

Vision of Women's Freedom: A Feminist Study of Selected Writings

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Dedication
To My Parents

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Abstract

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain is a prominent writer whose creative vent of mind gives rise to many important writings deserving attention from serious readers especially those thinking about the inequality of gender. Her firsthand experience as a woman has given her the fuel for writing about women's issues. In her writings, she portrays the overall miserable condition of the women of her time and tries to give a solution of the problem. This paper deals with three writings by Rokeya: namely *Sultana's Dream*, *Padmarag* and *Abarodhbashini*, where she tries to portray the bleak condition of womanhood and visualize the liberty of women. Condition of women has always been a matter of concern for Rokeya, and so, her dreams of liberating women from the shackles of patriarchy have been inalienably designed with intricate plots and stylistic features in her writings. In my research paper, I would like to explore Rokeya's sincere visions regarding the overall development of her own gender through proper schooling and economic solvency. I have applied the feminist approach of literary theory in my research for a better understanding.

CHAPTER ONE

1.1

Introduction

The pioneer of Bengali Muslim feminism, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain is a writer, social activist and also an educationist. Born in 1880 in the district of Rangpur in a village called Pairaband, Rokeya had a keen interest in the condition of women and their education. Her father, Zahiruddin Mohammad Abu Ali Saber, was a well-educated landowner and had a keen interest in education but maintained a strict rule of Islamic code of purdah in his home. That is why, while Rokeya's brothers got the opportunity of schooling, she was deprived of education, other than reciting the holy Quran at home.

Rokeya had a very special bond with her elder brother Ibrahim Saber and elder sister Karimunnesa who had a great influence in shaping her life. At that time girls were not allowed to study either Bengali or English. Only the holy Quran and the books of Persian language were the media of education. As both the sisters were interested to learn Bengali and English, Ibrahim taught them the languages. As the family didn't want, they were taught the languages at night while the other family members slept.

As usual, Rokeya got married at a very early age and had a huge age difference with her husband, Khan Bahadur Sakhawat Hussain, the deputy magistrate of Bhagalpur. He always had much interest in female education and helped his wife to improve her in Bangla and English language skills. With her husband's support, she mastered the two languages. Her husband would encourage her to write and Rokeya finally adopted Bangla as the principal language of her pen. She also practiced writing stories in English. She started her literary pursuit with the writing

of “Pipasha” (Thirst) in 1902 which along with her pieces *Sultana’s Dream* and *Motichur* was published when her husband was alive. She became a widow in 1909 and in that year founded a girls’ school named after her husband’s in Bhagalpur, with five students only. This school closed because of family disputes and was later reopened in Kolkata in 1911.

Rokeya visited many other schools in Kolkata to gather her knowledge about administering the school. She also talked to the Principals. Though in the early years of her school there were only a few students, gradually students of different religions and regions came to get admitted there. She used to visit the houses of Muslim families and convince the guardians to send their girls to her school, even promising the guardians free schooling for their girls.

Later she founded the Anjuman-e- Khawatin-e-Islam which provided the women the chance to congregate and discuss issues concerning women lives. They used to hold different debates and conferences on the position of women in society and their education. Rokeya used to seek out the poorer women and widows and offer financial assistance, gave shelter to women who were victims of domestic violence and provided matrimonial and educational services.

1.2

Background Study

Rokeya Shakwat Hossain started her literary career in the early part of the 20th century. Her writings focus on feminism and its effects. As her parents were orthodox, she has been deprived of attending a school in her childhood. She has been taught to recite the holy Quran and limit her mental faculties to housework only. But her undaunted thirst for education got an impetus from her elder brother who taught her both Bangla and English. With a deep gratitude, Rokeya thanks her brother in her Preface to *Padmarag* saying:

“You have moulded me from childhood.... Your love is sweeter than honey which after all has a bitter after-taste; it is pure and divine like Kausan [the stream of nectar flowing in heaven mentioned in the Quran]”. (p -7)

This nourishment later gets ripe with the encouragement of her husband after her marriage and she starts writing as a result.

Rokeya’s writings mainly speak against the oppression of women. Through her literary pieces *Sultana’s Dream*, *Padmarag* and *Abarodhbashini*, Rokeya garnered much attention of the readers. Now her writings are widely known, as feminist readers look at her as she has shed light on the exploitation and oppression of women and also for her focus on women’s equal rights. In *Sultana’s Dream*, and *Padmarag*, we see that Rokeya emphasizes on the need of education and self-employment for women. And in *Abarodhbashini* she satirizes the society where women suffer the tragic consequences because of purdah. *Abarodhbashini* is a counterpoint to Hossain’s fictional utopia.

On her husband's insistence, she kept on writing and gradually her writings were published in different papers and journals. As she was aware of the condition of women in the society she focused on women's oppression in her writings.

She had to observe purdah at a very early stage and was not allowed to meet unknown females even. During her time, women's education was frowned upon. But she became a self-educated woman with a progressive bent of mind.

Women lagged behind in every respect during Rokeya's time. Social conservativeness and lack of awareness were the prime reasons that worked against the advancement of women, who could not accept the opportunities to develop themselves as real and independent human beings. These narrow social attitudes coupled with women's own apathy crippled the spirit of women. As they dwelled in the depth of darkness, they were against female education. So, because of women's own mindset, their awakening was not possible.

Women were not self-reliant as their movement was restricted to the four walls of the house. The holy Quran and the Persian language formed their education which they received at home. Men believed that purdah was necessary for the safety of the women. In *Abarodbashini*, Rokeya sketches the condition of her society where women were not treated as human beings but as inanimate objects. We can see the tragic consequences of purdah observing women in that piece of writing. She reveals the absurdities of the society in *Abarodbashini*. And in *Sultana's Dream* she relies on the role reversal to show the society what women are capable of if given the chance. Through the ladies of the ladyland in *Sultana's Dream*, she shows that if the women were educated in the true sense then no one could stop them from prospering. They have the

capability to excel men in restoring harmony in the society. The blossom of female knowledge is the driving force of success in Ladyland.

In *Padmarag*, the women gathered courage to change their lot by becoming economically free and educated. The sisters of Tarini Bhaban before their arrival were burdens to their families. But in Tarini Bhaban, they transform themselves to be the independent citizens of the society. Being educated, they were no longer the burdens on anyone. Siddika's brother rightly says to her:

“Get ready for the awaiting life- struggle! With proper education I will prepare you so that you need not depend on any mischievous men for mere food stuffs.” (p- 92)

Siddika's different statements in the novel show how she becomes conscious for her rights. She gets the strength to fight against the traditional norms of the society and achieve economic independence. She refuses to go back to her husband as she was rejected by her in-laws and her sense of self-respect keeps her from doing this. Moreover thinks that if she returns to her husband society would win and succeed in making her a puppet. Through Siddika, Rokeya sends a message to women to prepare themselves for their rights and privileges. Siddika who fights for the rights of women and against patriarchy is the embodiment of Rokeya herself. Working for the betterment of the distressed women as well as of the society was her main concern.

1.3

Theoretical Framework

Rokeya Shakawat Hossain's writings focus mainly on issues of women. As we know, feminism speaks about the rights and equality of women for constructing a better society. Rokeya addresses emphatically all the discrepancies against women in her writings. That's why I have applied a feminist approach in my research paper.

The main idea of feminist theory is that men and women should be equal in every respect. It involves different movements, theories and philosophical ideas which are concerned with the issue of gender difference and its effects. Feminism also explores the conditions which construct women's lives. Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), the famous English author, is often considered to be the first feminist writer and also an early pioneer of women's rights. In the early twentieth century there were some celebrated feminist thinkers like Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935), Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) and Betty Friedan (1921-2006). Rokeya Shakawat Hossain (1880-1932), like them, was a strong voice of feminism in the history of Bangla literature. She emphatically asked for women's equal position in society and also for their rights and privileges.

Charles Fourier, a French philosopher, coined the word "feminisme" in 1837. This word along with the word "feminist" later appeared in the Netherlands in 1872, in Great Britain in the 1890s and in the United States in 1910. We find the trace and thought of feminism in much earlier works of many writers like Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), Olive Schreiner's (1855-190) *Women and Labour* (1911), Virginia Woolf's *A Room of*

One's Own (1929) , and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949). The writings of these writers vividly portrayed the unequal treatment of women regarding their rights. These books are the foregrounds of the history of feminist literary theory.

Feminists of different periods had different objectives. The history of feminist movements is divided into three waves. The first wave of feminism started in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Feminists of the first wave were mainly concerned with women's right to vote. They realized that to develop the lives of women, political power plays a vital role. Their political agenda stressed on the voting power of women and property rights. It also discussed the issues concerning sexual, reproductive and economic matters. They firmly believed that women possess the potential to contribute society to just as men.

The second wave of feminism referred to the ideas and actions associated with the "women's Liberation Movement." It began in the early 1960s in United States and gradually spread throughout the western world. It later became a global movement. This movement addressed some fundamental issues that affect female lives. It referred to different dimensions such as sexuality, marital rape, domestic violence, reproductive rights, family etc.

The third wave of feminism started in the beginning of the 1990s. This movement is usually perceived as a reaction to or continuation of second wave feminism. This movement embraced differences, personal narratives and individualism instead of putting everyone under one agenda. They focused more on individual identity than on political changes. Gender violence has been the central issue. They want to transform the traditional notions of sexuality and focus on the feelings about sexuality.

There are other branches of feminism which explore different issues related to women. Here I would relate the relevant feminist theories to analyze Rokeya's selected texts.

Cultural Feminism supports that there are biological differences between men and women. They believe that the fundamental personality differences between men and women are special and should be celebrated. According to them if women rule the world it would be a better place to live in as women are gentler and kinder than men. They also celebrate women's special qualities believing that women's way is much better.

Eco- Feminism asserts that patriarchy is harmful to women, children and other living being and things. It seeks for eradication of all forms of social injustice against women and environment. The role of women is of nurturer and caregiver. Material Feminism tends to free women from their daily household work like cooking, washing and other traditional female domestic chores.

According to Marxist Feminism, labour is divided in two parts – productive labour and reproductive labour. Productive labour results in monetary value in the form of paid wage. And reproductive labour is related with the private sphere where people work for themselves without receiving any wage. Women are associated with the reproductive labour such as cooking, washing, giving birth to child and rearing them. They don't receive any kind of monetary benefit in this labor as this is thought to be natural. These domestic labors are thus unrecognized in the capitalist system. Marxist Feminists puts forward that as women are excluded from the productive labour and men are assigned to that, it leads the male to take control over both the public and private spheres.

Socialist Feminism says economic dependence on men is the main reason of women's subservient to men. They believe women liberation can be achieved by being economically free. Liberal Feminism focuses on equality of men and women through political and legal reform. Further it sheds light on women's ability to prove their worth by their own actions. According to them the baseless and false natural notion of women being called weak both mentally and physically tends to create discrimination between men and women. And this kind of rooted belief stops women's entrance and success in the outer world. They strive for sexual equality in the society.

Another significant matter related to feminism is Patriarchy. A patriarchal society mainly consists of a male-dominated power structure in the arena of social, political and personal. It generally defies men's domain over women. According to feminist theorists' patriarchy represents a systematic bias against women. The oppression of women is not an individual problem rather is a structural one. Feminism characterizes patriarchy as an unjust social system that subordinates, discriminates and oppresses women.

Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream*, *Padmarag* and *Abarodhbashini* fits into the above discussed branches of feminism. In *Sultana's Dream* we see, like the cultural feminist thoughts, a woman runs the country and when they take over the power their land is a much better place to live in. They don't quarrel with one another, they don't shed blood while fighting with the enemy, they don't give death penalty rather drive the person out of the land forever. They don't encourage any kind of mischief. Virtue itself reigns there. Their religion is based on truth and love. As it is ruled by women it is free from anarchy.

The theory of material feminism can be applied to both *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag*. Role of women in Lady land is reversed, and women engage in political, social and economic affairs while men are busy in the household chores, rearing babies, cooking, washing etc. Women keep themselves away from the domestic chores. In *Padmarag* also, women are busy developing their other qualities apart from domestic work. Tarini runs the asylum where women from diverse religions and regions come together and empower themselves by gaining economic solvency. They cook not to maintain the traditional role but for survival. Their sole focus is to establish themselves as useful contributing citizens.

Like Marxist feminism, the women of *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag*, before emancipation, resemble the embodiment of the reproductive labour of the society. In Ladyland, ladies, before taking over power, were kept in the zenana to play the traditional role of women. In *Padmarag*, women were following the same steps. The portrayal of women in *Abarodhbashini* is the same where they are not allowed to come out of the house but are bound to perform the traditional roles of women, to dedicate their lives to domestic life and are not rewarded with wages. They are treated like worthless objects. Their production in the household is never valued.

Rokeya's belief about women's emancipation through economic independence is the basic point of socialist feminism. In *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag*, we see the women being economically solvent, and they set themselves free from the domination of men. The ladies of *Abarodhbashini* remain subjugated to male dominance as they have no hand or voice in the management of the household or social affair. Socialist feminists' urge for women's economic independence to come out from the male suppression is nicely portrayed in Rokeya's writings.

The liberal feminists' quest for women's equality and ability to prove their worth by action is clearly depicted in the literary pieces of *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag*. In *Padmarag* the women, after coming to Tarni Bhavan, rediscover themselves. They discover their inherent quality and thus turn themselves into potential resources for the society. Dina Tarini provides them with the opportunity and encourages them to empower themselves. She acts as the driving force behind the establishment of their lives. The women of Tarini Bhavan run several institutions inside it and gain success in personal and social arena.

The ladies of *Sultana's Dream* also prove themselves equal and are even advanced to some extent. They drive the enemies away when the men fail. They take over the power and the queen very easily governs the country and takes advice from the lady teachers whenever needed. In this way Rokeya portrays the equality of women.

The patriarchal society is very much evident in Rokeya's writings. In *Ladyland*, before the establishment of female authority, women were neglected. Education was not mandatory for women; they were married off at early stage. The scientific discoveries of women were looked upon as 'sentimental nightmare' and were also turned to laughing stock. Every aspect of women was underestimated by males.

The women of *Abarodhbashini* are not allowed to come out of the houses without 'purdah'. They are treated as mere objects. Girls are married off without their consent. They are not allowed to come in front of unknown females. Little girls were not given the chance to roam freely. Even being in 'purdah' they were packed like objects while travelling. The patriarchy in *Abarodhbashini* dominated the women to such an extent that some even lost their lives.

In *Padmarag* whenever the women tried to take any initiative for the betterment of the students of the school, the society always mocked at them. The parents also looked for opportunities to lay false allegations against them. After the ceremony in the school they received several letters where they were severely attacked by the society. One of the student's mother-in-law called Tarini prostitute. Their prosperity was not accepted by the patriarchal society.

In the light of all theory developments in feminist theory, I will turn back to Rokeya and early 20th century Bengal, to demonstrate how this great women was forging a new path for Muslim women in Bengal.

1.4

Research Methodology

Both the primary and secondary sources have been used to complete my thesis. As my purpose is to bring out the visions of Rokeya regarding women's freedom, I have minutely explored and examined both the sources. The translated versions of Rokeya's original writings have been used as my primary sources. The English translation of *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag* by Barnita Bagchi, a Bengali speaking Indian feminist, and that of *Abarodhbashini (The Secluded Ones)* by Roushan Jahan, a famous Rokeya translator, have been used as primary sources.

Besides these primary sources, I have also used the secondary materials like essays, scholastic articles from different academic journals, dissertations and theses done by some prominent critics and authors on Rokeya to enrich my thesis paper. Feminist literary theory has also been used for the critical analysis of her writings.

Since my focus is on the visions of women's freedom in Rokeya's writings, I have solely depended upon library sources to analyze the topic. As it is a qualitative research, it has been restricted only with textual analysis.

CHAPTER TWO

Sultana's Dream

Sultana's Dream is structured around the depiction of a nation of women. As the title reflects, we see the story opens in a dream sequence of the protagonist who enjoys her share of freedom through a utopian dream of breaking away from the four walls of the zenana. There women find their freedom through education and scientific advancement. Rokeya invites, with *Sultana's Dream*, women of her society to imagine an illusionary experience of liberty that exists outside 'purdah'. The story does not depict happy ending rather there is only the shattering of that "happy dream". The whole scenario is temporary and takes an opposite gear soon, and the awakening of the person who dreams functions as a signal to remind the readers that the empowerment of women is nothing but a temporary dream for women. Lorde Audrey, an African American feminist writer, says:

"The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow [her] temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable [her] to bring about genuine change" (Audrey 112).

Being deprived of equal education and other right and privileges which men enjoy, Rokeya feels the condition of women which is nothing different from what Henrik Ibsen, the Norwegian playwright, makes Nora say to her husband in *A Doll's House*. Nora says:

"Our house has been nothing but a playroom. Here I have been your doll- wife just as at home I used to be papa's doll-child". (Ibsen 164)

Rokeya is outrageously critical of men for their shielding women with the so called armour of love and affection which only make women lose their courage, confidence and will-power.

In her work “God Gives, Man Robs”, she refers the famous saying of the last prophet of Islam, Hazrat Muhammad (P.B.U.H.): “Talabul Elme faridatun ala khulli Muslimeen-o-Muslimat (It is the bounden duty of all Muslims males and females to acquire knowledge)”. (Hossain 491)

In “Showrojogoth” (The Solar System) also, Rokeya depicts another alarming consequence of the negligence of woman’s education. In the essay, Gauhar tells his brother-in-law Jafar that his wife’s faith in religion may get shattered easily for her lack of her proper knowledge about religion. He says:

“Your wife’s faith might tremble... because she does not know anything about her religion. She prays like a parrot, without understanding the words. If you let her meet a missionary Englishwoman she will at once think, ‘How noble Christianity is!’ (Hossain 265)

Rokeya fictionalizes the facts of life in *Sultana’s Dream* to make it more effective for the readers. Demands for women’s rights are fictionalized by using a very different technique like utopia. The women are here shown to enjoy their reversed roles in Ladyland which has also been fictionalized. Rokeya’s inner desire of making women free from their social and religious prejudices gets an easy outlet in her writings. Women are here shown to be the masters of houses and doing all the important business. But all these happen in her dream only. So her fond desires of real life are presented wonderfully by using the dream sequence to fictionalize the facts.

Women are here made to run universities, to discover scientific enterprises, to practice the rules of hygiene, so that they take the ultimate control of Ladyland leaving their male counterparts subservient. Rokeya always advocated for the equality of both sexes and so the common practice of making women remain idle has been challenged in her writing. Her Ladyland fictionalizes the facts of women's equality in comparison with men. In the Ladyland girls are not permitted to have an early marriage and education has been made compulsory for women. All these things are the real basic needs which are fabulized by the writer to make the text effective for the readers. Women were thought subordinate to the males in society where Rokeya lived. To her utter dismay they were mistreated and meted with the qualities sometimes imposed by the society or by religion as well. Rokeya projects in her mind the freedom of women from these shackles and bindings and so launches her utopia, *Sultana's Dream*, in which her real intentions about women are displayed abundantly with equal and active participation of women in all aspects of their lives. Thus the marginalized women of the real world are dreamt as enjoying the realities of their lives namely education, marriage and so on and forth.

Dream Sequence

Dream is an activity that everybody experiences. It is a kind of situation in which we would like to see or enjoy what we cannot do in our real life. Hovering within our unconscious experience, dreams also have the ability to pull at our consciousness during wakefulness intruding on our thoughts. According to Sigmund Freud, an Austrian Neurologist and the founder of Psychoanalysis, dreams are the forms of attempts for fulfilling wishes by the unconscious part of our minds to resolve a conflict, may be something recent or something from the recesses of the past. The realm of fantasy, according to Freud links the unconscious with the conscious, thus if recognized as utopian activity, *Sultana's Dream* like other feminist utopia's

appear to argue that dreaming becomes a state that could be utilized more effectively in the struggle for utopian transformation, linking ideas to action. People tend to dream of a perfect society when they are frustrated by the present one. Through dream they try to correct the follies and vices of the prevalent society.

The dream mode is used as a powerful tool to expand the boundaries of human thought. Sultana, the protagonist, dreams of an ideal world, Ladyland, where the women emerge as victorious in every sphere of their lives. *Sultana's Dream* is more about action than words, although the actions takes place within the dream itself. Women's empowerment, their emancipation and the development of the society were not idle dreams for Rokeya, rather the frame of dreams it carries has been her vision of life and she didn't built the castle of her vision in air. She has used the dream sequence for the development of the females and to make the society move forward. *Sultana's Dream* portrays the splendid inventions of the women of Ladyland. The talented women of Ladyland invent Solar Heat Catcher, Air car, Captive Balloon etc. She provides her imaginary girls with proper education and faculties and then presents them as perfectly empowered women with their achieved excellence in all spheres of life. So in the dream, she through the use of science fiction provides better pathways for a better nation. Through dreams, the author has fulfilled her inner desire of a society which can prosper through scientific inventions and discoveries and also bear the message to womenfolk that empowerment can lead them to the zenith of success and they too can dominate society. So we can say that dreams in text have a useful application. Sultana departs from Ladyland using the dream mode once again. She carries home the realization that women of Ladyland have an irrepressible zest for life.

An American Professor of Political Science, Lyman Tower Sargent's definition of utopia as 'social dreaming' fits well in discussing *Sultana's Dream* as it defines two key aspects of utopianism: the ongoing relationship between the individual and the social and between the private dream and the public dream expression of that dream. His work, "The Three Faces", manifests that the idea of social dreaming is not a paradox but it binds together the private and public, the individual and the public in one space. The significance of fantasy and desire in any Utopian project is emphasized by him. According to him it is not a 'mere daydreaming' but it should first be grounded in the mind before its representation. *Sultana's Dream*, according to Lyman's Tower's social dreaming theory, is a clear example. The individual desires of the writer and the open expression of them are well thought of by the writer herself and then are represented artistically to develop an educated, advanced and classless society without patriarchy is. And this feminist nation is reigned over by love, honesty, scientific invention and endeavor etc. Everywhere there is peace and harmony. Virtue itself reigns there.

Utopia

A utopia is an imagined community or society that possesses highly desirable or nearly perfect qualities. The word comes from the Greek "OU" (not) and "TOTTOS" (place) and means "no place" and strictly describes a non-existent society. In 1516, English humanist Sir Thomas More published a book titled "Utopia". It compared social and economic conditions in Europe with those of an ideal society on an imaginary island located off the coast of the Americas. More have wanted to imply that the perfect conditions on his fictional island could never really exist, so he called it 'Utopia'. The current use of 'utopia' referring to an ideal place or society has been inspired by More's description of Utopia's perfection. (www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/utopia)

According to some critics, Thomas More, a famous English social philosopher and author, invented a particular literary form that spread rapidly and his invention has been of immense importance; it gave shape to utopianism that has been accepted widely. This form sprung from traditions and precursors and has thus produced many offshoots.

Frederick L. Polak, one of the Dutch founding fathers of *Future Studies*, thinks utopia encourages efforts towards the development of human dignity. For him utopia means choice, freedom and creativity and is a constant mirror held up to the present, showing the faults of the contemporary society. He further says “If we are frustrated by something in our society, we dream of a society in which it is corrected.” (Tower 4)

This type of fiction is a detrimental act inviting a writer to have a double vision; one is a view of how life could have been and the other view of possibility-the idealistic view of right or to correct the wrongs. It depicts the shortcomings and the limitations. So, utopian world, it can also be said, is a looking glass world. The *Ladyland* manifests the image of an imagined perfection for Sultana whereas her world is the negative reflection.

The term describes both intentional communities who opt for creating an ideal society, a society based on purity and perfection. A perfect balance between the individual and society is one of the basic elements of utopia. Utopia is also used to exploring the ramification of gender both as a societal construct, or a hard-wired imperative. This term utopia has always been rooted in an idea or dream of an alternative society, or of better ways of being. Historically, utopia has been linked with the ideal in the sense of being that which is perfect and yet does not exist.

In Lyman Sargent’s “The Three Faces” he discusses utopia as a distorting mirror in reverse showing how good we could look. According to him utopia rightly upsets people because

it constantly suggests that the life we lead, the society we have is inadequate, incomplete, and sick and utopia expresses deep seated needs, desires and hopes.

Utopia is presented as a place of perfection. It is a dreamland where one wants to go and live for peace. John Keats, the famous English Romantic poet has shown in his poem “Ode to a Nightingale” his intense desire to escape the unbearable burdens of worldly life and fly there with the help of the wings of imagination to the land of the nightingale for peace and love. The land of the nightingale can be termed as a utopia for Keats as he strives to go there and leave behind all the sorrows of earth.

Feminist Utopia

Feminist utopia is a branch of utopian literature and the overlapping category of feminist science fiction. An American radical feminist, Sally Miller Gearhart calls this sort of fiction political. It contrasts the present world with an idealistic society, criticizes contemporary values and conditions, sees men or their systems as the major cause of social and political problems (e.g. war) and presents women as equal to or superior to men, having ownership over their reproductive function. Carol Pearson, another American poet, says that these texts ‘portray’ women as the creators of a new vision. Feminist utopias work within the ideological, as they utilize feminist ideologies in their creation of utopian spaces.

In utopias single-gender worlds or simple –sex societies have long been one of the primary ways to explore implications of gender and gender differences. In speculative fiction, female only worlds have been imagined a disease that wipe out men, along with the development of technological or mystical methods that allow female reproduction. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s novel describes this type of separate society. Many feminist utopias pondering separatism were

written in the 1970s, as a response to the lesbian separatist movement. Utopians imagined by male authors have often included equality between sexes, rather than separation. The use of female only worlds allows the exploration of female independence and freedom from patriarchy. The societies may not necessarily be lesbian or sexual at all- a famous early sexless example being *Herland*. In utopias, the projection of the myth doesn't take place in the remote past or in the future or in distant and fictional places imagining that at some time in the future, at some point, there must exist the possibility of living happily.

Ladyland is a utopia where science, technology and humanism work in unison to make women self-reliant. Patriarchal oppression becomes meaningless in this utopia. Like most feminist utopias *Sultana's Dream* is a direct exploration of a gendered pivotal society.

Ladyland is a utopian space since it represents an ideal feminist space. *Sultana's Dream* employs utopia to inspire those women who suffer within patriarchal societies. The story can be seen as representing a satirical utopian society as power of males is taken away and given to females.

Secularism and Morality

Like *Padmarag*, *Sultana's Dream* also includes the idea of secularism. In *Sultana's Dream* Sultana asks Sister Sara "what is your religion?" (p-12) To this she replies,

"Our religion is based on Love and Truth. It is our religious duty to love one another and to be absolutely truthful." "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." (p-12, 13)

So it is clear that in Ladyland it is their religious duty to love one another and to be truthful. If anyone lies then they are not punished with the death sentence rather they are banished from Ladyland. If any offender repents sincerely for his mistakes then he or she is forgiven. So it can be said that Rokeya represents humanism at its best. To her human beings are supreme. Morality is given priority and thus transcends other aspects of life. According to Rokeya humanitarian values should be the foremost priority of people. She in her essay “Shugrihini” (The Good Housewife) says:

We ought to remember that we are not merely Hindus or Muslims; Parsis or Christians; Bengalis, Madrsis, Marwaris or Punjabis; we are all Indians. We are first Indians, and Muslims or Sikhs afterwards. A good housewife will cultivate this truth in her family. This will gradually eradicate narrow selfishness, hatred and prejudice and turn her home into a shrine; help the members of her family to grow spiritually. (Hossain 210)

Ladyland

As the story proceeds, we see a girl, Sultana, notices a woman in her room with whom she befriends and calls her Sister Sara. She invites Sultana to come out of her room. Sultana, thinking it is safe to go for a walk at night, follows Sister Sara looking at the glowing light of the bright new moon but to her utter surprise she discovers that it is actually morning. Such sequence itself throws light on the restriction of women and their confinement in the darkness of sheer ignorance. Once they decide to come out of it, they find that there is a bright world waiting for them. Sister Sara takes Sultana to a place called ‘Ladyland’, the place where women are free to be a part of society and innovate to their heart’s content. It is a place where men are put in the zenana [seclusion]. The driving force behind the success of the utopian feminist country of

Ladyland is women's education. Rokeya emphasizes the importance of women familiarizing themselves with the world of science.

Sultana, when she comes out on the streets of the Ladyland, discovers to her utter surprise that there are no men outside, all are women. She feels awkward as she is accustomed to travel in a veil but here everyone is unveiled and so is she. In this regard Sister Sara says:

“You need not be afraid of coming across a man here. This is Ladyland, free from sin and harm. Virtue herself reigns here”. (p -4).

Rokeya gets the setting of Ladyland where women have successfully freed themselves from the control of men. This is where we begin to see Rokeya envisioning a society for women where they are free to practice scholarly pursuits. That is the reason Sultana is amazed to learn that men are kept indoors in Ladyland as they are not worth enough being kept loose.

Sultana's encounter with an opposite world than her own shows how much she has been internalized with restrictions on women. She cannot think that she is capable enough to protect herself as she is naturally weak. The patriarchal society has planted the thoughts in the women's mind that they are feeble and so they should confine themselves in the four walls rather than contributing in the affairs of the state. She says:

“We have no hand or 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”. (p -5)

In Ladyland, by shutting men in the mardana, they are defying the patriarchal voice of dominance, but this occurs only in Sultana's dream. She will soon come back to reality and that patriarchal system will dominate her with a greater force.

Ladyland consists of no police or jail as all men are inside the mardana. The women are engaged in governing the country and are contributing towards the development of their land. They create a utopia where they are their own masters, and no more under man's dominance.

In *Sultana's Dream*, the author shows when the ladyland was dominated by patriarchy, there were girls' schools and universities. They were acquiring knowledge in separate institutions. In her essay "Burkha", she tries to convey the same message when she says, "With separate girls' schools and adequate teachers, we could both maintain the obligatory minimum of purdah and still educate our women". (Hossain 218)

Pursuit of Science

Rokeya discusses the issue of power and how men hold dominion over women. The terms, 'lord' and 'master' precipitates Rokeya's war against the subjugation of women and the status of women during her time. She brings to attention the issue of power and privileges and demonstrates that women are able to work with the level of efficiency that men, in the form of prejudice, mark only as their own. Rokeya not only glorifies women's participation in science as a safe option but also states that given a chance to participate in scientific learning, they can use it productively for future generations without wasting resources. She portrays the women in Ladyland as individuals who use their skill and wit to create something for the goodness of the society instead of getting engaged in warfare.

The water balloon is one example of the inventions that help reduce the frequency of rainstorms and diseases caused by the mosquitos nesting in stagnant water and mud. They plough the land by using the water from water balloon. Their bathroom is also nicely decorated where the roof can be removed while taking a shower. Rokeya presents an interesting narrative where women are depicted as using their power to innovate. They use solar heat to cook. So their kitchen is free from coal, fire or smoke. Sultana comes to know more about their scientific creation when Sister Sara tells her that they collect rain water from “water balloon” (p -12) when they need rain water. So they do not suffer from flood or thunderstorm. In order to keep the country cool in hot weather they sprinkle water from artificial fountains and in cold weather they keep their rooms warm with sun-heat. They enjoy bath by removing the roof of the shower pipe.

When the female members of Ladyland start to engage themselves in scientific researches and come up with new ideas, their male counterparts make fun of them. Especially when the ladies manage to draw water from the atmosphere and heat from the sun, the men laugh at the members of the university and call the whole thing “a sentimental nightmare”. (p -8)

Here “a sentimental nightmare” demonstrates the inventions made by women. Rokeya here emphasizes the fact that men, by nature, are always ready to belittle the achievements of women. Here the scientific discoveries by the female members of the universities are being looked down upon by the males. According to them women are best at their homes not with scientific ideas.

But when the country was attacked by the neighboring country the male soldiers start fighting bravely but in vain. The queen of Ladyland tell the wise ladies of the university to come

up with ideas to defeat the enemies. She tells them that if they cannot beat them physically then they should use their brain power.

“If you cannot save your country for lack of physical strength,” said the queen, “try to do so by brain power.” (p -10)

One of the Lady Principals comes up with an idea and that is to direct all the rays of the concentrated sunlight and heat towards the enemy. The enemy faces the heat and sunlight and runs away panic stricken. The country is saved by the scientific invention of women and so all the men have been kept under mardana (opposite to zenana).

Rokeya here brings light that women too can defend themselves by using their brains. Physical power does not always dominate over brain power. Women consider themselves, as men also do, weak because they are physically weak but it is not necessary to think that physical strength is the key to success. Rokeya uses the example of an elephant saying:

“An elephant also has got a bigger and heavier brain than a man has. Yet man can enchain elephants and employ them according to their own shapes.” (p -9)

She envisions a land where women can run a government and make scientific discoveries to establish the belief that women are capable of handling any situation calmly and win using their own instinct.

Rokeya in *Sultana's Dream* depicts a land where a queen inherits the throne at the age of thirteen yet the country is ruled by the prime minister. Soon the rules reverse when the neighboring country attacks their land and the men fail to protect the land. The ladies attempt to rescue their country and gain success through scientific inventions. Here Rokeya, through the portrayal of the queen and the leading university ladies, sheds light on female involvement in

politics. She relies on the literary tool of fantasy to create a land where there is no patriarchal dominance; rather women are their own masters and have the ability even to run a country which has been quite impossible at her time. She shows women's productive and constructive sense by which women can defeat men. They utilize their wisdom and it is commendable as they dedicate their wit to come over the difficult situation and emerge victorious. It depicts Rokeya's desire to see women engage in political affairs and play the role of the commanding master which seemed literally unthinkable during her time.

Portrayal of Men

Sultana's Dream is a utopian literary work in and a strong attack against the male dominated social system. She creates an imaginary world in opposition to the existing patriarchal world. The men in the text are at the opposite pole to that of men in reality, and are portrayed as timid, defeated, shattered and spineless. In Ladyland, men perform the duties of women. They take care of the babies at home, cook for family members and even feel shy at the sight of women. They are kept in mardana just like women are kept in zenana. Sultana asks about the men's whereabouts to Sister Sara:

Where are the men? I asked her. In their proper places, where they ought to be. Pray let me know what you mean by their proper places. O I see my mistake; you cannot know our custom, as you were never here before. We shut our men indoors. Just as we are kept in zenana. Exactly so. (p -5)

Here the male race can be compared with the 'yahoos' of the yahoo island as depicted by the famous English satirist, Jonathan Swift in *Gulliver's Travels*. The yahoos are depicted as

idle, lazy creatures with no sense, conscience and consideration, a creature too lustful with no intelligence. Work is good for them and so they do their utmost to avoid work. They are presented as mentally and morally inferior. The men in *Sultana's Dream* are similar to the yahoos. The men here are timid and they feel shy at the very sight of the women. And that's the reason Sister Sara covers her body before entering the kitchen so that men can feel relaxed and can do their work without hesitation.

Men are depicted as a threat to women. Sister Sara opines that women are not safe until this threatening animal is locked in. The men folk demonstrate that they spread terror and brutality for the women. Males in both the real and utopian worlds are similar. They think that women's education is unnecessary. Women's contribution to society is rejected. The men of Ladyland are devoid of scientific awareness and are busy showing their masculine power. They call the technologies of women 'sentimental nightmares'. But later they are imprisoned.

Men here show no responsibilities towards the liberty of the country. Due to cowardice and lack of skill they step back and without any question get ready to abide by slavery and thus retreat from the battle field. They leave the country at the edge of destruction. At their shameless return the queen orders them to accept complete segregation from the outdoor world and take shelter into the cocoon of the mardana with no freedom and free will. They surprisingly accept the offer as a boon to save their lives. By accepting defeat they show their true nature of cowardice and selfishness. Instead of taking a stand for the country they bow their heads down and give in to the queen's demand. The famous Shakespearean adage "Cowards die many times before their death" certainly befits their personality.

Rokeya presents her inner desire to take a rightful revenge on the men folk. She overthrows the whole male community to the dungeon of the mardana so as to make them realize how women are treated and are shut in the heart of darkness. The qualities which men usually possess in the conventional social system are absent in *Sultana's Dream*. They are portrayed like parasites having a large body but hollow inside. Thus Rokeya constructs a feminist social structure where men are devoid of their traditional role of 'master'.

Imprisonment of men in the Ladyland is a sheer revenge against the imprisonment of women. But according to Rokeya, women are responsible for their own state of being oppressed as they silently submit to such oppression. She thinks that women may possess faculties and talents equivalent to or even greater than men. Women are capable of developing themselves to a stage where they may attain complete mastery over nature without any help from men and create a new world. She wants to motivate women towards a process of self-realization and break the barrier that has always hindered them. The dream sequence in *Sultana's Dream* presents many images which are totally opposite from reality. It demonstrates many issues regarding women's rights. She presents Ladyland as an ideal land for women to fulfill all their dreams and emphasizes her interest in educating women and focusing the termination of the practice of early marriage. Rokeya, through the portrayal of the Queen of Ladyland, actually expresses her intense will for women's education and raises her voice against early marriage being herself a victim of it. Sister Sara provides a brief history about her Ladyland and queen:

“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. Education was spread far and wide among women. And early marriage also was stopped. No women were to be allowed to marry before she was twenty one”. (p -7)

Rokeya sheds light on the cultural practice of early marriage and focuses on her fascination in science. She creates Ladyland to portray women at their best and to show that power in women's hands can be used more efficiently than by men. She shuts the men indoors. She also includes the universal clash between men and women in her Ladyland. Her description about how men actually react on hearing the scientific inventions by women are the real reactions of their hostile and dominations attitude towards women .They laugh at their invention and women decide that they would rather commit suicide than lose their honour.

Women's Education and Empowerment

It is evident from Rokeya's writing of *Sultana's Dream* that the driving force behind the success of Ladyland is women's education. She focuses on women familiarizing themselves with the world of science. To show the women that they too can be the head of the educational institute, she creates the characters of Lady Principles who have, with their wisdom and wit, reached the zenith of success and are capable of solving the obstacles which are in their way. That education is the key to women's empowerment and progress is one of the main features of this story. She demonstrates how women use their skills to achieve the same goals that men have fallen short of despite their show of physical might and military power. So she thinks that the desired progress of women is an urgent necessity for the advancement of a society, because no society could ever move forward in the true sense of the term leaving half of its members at home. That is the reason that she has always spoken of women's equal participation in the workforce with men. She depicts women in Ladyland working in universities, and trying their best to use their wit for the advancement of the society and queen who is dedicated to her Ladyland and is working very hard for its development.

Her target of criticism is not the patriarchal society only. She is equally scornful and critical of women for their tendency to remain under confinement. Thinking that women are equally responsible for their submission as they willingly accept their subordination and subjugation without realizing the consequence; she blames them for their blind submission and holds them accountable for their situation. She criticizes women actually when Sister Sara asks Sultana:

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. (p -5)

Here we find Rokeya to be a harsh critic of women who purposefully choose to be subservient to men. She holds women responsible for their own misery. She continues to say that “Shutting your eyes to your own interests” (p-5) is one of the many reasons women have been unable to rise from their deplorable state. She uses the analogy between the human and lion to show that physical strength doesn’t equal to power and believing one is weak is walking away from the duty of pursuing one’s own-interest. Women should know this strength does not always equal to power. They should not let men overshadow their talent by means of physical strength. Rather they have to use their skills in such way that men fail to dominate them. A man does not display physical strength to tame a lion. He uses different techniques to make the lion yield to him. And in Ladyland women does not use arms to seclude men, they make it happen by their shrewd thinking. In this way Rokeya manages to destroy the notions of strength associated with men.

Rokeya doesn't speak against women's household work. She thinks that women can't be good housewives if she doesn't gain special knowledge about housework. To accomplish the household chores one needs education too. In *Sultana's Dream* the land is free from all kinds of diseases. They do not suffer from epidemics and it is also free from mosquitos. And this happened because the land is neat and clean. They decorated the country beautifully and the kitchens of Ladyland are smoke free. So to keep the house well-arranged education is must. Rokeya in her essay "Shugrihini" (The Good Housewife) states that:

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 is 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 203)

She demonstrates very clearly the duties a good housewife has in arranging the house. She has also shown what happens when the house is not neatly maintained. She says:

You can often see cobwebs decorating the store-room like awnings. Tamarind and rice are mixed up and so are different spices. It takes an hour to find sugar. As the room is kept entirely closed you get a stuffy odour the minute it is opened. The housewives are used to it. (Hossain 203).

Education develops the mental faculty of a person. And through education we can differentiate between right and wrong, what we should do and what should be avoided. And education is compulsory in every sector of life. By describing the kitchen in *Sultana's Dream* and by showing what happens when the kitchen is not properly kept, Rokeya portrays why

education is necessary for girls in the housekeeping sector. She suggests the solution of the problem, that is, education.

To conclude, we can say that Rokeya unhesitatingly and unflinchingly expresses her allegations against a male-dominated society in her utopia *Sultana's Dream* to make women of her time aware and alert of their rights and privileges in the society. She spoke in a time when the society was fully under the control of male members. Despite the adverse situation of women in the then society, she did not lose heart to give her criticism against male dominance. She teaches women the values of education and self-confidence to flourish in an independent way in the society, no more to be in the beck and call of their male counterparts. The feminist approach she takes to preach her ideas justifies her attitude towards the society as a whole.

CHAPTER THREE

Padmarag

Rokeya dreamt of a female world where all women, regardless of religion and region, would receive not only education but also training in various skills and craftsmanship in order to ensure economic independence. In *Padmarag*, she demonstrates this vision. Here the story revolves round an institution called Tarini Bhaban where women who are from different races, religions and regions come together and who have been subjected to patriarchal oppression in their own personal histories. They unite there with their common goal to be self-reliant. These are women who have experienced all- rude and cunning in-laws, indifferent parents who don't spare a thought to their daughter's education or welfare and intriguing relatives and landlords who have no qualms about being unjust to the women. The women in Tarini Bhaban are engaged in diverse activities which include imparting formal education, teaching crafts to underprivileged women so that they can learn to be financially independent. They are also trained to be caring for the sick and the destitute.

Tarini Bhaban is named after its founder Dina Tarini who belongs to the Brahma community. The name "Dina Tarini" means 'saviour of the distressed'. Tarini, one of the main protagonists of *Padmarag*, is the second wife of a rich lawyer who is widowed shortly after her marriage. Her husband left behind a lot of wealth and there is no one to inherit these but Tarini. She decides to found Tarini Bhaban using the funds bequeathed by her husband, and under her leadership the asylum flourished. But she faces obstacles from her relatives and gives a deaf ear to them. Her student's mother-in-law also does not hesitate to rebuke her by using offensive language. We can relate this to the life of Rokeya as when she started her school for women she too faced many obstacles from the people. People too abused her using harsh words but she did

not pay any heed to them. Her husband also died when she was in her twenties and she found no one beside her when she started to establish the school. Her sole motive has been to work for the betterment of society and she worked maintaining strict purdah but still the rivals called her a prostitute. Some didn't hesitate to brand her as a woman of loose morals. But she didn't step back and neither did Tarini. Tarini continues the legacy and works for destitute women in the society.

Tarini Bhaban is like an asylum and consists of a school, a training institute for adult women, a shelter for widows and a home for ailing and needy people. Tarini's activities are not encouraged by her relatives and she resolves to go against their wish by her activities. She is not only frowned upon by her family members but also by the people who send their daughters to the asylum. Though they are benefitted by her project, they leave no stone unturned to abuse her in the most offensive way. One of her former students' mother-in-law calls her a whore. Other parents also don't hesitate to insult her whenever they get a chance. But the working women in Tarini Bhaban are indifferent to their attitude. The works of Tarini Bhaban are in constant touch with the world outside through their activities but still they are isolated from the mainstream.

Though Tarini Bhaban plays diverse roles, it doesn't accept any kind of government sponsorship. Some rich women donate money but their names are kept secret.

Secularism as Religion

Rokeya firmly believed in humanity as the soul of religion. She never discriminated people by their religion. Her literary, social and religious standing has been her belief in non-sectarianism. In administering her own school she visited Hindu and Brahma schools to know the about the ways of running a school as she didn't receive formal education and so had no idea

about it. The students of her school were also from different communities. She has dreamt of a community which will be dominated by secularism. In her novella *Padmarag* she sketches the characters where they are provided shelter in Tarini Bhavan and women of all caste and creed live with great harmony there. They enjoy a deep bond of mutual love and respect under the headship of a Hindu woman. Using a metaphor she emphasizes the fact that for a humanitarian person there is no difference among different religions. In her preface she tells a story related by her elder brother:

Religion is like a three storied mansion. The ground floor has many chambers housing Hindus with their many factions, such as Brahman, Sudras etc., and Muslims with their many communities, like Shia, Sunni etc., and similarly, many Christians with their different denominations, Roman Catholic, Protestants and the like. Go to the first floor; there are only Muslims, only Hindus, with no divisions into factions. On the second floor, there is just one chamber inhabited by only people, all the same; there are no Hindus, no Muslims; all are worshipping only one God. In the final analysis, there is nothing except the great God. (p -8)

Nonsectarian view has been a special feature of her writing. Rokeya's vision has been to see women free from the clutches of the patriarchal society and their emancipation being economically free and to be educated but her vision is not only for Muslims. She didn't advocate for any specific region or religion rather she spoke for all women.

Siddika as Padmarag

Siddika is named 'Padmarag' by Tarini. Her metamorphosis from a lonely, secretive and sad young girl to a skilled, self-assured woman ready to face the future begins when she enters

Tarini Bhaban. She shows how a woman can transform herself into a complete person if provided the opportunity. We are introduced to the character when her 'brother' comes to a railway platform and urges some women to take his sister with them for a few days. The group of women was surprised at the man's behaviour as he was ready to hand over his sister to some unknown persons. But they agree to take her along and thus Siddika lands in Tarini Bhaban.

Rokeya shows the process of Sidikka's self-development once she enters Tarini bhaban. She keeps herself as a recluse in Tarini Bhaban as she goes through a bewildering and unexpected series of disasters and misfortunes and has been habituated to loneliness, gravity and secrecy. The other members of Tarini Bhaban call her a 'hard hearted' and 'cursed goddess' forced to come down to earth.

"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?" (p -39)

Later they say:

"Goodness! I've seen many folks, but never a girl quite like this one! Truly the hard hearted daughter of a hard hearted mother!" (p -39)

But gradually we see she undergoes a transformation as we go through the story.

Everyone in the asylum is engaged in different tasks but when Sidikka asks them to assign her some work; she discovers that she is not useful to them in any way. She can neither chop wood nor teach the students. She can't sew clothes either. She finds herself severely handicapped.

Later she starts sewing pillow covers, curtains and sheets for the patients. She also starts cooking and preparing medicine mixture for the ill people. Thus she gets herself busy with the daily chores of the institution and gradually becomes a very important member. Her desire to work is her first transformation. When she starts working, she is an amateur but slowly she proves her worth and so Mrs. Sen loads her with more responsibility.

Here Rokeya's motive has been to show how women are endowed with various responsibilities but none are useful as they are trained to fulfill only the daily necessity of their house. And these responsibilities are not worth in maintaining their lives. The education they are given is neither rigorous nor heuristic. She wants women to be educated in the true sense to serve, to empower themselves but not to use education as glittering ornaments. She asserts the fact that educated women should contribute to the welfare of the society, they should spread their knowledge among the ignorant and play a pivotal role in developing the society and also pave the way for others and themselves.

Siddika strengthens her bond with the other sisters in Tarini Bhaban and comes to know that most of them also have suffered the pathos of their past life. Their grief touches her soul and she, like them, tries to maintain a cheerful appearance. She meets her husband in Tarini Bhaban where he has been brought by the female members as he is left injured and unconscious on the road. At first, she doesn't recognize him but later when she comes to know that Latif Almas is her husband she doesn't reveal her identity. In the meantime, Latif falls for her not knowing the fact that she is his wife and later the truth comes to light. Latif is eager to accept her but Siddika refuses to lead the life of a normal housewife. Her husband and other members of the asylum try to persuade her to get reunited with him but Siddika remains adamant in her decision. When they

ask her to agree to a truce, Sidikka tells them that she is not mere puppet to be rejected whenever one likes. She says:

Old and new have become a tangled mess. Married life is not for me. How can I forget the humiliation of being cast aside because the property was not handed over? They had coveted my property-not me. Are we women puppets that men can reject us at will and take us back again when it suits them to do so? I wish to show the world that opportunity knocks but once in life. That era is over when men would trample on us and still have us licking their boots. By dedicating my entire life to Tarini Bhaban, I shall try to further the welfare of women and eradicate the tradition of seclusion from the root itself. (p -175)

Siddika resolves to reject married domesticity and to devote her life to the betterment of her own community and for the welfare of society. She wants to set an example in that married life is not the only goal of a woman's life. She doesn't want men to be proud of the fact that no matter how highly educated, noble, spirited, great and honorable women are, ultimately, they are bound to humble themselves before men. She thinks that a housewife's duty does not constitute life's essential duties. She wants to dedicate her life to awaken the women who are yet enlightened. She leaves Tarini Bhaban, but for a far more difficult existence, in a sense, choosing to act as an empowered woman who will work for the betterment of the deprived women of her estate. Sidikka chooses this path with great resolve and renunciation. Though she rejects to live with Latif, she wants to be committed to him in her mind and soul for the rest of her life. She wants to consider herself as his widow.

Rokeya, through the portrayal of Siddika, focuses on the fact that being educated a woman can be a good educator and work for the society and also lead from the front. And thus it creates a dual role for them, both as educator and social worker.

Pathos of Other Residents of Tarini Bhaban

Rokeya uses tragic personal histories of her female characters where she presents an indictment of the society. Though they have tragic pasts, they always try to remain cheerful. Almost all of them are 'biye fail'. Here through the word 'biye fail' Rokeya tries to convey that they are the victims of the cruel society and they end up failing in their married life and also fail to pass the BA exam. These destitute women end up in Tarini Bhaban and engage themselves in different tasks and thus find a new meaning in their lives. All of them wear the same kind of clothes, with no jewelry to beautify themselves. They prefer simplicity. They call one another 'tumi', though use the word 'apni' while addressing Mrs. Sen. When Siddika first comes to Tarini Bhaban, she is introduced to Saudamini, Charubala Dutta, Vibha and Mrs. Helen. Siddika is impressed with their behaviour and is unaware of the fact that they have their own pathetic tales in their past.

Saudamini, a woman of 43, is still beautiful at this middle-age. She is always in a cheerful mood. That's why Siddika says: *Could my heart be light as thine / I'd gladly change with thee*". (p -70) On hearing this, Saudamini smilingly tells Siddika that she is ignorant of her grief:

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 Saudamini 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. (p 71)

Saudamini tells Siddika that her tale is that of the woman constructed into the monstrous step mother. She reveals she has been fated to contend with a rival, her husband's first wife. Though she is dead, she left behind two children who turn out to be the curse of her life. But their maternal aunt, Shyma Didi, is responsible for it. She always tried to present Saudamini as a typical cruel step mother. The indifference of Saudamini's husband shatters her dream and thus she fails to prevent herself being turned into a traditional female stereotype. She couldn't save her step-daughter from drowning and finds herself on the shore in a state of madness. Later she starts working as a governess in a family and comes to Tarini Bhaban through them. Under the guidance of Mrs. Sen, she starts her life afresh.

Rafia, another worker in Tarini Bhaban, had been married to a rich person, a lawyer. The lawyer left her with two baby daughters for England to qualify for the Bar but came back after ten years with a new wife. During these ten years, Rafia trains herself to be a fit life partner for her husband but this of no use. Her husband divorces her and thus her married life comes to an end.

Sakina's husband rejects her on the very day of their wedding during 'subhadrishti', the auspicious exchange of gazes between husband and wife, as the husband comes to know from his mistress, that Sakina is not beautiful. After some years, her husband comes back to take her to

home under pressure but Sakina refuses to go with him as she does not forget the humiliation on her wedding. And that humiliation is meant for the whole womankind, as she understands.

Usha has been thrown out by her in-laws because some robbers abduct her from her home but to whom her husband shows his cowardice and offers no resistance at all. However, she is rescued by some strangers but is not accepted by her in-laws on the ground that she is no more 'pure' as she has spent the night with strangers. The maid of the house sells her to prostitution under the pretext of offering her a job and takes with her but her daughter –in –law helps her elope and come to Tarini Bhaban. Usha starts the job of a cook. Mrs. Sen sponsors her higher education. Though she fails in the 'BA' exam for three marks, Mrs Sen assigns her as the head teacher at Tarini Bhaban.

Helen is not from the Bengali community. She comes from England and yet her fate is not different from those of the other sisters of Tarini Bhavan. Her husband is a drunkard and always misbehaves with her in his state of extreme drunkenness. He didn't refrain from hitting her whenever he liked. He didn't hesitate to involve in an illicit relationship and moreover murdered a person. When Helen appealed for separation from this man the court of England denied her petition and rather declared her as 'tied for life to a lunatic' and thus defined her as the sacrifice of the marriage law of England. Sakina says out anger:

“What greater injustice or oppression could one possibly think of? This England –this noxious, putrid England – claims to be civilized!” (p- 96)

Helen is the representative of the first world countries which claim to be civilized. In that country also women are not easily freed from the clutches of the patriarchal system. Rokeya in the essay “Delicia Hottha” (Murder of Delicia) portrays the pathetic condition of women of the

so called civilized country England. There Delicia is a lady who is economically free and supports her husband financially. Her husband attended parties and spent a lot of money but the money belonged to Delicia and she never bothered to know what he has been doing with the money. Later she comes to know that her husband was having an illicit affair with a lady to whom he gave expensive gifts. Delicia is shattered both mentally and physically and thinks of filing a case for divorce but she comes to know that she won't be able to prove her husband's relationship and so the law will not support her. The law is also made by man so there is no chance for her to get justice. Here Rokeya shows the women of the civilized country are too not free from the men made law and a first world country like England does not provide security for women.

The condition of both Delicia and Helen are the same but the difference is that Delicia couldn't tolerate her husband cheating and gradually meets her death and Helen in Tarini Bhavan starts her life fresh. She no more laments her past and turns her pain into strength like the other members of the Tarini Bhavan.

Through the lives of these women Rokeya presents an indictment of society where institutionalized, familial, marital and sexual practices either drive women to madness or to the brink of suicide. When Sidikka comes to know the bitter truth of their life she asks:

Is there no medicine to cure these running sores of society? To stay bound to a madman all one's life, to be abandoned without a reason, to be forcibly sent to live with a drunken husband and a co-wife by one's brother even when one expresses unwillingness...Is there no remedy for this? (p -104)

To this, Saudamini replies:

There is! That remedy is the ‘Society for the Alleviation of women’s Suffering in Tarini Bhaban’. Come, all women who are abandoned, pauperized, neglected, helpless, oppressed come all. Then we declare war against society. And Tarini Bhaban is our fortress. (p -104)

Sakina further says:

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. (p -104)

Working Women as Leaders

Rokeya, ahead of her peers, realizes that economic independence and solvency is very important if women are to get emancipated. They should no longer be dependent upon fathers, brothers or husbands for their livelihoods. To meet this end, she encourages the revival of craft industries where women can easily participate in from home. She, in both her actions and writings, contributes a lot to bring out the importance of earning and portrays this remarkable feature in *Padmarg* wonderfully.

The women in Tarini Bhaban are engaged in multifarious tasks. Their professional activities help them to re-invent themselves as well as earn their living. By working in different departments they develop themselves as leaders and play the role of an efficient leader whenever needed. These tasks help them confront the society and handle the situation accordingly. Rokeya here portrays the office life of women engaged in professional activities. They type, prepare reports of the school’s jubilee celebrations and deal with the everyday problems of running a girl’s school. They have to face a lot of obstacles; many of them are created by the guardians of

the students. According to them, the students are the responsibility of the teachers. So their teacher should teach and as well as take care of every detail of them. The parents send the girls to school even when they are physically and mentally unfit. They are not taken proper care by the family. The parents, instead of taking the matters seriously and visiting a doctor, complain to the school that they are not being adequately educated. The school is not responsible to discipline the girls who wet their beds yet the school authority is blamed for it. The negligence of the South Asian girl is wonderfully and minutely presented in these accounts.

Saudimini, irritated by the parents' complaint Mrs Sen to add two more sections in Tarini Bhaban: Tarini Nursery and Tarini Lunatic Asylum. Rokeya here reveals the irony of a situation where the parents are incapable of imparting good values and education to their children.

The women of Tarini Bhaban, thus, have to look after all the daily hassle of the work and satisfy themselves. They have to keep record of every detail of the students, look after the patients and do all the necessary work for the asylum. In this way, the women of Tarini Bhaban develop themselves as leaders.

Rokeya understands that to achieve freedom and emancipation women need, first of all, to be educated and accordingly she begins her journey towards women's freedom by preaching the merits of schooling of the females. And the first fruit of the venture is the establishment of a Muslim girls' school in 1909. Rokeya goes door to door to entreat the guardians to send their daughters to the school ensuring security and '*purdah*', covered transports and vehicles for girls. She, in *Padmarag*, describes the situation which she herself faced in the course of her own life

while administrating her school. She leads from the front and carries out the duties of a true leader.

Padmarag: A Wonderful Manifestation of Women's Economic Freedom

Rokeya doesn't wishes for a miracle to change the lot of women. Neither does she rely on men as far as women's liberation is concerned. She emphasizes on the fact that women themselves must come forward to explore the main causes of their miseries and try to do away with their lacking and limitations. They must have the vision to become the equal development partner with their male counterparts and gain confidence in their own strength. According to her, education is the key through which they can bridge the public and private spheres. In *Padmarag*, she demonstrates a wide range of issues covering the tribulations of a woman in a patriarchal society, the advantages of community living, self-development, and the key to self-reliance and ultimate freedom.

The sisters of Tarini Bhaban have lived their lives under the male dominance before coming there and they don't have any identity of their own through which they could explore themselves. As soon as they start engaging in diverse work, they gradually succeed overcoming their limitation and establish themselves with their own merit. They start earning their own livelihood and contributing financially to help Latif Almas to go back to his home. They become self-reliant and thus attain economic freedom and solvency.

Men lay some strategic rules with the help of prejudice, superstitions, religious dogmas that contribute to make women inferior to them staying uneducated and economically insolvent. Women are treated either as servants of men or as their objects of sexual pleasures. Education

and economic freedom are the important ways to break this barrier and emancipate them from the clutches of the patriarchal society. The women of Tarini Bhaban realize this truth only when they are left alone to suffer their miseries. But Tarini Bhaban becomes a saviour to these unfortunate, helpless and disadvantaged women.

Finally we see that Siddika rejects a normal life of a married woman and chooses a path which is difficult. She becomes a non-conformist and her spirit to dedicate her life for the empowerment of women helps her live a single life. She is able to realize her courage because of the useful vocation in Tarini Bhaban. Almost all the people at the asylum entreat her to get reunited with Latif and lead a happy conjugal life. But Siddika's resolve not to follow the tradition anymore helps her refuse Latif. Moreover, her in-law's preference of her property to herself leaves an impact. She says that she is not a mere toy and does not want to adopt the traditional way of a woman's life. She rejects living in "a doll's house" and wants to prove that marital harmony alone should not be a woman's ultimate quest. But she does not want to divorce Latif either as she would like to be his fiancé in spirit. Rokeya shows how women can be awakened from their confined world through self- education, economic freedom and self-reliance.

CHAPTER FOUR

Abarodhbashini

In *Abarodhbashini*, Rokeya compiles 47 reports to describe the plight of women in society. The reports also document purdah and seclusion customs imposed on women. It is a non-fictional work that captures the daily life of women who are bound to restrict their movement in confinement.

The reports from *The Secluded Ones* (The translated version of *Abarodhbashini* by Roushan Jahan) presents the effects of seclusion, satirize sometimes with humour, and sometimes with pain. They not only depict the purdah customs prevalent in the then society; but also show the outlook of men and women of purdah-observing families. The same approach of non-purdah observing persons towards purdah is also made clear.

Rokeya says, “The system reminds me of the lethal carbonic acid gas, which being a painless killer, its victims are never alert to its hazards. Women kept confined to the home die a slow death by the effect of this fatal gas known as purdah.” (p -441).

Rokeya’s intention has never been to attack and condemn this mandatory Islamic code for women; what she has always wanted to show how strict “purdah” has restricted women from participating in activities in and outside their homes. She has let her anger loose in the preface of *Abarodhbashini* by saying:

When visiting Kurseong and Madhpur, I picked up many beautiful attractive stones.
From the sea beaches of Madras and Urissa, I gathered seashells of many colours and

shapes. And during my twenty years of service to the society, I have gathered only curses from our die-hard Mullahs. (p- 130)

She further says that this acute form of imprisonment to a room or to the inside of the house is detrimental to health that ultimately deadens their minds and makes them yield to innocuous and useless patterns of behaviour. That is the reason she, in her essay “Tin Kure” throws a straight question to the upholders of orthodox beliefs:

“Purdah does not mean deprivation of all rights and confinement within four walls. Have you read the Quran Sharif? Or do you just hang it around your neck?” (Hossain 485)

She also considers extreme veiling or covering and early marriage of girls as two major impairments to Muslim women’s education. She challenges the so called male proliferation of strict purdah in her essay "Bhrata Bhagini". She says:

“Removal of that artificial restriction keeping women confined to homes will lead to unrestricted spread of education among women. And it will then be impossible to arrest the progress of such education.” (Hossain 469)

Satire and Humour in *Aboradhbashini*

Satire is of ancient origin as the history of satire begins with the early Greek poets among whom Aristophanes is deemed to be the master of the art. It is used for social purposes to reform the society. The famous *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English* defines satire as “the use of humour to attack a person, an idea or behaviour that you think is bad or silly.” (p- 1042) According to M.H. Abrams’ *A Glossary of Literary Terms*:

“Satire can be described as the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation.”(Abrams 187)

According to J.A.Cuddon’s *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*:

“...satire is a kind of protest, a sublimation and refinement of anger and indignation”.
(Cuddon 599)

Cuddon goes on to define it by saying:

In his dictionary, Samuel Johnson, defined satire as a poem ‘in which wickedness or folly is censured’. Dryden claimed that the true end of satire was ‘the amendment of vices’; and Defoe thought that it was ‘reformation’. One of the most famous definitions is Jonathan Swift’s. ‘Satire’, he wrote, ‘is a sort of glass wherein beholders do generally discovers everybody’s face but their own, which is the chief reason for that kind of reception it meets in the world, and that so very few are offended with it. (Cuddon 598)

Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* is a wonderful manifestation of satire in the history of English Literature. In that book, Swift satirizes the contemporary political and social issues of England and to lash mankind, especially those of England, for their follies, absurdities and evil ways. In *Gulliver’s Travels* Swift satirizes the socio-political situation of England. But, unlike Swift, Rokeya here satirizes inequality between the sexes.

The tradition of satire in Bengali literature dates back to the middle period. It is the literary expressions pointing out social follies and vices in witty ways. Unlike full-fledged plays, satirical compositions lack complexities of themes, developments of characters and plots. The

first Bangla satire was Golaknath's *Kalpanik Sangbadal* (1795), a translation of the play *The Disguise*. Bangla satire is, however, primarily based on Sanskrit 'prahashan' or satire. The foundation of Bangla satire was laid in the early 19th century by two Sanskrit satires, *Hasyarnab* (Jagadish, 1822) and *Kantauksarbasva* (Ramchandra Tarkalankar, 1828). Religious fundamentalism of Bengali Hindus and Brahmanical practice of polygamy were the general themes of Bangla satires. (<http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=satire>)

Ramnarayan Tarkaratna (1822-86) was perhaps the first writer to compose Bangla satire on Sanskrit structure. His best known satire is *Kulinkulsarbasva* (1854), based mainly on the frivolities of Hindu casteism of contemporary society, the lustful nature of Brahmans who used to have extra-marital sex and also the pathetic life of high caste Hindu girls. In *Ekei Ki Bole Sabhyata* (1860), Michael Modhusudan, the famous Bengali poet and playwright, satirized the artificiality of those Bengalis who followed European manners and conventions out of context while in *Budo Shaliker Ghade Ron* (1860), he exposed the lustfulness of high-caste Brahmans. He raised the level of satire and introduced a unique style in the history of Bangla literature. His plays are still the standard by which Bangla satire is measured.

The works of the following Bengali authors like Peary Chand Mitra's (1814-1883) *Alaler Ghorer Dulal*, Kali Proshonno Singho's (1841-1870) *Hutum Pechar Noksha*, and Abul Monsor Ahmad's (1898- 1979) *Food Conference* and *Relief Work* are all the masterpieces of the tradition of Bengali satirical writings.

Rokeya also adopted this tradition of satirical writing by satirizing the contemporary society which was dominated by men in every aspects. Women were changed to some inanimate objects and things which were under the beck and call of the male members of the family and the

society. They were denied of their basic rights and confined to the cocoon of the family which was named as *zenana*. Outside the *zenana* the ladies hardly had any existence and so they were not generally expected to have any comments or suggestions regarding any matters of the family and society. They were not sent to school, were sent for early marriage without any consent, were asked to veil themselves like an object while travelling, were not let go in front of any female members let alone males and so on and so forth. Even the little girls were also not allowed to come in front of anybody. The restrictions in every sphere of their lives were imposed by the domineering male members of the society. The Islamic codes of life were misinterpreted only to confine women in the *zenana*. So, the social code along with the religious code of life was used to torture women by their male counterparts. And the worst of all, women themselves never thought of protesting these violence and injustices against them. Rather they obeyed all these rules as a blind follower of the men.

Rokeya, through her sketches in *Abarodhbashini*, has satirized the then prevalent patriarchal society which would treat women unequally. She is here trying to bring out the darker side of the society about women to ridicule the follies and frivolities of the males. And in doing so, she warns very skillfully the male members of the society about the demerits of bringing the half portion of the people, womanhood, into confinement. She very humorously presents in her skits the different deplorable conditions of the women under the grip of the veil and sends the message to the male members to correct the vices of confinement. Without an equal contribution from women, the society would certainly lag behind. And, according to her, women certainly have the ability to go hand in hand with men, and to some extent they can even surpass men with their intelligence and wit. And this has been clearly shown in *Sultana's Dream* where she satirizes the strength and ability of men and prioritizes those of women. She believes on the

equality of both males and females that has been advocated by the famous Bengali poet Kazi Nazrul Islam in his “Nari” (Women) where he says:

I sing the song of equality
 In my view gender difference
 Is essentiality a triviality
 Everything that is great in the world,
 All the beneficial and good,
 Half must be credited to woman,
 And to man half only we should. (Trans. Farooq)

Like Kazi Nazrul Islam, the Nobel award winner Bengali author Rabindranath Tagore also speaks in favor of women freedom. His *Streer Patra*, *Shomapti*, *Ghare Bare* manifest this view.

Condition of Women before Wedding

Abarodhbashini is Rokeya’s questioning of practice of purdah and seclusion. In her reports in *Abarodhbashini*, she discusses the dire consequences of women living a life of seclusion. In report eleven she says the following during a visit to her granddaughters during their weddings.

I could not stay at Manju’s ‘cell’ for long- I felt suffocated in that close room. I opened the windows but within a couple of minutes a haughty begum walked over and closed the windows, remarking curtly, “The bride is in the draught.” I had to leave the room. I failed to stay in Sabu’s cell even for a minute. Those poor girls, at that time, had already stayed

in that room for six months. Ultimately, Sabu had a spell of hysteria. This is how we are trained to endure seclusion. (p- 138)

Report 11 is one example of the effects of seclusion on women. In report twenty seven she discusses the same thing when she reports the incident:

I am going to talk about something that happened only ten years ago. One such girl was compelled to stay in the Maya Khana for six months. Her family neglected her. The people of Bihar, generally, don't take regular bath. Who would bother to see that the girl confined in Maya Khana has a daily bath? After all someone would have to carry the girl to the bathroom since a prospective bride is forbidden to walk. Her movements are totally restricted. The whole day she sits on a bed holding her head down. At night, she sleeps on the same bed. Since she may not open her eyes, someone else has to feed her. Her hair may get all tangled but she is not permitted to brush her own hair. She has to depend on others for the simplest of things. After six months during her wedding, her eyesight was damaged forever as a result of keeping her eyes constantly closed. (147-48)

These two reports present the pitiful condition women faced. A girl losing her eyesight in the name of Purdah is heart-rending. Women are subjugated in the name of institutional marriage. So, marriage has also become a weapon to relegate women into that pathetic condition. Marriage is considered as a sacred bond between two persons. It unites the hearts of the bride and groom. But these customs of confining the brides in the cell creates fear in their minds. How are women to enjoy their wedding if they have to undergo such dire rituals before their marriages?

Marriage without Consent

Reports 26, 30 and 34 talk about women's getting married without their consent. In our society, the groom's consent is considered as the final command. But in case of women, their opinion is totally ignored and not given any importance. They are not asked whether they are happy with the alliance let alone their consent. The parents decide who they are to get married to.

Report 26 is also full of humour. The three sisters who are to be married have similarities in their names and so the Mulla commits mistakes in uttering the names. All the pre-settled plans are nipped in the bud and as a result the pre-planned couples are matched with the wrong persons. When the elder bride comes to know about the blunder, she prefers to keep silent rather than saying 'kobul'. But she is constantly pinched by her mother to say 'kobul' and at a certain point hits her to utter the word. Later when one of the grooms sees that his wife is changed, he sends a letter to his mother-in-law to exchange his bride or else he would file a case against them.

In report 30 the girl continuously cries not to marry the boy her father selects for her but in vain. She is forced to say 'kobul' and her parents' tries to persuade her but at one point someone pinch her and the sound she makes is taken to be her consent and thus gets married.

Report 34 also reflects the grim picture of society where the girl's consent is not necessary. In this report the victim herself calls her children illicit as she has not been asked about her opinion during her marriage and neither did she say kobul during her marriage. That's the reason she doesn't hesitate to call them illegitimate.

Condition of Hindu Women

Report 12 is a story about a Hindu woman who has gone to take a religious bath with her husband and mother-in-law. On her way back she loses her companion in the crowd. After sometime, while looking for her husband, she sees someone wearing a yellow bordered “dhoti” and assuming that man to be her husband starts following him. Few minutes later, the police stop them accusing the man for abducting someone else’s wife. Later the woman reveals that she has never seen the face of her husband and all she knows is that her husband normally wears a yellow bordered dhoti and so she mistakes the other man to be her husband. The story shows that not only the Muslims but the Hindu women were living in seclusion.

In report 41 we see a Hindu woman comes to take a religious bath in a palanquin but it is funny to see the way she takes that bath. The whole palanquin is dipped into the water along with the lady inside. Rokeya goes to the extent to depict the miserable condition of Hindu women. Hindu women are not forced to wear burkha (a long cloth to cover the whole body) but they too are forced to follow the norms of the patriarchal society that have forced them to live in seclusion. The sufferings of Hindu women are no less than that of Muslim women.

In the 19th century there had been no tradition in the Hindu community to take the wives to aboard. Due to family obstacles the first Indian I.C.S. Satyendranath Tagore couldn’t take his wife aboard with him. The leader of the Brahma society Keshabchandra Sen also couldn’t take his wife along with him in his inaugural ceremony. The way the other aristocratic females used to take the religious bath in Ganga River is the example of confinement not of purdah. The author has described this pitiful condition of the then prevalent Hindu society through report 12 and 41.

Condition of Little Girls

In report 13, Rokeya reveals how a nine year girl has been forced to wear burqa and then travel. As a consequence she stables on unknown person as she can't see anything because of the veil. At the tender age of nine she has been forced to comply with the burkha tradition.

The society not only imposed burkha on them but also restricted their movement in front of ladies also. Sketch 20 and 23 shows how the little girls are confined in rooms to avoid confrontation with unknown females also. They are kept hidden in rooms which is not worthy to stay. In report 23 Rokeya depicts her own life experience where she has been locked in a room to hide from some women. There nobody took care of her food and drink. And for four days she suffered this starvation.

Preference of Death to Veil

In sketch 8, 9, 14 and 40 she portrays the deplorable situation women have to suffer in the name of purdah. In reports 14 and 8, women sacrifice their lives in order to avoid confrontation with men. One woman even prefers to get burnt to ashes while another chooses to embrace death in the railway track not even letting anybody help her.

The other woman gives away her savings of whole life only to avoid a thief's gaze. The women in report 40 shut themselves in the burning house as they see the male members standing in the yard. The male's presence is more harmful to them than fire and so they refuse to come out of the house but later some brave boys forcefully bring them out.

These incidents are the calls to conscience that strikes a chord and asks the readers to question the deplorable practice of “purdah”. It is really pathetic to lose one’s life only to maintain the so called seclusion imposed by the patriarchal society.

Religious Prejudices as Barrier

Religious prejudice also forces women to keep themselves confined in seclusion and sometimes even lose their lives, be it a woman or a child of eight years old. Report 39 presents such a story where an eight year old girl dies only because she rides a bit of a ladder. Her father could not tolerate this and scolds her. The little girl fails to take her father’s wrath and meets her death after suffering from high fever for three days. Only because Hazrat Ayesha, the prophet’s wife, reached to her adolescent period at the age of 9, the girls of the aristocratic Muslim families are restricted with different prejudices from their adolescence. Religious prejudices also act as obstacles only for females, not for males.

Preference of Silence to Words

Reports 2, 3, 4 and 7 reveal how women prefer to remain silent even in the worst condition they face. One woman stays in the “Palanquin” (a traditional vehicle of carrying women, especially newly married ones, made of wood and carried by male labourers) the whole night with her baby as the bearer mistakes her to be out of the Palanquin. She does not call out the name of the palanquin bearer as he will hear her voice. Her innocent baby has also to suffer the severe cold of the night and she tries her best to prevent her child from crying. Blinded by religious prejudice, they would like to comply with the convention of the society that has been housed by men.

In report 3, some aristocratic women along with their masters wait in the train station. The master goes somewhere else giving the custody of the ladies to Haji Saheb, a trustworthy male. That male makes the women wear heavy burkha and then spread a carpet on them, and so, they take the shape of sacks. After a while the officer tells the man to move his belongings and kicks on them thinking these to be ordinary things.

The females of that time would like to tolerate all the hassles in their day to day life even without making any sound lest the male members should hear. The scenario remains the same in report no. 7.

The women do not protest the thieving inside the house rather they give their jewelries and to the thief like gifts. A newly wedded bride delays in the task as some complexities with taking off the ornaments arises. The thief finally cuts off the ear of the bride along with the jewelry. Surprisingly, the lady doesn't make any sound as making sound.

Rokeya creates some humorous situations where women to remain silent and are afraid of going against the traditions and even invite disasters in their lives. They comply with the society that has been made by their male counterparts.

Condition of Women While Travelling

In reports 3, 22, 23 and 24 and 25 we see travelling does become a matter of torture for females. In the above mentioned reports the women are turned to be the heaps of things while travelling. People mistake the heaps to be belongings and once a man sits on it and quickly gets up as he gets frightened on seeing the heap moving. Later the master comes and reveals that they are ladies.

The ladies are packed like inanimate objects while travelling. At first they are to sit on the palanquin and then the palanquin is covered with clothes and then again stitched with other clothes this packing goes on for three to four hours. And at last the packets are taken out for boarding. The ladies have to stay there till the journey ends. They often faint and it takes three to four hours to regain their senses. These pathetic conditions are created by their masters and the ladies would like to conform to these conditions with a pleasing heart.

Rokeya describes her own experience while travelling in report twenty five. She visits her daughter's house and requests her son-in-law to make arrangements for her to roam around and two granddaughters and her daughter are also to accompany her. Her granddaughters are elated as they get the chance to visit different places but it doesn't last for long when they witness how their vehicle is covered. They are no more able to see the outside world because of the outside cover.

In report 47 the author describes her own plight while running her school. She tries to make her students' vehicles well covered as society is concerned about purdah. But the students often fainted, again some vomited and some used to cry out in fear. Some parents come to complain about the extreme purdah as the girls condition got worse but Rokeya felt helpless. Later on in the evening she receives some letters where the writers warn her to fix the veils properly in the van or else they would speak ill of her school and write articles on the newspaper degrading the honour of the school.

Purdah is related to the class distinctions of society. The aristocratic class wouldn't let their spouse, sister or mother go outside without purdah whereas their housemaids were allowed to move without any restrictions. So purdah is related to the status and honor of the society. The

rules are made flexible and could be bent to suit the needs of the elite. It is expensive too. Islam doesn't ask to keep women in such a miserable condition in the name of purdah. Her essay 'Burkha' is enriched with different features and characteristics. She discusses here that 'purdah' is one of the rituals for both man and woman in Islam. She has shown due respect to the ritual as in Islam purdah has been asked to maintain to cover the body properly, not to shut oneself in the four walls. But the patriarchal society has made it compulsory for females and that to such an extent that they can't even breathe outside their room. According to Abu Hena Mustafa Kamal, a famous Bangladeshi poet, essayist and critic, some Muslim and non-Muslim scholars failed to differentiate between purdah and seclusion.

Difference between *Sultana's Dream* and *Abarodhbashini*

Sultana's Dream is a short utopian story and *Abarodhbashini* presented actual reports. These two writings represent two genres where Rokeya throws light on her central focus on injustice against women in different ways. In *Sultana's Dream* she deals with the utopian condition of women and in *Abarodhbashini* she presents a realistic and satirical picture of the pitiful condition of women.

In *Sultana's Dream* women's position is reversed. Ladies of *Sultana's Dream* rule the country which they turn to a harmonious world where women live only under Nature's care. In ladyland women roam around freely, study at the universities, are in control of science and technology, keep their men in seclusion and they are also involved in domestic activities. The heroine Sultana to her utter surprise sees that there are no men outside and she is also being reprimanded for her mannish shyness (In Lady land men are timid and shy). The men of Ladyland hardly has any significant role outside the home. They are insignificant and do not

have any hand in the development of the country. They are bent and crooked in coyness, unable to walk comfortably. Sultana while visiting Ladyland comes to realize that the countrymen of her state treat women like a lesser breed. They are not allowed to participate outside their home. So, they are shy, they feel awkward to roam around outside without purdah. But in Ladyland the role is reversed. It is ruled by a queen. The women are bold, punctual, intelligent, and inventive and are capable of doing anything. They function in the outer world with confidence and success. And the women in Ladyland feel proud of themselves as they have achieved their freedom by using their intellectual faculty. This freedom which they enjoy has been won by them by defeating the men through brain power. They educate themselves and then show the path of liberty to the women and thus they tread the path of freedom. They have emerged out from the undue authority exercised by men in the name of religion. The women have established the faith that they could rule the country and control social matters better than men. They have made scientific inventions through which they are able to turn the country to a dwelling as there are no more thunderstorms and unwanted rain, which is now controlled through the invention of the water balloon. They can draw water from the balloon whenever they need. There are aircrafts and they can easily move from one place to another. They don't have to endure mosquito bite or smoke in the kitchen. To protect the country they don't shed blood rather they use solar heat to defeat the enemies. The intelligent ladies thus managed to confine men inside 'mardana' (opposite of zenana) and rule over them. Women in Ladyland find no time to fight with one another as they are all busy to make Nature produce as much as they can. Sister Sara says "we dive deep into the ocean of knowledge and try to find out Nature's precious gems." (P-14) Their scientific discoveries have made them lead a more comfortable lifestyle. In *Sultana's Dream* the ladies come out of confinement and takes hold of the power to establish their identity and they

prove their worth by their activities. They make male yield to them and thus successfully manage to run the country.

Unlike *Sultana's Dream* the ladies of *Abarodhbashini* are forced to confine themselves in the four walls. They are treated as mere objects that have no say in any aspects of their lives, neither in family matters nor in social. They are completely secluded from the outer world.

In the name of religion women are oppressed. Social customs are forced on them. The portrayal of ladies in *Abarodhbashini* are heart rendering. We see some women die a miserable death for they have not been able to get rid of their mental confinement. They risked their own life to follow the so called social norms imposed on them by the patriarchy. The overall condition of women is so shocking in comparison with *Sultana's Dream*. While in *Sultana's Dream* women flourished to the extent of challenging their male counterparts, in *Abarodhbashini*, they are reduced to inanimate objects. The voices of the *zenana* are no more heard as their males' voices reign supreme. They couldn't utter a single word let alone play any role as family members. They are like the ornaments on the dressing table which are used only for their utilitarian value. As soon as the necessity ends up, they are very easily thrown up.

Abarodhbashini exposes the excesses of seclusion presented sometimes with humour and sometimes with pain. The women are deliberately manipulated by religious laws. They use religion as a shield between women and their development. Bharati Ray, in a translation of Rokeya's essay on degradation of women, notes in *Early Feminist of Colonial India*:

We must not allow ourselves to bow down to the undue authority exercised by men in the name of religion. It has been seen time and again that the stricter the religious restrictions the more severe are the women's victimization....Some may ask me 'why do you bring in

religion while you are discussing social conditions? To which my reply is: 'Restrictions imposed by religion are responsible for tightening the chains of slavery. Men are ruling over women under the pretext of laws prescribed by religion. That is why I am obliged to bring in the question of religion.... (p - 63, 64)

In *Sultana's Dream*, we see child marriage is terminated and no one is to get married before 18 but in *Abarodhbashini* Rokeya presents incidents where we see girls are getting married even before eighteen. Moreover they were not asked whether they are willing to get married. Education is compulsory in Ladyland but the women in *Abarodhbashini* were not even allowed to go in front of unknown women let alone to schools or colleges. The ladies in Ladyland can roam around without any restrictions and according to their own will. But in *Abarodhbashini*, if the ladies are to go out they have not only to cover their faces but also have to be packed like mere objects. In many reports, Rokeya has vividly described how women are turned into heaps of packets while travelling. And when they reach their destination, their condition is worth- watching. The women don't have the opportunity to voice their opinions. They cover not only their faces with veils but also their voices as we see they don't make a single sound even when they are kicked by the officer of the railway station. Or even the lady does not make any sound when she feels cold.

The ladies of *Sultana's Dream* show the courage to prove what they are capable of doing and gain their freedom by defeating men. But the women in *Abarodhbashini* are in no way thinking of freedom. They accept male supremacy and are happy to be mastered by males. Rokeya wants to convey the message that God has asked the women to veil but not to confine them from the outer world. They impose rules and regulations upon them and women very obediently accept them as their ultimate fate.

Finally it can be said that Rokeya, in *Sultana's Dream*, fictionalizes the factual events while in *Abarodhbashini* she makes a graphic presentation of the factual events wonderfully and brings about a strong voice in both the works against the dominant patriarchy. Women are to be free from their conservative outlook and come forward to work hand in hand with their male counterparts for the development of society. They are to shake off their blind prejudices imposed by their men and surroundings to have a say over the matters relating to their lives and personality. The techniques used by Rokeya in *Sultana's Dream*, namely utopian style, and that in *Abarodhbashini*, namely satire and humour, help Rokeya positively in effecting the justification of her purpose. Both the works manifest Rokeya's far-sightedness and courageous will to get a society free from the domination of one party and also contributed and enjoyed by both the parties equally and unhesitatingly.

She tries to raise her voice not against the Islamic code of veil but against the society which forces women to oppress themselves being obedient to the dominating males. She speaks about the bitter truth of how women are degraded in the name of religion, custom and tradition. That's why; she satirizes the men's inability to comprehend the religion very well as well as misinterpreting the religion.

The effect of this confinement renders the ladies worthless. They themselves are not eager to come out of this seclusion. In report 8, we see how a woman is burnt into ashes when she refuses to go out of the burning house on seeing males in the yard. Kazi Nazrul Islam, a famous Bengali poet, perfectly states in his "Taruner Sadhona" where he says:

Our contentment does not suffice confining our daughters, wives and mothers into the darkness of captivity. We have also rendered them an everlasting imprisonment throwing

them into the profound cave of illiteracy. This years-long captivity and tortures have caused such a paralyzing effect in their body and mind that whenever they will find any chance to come out of it, probably they themselves will refuse first. (Islam 553)

Conclusion

Rokeya advocated for the basic human rights for women. She tried to reform the society where women were considered to be inferior to men. So, her writings strategically pinpoint and analyze gender biased social, cultural and political practices. She displayed her utter disgust towards the purdah system which patriarchy imposed on women. According to her, seclusion prevents a woman from taking part in the societal activities. That is why she has relentlessly spoken against purdah which makes women too weak for survival. Moreover, the social practice of purdah restricts the mobility of women. Rokeya wonderfully depicts the deplorable condition of women in the clutches of purdah and asks her sisters to come out of the cocoon of the four walls. She emphatically denounces the world of patriarchy and visualizes a world in which women are free from all kinds of prejudices and beliefs. All her writings announces the liberty of women and make them dream of a gender just society constructed by the equal contributions of the both sexes.

She believes that men deliberately prevent women's entry and equal opportunity and force them to stay inside the house so that women remain inferior to men. Women's unconditional submission to the family is thought to be natural. And these artificially created naturalness is used by their male counterparts to rob them of their basic rights and privileges. Once subjugated, women lose their strength and ability to rise up again to have a say over matters relating to them. And so, they suffer terribly inside the house. There is even nobody to listen to their pathetic cry as they are expected to be born inside, grow up inside and die inside the house. As they know that education and economic freedom can uplift women's status, patriarchy intentionally subjugate women. They don't think, "One is not born, but rather

becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir 283). They consider women to be no (body) and praise women having no (thing) to say. They want women to be devoid of individual desires and aspirations and forget that they might have their own lives and livings. It is in men’s nature to reproach women, she says.

Like Virginia Woolf, a famous English feminist writer who said in her *A Room of One’s Own*, “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (Woolf 4), Rokeya also says that women must be economically solvent to announce their existence in related the family and society. She insists, in her writings, on the fact that men and women should be treated as equal human beings as she believes that they are created differently but equally. The lack of education is the foremost reason of women lagging behind in every sphere of their lives. If the half of the population of the society remains uneducated, the progress of that society would also remain unfulfilled. To Rokeya, education is the gateway women achieving their emancipation. Her emphasis on the development of the mental faculty of women, her eagerness towards women’s education as a means of economic independence and her distinction between seclusion and purdah have place her miles above from other social reformers. Her relentless effort to promote the education for women makes her writings stand the passage of time.

Rokeya not only drew the picture of women’s suppression but showed the way women could come out breaking the shackles of patriarchy to shape their lives as well. In all the texts that I have examined in my thesis, she laments women’s conditions first and then prescribes the ways to upgrade the situation. She doesn’t speak for a war against patriarchy, but looks for a peaceful solution of the problem. The sufferings and struggles of women are decried by this humanitarian soul in an earnest way for the betterment of the society. She dedicated her life for

the betterment of women leaving behind her own interest. Her legacy lives today through her literary contributions and her school.

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