

## Moving Beyond Gender Codes: The Upside-Down World of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain

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### Abstract:

The paper aims to study Rokeya's Sakhawat Hossain's contribution as a writer and social reformer and how she tried to foreground the agency of women. The focus of the study is on Rokeya's emancipatory ideals and how her works deal with the issues related to gender and how women activism and education opened up new vistas for social and political reforms in South Asia. Though the percentage of women education has increased, they remain second class citizens in today's enlightened and technologically advanced world. In her works she talks about the essence of the economic freedom of women, importance of education especially the vocation-based education, socioeconomic development and raising the status of women. She proposed plans and programs and suggested the right measures for women's emancipation. Lessons learned from her initiatives are still relevant today and can be applied to address the contemporary issues reflected in the day to day life of women. The present study will be done with the help of the analysis of Rokeya's Sultana's Dream and Padmarag.

**Keywords:** Rokeya, woman, education, emancipation, agency

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last century, women's rights have progressed significantly but there is still much to be done. Poverty, discrimination, and violence are still persistent in the lives of women and girls. Discriminatory social norms continue to isolate women denying them of the equal opportunity to participate in politics, health, education and employment. Across 156 countries, just 25% of parliamentary seats are filled by women and 81 countries have never had a female head of state. There are only 13 countries with 50% or more women ministers. Violence against women remains devastatingly pervasive. 1 in 3 women are physically or sexually abused by an intimate partner or from a non-partner over their lifetime. 830 women die every day from preventable pregnancy related causes. Women make up two-thirds of the world's 796 million illiterate people.

Of all CEOs on the list only 7% are women. Globally, women earn 16% less than men. Of Global labour force participation rate, the women participation accounts for only 49%. On average women do three times as much unpaid care and domestic work as men. Globally 25% women (aged 25-34 years) are more likely to live in extreme poverty than men.

Promoting women's rights, and addressing all forms of discrimination, will be crucial to achieve a more equitable, inclusive, just and sustainable society. From individual decisions to collective action, women must be heard and paid attention to. Women's voices are essential to sustainable development of our societies. Gender equality is at the core of humanity. Nobody should ever be discriminated because of who they are. Human rights are for everyone and everywhere.

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain popularly known as Begum Rokeya is one of the influential feminist voices of the contemporary times. She is a prolific writer, social activist, and educationist. She is the pioneer of Bengali Muslim Feminism. Rokeya has rightly received the epithet, "Mother of Bengali Muslim Women's Movement in Bengal". She was one of the leading reformers of her age. Though having been raised by a conservative Muslim family and maintaining the practice of purdah throughout her whole life, Rokeya, nonetheless, played an integral role in extending public education for Bengali Muslim women in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Rokeya's life is very interesting because she belongs to a time period where there was little focus on women's education and it was not considered important to educate them. Even her father, Zahir Mohammad Abu Ali Saber was against educating women. She has been taught secretly by her older brother, Ibrahim Saber (to whom she dedicated *Padmarag*), who gave her important lessons in English. She learnt Bengali from her elder sister, Karimunnessa (to whom she dedicated *Sultana's Dream*). She was married at the age of 16 to a widowed civil service officer, Syed Sakhawat Hossain. He was an enlightened man who recognized the need to educate women and it was under his influence that Rokeya dared to inscribe her thoughts on female issues and experiences. Her feminist writings have become an emblem of embattled women's rights.

Rokeya used her writing as a platform for social change. Having witnessed the sufferings of women in Bengal, Rokeya believed that as a practicing Muslim woman it was her duty to right the wrongs of society. She herself had to struggle to acquire education. She wanted to ensure that she must leave her legacy for the Muslim women of the coming ages. It was the support from her husband that encouraged Rokeya to speak up for gender

equality and to champion the cause of women. Her activism is fuelled by the sufferings she has seen the women and girls of her generation were going through. She was actively involved in the education and other welfare measures to further their cause and to empower them. The two major contributions of Rokeya were 'Sakhawat Memorial Girl's School' and 'Anjuman-e-khawatin-e-Islam' (Muslim Women's Association). In 1916, she founded the Bengal branch of Anjuman-e-khawatin-Islam that undertook welfare activities for Muslim women including providing literary assistance.

She represents a group of women who have been denied education and if given, that was in a very informal way. This stress on the education of women that comes from Rokeya appears in a very pronounced manner in both the narratives, *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag*. Rokeya believed that like men women are complete human beings with infinite possibilities for future. She reimagines an equal world for all. Rokeya uses an Islamic framework to underline the importance of empowering and uplifting women. She says:

Had God himself intended women to be inferior? He would have ordained it so that mothers would have given birth to daughters at end of the fifth month of pregnancy. The supply of mother's milk would naturally have been half of that in case of a son. But that is not the case. How can it be? Is not God just and most merciful? (Hossain, 1988, p. 41)

To give an account of women's marginalized condition and to describe the loss of individuality in them, Rokeya devised the term '*manoshik dashhatto*' (mental slavery). It is embedded in the way women think. In her view mental slavery has held women back. She calls women to break free from this captive image of them and to dismantle patriarchal structures of power and control.

### Research Questions

The major questions of the study are given below:

- How does Rokeya use her writings to expose the insidious injustices of patriarchy?
- In what sense do her struggle, activism and works contribute to the upliftment of women?
- What are the measures she expounds should be put in place to promote gender equality and to empower women?
- How does she synthesize art and scientific thought as a method of female resistance?
- How she used Feminist Utopia to imagine a futuristic society stripped bare of patriarchal constraints?

### Research objectives

- To expose the insidious injustices of patriarchy that has pushed women to the margins.
- To describe and define the complex system of oppression responsible for maintaining and circulating stereotypical ideas and practices about gender.
- To show that Rokeya's writings and ideas bear significant relevance for our present reality especially when it comes to the issues related to women. And how her vision of a more equitable society sans cultural, religious and gender biases still remain an inspiring model.
- To emphasize that Rokeya's opinions and visions can be wielded as a dynamic and dialectical narrative of change opening up vistas towards a better and brighter future for women.
- To underscore the necessity of embodying feminist knowledge to resist and combat patriarchy.

### Analysis of Sultana's Dream

Sultana's Dream is one of Rokeya's earliest written pieces. The story represents Rokeya's dream of a future in which women can serve as political leaders of a land. The narrative is a foundational tract of contemporary feminism marked with Rokeya's in-depth analysis of the women's condition in India. The story presents an upside-down world where the traditional roles of male and female are reversed. It is a story with the agency to reconceptualise the relationship between the two with fictional women of unapologetic strength and fortitude. It is about Sultana and her dream of becoming a woman with infinite possibilities for future. The aim of Rokeya is to create a space where everyone is living equally regardless of their gender, sex and sexual orientation. She is of the view that in the race to development we cannot forget about the women. Rokeya is a proponent of emancipation of women which she believes could be achieved only through education. Women's education is at the centre of *Sultana's Dream*. Told from the perspective of the women, the story is a critique of the prescriptive norms of gender. But it would be wrong to restrict it to merely a manifesto of feminism, the work also offers possibilities.

The novel starts off describing Sultana who is shown as sitting idly in her chair contemplating over the miserable condition of women in India.

This work of Rokeya is a dream sequence of the protagonist (Sultana) portrayed as sitting idly in her chair contemplating over the miserable condition of Indian women. She is not sure whether she fell asleep or not, but knows as if she were awake. She receives a visitor known as Sister Sara who takes her for a walk. While walking with her friend, Sultana discovers that the streets are full of people. She feels embarrassed because in conservative Muslim families it is considered taboo for a girl or woman to go outside. But surprisingly, there were no men out. This prods the narrator to get to know where all

the men have gone. Why is there no man out? What may be the possible reason of their nonappearance? When the fact is that streets generally belong to men? Sister Sara tries to satiate Sultana's curiosity by telling her that they are in *Ladyland* and in *Ladyland* men are supposed to stay at home just like women are assumed to be. The narrator says because women are naturally weak, they should not come out of the zenana (refers to the part of a house reserved for women) as it is not considered safe for them. Sister Sara responds that this is only true when men or wild animals are out in the streets. The narrator articulates since men are at the helm of decision making in her country they have all the power. Countering Sultana's argument Sister Sara says even lions are marked by great physical strength as compared to men, but that does not mean they dominate the world. "A lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race" (Hossain 2005, p. 5). What she intends to convey is that even though men are thought to be superior to women does not mean that they can control them? What women require is the will power to challenge stereotypes and break gender barriers?

Sister Sara believes that women have the capacity to push the boundaries of innovation other than knitting and needle work. They can inspire the world with their achievements, perseverance and courage in the face of patriarchal challenges. What they need is the self belief, belief that they are gifted for something. She thinks that women are more efficient than men because they have the ability to perform both, the domestic work as well as the office work simultaneously.

Sister Sara explains to the narrator that *Ladyland* is an ideal place as there are no epidemics or mosquito bites and people don't die young. Then she informs her about the technologies developed in *Ladyland* under the leadership of the country's queen who also has directed that

all women must be committed to their work and disqualified from marrying until they were twenty-one. She also tells her about the two universities and their lady principles.

Sister Sara recounts an incident telling the narrator that when women were busy in inventing new technologies men laughed at them. But when the neighbouring country declared war on them the lady principles with their students marched the battlefield and defeated the enemy with sun's rays. After this war no one dared to invade *Ladyland*.

Sister Sara, then, explains about the *mardana* system and says that ever since this system came into being there has been a decline in the crimes rates. Therefore, there is no requirement of criminal justice system in the *Ladyland*. She continues to explain how the women of *Ladyland* save labour that shows the efficiency of these women. On the request of narrator Sister Sara introduces her to the Queen of the *Ladyland*. They are given a warm welcome by the Queen who also updates the narrator about their business. Narrator takes a tour of the *Ladyland*, but wakes up to discover that it was all a dream. *Ladyland* was a dream.

Described as Feminist Utopia, *Sultana's Dream* offers the possibility of an alternative space for women, a space which could represent their aspirations, where there is no hierarchy of gender, where they are free from all kind of patriarchal constraints and where their creativity and persuasive skills are stretched to the limit.

A branch of literature, Feminist utopia is the overlapping category of feminist science fiction and Utopia. It offers a contrast between the present world and an ideal world on multiple fronts considering patriarchy as the major cause of women's backwardness and their marginalization. Feminist utopias work within the ideological framework of feminism as they draw on feminist theories in their fashioning of utopian spaces, free from

stigma, stereotypes and harmful gender norms. Sally Miller Gearhart calls this sort of fiction political.

Ladyland is one such place where women are shown as agents of change empowered by science and technology. It is a place where they can envisage a future of their own, free from all kind of patriarchal oppressions. Rokeya employs utopia as a technique to inspire women to reimagine a better future for them not limited by time, place, identity, politics or society. The story presents many literary inversions and moments of irony that Rokeya employs in order to create this women-run utopia. The first inversion is that the heroines of Ladyland are women educators, who achieve their victory by combining science and technology, rather than being dependent on warfare. Their story emphasizes the idea that education can overcome physical strength or violence. The second inversion that occurs in the story is the seclusion of men not women and this is how Rokeya has turned the order upside down. Sister Sara explains:

It is not safe so long as there are men about the streets, nor is it so when a wild animal enters a market place... [Yet] 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? (Hossain, 2005, p.5)

Sister Sara explains that men have the capacity to be violent and destructive and often are; thus, in her opinion, it is the dangerous men who should be secluded for the protection of society, rather than secluding the innocent women who have not committed any crime. The replacement of patriarchal power with matriarchal power is the greatest subversion in story. It is a poignant criticism of the patriarchal system which has perennially undermined women and relegated them to an inferior position. Rokeya creates a parallel world alongside with the existing patriarchal world where men are at the opposite pole

compared to men in the patriarchal world. The men of Ladyland are timid, beaten and without agency. They are kept indoor (*mardana*) just like women are kept indoor (*zenana*) because they are perceived a threat to women. But their imprisonment serves other purposes too that is making men realize how it feels to be excluded and to be thrown into a pit of obscurity. Further this can be taken as a sheer vengeance on men folk for imprisoning women and writing them out of developmental narrative. The fact is that the world cannot afford the loss of half of its imagination and creativity. The world has to acknowledge women's contributions if it really wants to achieve generation equality that would be only possible if we build a gender inclusive society. To empower women is to empower the nation. The work can also be seen a resistance to the captive images of gender and womanhood used by men to control women.

By reversing traditional gender roles Rokeya creates an upside-down order with women at the table. The women of Ladyland are brave and intelligent overshadowing men through their research and innovation thus claiming their space in leadership and decision-making. Rokeya upholds that women must come forward and speak up against their oppression. To be silent means to be complicit in the crime. The silence encourages men to keep women down making them more vulnerable to victimization. She motivates women towards a process of self-realization; realization that they are capable to shape their own destinies by breaking the barriers that have held them back for far too long rather than relying on men to fight for their rights and lives. Realization where a woman's place is? Rokeya also maintains that women must support and inspire each other to create a gender equal world regardless of age, caste, class, colour and sexual orientation. Rokeya places education above anything else needed for the emancipation of

women from patriarchal abuses. It is only through education women can secure justice and meaningful changes in their lives. Education can provide them with opportunities to shine and shape a more equal future. Education will help them in becoming more resilient and achieving self-reliance. It is the tool women can use to empower themselves. Because they no longer can take a back seat and wait for equality. They have to act and lead the world to a better future. The following description of the Queen of Ladyland speaks of Rokeya's preoccupation with women's education:

Our good queen liked science very much. She circulated an order that all women in her country should be educated. Accordingly, a number of girls' schools were founded and supported by the Government. And early marriage also was stopped. (Hossain, 2005, p.7)

To show that women can lead the way to generation equality Rokeya creates the characters of Ladyland and Lady Principles who with their knowledge and wisdom have reached the height of success. Education is essential to empowering women and instrumental in their fight against patriarchy. Rokeya uses these stories of determination, strength, and resilience to inspire the women of her age to stand up for their rights and never give up on equality. She thinks that women must be accommodated in the developmental narrative if the society wants to progress because no society could ever progress in the true sense of the term leaving half of its imagination at home. No society can afford to discriminate against half of its population, half of its imagination and half of its ingenuity. Women have been underrepresented, undervalued and undermined for far too long. The protection and promotion of the rights and dignity of girls and women is of greater import for a better and bright future of a society. We need a greater accountability to ensure that no one is left behind. In her role as a writer, activist and

a leader Rokeya has championed women's cause and spoken of their meaningful participation in all areas of life from politics to business, to science and technology guiding their way to claim their space in society.

Patriarchy is not the only target of Rokeya. She also blames women for their precarious existence.

Why do you allow yourselves to be shut up? Because it cannot be helped as they are stronger than women. A lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race. You have neglected the duty you owe to yourselves and you have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interests. (Hossain, 2005, p.5)

One of the reasons she tells why women are subservient to men because they assumed that men are stronger than women which certainly has put them in a disadvantaged position. Rokeya contends that women have to come out this inferiority complex. They need to find a way to learn, a way to speak out, a way to challenge and a way to change. The analogy between human and lion used in the above quote emphasizes on the fact that physical strength is not a necessary quality needed to control others and believing one is weak is irresponsibly withdrawing from pursuing one's cause. Women need to challenge this reinforced perception of masculinity and use their intelligence, experience and skills in such a way that can turn them into the future leaders. This is the way Rokeya manages to neutralize the gendered notion of strength.

Rokeya acknowledges the importance of education therefore stresses on the need to educate women even in the household work. She thinks that to accomplish the domestic chores one needs education too. Rokeya in "Shugrihini" (*The Good Housewife*) states:

One needs intelligence in order to keep the house clean and well-arranged. The housewife will have to show her taste in

the very beginning when the house in being built. After the house is built, one needs furniture. Intelligence is needed in arranging them. One should know where each piece of furniture would look the best and where it will not. (Hossain, 1903, p.203)

Rokeya had strong faith in the emancipatory power of education which she held could guide women through, help them to be self-reliant, and lead change. She acutely felt the need to educate the sensibility of women in order to emancipate them from oppressive throes of exploitation and insecurity. Education is decisive in dismantling the patriarchy and defying gender stereotypes. Women need to be taught that they can reach as high as humanly possible.

### **Analysis of Padmarag**

In *Padmarag* she presents “a complex educational and philanthropic female utopia” (Hossain 2005, p.12). Written in 1924, this novella increases the canvas of *Sultana's Dream*, aimed at reforming society through women’s education. The setting of the novella is in an institution named as Tarini Bhavan (Tarini house). Tarini Bhavan consists of a school and a house for those girls and women who are abandoned by their families. It is a place where women from different religious and ethnic backgrounds who have been denied, disempowered and treated unfairly by patriarchy improve their lot through education and equal opportunities provided to them. So, *Padmarag* revolves around an organization which works for the upliftment of oppressed and maltreated women who have no place to go. It is founded by Tarini Sen, a widow who herself had struggled hard to rise above her circumstances. The characters in the novel are mainly women, working independently but also suffered a lot in the hands of cruel husbands, in-laws; pococurante parents who cared little for their daughters' life, education or welfare. They strive to be intellectually, emotionally and financially

independent by pursuing work goals that will give meaning to their existence and will help others simultaneously.

The protagonist of the novella, Padmarag /Siddika/Zainab, is one such victim who is abandoned by a person (Latif) she has been betrothed with, but the proud and self-respecting Siddika holds her own dignity. Advised by her brother that education is necessary to fight patriarchy and to achieve liberty she devotes herself to the same. He says, “Get ready for the awaiting life struggle! With proper education I will prepare you so that you need not depend on any mischievous man for mere foodstuff” (Hossain, 2005, p. 35). Siddika meets Latif once again in Tarini Bhavan when he is rescued by the sisters of Tarini Bhavan at a time when he got injured in an accident. Latif compares her to his second wife, who is described as a coarse woman, who beats the servants. In comparison, Latif perceives Siddika to be both educated and accomplished. Her proposes her to marry him only to get rejected by her.

Siddika’s rejection of Latif’s marriage proposal is quite revolutionary. Siddika, though she loves Latif, provides a reason for her decision to reject Latif. She wanted the world to know that some women at least would not allow themselves to be treated like puppets whose fates could be played with.’ Perhaps she did not want to enter a polygamous relationship with Latif. Or perhaps she simply wanted to remain independent from the expectations of a wife. The reason is not clear, but Siddika’s rejection does send a clear message that education does not necessarily lead to marriage, rather it makes a woman independent, who is able to use her struggles as a way to become a stronger woman, ready to contribute to social reforms. Siddika does so, by staying on at Tarini Bhavan and by helping the poor, destitute women of her society.

Siddika is named ‘*Padmarag*’ by the members of Tarini Bhavan. The process of Siddika’s self-development starts once she

enters Tarini Bhavan. She is addressed as 'hard hearted' and a 'cursed goddess by the residents of Tarini Bhavan.

Is Padmarag not really human? Does she not understand the language of human being? Is she actually a divine creature descended from some unknown paradise because a curse has been laid on her? Goodness! I've seen many folks, but never a girl quite like this one! Truly the hard-hearted daughter of a hard-hearted mother! (Hossain, 2005, p.39)

Her transformation is gradual. Everyone in the Bhavan is engaged in some kind of work. When Siddika tries she discovers that she is incapable of doing any of those. She neither can chop wood nor teach. She can't sew clothes either. But she does not give up trying and her desire to work is her first transformation. When she starts working, she is an amateur but slowly she proves her worth.

Rokeya observes that various sorts of training given to women at Tarini is not enough as they fulfil only the daily necessity of their house. She wants women to be educated in the true sense that can serve their cause and empower themselves. She further asserts that women need to embrace their inner activist using education to give to the cause and to advocate for an equal future for both men and women.

Siddika forms sisterhood with the other girls staying in Tarini Bhavan who like her are also the victims of patriarchal oppression. Rokeya calls for greater solidarity and sisterhood for unifying their struggle against the daemons of patriarchy which is expounded by many contemporary feminist thinkers, authors and activists including Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Elif Shafak, Bernardine Evaristo, Minna Salami and the alike.

Other characters of the novel, named Sudamini, Rafika, Helen, Sakina and Usharani share the same story of oppression and marital abuse. They all are the victims of female stereotypes, abduction, forced marriage, child

marriage, illiteracy etc. Rokeya uses the tragic personal stories of her female characters to represent the everyday struggle of women leaving us to question their place in the society. Despite of the improvement in some areas of women's and girls' lives they continue to be largely underrepresented. Underrepresentation in leadership and decision-making is still the norm. Their views are often ignored or sidelined. Tarini Bhavan does not only offer shelter to these poor women but also provides them with opportunities to explore their self by engaging in different activities and find new meanings in their lives.

At Tarini Bhavan Siddika gets acquainted with Sudamini, Charubala Dutta, Vibha and Mrs. Helen and is very much impressed by these women unaware of their struggles and experiences. Sudamini, a middle-aged woman has still retained her youthfulness even at the age of 43. Her always cheerful nature makes Siddika to crave, "Could my heart be light as thine/I'd gladly change with thee" (Hossain 2005, p.70). Responding to Siddika's craving, Sudamini says that her cheerfulness is merely a façade. She is ignorant of the pain she carries within herself:

Oh! You'd exchange your heart with mine, would you? Now that would be a blessing for me! You cannot imagine how traumatized it is, sister! Do you really think that Sudamini is free from all anguish? See how beautiful is the lightning that streaks the clouds. That does not make it less terrifying! I laugh so that you may laugh too. Even this has now become a habit with me. (Hossain 2005, p.71)

Sudamini then relates about her experiences of being a wife and a mother. She is married to a man already married with two children who turn out to be the curse of her life. She is portrayed into a cruel stepmother who could not keep her husband, thus, failing to prevent herself from being subdued to stereotypical



images of a monstrous stepmother and. This inflicts deep psychological wounds which does not only weaken women but society as a whole. We need to discourage traditions and practices that have been used to discriminate against women. There are many women like Sudamini who risk experiencing harmful practices and are burdened by domestic responsibilities. Women's rights are often being eroded in the name of traditional practices and values.

Rafia suffers because of her gender. She had been married to a person, a lawyer by profession who leaves her with two baby daughters for England to qualify for the Bar and returns back after ten years with a new wife. During all those years Rafia tries to be an ideal wife but of no use as her husband divorces her bringing an end to her ten years long married life. Thus, her ten years of sacrifice amount to nothing. The story of Rafia is the story of all those women whose destiny unfolds under patriarchal scourge like that of Sakina who is humiliated by her husband on the very day of their wedding when he forsakes her on the ground that she is not beautiful. So, there is a need to rethink the parameters of beauty as well.

Usha is ousted by her in-laws on the account that she is a woman impure. They cannot accept a woman as their daughter in law who is polluted as Usha's in-laws think of her because she has been out alone with strangers who abducted her from her home. She is rescued by some unknown people who try to sell her to prostitution under the pretext of giving her a job. Usha somehow manages to escape and ends up in Tarini Bhavan which does not only provide protection to the victims of abuse but also help them to lead an independent life by offering them vocational training.

Helen, an English national, is another victim of the insidious injustices of patriarchy. Like other women residents of Tarini Bhavan she also is a sufferer of the patriarchal system. Wearied by adversity

of her husband and with no recourse to divorce she is almost devastated. One cannot imagine a greater injustice and oppression than being tied to a lunatic for life. "What greater injustice or oppression could one possibly think of? This England, this noxious, putrid England claims to be civilized" (Hossain, 2005, p.96). Helen's story is fundamental to examine the prevailing human rights crisis in the First World countries, especially the one that concerns the marginalization of women. Although there are differences in how different social systems operate, it is almost universal all the world's customary laws deny equal rights to women. Like Helen, several women continue to suffer through the existing practices prescribed in customary laws and traditions.

The lives of these women are testimonies to their vulnerable condition from child abuse to routine marital thrashings. Rokeya speaks for all those women who struggled in silent subordination. Questioning the helplessness of the situation Siddika says, "Is there no treatment for these suppurating sores of society; these running sores of society. You either have to remain tied for life. Is there no redress for these injustices? (Hossain, 2005, p.104) To this, Saudamini replies, "There is! That remedy is the 'Society for the Alleviation of women's Suffering in Tarini Bhavan'. Come, all women who are abandoned, pauperized, neglected, helpless, oppressed come all. Then we declare war against society. And Tarini Bhavan is our fortress" (Hossain, 2005, p.104). Partaking in the conversation Sakina utters:

I want to show people there are paths other than keeping house open to us. Keeping house for a husband is not the essence of women's lives. A human life is a precious gift from God. It is not to be wasted by blowing on the coals of a cooking oven and crying. We must declare war against society. (Hossain, 2005, p.104)

Sakina's anger is just and warranted. Women too have the right to equality,

health, education, opportunity, safety and dignity. They should not anymore be judged by traditional gender roles whose only job is to maintain the house. They deserve a much better life with more possibilities for future. Meaningful participation of women is required for effective decision-making about important social affairs. Bringing different voices at the table is essential to creating positive change.

Rokeya realizes that financial disadvantage is a key contributing factor to the overall marginalization of women that remains embedded in the economic system. To be truly independent and to make their own decisions women have to be economically empowered. Rokeya through both; her writings and activism make major contribution in bringing out the importance of earning. *Padmarag* and *Sultana's Dream* blatantly put forth this idea of the novelist. A radical champion of women's rights she highlights their entrenched exclusion and encourages action dedicated to achieving equality for all women.

The women characters of Rokeya inspire the world with their achievements, perseverance and courage. They are taught not just how to make a living but also how to act decisively, to defy stereotypes and to initiate and sustain change. They satisfy themselves by engaging themselves in multiple tasks from maintain students' record, attending patients to carrying out all the important works for the asylum. In this way, they transform themselves into capable leaders. Rokeya stresses on the need to educate women. Female education is at the forefront of Rokeya's feminist agenda. She upheld that women's education is an essential pillar of the development of any society or country. And her remarkable contribution to women's education is the foundation of a girls' school in 1909.

Rokeya has been a major exponent of South Asian feminist movement known for her activism and analysis of the woman's

condition. Instead of waiting for a miracle or relying on men to improve their condition Rokeya urges women to develop their own traditions of resilience and overcoming. They have to realize their own potential essential for breaking through barriers and fighting for gender equality. She is of the opinion that women must get behind the discriminatory ideology and know the root cause of their miseries. Moreover, they must have the vision because it is important to have a vision and push harder for what you believe in.

## 2. CONCLUSION

On the basis of the above analysis we can conclude that as a 'feminist foremother' Rokeya worked in a way to uplift the status of women in a society that gravely undermines their presence as complete human beings. She questions the educational, social, and financial disadvantages women have faced through history and resists against discriminatory social norms which pushed them to periphery. She uses her imagination to make transformative commitment to gender equality. And she does so by reversing traditional gender roles in both of her works; *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag*. She speaks for all women as they struggle in silent subordination.

She did not demand sympathy for women but the meaningful equality of both the sexes in the social, political and economic spheres of life. Through her writings Rokeya exposes the underlying structural inequalities and pervasive discrimination which has pushed women into the pit of obscurity. She desired a need for change in attitudes for advancing gender equality and for building of a community of shared future.

The vision of Begum Rokeya is to demolish obstinate structures of gender-based discrimination and to motivate women to stand up for their rights. She worked tirelessly for their equitable space in a world so entrenched in gender

inequality. She developed her art at the expense of the interests of the women of her community in particular and women around the world in general. She wanted the emancipation of women through education and economic freedom. Both her writings and activism show her commitment to a community marginalized by poverty and discrimination. Rokeya's voice is a clarion call for women to rise above their marginalized status and to think beyond patronization if they really want to improve their lot.

### 3. REFERENCES

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