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The Political Act of Writing Feminism- Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and the Utopian Vision

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By

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ABSTRACT

Feminist Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain lived a life of seclusion and oppression like many middle-class Muslim women in colonial India during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. During this period, Rokeya used writing as a tool to fight against the oppression women faced from the patriarchal society and reimagined their gendered position in society. Rokeya wrote two novels, *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag*, both set in feminist utopian societies. In these works, Rokeya expresses that the problem to the oppression of women can be traced to the *purdah* system or the seclusion of women, the solution is to grow educational opportunities for women, which could lead women to create the ideal feminist utopian society that prioritized greater equality for women. These works give a glimpse of women's lives during this period and show writing allowed Rokeya to create a legacy as a feminist that envisioned an idealistic society for women.

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INTRODUCTION

Contextualizing Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century India

> *"Elder Brother,*
>
> *I have basked in the warmth of your love from my very infancy. It is you who have raised and shaped me. I have no idea what a father, a mother, a guru or a teacher is like – I only know you."*[1]

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a pioneering feminist in late nineteenth and early twentieth century India, dedicated her book, *Padmarag*, to her brother, Abul Asad Ibrahim Saber. She was grateful to her brother for giving her the opportunity to learn how to read and write in English and Bengali. Few women had the opportunity to receive any form of secular education during this period, and Rokeya knew she was one of the lucky ones. Her ability to read and write allowed her to be a dedicated feminist writer to discuss women's issues.

Rokeya devoted her life towards improving women's issues, which she did through her ability to write and her philanthropic efforts. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, women emerged in the public realm of discourses that involved women's issues. Rokeya was one of the first women to join this male-dominated public space to discuss women's issues. Her works are examples of how women during this period were able to join the discourse that discussed the circumstances and future of

[1] Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag* ed. Barnita Bagchi (Haryana: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 17.

women. Rokeya is a significant feminist in Indian colonial history, whose works reflect the feminist discourse and evolving reform ideas of women's issues in the public realm during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that problematized the seclusion of women, advocated for women's education, and reevaluated feminist utopian visions, which evolved and furthered the complexities of gender relations in India.

Emergence of Women in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century India

A discourse emerged during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century about the state of modernity within the Indian subcontinent. This discourse was mainly between British men and Indian nationalist men who were contesting the idea of modernity in India. The British colonial state used various methods to gain knowledge about Indian subjects' social, familial, and religious customs and traditions starting in the eighteenth century. Bernard Cohn writes, "Nevertheless, the British believed they could explore and conquer this space through translation: establishing correspondence could make the unknown and the strange knowable.... This knowledge was to enable the British to classify, categorize, and bound the vast social world that was India so that it could be controlled."[2] Knowledge formation, especially at the beginning of colonial rule under the East India Company, proved to be important for the British. The knowledge that the British government accumulated about its subjects became vital knowledge for the colonial state to use to advance their colonial agenda. To truly understand their subjects,

[2] Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 4-5.

the British government believed that they needed to know every aspect of their subjects' lives. This included the intimate traditions, customs, and culture that Indians engaged with on a day-to-day basis. In order to understand their subjects' culture, the British started investigating Indian men and women's personal lives within the home. The home became a sign of culture in which the British could understand the ideals and practices of Indian subjects.[3] As a result, the British studied the oppressive environment and culture that women had been living in under the patriarchal society.

The British used the oppressive conditions that women lived in to criticize India's inability to modernize. The ideals of modernity that the British studied derived from westernized definitions and standards of modern practices. Indian traditions were now surveyed in contrast with western ideologies of modernization. During the nineteenth-century, women became the central subject of the colonial state to contest modernity in Indian society. Topics such as the tradition of sati (the practice of self-immolation of widows), child marriage, widowhood, polygamy, education, and *purdah* were essential discussions of modernity in the nineteenth-century between Indian nationalists and the colonial state.[4] The *zenana*, secluded quarters for women within homes, and *purdah*, the practice of veiling women, were matters that the state found essential to establish their

[3] Sanjay Seth, *Subject Lessons: The Western Education of Colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 135.

[4] Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 12.

justification for colonialism. The condition of women became a point of criticism of Indian society inability to modernize for the British. Historian Antionette Burton writes, "The 'oriental' zenana, or women's quarters, was pathologized as dark, unhygienic, and indicative of Indians incapacity of self-rule throughout the nineteenth-century, with Victorian feminists taking the lead in extrapolating from this domestic space a host of judgments about the character of Indian men, women, and children from the 1860s onward."[5] Women became the center of the topic of modernity because the British believe that Indian men and Indian society overall did not treat women the way other "modern" states had. In this criticism, the ideals of a modern state and their treatment of women was mainly defined by the way western society had given women more opportunities than women in India. Unlike Indian women, women from western countries had more opportunities to express their individuality and did not live their lives in seclusion under systems such as *purdah*. While women in the west still faced gender expectations and roles, the British believed that Indian women's oppression was a sign of "backwardness." Indian women became tied up in the controversy of the "woman question,"[6] however historians such as Sanjay Seth have argued that it has often been

[5] Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 8.

[6] The "woman question" has been used as a historiographical term to define the intellectual debates that discussed the rights, opportunities, and condition of women from the 1400s to the 1900s. At the same time, the term has also been used to define the efforts made by feminist campaigns and movements to change some of the traditional ways women's lives were defined by gender expectations and norms.

noted that the conversations of Indian women had less to do with women and rather to do with what women could be seen to signify or could be made to signify.[7] The British used the oppressive state of Indian women lived in to shed light on their condition and to express that India was not a modern state in their eyes. The British criticized Indian women's oppressive state in order to use them as a way define and contest modernity for their own benefit.

As a result, the British used the "civilizing mission" narrative to justify their rule over India, stating that India needed the paternalistic rule of the British in order to transform and become recognized as a modern state. Sanjay Seth writes how the British believed that they could rule over India because India was not yet "modern",

> Another argument, and one of the principal justifications of colonial rule, was that was too economically and socially backward to join the rank of self-governing nations. The British claimed to rule India for her own benefit, in a fashion design to slowly but steadily result in a "moral and material improvement" …Not only was India economically poor and technologically inferior, but this poverty and inferiority meant that India belonged to the past, that it was "medieval" rather than modern. Having proved incapable of progressing to the next rung of the historical, evolutionary ladder of its own, India required an extended period of foreign rule to be transformed or, as it was often put "regenerated."[8]

The British approached modernization of India through the framework of colonial modernity. Colonial modernity refers to the type of modernity that India was able to achieve under British colonial rule. The trajectory of modernization over time in India

[7] Seth, *Subject Lessons*, p. 130.

[8] Seth, *Subject Lessons*, p. 131.

was heavily influenced by the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized. Colonial modernization was a twofold process where the British defined modernity based on their own terms and modernity was constantly negotiated by Indian men and the colonial state.

The modernity that India achieved was defined by the British. The ideals of modernity that the British studied derived from westernized definitions and standards of modern practices. Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty defines western ideals of modernity as, "Concepts of citizenship, the state, civil society, public sphere, human rights, equality before the law, the individual, distinctions between public and private, the idea of the subject, democracy, popular sovereignty, social justice, scientific rationality, and so on all bear the burden of European thought and history."[9] The importance of colonial modernity was immense because the standardization of these ideals of modernity were not embedded within Indian society, but rather came from British ideologies through the process of colonialization. The British compared India's modernization to the intellectual, cultural, social, and political advancements of their British homeland. The idea of a "modern state" or "modern society" could be attested as subjective given one's definition of modernity, so the British's criticism of India's inability to modernize was based on their western ideals of modernization. Therefore, the lack of concepts such as citizenship,

[9] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Differences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 4.

human rights, and democracy was sign of "backwardness" for the Indian subcontinent, and it is then that the British criticize India for its inability to become a modern state.

Colonial modernity became essential for the British to argue for colonial rule because Indian subjects had yet to adopt these "modern" ideals in their political, economic, and social lives and needed the colonial state in order to become "modernized." The colonial state heavily pushed the civilizing mission, and women became the center of this mission. Such a framework created an atmosphere for reform efforts by the colonial state. The colonial state believed that in order to modernize India, they need to improve the "backwards" state of Indian women. Reform efforts for women were limited by the colonial state because the idea of modernity for the British was not to provide efforts to modernize India, but rather find claims in order to justify their rule. Providing reform efforts to modernize India to a certain extent could pose a threat to their political, economic, and social dominance and rule in the Indian subcontinent.

Colonial modernity also involved a constant negotiation between the British and Indian men. While the British criticized India for being in this "backwards" state, at the same time they denied India the elements they would need to reach modernity based on western ideals. Therefore, India was uncapable of fully reaching the progressive society that the British had proclaimed. The modernity that India was able to reach was colonial modernity which was reached through negotiating with the British. Indians carved out a space in which they could be modern, but they were only able to do this by constantly

negotiating with the British. This negotiation involved a constant fight to allow Indians more autonomy and rights. By having these rights and more control, Indians believed that they could try to reach a new "modern" India. Careful negotiation with the British was necessary for Indians because asking for too much control could lead the British to put up more boundaries and allow less autonomy for Indian men

The context of colonial modernity is important to note. While the British argued that India is "backwards" for reasons such as the treatment of women, and therefore India needs to modernize, at the same time they pushed for the preservation of Indian traditions. The British began pushing ideas that traditional aspects of Indian society such as the local kings, or nawabs, were the core of Indian society and thus considered truly "Indian." They criticized those Indian men who asked for more rights and wished to push the modernization of India. These Indian men in the British's view were trying to become something that they were not. Indian men had this constant negotiation with British men to create a space in which Indians could create their own claims over modernity.

One way English-educated and elite nationalist Indian men approached this negotiation was by discussing their beliefs of the woman question in response to British claims of colonial modernity. This led to a public discourse between British and Indian educated and elite men where they publicly defined modernization, women's issues, and Indian society on their terms. While some men that were part of reformed religious institutions, such as the Brahmo Samaj and later the Prarthna Samaj, Arya Samaj, and the

Theosophical Society supported reform efforts such as female education, other men argued for the oppressive condition in which women were already living in.[10] Partha Chatterjee argues that there are two spheres of nationalist ideology of culture: the national and spiritual. He writes,

> It was in the material sphere that the claims of western civilization were the most powerful. Science, technology, rational forms of economic organization, modern methods of statecraft, these had given the European countries the strength to subjugate non-European peoples and to impose their dominance over the whole world. [However,]… in the spiritual domain the east was superior to the West.[11]

Indian nationalists acknowledged that the British had superior claims over India solely based on their material dominance, however they believed that India was spiritually stronger. As a result, Indian nationalist then argued that they needed to be materially strong like the west, but to also strengthen spiritually to modernize India. At the same time, they focused more importance on the spiritual domain rather than the material domain. The nationalists claimed that women were the primary repositories of this spiritual domain. Making such claim, nationalists were stating that women's reform was a subject that had to be dealt with by Indian men and not the British colonial state. This is when nationalists began discussing reforms needed in India to become modernized.

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[10] Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, p. 91.

[11] Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), p. 237.

Just like the British, Indian nationalist used women to discuss and argue for their own political agenda. In response to the British's claims over India due to colonial modernity, they promoted self-rule. Nationalists had hoped that self-rule would allow them to implement reforms needed on their own terms to strengthen India in both national and spiritual spheres. In turn, Indian nationalists used women to contest for self-rule by promoting reform efforts targeted towards women. Tanika Sarkar writes,

> If the household was the embryonic nation, then the woman was the true patriotic subject. The male body, having passed through the grind of Western education, office, routine, and forced urbanisation, having been marked with the loss of traditional sports and martial activities, was supposedly remade in an attenuated, emasculated form by colonialism. The female body, on the other hand, was still pure and unmarked, loyal to the rule of the shastras.[12]

Women were now the site at which Indian societal traditions were being challenged and debated by both the British and Indian nationalists.[13] The purpose of Indian nationalists to discuss women's issues was so that they could begin discussing reforms needed to spiritually strengthen India to become modernized.

They did this firstly by discussing the necessity of reform for women so that India could once again become a glorious state. Indian nationalists believed that India needed

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[12] Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 43.

[13] Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 72.

reforms to return to the Golden Age of India, also known in history as the Vedic period or Vedic Age (c. 1500 – c. 500 BCE). Geraldine Forbes writes, "During this 'golden age' women were educated, married only after they had reached maturity, moved about freely, and participated in the social and political life of the time."[14] The Vedic period was a glorified era in Indian history where Indian nationalists believed that India was at its height of glory and strength. Naturally, they believed that in order to improve the state of women, they needed to provide reform efforts that would help women directly, so that they could be as knowledgeable and respectable as women during the Vedic period. An idealistic image of the perfect modern Indian woman was created by Indian nationalists that they envisioned for the "new woman" or the "modern woman." Tanika Sarkar writes,

> An icon was constructed of the true patriotic subject, and the good Hindu woman with her simple dress, her ritually pure conchshell bangles and red vermillion mark, her happy surrender and self-immersion in the sansar, and her endless bounty and nature expressed by cooking and feeding. She was charged with an immense aesthetic, cultural and religious load in nationalist writings, as Annapurna, the goddess of food, as the bounteous Motherland.[15]

The iconic modern Indian woman, who was Hindu, was an idealistic goal for Indian nationalist to address the issues surrounding women. A woman, like Sarkar discusses, would have been an ideal woman for Indian nationalist because modern women would still be expected to conform to gender expectations and norms found within the

[14] Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, p. 16.

[15] Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, p. 120.

traditional patriarchal society. However, they would now also be equipped with necessary skills and knowledge to be able to serve their new independent nation.

The second way Indian nationalists used women to discuss direct claims over self-rule was by having a say in the government. Under British rule, Indian nationalists believed that they had very little say over their own governance as subjects of the Raj. While the British claimed that the oppressive state of women in India was a sign of India's "backwardness," Indian nationalists argued that it was actually a sign that the colonial state had made no efforts to properly address and reform women's condition. They believed that the British used Indian women to justify their rule over India, but they had failed to bring real changes. Indian nationalist proceeded to claim that they needed self-governance so that they could have more say when it came to governing India.[16] Indian nationalists recognized that the condition of women within the patriarchal society needed to be improved, but in order to do so they first needed to gain self-rule so that they could provide reforms that the British failed to bring. Because the British had neglected to improve the condition of women in India, nationalists believed that giving more rights of governance to Indians would bring more realistic reforms needed for India to become a "modern" state, like the British hoped India would become.

[16] Seth, *Subject Lessons*, p. 131.

Although women were used as tools to discuss India's modernization, there were two critical issues of the discourse of colonial modernity. The first was that often the actual improvement of women's conditions was not addressed by both Indian men and the colonial state. The discourse between the British men and Indian nationalist brought up serious issues regarding women, however both sides had done very little to create actual changes. For example, Sanjay Seth writes, "The education of women was not high on the agenda in Britain at the time, and the small resources to be devoted to educating England's Indian subjects were not to be wasted on the lowest classes or on women. Thus, the earliest effort at providing formal education for girls came from private agency…"[17] Even though both the British and Indian nationalists saw that there was a lack of opportunities, such as education, for women they did very little to bring such opportunities. For British and Indian men, the discourse was created to discuss ideas of modernity, colonial rule, and self-rule rather than addressing how to create real reform for women.[18]

The second issue that the discourse of modernity brought was that it left women out of the conversation. While women's issues were heavily debated by men, women were not part of the conversation when it came to their condition. Women believed that they were used by the colonial state to justify their rule and they were used by Indian

[17] Seth, *Subject Lessons*, p. 137.

[18] Seth, *Subject Lessons*, p. 146.

nationalists to argue for self-rule, but minimal reform efforts were made to actually improve women's oppressive conditions. Historian Lata Mani writes, "The increasing focus on women has been mistakenly conceived as signifying a new and thoroughly modern concern for their rights as individuals.... It may be no exaggeration to say that these debates reconstituted patriarchy and caste much more than liberating women into modernity."[19] The colonial state's inability to initiate genuine reform efforts further fostered the patriarchal society in which women faced oppression. They also felt that they had no space to discuss the issues they were facing, and instead it was men who interpreted and discussed issues about women. This left Indian women to fight for their own reform efforts.

Middle-Class Culture and Education

One notable example of how the discourse of modernity was contested was through the introduction of western education in India. The British colonial state ruled over the India subcontinent for 200 years, and during their rule the British studied and learned about their subjects' everyday culture, customs, traditions, and way of life. One aspect that the British sought to learn was about India's knowledge formation and schooling systems. The western education administered in Britain had been a sign of prestige for both British and Indian men, and many British officials who worked for the

[19] Mani, *Contentious Traditions*, pp. 194-195.

colonial state in India received an education from some of the most prominent educational institutions. They used their educational experiences to carry out their duties as officials for the colonial state. Thus, it was expected that British officials who learned about knowledge formation and educational systems found in India compared it to the western education that they received back in Britain, and they started criticizing indigenous knowledge. Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859) was an English politician who was at the forefront of this criticism. Historian Sanjay Seth discusses Macaulay's criticism of indigenous education by stating, "Macaulay characterized them, 'medical doctrines which would disgrace an English farrier, astronomy which would move laughter in girls at an English boarding school, history abounding with kings thirty feet high and reigns thirty thousand years long, and geography made of seas of treacle and seas of butter."[20] This criticism of indigenous education began new efforts from the British colonial state to introduce western style education in the Indian subcontinent so that Indian male subject were better equipped to serve the colonial state. Macaulay published Macaulay's *Minute* of 1835 and argued that English should replace Persian as the official language, and he also discussed the need for English education in India.

The Bengal Renaissance, during the nineteenth century, was a cultural, intellectual, and artistic reform movement. It has been termed as renaissance because this movement, similar to the European Renaissance in the sixteenth century, sought to

[20] Seth, *Subject Lessons*, p. 1.

question religious and gendered practices found in India which was intended to lead to an "awakening" to modernity. Raja Rammohan Roy, the "father of the Bengal Renaissance," and other reformers led this sociopolitical reform movement in attempts to question traditions and customs found in India and to praise India's past glories. Because Hindu reformers began questioning the traditions found within their communities, they were more accepting and willing to discuss and implement reform ideas. The Hindu communities, especially in Bengal after the Bengal Renaissance, were the first to embrace western education and the efforts that were made by the colonial state to introduce western education. A new middle-class Hindu community immersed in a set of ideas and culture due to their western education emerged. These western educated Hindus created their own institutions, such as the Hindu Presidency College in 1817, which instilled western education into its curriculum. This new educated collective created a new community of middle-class subjects of the colonial state. Western education, especially the knowledge of the English language, brought new opportunities for the Hindu community to work for the colonial state. These opportunities were obtainable for Hindus who had received western education because they could work in the colonial system due to the knowledge and skills they had learned. Hindus who obtained these positions had now created and immersed themselves in a new middle-class community and culture, but these opportunities were limited to Hindus.

While Hindus, especially in Bengal, began prioritizing this new form of knowledge, Bengali Muslims were hesitant about western education. Aparna Basu writes

in her book *The Growth of Education and Political Development in India, 1898-1920,* "While the Hindus, urged by Rammohan Roy, were crowding English schools and colleges, the Muslims sat apart, wrapped in memory of their traditions, and held back by the conservatism of Islam."[21] The hesitancy that Muslims obtained was partly due to their conservative belief system and their desire to hold onto traditional ideas of knowledge formation. Basu writes,

> It is a generally accepted theory that Muslims held aloof from the new system of education because it was opposed to their tradition, unsuited to their requirements and hateful to their religion; that they kept away from English schools because of the want of Muslim teachers, the absence of any provision for teaching the Muslim languages and the absence of religious education in the schools.[22]

Muslims were still immersed in traditional ways of knowledge formation and culture that could be traced back to the glorified Mughal empire and the preceding Muslim princely states in the Indian subcontinent. Their hesitancy was attributed to their unwillingness to conform to new ways of learning and new educational styles in order to preserve traditional ideas and practices. One of these traditions included the utilization of language. English was the predominant language taught in western style educational institutions in order to educate a group of subjects who could be equipped to work for the

[21] Aparna Basu, *The Growth of Education and Political Development in India, 1898-1920* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 147.

[22] Basu, *The Growth of Education and Political Development in India,* p. 151.

colonial state.[23] English was a major aspect of a well-rounded western style education, so much so that the term English education has synonymously been used to describe western education by historians who study South Asian and British history. Prior to the colonial state's arrival, under the Muslim Mughal empire, languages such as Persian were the dominant languages used for administrative works. Muslims were unwilling to accept the utilization of English because embracing English would signify a loss of the historical past and traditions. To Muslims, Persian and Urdu signified a sense of culture.

The British took the unwillingness of Muslims to embrace western style education as a sign of weakness. While Hindus had embraced western education, the British believed that Hindus had made far more advancements within the hierarchal colonial system, and Muslims had fallen "backwards" due to their lack of western education and utilization of the English language.[24] To the British, Muslims had failed to embrace modern forms of knowledge and instead continued to bask in traditional Muslim cultures of the past. British criticism was backed by statistical analysis of western education within the Muslim community. David Lelyveld discusses this lack of western education in his book, *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India*, and states,

> Punjabi and Bengali Muslims were overwhelmingly poor, illiterate peasants; in fact, over two-thirds of the Muslims of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh (later known as the United Provinces) were the same, and most of the rest were

[23] Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 2.

[24] Seth, *Subject Lessons*, p. 11.

> equally poor and illiterate urban laborers. Estimated literacy for North-Western Provinces and Oudh Muslims was something on the order of three percent.[25]

While the British criticized Muslims for their inability to embrace western education, they also had a growing concern that Muslims would fall behind and eventually would not be productive subjects for the colonial state if measures were not made to educate Muslims. Due to this, it was important for the British to create efforts to introduce and encourage western style education. At the same time, Muslims in Bengal had some reasons for complaining about their "backwards" state, and they mainly attributed their state to colonial rule and Britain's inability to provide educational opportunities.[26] It is then, that both British and Muslim leaders began discussing ways that Muslims could receive western education.

In order to get Muslims immersed in this new western education and the middle-class culture, Muslim social leaders, who were generally part of the elite class or had positions and careers within the Muslim community, undertook the project of educating Muslims throughout the Indian subcontinent. Muslim elites acknowledged the colonial state's criticism of the Muslim community's "backwardness" and they believed that opportunities for Muslims needed to be made. Historian Sanjay Joshi, who has written extensively on the middle-class, writes in his book *The Middle Class in Colonial India*,

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[25] David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 15.

[26] Basu, *The Growth of Education and Political Development in India*, p. 150.

> Being middle class in colonial India was a project undertaken by a social elite which deployed a category consciously picked up from the history of their rulers, the British. Taking a cue from the enlightened, progressive role attributed to the middle class in British history, western educated elites of colonial India found a little trouble in representing themselves in the same way.[27]

Muslim elites and leaders began prioritizing western education similar to the British, and thus it created a new sociopolitical middle class in Indian society. These Muslim elites became the forefathers to introduce western education in Muslim communities. They did so through the official endorsement of the colonial government. In 1881, the Indian education commission, led by William Wilson Hunter, endorsed the idea that Muslims had fallen behind in education and made seventeen recommendations designed to redress the problem.[28] Muslim elites and leaders took these recommendations and began creating educational opportunities.

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, an Islamic reformist, was one of the first Muslims who started efforts to create educational opportunities for Muslims in India. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan founded Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College, currently known as Aligarh Muslim University, in Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh in 1875. Sayyid Ahmad visited Britain in 1869 and saw how intellectually rich the country was in comparison to the Indian Muslim community. He recognized the importance of western education and the English language, which could provide Indian Muslims with the education that they would need

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[27] Sanjay Joshi, *The Middle Class in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. xxi-xxii.

[28] Seth, *Subject Lessons*, p. 112.

to be leaders of the Muslim community. After his visit, he believed that western education and English was a necessity for Muslims in India. Upon returning to India, he started organizing a college for Muslim boys. This college, in Sayyid Ahmad's eyes, was designed to teach modern western education and required English and other languages to be taught. Other than the English language, western education had much more to offer such as science, modern medicine, etc. Sayyid Ahmad wanted to establish this college so that Indian Muslims had access to western education, while at the same time they could hold onto their Islamic faith and traditional culture.[29]

New goals and institutions that had been created in response to the criticism made towards the Muslim community brought new opportunities for Muslims. Institutions like Aligarh University motivated Muslims to seek western education and immerse themselves into a new Muslim middle-class culture. This Muslim middle-class culture, also known as *sharif* culture, became comparable to the Hindu middle-class culture that was growing alongside the Muslim middle-class. Western education and the ability to utilize the English education became prerequisites to become a part of the middle-class. It also brought many opportunities beyond knowledge and education. At Aligarh University, "There would be specialized courses of study suitable to government service, law and medicine, commerce, land management, and scholarship in arts, science, or religion. All would get a religious education as needed to carry out the obligations of

[29] Basu, *The Growth of Education and Political Development in India*, p. 157.

Islam."[30] Institutions, like Aligarh University, made a priority to provide education and skills that would directly help Muslim men receive positions and careers within the colonial state or within their communities, similar to the Hindu middle-class. English education provided the language skills that men would need to work in administrative positions for the colonial state.[31] While leaders such as Sayyid Ahmad believed that Western education was important for the advancement of the Muslim community in the Indian subcontinent, they also wanted to provide the necessary knowledge that young Muslim men would need to carry out their duties as Muslim men. By giving a strong religious foundation, Sayyid Ahmad wanted these Muslim men to become leaders within their communities and to help the advancement of the *ummah* (the entire Muslim community).

Once western education was more widely embraced in Muslim communities, receiving western education became sociably necessary and essential for members of *sharif* households. This middle-class culture had its own new sets of beliefs, values, and modes of politics, thus creating a new social group.[32] The class system is a complex cultural construct that classifies people within society to a certain class. It is usually classified by both economic and social characteristics. While economic status is

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[30] Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation*, p. 123.

[31] Tithi Bhattacharya, *The Sentinels of Culture: Class, Education, and the Colonial Intellectual in Bengal* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 4.

[32] Joshi, *The Middle Class in Colonial India*, p. xvii.

important in identifying someone as middle-class, it is often the social ideals and lifestyle that one obtains that defines them as middle-class. In the case of late nineteenth and early twentieth India, western education gave male family members direct access to the new emerging middle-class culture that they may have once not been able to obtain. Thus, education became one of the most marketable skills for a Muslim male.[33] Obtaining western education became a sign of prestige, and men were expected to continue their family lineage of western educated male family members in order to maintain their family honor and reputation within their communities. For some Muslim households it became a gender expectation for male family members to receive western education, so that they too could be respectable sons, brothers, husbands, and fathers for their families. This new middle-class culture put greater pressure on men to be the financial backbone of the family. Having an education provided jobs that paid better than lower-class careers, and thus men could carry out their gender roles as the financial backbone of their families. Men began following their father's and grandfather's footsteps by prioritizing western education and obtaining career paths.

Women's Movement

So where were Muslim women when their male family members were able to receive western education, immerse themselves in a new middle-class culture, and obtain new career opportunities? Women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were

[33] Sanjay Joshi, *Fractured Modernity: The Making of a Middle Class in Colonial North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 7.

bound by the traditions of seclusion. While Muslim women grew up in the same environment as their male family members, women did not receive equal opportunities as them. Middle-class Muslim women faced a life of seclusion in their homes as they watched their fathers, brothers, and husbands engage in a society outside their homes. Women's accessibility to education was extremely limited in comparison to men. While men were seen as the superior gender in the patriarchal society, any access to education or opportunities that women received was given to them through the male patriarch of the family. Women were expected to continue their lives in seclusions and to carry out their gender expectations and roles, and due to this, women lacked a sense of individuality. This oppressive status of women became a point of criticism for both the British colonists and Indian men, and it began a discourse about modernity between these two groups.

In response to the colonial state's and Indian nationalists' inability to provide genuine advancement for women, the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century began a new wave of reform efforts and movements by Indian women. Women who were part of this movement believed that they had been left out of the conversation when it came to reform ideas and the necessary steps that needed to be taken in order to give women a better quality of life. Thus, this movement was a way for Indian women to join the discourse alongside British men and Indian nationalist. The women's reform movement shed light on two critical aspects: the conditions women lived in and reforms that needed to be made in India. By discussing the condition that women lived in, it gave women the ability to show how critical the condition of women truly was in the Indian subcontinent.

Women also began discussing the necessary reform steps and solutions that women needed in order to improve their condition.

Women began the movement by addressing the issues that were directly rooted to their oppression. Women began using writing as a tool to publish literary works and other forms of writing to discuss the experiences of oppression that they had faced. At the same time, they were publicly criticizing Indian men for creating a patriarchal society that kept women in an inferior position in society, and they began to also criticize the British colonial state for not providing the necessary opportunities that women would need to grow out of their oppressed positions. Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was one of the most prominent leaders of the women's movement during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. She indirectly criticizes the British government and Indian nationalists by stating in her lecture for the Bengal Women's Educational Conference in February 1927,

> You might be surprised to learn that I have been crying for the loneliest creature in India for the last twenty-two years. Do you know who that lowliest creature in India is? It is the Indian women. No one has ever experienced any anguish for them. Mahatma Gandhi was aggrieved by the suffering of the Untouchables; by traveling in third-class, he tried to comprehend the plight of the impoverished railway-travelers. There are people also who feel for animals, so we see animals' rights groups everywhere. If a dog is hit by a car, we hear an outcry in the Anglo-Indian media. But there's not a single soul in the whole of the subcontinent to mourn for incarcerated women like us.[34]

[34] Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *The Essential Rokeya: Selected Works of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880 – 1932)* ed. Mohammad Quayum (Leiden: Brill, 2013), p. 127.

Feminists like Rokeya believed that nobody had supported women and had only kept them in inferior positions within society. Rokeya's lecture was impactful because women had not openly criticized men for their inferior state, but the women's movement during this time allowed women to start questioning their position within society and to start discussing reforms of women's issues. Although the women's movement gave women more room to criticize men, Rokeya's ability to speak openly about women's issues and blaming men was still considered a bold move. Even though some women began criticizing men, not every woman dared to criticize them so openly. At the end of the day, women were still part of the patriarchal society and openly discussing that men were at fault for keeping women oppressed would have caused societal backlash.

Women also started reimagining the world they lived in and their position within society. They did this through two different ways. The first was to contest the oppressive traditions and culture in which they lived. British men and Indian nationalists had already discussed how oppressive some traditions had been for women such as sati, child marriage, widowhood, polygamy, lack of education, and *purdah*. However, what they failed to do was to address these issues and bring real reform. It wasn't until the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that women began protesting for laws and reform for oppressive traditions. One of the most prominent examples is the fight for the Sarda Act, also known as the Child Marriage Restraint Act, which was passed in 1929. Women collectivized in order to protest the age of marriage for girls. Child marriage was

practiced throughout the Indian subcontinent, and women believed that the British government needed to pass laws that would provide change. Mrinalini Sinha writes, "They thus went on to urge the Legislative Assembly and Legislative Councils to enact measures that prohibited child marriage, early parentage, enforced widowhood, dedication of girls to temples, and commercialized vice (prostitution) in India."[35] And this shows, that women were now questioning their past and were starting to reimagine what the future would look like for women. On the other hand, women protesting in this new women's movement expanded gender roles for women. They no longer wanted to be expected to marry at a young age and live a life of seclusion and submission to their husbands. They wanted the right to marry at a later age. At the same time, their ability to protest created a new gender role that they had not been able to claim before: citizens. Sinha writes, "The alternative genealogy makes clear that the "'difference'" of anticolonial nationalism was constituted not just in an inner/spiritual sphere where the cultural autonomy of community identities was asserted. It was constituted also in an outer/material sphere wherein a new construction of "women" provided basis for a national vocabulary of citizenship."[36] The movement that women were now involved in gave women a voice in their government. They could now make direct claims over the British government as citizens. Although the Sarda Act was not enforced to its full extent,

[35] Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 141.

[36] Sinha, *Specters of Mother India*, *p.* 253.

its passage showed that women were beginning to have an impact and voice. Women were now seen as a part of society who could protest for policies and legislations that protected them under the law.

The second way women started reimagining their position within society was by discussing how they could expand their gender roles and what rights they had. Women wanted to expand their gender roles because they had limited accessibility to the society outside their homes and the gender expectations and norms that they had to adhere to were often given to them by men and that they had followed in name the name of tradition and culture. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the women's movement sought to redefine the "new woman" on their own terms. One of the most important aspects of the society that feminists wanted was greater equality between men and women.[37] Greater equality for women would mean that women now could have the same opportunities as men. This would be a great advancement for women because they had very limited opportunities under seclusion, and it would give women the opportunity to become more involved within society outside their homes. Women also started discussing their rights that had been ignored by patriarchal society. This is mostly seen by Muslim feminists such as Rokeya who began to argue that Islam offers many rights to women. Rokeya wrote in her essay titled *God Gives, Man Robs*, "And on the other hand, while Islam allows every freedom to women (so much so that women cannot be given in

[37] Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, p. 28.

marriage without her consent in free will, which indirectly prohibits child marriage), we see people giving away their daughters in marriage at tender ages or giving them in marriage without their consent."[38] Rokeya believed that women actually had more rights under Islam than men had given women, and she uses Islam to shed light on women's rights. Rokeya, a Muslim herself, uses Islam to show that religiously there aren't any parts of the Qur'an or Hadiths (the sayings of Prophet Muhammad) that promote the oppression of women. Instead, she argues that Islam protects women and gives them rights.

Rokeya, a notable writer of this women's movement, wrote in response to the oppressive life she and many other women had faced. Writing was a tool for Rokeya to discuss women's issues such as the oppression of women and reform solutions that needed to take place to improve women's quality of life. Many women published works during this period, however Rokeya is a notable feminist writer because of her use of fictional writing. Rokeya wrote two fictional pieces, *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag*, to describe women's issues that she believed needed reform. Both these works use utopian style writing, where the female characters live in an idealistic world for women. She was a unique writer of this period because she was the only woman who had published works

[38] Hossain, *The Essential Rokeya*, p. 170.

in a fictional setting that still addressed the activism that women's organization and the overall movement targeted.

Print Culture

Rokeya's utopian works were written during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. By this time, printing had become a popular medium for Indians across the subcontinent to read about current news, read for entertainment, and to use printed material for knowledge formation. Not all of India was literate, but India transformed to a literacy aware society. While not everyone could read, people did gather around to hear news, or religious texts read out loud to them. Rokeya's works could not have been published without this thriving print culture. During the Mughal reign, printed works were created in Persian for administrative duties. Under the colonial rule, the utilization of print transformed after the 1857 Indian Rebellion. British officials used print, especially vernacular printing, to keep closer tabs on local information. The British censored and surveilled the printing press in order to gather any information that could be seen as a threat toward the British's rule in India.[39] Many local newspapers, magazines, and books circulated as a result of the thriving print culture that began as a British response to the rebellion. The popularization of print then grew beyond the British's

[39] Anindita Ghosh, *Power in Print: Popular Publishing and the Politics of Language and Culture in a Colonial Society, 1778–1905* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 15.

control and many local communities began immersing themselves in this print culture in many different vernaculars. These publications became widespread because they utilized everyday language that was accessible to the average person.[40] By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the print culture in India throve beyond the British's desire of surveillance, and rather print became part of the everyday culture in the lives of both men and women. This meant that the print culture throughout the Indian subcontinent had become a form of culture that was a vital aspect of their everyday lives. A wide range of people such as missionaries, pundits, literary scholars, social reformers, caste and religious spokespersons and nationalist began publishing their own works.[41] As print became more popular the production of print became cheaper and more accessible, and print became a desirable medium of communication.

Women who could read had access to published works in various languages such English as well as local vernaculars, such as Bengali, and began immersing themselves in this print culture.[42] Women at first became part of this print culture as casual readers, but it is in within this framework that women themselves eventually began publishing their own works about women's issues. However, the accessibility of writing published works was limited to women who had the opportunity to learn how to read and write. Most

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[40] Anindita Ghosh, *Power in Print*, p. 16.

[41] Charu Gupta, *Gendering Colonial India: Reforms, Print, Caste and Communalism* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2012), p. 21.

[42] Anindita Ghosh, *Power in Print*, p. 229.

women did not have the opportunity to learn how to read and write because it went against traditional gender roles and norms for women. Women who did write prior to this period did not write with the intention of becoming part of a print culture. They mostly wrote personal journals or letters that were meant to be a private form of writing. Rokeya was one of the women who had lived in a strict and restrictive environment but was fortunate enough to have prior knowledge of reading and writing from her brother and husband who encouraged her to immerse herself in writing. Her desire and ability to create published works derived from her aim to communicate her world views.

Rokeya was a notable author for utilizing English in her works. Not only did this allow her works to be understood by many Indian and British people, but it showed that Rokeya's goal was to have her works spread across the Indian subcontinent. The print culture during this period was dependent on print that communicated ideas in local vernaculars. English was a more encompassing language that allowed Rokeya to express her ideas to a larger audience. Due to this, her usage of English is important because her ideas of gender transcended beyond provincial borders and across India.

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was a Bengali feminist writer during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century who sought to address the issues concerning the practice of *purdah* and the overall oppressive condition of women in Indian subcontinent. Rokeya was born December 9th, 1880, in a village called Pairaband (which was once

named Rangpur) found in the Bengal Presidency. She grew up in a middle-class Muslim household where her father, Zahiruddin Mohammad Abu Ali Saber, was a *zamindar* for the British colonial state. *Zamindars* served as land revenue collectors for the British government in India. He, like many other *zamindars*, had received an education and was fluent in many languages including Arabic and Persian.[43] Saber was the patriarch of the home and thus was responsible for upholding a strict middle-class Muslim lifestyle and household for his family and himself. He adhered to many of the patriarchal traditions and customs found in nineteenth and twentieth century homes. Saber's household was expected to follow the *purdah* system where the women, his four wives and daughters, had to be physically secluded from the rest of the household. Anwar Dil and Afia Dil write in their book, *Women's Changing Position in Bangladesh: Tribute to Begum Rokeya*,

> In the words of Rokeya: 'I had to observe purdah…as soon as any woman of the locality would come, somebody in our house would give a signal with the eye and I would run pell-mell and hide myself anywhere in the nook of the kitchen, within the rolled up pallet of the maid servant, and sometimes under the bedstead…if I fail to understand the signal of the eye and came across somebody, the well-wishing elders would say: 'How shameless the girls have become.'[44]

In conjunction with a life in the confines of a *zenana*, Rokeya, her elder sister Karimunnesa, and her younger sister Homeira did not receive any formal secular education. They, like many other girls in seclusion, had received very little religious

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[43] Anwar Dil and Afia Dil, *Women's Changing Position in Bangladesh: Tribute to Begum Rokeya* (Dhaka: Intellectual Forum and Adorn Publication, 2014), p. 28.

[44] Dil and Dil, *Women's Changing Position in Bangladesh*, p. 28.

education and they were taught, "recitation of the Qur'an like a parrot, without the benefit of understanding its meaning."[45]

Rokeya's father, Saber, was the patriarch figure of the household that upheld the gender norms and expectation for everyone, especially his daughters. His ideals aligned with the normative gender discrepancies between men and women. For example, Saber made sure that his sons received a well-rounded English education and were well versed in Arabic, Persian, Urdu and English so that they too could receive the same opportunities he did, especially to be a *zamindar*.[46] On the other hand, he did not give his daughters the same opportunities to receive education and kept them in secluded confines. Rokeya viewed her father as every other male patriarch: a man that had chosen a life based on the gender norms set by societal norms. However, in contrast to her father, Rokeya's brother, Abul Asad Ibrahim Saber, sympathized with his sisters and believed that they too should receive some form of education. Ibrahim had the opportunity to receive English education from St. Xavier's College in Calcutta, given that the male siblings in their Muslim household were allowed this privilege.[47] Ibrahim knew that the middle-class household he grew up in valued education because it brought progress and opportunities for men, and he believed that women, especially his sisters, should have the

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[45] Hossain, *The Essential Rokeya*, p. XVII.

[46] Bharati Ray, *Early Feminists of Colonial India: Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 20.

[47] Dil and Dil, *Women's Changing Position in Bangladesh*, p. *29*.

same opportunity to receive an education. He obtained progressive ideals when it came to education and decided that he wanted to teach his sisters Bengali and English so that they too could change the course of their future lives. Hasna Joarder and Safiuddin Joarder describe how Ibrahim became a teacher for his sisters by stating,

> The brother and sister would begin their sessions at the dead of night when all the members of the household had gone to sleep; else there was the possibility of their father preventing her daughter from receiving the 'corrupt' modern education. The small girl proved to be an avid learner and her 'teacher' was very diligent in imparting knowledge of all kinds to his small 'pupil.' Thus, by a stroke of fortune Rokeya, living in a conservative family in a sleepy, out-of-the-way village in Rangpur, had the world of knowledge spread before her eyes by her large-hearted brother.[48]

The siblings knew that this was not allowed and if caught, their father and other family members would react harshly. Rokeya was indebted to her brother who took a significant risk so that his sisters would receive some form of education. He had opened Rokeya's world beyond the confines of her *zenana*. She was now able to expand her opportunities due to the education she had received. Her father had kept her in seclusion, while her brother recognized her potential and wanted her to have more opportunities other than life in seclusion. Rokeya was always thankful and appreciative of her brother for giving her the opportunity to learn how to read and write in English and Bengali.

Rokeya was married to Khan Bahadur Sakhawat Hossain at the age of eighteen in the year 1898. Like her brother, Sakhawat was well-educated and had received an

[48] Hasina Joarder and Safiuddin Joarder, *Begum Rokeya: The Emancipator* (Dacca: Nari Kalyan Sangstha, 1980), p. 6.

education in agriculture from England. Sakhawat, once married to Rokeya, started teaching Rokeya how to read and write in English, which she was very keen on.[49] He had a progressive outlook in terms of education for women. Historian Bharati Ray writes, "Sakhawat believed in the need for women's education and gave full support to Rokeya in her pursuit of learning as well as in her literary activities."[50] It was with the support of her husband that Rokeya pursed a life of literary writing. Sakhawat had seen the talent and passion Rokeya had in education and writing that he encouraged her to put her ideas down on paper so that she could fully express and publicize her thoughts.

Rokeya had a rare life where she was able to learn how to read and write in multiple languages since her brother and husband had taught her and encouraged her to pursue a life outside the *zenana*. This shows that although patriarchal values and gender norms were part of Rokeya's life, especially through her father, she was able to see in her lifetime that social norms could evolve as seen with her brother and husband. Rokeya's life as a writer was a unique one for the time period. On average, not many women during this period pursued writing mainly due to their secluded lives under the patriarchal system. However, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century a new wave of feminist writers, such as Rokeya, Pandita Ramabai, and Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, began

[49] Ray, *Early Feminists of Colonial India*, p. 22.

[50] Ray, *Early Feminists of Colonial India*, p. 22.

writing about their circumstances in the oppressive patriarchal society. As stated by Md. Mahmudul Hasan about Northern Indian and Bengali Muslims,

> During the colonial period, there was a strong feminist intellectual movement among Muslims in North India spearheaded by a host of writers and social reformers. Among Bengal Muslims, such feminist consciousness–raising activism took off in a real sense with the intellectual culture of Rokeya. Feminist intellectuals in both regions fight to facilitate women's education and to remove women's legal disabilities and other restrictions in family and social life. Both these feminist literary traditions put together constitute a vibrant intellectual culture.[51]

Rokeya used her works to discuss the condition in which women lived in, the possible reform solutions to help women, and the idealistic world for women to improve their quality of life. Rokeya wrote five major publications (*Motichur Part One, Motichur Part Two, Sultana's Dream, Padmarag, Avarodhbasini*) along with articles in magazines that covered a wide range of women's issues. Rokeya used writing to show how she and many other women were limited by the societal and cultural atmosphere, they inhabited. As a middle-class Muslim woman in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, her accessibility to society was denied by her culture.

Patriarchal Society

The social environment that Rokeya grew up in was based around a patriarchal society. The patriarchal structure found in Muslim middle- and upper-class households

[51] Md. Mahmudul Hasan, *A Feminist Foremother: Critical Essays of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain*, ed. Mohammad A. Quayum and Md. Mahmudul Hasan (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2017), p. 104.

derived from both social and religious ideals. These ideals created and shaped the environment in which Muslim women lived in. Religious Muslim and Hindu male leaders became advocates for the suppressive position of women in society. The most well-known document in this regard is Maulana Ashraf ‘Ali Thanawi’s *Bihishti Zewar* (Heavenly Ornaments) which was originally written in the early 1900s and published in 1981. Maulana Ashraf ‘Ali Thanawi (1864-1943) was part of the Deobandi reform movement, during the late nineteenth century, that sought to reform the awry Indian society. To bring order to this world, Muslim leaders such as Maulana Ashraf ‘Ali Thanawi believed that the structure of society must be reformed. As a leader of the Deobandi movement, he wrote *Bihishti Zewar* as a guide for women that discussed and listed the necessary duties and proper behaviors a respectable Muslim woman should adhere to.[52] He wrote this guide because he believed that women needed to be instructed about proper behavior. *Bihishti Zewar* became a popular gift for newlywed brides so that they could learn to be ideal women for their new families. Barbra Daly Metcalf writes, “Though men and women are identical in all that matters, Thanawi never questions their different social roles. Women are meant to be socially subordinate to men and to adhere to the shari’at standard of seclusion, when possible, inside the home.”[53] Published works like these further established gender norms and expectations for women. At the same

[52] Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Perfecting Women: Maulana Ashraf Thanawi’s Bihishti Zewar* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 3.

[53] Metcalf, *Perfecting Women*, p. 9.

time, it portrayed a certain view of the Indian woman, "…the women's behavior he saw as largely uncontrolled and emotional…. The anxiety over women's behavior suggest that women are seen as an extension of men: in women, men see the lack of control they most fear in themselves."[54] Some aspects that Maulana Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi discusses in his work include the avoidance of lustful sin, the importance of prayer, and stories of ideal religious Muslim women so that women could learn to idealize proper behavior. It was with this perspective that religious ideals were used to develop patriarchal societal and gender norms.

While religion played a major role in the development of ideals found in patriarchal society, caste and class was just as important. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, men from middle- and upper-class households began to immerse themselves in a new class society defined by English education. This English education provided them new opportunities and careers within the colonial framework. Women of these middle-class households did not have the same opportunity as their male counterparts. Their lifestyles contrasted from their male family members, and they were expected to live a sheltered lifestyle. Historian Hanna Papanek discusses the importance of women's behavior by stating, "At the same time, women who are sheltered became important demonstrators of the status of their protectors, and their behavior became

[54] Metcalf, *Perfecting Women*, p. 14.

important in terms of honor and family pride for the entire kin group."[55] This new middle-class was founded on the ideal of *izzat* (honor, reputation, and prestige), and the behavior of the women in these households directly reflected the reputation of the entire family.[56] Women fulfilled their gender expectations by being subordinate to their male family members.

The specific gendered experiences that women faced was directly controlled by men. This made men the gatekeepers of the patriarchal society. Women on the other hand were just as involved in this patriarchal society; they had to adhere to the gendered traditions observed in their homes. The traditions and ideals found in this patriarchal society were deeply engrained within each household, and women had little room to protest their social status, environment, and condition. Thus, women became members in a male dominated society that they had no say in. Women's biggest gender expectation was to be ideal daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers in their families. During the nineteenth and twentieth century, these gender expectations began at birth and were adhered through many traditions found within the home. At birth, baby girls faced a higher risk of infanticide due to the preference of male babies. Male babies were preferred over female babies because it was believed that they could carry out the familial kin name. In addition, the religious and social ideals about women's inferior status

[55] Hanna Papanek and Gail Minault, *Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia* (Delhi: Kay Kay Printers, 1982), p. 8.

[56] Papanek and Minault, *Separate Worlds*, p. 39.

created a social environment that put baby girls at a higher risk for infanticide. Their educational experience was limited, where they had little access to formal education. Most of their education consisted of religious education to further instill religious ideals. Most of the time, women did not learn to read and write so their religious knowledge mainly consisted of repetition of the Quran. If given the opportunity, women only learned basic reading and writing skills that were not sufficient to be utilized outside the home. Historian Judith E Walsh's book, *How To Be The Goddess Of Your Home*, translates and analyzes manuals written in late nineteenth century Bengal that were printed and distributed to teach young women gender expectations. These manuals have become important historical documents that depict the gender discrepancies found in the patriarchal society. These manuals lay out the appropriate gender roles that women were expected to adhere to. At the same time these manuals show what a woman's place was in the home. For example, "A housewife is nothing other than a very competent, well-rounded woman. She has to keep her eye on everything. When a woman can perform her own duties perfectly while still keeping a constant lookout for any way to inexpensively make her family more comfortable, then she is a housewife in the true sense of the term."[57] During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century women's lives involved men at every stage of their lives. At the beginning her father was her patriarch, and if her

[57] Judith E. Walsh, *How to be the Goddess of Your Home: An Anthology of Bengali Domestic Manuals* (New Delhi Yoda Press, 2005), p. 90.

father passed away then her eldest brother took over the role of patriarch. Once she married, she was expected to serve her husband and be a subservient wife and loving mother. If a woman did not have these key men in her life, then it was considered that she was missing the most important aspect of her life.

Purdah

The most prominent traditions found in middle- and upper-class Muslim patriarchal households in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was the observance and practice of *purdah*. *Purdah* can be translated to as curtain or veil in Hindi and Urdu. The gendered tradition of *purdah* was to keep women secluded from society through various practices within the home. Ideal Muslim women were expected to be secluded from society in order to maintain the hierarchy of the patriarchal society. *Purdah* was one of the most important ways men kept women in an inferior state within the home. A Muslim woman usually began observing seclusion in *purdah* once she had reached puberty.[58] There were two forms of *purdah* that could be found in middle- and elite-class Muslim households: physical seclusion and symbolic seclusion. These forms of seclusion were implemented in the home to further uphold the traditionalist views of women.

Physical purdah was one of the most common ways middle- and upper-class Indian women were secluded from society. There were two main forms of physically

[58] Papanek and Minault, *Separate Worlds*, p. 3.

secluding women in society. For many Muslim women they spent most of their days in secluded and isolated areas of the household called the *zenana* where they were separated by a physical curtain or veil. These secluded areas were created so that women were unable to see anyone, and the outside world could not see them. Hanna Papanek writes,

> Living spaces for men and women are segregated where purdah is observed. Sections of a house or other living areas are set aside for the exclusive use of women and of those men whom they may see. In the case of the urban poor, this may mean that women in purdah almost never move out of the single room in which the whole family lives. For middle- and upper-class families it may mean separate entrances to the women's part of the house (zenana); the carved screens to cover its windows and balconies are prominent in Muslim architecture. Inside homes, curtains or screens may be used to shield women from the sight of male visitors, even though conversations may be possible.[59]

The physical seclusion of women created a unique dynamic in the home where women were shielded from male figures who were not their family members. Women were expected to remain in their zenanas to avoid any interaction with the outside society. In some homes, women were expected to not interact with both male and female visitors. This ensured that women remained in an environment sheltered and controlled by the men of the household and would not become influenced by society. This is rooted from the fear that men had about maintaining a proper household to uphold their reputation in society. By keeping women in *purdah*, men were able to further micromanage the interactions that women had and thus insured that they avoided any potential incidents

[59] Papanek and Minault, *Separate Worlds*, p. 9.

that may be considered socially taboo or against normative gender expectations. Most women in *purdah* believed that it was a social practice they needed to adhere to.

Women were also physically secluded in areas outside their home to ensure that *purdah* was being always observed. Hanna Papanek states,

> Public spaces are often enclosed so that secluded women may move in them as if they were private. Vehicles can be equipped with curtains and separate compartments set aside for women in trains and buses, although occasionally these compartments are physically but not visually separated. Pathways may be temporary curtained for women alighting from vehicles to enter buildings, for example if there are special ceremonies in private or public buildings such as weddings or religious occasions. Curtains may also be used to separate males and females in coeducational schools, although the majority of schools are not coeducational below the university level.[60]

These forms of seclusion further show that the ideals of the patriarchal society were observed beyond the confines of the home. Indian Muslims in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had fostered an entire societal environment that prioritized the seclusion of women from society in every aspect of women's lives.

The second form of physical seclusion included concealing women's physical bodies. This usually was implemented by the use of a burqa or concealing cloak that women were expected to wear in public settings. While this was also a form of veiling women from society, and especially men who were not family members, some historians such as Hanna Papanek have argued that burqas could be considered liberating.[61] It

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[60] Papanek and Minault, *Separate Worlds*, pp. 9-10.

[61] Papanek and Minault, *Separate Worlds*, p. 10.

allowed women to leave the confines of their *zenanas* and experience the society outside their confined homes. Although they had to veil themselves from others when entering public spaces, they were now able to expand their limiting accessibility of society to enjoy public tasks such as going to the market to shop for produce or visit family members at their homes. *Purdah* in this form was observed in various ways and across varying forms of covering. Some women utilized the burqa that covered a woman's body from head to toe so that the woman was completely covered. Women who wore burqas had netting over the eyes to allow vision and a long cape to cover the hands and wrists. The material needed for this form of veiling was expensive, so many women opted for other forms of veiling including hijabs that covered women's hair. Women also utilized other garments to cover their head and face including the end of the sari which was usually six yards long or their dupatta, a two-yard scarf or veil worn with several dress styles which could be draped in various ways.[62] Women had many degrees of modesty that ranged from complete veiling to veiling certain aspects of their body. Regardless of the degree of covering, veiling had become engrained within the patriarchal society to ensure that women were somewhat secluded from societal interactions.

Other than physical seclusion, women were also symbolically veiled from society. Symbolic seclusion was used by men to limit women's independence and freedom outside the home and in their daily decision making. This meant that women were given

[62] Papanek and Minault, p. 11.

little autonomy outside their homes. The biggest factor included the inability of obtaining educational opportunities. Women were given very little opportunities to receive any form of education. Usually, women only received religious education and did not have the opportunity to experience secular education. Most girls did not go to school physically, and if they did receive some form of education, then a tutor or religious leader/teacher would come to their homes to teach the girls. Women also did not have access to society the same way men did. The men in the patriarchal homes often forbade the female family members to expand their roles beyond the confines of their homes. This meant that women could not obtain jobs or be involved in the larger community outside their homes. Other factors of symbolic seclusion could be found in marriage practices. Women often had arranged marriages where their parents chose their husband, often someone who the parents had good relations with and trusted. For example, some Muslim households preferred to arrange marriages with cousins to ensure that the family that their daughter married into had common ideals so that their daughters could adjust easier after marriage.[63]

While physical seclusion of women in society was a major factor in the practice of *purdah*, it was symbolic seclusion that was practiced on a larger scale. Keeping women secluded in society could be mostly found in middle- and elite-class Muslim and Hindu households rather than lower-class or caste households. Historians have attributed

[63] Papanek and Minault, p. 40.

this to financial cost that comes with keeping women secluded. Women from middle- and elite-class households could be in seclusion because they could afford to be veiled from society, while lower-class women had limited opportunities to stay home due to their financial hardships. Women of lower classes had to work outside their homes in order to provide financially for their families. The practice of veiling women was limited to households that could afford the luxury of keeping their women secluded from society. Other forms of physical seclusion were just as costly, such as physical veils. Burqas required a significant amount of cloth to ensure that women were fully covered, and thus not every household could afford to veil women completely. Economic hardships contributed directly to the widespread observance of symbolic seclusion across the Indian subcontinent. Aspects such as secluding women from societal opportunities and controlling parts of women's daily lives was more financially fiscal for households regardless of financial status.

There is a growing literature of the veiling of modern women that would be beyond the scope of this work. However, it is important to note that this new literature changes the way veiling is viewed in modern times. Scholars such as Leila Ahmed that study Islam and gender have noted a shift in the way modern Muslim women view the physical veiling of a woman's body. More Muslim women today are choosing to wear veils and headscarves. In Leila Ahmed's book, *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's*

Resurgence, from the Middle East to America[64], she discusses that women today have chosen to wear veils to reclaim the spaces that they once had no control over. By wearing a veil out of their own will, women today can now define veiling on their own terms which in turn defines the modern Muslim woman.

Chapters Breakdown: Purdah, Education, and Utopianism

This work seeks to analyze a feminist movement in history that complicated gender relations in India. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was a feminist leader that sought to challenge and reimagine societal gender norms found in the limiting Indian patriarchal society, and her published works, that discussed *purdah*, education, and utopianism, revealed the complex gender dynamics and feminist visions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century India.

The three main themes found in Rokeya's works, *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag*, are highlighted in the three main chapters. The first chapter analyzes the criticism that Rokeya makes about the patriarchal society, specifically through problematizing the gendered practice of purdah. This chapter looks at how Rokeya described life in purdah and her personal experience growing up in purdah. She identifies that there are two forms of purdah, physical and symbolic seclusion. Rokeya argues that women who are not physically secluded in zenanas still face symbolic seclusion. Symbolic seclusion is referred to as the inability for women to participate in

[64] Leila Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

the society they live in without societal backlash. Rokeya wrote about purdah in her works to show how limiting purdah can be for women's independence and freedom. The discussion of purdah incorporates several other topics explored by Rokeya, such as feminism, gender roles, gender norms, and patriarchy. Rokeya also concentrates on the mental, emotional, and physical consequences of women who live a life in purdah. By using fictional characters as an outlet to depict common stories of women in purdah, Rokeya is able to describe purdah intimately and vividly. Simultaneously, purdah is represented as a tradition involving both men and women. Women are kept in an oppressed state away from society and men who limit women's agency by preserving the tradition of purdah. The patriarchal society in which women lived defined women's role and power in society. Purdah was restrictive where women had very little room to define their role in society.

The second chapter examines the solution to women's issues that Rokeya offers, education. Rokeya believed, as did many feminists during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, that allowing women's education was a fundamental and necessary step needed to directly improve women quality of life. As someone who did not receive any formal or non-religious education, Rokeya was grateful for her brother and husband. They gave her the ability to read and write in multiple languages, including English. Through these skills, she was able to publish her thoughts for others to read, which in turn gave her a voice in a society in which women were forbidden to criticize the patriarchal society. Rokeya believed that formal education could allow women some

freedom outside the traditional gender norms they were expected to adhere to. While education did not lead directly to new jobs, Rokeya emphasizes in her works that women needed to learn subjects such as science, history, English, and practical skills to fulfill their roles as daughters, sisters, mothers, and wives in a more effective manner. Education was also thought of as a tool for women to redefine themselves in their society. In middle-class Muslim households, English education allowed male family members to obtain reputable jobs within the colonial state. Women of these households, such as Rokeya, began to advocate for women's education to expand their agency and be considered equal members of society as men.

The third chapter analyzes Rokeya's use of utopianism in her works to show her feminist views and goals. Utopianism is the methodology and setting that Rokeya utilizes in her works to write her narrative pieces, *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag*. Rokeya portrays both stories as the ideal world in which women have more autonomy over their lives. Although Rokeya's other published works and speeches highlight important aspects of women's issues, *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag* are unique because they approach women's issues by illustrating a utopian society in which oppression is addressed and prioritized. In *Sultana's Dream*, women hold more power than men. In *Padmarag*, the setting takes place in Bengal, where women are still part of the patriarchal society but have found a way to create an institution that allows women some independence and freedom. Both worlds emphasize that women's lives in purdah are restrictive, and that education is vital for women's emancipation. Rokeya wrote her stories in a utopian world

because the early nineteenth and late-twentieth-century society that she lived in, did not allow women much space to criticize their oppressive state. Writing a story based on utopianism allowed Rokeya to write about the idealistic world that feminist women had envisioned during the early twentieth century women's movement in India. Although Rokeya faced criticism from men, she was able to write her works without severe consequences because these works were fictional pieces. However, both works were not taken lightly just because they were fictional. They still addressed real problems when it came to women's issues and offered practical reform ideas. Feminists involved in the women's movement drew inspiration from Rokeya's works to further improve the oppressive conditions in which women lived.

Sources

This work does not use traditional sources found in other historical works. Rokeya was a writer that used fiction as an advantage for her literary pieces. She was able to use these works as a creative outlet to fictionize the ideal world that women should live in. Given this, this work mainly utilizes Rokeya's works, *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag*, for the historical analysis. Although, these works are fictional they still reflect and show Rokeya's feminist ideas and visions.

Rokeya's works are rare pieces of history for this time period. Women during this period, as historians of the subaltern school of thought would claim, were part of the subaltern or the "voiceless" agents in history. The archives for women are limited because women as a whole during this period did not write and publish much, but the few

women who did can be used as sources to discuss the lives of women during this period. In order to find the voice of women in history, it is important to use the available sources that women have left behind. Rokeya's account does not speak for every woman's voice in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century India, but it does reveal a change in the ideas and goals women had towards women's issues. It shows a shift in history where women now wanted to make changes about their lives on their own terms.

Figure 0.1: Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain

Figure 0.2: Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Khan Bahadur Sakhawat Hossain

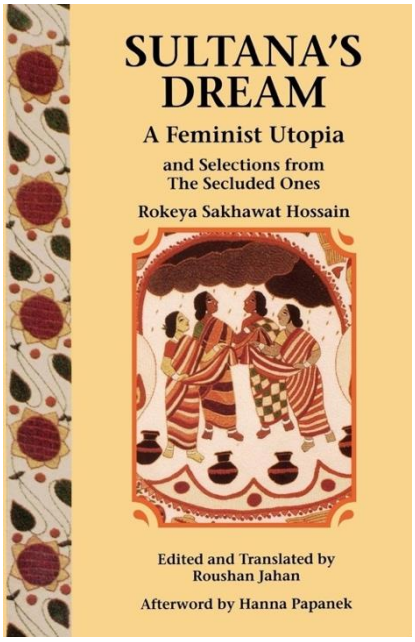

Figure 0.3: Cover of *Sultana's Dream* (Originally Published 1905)

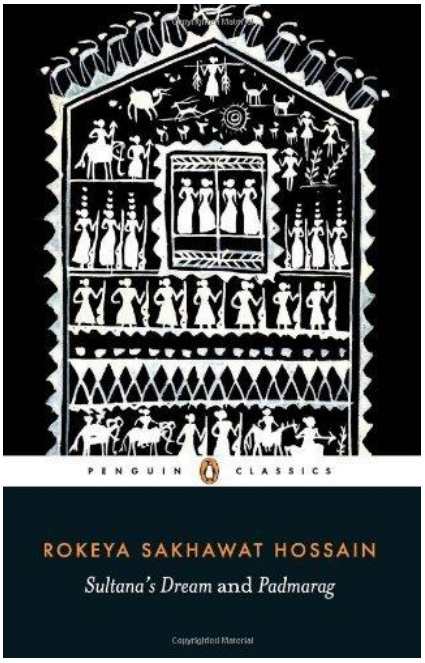

Figure 0.4: Cover of *Padmarag* (Originally Published 1924)

Figure 0.5: Raja Rammohan Roy (1883)

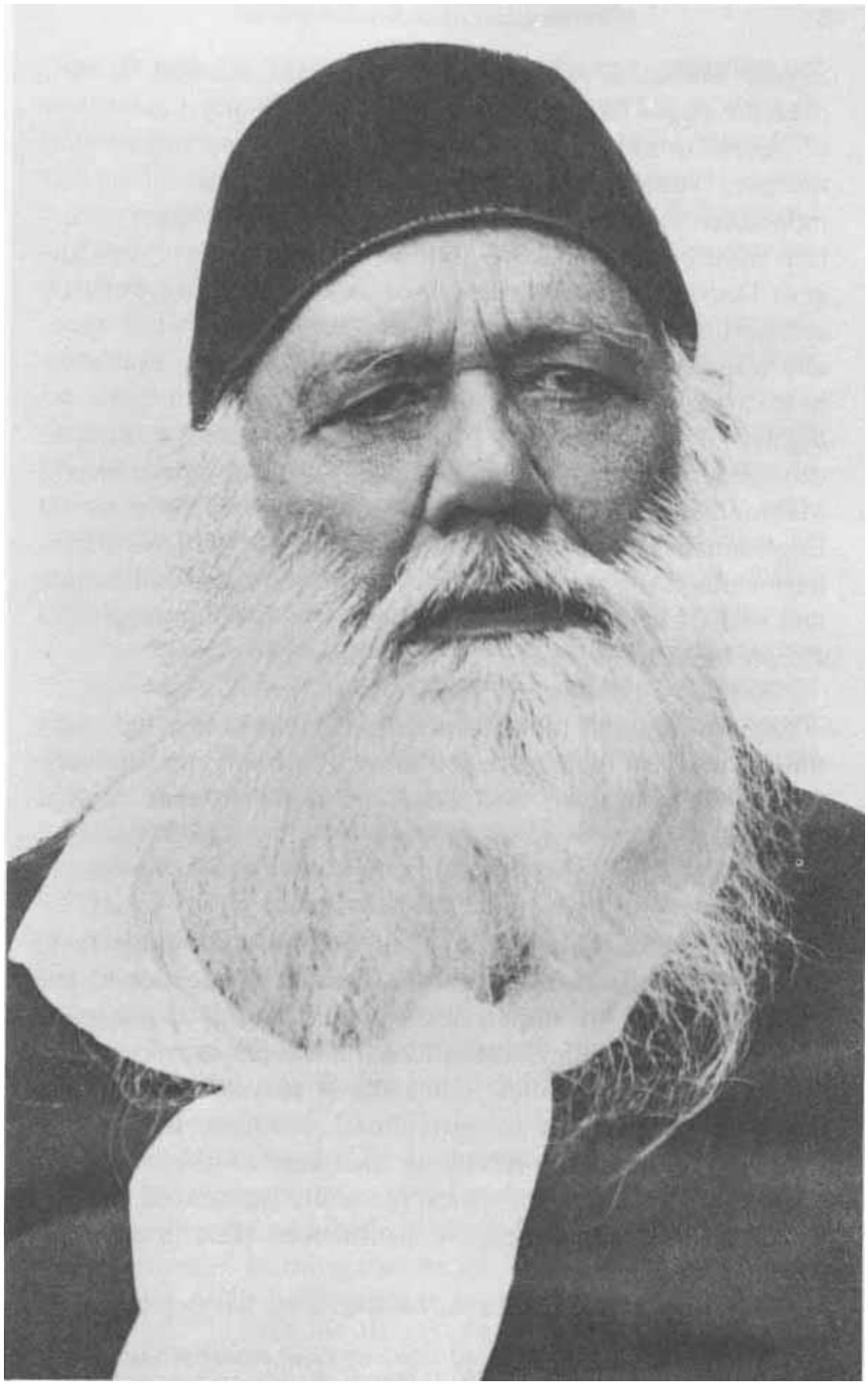

Figure 0.6: Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan

CHAPTER ONE:

Problematizing the Practice of Purdah

The societal world Indian women lived in during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was a patriarchal society defined by men. This patriarchal society found in middle- and upper-class Muslim households had gender specific expectations, roles, norms, and traditions. The social structure of this patriarchal society heavily depended on a hierarchical structure where male family members were the heads of the household. Usually a patriarch, the oldest male member of the household, defined and controlled family member's roles that needed to be carried out. It was in this male dominated household that they defined women's purpose in life. Historian Sonia Nishat Amin writes, "The familial space was perhaps the only domain where women – rich or poor – derived any significance and meaning from their lives and its structure was a key element in maintaining prescribed gender relations."[65] This patriarchal male dominated society controlled every aspect of women's lives from a young age, which in turn gave women very little room to define their own lives. The most prominent tradition of this society was the practice of *purdah*, or the seclusion of women both physically and symbolically. Women were denied access to society by living in secluded dwellings called *zenanas*, they had very little interactions with society outside their homes, and they

[65] Sonia Nishat Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876 - 1938* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), p. 36.

were denied opportunities such as financial independence and western education. This troubled feminist writer Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain because she not only had personal experiences with the practice of *purdah*, so she also began openly criticizing the tradition. Rokeya used her writing to problematize the practice of *purdah* by criticizing the seclusion of women that limited women in society and their gender roles which she identified as the problem to the continuous oppression of women in India.

Rokeya's Writing About Purdah

Rokeya's first publication, *Avarodhbasini*, unveiled the oppressive experiences she lived through or witnessed during her lifetime. *Avarodhbasini* was published in Calcutta in 1931 as a series of columns in periodicals. She describes forty-seven different incidents of the practice of *purdah* and discusses how each one caused emotional, physical, or mental distress to women's lives. The women she discusses range from all ages from children to elder women. An example that Rokeya discusses in her thirteenth column is about a young girl who was Rokeya's student who was forced to wear a burqa by her father to maintain *purdah*. She wrote, "Just imagine! Hira is a girl of nine only! Even a little girl like her must use a "blind" burqa – or else we flout the great custom of purdah!"[66] Rokeya believed that the patriarchal customs and traditions found in society were harsh and she wanted to shed light on the extent families went through to maintain *purdah*. Her discussion to write about children who faced a life of seclusion was

[66] Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *Inside Seclusion: Avarodhbasini of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain,* ed. Roushan Jahan (Dacca: Women for Women, 1981), p. 46.

deliberately included in her works so that readers could become aware of how early women's life of oppression began. At the same time, Rokeya used *Avarodhbasini* to discuss the hardships women faced in seclusion. Not only does Rokeya write about descriptive incidents of when women faced oppressive situations in their life, she also discusses in detail the physical seclusion that women faced in *purdah*. For example, Rokeya describes the *zenana*, by recalling an article from Punjab in an Urdu newspaper.[67] In this article a woman describes her experience of witnessing the oppression of women in a rich man's village home,

> When I asked, 'Where are the girls?' I was told that they were in the kitchen. I wanted to meet them. Among the assembled ladies, I was the only one taken to the kitchen. It was a small and extremely hot room. But obviously there was no other place for them to go to…. The roof was even more uncomfortable. I was hoping that there would be some place where we would be able to sit comfortably. At least, there would be a shed to keep the rain (and sun) out. But there was nothing. The sun was beating down on a bare roof. There was no arrangement to sit. Moreover, the whole roof was littered with a cow dung-cakes (being dried to be used as fuel). The stench arising from these was horrible…No one seemed to have any time to think of their comfort.[68]

Rokeya's work *Avarodhbasini* is important because in a time where women were expected to be silent and subservient, she wrote openly to criticize about how patriarchal society that women lived in was an oppressive system for women. At the root of the patriarchal society that Rokeya openly criticizes are the men who were the gatekeepers of

[67] Rokeya did not mention the origins or name of the newspaper that she is referencing. This is because she recalls the newspaper article by relying on her memory.

[68] Hossain, *Inside Seclusion*, pp. 52-53.

this oppressive state. Rokeya wrote about a *zamindar* household, "The bride refused to say 'I do' at the wedding assembly – she was ignoring the importunities of her female relatives. Suddenly one of them pinched her and she cried out. They immediately reported that she had consented to marriage. The marriage was solemnized. Hurrah for seclusion."[69] Examples like this show that women did try to push the boundaries of gender norms, however, there were many women who also abided by cultural gendered traditions, as seen with the women who pinched the bride. Women like these often accepted these traditions in the name of culture and sometimes religion and became the repositors of these traditions. Rokeya openly criticized the zamindari background that she had grown up in by arguing against the practice of secluding women in society, which was significant for the time period. Before the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, women would have faced extreme backlash for making comments like this, especially in public spaces such as written publications. Rokeya's works are unique and show how women themselves felt about their oppressive state, both as passive actors and as women who began to evolve their ideas.

Rokeya's discussion of *purdah* went beyond writing about specific incidents of oppression that she had witnessed or faced herself. Two of her most well-known works were *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag*. Rokeya's literary works are unique because they utilize utopian literary strategies to discuss the idealistic world that women would have to

[69] Hossain, *Inside Seclusion*, p. 63.

inhabit in order to have a better quality of life than what they had been facing in late nineteenth and early twentieth century colonial India. These works were published and distributed across the Indian subcontinent and were used to bring awareness to the life of *purdah* that women had been facing and how reform within the patriarchal society needed to occur in order to improve the oppressive state of women.

Sultana's Dream was one of the most influential texts that Rokeya had published. The book has been used by many girls' schools since its publication to discuss fiction, women's issues and utopian writing. *Sultana's Dream* is set in an alternative reality called Ladyland. Roushan Jahan writes, "In Ladyland men are a part of the society but are shorn of power, as women were in Rokeya's India. They live in seclusion and look after the house and children, again, just like the women in Rokeya's India. Women, the dominant gender in Ladyland, do not consider men fit for any skilled work, much as Indian men thought of women at that time."[70] This fictional feminist utopian literature switched the roles of women and men in society, which was a bold exercise that Rokeya engaged with as an Indian woman in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century due to strict gender expectations and norms.

By discussing gendered role reversal, Rokeya tries to engage her audience in a story line that directly criticizes men for upholding oppressive traditions in patriarchy.

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[70] Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *Sultana's Dream: A Feminist Utopia and Selections from The Secluded Ones* ed. Roushan Jahan (New York: The Feminist Press, 1988), *Sultana's Dream*, p. 4.

The story involves two characters, Sultana who lives in colonial India and Sister Sara who is from Ladyland where the two characters meet in Sultana's dream. The dream takes place in Ladyland, a fictional utopia, where Sultana and Sister Sara discuss the differences between their two homes. Sister Sara says, "'As a matter of fact, in your country this very thing is done! Men, who do or at least are capable of doing no end of mischief, are let loose and the innocent women shut up in the zenana! How can you trust those untrained men out of doors?'"[71] Sultana responds, "'We have no hand or a voice in the management of our social affairs. In India man is lord and master. He has taken to himself all powers and privileges and shut up the Women in the zenana.'"[72] Rokeya essentially criticizes the patriarchal society that women live in by discussing that men take all power and privilege and women are silenced and forced inside zenanas. Rokeya also openly criticizes the *purdah* system by showing gender reversal and criticizing men's competency. She wrote, "'How my friends at home will be amused and amazed, when I go back and tell them that in the far-off Ladyland, ladies rule over the country and control all social matters, while gentlemen are kept in the mardanas to mind babies, to cook, and to do all sorts of domestic work;'"[73] By assigning traditional female gender roles to men, Rokeya argues that women are just as capable as men to be involved in the

[71] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*, p. 9.

[72] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*, p. 9.

[73] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*, p. 15.

political and social affairs needed in society. At the same time, she offers a critique towards men to show that they too are just as capable of doing gendered tasks meant for women.

Rokeya not only discusses the physical seclusion of men in Ladyland, but men are also symbolically secluded from society the same way women were in colonial India. Men in this story are described as shy, timid, and awkward especially in public.[74] These attributes reflect the proper behavior that women were expected to maintain in colonial India. In *Sultana's Dream* the men are also described as lacking patience that was needed for specific tasks, such as needlework to stich embroidery.[75] These characteristics show that men in Ladyland were symbolically secluded, stereotyped, and discriminated due to their gender. Commonly in India, women faced these hardships, where their abilities were undermined simply because they were women, and that men were more superior in all aspects. Her imagery of the treatment of men is a direct reflection and criticism of the discrimination of women based on gender.

While this work was written as a fictional piece, the importance of Rokeya's discussion of seclusion in *Sultana's Dream* is vital in perspective of historical context. Many men were outraged by Rokeya's bravery in writing such a piece of literature and she received much criticism for publishing this work. This provocative writing was

[74] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*, p. 8.

[75] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*, p. 10.

unorthodox in colonial India where women were secluded and silenced by men. For a woman to write about men being oppressed in society was unforeseen. Women before Rokeya did not have a voice to discuss the hardships they faced in the patriarchal society, but Rokeya emerged as a feminist writer and carved out a space in the public realm, by publishing her work, to discuss these issues. Rokeya went beyond highlighting the oppressive state of women by creating a feminist utopian literature that openly criticized men, the patriarchal society, and most importantly the practice of *purdah*. In her utopian world, women would not have to face seclusion as they did in late nineteenth and early twentieth colonial India.

Another notable work of Rokeya was her book *Padmarag* because unlike *Sultana's Dream*, that discussed oppression in a reverse perspective of men, *Padmarag* discussed oppression through the lens of women and shows their hardships and how they overcame these hardships. Like *Sultana's Dream*, *Padmarag* was another feminist utopian novel published in 1924. *Padmarag* is different from *Sultana's Dream* because it takes place in a society that resembles the colonial society Rokeya lived in. *Sultana's Dream* took place in a fictional feminist utopia while *Padmarag* is set in contemporary Calcutta, Bengal. The main character Siddika ends up in Tarini Bhavan, a housing facility and school for oppressed women.[76] The book discusses Siddika's time at the housing facility. It traces how Tarini Bhavan supplied jobs and education for women to be

[76] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag*, p. 30.

financially independent. Barnita Bagchi writes, "In Tarini Bhavan, a community set in Bengal and founded and run by their own kind, women from diverse races, regions and religions with personal histories of patriarchal oppression band together, united by the common goal of fulfilling an educational and philanthropic purpose."[77] Rokeya includes various women in this story from different religious and socio-economic, religious, and educational backgrounds to describe her ideas on egalitarianism and the collaboration of women from different religious and socioeconomic backgrounds. Every female character in *Padmarag* discusses their experience in seclusion before they arrived in Tarini Bhavan. It is important to note that like colonial India, Rokeya shows in her story that the practice of *purdah* and seclusion was not limited to just Muslim women but was also a practice found in Hindu households, this is why women of many backgrounds came to Tarini Bhavan. The women in the story called themselves 'sisters' because the lived in a community at Tarini Bhavan and were encouraged to support one another overcome the emotional and physically oppressive hardships they had faced in their lifetime. This created a special bond among these women because they were a sisterhood that came together to support one another's past and uplift each other for a better future.

Rokeya carefully crafted each woman's story in Tarini Bhavan to show various ways women had been oppressed during this time period. While these stories are fictional, they could easily reflect real incidents women experienced. The stories of these

[77] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag*, p. xiii.

women begin with Mrs. Dina-Tarini Sen, who founded Tarini Bhavan after a near life-ending situation where she faced many ailments and doctors had given up. She survived and wanted to create an institution that helped women who had faced severe consequences due to oppressive situations in their life. This institution was created to help women be part of a collective that taught young girls by providing education that they may have not been able to access elsewhere. The women who run Tarini Bhavan all have unique religious and geographic backgrounds and experiences of oppression and have received a new lease on life by escaping their oppressive past to help other women. Tarini Bhavan is owned and run by women and for women. Mrs. Sen's family was not pleased with her work in creating this institution to provide help for women, and she was socially secluded from her family due to this.[78] Mrs. Sen is an example that Rokeya uses to show that women who believed and wanted progress for women in society often faced societal backlash. Rokeya's usage of Mrs. Sen story is also a reflection of how women received backlash. Being excluded socially from one's family was a common form of consequence if family members did not accept a woman's behavior. Mrs. Sen's efforts at Tarini Bhavan to promote education of girls, provide sanctuary for women who escape their oppressive state, and provide jobs for women to be financially independent was a strong critique of, and threat to, the existing patriarchal system which viewed it as an overreaching progressive organization.

[78] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag*, p. 28.

The main character of this book Siddika, or also nicknamed Padmarag, by the women at the institution and, came from a zamindari household where she received little education. Her life skills she had learned were not enough for her to work for a living and be independent as she was bound to a life of seclusion.[79] After facing a life of oppression that she wanted to escape, she ends up at Tarini Bhavan to restart her life. In the story, Padmarag becomes the character through whom the story is told. The story is told from her perspective from the beginning of her time at Tarini Bhavan and it walks through her experiences and introduces the people she meets. As Padmarag meets these women, she learns how oppressive the society in which she lives in has been and that she is not alone in her situation. They have open discussions, especially at night, about different life experiences of being frauded by family members, being discriminated and undermined for being women, their life in seclusion, and the lack of support from family members and the colonial state through their hardships. The women at Tarini Bhavan become her sanctuary to overcome the hardships that she had faced in seclusion.

Padmarag's character shows how Rokeya believed that women needed to come together to support one another through their emotional and physical hardships. In the story, Tarini Bhavan was a safe haven for women, which was a reflection of Rokeya's advocation for institutions that would help women. She shows this through the main character, Padmarag, who becomes the anchor in the story that engaged in supportive

[79] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag*, p. 41.

conversation with other women at Tarini Bhavan. The women at Tarini Bhavan coped with their oppression by leaning on one another to face the emotional repercussions. There are stories that Rokeya wrote to illustrate how these women supported one another. One way these women supported one another was by discussing their emotional trauma and offering advice to each other. These open forms of discussions helped women vent their feelings and they listened and learned ways to cope with their hardships in a safe environment. For Rokeya, including these discussions gave her an opportunity to share stories of how women faced intense consequences due to their lives in *purdah*. One of the women Rokeya discusses in *Padmarag* is Saudamini who faced a life full of emotional hardships. She married her husband and became a stepmother to her husband's children; however, she was treated poorly by her family members, leaving her helpless. She was blamed for infractions such as theft by her family members. Saudamini says, "'I went back with a sigh of relief to my mother's soothing arms. Unfortunately, I failed to win any sympathy for my woes. Not a soul commiserated with me. Even my mother, who happened to be the light of my life in spite of being my stepmother, felt no empathy for my plight."[80] The inclusion of Saudamini's story shows that women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had faced difficulties with their husband's families. Women during this time often lived with their husband's families after marriage and the perception of women as inferior usually intensified family feuds within the

[80] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag*, p. 78.

household. Saudamini's story reflects how women during this time period faced hardships in the form of emotional blackmail and feuds. Saudamini's story shows this through her experience with her husband and her interaction with her mother after she left her husband's home. Women often were treated as secondary within the household and family feuds further kept women in an oppressive and submissive state. Saudamini had limited access to anything other than what her husband and in-laws had expected of her. She was kept in a secluded social environment, and her husband and in-laws dominated and controlled her life. Any infraction, or accusation of one, lead to feuds. She also was not able to find any support from her mother for leaving her husband's home, which further escalated the feud. Additionally, women like Saudamini's mother had become passive agents within the patriarchal society and is symbolic of those women who did not sympathize with women who tried to challenge, escape, or overcome patriarchy. Her mother had little sympathy for her daughter because women were expected to live in the same household as their in-laws and to be a pliant and submissive daughter-in-law who did not get into feuds. If she did get into feuds, it was expected that she resolves these on her own and not run to her parents to solve these issues, because she is no longer considered a family member of her parent's family since she married into her husband's family. Saudamini's mother, like many unsupportive mothers, is a passive agent in the patriarchal society because instead of supporting her daughter she was more focused on upholding patriarchal norms and expectations. She is an agent that follows the social structure, rather than revolting against it. Saudamini's story shows that women had very

little option living in colonial India because they could not find support when they were feuding with their in-laws. They were often fighting these battles by themselves because their husbands would take the side of their parents. The women's parents would often feel that their daughters were not strong enough to resolve issues at their husband's home if she came back to her parents' home after disagreements. The consequences she faced were a direct result of the lack of support she received from both her in-laws and parents. This lack of support and consequences she faced forced her to take charge of her own life by escaping this oppressive environment and finding sanctuary at Tarini Bhavan, where she developed a sisterhood of women.

Rafiya, another sister at Tarini Bhavan, was abandoned by her husband who went to England to study law. He was supposed to return to India in three years; however, he did so ten years later. In the meantime, he mailed his divorce papers from England and to Rafiya's surprise came home with a white woman. Having endured the emotional hardships and not wanting to prolong the trauma by staying with her husband's family, she decided to leave. Rafiya's emotional trauma was significant to the point where she needed proper medical treatment which she received at Tarini Bhavan to stabilize her mental state.[81] Rafiya is a prime example of how women were obligated to continue their gendered roles regardless of the presence of their husband. Women were expected to continue their roles as submissive daughters-in-law to her husband's family even if her

[81] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag*, pp. 92-94.

husband was physically not living with them or had emotionally moved on. This is because legally, they are still married. Rokeya discusses Rafiya's stories to shed light on the disregard to women's emotional state. Her in-laws did not give her the freedom she needed, but instead she was expected to continue to abide to them. Rafiya faced an emotional ten years without her husband and when he did come back to India, he wanted to divorce her and wanted to be with another woman. Her in-laws neglected her trauma and still expected her to continue her wifely duties. Incidents like Rafiya's story were common in late nineteenth and early twentieth century India because the gender expectation in the patriarchal society were strict and women were expected to adhere to these expectations regardless of their emotional state. It was not until she reached Tarini Bhavan where she was relinquished from these gendered expectations.

The stories that Rokeya includes in *Padmarag* are examples of some of the extreme results and consequences that women faced in oppression during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. While the stories may have had extreme consequences that many women had not faced, they were still possible outcomes that women had face during the time period. Rokeya used fictional storytelling as a method of writing in *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag* in order to make vivid and descriptive works that show the severity of the oppressive state of women. Rokeya was able to shed light on how diverse the implementation of *purdah* could be. While the physical seclusion of women was prominent in her works, it is the symbolic seclusion that was more common during the time period she was writing in. As such, it is important to recognize that

Rokeya wrote about *purdah* to address a major societal issue that had been neglected in the past. By writing about purdah, her goal is to address the problem that women faced in seclusion, and she wants to promote a discussion of how the oppression of women can come in diverse forms. She wants women to recognize that they have been in an oppressed state their whole lives and that this societal problem should be addressed.

Impact of Writing About Purdah

The new movement of feminist writers shed light on the intimate details of life in seclusion and how women were kept in an oppressive state in patriarchal society. While it is important to understand the details of women's experiences in seclusion that these writers wrote about, the actual act of writing during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century has become a historical moment that historians have found interest in studying. Historians have made a point of study why women began this new movement of writing feminist work and what they hope to achieve from publishing their writings. Feminist writers, such as Rokeya, used their ability to write so that they could bring attention to the oppressive state that women were living in. They used writing to discuss women's issues that had been neglected in history. By doing so, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century women began questioning their social position within society. Women had been bound by the oppressive environment of the patriarchal society, and it was the development of this historic literary movement that they began questioning and reframing their ideals of the hierarchical framework of the patriarchal society and their status within this society.

One way women started questioning their oppressive position was by considering the origins of their inferior status in society. Feminist writers like Rokeya believed that the masculine gender superiority found in the patriarchal society was to blame for women's position in society. Bharati Ray states,

> But then, who's fault was it that women had reached the state, showing acute analytical perception comparable to modern-day feminism, Rokeya pinpointed 'the lack of opportunity' as the key cause of women's slavish condition. Women had been denied equal opportunities with men by the male imposed social system. To give but one example among many of the unfairness of the system, the women-turned-slaves were without any proper homes. They merely resided in the homes of their masters, their male relations, and were subservient to them.[82]

By writing about the oppression in seclusion, women started discussing and openly criticizing the society in which they grew up in. Women started to write about how men had created an environment that subjugated women and had created a male dominated society. Women scrutinized the origins of ideals that fostered the practices and traditions within the patriarchal society that kept women at a societal disadvantage. For example, Rokeya says in her lecture for the Bengal Women's Educational Conference in February 1927, "…it is unavoidable to discuss the condition of our society; and in explaining the circumstances of our society, it becomes inevitable to reflect on the negligence, indifference, and contemptible attitude of Muslim men towards women."[83] Rokeya essentially argues that Muslim men's inability to envision women beyond their traditional

[82] Ray, *Early Feminists of Colonial India*, p. 61.

[83] Hossain, *The Essential Rokeya*, p. 126.

gender expectations and roles held women back from "modernizing." They instead used different way to justify these gender roles.

Historian Mahua Sarkar analyzes Rokeya's beliefs of religious figures who used religion to justify the tradition of seclusion. Sarkar writes, "As she saw it, the holy texts, which contained such injunctions, were nothing but technologies of control invented by men and deployed against women 'in order to keep [them] in darkness.'"[84] Rokeya herself was a Muslim woman who believed that certain orthodox and conservative Muslim men used religion to justify the oppression of women in the Indian subcontinent. Feminist writers began critically questioning the origins of religious ideals that kept women in an oppressive state and had criticized the use of religion (specifically Islam) to create the gendered hierarchy.

Women specifically used the home as the framework of their feminist works because home represented the root of their oppressive status. While the home was the physical setting of secluding women, it was also the primary site where women, starting at an early age, learned and enacted their gender expectations and roles. Historian Antionette Burton discusses that feminist writers who discussed their oppression at home were, "…keenly aware that house and home were central to their social identities and the cultural forms through which they experienced both family life and national belonging."[85]

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[84] Mahua Sarkar, *Visible Histories, Disappearing* (Women. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 119.

[85] Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive*, p. 4.

Feminist literary pieces about seclusion within the home shed light on how oppressive women's lives were in the confines of the home. The home symbolized the beginning of women's oppression and signified where women were expected to carry out their most important gender roles throughout their lives. Writers used the home as a form of archival source, as Antionette Burton argues, in order to construct history through the lens of domestic space.[86] The domestic space that women inhabited defined their status within the patriarchal society and the gender norms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Feminist writers used this domestic space to develop the contextualization of women's oppression and to determine the root of women's issues.

Feminist writers wanted to achieve two different goals by publishing works that openly criticized the seclusion of women and the overall patriarchal society they inhabited. The first was to reimagine their position within society. The gendered position that women had within the patriarchal society was inferior to men. Women wanted to understand where they were within the hierarchy and to reimagine the gender expectations, gender roles, and gender norms that put women in their position. This began through their criticism of the *purdah* system that had secluded women from society and had kept them in an oppressed status. Women believed that seclusion under the *purdah* system had suppressed them from opportunities that could allow them to expand and reimagine gender roles and norms for women. When women addressed the

[86] Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive*, p. 5.

oppression under this system, they considered what their lives would be like if they were not kept in an inferior state.

The second goal that women wanted to achieve by writing about the *purdah* system was to take a stance on their life. Women before the late nineteenth and early twentieth century lived a life of seclusion and were silenced into voicelessness. With the ability to write, women were now able to defend for their own lives and the improvement of the quality of life for women within the Indian subcontinent. One way feminist writers did so was by encouraging women to realize that they had become passive agents within the patriarchal society. They encourage women to understand that they had been deliberately put in an inferior status. Rokeya was amongst these writers and Bharati Ray writes, "Rokeya also strongly criticized women for their debased condition, and for 'shutting their eyes to their own interests.'"[87] One of the most widely quoted magazine articles that Rokeya wrote called *Subho Sadeq* (The Dawn) discusses how Rokeya wanted women to realize that they had been oppressed. She wrote,

> Sisters, wake up, open your eyes wide, and march forward. Say, mother, pounding your chest, we are not animals! Say, sister, we are not property! Say, daughter, we are not items of ornament to be enclosed in an iron safe. Say, all in unison, we are humans! And show with your actions that we are half of the best of God's creation, and in reality, we are the mothers of the created world. From your own associations to protect your rights and privileges.[88]

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[87] Ray, *Early Feminists of Colonial India*, p. 76.

[88] Hossain, *The Essential Rokeya*, p. 137.

Rokeya wanted women to start realizing that their lives were worth much more than a life in seclusion and in order for any progress, they must first learn and understand their own position in society. For Rokeya to make bold statements as such, she risked societal backlash from both men who upheld the patriarchal norms and women who had become passive agents of this society. However, she believed that women urgently needed to take a stance for the eventual improvement of women's lives.

The impact that feminist writing had towards the movement for women's issues was significant. The first impact *purdah* literature had was that it helped women cope with the oppressive conditions that they had faced in their lifetime. Feminist writers highlighted some of the gruesome details of oppression across the Indian subcontinent and it shed light on how difficult women's lives were beginning at birth. Writing became a tool for women to cope with the physical and emotional hardships they had faced during their lifetimes. They also became works that represented an entire gender within the patriarchal society that had been silenced in their seclusion. Rokeya's works represented the oppression women had faced silently for many years. Women used these works to cope and relate with issues that authors such as Rokeya had discussed. The realization that they were not alone in this form of oppression further empowered women to take a stance to improve their condition.

The second impact of these feminist works was that women started reconsidering their status within society. Written works supplemented efforts women made to improve the overall oppressive condition that women lived in. Women began redefining what a

modern Indian woman would be based on gender roles and expectations defined by themselves. Writing had become a tool to empower women to protest for a group (women) that had otherwise been politically silenced in history.[89] In order to do so, the writings of feminists helped women fully understand the extent of oppression and what specific issues needed to be resolved to improve women's quality of life. This began a conversation or dialogue between men and women to consider what changes needed to be made and what opportunities women needed to create equality between men and women.

Women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century came across an urgency to improve women's quality of life who had otherwise lived their entire lives in physical and/or symbolic seclusion. Many feminists, such as Rokeya, had taken inspiration from their own experiences and incidents that they had witnessed of friends and families to reconsider how women had been oppressed in the patriarchal society. They began problematizing the seclusion they faced by using writing to reach both women who had been in similar situations and men who had neglected women. Women prior to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had not openly criticized their oppressive state and more importantly the *purdah* system. The writings of Indian feminists began a new women's literary movement where they defined the problem of their oppression to gendered traditions of seclusion, and eventually demand that tangible

[89] Sinha, *Specters of Mother India*, 143.

reform efforts be made in order to improve the societal status and quality of women's lives.

Figure 1.1: Drawing of Zenana (1848)

Figure 1.2: Burqa

Figure 1.3: Hijab

Figure 1.4: End of sari used to veil women's head (1924)

Figure 1.5: A dupatta used to veil women's head

CHAPTER TWO:

A Movement for Women's Education

Middle-class Muslim women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century lived in a new middle-class culture that redefined their experiences. The Muslim middle-class, that emerged during this period, created a distinct middle-class culture that consisted of reformed ideas and practices. This culture prioritized education for men because western education allowed for new opportunities within the British framework. However, women did not have the same opportunities. Leaders within the Hindu and Muslim communities who embraced western education, such as Raja Rammohan Roy and Sayyid Ahmad Khan, spread a new middle-class culture. In this culture, began receiving western education from institutions like Hindu Presidency College and Aligarh University. Middle-class women who watched their brothers and husbands receive education, often had secluded lives under the *purdah* system. For most women who did receive an education, it was mostly limited to studying religion, and in this case Islam, - so that they could become the ideal daughter, sister, wife, daughter-in-law, and mother. It is in this new middle-class culture that women began reimagining their social standing in society and considered possible solutions, such as education, to liberate themselves from their oppressive state and redefine their gender roles in society.

Solution: Women's Education

Indian feminist of the women's movement in the late nineteenth and early

twentieth century believed that the most impactful solution to women's issues in the subcontinent was women's education. Muslim women especially who came from middle class and elite household grew up in an environment where western education was prioritized. However, this education was limited to the male family members leaving women with little to no educational opportunities. Sanjay Seth discusses statistics on women's education,

> In 1882 there were, in all of British India, six girls in college, just over two thousand in secondary schools, and 124,000 in primary or "mixed" schools, the vast majority of these in the provinces of Bombay, Madras, and Bengal, leaving a minuscule number of girls receiving any formal education in the rest of British India. Well under 1 percent of girls of school-going age (narrowly defined) were enrolled in any educational institution at any level, and for every thousand boys enrolled, there were only forty-six girls.[90]

There was a clear lack of educational opportunities for women, and it became the goal of feminist during this time to advocate for and to provide more opportunities for girls and women so that they did not have to live a life of seclusion. The educational opportunities that women did receive in their lifetime was very limited and was different from what their male counterparts received in middle class households. Men had opportunities from a young age to receive formal western style education where they learned many different languages and were also provided religious education. Once they had completed their primary and secondary schooling, they had the opportunity to go to institutions like Aligarh University where they could receive higher education for potential careers that

[90] Seth, *Subject Lessons*, p. 129.

could lead to greater opportunities. Historian Gail Minault discusses in his book, *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India*, that Muslim children began their education with a *bismillah* ceremony when they were four years, four months, and four days old. After that, both boys and girls were taught to memorize and recite the Quran like a parrot.[91] For girls, this usually was the extent of her education, and she usually spent her life in *purdah* where she was taught to be a submissive daughter and wife. The girls who did receive further education usually did so by their siblings or tutors that were hired to teach the girls within the household.[92] She may have been taught basic reading and writing skills in one language, but not enough for her to become independent from her male family members. Feminists, like Rokeya, who grew up in such secluded households, saw their brothers, fathers, and husband benefit from an education that provided them with more opportunities in life. Feminists wanted this opportunity for themselves and other women across the subcontinent. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, women sought the solution to their oppression which was to provide educational opportunities for women, and they began their advocation and protest by writing about it.

Rokeya was the most prominent feminist writers during the women's movement who openly expressed her support for women's education. Living a life of seclusion and

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[91] Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 19.

[92] Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, p. 35.

having some educational opportunities from her brother made her value the importance of education. Her ability to read and write in English and Bengali gave her a platform to write about what she felt was the solution to the oppression of Indian women: education. While women had received religious education, it was secular and western style education that women sought after during the movement. The lack of this education gave women limited accessibility to society outside their home and they could not do much with the education they did receive. Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag* became important works where she discussed and reimagined what an ideal world for women would look like. The main premise of her utopian visions, the framework of both her novels, is that women received well-rounded education starting at a young age. These works became known as important testaments of the women's movement's efforts to advocate for their education.

Type of Education for Women

After advocating for women's education, feminists of the women's movement began discussing, envisioning, and advocating for the type of education women should receive and Rokeya became an avid and prominent participant of this discussion. There were two different ideas that Rokeya envisioned for women's education which were new subjects and new skills that women should learn. Rokeya envisioned that in a utopian world women would learn different subjects in school so that they could get a well-rounded education in various subject areas. The subjects that Rokeya wanted women to learn about can be found in her utopian works. For example, in *Padmarag*, Tarini Bhavan

(a fictional educational institution for girls) provides many subjects, "Science, Literature, Geography, Astronomy, History, Mathematics – all these subjects were taught, but the method of instruction was quite exceptional. The students were not forced to memorize misleading versions of history and end up despising themselves and their fellow Indians."[93] Rokeya believed that women lacked education on subjects in the fields of science, math, literature, and social studies and having educational opportunities to learn about these subjects could be beneficial. At the same time, she believed that the quality of education was just as important. Women needed to be taught to think for themselves rather than being taught to learn and recite like parrots as they had done in the past. Teaching girls important subjects like history as they did in Tarini Bhavan could help them develop and grow outside of the ideas they had been forced to internalize by men. Education could provide self-realization for women.

Rokeya emphasizes the necessity of teaching girls science and technology in *Sultana's Dream*. *Sultana's Dream* is a utopian work that takes place in a science fiction world called Ladyland, where women who are in charge of the political, social, and economic sectors of society develop scientific and technological advancements. This novel is categorized as a science fiction because Rokeya discusses how their city is based on technological advancements that defy our version of reality. For example, some of the

[93] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag*, pp. 30-31.

inventions that women make extract energy and resources from nature in unconventional ways, such as extracting water directly from clouds. These advancements become important in Ladyland because they provide more efficient ways to function as a society. Rokeya wrote that Sister Sara (a woman from Ladyland) says, "'Our good Queen likes science very much. She circulated an order that all the women in her country should be educated. Accordingly, a number of girls' schools were founded and supported by the Government. Education was spread far and wide among women.'"[94] Rokeya envisioned strong educational systems, with the support of the government, could provide women with knowledge in subjects such as science which they had not received in the past. The reason Rokeya pushed for science was because she believed that it could spark innovation for women. Roshan Jahan writes, "Among her contemporaries, even the most forward-looking Brahmos, who were generally in favor of education for women, emphasized a curriculum that was not strong in science and mathematics. In this context, Rokeya was not only stressing the need for female education in general but also a type of education that enabled women to excel in science."[95] The Brahmos, are in reference to the men of the Brahmo Samaj which was a Hindu reformist movement that began supporting women's education. During this period, they were in favor of educating women, but it was a limited support and usually they did not encourage western

[94] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*, p. 11.

[95] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*, p. 5.

education for women. Science was a subject where women could possibly become inspired to create scientific and technological innovations to help society at large. Subjects like science were not encouraged for women because their traditional gender roles consisted of serving their family members and to not engage with society outside their homes. Science gave women the accessibility and power to engage themselves in a society that they did not have access to. Women who did have some access to education were limited to religious schooling, and the purpose of receiving that education was so that they could learn to be the ideal subordinate female. Subject like science were not intended to be taught and learned for that purpose, but rather for personal interest and to understand life beyond oneself. It created an environment of individuality that women lacked during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Women did not have access to express themselves in work other than their traditional gender roles, and subjects like science were seen as threats to the suppression of women because education allowed women to express themselves in other ways. Rokeya became an advocate for subjects such as science because she believed they could provide women the ability to express themselves outside their traditional gender roles. For example, she wrote about the women in *Ladyland*, "'When the heat becomes unbearable, we sprinkle the ground with plentiful showers drawn from the artificial fountains. And in cold weather we keep our rooms warm with sun heat.'"[96] Women in colonial India did not have the ability to be

[96] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*, p. 16.

involved in the creation of such inventions that benefited society. Women's roles were mostly bounded to household chores, and in this story they are able to express themselves outside of the roles by engaging in scientific innovations.

Other than subjects inside the classroom, Rokeya also encouraged physical education. Rokeya's goal was to provide women a well-rounded education, and physical education provided women the mental and physical strength they would need in their lives. Bharati Ray writes, "…Rokeya advised parents and teachers to give physical training to girls both at home and at school. She advocated teaching girls how to play with swords and rods, and how to grind corn in indigenous machines known as *janta* (which would develop arm muscles)."[97] Rokeya's advocation for physical education is unique because she believed that women needed to be just as physically fit as they would be intellectually. Women under seclusion had been kept in a very fragile state where they had very little room to experience life outside of their homes. By receiving physical education, women would then be able to engage in some of the labors outside their homes. While Rokeya did not explicitly state that she hoped women would join the work force through obtaining laboring jobs, she did advocate for physical education because it could provide women the physical strength they needed for their everyday tasks.

The skills that Rokeya believed women should obtain were just as important in her works. The premise of Rokeya's educational goals were based around the traditional

[97] Ray, *Early Feminists of Colonial India*, p. 71.

tasks and roles women had during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Rokeya advocated to women that they needed education to continue the traditional gender roles that they had in a more effective manner. This was because Rokeya herself knew that she was bound by the patriarchal society, and the complete abandonment of traditional gender roles was not possible for women. Instead of changing the gender roles of women, the education that women were to receive in Rokeya's utopian world would help them further their traditional gender roles. Although Rokeya advocates that women transform their gender roles beyond their household chores, she also stresses importance that women continue to have active roles as mothers and wives. That is why in her writings and speeches, especially seen in *Motichur,* Rokeya advocates for home economics education. She believed that women should have basic knowledge of medicine, chemistry, cooking, and nutrition so that they could better care for and serve their families.[98] Women also could not abandon their religious education. Religion played a major role in the lives of Muslim and Hindu households, and it was expected that women at least receive thorough religious education. This was mainly because women were expected to be the teachers of religion to their children, so feminists like Rokeya also acknowledged that women needed to be equipped with religious knowledge. This also allowed women to prioritize ethics and morals that religious teachings taught which they

[98] Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *Motichur,* ed. Ratri Ray and Prantosh Bandyopadhyay (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 59.

could also teach their children.[99] A modern woman, in Rokeya's eyes, would have the necessary skills to carry out her traditional gender roles, and the knowledge she learned from new subjects would allow her to begin teaching her children at a young age. She could then fulfill her traditional duties as a daughter, wife and mother with dignity, effectiveness, and pride.

Another skill that Rokeya believed women should learn through educational opportunities was the ability to use their education for the greater good. Rokeya understood the power that knowledge could provide women and she believed that women need opportunities to showcase and utilize their knowledge. One of the most notable examples of this is seen in *Sultana's Dream* where women made scientific innovations that extracted water from the clouds, utilized solar power, stopped rain, and built nurturing gardens that provided fruits and vegetables. While the innovations were impressive in this story, Rokeya puts these examples in her story to show that women could contribute to society given the opportunity. She wanted women to use the knowledge they had received. Granted that traditional gender roles and the patriarchal society were still prevalent at the time; it was still important to Rokeya that girls starting at a young age begin learning so they could slowly expand their gender roles. In *Sultana's Dream* Rokeya also discusses that women use brain power to face any political,

[99] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag*, p. 31.

economic, or social issues that may arise in Ladyland.[100] Rokeya discusses this because she grew up in an oppressive environment where she wasn't allowed the privilege of education. Thus, women who were in seclusion had very little knowledge to help beyond what they were expected of in the household. However, Rokeya also encouraged women to be respectable mothers and wives. Her stance of women's gender roles was to expand them with education, but at the same time continue some of their traditional roles in a respectful manner. Rokeya believed that if Indian girls could get an education, they could utilize it inside and outside their homes.

While the implementation of education within society was not as significant as Rokeya envisioned in her utopian works, she made it her life's goal to go beyond pen and paper. Many historians have alluded to the idea that *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag* reflect the goals and aspirations Rokeya had for a school she wanted to build.[101] Rokeya eventually built her own school where she could develop and implement a curriculum that helped her reach her goal of providing impactful education for girls. Rokeya's husband, Khan Bahadur Sakhawat, died in 1909 and had left Rs. 10,000 for Rokeya to build a school so that girls could receive an education, a lifelong goal of hers.[102] She built Sakhawat Memorial Girls' High School in Bhagalpur, Bihar a few months after her

[100] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*, p. 13.

[101] Ray, *Early Feminists of Colonial India*, p. 74.

[102] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*, p. viii.

husband's death. In 1911, Rokeya permanently moved her school to Kolkata, the city she had grown up in. While there is no evidence as to why Rokeya moved her school to Kolkata, perhaps she did so because Kolkata was a larger city that allowed her to grow her feminist network and progress her agenda to spread feminist ideas and educational opportunities. By establishing a school for girls, Rokeya became a founder of an institution that prioritized education for women, something that was neglected in history. This school also gave Rokeya a practical way to encourage women to seek change. She created an educational institution that provided the very education that Rokeya had written and spoken about. Bharati Ray writes about the curriculum at Sakhawat Memorial,

> The curriculum at Sakhawat School in its early years included Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Bengali, and English, as well as mathematics and needlework. By 1930 the school had become a high school with a secondary school curriculum. It also emphasized basic household skills: cooking, sewing, childcare, and gardening. Furthermore, physical education and some vocational skills like nursing and handicrafts, were also taught.[103]

For Rokeya, Sakhawat Memorial was a way she could make her goals for education a reality where she could give back to girls within her community so that they did not have to grow up in seclusion the way she and other women had. However, from the beginning of the establishment of Sakhawat Memorial, Rokeya faced some criticism and backlash for her school. Rokeya knew she needed to conform to some traditions of *purdah* in order to appease some conservative men. She did so by observing physical *purdah* at her

[103] Ray, *Early Feminists of Colonial India*, p. 74.

school. Girls had curtains to cover their transportations to and from school, there was only slight modification when the students began vomiting and fainting in the hot and airless carriages. At school, the girls were expected to cover their heads, but not as they would at home in attire such as burqas. These modest head coverings signified what a new modern woman would wear in a place of learning.[104] Rokeya had to comply to some of the traditions of *purdah* because her school still existed in the same patriarchal society she grew up in. In order to convince parents and family members that educating girls would not interfere with the overall rigid structure of the patriarchal society, Rokeya had to comply with some aspects. Regardless of Rokeya's compliance, she still faced backlash for creating Sakhawat Memorial. Hasna Joarder and Safiuddin Joarder write, "The Muslim society, stepped in superstitious ideas, could not conceive of a woman – and that also a widow – establishing and managing a school. Attempts were made to ridicule and vilify her."[105] Although she faced societal backlash, Rokeya was strong and resilient, and she put more effort into making Sakhawat Memorial a reputable educational institution for girls. Today, Sakhawat Memorial is a well-known government school in Bengal for girls that provides a well-rounded education, and Rokeya's utopian dreams are carried out every day at her school.

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[104] Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar, *Women and Social Reform in Modern India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), p. 71.

[105] Joarder and Joarder, *Begum Rokeya*, p. 7.

Potential Impact of Educational Opportunities for Women

Feminist writers wrote extensively about why they believed education could be a promising solution to women's oppression in India. They gave many reasons as to what education could provide women. There were four main reasons why feminists supported education. The first was that they believed it could improve their social standing. Without education, women were bound to a life in *purdah* which left women with very little opportunities. Education was seen to teach women the necessary knowledge and skills they would need to become active members of society. Hasna Begum writes, "Rokeya calls to the women-folk, a component half of mankind, to be independent by attaining consciousness and strength with the light of knowledge acquired through the free use of their own intellectual power, and not to remain unconscious like puppets."[106] Rokeya always wanted women to be able to reflect and change their submissive and oppressed status in society. Women had no independence in their submissive state, but feminists like Rokeya believed that education could provide the intellectual basis for women to step out of their *zenanas* into the society that they once were not allowed to have access to.

Education was also seen to provide more opportunities to women, opportunities that they had not experienced before. Some of these opportunities included expanding

[106] Hasna Begum, *Begum Rokeya the Feminist: Views and Visions* (Dhaka: Sucheepatra, 2011), p. 26.

upon the traditional roles they already obtained. Geraldine Forbes writes about Rokeya's beliefs, "…she pointed out that education would help women fulfill their traditional roles knowledgeably and professionally and hence contribute to the progress of the nation. Additionally, education would make it possible for women to grow and develop in step with their menfolk."[107] The traditional roles that women had, needed to be fulfilled according to Rokeya, however proper education that taught women a well-rounded education could provide the necessary skills for women to carry out these roles effectively. Education could also create and expand new gender roles for women. While Rokeya expressed the necessity of traditional gender roles, she also discussed that women had more to offer than cooking, cleaning, and tending after their families. In the story *Padmarag*, the main character Siddika exclaims, "I wish to prove to society that married life alone is not a woman's ultimate quest; a housewife's responsibilities do not constitute life's essential duties."[108] Rokeya believed that education was one of the most essential ways women could expand their roles beyond being housewives. One of these new roles included financial independence,

> Of all the Bengali reformers, she seems to have been the only one who clearly understood that economic independence is the first prerequisite of women's liberation. She wrote: 'Some say that women tolerate oppression from men because they depend on men's earning. They are right.' She proposed that women start working: 'If our liberation from male domination depends on our ability to earn independently, then we should begin. We should be lawyers, magistrates,

[107] Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, p. 56.

[108] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag*, p. 176.

> judges, clerks…the sort of labor we put in our household can bring wages if we use it outside.'[109]

Rokeya knew, however, that education would not bring jobs or careers directly to women, and that was not the goal for women. She did not want women to abandon their roles as mothers and wives completely, however she did acknowledge that women had the ability to have some financial independence to a certain degree. The financial independence that women could get would allow women to expand into a new gender role. Rokeya also believed that a new gender role that women could obtain through education was the ability to contribute to society, she wrote, "Finally, the benefits accrued by society (including men) would be immense, for educated women would be responsible in and useful to the society."[110] With education, women could be part of and contribute to society rather than be veiled away from society. Rokeya's vision for women was that they be part of the very society that they did not have access to. Lastly, a gender role that education could provide is that it would give women the foundation needed to protest for more rights in the future.[111] Some of these rights could include inheritance rights, equal pay, and the end to *zenanas*. Education could allow women to become feminists like Rokeya who protested and advocated for the liberation of women from the conservative patriarchal traditions and culture. They could engage with other likeminded

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[109] Roushan Jahan, *Sultana's Dream*, p. 49.

[110] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*, p. 47.

[111] Hossain, *Motichur*, p. xxi.

educated women to further the discussion of women's issues and create new reform ideas and plans.

The third benefit of education for women is that it would give them accessibility to independence and individuality. Women did not have independent lives under the *purdah* system, so education could help women engage with the society that they lived in. Women also did not have their own sense of individuality. Historian Malavika Karlekar writes, "Education facilitated the growth of individuality, a degree of enquiry and of self-expression where it was least expected."[112] In the patriarchal society, women were discouraged of any form of individuality. They were expected to conform to the ways the patriarch of their families expected them to live. Their clothes had to be modest, where their heads were often covered by some form veil, so they were unable to express themselves through clothing. They also did not receive any education so that they could not think beyond their expected gender roles. Education gave women the ability to learn beyond traditional gender norms and take interests in subjects and topics that they enjoyed learning about. Rokeya openly criticized women for being passive actors in the patriarchal society, so for Rokeya education was seen as a way for women to grow from their passiveness and to become their own individual selves.

Education also provided equality between men and women to a certain extent. The patriarchal society still existed, and women were still expected to be part of this

[112] Malavika Karlekar, *Voices from Within: Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 29.

society just as much as men. However, the advancements made to educate women was one step closer to equal opportunities for boys and girls. Women only received religious education and very few learned basic reading and writing skills before the early twentieth century, but the introduction of Rokeya's writings and institutions like Sakhawat Memorial began a women's movement where people began reimaging and changing the way they envisioned women's education. Rokeya's work began a conversation where feminist began to actively seek and create educational opportunities for girls. Rokeya was successful in her efforts because now women's education was not limited to religious education, but women could now receive similar educational opportunities as their male counterparts in subjects such as science, social studies, technology, literature, language, etc.

It is important to note that writing about education and creating educational opportunities did not come easy. Feminists were criticized for advocating for educational opportunities for women. While some Indian reformers believed education could be important for women, they also believed that the education women received should be limited. The cultural ideals that Indian men possessed created superstitions about women's education. Judith Walsh discusses the hesitancy of reformists by stating, "No subject provokes more hysteria in reformist writings of the period than the idea that, once

educated, women might cease to do housework…"[113] If women became educated, Indian men believed that women could abandon their housework all together. The idea of educated women instilled fear in men because they had control over women in the patriarchal society and if educated, women could become too independent. The fear therefore was that men would lose complete control over women, the cultural power they had through various traditions and practices. The response of men to feminist writings on education and educational institutions for girls has been documented, "Within households girls who wanted to learn were teased and ostracized. Those who attended schools were stoned in the streets and marginalized in the classroom if they attended boys' schools. They were harassed when they sought to practice their professions."[114] The efforts made to educate women was not easy, and women had many obstacles to face due to the ideals embedded deep in the patriarchal society. They received threats and risked societal backlash from family members and community members, but feminists knew that education was an impactful solution to women's issues that British men, Indian nationalists, and now feminists had concerns over. Nonetheless, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is triumphed as an era where feminist resiliency created a new atmosphere for women's liberation to provide educational opportunities throughout the Indian subcontinent.

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[113] Judith E. Walsh, *Domesticity in Colonial India: What Women Learned When Men Gave Them Advice* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004), p. 81.

[114] Sarkar and Sarkar, *Women and Social Reform in Modern India*, p. 74.

Figure 2.1: Aligarh Muslim University – Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh
(Previously Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College)

Figure 2.2: Sakhawat Memorial Girls' High School – Kolkata, West Bengal

CHAPTER THREE:

Feminist Utopianism: The Vision

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain spent her adulthood writing and publishing literary works that highlighted women's issues. As a feminist writer, Rokeya envisioned various goals and an idealistic society in which women could improve their quality of life. She did so by utilizing the literary element of utopianism in some of her works. Rokeya's utopian works incorporated her feminist views and aspirations to resolve women's issues, and at the same time she used these works to discuss the social, political, and economic conditions that would foster a thriving environment for women. Rokeya's world, like many other women who came from middle-class Muslim households, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was defined by seclusion and oppression from society and educational opportunities. Rokeya used her ability to write in Bengali and English to publish literary works, such as *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag*, that described her vision of a utopian society that would combat the unjust circumstances of women. These works are a testament of the feminist utopian visions and goals women wanted to achieve so that they could build and work towards a society that valued greater equality between men and women.

Utopian Writing in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century India

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century had a growing feminist print culture where women began writing in many different forms. This growing print culture

consisted of women who began writing in light of feminist ideas in response to the discourse about women and modernity. Women joined this discourse in their own way by publishing works of their ideas of women's issues. Geraldine Forbes states, "…we know that in Bengal women produced almost 400 literary works, ranging from poetry to novels and autobiographies, and twenty-one journals."[115] Not only was Rokeya part of a flourishing print culture, but she wrote in a period where women's published works had become at testament of growing ideas. The new women's movement during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century contributed to the new feminist literary movement. This period had a growth in feminist works due to the progressive nature of the women's movement. Women, such as Rokeya, who were involved in the women's movement used writing as an outlet to discuss women's issues that they believed had been neglected. They also used their works to describe the idealistic reforms that were necessary in society to improve women's quality of life. Women who produced works that reflected efforts of the women's movement are described as "Progressive Writers" because they utilized their works to describe the efforts that the women's movement was working towards.[116] The goal of these publications was to develop reform ideas for women's issues. These works also developed a larger network between women across the Indian subcontinent where they could now discuss ideas for the women's movement.

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[115] Forbes, *Women in Modern*, p. 29.

[116] Munazza Yaqoob and Sofia Hussain, *Muslim Women Writers of the Subcontinent (1870-1950)* (Islamabad: Emel Publications, 2014), p. 4.

Rokeya was the foremother of utopian writing when she published *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag* and this style of writing was unique to the women's literary movement during this period. Other feminist writers, such as Pandita Ramabai and Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, wrote works that highlighted certain individual goals, reforms, and ideas they thought were necessary for society to improve the condition of women. However, Rokeya had created works that envisioned entire utopian societies for women to thrive. Her works recreated societies that involved new political, social, cultural, and economic structures that prioritized women rather than seclude them.

Rokeya's utopian works have stood out as the most important utopian works in South Asian history. Not many other works have been written utilizing the utopian literary style and methodology in South Asia. While works may include utopian aspects, Rokeya's works are unique to the subcontinent's history because her works create entire utopian societies for women. Utopianism as a literary methodology shows readers what the author believes is an idealistic world. Writers usually use utopianism to describe the perfect world for a well-rounded society and can sometimes describe unrealistic ideas and views that express their aspirational goals. Rokeya's works show the societal framework that she felt was necessary for a utopian society.

While Rokeya utilized utopianism in her works, she was not the first to create literary utopian works. Utopianism as a literary methodology originated from the west by with Sir Thomas More. More wrote his work *Utopia* in 1516 where he described a fictional imaginary and perfect island called Utopia. This island had a perfect social,

political, and economic world where men and women lived harmoniously. This island contrasted in many aspects found in England under the Tudor monarchy. Communism is a foundational ideal in utopia where work is this dived evenly and both women and men receive education to provide for the utopian society.[117] More's *Utopia* was a literary work that defined utopia as a "perfect" world, and his utilization of utopia as a literary style inspired many other authors to write literary works to describe their version of utopia.

More's work has been described as the literary work that founded and developed the ideas of utopianism, however his work was not the first to utilize the strategy of reimagining society. Christine de Pizan's work *The Book of the City of Ladies*, originally published in 1405 reimagined a society created by women called the City of Ladies. This city comprises of the most knowledgeable and skilled women. Although the word utopia was not devised until 1519 by More, Pizan imagines a utopian world for women where they have many more opportunities than what she had witnessed in France. Pizan advocates for women's education and women's abilities if they were given more opportunities to contribute to society. Pizan's work is not only an important utopian literary work, but it is also a vital work of feminism. Authors such as More and Pizan created utopian works because of the worlds in which they lived. To criticize their worlds, they reimagined the idealistic world that they wanted to live in. Often the

[117] Thomas More, *The Utopia of Thomas More,* ed. William Dallam Armes (New York: The Macmillan company, 1912), pp. xli-xlii.

structures of these utopian worlds contrasted from the society they lived in, which became an indirect criticism of their societies. Pizan wrote in *The Book of the City of Ladies,* "…an extraordinary thought became planted in my mind which made me wonder why on earth it was that so many men, both clerks and others, have said and continue to say and write such awful, damning things about women and their ways."[118] Pizan's world views were based off her experience as a woman in France during the early fifteenth century. After Frenchman Jeun de Meum's misogynistic poem *La Roman de la Rose* (The Romance of the Rose) that used sensual imagery became popular, Pizan responded by writing *The Book of the City of Ladies* to criticize the poem.[119] As a result, her feminist utopian work was created as a response to Jeun de Meum and the environment she lived in, the development of her world views, and her beliefs of the idealistic society for women.

Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* and Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag* have similar aspects given that they both portray feminist utopias. Both authors use fiction to portray their idealistic views and societies for women as a response to their treatment in society as women. However, *Sultana's Dream* was published in 1905 and *Padmarag* was published 1924, approximately five centuries after Pizan's *The Book*

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[118] Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (London: Penguin Books, 1912), p. 6.

[119] Natalie Zemon Davis, "Decentering History: Local Stories and Cultural Crossings in a Global World," *Wiley for Wesleyan University* 50, no. 2 (2011): pp. 195-196.

of the City of Ladies. There is no evidence that Rokeya had read or had any knowledge of western utopian works when she wrote her works, but by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the Indian subcontinent was immersed in a society that had translated versions of western literature, partly due to the western influences introduced by British rule in India. By this period, western education was also an integral part of middle-class communities, and western literature was taught in schools, colleges, and universities. It is difficult to tell if Rokeya was part of this community of individuals who read and valued western literary works, especially classic works such as Pizan's, in the Indian subcontinent. It is unlikely that Rokeya read Pizan's work, but the chance of her coming across More's *Utopia* or some version of it is quite high. Particularly because during the nineteenth century there were discussions regarding the ideal society, especially in the West. However, Rokeya's world was limited by the patriarchal society she lived in. She was one of the limited women of this period who did know how to read and write in multiple languages, including English. Her ability to read and write as a woman was often looked down upon by men. She did not have the ability to search for literary works that she may desire the same way men were able to in the libraries in larger cities such as Kolkata, Bombay, and Madras. She may have only been allowed to read and write in the privacy of her home, due to the fear of public reaction in society. Even after these limiting circumstances and obstacles, she was the first woman in South Asian history to write feminist utopian works. Writing on its own was a difficult task for women, but

Rokeya was able to create impactful literary works that reimagined the limiting society she lived in.

Rokeya's Feminist Utopian Works' Structure

Rokeya published two different works that described her utopian ideals and visions. Both these works have different structures and components in the utopian societies. The first feminist utopian work that Rokeya published was *Sultana's Dream* in 1905. It was originally published in the English periodical called *The Indian Ladies Magazine*, the first women-edited magazine in colonial India published in Madras during 1901 to 1918 and from 1927 to 1938. The utopian world in *Sultana's Dream* was constructed by utilizing aspects of science fiction. Women in this utopian world live in a new society called Ladyland where scientific innovation and inventions are developed by women and help the utopian society function physically. *Sultana's Dream* is a fictional piece that could be described as an exaggerated view of utopia. Rokeya completely changes the structure of society that does not reflect the world women and men lived in during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century India. Ladyland is a society where women and men's gender norms and roles are entirely flipped. The type of gender expectations that men had were now carried out by women. Women created universities, factories, laboratories, and observatories to create a flourishing society.[120] Women are the ones in charge of the political, social, and economic affairs of Ladyland, they have a

[120] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*, p. 18.

queen and prime minister who both developed institutions such as universities for women. In comparison to late nineteenth century and early twentieth century India, in *Ladyland* women had more participation in society in various types of positions they otherwise would not have access to in India. These roles are important because they signify the idea that women are capable of handling administrative positions. While women were fully immersed in their society, men were expected to fulfill traditional gender roles such as cooking, cleaning, and tending to babies. Men also lived secluded lives similar to the *purdah* experiences women like Rokeya had witnessed and lived through in their lives. This story involves two main characters, Sultana who is a woman from colonial India who snoozes off to a dream and meets Sister Sara in Ladyland who resides there. Sister Sara gives Sultana a tour of Ladyland and as they walk, they discuss what they are observing. They have a conversation of the *purdah* system and say,

> 'Now that they are accustomed to the purdah system and have ceased to grumble at their seclusion, we call the system *mardana* instead of zenana.'
> 'But how do you manage,' I asked Sister Sara, 'to do without the police or magistrates in case of theft or murder?'
> 'Since the mardana system has been established, there has been no more crime or sin; therefore we do not require a policeman to find out a culprit, nor do we want a magistrate to try a criminal case.'[121]

Rokeya's use of the word *mardana* is deliberate because the word *mard* is a word used for man in Urdu and Hindi (Persian roots). The *mardana* in Ladyland is a reimagined version of the *zenana* and *purdah* system that women faced in India. Rokeya's utopian

[121] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*, pp. 14-15.

construction for Ladyland is based on gender role reversal. Rokeya does not purposely create this role reversal to state that men deserve to be in *purdah* like women, but she uses this exercise to describe an alternative universe where men are treated the same way women were treated. This strategy creates an oppressive environment that is uncomfortable because it is out of the norm. To discuss the oppression of men in this light was radical but effective in describing how oppressive the environment was for women. The utilization of utopia is important because it allows Rokeya to illustrate the oppressive and unequal gender roles women were expected to adhere to. It is also telling that confining men to the *mardana* eradicates crime in Ladyland. This implies that Rokeya believes that women do not commit very many crimes and hence Ladyland does not have law and order problems. Therefore, society's resources could be better utilized towards other needs if women continued to exercise greater freedom.

Padmarag is another utopian work that Rokeya published in 1924. While many aspects such as women's education and new gender roles for women found in *Sultana's Dream* were goals that Rokeya wanted to aspire for, *Padmarag* was a more realistic and practical outlook for a feminist utopia. The societal framework found in *Padmarag* is based off the existing patriarchal society found in the Indian subcontinent during this period. In *Padmarag*, women are still seen as the inferior gender in society and are expected to adhere to traditional gender expectations, but the institution in the story called Tarini Bhavan was created as a solution. Rokeya wrote, "Going against the wishes of her brothers-in-law, the older and the younger, and those of other relative, Dina-Tarini

set up a home for widows. She named it Tarini Bhavan. Encouraged by its success, she established a school and formed an organization, also known as a society, called the Society for the Upliftment of Downtrodden Women."[122] Mrs. Sen (also known as Dina-Tarini), lived in a society where she and many other women had faced oppression by men. She went against the societal pressures and expectations that men had created for women in colonial India and decided to help women so that they did not have to face the same oppression she faced. As a response, this institution was created and run by women to support other women escape their oppressive lives and to eventually expand their gender roles. Rokeya in her writing acknowledges that women are defined by gender roles, but at Tarini Bhavan women could expand upon their existing gender roles. The Tarini Bhavan institution was created as a sanctuary for women to restart their lives and Rokeya describes this by stating, "Where would a widow find refuge, when she had no one in the world to turn to? In Tarini Bhavan. Where would a young orphan girl with no relatives be educated? At Tarini School. Where would a wife go, when she was forced to leave her marital home because of her husband's intolerable brutality? To the same Tarini Workshop."[123] While the solution to women's issues in *Sultana's Dream* was to take control of society, Tarini Bhavan was an institution in Rokeya's utopian world that is still part of the overall patriarchal society but is a haven for women. The structure of colonial

[122] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag*, p. 27.

[123] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag*, p. 28.

society does not change in *Padmarag*, women are still seen as the inferior gender. However, Rokeya describes Tarini Bhavan as a safe place where women could feel comfortable in an environment that was an escape away from the gender expectations that their families had pressured them into.[124]

The Construction and Views of Rokeya's Feminist Utopia

Rokeya utilization of utopia as a literary style is thoughtfully incorporated in the construction of *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag*. Her utilization of fictional character and writing in a fictional setting was purposeful. Rokeya imagined the perfect world for women, but she was still writing in a period where she was still part of the patriarchal society. By writing these stories with fictional characters, Rokeya was able to keep the story's anonymity. The characters in the story reflected the experiences and views that Rokeya obtained, but she was able to tell the story in a way that did not expose exact events in her life. This was not an innocent step that Rokeya took since she knew she was restricted by the society she lived in. This however did not stop her from creating and writing about her own utopian world and views in her published works, but she was able to do so because she created fictional stories. The most prominent ways she does this is with the main characters of both *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag*. In *Sultana's Dream*, the main character Sister Sara is a reflection of a progressive and modern thinking woman that Rokeya created. In some ways it can be argues that Sister Sara and other

[124] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag*, p. 104.

women in *Ladyland* represent feminists like Rokeya who had the same ideals. Some of these ideals include advocation for women's education, expansion of gender roles, and the end to the *purdah* system. While Sister Sara does not represent one person's thinking, Rokeya wrote about her and the other women of *Ladyland* to show how some women were more progressive minded without the risk of calling out any one person. In *Padmarag,* Dina-Tarini the founder of *Tarini Bhavan*, represent the types of reform efforts feminists wanted during this period, especially the spread of women's education. While many of the efforts at Tarini Bhavan reflect Rokeya's school, she is able to use these fictional settings and characters to show ideas of how women could approach progress without disclosing specific details of women's efforts in colonial India during this period. Fictional stories gave her the ability to write about her ideas and views without causing extreme societal backlash by men. She could have defended her works as purely fictional to those who opposed her. On the other hand, as a feminist who devoted her entire life for the betterment of women, her views on women's issues are embedded and reflected within these feminist utopian works.

Utopianism as a literary framework also allowed Rokeya to create her own idealistic world. Rokeya designed a world that incorporated and left out aspects that she prioritized in her utopian world. This is apparent in three different discussions of politics, religion, and equality. Rokeya's works are not very political for this period. She rarely discusses the colonial framework in her works, and she does not propose independence or self-rule like many nationalist works. While in *Sultana's Dream* women are in charge

politically, Rokeya does this to propose that women should be involved in the political process, not necessarily to abandon politics all together. In Ladyland, there is still a queen, a prime minister, and the political system remains similar to many other societies during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in perspective of overall structure. Her works however, are not like many other nationalist works who propose independence from the British. The focus of her works does not revolve around a political agenda, but rather a social focus for women. This is why Rokeya does not stress to much importance on ideas of class distinction and structure in these works. If she wanted, she could have incorporated political ideals of the nationalist movement that were gaining political prominence in India in her works, however her works are more focused around the societal changes that need to occur for women.

Rokeya also minimizes the importance of religion in her utopian works. Rokeya was a Muslim herself and had received an Islamic education at a young age, however in her utopian works she rarely stresses the importance of religion in her works. When she does discuss religion in her works it is mainly to discuss that religion is practiced but society is based on secularism. In *Sultana's Dream* Rokeya wrote about Sister Sara and Sultana's discussion,

> 'Our religion is based on Love and Truth. It is our religious duty to love one another and to be absolutely truthful. If any person lies, she or he is…'
> 'Punished with death?'

> 'No, not with death. We do not take pleasure in killing a creature of God – especially a human being. The liar is asked to leave this land for good and never to come to it again.'[125]

Rokeya's discussion of religion in *Sultana's Dream* does not incorporate existing religions found in the Indian subcontinent, however elements of her Muslim background are still present. For example, just like Islam, she discusses that the women in Ladyland still believe in one God and that they rely on him for moral and ethical decisions, such as executing members of their society. While religious elements are part of this society, there is no one religion that overrules Ladyland. They base their religious views on the ideals of love and truth, and the formation of an actual religion is not present. Rokeya does not incorporate religion in her utopian views because she has openly criticized the utilization of religion to oppress women in her works and speeches. Rokeya says in her lecture for the Bengal Women's Educational Conference in February 1927, "As long as the men are reluctant to recognize the rights of women as provided for in the sacred writings, they will not allow education for women…. Only a crazy person seeks autonomy for himself by keeping his female-half in bondage"[126] In this lecture Rokeya states that she believes that men have often neglected women's educational opportunities in the name of Islam, but they themselves have yet to understand that Islam gives women many rights. She believed men did not understand women's Islamic rights and kept

[125] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*, p. 16.

[126] Hossain, *The Essential Rokeya*, pp. 129-130.

women in seclusion, so for Rokeya although religion played a major role in her personal life, she also acknowledged the negative ways religion has been used to define the hierarchical structure of gender.

Rokeya does discuss religion in more depth in perspective of egalitarianism in *Padmarag* because the setting takes place in colonial Bengal. This is because unlike *Ladyland*, a more exaggerated society, religion is part of and plays a significant importance in Indians' lives in colonial India. The setting of colonial Bengal could not be well developed without the discussion of religion. However, in *Padmarag* she is able to show how she views religion in a more progressive lens. She discussed that women at Tarini Bhavan come from diverse backgrounds and different religions including Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. She wrote, "The school section, naturally, had Brahmos, Hindu and Christian teachers. When the number of Muslim students increased, a couple of teachers were appointed to impart religious instruction to them. What commendable egalitarianism! Muslims, Christians, Brahmos, Hindus – all working in harmony, as though born from the same womb."[127] Rokeya's discussion of religion in *Padmarag* is different because the societal structure that the story takes place in incorporates diverse religions. Instead of dismissing religion all together, in Rokeya's utopia women live and work in an egalitarian institution. Rokeya recognized that women who came from different religions had diverse backgrounds and she embraces these

[127] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag*, p. 30.

differences in her work. This is an example of how *Padmarag* is a more realistic approach to utopianism. Rokeya acknowledges that women have different beliefs and instead of creating an institution secluded for Muslims only, Rokeya believes that women can achieve a lot more in an egalitarian society where women could learn from one another. Women at Tarini Bhavan developed an institution that was staffed by diverse women that also helped women no matter their religious views or backgrounds. This progressive ideal was not a new ideal in India, but it shows that Rokeya was in favor of embracing women's differences. At the same time, her embracement of different religion also minimizes the importance of religion all together. While religion is part of the societal world in Tarini Bhavan, it does not hold significance to determine the generous work found at the institution. Rokeya believes that in a feminist utopia, women should help all women and not base their kindness on preconceived prejudices of women from different backgrounds.

Rokeya also constructs her utopian world in perspective of gender roles and norms. As discussed previously, women in *Sultana's Dream* had reversed gender roles and in *Padmarag* men and women had traditional gender roles but were able to expand their roles by receiving an education. In both works, Rokeya believes that a utopian society would allow women to have new gender roles. In *Sultana's Dream* some new roles for women include inventors, teachers, scientists, and businesswomen.[128] These

[128] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*, p. 15.

roles were not found in the India subcontinent when Rokeya was writing her works, but she aspired for women to one day be able to obtain roles described in *Sultana's Dream*. In *Padmarag*, women were able to venture to new gender roles, "Some were given training that would make them eligible for teaching jobs…. to sum it up, the women belonging to the section earned their own living. It was here too, that training was imparted to those who would become teachers at the Tarini Bhavan School and to nurses who would go on to work at the Home for the Ailing and the Needy."[129] The importance of Tarini Bhavan was that it provided jobs for women, something that most women did not have access to. Women were held responsible for household work and chores, but very few had the opportunity to work at a job or have their own careers. Rokeya's incorporation of paid work is important to her construction of a utopian world.[130] Many women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century did not work jobs that provided financial income, household financial responsibilities were attributed as male gender role and expectation. Women who did want financial independence from their male family members, especially her father and husband, were looked down on for "becoming distracted" from gender expectations of being effective mothers, wives, and daughters. Financial independence for women was also seen as disrespectful towards male family members since financial responsibilities were male gender expectations. In

[129] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag*, pp. 31-32.

[130] Papanek and Minault, *Separate Worlds*, p. 131.

Rokeya's utopia, women could expand their gender roles to become financially responsible, which she had envisioned for colonial India. This is a major factor to Rokeya's utopian construction because many women during this period could not financially support themselves on their own even if they wanted to leave their oppressive circumstances. Rokeya believes that a utopian society would allow women to gain some form of financial independency. This however is easier written than implemented. On one hand Rokeya acknowledges the necessity of women to expand their gender roles to embrace financial independency, but on the other hand, educational opportunities for women did not directly lead to jobs for women. Therefore, women in *Padmarag* are employed by the women at Tarini Bhavan. Rokeya believed that in order for women to slowly work their way up to complete financial independence, women first needed to create institutions like Tarini Bhavan that would provide paying jobs and positions for women.

Rokeya also believed that a feminist utopia would allow women to have new opportunities that they could not have in late nineteenth and early twentieth century India. Most of these opportunities were a result of new educational opportunities that women would receive. Education would allow women to be better engaged with the society they once were secluded from and as a result bring new opportunities in their lives. Some of these opportunities include the ability to contribute to society. Sultana says, "We talked on various subjects; and I learned that they were not subject to any kind of epidemic disease, nor did they suffer from mosquito bites as we do. I was very much astonished to

hear that in Ladyland no one died in youth except by rare accident."[131] Women in Ladyland were able to create scientific innovations to assist residents of Ladyland in every aspect of their lives, including medicine. The low death rate in Ladyland represented the new opportunities that women received where they could contribute to medical innovations that prevented diseases and viruses. Sultana is also surprised that women did not die at a young age, which is a reflection on infanticides that girls faced in India. Female babies were often killed at a young age due to the financial burden that they brought to families in perspective of dowry and their inability to provide financially for the family. Girls who suffered from infanticide did not have the opportunity to live their lives beyond a young age. Rokeya alludes to the idea that in her feminist utopia, women did not die at an early age for causes such as infanticide. Another opportunity that Rokeya believed that a feminist utopia could offer women was the ability to help other women in need. In *Padmarag*, the Tarini Bhavan institution is created to help women in every aspect of their lives emotionally, physically, and financially.[132] This is done by giving women who came to the sanctuary opportunities to work on themselves. Once they are in a better position, they are able to help others. They then get different opportunities within the institution to aid women in need which opens their opportunities. Some of these opportunities include becoming teachers for women, working as nurses for

[131] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*, p. 10.

[132] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag*, p. 31.

people who are physically ill, and working as staff in the housing facility and school. These opportunities are important to Rokeya because she believes that women themselves could become leaders of their communities, like Mrs. Sen, and provide ways to help other women get through their oppressive circumstances.

These new gender roles and opportunities that women would receive in these two utopian works were incorporated by Rokeya to show that women could expand their abilities if given the opportunity. These roles and opportunities could help women engage with society more than they had in India. The goal of these new roles and opportunities that Rokeya discusses in her works is that they would allow women to reimagine their lives and themselves. In *Sultana's Dream* new opportunities allowed women to see themselves as active members of society. In India, women were more passive actors in society when they lived in seclusion. Ladyland provides opportunities for women to be part of a society that prioritizes and encourages women's participation in society. The goal of new opportunities and roles in *Padmarag* are more geared towards the patriarchal society that women lived in. Women would be able to use their new opportunities and experiences to become more well-rounded members of society. Rokeya wrote about a sister in Tarini Bhavan named Saudamini who states, "'Life's cruel vicissitudes must have forced poor Padmarag to fall here like a bud torn from it stem. Even if she doesn't come from a respectable background, we will help her to become respectable.'"[133]

[133] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag*, p. 37.

Women at Tarini Bhavan wanted to be part of an institution that helped women get out of the oppressive circumstances that they lived in. Saudamini explains to her other sisters that she wants Padmarag to become a respectable woman. Padmarag came to Tarini Bhavan and introduced herself as Siddika and Padmarag because she went by both names. Padmarag means ruby, and the sisters believed it was a fitting name for because she had a rosy complexion that emulated a ruby. Since then, the sisters analogized Padmarag's name to wanting to provide the best care possible for this "ruby." In perspective of what Tarini Bhavan provides this meant that Padmarag would be able to emotionally deal with her past, become educated, and become financially independent from her family. Rokeya's aspiration was to help women take charge of their own lives with the assistance of a feminist institution like Tarini Bhavan.

Both these works created an important outlook and framework to Rokeya's feminist utopian views; however the way women faced the oppressive patriarchal society is arguably the most important aspect of these works. Rokeya's utopian worlds both incorporate the same methods and process that she believes women need to incorporate in their society. Rokeya believes that women need to collectivize together in order to provide real change for women. Rokeya criticized that both British and Indian men had neglected to provide real reforms for women, so as a response Rokeya wrote these two works as ways to show how women could take control over their oppressive state and to help womankind in the Indian subcontinent. While a society like Ladyland that is ruled by only women is a fictional aspiration of Rokeya, the collective efforts made by women

in Ladyland is something that Rokeya highlights in her work. Women in Ladyland come together to bring progress to society so that women as a whole could progress. Women build universities, create new inventions, and establish foreign relations with other nations in Ladyland so that they could create society that helps women flourish, especially more than the opportunities that Rokeya had access to in her lifetime. In *Padmarag*, women collectivize as a sisterhood in Tarini Bhavan. The members of Tarini Bhavan call each other sisters because they come together to help each other mentally, emotionally, and physically. They also call each other sisters because they see one another as their family. These women abandoned their families to have a fresh start on their new lives at Tarini Bhavan, so the women at the institution become their new family members who support them through their new journey. At Tarini Bhavan these sisters also create their own community. This community's main goal is to aid both men and women who need help. Rokeya discusses the collectivization of women as a community to show that women can come together for a greater cause if they are given the opportunity. The collectivization of women in Tarini Bhavan is also a testament of a strong progressive movement. Women of this institution are part of a movement to provide the necessary tools for girls that they will need to be well-rounded individuals in society. These are the very tools that women in late nineteenth and early twentieth century India were secluded from, especially access to educational opportunities. This movement also fights against the oppressive patriarchal society. Saudamini responds to Padmarag when she asks for a solution to past traumas and says, "'There is! That redress

is the Society for the Upliftment of Downtrodden Women at Tarini Bhavan. Come, all you abandoned, destitute, neglected, helpless, oppressed women – come together. Then we will declare war on society! And Tarini Bhavan will serve as our fortress.'"[134] While the impact is not as large as Ladyland where women have full control and have overthrown the patriarchal society, women at Tarini Bhavan fight against patriarchy on a smaller scale. By aiding women who faced negative consequences due to their oppression, women at Tarini Bhavan fight against and help women liberate themselves from the social ills of the patriarchal society. A feminist utopian institution like Tarini Bhavan could provide well-rounded access to a collectivized sisterhood, community, and movement.

[134] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag*, p. 104.

Figure 3.1: Sir Thomas More (1527)

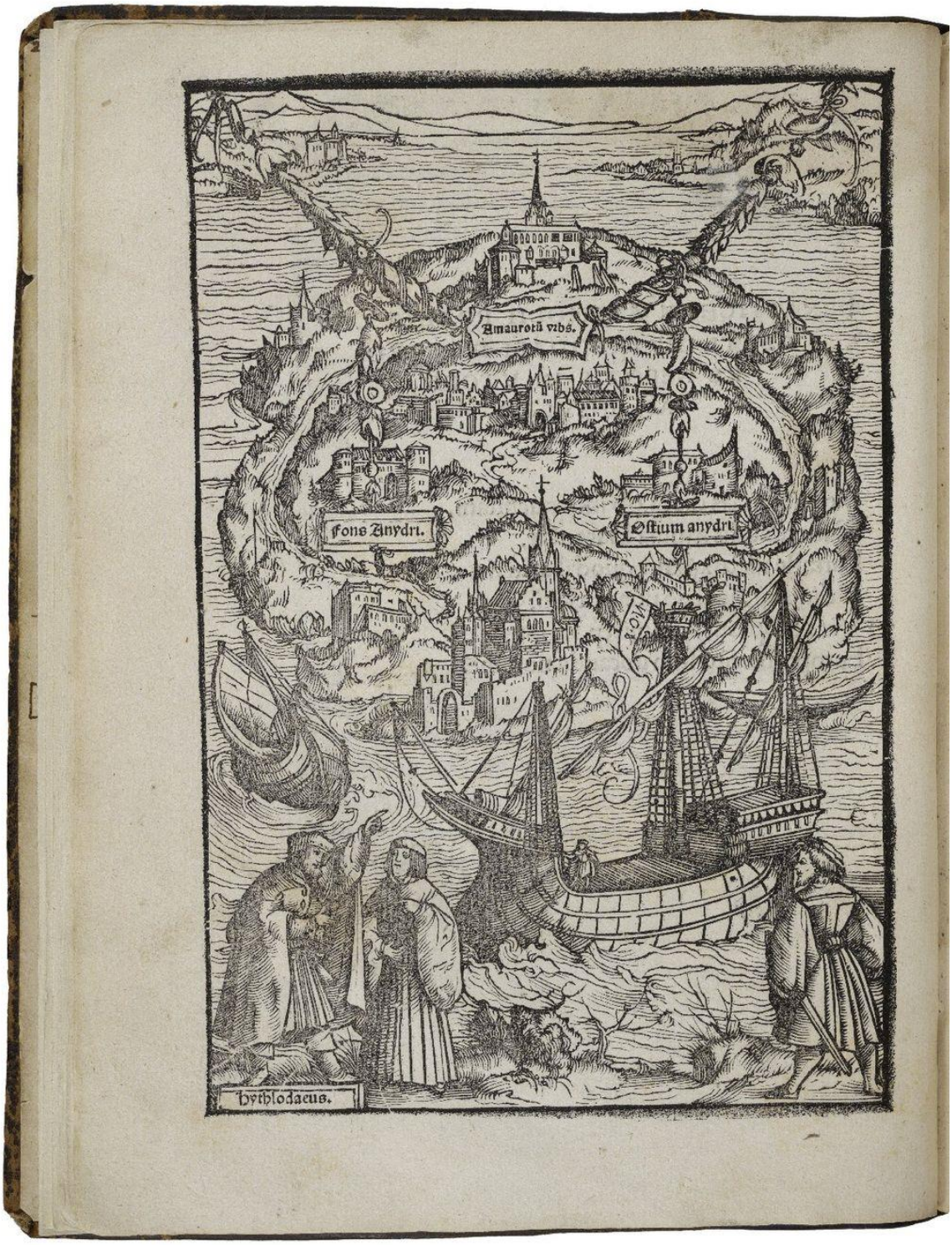

Figure 3.2: Illustration of Thomas More's *Utopia* (1518)

Figure 3.3: Christine de Pizan presenting her book to the Queen of France (between 1410-1414)

Figure 3.4: Illustration of Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* (between 1410-1414)

CONCLUSION:

Rokeya's Feminist Legacy

The Importance of Rokeya's Feminist Utopian Literary Works

The flourishing print culture of late nineteenth century Bengal allowed women like Rokeya to have a platform to discuss women's issues and to reimagine their world views. Rokeya's published feminist utopian works were significant literary works for both men and women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Readers could understand the inner workings of a feminist's views of women's issues. Having these works published allowed Rokeya to aim to communicate to other members of Rokeya's community in Bengal and across the Indian subcontinent of her views of utopia from the lens of a feminist. The literary platform that Rokeya was able to build with the publication of her literary works, through her novels, periodicals, newspaper articles, lectures, speeches, and letters was a significant achievement for a woman of this time. Given her platform, Rokeya's feminist utopian works carried importance and significance for multiple reasons for both men and women of this period.

First, the importance of Rokeya's work is that it impacted women's personal lives on an individual basis. Rokeya wrote her utopian works to relate to women who had been in the same position as her under seclusion. Her works, although about utopia, have components of sympathy and empathy to them. As someone who had been in and witnessed similar situations that women had faced in the patriarchal society, Rokeya

made sure to incorporate her emotional support and understanding for women in seclusion. Writing about utopia, at the same time, was a way for her to escape the harsh conditions she had lived in an imagined world away from the social ills she had faced. While escaping reality was not Rokeya's primary goal, it did help women who had access to her works or who had heard her works, before and after her death, to imagine a better life for themselves. They could also use Rokeya's works to emotionally cope with their own lives, and to hold onto hope for a better future where they could have better opportunities. As innocent as fictional imagination for children and adults can be, for Rokeya's work this imagination shed light on some larger concerns for women's issues such as educational opportunities and women's overall status in society. Women needed Rokeya's work to emotionally understand and realize that they had been living in oppressed circumstances and that they could be provided with a better life in the "perfect" society that prioritized women.

Rokeya's works were also a form of resistance writing on behalf of all women as she was able to highlight how critical the women's issues were. She was against the patriarchal gender norms and expectations that had been part of the patriarchal society she lived in to hopefully achieve some of her utopian goals and visions. Writers like Rokeya also resisted against their position within society. Rokeya wrote in part one of *Motichur*, a published collection of Rokeya's articles from various journals, "That is the reason I say, we do not have even a humble heart of our own. No living creature is so

shelterless as we are. Everyone has a home; we are the only ones who have not any."[135] Women during this time were questioning their oppressive status in society, and Rokeya was one of these women. Rokeya felt that women did not have a safe home environment because they faced most of their oppression within the household. This is one example of how feminists, like Rokeya, used their writing to question their lives and their position in society and began resisting against their past life experiences.

It is important to note, women could not completely resist every aspect of their gender norms and expectations. Women such as Rokeya still practiced aspects of *purdah* even though they were openly criticizing the seclusion of women. This is because women were not able to physically abandon their traditional gender roles and expectations in the patriarchal society. There would have been many physical and emotional consequences that women would have faced if they did. Therefore, Rokeya's feminist works are important when trying to understand the women's movement during this period. Women could not physically resist the patriarchal framework they lived in; however, they could write about the issues they had with the patriarchal system. Writing becomes a form of resistance for women because they are able to do so without actually implementing their ideas quite yet since their ideas were radical given the historical context. Authors like Rokeya are then able to take their discussion of resistance further by writing in a fictional literary framework. The discussions of feminist ideas in these works are just as important

[135] Hossain, *Motichur*, p. 89.

as the actual reform feminists accomplished. This is because these ideas represented the beginning of a movement of women who started to change the way they think and resist existing ideas found in their environment. Rokeya wrote these works as a form of resistance for all Indian women who were in oppressive circumstances, including women who were still voiceless. Rokeya was one of the lucky women who was able to discuss these issues so openly, but not many women during this period had the same opportunity. Rokeya's feminist works not only resist against patriarchy for her own benefit, but they also represent the thousands of women who were voiceless in their oppression. She contributes these works as resistance on behalf of all Indian women as a collective, especially those who could not resist ideas as openly as her.

Writing also gave Rokeya a platform to voice her opinions on women's issues in a more public way. Women did not have many opportunities to openly criticize patriarchy and the condition they lived in. They were expected to stay silent and carry out their duties as the inferior gender. Rokeya wrote in her essay *The Dawn*, "All the blame is often ascribed on us, considering us dumb and stupid, but we have never protested against such bias because we are voiceless. We are mostly treated like animals…."[136] Rokeya was able to be the voice for the voiceless women who suffered under the patriarchal system. She was also able to propose progressive ideas for women. Ideas such as educational opportunities were looked down upon by men who believed in traditional

[136] Hossain, *The Essential Rokeya*, p. 136.

gender roles during this period, but she was able to discuss the importance of reform at great lengths in her written works. If she had tried to discuss these issues openly without having a literary platform, men, and women both would have ignored her ideas and views. While Rokeya's works may have not personally affected the average Indian woman directly, indirectly Rokeya was discussing women's issues openly and publicly for the betterment of women as a collective.

Secondly, Rokeya's works are important because they represented the efforts of the women's movement in India during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Some of the efforts and ideas that feminists wanted to implement and discuss to help women directly could not be logistically implemented in every community across India, and this is why women's writing such as Rokeya's works become integral pieces of literature to bind together the ideas and efforts of the women's movement. Feminist works go beyond writing about ideas and views of women's issues, the works themselves are a testament of the women's movement. The very act of women writing was not a common practice in India, so the new wave of feminist works during this period represent a new stage of the women's movement. Rokeya was not only part of the women's movement, but she was also part of a new literary historical moment.

Women's writing was an important tool because they were unable to write so openly in the past. Writing became a form of political exercise or act for women. As progressive as these women were during this period, they were still limited by the society they lived in. They could not protest the same ways people have in more modern times. It

is important to note that while protests, marches, and sit-ins were part of the women's movement during this period, such as those of the passing of the Sarda Act or also known as the Child Marriage Restraint Act in 1929, these were not accessible to many women especially those in smaller towns or villages. The forms of protests often took place in larger cities where women received more support on their ideas, such as education, than more rural areas of India. They were also limited because the physical act of protesting was not accessible to women in seclusion and engaging in such protests could lead to violent consequences by men. Women had to become creative in ways to protest societal norms in a different way. Writing was one of those tools. Feminist authors like Rokeya, were able to write their works as a form of political protest against the societal framework because they were able to discuss their points and to distribute their ideas to the public. Rokeya was one of those feminists that did not engage heavily in protests, marches, and sit-ins with other women, but she instead was able to reach women across India through her literary works and speeches. Literary works became a symbol of political action for feminists who were expected to be silent and passive actors in society.

Rokeya's works also represented ideas of the larger women's movement because she openly criticized the British government and Indian men. Criticism of the British government and Indian men was part of the women's movement, especially during the efforts to make the Sarda Act into legislation[137], and Rokeya herself also joined in this

[137] Sinha, *Specters of Mother India,* p. 158.

criticism. While Rokeya was not as direct with her criticism, she does make remarks through imagery to voice her criticism of the British government. In *Sultana's Dream*, the queen says, "We do not covet other people's land, we do not fight for a piece of diamond though it may be a thousandfold brighter than the Koh-I-Noor."[138] While this is not a criticism directly related to women's issues, it does show that Rokeya felt strongly that the British government's purpose to rule India was to extract natural resources away from India. Indirectly, this passage shows that she felt that instead of helping Indians, the British government was more focused on the economic benefits for their empire. She demonstrated this belief and criticizes the British government in more depth in *Padmarag* when she wrote, "'In other words, English law was unable to release Helen-di from the embrace of a lunatic. Helen would have to endure the terrible consequences of living with a madman. What greater injustice or oppression could one possibly think of? This England – this noxious, putrid England – claims to be civilized!'"[139] Rokeya openly expresses it wasn't easy for women like Helen during this period to get a divorce. Helen had a hard time getting a *decree nisi* granted to divorce her abusive husband. There was a lack of support of the British government when it came to women's issues; the British had neglected women's voices. These ideas of criticism were prevalent to the women's movement because it identified that Indian women rarely had assistance from the British.

[138] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*, p. 17.

[139] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag*, p. 96.

Rokeya also criticizes Indian men in her works. In *Sultana's Dream* her criticism of men is apparent in her construction of Ladyland, where men are put in the same social oppression that women faced. She criticizes men for keeping women secluded, so in her utopia men have to face what women faced in India. In *Padmarag*, the sisters openly criticize Indian men when discussing some of the experiences they have lived through and witnessed. Siddika says, "If after being humiliated by a drunkard of a husband, you refused to live with him and his concubine, your own brothers want to truss you up and pack you off to him. If a man runs for his life by leaping out of a window, abandoning his spouse to her fate, she is expected to beg strangers for shelter – is there no redress for these injustices?"[140] Siddika is stating these incidents to show that women in India were kept in circumstances that they had no choice in because men spoke and made decisions for women, especially when they were most helpless. Rokeya's criticism of the British government and Indian men is important because her works gave her the ability to begin looking at women's lives socially, culturally, politically, and economically. She attributes many of the women's issues in India to the neglect that women face from the British government and Indian men. These criticisms in her works were important to the women's movement because they began the conversation of reform. Because both British and Indian men had neglected women, the women's movement needed to take place so that women themselves could bring reform.

[140] Hossain, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag*, p. 104.

Both British and Indian men had discussed the issues of modernity in perspective of women's issues in a public discourse, however they had failed to incorporate women in the conversation and had made very little reform efforts to help women. Rokeya's works gave her the ability to have a platform to discuss some of the reform ideas she believed were necessary for women. They allowed her to create her own space within the public discourse that men were having about women's issues. Women, like Rokeya, joined the discourse so that women's issues were no longer topics of modernity dominated by the male voice, and instead they wanted to discuss women's issues on their own terms. The importance of these works to the women's movement is most important in perspective of what these works represented. This work as a collective showed that women wanted a say in discussions made about women's issues. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, women no longer wanted men to speak for and make decision for women, they instead wanted more autonomy over their lives on their own terms.

Rokeya's writings also contributed to the women's movement as inspirational literary works. Her works are known as some of the most important works for the women's movement during this period, and she uses her works to inspire other women. While she discusses some of the important issues women faced in India, the main foundation of her works is the construction of a feminist utopia. She was less focused on some of the oppressive circumstances women had faced, and she was more focused on constructing the ideal world for women. She created these works to look forward to the

future for women, rather than looking back at the suffering of the past. The feminist utopia that Rokeya constructed was inspirational to diverse women, Hindu, Christian, and Muslim women all found inspiration in her works. This may be since her utopia consists of ideals of secularism and egalitarianism where women of diverse backgrounds feel comfortable living in. Rokeya wanted that *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag* not only show her version of utopia, but also inspire women to work towards the ideal feminist utopian world. Her work displayed her own views, but she wanted that the works also promote self-realization. Rokeya wanted women to realize that they had more power than men had given them. By writing feminist utopian pieces, she wanted women to take aspects of the works and be inspired to work together with the other women in the women's movement.

Thirdly, the importance of Rokeya's works is that it showed how feminist during this period reimagined their worldviews. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century was a crucial moment in history where feminists were developing and evolving new world views. Writing was a process that gave Rokeya the ability to create a fictional society that aligned with her own world views and visions. She was able to carefully describe some of these worldviews. The influences of her worldviews were a reaction or a result of the world she lived in. The society she lived in was dominated by patriarchy and it made her feel that society as a whole was oppressive for women, and she criticized social norms in her works. She saw the unequal opportunities women received, so she pushed for education for women in her works. She also saw that the overall structure of

society had fostered an environment that did not prioritize women, and as a result she created her own feminist utopia. The writing process for her was an exercise to cope with the inequality she had to face in her lifetime and to develop reforms and goal for these issues. While her works are a symbol of her own views, her works have also been used to describe the overall views of feminists during this period. Her views of patriarchy, feminism, the women's movement, and reform coincide with other popular beliefs that feminists discussed during this era. These works are a testament of developing worldviews of women involved in the women's movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Rokeya was also able to develop her goals of what a "modern" Indian woman would be like. For Rokeya, as seen in *Sultana's Dream*, women would have more autonomy over their lives. They would be able to immerse themselves into the political, social, cultural, and economic world more than they had been able to in India. In *Padmarag*, Rokeya saw modern Indian women as women who overcame their oppressive circumstances. These women would be able to gain education, eventually work, and most importantly help one another. Writing allowed Rokeya to develop her own ideas of what a modern Indian woman would become, which in turn also shows the kinds of opportunities women should receive to become a modern woman. Some of these opportunities include education, financial independence, the end of the *purdah* system and seclusion, and equality between men and women. The significance of this discussion in Rokeya's work is that she, as a feminist, was now developing her own worldview on

modernity. The discourse of colonial modernity between the colonial state and Indian nationalist men used women to develop ideas of India's modernity. This discourse left women out of the conversation, and thus women's modern state was based on what men had defined women as. This is especially seen with the construct of the ideal Hindu nationalist woman created by Indian men with nationalist ideals.[141] Rokeya's development of a new modern Indian woman, shows how feminist of this period were reclaiming their power to define modernity on their own terms. Women wanted to develop and contribute their own ideas of how women would progress in the modern era.

Passing Rokeya's work as purely fictional does not give her works the historical significance they deserve. Rokeya herself was a prominent feminist of this time, and her works are a direct reflection of the ideas and visions she had for women. While she uses literary elements that were often fictional in her works, it is important to note that Rokeya embeds many elements in her works to discuss the women's issues and ideas of the women's movement during this historical time. Rokeya discusses the issues of seclusion, the lack of educational opportunities, the emotional trauma women have faced, criticism for British colonists and the patriarchal society, and the necessary reforms that needed to take place for women, and the idealistic society for women. Her works are more than words in print, they describe the suffering of women in the past centuries, and how women in this period are slowly collectivizing to take control over their lives. Women

[141] Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, p. 28.

like Rokeya no longer wanted to live secluded lives and have no say over their wellbeing, they wanted to express their own views and to envision a better future for women.

Her works are important examples of science fiction, because Rokeya envisions an idealistic world where women are responsible for the growth of scientific and technological inventions and advances. However, on a larger scale these works are products of Rokeya's historical environment during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal. *Purdah* was a common practice for women of middle-class Muslim households in Bengal. Eventually, Rokeya was one of the rarest women of this period who had the opportunity to learn how to read and write. Her works showcase her views and goals for women's issues given this period. While she was a progressive woman of the time, she still had to conform to aspects of traditional patriarchy because she was restricted to the ideals of this period. She demonstrates this in her discussion of the new "modern" Indian woman, where she believed women could expand into new gender roles but still needed to fully carry out their traditional gender roles. Rokeya was also influenced by her middle-class Bengali background. She witnessed the impact western education brought for the men in her life, and she advocated for women's education. Rokeya understood the importance of education because she grew up in a middle-class household that embraced western education, just like many other middle-class Muslim households had begun to do so during this period.

She was able to publish her works for both men and women to be able to read because she was living through a period where print had already been flourishing. The

print culture during this period allowed women like Rokeya to begin writing for the ideas and efforts they made for the women's movement. Even her suggestions of a feminist utopian society are a result of the historical time period she was writing in. She wanted women to have access to education because they had been deprived of the opportunity. She knew that education gave her the opportunity to become a writer, so educational opportunities for women could lead to diverse opportunities. She also wanted women to collectivize because she knew, like many other women at this time, that the British government and Indian nationalist men have done very little to bring reform for women. It was important for Rokeya to suggest a solution to women's issues that would bring real changes, and for her that meant that women themselves come together in order to improve their own lives and the lives of women in the future.

The impact of Rokeya's work go beyond a feminist vision, they are a testament of what life was like for women in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal. Her work is a piece of historical evidence of the steps women took during the women's movement. They highlight the women's issues that women of this movement had concerns about. They also propose different reform ideas that women wanted to incorporate in society to improve upon the issues women faced. And lastly, they show the idealistic society that women wanted to live in. These utopian works are not just a fictional vision, but they show the moment women started to recognize and address the many issues they faced, and they took control over their own lives. Rokeya was just one of the many feminist voices that wrote during this period, but for Rokeya and women

who have read her works since, the imagination of feminist utopia represents a hope for a better future for Indian women.

Rokeya's Legacy and Impact on Feminism

Rokeya has become one the most prominent historical figures in South Asian history, especially as a feminist and literary writer. Her works have made an impact on South Asian society even after her death in 1932. She is an inspirational figure for women's history and has often been called a pioneer of the women's liberation movement. She has made the most impact in areas involving the women's movement, the development of women's education, and reform for women.

Rokeya herself was a prominent leader of the women's movement in the late nineteenth are early twentieth century. She founded the Anjuman-e-Khawateen-e-Islam (AKI) also known as the Islamic Women's Association in 1916 in Calcutta, Bengal. Hasina Joarder and Safiuddin Joarder write, "Day in and day out, she moved from one home to another trying to convince the women that there were a great many things to be done for the improvement of society and that the women should get together, discuss those problems and try to solve them."[142] This organization was an extension of the more well-known national association called the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) which sought to help and support women financially and emotionally through their hardships. These organizations provided many events and opportunities for women to

[142] Joarder and Joarder, *Begum*, p. 9.

expand their gender roles and learn, such as vocational work and activities. Rokeya's involvement in the AKI is a reflection of some of the beliefs she portrayed in her utopian works. She wanted women to come together as a collective to help other women in need. Her work for the AKI also shows how motivated Rokeya was to make real changes and reforms for women. She took matters into her own hands by founding an institution to help women and make her feminist utopian goals a reality. Her legacy as an active feminist has been an impactful one. The AKI and other organization were able to make advances and progress that women were unable to make before this period. Gail Minault writes, "Organizations to promote women's education, or to bring about legal and social reforms, provided a training ground, a way for women to meet with other women, to develop organizational skills, to become socially active in ways which were limited but acceptable to their society."[143] These organizations were the initial steps that feminists were taking in order to make real changes for women. The organizations themselves were also important to create the sisterhood that Rokeya discusses in her writings. Organizations like the AKI have helped women create a haven where women can come together to support one another and network with each other for the betterment of Indian women. The legacy that Rokeya has left for these organizations has inspired many women since to come together to organize, and women's organizations are still growing today.

[143] Gail Minault, *Extended Family: Women and Political Participation in India and Pakistan* (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1981), p. 84.

Rokeya has also impacted the women's movement by motivating women to reconsider and reimagine gender power dynamics. She does not state that gender inferiority is right in society or that one gender needs to be more powerful over the other. But her ultimate goal is to have equality between men and women. She began the discussion of changing the gender power dynamics that were present in the patriarchal society where men had majority of the power. By becoming actively involved in the women's movement and creating feminist utopian works, she shows that women needed to reclaim their power in society. She is not recommending women to overpower men, but she does want that women have the same opportunities as men, especially for educational opportunities so that the gender power between men and women is equal. It is with this same goal that women, part of women's organizations and movements, work towards greater equality. Rokeya may not have been the first woman to propose the idea of equality between men and women in society, however her works have become historical examples of how feminists have been thinking and working towards equality for centuries.

Rokeya's works have also been used to understand and navigate feminist visions of the past and future. Her visions, although progressive, are a result of her time period. However, the impact of her works has inspired women in feminist efforts thereafter. Some aspects of society that Rokeya had hoped would eventually reform such as socially veiling women and limiting women's opportunities are still part of some communities in India. Feminists of women's organizations have used her works as inspiration to achieve

their likeminded goals that Rokeya had discussed. The most significant way her feminist vision has impacted women is their desire to provide educational opportunities for women. Geraldine Forbes writes, “But this was a dynamic process; women were becoming educated and then becoming the educators.”[144] Like Ladyland and Tarini Bhavan, women have since looked at Rokeya’s work and the feminist visions of this period as inspiration to provide the educational opportunities women need. Women themselves are becoming educators after having the opportunity to receive education, so that girls in the future could also have the same opportunities, if not better educational opportunities.

Rokeya’s legacy as a feminist, who imparted her beliefs of education, is most significant in the development of her school and the legacy it has upheld. The Sakhawat Memorial Government Girls' High School in Kolkata, Bengal was a project that she undertook in her lifetime to implement the educational opportunities that she wrote about. Rokeya wanted girls to have a well-rounded education so that they could grow and have a future full of opportunities. Her feminist utopian works were written with diverse people in mind. Her audience included the British government, Indian men, and Indian women. She had openly criticized that the British government and Indian men had done very little for women, especially when it came to educational opportunities. Her school was a testament of her feminist utopian beliefs that she had written in her works. Because of the

[144] Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, p. 61.

lack of educational opportunities that Rokeya had discussed in her works, she felt that she needed to take action on providing these opportunities for girls. Her school not only represents an institution that provides education for women, but it also represents the legacy of Rokeya as a feminist. The development of her school is a testament of the grassroot efforts that she was involved in. She is well known for founding the AKI, but her school was also a significant grassroot effort in her own community where she made efforts to help girls directly. Her literary works and school have also inspired other women to help with educational opportunities. Rokeya says in her letter to the editor of *The Mussalman*, an Urdu newspaper, "In the wake of the Sakhawat Memorial School, two or three other girls' schools have been established…."[145] The legacy and aid that Rokeya's school offers for girls today shows that she still has an impact on feminists today and the feminist utopian vision she had is growing even after her lifetime, as many institutions for girls have been established. Sakhawat Memorial Government Girls' High School a historical institution that represents the feminist vision of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and the new movement to provide education for women.

Rokeya's impact and legacy, aside from her school, is still prevalent today. The BBC in 2004 conducted a poll to determine the Greatest Bengali of all time. This poll ranked twenty prominent historical figures in Bengali history. Out of twenty people,

[145] Hossain, *The Essential Rokeya*, p. 178.

Rokeya ranked as the sixth greatest Bengali.[146] Even more significant was that she was the only woman who appeared on this list. Rokeya's image as a feminist has had a long legacy, and it has been most impactful for women, just as she had hoped. Since Rokeya's works published, they have been widely read across the Indian subcontinent by diverse women. Many girls read her works in schools to learn about the feminist movement and visions of her time. While her visions were based on the period she wrote in, her visions have not been limited by time. Her works have been quoted and used as inspiration for women, especially when she encourages women. One of the most noteworthy quotes where she encourages women comes from her magazine article called the *Subho Sadeq* (The Dawn) where she states, "Anyhow, mothers, sisters, daughters, do not sleep anymore; wake up, and march forward to accomplish your life's mission."[147] Rokeya's words and legacy have inspired many generations of women to work towards a better world for women.

[146] Sabir Mustafa, "Listeners name 'greatest Bengali'," BBC News, 2004. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/3623345.stm.

[147] Hossain, *The Essential Rokeya*, p. 137.

Figure 3.5: Statue of Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, University of Dhaka

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