

# ROKEYA'S ARTICULATION OF THE WOMEN'S QUESTION IN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

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The Department of History of **Diamond Harbour Women's University** organized a special lecture on 28<sup>th</sup> August, 2018 at Academic building of university. The theme of the special lecture was '**Rokeya's articulation of the women's question in early twentieth century**'. **Prof Sonia Nishat Amin**, Department of History, University of Dhaka, delivered an extremely informative lecture on this topic. She highlighted the voice of Begum Rokeya, the pioneer of women's liberation in Bengal Muslim society. She also discussed in detail how Rokeya has shown the way to emancipation of women from the strict confines of patriarchal society. She was a defiant and flamboyant woman. Her voice created a stir in the society not only through the establishment of educational institutions, but also through various organizations and writings.

Rokeya was different from the others in her ability to see education not as an end itself, or at best as an aid to woman's familial role, but as a means to women's economic independence. In her effort to popularize female education in a society that laid great stress on domestic values, Rokeya upheld the perfect house-holder, good wife and good companion argument. In her "domestic", pieces she reiterated this invariably linking superior domesticity with good education. But while demonstrating the need of education in order to produce the "guardian of society and hearth – the grihalakshmi" she promoted the study of physics, chemistry and horticulture, which makes one wonder how far Rokeya had the: home" in her mind and how far the "world". Rokeya's ruthless logic and belief in women's equality drove her to dimensions seldom reached by others, as expressed in her proclamation in 1931, the year before her death: We need an idea educational institution where our girls can equip themselves to keep pace with other communities. If women of other communities can become doctors, lawyers, councilors and politicians, why should our girls be deterred?

Rokeya was an ultimate blend of pragmatism and idealism, of conservatism and radicalism. In her major writings on education, Rokeya slipped in one or two sentences advocating

women's right to work and education as a means for this. But by and large, she stressed the more prevalent attitudes regarding female education in her public life. It was in her fiction that she allowed possibilities of female education to develop to its full economic significance. To Rokeya, female education was the great solution to the prevailing social malaise in the nation, not just her community. She never strayed far from her historically determined role of synthetization.

Though Rokeya's feminist theory was woven into most of her writings, there were some pieces exclusively concerned with problems of patriarchy. In this category fall "Streejatirabanati", "Ardhangi" and "Narir adhikar", her last work written in 1932 and published posthumously. In "Streejatir abanati" her feminist message which was revolutionary in the context of those times, rang out loud and clear: We shall do what is required to attain equality with men. If that involves earning an independent livelihood so, be it. If necessary, we shall be lady-clerks, lady magistrates, or lady judges. If we cannot get employment with the Raj, we shall take to agriculture. Why do we weep because grooms are hard to find in India? Educate your daughters and let them earn their own livelihood.

In the remarkable fantasy *Sultana's Dream*, written in flawless English, Rokeya gave full rein to her imagination by depicting "Lady Land", a realm where gender roles were reversed and women assumed the public role while men stayed indoors. It is now hailed as a "radical" piece of feminist writing though Rokeya herself was not a radical all of the time. But if one is to look for the radical in Rokeya one would have to look at her early feminist essays as well as her fiction where she freely resorted to subversion of existing ideologies. Several of Rokeya's writings were concerned with the role of women in the domestic sphere – the family with women as the guardian of this other, real-life "sanctuary". In "Ardhangi" Rokeya illustrated the stunning breadth and clarity of her feminist theory; she set down in clear terms that women all over the world were subject to gender oppression.

Rokeya did not spare the Muslim community either, but here her attacks were more guarded. But ensconced within her obeisance to scriptural authority in "Ardhangi" was a subversive passage often overlooked by critics, where Rokeya questioned the premise that "woman is half of a man" as laid down in Islamic ideology.

Finally, the discussion ends with a question-and-answer session. It is hoped that this important discussion ends will play an important role in awakening a new spirit of liberation among girls.