The Education of the Secluded Ones

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain 1880-1932

By Yasmin Hossain

Le processus de l'éducation des femmes vivant dans la claustration implique beaucoup de discrétion en plus de provoquer de la désapprobation, de l'ostracisme et parfois une perte de dignité. Ce processus dépend aussi de la coopération des frères, des époux et des beaux-parents qui se sont occidentalisés. L'article traite de comment Begum Rokeya a acquis sa propre éducation avant de s'en aller négocier l'éducation des jeunes filles musulmanes du Bengale.

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, commonly known as the emancipator and educator of the Muslim women of Bengal, is of particular significance in understanding the attitude of the Muslim communities of Bengal regarding female education and eventual emancipation. Born within the confines of a rigid *ashraf* family (Roy), in rural Rangpur in present day Bangladesh, Begum Rokeya was to contradict all the predictions of her background. In later life, she moved into the public sphere to assume the role of a national figurehead by actively promoting female education through the establishment in 1911 of the highly successful Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School, in Calcutta. She simultaneously campaigned for full emancipation of *purdahnasheen* women through the establishment of the Bengal branch of the Anjuman-e-Khawatin Islam, in 1916. (Minault)

Begum Rokeya is best known for the establishment of the school which she began with only a handful of girls whom she personally collected from and returned to their homes in specially designed *purdahnasheen* carriages. Mindful of her critics, Rokeya negotiated with, as well as challenged the patriarchy, particularly over the issue of *purdah*, the main deterrent to female education. The success of her attempts is clearly demonstrated in the blossoming of the school, which having gathered a momentum of its own, runs to the present day.

Rokeya is also known for her writing. She was published regularly in journals such as *Mashik Muhammadi, Sawgat, Nabanur, Muazzin, Bangiya Musalman Sahittya patrika,* and *al-Eslam.* Her literary contribution is also significant. She wrote one novel, several plays, poems and short stories, the best known of which is *Sultana's Dream,* published in 1905 in the *Indian Ladies Magazine* (Jahan 2).

> ***It was not education but purdah which was deemed necessary for the upbringing of girls.***

Begum Rokeya's educational process is not an uncommon story in the lives of most educated women of her time and background. In her father's polygamous household, it was not education but *purdah* which was deemed necessary for the upbringing of girls. The vulnerability of the Muslim identity reached a crisis point in nineteenth century Bengal with its highly successful class of Hindu professionals. As a consequence, Muslim families, such as Rokeya's, clung fiercely to traditional values, incessantly evoking the *ashraf* way of life, claiming foreign ancestry and descent from lands close to that of the Prophet Muhammad. (Roy). Of her childhood Rokeya recalls:

> I had to observe *purdah* even from women from the age of five. I did not understand why it was improper to meet somebody, but I had to observe *purdah.* The inner side of the house was out of bounds for the menfolk; so I did not have to suffer by their presence. However, women freely entered the house, and I had to hide myself before they could see me. As soon as any woman of the locality would come, somebody of 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. I had to run and hide myself just as the chicks do when their mother gives them the signal against a kite. But while the chicks had a definite place—their mother's wings—to hide, I had no such place. Moreover, the chicks understand their mother's signal instinctively. I had no such instinct, and if I failed to understand the signal of the eye and came across somebody, the well wishing elders used to say "how shameless the girls have become." (Joardar and Joardar 5).

In this environment, girls with education were regarded as being as abominable and shameless as those without *purdah.* How then was it possible for Rokeya to familiarize herself not only with the Urdu and Bengali alphabets, but also with English? We know that at the age of five

Rokeya once visited Calcutta with her mother. There, she was introduced to tutors and a missionary woman was even appointed to teach her. But the plan was quickly abandoned when the elders of the family decided that education received from a Western woman would break *purdah*. After returning to her village house in Rangpur, it was her eldest brother, Ibrihim Saber, who inspired Rokeya and initiated the learning process.

Most of the teaching sessions, however, took place in the darkness of night. Samsun Nahar, familiar with the Saber family and a personal friend of Rokeya, presents us with a romantic picture of the siblings seated with their books after the evening meal when the father had gone to bed. They studied together by candlelight, often until dawn, when they were interrupted by the *Azan* for the morning prayer. (Akanda) Rokeya was not only hard-working but also bright and curious. Her progress no doubt delighted Ibrihim and soon a tender relationship developed between the two. It was also Ibrihim who postponed Rokeya's date of marriage for as long as he could, and when the time came, he was most enthusiastic about the educated, westernized Sakhawat Hossain whom Rokeya eventually married.

The other major influence on Rokeya's education was her sister, Karimunnessa. She is interesting in herself, apart from her role as Rokeya's guide and mentor. Born in 1855, Karimunnessa too was an exceptionally bright and curious child, eager to learn. Her life in her father's house was uninspiring. She learned the *Quran* by heart, but any other education was taboo. Yet from an early age, she was resourceful enough to eavesdrop on the *Munshis* who came to teach the brothers. In this way, she taught herself some Persian and, by copying her brothers, learned to write Bengali in utmost secrecy. Learning by eavesdropping on the lessons of the male members of the house was not uncommon in secluded households, where education was taboo for girls. Karimunnessa was eventually discovered by her father, who at first was amused and for a short while took an interest in teaching her himself. However, this came to an abrupt halt when the *mullahs* learned of it. Their criticism was so severe that, fearing ostracism, not only did her father stop her education at once but married her off hurriedly when Karimunnessa was about fourteen.

She married Abdul Hakim Khan Gaznavi, the son of a *zamindari* family in Deldewar in Tangail. (Khan 244). Her new home, although far from Rangpur, and remote and difficult to get to, was a blessing for her. Not only was it liberal and modern, but most importantly, it encouraged female education. She began to learn along with her brothers-in-law. She proved to be a gifted woman who read "hundreds of thousands of books" (Kadir 288) and began to write love poems, as well as others dealing with gender issues and the question of women's status. The following is an example of one such poem:

Whether rich, poor or middle class
Men are never trust worthy
Forget not, forget not sisters!
Their words
Are the ruination of women.
(Sufian 86).

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In 1881, she completed her long poem, *Dukkha Tarangini*, as well as her 118-page long *Manob Bikas*. She had worked on the latter for almost twenty years. Neither of these was published but we are told that they were carefully written, bound in leather, and presented as proper books. Her curiosity and energy for learning never ceased, at the age of sixty-seven she decided to take up Arabic in order to understand the *Quranic* verses she knew so well by heart.

In 1878, on her widowhood, Karimunnessa was left with two young boys, Abdul Karim Abu Ahmed Khan Gaznavi and Abdul Halim Hussain Khan Gaznavi. There was general opposition in Delduar to the education of her sons in the modern system, so she moved to Calcutta, breaking with the custom of a joint family. It is likely that as a widow, she would have spent much time in her paternal home. Being twenty seven years older than Rokeya, Karimunnessa took on the role of mother in the large and busy household.

Karimunnessa was crucial to Rokeya's development. It was she who voiced her opposition to the social norms concerning women, thus setting a precedent for Rokeya. She was defiant in her challenge to society, her convictions were strong, and her faith in herself constant. In her, Rokeya, younger and impressionable, found a mentor. It was the older sister who taught her not only to intellectualize the issues and themes we see her so involved with in her work, but also to question the very nature and purpose of existence, pushing her forward onto the quest for self identity. In this, her influence is immeasurable, for in her, Rokeya found a role model who inspired and encouraged her at every step.

The elder sister died of heart failure in 1926 at the age of 71. It is with deep regret that Rokeya writes "Karimunnessa Sahiba could have been one of the brightest jewels of this land had society not throttled her genius."

The third person most influential in encouraging Rokeya's education was Sakhawat Hossain, her husband. He was the Deputy Magistrate of Bhagalpur, a man in a position of some power, and one who enjoyed the trust of his colonial employers. Not only was he likely to have been influenced by them in European ways of thinking, but he himself had visited the Continent and had studied agriculture in England. He was an advocate of female education and, recognizing the potential of his wife, was determined to develop it further. He improved her English and stimulated her intellectually, no doubt introducing new ideas and literature all the time. In *Baiyu Janay Panchash Mile*, we are told that Rokeya began to write *Sultana's Dream* not only to fill the time while her husband was on tour, but also to impress him on his return. No doubt Rokeya was a tremendous asset to her husband, contributing greatly to his reputation as a westernized, modern man. It is clear that he was proud of her achievements and believed in the causes she herself battled for. At his death, he left her Rs. 10 000 to spend on schools for Muslim girls.

Rokeya's educational accomplishments were acquired on an informal basis, yet the idea of formal academic qualification had enormous appeal for her. There remained in her a longing for formal recognition as an accomplished scholar. Yet, she was a learned woman. Of her, Dr. Muhammad Enamul Haq writes: "the knowledge this extraordinary woman acquired on her own, from within the confines of her home, was no less than the education meted out at universities." (Alam 5) .

The educational experiences of women such as Rokeya and Karimunnessa were not unique. Learning in secrecy from well-meaning brothers or guardians, or even learning by eavesdropping on their lessons, and after marriage, from the modern westernized husband, were the only means of women's initial access to education. But however sympathetic to the education of women, most male patrons pursued their own interests through them. The patriarchal aim diverged from the course set out by Rokeya and other women educators. The male ideal of female education was tailored to fit the image of modern India. The education of women was not a cause in itself, but an issue in the process of decolonization. Therefore, the beginning of female education controlled by women depended on a negotiation with the patriarchal establishment, leading to a relaxation of its constraints. Rokeya began to challenge prevailing assumptions about the status of women in earnest after widowhood, when women, particularly those without children, were freed from the ties of domesticity.

The crucial issue was that women could begin to teach one another, as in the case of Karimunnessa's instructions to Rokeya. This was then an important turning point. Women could begin to depend on others of their own sex rather than on men. It is when women began to claim and take responsibility for their own education that marks the beginning of female-engineered emancipation outside direct male control, and often in defiance of it.

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