

BEGUM ROKEYA- HER LIFE, LITERARY WORKS, FEMINISM AND FEMALE
EDUCATION (2, 5, 10 MARKS QUESTIONS)

SEM 5, DSE A2 PAPER

Begum Rokeya was the mother of the Muslim Awakening in undivided Bengal. She devoted her life for the emancipation of Muslim women who were to follow stern religious practices like *purdah* and others. She realised that the Muslim women should be given the opportunity for education. In the History of Women education of India she was a significant figure who was dauntless enough and did not care the strong criticisms of the religious heads (*Maulabi*) of Muslim community. In the History of women liberation in colonised India, Begum Rokeya (1880-1932) was like the pole-star guiding and showing the Muslim society the right way to be followed defying all the social and religious obstacles in the path of modernity. She struggled hard to bring the Muslim women within the circle of education. So she is rightly considered as the precursor of women education in Muslim society of undivided Bengal during the British rule.

Family background : She was born in a village named Pairabondh in the Rangpur district of undivided Bengal in the year 1880. Her father was Zahiruddin Muhammad Abu Ali Saber. Her mother was Rahatunnessa. She had to live behind the curtain from the age of five like all female members of her family. She had a deep craze for studying in the early days of her life. In an era when women education was neglected, Rokeya's brother secretly taught her to read and write English and Bengali. In the year 1896, Her father arranged her marriage when she was sixteen to a widower named Khan Bahadur Syed Sakhawat Hossain who was nearly forty years old at the time of marriage. Sakhawat Hossain was a man of liberal and progressive ideas. He helped her in studies and made all the arrangements for her studies. Later with his help, she started to publish her writings in Indian periodicals of that time. Her happy days did not last long as her husband died unexpectedly in 1909. After his death she fell in the great sea of misery. But she was not ready to submit before destiny. Actually, she had a noble mission to achieve. She struggled hard and devoted her life

for the cause of Bengali Muslim women's emancipation. She felt the need of women education and founded a girls' school for that purpose. She died of heart problem on 9th December, 1932. Her greatness lies in the fact that till the last day of her life she worked for the upliftment of women education in Bengal. During her short-lived married life, she had to look after her much older, ailing husband and bear the demise of her "two baby daughters" at their early age. Such agony in personal life was compounded by the misconducts she received from her step-daughter and step-son-in-law owing to family disputes over inheritance.

Rokeya and her literary works: She was a prolific writer of both Bengali and English. She wrote essays, novels, utopias, poems, humor and satirical articles on the rights of women and other social issues of that time. Her husband inspired her a lot in this regard. Her literary career started in 1902 with a story named „*Pipasa*’ (The Thirst). She wrote two anthologies of essays named „*Motichur-I*’ and ‘*Motichur-II*’. She wrote a novel named „*Padmarag*’ (1924). These writings are in Bengali. She also wrote few works in English. „*Sultan*’s Dream” (1908) is one of them. She also wrote two essays- „*God Gives, Man Robs*” (1927) and „*Educational Ideals for the Indian Girls*” (1931).

Rokeya had to work on three fronts simultaneously: literary, political and educational. The publication of the essay “Pipasha” in the Calcutta-based *Nabaprabha* in 1902 marked the inauguration of her literary career. Despite her tremendous creative talents, insights and energies, we notice a gap in her literary production from 1909 to 1914. During this period, she could not focus on writing, presumably because of multiple griefs caused by the deaths of her parents, children and husband. Her life was full of trials and tribulations.

Moreover, she had to employ utmost efforts to establish her school. These may have been the reasons why Rokeya could not produce works between 1909 and 1914. However, apart from this break of continuity in literary production, we find Rokeya relentlessly writing for a whole period of three decades beginning in 1902 and ending with her death, and producing foundational literary works of different genres and subject matters, predominantly women's issues. It was tough for Rokeya to bring cocooned women out of seclusion, to motivate and persuade them to appreciate the importance of becoming involved in Anjuman activities.

Rokeya's literary career belongs to the Rabindra Period in the history of Bangla literature. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) had a large literary following who benefited from his literary style. For example, Rokeya's junior contemporary Sufia Kamal (1911-99) attended sessions in Tagore's house and may have benefited from such interactions with him. She is also known to have written a long poem to celebrate one of his birthdays. But, unlike other Bengali writers, Rokeya is not known to have sent any writing to Rabindranath for his appreciation (Syed 91). So she was not influenced by Rabindra's imagination and spirituality. Her literary style is chiefly her own, befitting the demands of her feminist agendas. She was not predisposed towards the male-dominated literary tradition; rather, she employed her own style to explore the female psyche and to describe its sufferings under patriarchy. Rokeya had a number of Western acquaintances.

During the colonial period, as Muslim leaders including Sayyid Ahmad Khan in North India and Nawab Abdul Latif (1828-93) and Syed Amir Ali (1849-1928) in Bengal advanced Muslims' causes, there was a feminist "subculture" in both regions – on literary and political fronts – that espoused gender egalitarianism, especially women's education and advancement (Hasan, "Marginalisation of Muslim" 181). While in North India it was spearheaded by a host of writers and social reformers, in Bengal it took off in a real sense with the intellectual culture of Rokeya. They fought to facilitate female 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.

Educational thoughts of Rokeya and Her contribution in women education:

Rokeya's philosophy of education was based on her own life experience. She was an idealist in her approach. She witnessed how the women of the Bengali Muslim community suffered due to age-old religious norms and the patriarchal dominance. To drive away their misery she felt the need of education. She dreamt of a new dawn of a new age when Muslim women would be treated equally like their male counterpart. She rightly detected the cause of the unspeakable misery of the Muslim woman as the misinterpretation of Islam. She took the vow of women education. But it was not an easy task when the Muslim women were secluded from the outside world in the name of religious directives of Islam. At that time a handful of Muslim women belonging to the higher class of the society got the opportunity

only for religious studies by the instructors or *Maulavis* of the nearby mosques. The *Maulavis* taught them holy Quran in confinement. At first she started to write various articles, essays, books etc. in support of women education and their emancipation. With her husband's help and encouragement, she started a girls' school in Bhagalpur. For that purpose her husband, Syed Sakhawat Hossain gave her a legacy of Rupees 10,000. Five months after the death of her husband, she established a high school there in the memory of her beloved husband and named it as „Sakhawat Memorial Girls' High School". It was started in Bhagalpur—a traditionally Urdu-speaking area with only five students. In 1910, she was forced to close down the school because of a feud over family property with her step-daughter's husband. In the same year she came to Kolkata (Then Calcutta). She did not leave the motto of her life which was the emancipation of Muslim women. She re-opened Sakhawat Memorial Girls' High School here at 13, Waliullah Lane on 16th March, 1911. At first there was only eight students. Gradually, the number of students rose and it became eighty-four in 1915. She ran her Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School for 24 years fighting against ear-piercing criticisms as well as various social hindrances. She tried hard and soul to make it the best school for Muslim girls. At first the non-Bengali families sent their girls to Sakhawat Memorial Girls' High School. But the Bengali Muslim families were indifferent about their girls' education. So Rokeya came forward and took the initiative of persuading Bengali Muslim families to send their daughters to her school. She even made door to door campaign and convinced the parents that *purdah* would be observed at her school too. She arranged a horse-drawn carriage so that girls could go to school and return home observing *purdah*. Later she offered a free bus service for the girl students. For observing *purdah* she instructed to fit the shutters to the windows of the bus. Sometimes the girls inside the bus fainted because of the lack of ventilation. Later she replaced the shutters with curtains. One of her friends described the bus as „moving black hole". She was a thoughtful woman who felt the need of various subjects for educating the Muslim girls of that time. She herself constructed the curriculum for the girls of her school. She included the following subjects in the curriculum:

(i) Quran , (ii) English , (iii) Urdu , (iv) Persian , (v) Home nursing , (vi) First-aid , (vii) Cooking , (viii) Sewing , (ix) Physical education , (x) Vocational Training.

Rokeya was by heart and soul an educationalist. She got a little support from the British Government for running her school. But she was not a person to be defeated so easily. She

used her private income in order to run her school. There was not only economical hindrance but also hindrances in other areas. She faced religious criticisms and countered them by writing many articles, essays to differentiate between true religion and man-made religion. Her aim in this regard was to convince the parents about the need of education in the life of their daughters. She saw how the Muslim women submitted themselves to their husbands and had no chance to question inequality inherent in the Muslim society. Rokeya wanted to break the religious dogma and also wanted to inform the women that Islam did not promote inequality between man and woman. For the true understanding of the religious doctrine in the Quran, she recommended the translation of the Holy book into provincial languages. She recommended the reading of Quran. But she did not support the parrot like recitation of the Holy Book. She told that the very truth exposed by the Quran should be understood by the Muslim girls. She emphasised on physical education because she believed that it would make the women physically stronger, fit and confident. She also gave importance to vocational training because she thought that it would make the women economically independent. She also recommended the value oriented education for making the girls ideal daughters, wives and mothers or obedient daughters, loving sisters, dutiful wives and instructive mothers. Rokeya dared to go against the norms of the Muslim society for the inspiration she got seeing the efforts made by the British Rulers and the educationalist like Vidyasagar in the expansion of women education. She was also affected immensely by the rationalism of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and Keshab Chandra Sen. She felt the need of good teachers for providing the best education to the girl students of Bengal. There was a lack of female teachers at that time. For creating good female teachers she herself used to train them.

Female education: The focus of Rokeya's activism was the promotion of female education. In British India, the social setting was so hostile to female education that even the giant Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-98) did not dare to include it in his powerful movement for Muslims' education, thinking that such a move would frustrate the ultimate objective of their advancement. But Rokeya did not give in; she waged a persistent battle for female education, braving the social norms and barriers that stood between women and the prevailing intellectual culture.

It is important to note that Rokeya raised the issue of female education at a turning point in the history of Muslim Bengal. After a long period of colonial oppression, Muslims

realised its economic, political and cultural detriments. Upon starting her school, she became extremely preoccupied with it mentally and physically. Towards the end of life, that hard work had a telling effect on her health. She walked around from door to door in order to collect students and persuade the guardians to send their daughters to the school. She assured them that she would personally take full responsibility of looking after and tutoring them and, what is more, they would not have to pay school fees or travel costs. In order to convince the parents and guardians, Rokeya ensured that the school carriage was fully covered, which made it look like a moving tent. Rokeya did not believe in any disparity between the learning of men and women, which was highly revolutionary considering the material culture in which she launched her educational movement. Even the forward-looking Brahmins and Brahmos of colonial Bengal did not teach women much beyond socially accepted subjects.

Rokeya did not believe in any disparity or discipline differences between male and female education and sought women's access invariably to all branches of knowledge. She campaigned to make "chemistry, botany, horticulture, personal hygiene, health care, nutrition, physical education, gymnastics, and painting and other fine arts open to women" (Hasan, "Marginalisation of Muslim" 188). In *Sultana's Dream*, she portrays Sister Sara as someone who is proficient in modern branches of knowledge such as history, politics, military strategy, education and science. In *Padmarag*, she depicts an ideal system of female education where almost all branches of learning – science, literature, geography, history, mathematics – are taught. Away from her imaginative world, in practical life it was not possible for her to implement all that she promoted through writing. However, for her Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School, she formulated a "curriculum [that] included physical education, handicrafts, sewing, cooking, nursing, home economics, and gardening, in addition to regular courses such as Bangla, English, Urdu, Persian, and Arabic".

Rokeya's Feminism

In countering patriarchal authority and in promoting women's educational and civil rights, Rokeya does not follow an anti-male or anti-Islam stance. She satirises Muslim men, as they do not have any agenda to empower women who can potentially help them in reform and freedom movements. However, she does not demonstrate any syndrome of caricaturing all

men while criticising those who are against women's education and independence. She does not rest content with simply putting the blame on men; rather, she looks into the core of the problem to identify the areas women themselves need to address. Equally, she emphasises women's role in the overall advancement of society. She is as caring for men as she is for women. She does not criticise men only for women's sufferings, as women themselves are also responsible for their plight. So they should shoulder equal or even greater responsibility to improve the status of the Muslim community. Rokeya wants to dismantle the gender binarism and proposes that both men and women should equally contribute to the advancement of society. She exposes and critiques unreservedly many extrinsic frivolities that women have acquired over time.

Rokeya does not treat men simply as women's enemy. Instead of using disrespectful terms against men, she calls the adversaries of women's liberation "imprudent," as they want to exercise unquestioned authority over women and ignore the greater interest of society. However, she is also very strong in denouncing men who regard women merely as dolls and chattels to possess and dispossess at will.

Rokeya critiques the patriarchal, malestream interpretation of Islam and re-examines it in light of gender justice, and does not take the prevalent patriarchal notions of Islam as its norm. Her overly critical view of cultural Islam is actually against its malpractices not against the religion. She points her finger at those who consider themselves the custodians of Islam and abuse it to promote patriarchal authority at the expense of women's rights.

Conclusion

Rokeya stands out as the greatest feminist writer of Bangladesh for the superior literary merits of her work as well as for her incredible courage and resilience to struggle for women's emancipation against the hostile, unfavourable material conditions of her society that was not ready to receive her revolutionary feminist ideas positively. Rokeya did not have such exposure, though she benefited from her interactions with many Europeans residing in India and with many local reformers and litterateurs. Her interaction with men of literary gifts who had sympathy for women's liberation was limited, as the scope of communication was seriously hampered by extreme notions of Indian-style purdah. To a

great extent, Rokeya maintained extreme purdah when interacting with men, fearing that non-compliance, and her consequent unacceptability in society, might thwart her agendas of women's advancement as well as the progress of her school. Despite these limitations, her achievements concerning women's rights have been incredible and unsurpassed. Rokeya's feminist theory and strategy were extremely conducive, as her ideas have strong relevance to the continuing indigenous feminist struggle of the women down to the present. Her overarching influence and pertinence is strongly felt across Bangladesh and beyond.