum Rokeya proposes before women to be heedful towards maintaining peace and sanctity at home rather than their mental obsession for the world outside; from this it seems that she is, in a real sense, a far-sighted personality always stricken with concern.

In her write-up on 'Sishupalan' Begum Rokeya demonstrates concerning statistics as to how many children die a premature death every year in Bengal and how many mothers pass away while pregnant. According to her, this premature death is caused solely by superstitions, uncleanliness, neglect, debility, poverty, famine and epidemic. Bengal has not been left with any alternatives to get rid of such a perilous situation. This prompts her to say: *Sarbya angey batha, oisad dibe kotha.*²³ (Pain in the whole body, where to administer medicine). For the

²¹ Anil Ghosh. (ed.). op. cit., p. 142.

²² Ibid., p. 156.

²³ Ibid., p. 171.

prevention of premature death, she has solved many questions of the life of the people of Bengal by way of taking into consideration several issues like feeding and nursing a child, a child's time of sleep, a mother's duty etc. She attributes two factors behind this problem viz. lack of female education and early marriage. The author argues that a child has to be protected for the preservation of society and for protecting a child his or her mother needs protection.

In her fanciful story entitled 'Muktiphol' Begum Rokeya deals with an immoral practice. Once upon a time the queen of Bholapur has become a pauper nowadays due to paucity of funds and want of cloth and food for such plight of the queen, her profound affection for her sons to the utter neglect of her daughters was mainly responsible and was why an ascetic imprecated her in this way: *Botsey, tumi putrake adhik sneho koro kanya ke ektukuo ador jatno koro na, eha baro annay. Poriname tumi ei oti adure putraer dara kosto paibe.*²⁴ (Dear lady, it is extremely bad of you to shower your affections on your son and not to take the least care and love for your daughter; in consequence, you will be in distress because of this pampered son). Incidentally, that happened. While bringing *muktiphol* (The effects of emancipation) from the Kailash mountain the princes under the influence of their advisers took recourse to an expedient but in vain. This is one of the attributes of the character of the people of Bengal. In fact, laudable are the efforts of Srimati and Sumati, the two daughters of the woman pauper, in gaining the *muktiphol* at the sacrifice of their interests. Therefore, the author seeks to bring it to the attention of her readers through this write-up that gaining freedom from bondage is impossible without the active cooperation of women.

Begum Rokeya paints a true picture of the life of the Hindu Bengalis in her paper entitled 'Naripuja' (Adoration of the Mother Goddess). To the Bengali Hindus, the women, already imagined as goddesses (since most of the deities are women) are exalted to the position of divinities and hence they are adorable. But woman writer indicates: *Mussalmanera ramanidalon kore satya, kintu tahara prokashey naripuja kori bolia chalana kore na.*²⁵ (It is true that Muslims make assaults on women, but they do not pretend in public that they are adorers of women). In contrast, the Hindus offer worship to the mother goddesses and at the same time subject women to a state of persecution. In this case, there is some kind of flexibility in the attitude of the Muslims regarding their dealings with women rather than the Hindus. Further, it is the Hindus who have learnt from us the *purdah* system. That is to say that the *purdah* system was in vogue in contemporary Hindu society. Side by side, while examining the social condition the authoress takes note of the economy of Bengal in her essay captioned 'Chasar Dukkhu' The soliloquy of a Bengali peasant is appended below:

²⁴ Ibid., p. 177.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 218.

*Khetey khetey puira mori, re bhai
Pachai jote na tana.
Bouer poicha bikai tobu
Chailay paina dana.*²⁶

(I toil in the field with the sweat of my brow,
unrewarding and without a loincloth at the buttocks.
My wife is deprived of worldly gains,
My ward remains unfed too).

A peasant engaged in making Bengal full of profuse delicious water and rich in fruits and green with plentiful corn very often suffers from a shortage of food, nor do his sons and daughters have square meals a day. Even, 'the wife of a peasant sells her daughter in exchange for two-kilogram pulses.'²⁷ This frightful sight of Bengal's economy finds an echo in the writings of Begum Rokeya.

In her work entitled *Aborodhbashini* (1931), Begum Rokeya refers to forty-seven incidents in connection with the *purdah* system. In each and every incident she explicates brilliantly a tale of agonies of women living in the *zenana*.²⁸ These seem to be the wonders of the readers of the modern era. A man like Sheikh Abdullah, a representative of conservatism, is inclined to project the *purdah* as a most painful ulcer. On the other hand, Begum Rokeya compares it with fatal carbolic acid. Mosfeka Mahmud contends that as a result of the *purdah* 'the wives and the maidservants of the family of Sharifs fall victim to a blind hysteria disease. Even, they are under duress to court sad demise.'²⁹ And regarding those women living in the *zenana*, the viewpoint of the society is: Wherein lies the credit of the women living in the *zenana* if they do not undergo suffering?³⁰ Contrarily, Begum Rokeya observes by way of siding with the women interned in the *zenana*. Begum Rokeya said that:

*Keno asilamhai hai! ei pora sansare,
Keno janmo lovilam purdahnasin ghore.*³¹

(Alas! What for have I come in this ill-fated domestic life,
what for have I been born in a family sticking to the *purdah* system).

²⁶ Ibid., p. 229.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 231.

²⁸ Anil Ghosh (ed.). op. cit., pp. 401-38.

²⁹ Mosfeka Mahmud. op. cit., p. 12.

³⁰ Anil Ghosh (ed.). op. cit., p. 408.

³¹ Ibid., p. 438.

Her travels in various parts of the Indian subcontinent lead her to conclude that it is not only the Bengali womenfolk but also the whole of the Muslim womenfolk of the Indian subcontinent which is left in an utterly neglected, oppressed and miserable state under traditional social ethos.³²

In her essay captioned 'Pointrishmon Khana' (three thousand and five hundred kilos of food) Begum Rokeya classifies the Muslim society of Bengal into two parts viz. Ashraf and Atraf. With reference to both these classes, the manner by which the education and culture, the food habits and the socio-economic structure of the Bengali Muslims have come to light through her reflects on the impoverished condition of the society. Further, while drawing a scenario of rural Bengal, Rafiuddin Ahmed has discoursed at length the mutual relationship between the Ashraf and the Atraf classes.³³ At Mallikpur on the 11th day of the Sharif, the authoress makes a mention of the eating and drinking in this way 'The chefs are serving sufficient food among all assembled there, yet the people and the housewives belonging to the Atraf class are on a rampage for food by way of leaning on the *deck* (where food is kept) like a vulture. The containers wherein food is kept hidden include mugs used for evacuation, old tins and abandoned clay urn-shaped pots.³⁴ Moreover, it is stated in a story entitled 'Biye Pagla Buro' (an old man extremely enthusiastic about marriage) that immediately after the passing of the Sarada Bill (1927) 'marriage between an old bridegroom and a girl below thirteen years is prohibited.'³⁵ Even at that time, Muslim society was dominated by early marriage and polygamy. The authoress further makes clear in this story that a bridegroom of seventy years old from a village in eastern Bengal was ready for marriage for the eighth time after a seventh marriage. But at this old age, a spinster having not been found, a child widow of 22/ 23 years old was produced as a wife. Finally, though the marriage did not take effect, the author demonstrates that the customs of early marriage and polygamy were prevalent in society.

The *Tarinibhavana* (An orphanage) has been at the centre of a novel captioned *Padmarag* (1923) by Begum Rokeya. Far from being merely a figment of imagination, the *tarinibhavana* is the credo of her private life. That is why it is ideal and the system of education is flawless and perfect. Conversely, Siddiqua, the heroine of the *Padmarag* is idealised in the ideals of the *tarinibhavana*. The ideals of the *tarinibhavana* were equality, fraternity and unity and life was based on the truth and the beauty. Regarding life Siddiqua states: *Ami aajibon nari jatir kalyan sadhoner chesta koribo ebong aboradh prathar mulloched koribo. Ami samaj ke*

³² Anowar Hossain. op. cit., p. 68.

³³ Rafiuddin Ahmed. *The Bengal Muslim 1871-1906: A quest for Identity*. Delhi, OUP, 1998, P. xxv.

³⁴ Anil Ghosh (ed.). op. cit., pp. 472-73.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 475.

*dekhaite chai ekmatra bibahito jiboni nari janmer charam lakkha nohe, sansar dharmay jiboner sardharma nohe.*³⁶ (I will strive for the welfare of the womenfolk till death and to extirpate the custom of the *zenana*. I seek to establish before society that it is not that married life is the ultimate goal of a woman's birth, the domestic life is solely the essence of life). Simultaneously, vindicating the fact that economic freedom is the only means for the emancipation of women, the authoress have hoisted the flag of the victory of women's liberation much earlier.

In another paper entitled 'Alankar Na Badge of Slavery,' Begum Rokeya shows how a woman has been placed under a subordinate position of he-men. By prowess and artfulness, man has brought an animal under his control. 'Similarly, by dint of might and intelligence man has placed a woman under his thumb.'³⁷ So, since ancient times a woman has been under the bondage of human beings and gradually, men 'from the position of landlords and heads of family and others have become our husbands.'³⁸ As a result, a woman has become a captive of society and that captivity has been epitomised in slavery. Through this literary production, the author has called upon the womenfolk to lead a social life by way of making women conscious of their miserable conditions. She asks a question before women, what are we in the civilised world of the twentieth century? Are we slaves? Slavery is understood to have been abolished from the world, but has our servile dependence ceased to exist? In this context, it may be said that she wrote that essay with an eye to bringing about the welfare and the emancipation of women.³⁹

The note of dissent of Begum Rokeya regarding the marriages of men more than one (Bahu Bibaha), the indiscriminate *talaq* system etc. has been marked out in her last written article 'Narir Adhikar.' She has dwelt on the rights of women in the dissolution of marriage. She says: *Amader dharmomate bibaha sampurna hai patra patrier sammati dara. Tai khoda na karun, bicched jodi ase tobe seta asbe ubhaier sammoticrome. Kintu eta keno hai ektarfa, arthath sudhu swamir dara.*⁴⁰ (In our religion marriage takes place on the basis of the consent of the bridegroom and a prospective bride. Hence, God forbid that if divorce comes, that must come through the consent of both. But what for is this one-sided, or that is to say only by the husband)? At present, a movement has been set on foot on the question of the *talaq* or divorce, but seventy-five years back Begum Rokeya, like a real social reformer, turned her attention to this burning question of the day. Herein lies her ability to anticipate the shape of things to come in future.

³⁶ Shamsun Nahar Mahmud. op. cit., p. 78.

³⁷ Anil Ghosh, (ed.). op. cit., p. 627.

³⁸ Anowar Hossain. op. cit., p. 118.

³⁹ Anwarullah Bhuiyan (ed.). op. cit., p. 138.

⁴⁰ Mosfeka Mahmud. op. cit., pp. 34-35

The period following the death of Begum Rokeya witnessed a radical transformation in the social system of Bengal, and Begum Rokeya was the prime mover behind this change. It was for this reason that Mosfeka Mahmud projected Begum Rokeya as a 'beam of light in the midst of darkness.'⁴¹ After endeavouring arduously for the emancipation of women over a long time, she made impossible proposition a possible one. Profound selfconfidence and trustworthiness to ideals were contributory factors behind her success in this sphere. Her literary productions waged a crusade against the existing social system since she felt an urgent need for the reconstruction of the social setup. To her, intense mental urge for creativity is much more important than jubilation for extermination or annihilation. Naturally however, her genius is a creative one.

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⁴¹ Ibid., p.7.