

Gender Equality in Rokeya's Writing

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ABSTRACT

This thesis looks into the notion of gender equality and its reflection in Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's writing. It analyzes the meaning and importance of gender equality, types, causes and consequences of gender inequality and the recommendations of Begum Rokeya for eradication of the gender based inequalities from the society. In this regard, I have reviewed eight texts from Rokeya's writing. These are *Padmaraag* (a novel), *Sultana's Dream* (a short story), *Abarodh Bashini* (a collection of true cases of seclusion), *Stree Jatir Abanati* (an essay), *Ardhangi* (an essay), *Burqa* (an essay), *Sugrihini* (an essay) and *Shristee Tattha* (a short story). I have observed that Rokeya's views on gender equality are more or less similar to the views expressed by modern social scientists. This thesis notes that Rokeya delineated the importance of gender equality from political and development perspectives. This thesis further notes that Rokeya had explained four types of gender inequality: denial of equal social status, denial of human rights of women, denial of property rights of women and confinement. This thesis shows that Rokeya chalked out six causes of gender inequality: lack of women's education, lack of women's interest in career, psycho-social complexities in female-female relationships, lack of opportunities, exaggeration in practice of seclusion and male perceptions towards women's education. This thesis also encapsulates the consequences of gender inequality, i.e., low participation of women in the field of education that ultimately undermines progress/development, as sketched by Rokeya. Finally, this thesis identifies five strategies for eradication of gender inequality as advised by Rokeya: spreading women's education; strengthening community networks; empowering women; rectifying unnatural practice of seclusion; and getting men involved and changing their perception towards women's education.

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PREFACE

The writing of Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain speaks about gender equality. Her writing is so much focused on gender equality and associated issues that it is regarded as a resource of women's and gender studies. The concept of gender equality may be interpreted from different perspectives. However, in this thesis I have looked at the notion of gender equality and its reflection in Rokeya's writing from a social science perspective. I have observed that in her writing Rokeya talks about gender equality in order to ensure women's rights and liberty, and to empower women through imparting education. Surprisingly, I see that what Rokeya has to say in the beginning of the 20th century is still relevant to what is needed in the 21st century.

I think that Rokeya is the first Bengali woman who points out that gender is a cross-cutting issue and one of the crucial elements of development. Her writing depicts the true state of gender at her time, i.e., pictures of gender inequality and the reasons for female degradation in the family, society and in the political arenas. Her writing also suggests the ways/actions of achieving gender equality in society. Her advice transcends her own times and is still relevant today in the fields of social science, literature and other academic discourses.

In order to understand Rokeya's views on gender equality, I have divided this thesis into three chapters. Chapter One discusses the concept of gender equality and associated notions in Social Science. Chapter Two provides an overview of some selected texts by Rokeya which refer to the theories discussed in Chapter One. And, Chapter Three presents an evaluation of Rokeya's writing in the light of the concept of gender equality.

CHAPTER ONE:

THE CONCEPT OF GENDER EQUALITY AND ASSOCIATED NOTIONS

I have noticed a bright reflection of the concept of gender equality and associated notions in Rokeya's writing. In order to see that one needs to understand the theories of gender studies. I am going to discuss these in this chapter. Let me begin the discussion with the search of the meaning of gender equality.

There is no easy answer to the question of what is meant by gender equality. Does equality mean that women have to take on masculine norms, values and lifestyles? What is the standard by which the achievement of gender equality is to be judged? What is the nature of the difference between men and women? How does it relate to the attainment of equality between them? Debates and researches are ongoing in order to find the common and agreed answers to these questions. Therefore, the issue of whether equality requires all women being treated the same as all men, irrespective of their differences, or whether equality requires that differences between women and men be recognized and provided for, remains central to gender studies. However, there are three dominant perspectives namely equality, difference and diversity that explain the concept of gender equality.

Equality perspective refers to the British equal rights feminists. Here the concern is to extend to women the same rights and privileges as enjoyed by men, through identifying the areas of inequality and unequal treatment and eliminating them via legal frameworks. Williams (1997) thinks that women should not be exempted from military combat roles because this represents special treatment for women, and also marks women as different in other ways. In the equality perspective, therefore, gender is regarded as an attribute that should not be

significant in the distribution of social values or social rights. Thinkers of this perspective believe that equality can be achieved through gender neutrality or androgyny.

Believers of the difference perspective take an opposite position of equality perspective. They celebrate the natural and/or biological difference of women and the others who don't fall into the dominant group. This perspective insists on the recognition of and valuing of the ways in which women are different from men. Ruddick (1997) suggests that feminine (maternal, caring) values are qualities that need centring, and replacing masculine values.

Contributors to the diversity perspective criticize both the equality and difference perspectives. According to them on one hand, the equality perspective fails to recognize its own limitations where the values and lifestyles of the dominant groups, such as men and heterosexuals, are being considered as the standard norm. This means that the goal of equality is to be achieved through the assimilation of subordinated groups like women, lesbians, gays etc. to the values of the dominant groups. On the other hand, the difference perspective fails to theorize the extent to which "maleness" and "femaleness" are themselves socially constructed and also underplays the significance and plurality of other forms of difference (Squires 1999: 131).

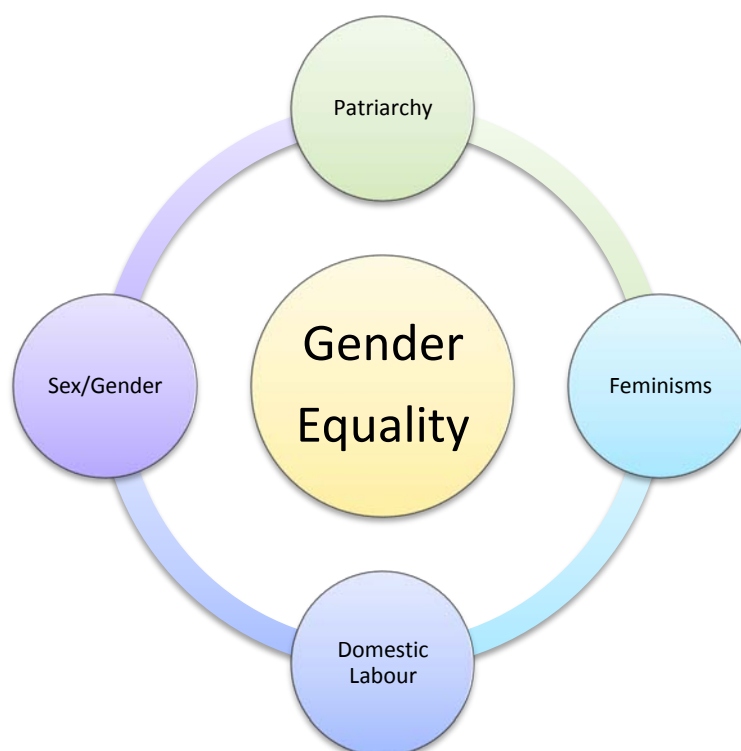
They then question the assumption that equality and difference are mutually exclusive opposite, and try to find the connections between them. These connections are well explored in the work of Iris Marion Young (1990). She argues that the concept of equality needs to be re-conceptualized. She says that group differences are not neutralized or transcended. Thus, equality exists among socially and culturally different groups, arising out of their mutual respect for each other and affirmation of one another in their difference. For Young (1990:

171), 'difference now comes to mean not otherness, exclusive opposition, but specificity, variation, heterogeneity'. In place of universally formulated and neutral equality policies, Young advocates for equality strategies such as 'group-conscious policies' and the guaranteed representation of oppressed groups in democratic decision-making bodies.

In order to summarise the above discussion, this can be said that equality is the condition or the state of being the same in terms of access to or enjoying the human rights, i.e., religious, political, economic and social rights and so on. Historically, these rights have been granted to men rather than women. As a result the feminist movements emerged in the late nineteenth century demanding the equality or equal treatment of men and women in all spheres of life. In connection to the demands raised by the feminists, the British parliament enacted some legislation such as the right to vote. The feminist movement of equality also inspired gays and lesbians to struggle to get rights to marry and get social acceptance of their behaviour.

My understanding is that gender equality can never be properly understood if it is read as an isolated concept. I have noticed that among various issues, the concept of gender equality encompasses four notions: sex-gender binary, patriarchy, feminism, and domestic division of labour. I have further noticed that these four notions of gender studies are connected with each other. The diagram below helps us to visualize the relationship between the concept of gender equality and four associated notions at a glance.

Diagram 1: Gender equality and associated notions



1.1. Sex/gender binary:

It is getting difficult day by day to establish a clear distinction between sex and gender. Originally these two terms were used as synonyms to each other especially by the biologists, psychologists and medical researchers. Later in the aftermath of the Second World War, an effort was made to distinguish the idea of sex from the idea of gender. During the 1960s a new way of thinking about gender began to emerge that critiqued the earlier frameworks. It introduced a paradigm shift of gender from biologically based analysis to social analysis. On one hand, it means that sex is natural and based on biological features of human beings. Therefore, the term sex generally denotes the biological differences of a man and a woman which are seen as congenital and limited to physiological reproductive functions. On the other hand, it means that gender is cultural and based on social relations of men and women. Therefore, the term gender generally denotes the social characteristics of men and women

which are seen as culturally constructed and assigned. The role of gender differs both within and between cultures. It defines identities, status, roles, responsibilities and power relations among the members of any society or culture which is learned through socialization. It is not static or innate, but evolves to respond to changes in the social, political and cultural environment. This idea is expressed by Harriet Bradley (1996: 205) who thinks that ‘gender refers to the varied and complex arrangements between men and women, encompassing the organization and reproduction, the sexual divisions of labour and cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity.’

In a discussion on gender, Professor Nazmunnessa Mahtab (2012:119) quoted from Scott who says that ‘the core of the definition of gender rests on an integral connection between two propositions: gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying the relationships of power.’ Although the term implies a social construct, it refers to aspects of our lives that are real. Further it should be noted that gender is at the same time a material and a cultural phenomenon. It refers both to lived experiences of men and women in relation to each other and to the ideas we develop to make sense of these relations and to frame them. Material experiences inform cultural meanings, which in turn influence the way lived relations change and develop.

Gender identities are thus not natural, rather cultural. People are born female or male (sex); they learn how to be girls and boys, and then become women and men (gender). Gender refers to what it means to be a boy or girl, woman or man, in a particular society or culture. Society teaches behaviours, attitudes, roles and activities. Gender defines the roles,

responsibilities, constraints, opportunities and privileges of men and women in any context. This learned behaviour is known as gender identity.

The formation of gender identity is further explored by the French writer Simone de Beauvoir, who says in her book *The Second Sex* (first published in English in 1953) that ‘one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’ (de Beauvoir 1972: 295). De Beauvoir further describes women’s status in a patriarchal and/or andocentric culture as ‘the Other’ and men as ‘the One’. She has observed that women are defined and differentiated with reference to men but men are not defined with reference to women. She has noted that in gender relations the masculine principle is always regarded as the favoured ‘norm’ and the feminine one becomes positioned as ‘Other’. For de Beauvoir, civilization was masculine to its very depths, and women were the continual outsiders. She offers a number of reasons for women’s status as ‘the Other’ including the reproductive role which is seen as biological limitation set by men. Lack of definite resources, feeling the necessary bond with men or dependency to men, and often accepting the patriarchal image of ‘the Other’ and being pleased with this status are the other reasons of being ‘the Other’ as mentioned by de Beauvoir.

Ann Oakley has explored the construction of gender in western society in her book titled *Sex, Gender and Society*, 1972. She has observed that western society is very prone to exaggeration of gender differences. She has further observed that there is a tendency in western society to look at women’s best gender role as mothers and housewives. Western society further more believes that “social efficiency” is based on women’s role as mother and housewives, and any tampering with these roles would certainly diminish happiness. Oakley (1972: 192) has argued that it is a vaguely conceived belief which has a blatantly disreputable past. She has then commented that this idea should have been discarded long ago.

Does biology contribute to some behavioural characteristics? It was always a question in the discussion of gender. Judith Butler's theorization of gender introduces the notion of performativity and argues that biology does not contribute to behavioural characteristics rather gender behaviour is based on performativity. This approach is perhaps the most radical one and questions the whole way we appeal to gender identity. Butler (1990: ix) asserts that all identity categories 'are in fact the effects of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin.' She (1990: 6) argues further that 'the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders. Assuming for the moment the stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of "men" will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that "women" will interpret only female bodies.'

1.2. Patriarchy:

The literal meaning of patriarchy is the rule of man or the rule by the male head of a social unit, i.e., a family or a tribe, etc. The patriarch is normally a societal elder man who has legitimate power over other men, all women and children in that particular society. In social science, the concept of patriarchy has been theorized in many ways. It is considered as one of the key theories of gender studies which further leads to the development of a number of other theories that aim to identify the bases of women's subordination to men. In this thesis, I will discuss three of the earlier notions of patriarchy: the radical feminist theory, the Marxist feminist theory and the dual systems theory.

Kate Millet analyzes the concept of patriarchy from a radical feminist point of view in her classic piece *Sexual Politics*, first published in 1971. Here she identifies the family as the

chief institution of patriarchy and as the key means through which men's domination and hegemony are achieved. In her own words (Millet 1969: 11):

Patriarchy's chief institution is the family. It is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society; a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole. Mediating between the individual and the social structure, the family effects control and conformity where political and other authorities are insufficient. As the fundamental instrument and the foundation unit of patriarchal society the family and its roles are prototypical.....

Traditionally, patriarchy granted the father nearly total ownership over wife or wives and children, including the powers of physical abuse and often even those of murder and sale. Classically, as head of the family the father is both begetter and owner in a system in which kinship is property. Yet in strict patriarchy, kinship is acknowledged only through association with the male line. Agnation excludes the descendants of the female line from property right and often even from recognition.

According to Marxist feminists, patriarchy arises from the workings of the capitalist economic system where patriarchy requires and benefits from women's unpaid labour in the home. The subordination of women to men in society therefore tends to be regarded as a by-product of capital's subordination of labour. Class inequality is argued to be the central feature of society and is seen to determine gender inequality (Barrett 1988).

Both the radical and Marxist feminist explanations of patriarchy have different critiques. Marxist theories over-emphasize class and capitalism; and radical theories over-emphasize family and biology. As a result 'the dual systems' approach has emerged. Here capitalism and patriarchy are understood as interdependent, mutually accommodating systems of oppression, whereby both systems structure and benefit from women's subordination (Hartmann 1979).

The above mentioned early notions of patriarchy have some limitations as identify by Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan (2006: 94). Firstly, there is a failure to acknowledge or account for historical variations in gender relations. Secondly, the basis of patriarchy is limited to one or two factors, such as biology or capitalism or the family. Thirdly, they fail to recognize the cultural variations by suggesting that the relations between women and men are the same world-wide.

These limitations are overcome by Walby in her theory of patriarchy, as she claims in her book titled *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Walby (1990) argues that patriarchy is a system of social structures and practices where men not only dominate and oppress women but also exploit them. She identifies six structures of patriarchy: household production, paid work, the state, male violence, sexuality and culture. Together, these are captured the depth, pervasiveness and interconnectedness of degradation of women. Her theory also explains how patriarchy moved from the private to the public sphere. She argues that during the early- twentieth century, patriarchy was based as the household and involved individual men exploiting the labour of individual women. At that time women were largely confined to the family and had limited participation in public life. However, now-a-days when women's participation in public life has been significantly increased, Walby observes that women are facing a new form of inequality and discrimination. A good number of incidents prove that men are now exploiting women at the workplace and in the academic institutions. Referring to this context, Walby comments that rather than being restricted to the household, women now have the whole of society in which to roam as well as to be exploited.

Walby's account of patriarchy has been criticized by Pollert (1996) who thinks that Walby's effort to overcome the limitations of patriarchy is unsuccessful because she could not identify

the root causes or the origin of patriarchy. She could only develop a more elaborate description of patriarchy, but not an explanation of why it exists and how it is perpetuated.

1.3. Feminisms:

The French notion of *'féminisme'* is the source of the modern concept of feminism. In the nineteenth century the concept of feminism was used as a medical term either to describe the feminization of a male body, or to describe women with masculine characteristics. Feminism was first used as a political term in the United States in the early twentieth century by a group of women. They asserted 'the uniqueness of women, the mystical experience of motherhood and women's special purity' (Jaggar 1983: 5). Eventually it is understood that the term denotes someone or a particular group who wants an end to women's oppression by changing women's social position and ensuring equality between men and women.

All feminists agree on the central fact of women's subordination and believe that women suffer social and/or material inequalities simply because of their biological identity. They are also committed to challenging this condition but the means by which such challenges might be made are not common. This refers to the pluralistic character of feminism. This further suggests that feminism emerged from diverse cultural and political perspectives and focused on issues germane to the time and location they inhabit (Pilcher & Whelehan 2006: 48-51). There are some dominant strands that make up feminist thought. These strands are namely liberal, Marxist, radical, socialist and eco-feminisms.

Liberal feminism is based on the diversity of liberal thought dominant in Western society since the Enlightenment. Mary Wollstonecraft's book titled *A Vindication of the Rights of Women with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*, 1792 is regarded as the manifesto of

liberal feminism. In this book the writer argued that the biological reasons for granting different political rights between men and women are irrelevant. She further argues that women are intellectually inferior to men only due to lack of equal access to education (cited in Mahtab 2012: 82). Liberal feminism proclaims that the degradation of women or women's subordinate social position can be addressed by existing political processes under democracy.

Marxist feminism links changes in women's social conditions with the overthrow of industrial capitalism and changing relations of workers to the means of production. We know that a society is divided by class, race and gender distinctions. These issues have been taken into consideration by Marxist feminists. They believe that it is more useful to consider different forms of oppression as multi-pronged and inter-related phenomenon rather than arguing that one form is more destructive than others.

Unlike the Marxist assumption, radical feminism is associated with the notions of separatism. Radical feminists assume that a woman-centred politics can only be devised in a women-only space (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2006: 48-51). Apart from this, radical feminists argue that the root cause of women's exploitation is biological. This reason is highlighted in Shulamith Firestone's book titled *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, 1970. In her book Firestone argues that women would achieve equality only with the help of advanced reproductive technologies such as IVF/test-tube babies (cited in Mahtab 2012: 84).

Socialist feminism emerged in the mid 1970s by a group of former Marxist feminists who were dissatisfied with Marxist feminism because it considered women's subordination as secondary to class subordination. Socialist feminists were also unhappy with the radical feminists who considered patriarchy as the primary reason for women's oppression but

ignored factors like class, gender and race. Socialist feminists emphasized these factors to address women's subordination. The concept of patriarchy was also redefined by socialist feminists who added the historical dimension and argued that patriarchy may take different forms in different cultures and socio-economic contexts. Juliet Mitchell in *Women: The Longest Revolution*, 1994 argued that there were four interlocking structures to be considered in women's subordination: production, reproduction, sexuality and child rearing. She further argued that in order to understand women's subordination, it was necessary to understand how sexuality and emotional nurturance were met (cited in Mahtab 2012: 85).

Eco-feminism is a new concept in the realm of feminist politics. Eco-feminists argue that there is an integral link between women and nature. In support of their arguments, they provide examples of natural degradation where it is evident that women and children are the primary and first victims of any natural disasters. They further argue that patriarchy is equally responsible for women's subordination and natural degradation. They claim that patriarchy is built on four interlocking pillars: sexism, racism, class exploitation and environmental destruction which resulted into the structures of gender subordination, where women are subordinated to men, and children and younger men are subordinated to elder men. Therefore eco-feminists are committed to break down the structures of gender subordination and to ensure the rights of women as human beings. They want to make sure that any environmental policy must address women and children's issues considering that women and nature are interconnected (Mahtab 2012: 85-86).

The concept of feminism can further be analyzed from a historical perspective using the wave analogy: first, second and third wave feminism. The apparent pattern of the rise and fall of feminism over time has led to the 'wave' analogy. The peaks and troughs of the feminist

movement are characterized as following the motion of tidal water, with its ongoing cycle of gradual swelling, eventual cresting and final subsiding. The earlier period, dating from the late nineteenth century to the 1920s is known as 'first wave' feminism. In turn, the resurgent feminist period dating from the 1960s to the 1970s is known as 'second wave' feminism. 'Third wave' feminism has numerous definitions. However, I think, this can be best described as the feminism of a younger generation of women who acknowledge the legacy of second wave feminism, but also identify its limitations.

1.4. Domestic labour:

Domestic labour refers to the distribution of household works between men and women. All kinds of domestic labour are broadly divided into two categories in a family setting: economic work and caring work. On one hand, economic work refers to earning necessary money or gathering economic resources to run a family. On the other hand, caring work refers to managing day to day household activities, i.e., child rearing, cooking, cleaning, laundry etc. Traditionally, especially since industrialization men are held responsible for economic work and women are held responsible for caring work. This division of domestic labour has drawn the attention and interest of the critics of gender studies.

The concept of the domestic division of labour has come into discussion in the academic arena in 1970s through some feminist writers. Critics looked into the notion in the light of patriarchy and capitalism. They noted that the domestic caring work done by women are mostly unpaid and sometimes its importance is ignored by the male head of a household. They argued that the importance of domestic caring work is enormous and no less than the importance of domestic economic work. Using Marxist theories, feminists argue that domestic caring work has its own economic value because it is a form of productive activity

like men's paid work. Therefore, domestic caring work should also be duly paid. Della Costa (1972; cited in Pilcher & Whelehan 2006: 31) argues that 'the domestic division of labour benefits capitalism. Unpaid housework and caring work replenish labour power on a daily and generational basis, and in this way contributing to the production of surplus value, sustain the capitalist dynamic.'

Delphy and Leonard (1992) explain the concept of domestic division of labour in the light of patriarchy. They argue that 'women's continuing subordination in Western society is due in large measure to men's exploitation of women's domestic labour' (1992: 29). They further argue that 'women's oppression is directly beneficial to men and perhaps only indirectly beneficial to capitalism' (1992: 35). They say that all kinds of domestic caring work, including the sexual, emotional and symbolic works, done by women for men and other members of a family take place in a patriarchal mode of production. They observe that men perform an insignificant amount of household caring work and as a result they get benefits from it. Delphy and Leonard mention a two-fold benefit that men gain by avoiding the routine and never-ending caring works. Firstly, men get direct economic benefit as the caring work done by women is unpaid. Secondly, men get professional benefit or an advantage in the labour market as being freed from caring works than women.

Hartmann (1982) observes that there are some inter-connecting phenomenon between capitalism and patriarchy in relation to the domestic division of labour which resulted into a vicious circle of disadvantage for women. She says that before capitalism, a patriarchal system of the division of domestic labour was established in a family setting. Through that men learnt how to dominate women and children, and other techniques of controlling labour power and hierarchical organization. Eventually when capitalism emerged, men used those

techniques to segregate paid works in an industrial setting. Job segregation was made in such a way that men hold the jobs with greater material rewards than women. Lower wages was paid to women intentionally and purposively. Hartmann (1982: 448) argues that it is done in order to 'keep women dependent on men because they encourage women to marry. Married women must perform domestic chores for their husbands.....This domestic division of labour, in turn, acts to weaken women's position in the labour market. Thus the hierarchical domestic division of labour is perpetuated by the labour market, and vice versa.'

Recent studies show that men's involvement in the caring works and women's involvement in the paid works are increasing day by day. However, the basic division of domestic labour remains the same as it was in the older days. It has been observed that despite women's increased involvement in paid work, they remain responsible for the bulk of unpaid domestic works. This case is evident even when their male partners are themselves unemployed or when both partners are involved with full-time job. Other studies suggest that 'when both partners undertake full-time paid work, a solution increasingly favoured is to pay someone else (usually a woman) to do the housework' (Gregson and Lowe 1994; cited in Pilcher & Whelehan 2006: 32-33).

Though men's involvement with the caring work is increasing, the rate of change in the traditional domestic division of labour is very slow. Therefore, social scientists turn their attention to understand the reasons for the persistence of traditional domestic division of labour which make women responsible for the unpaid caring work. Pilcher (1999) identified a number of factors including the greater time availability of women, lack of women's economic power in comparison to their male counterparts due to gender segregation in paid work, and beliefs that it is women's role in a family to perform the domestic caring work.

‘Therefore, it is likely that further and more substantial changes in the domestic division of labour will occur only very slowly’ (cited in Pilcher & Whelehan 2006: 33).

Wrapping up Chapter One:

Before I wrap up Chapter One, let me confirm that in this chapter I have discussed the meaning and different aspects of gender equality and how the concept is linked with the notions of sex/gender binary, patriarchy, feminism, and domestic division of labour. It is to be noted that the association of the concept of gender equality is not limited only to these four notions; rather it is associated with many other issues of gender studies. In the next chapter, I will analyze how and to what extent these theories are reflected in Rokeya’s writing.

CHAPTER TWO:
AN OVERVIEW OF SOME SELECTED TEXTS BY ROKEYA

This chapter presents a general overview of some literary pieces by Rokeya. Here, I will review some of the texts from her writing. I have selected eight texts: *Padmaraag*, *Sultana's Dream*, *Abarodh Bashini*, *Stree Jatir Abanati*, *Ardhangi*, *Burqa*, *Sugrihini* and *Shristee Tattha*. I have noticed that the theories discussed in Chapter One are reflected in various ways in these literary pieces. It is to be noted that gender only becomes a meaningful term when we consider the relationship between a man and a woman and the broader relations surrounding them. Therefore, gender must be seen as a lived experience which is found in Rokeya's writing as case studies, narratives and/or, personal stories of individuals.

Sultana's Dream is regarded as a radical feminist piece where Rokeya talks about separatism and a women-centred politics. However, her intention was not to put men down but to promote women alongside men and to ensure gender balance and equality in all spheres of life. Liberal feminists think that the key battle for women's emancipation is getting equal access to education. They argue that if men and women are educated equally, eventually women will get equal access to social benefits (Pilcher & Whelehan 2006: 48-51). I can see a reflection of this thought in *Stree Jatir Abanati* (the degradation of women) and other writings of Rokeya. Both liberal and Marxist feminisms suggest a necessary link with men and an acceptance that men are part of any movement for change (Pilcher & Whelehan 2006: 48-51). I have observed a reflection of this thought of getting men involved with the movement of women's emancipation in *Burqa* and other writings of Rokeya. Her *Sugrihini* (Good Housewife) refers to the gender theory of the domestic division of labour. These issues will be discussed in detail in the following sections of this chapter.

2.1. Padmaraag:

Padmaraag is a novel. Rokeya wrote the novel at a late stage of her life when her writing had matured and she had already deeply observed the unequal treatment of women in the family, society and political arenas. Thus this piece reflects Rokeya's life experience and/or her philosophy on gender equality. About the piece, Shaheen Akhtar (2008: xxiii) made her comments in the following way:

When Begum Rokeya took up the pen at the beginning of the twentieth century, one might say that Muslim women had become active participants in the reform movement. The desire to have women receive modern education was a top priority in Begum Rokeya's agenda. However, her goal was wider—enabling women to earn and achieve economic independence. Her writing combines women's envisaged roles with marriage, conjugal life and household matters. A glowing example of this may be found in the novel *Padmaraag*.

Among many other messages, this novel reiterates the radical feminist vision of avoiding the life of a house wife. On the one hand, the novel presents personal narratives and sufferings of some of the *Biya* (marriage) fail women (who could not succeed in their marital life). On the other hand, it presents an institution called Tarini Bhavan, aimed to eliminate women's sufferings. Tarini Bhavan had three components: a girls' school called *Tarini Bidyalay*, a shelter home for the widows and other vulnerable women of the society called *Bidhoba Ashram*, and a charity hospital/clinic called *Atur Ashram*. The governing body of the *Tarini Bhavan* was an association of women called *Nari Klesh Nibarani Somiti* (Association for the Elimination of Women's Sufferings). Most of the expenditures of the Tarini Bhavan were met through funds provided by the *Nari Klesh Nibarani Somiti*. It did not receive any government fund thus it was almost free from government jurisdiction.

The main plot of the novel is developed through the personal narratives and development of its protagonist, *Padmaraag*. The main character of the novel is further known as Zainab or

Siddika. The three names of the protagonist represent three stages of her life. Zainab represents a girl/lady who has a dream about marriage and family life. Siddika represents another stage of life of the same person when her dream about marriage is broken. The same person becomes Padmaraag when she decides not to lead a family life, rather serves for the betterment of vulnerable women. About the personality development process of Padmaraag, Barnita Bagchi (2005: xiii) made her note in the following way:

Three simultaneous processes shape her development into strong, self-sacrificing and committed young women who emerges when Padmarag draws to a close. First and foremost, is her desire to be useful and to work in the busy hive of Tarini Bhavan. It is followed by her bonding with the older residents of Tarini Bhavan, as she learns from their personal narratives that they too, like her, have suffered untold misery before finding their vocation at the institution. Thirdly, she awakens to love for Latif. At the end of the novella, she courageously chooses a very unusual path for spending the rest of her life.

The story begins with a young man who is looking for a refuge for his sister. Finally he finds a refuge for his sister at the Tarini Bhavan. Here, the writer introduces readers to Siddika who conceals her actual identity and informs us that she needs a temporary shelter and thus her brother leaves her at Tarini Bhavan. In course of time, Siddika becomes an activist of the institution. The Head of the institution, Ms. Tarini Sen endows her with the name of Padmaraag. Since then other sisters of Tarini Bhavan have started calling her Padmaraag (a precious stone). Suddenly Mr. Almas, a barrister comes into the scene by being admitted to the *Tarini Atur Ashram* following a devastating and life threatening injury. Along with other sisters of Tarini Bhavan, Siddika/Padmaraag gets involved in nursing Mr. Almas. The man gets well and falls in love with Padmaraag. She also falls in love with the man. But this love is not declared by either of them.

With the development of the story, the actual identity of Siddika is revealed to us. She informs the reader that her actual name is Zainab and she is a daughter of a *zaminder*. At this stage all the mysteries of the story is revealed to the readers. We come to know the story of her marriage and then divorce like situation, the death of her *zaminder* brother and her nephew, and how she became an absconder. She further informs us that it was actually she in the guise of a man who sought refuge for her sister. It is also revealed at this stage that Mr. Almas is her husband who had abandoned her long ago due to family pressure but now wants to accept her after the death of his second wife. Though Padmaraag has fallen in love with Mr. Almas, she decided not to go with him.

About the novel, Barnita Bagchi (2005: xiii) says that ‘it is a remarkable work and crucial to one’s understanding of Rokeya’s body of writing and her priceless contribution to society.’

She (Bagchi 2005: xiv) further makes her comments about the piece in the following way:

Generically, this unusual work is hybrid in character. A flowing narrative that abounds in stock literary devices—a generous infusion of melodrama and romance, with disasters and coincidences galore—this novella also serves as a polemical, passionate and intellectual treatise on feminism, education and social welfare.

A counterpoint to the melodramatic element in Padmarag is the realistic, almost gritty underpinning that comes through, particularly in Rokeya’s depiction of a school and intuitions run by women. Drawing from the fount of her own experience of running a pioneering school for Muslim girls, Rokeya not only offers a wryly humorous account of the countless trials faced by the administrators of a girls’ school, but introduces us to ordinary women who are trying through their everyday activities to create a utopia in the midst of a humdrum world.

2.2. Sultana’s Dream:

Sultana’s Dream is a short story. Apart from discussing the importance of gender equality, among other issues, it talks about the rights of the refugees. I have noticed that Rokeya is the

first Bengali woman who speaks about the rights of refugees. To what extent she is for the refugees is clearly understood by reading her fiction *Sultana's Dream*. In the fiction, the Queen of Lady land bravely engaged in a war with the King of its neighbouring country in order to protect the rights of the refugees.

In the story, we see that a group of persons came from a neighbouring country and took shelter in Lady land. These refugees were in trouble having committed some political offense. The king of the neighbouring country requested the kind-hearted Queen of Lady land to hand the refugees over to his officials. The Queen refused to do so, as it was against her principle to turn out people who seek asylum. Hence the King declared war against Lady land. Then the story goes on to describe how Lady land won the war and finally protected the rights of the refugees by using the scientific discovery of its women warriors. My observation is that Rokeya showed that refugee rights are protected in a country that is ruled by women. If the Head of Government of Lady land was not a Queen and if women of the country had no participation in the decision making process, then the table may have been turned in a different direction.

Now let me describe some parts of the story. It begins with Sultana lounging in an easy-chair in her bedroom, not sure whether she had dozed off. All at a sudden Sister Sara appeared and took her for a walk. Sultana found that she had entered a new country called 'Lady land' that was ruled by women. The country was neat and clean and beautiful like a grand garden. While walking on the street, Sultana met many women but not a single man. When she asked curiously about the whereabouts of the men, Sister Sara informed her that all the men were in the *Mardana* (confinement) just as the women in British Bengal were being shut indoors in the *Zenana*. Sultana was very surprised and wanted to know why and how this had happened.

In reply, Sister Sara referred to the refugee situation and the war. The enemy was very strong thus the military of the country had no options but to step back. Then the Queen held a meeting with the wise ladies of the country. After consultation, it was decided that a lady principal of a university who invented a device to collect the concentrated heat from the sunlight, would fight with the male warriors with her two thousands female students. However, the lady principal requested the Queen that before hearing her plan, all the men of the 'Lady land' should be entered into the *Mardana*. The men agreed to do so since they had no hope to win the war. But finally the ladies gained a decisive victory without shedding a single drop of blood. In the battle field, when they directed all the rays of the concentrated sunlight and heat towards the enemy, they fled away panic-stricken leaving their guns and ammunitions behind. This is how the ladies won the war and the men were confined. Then the story goes to inform Sultana about the progress of the country in the fields of education and scientific research, administration, judiciary, trade and commerce and so on under the women's leadership. Sultana also met the great Queen and visited different establishments of the 'Lady land'. While returning, somehow Sultana slipped from the air-car and the fall startled her out of her dream. She woke up and found herself still lounging in the easy-chair in her bedroom.

If one revisits *Sultana's Dream* in the light of the modern International Refugee Law, one can observe that the story contains some essential ideas which are now part of the International Refugee Law, i.e., 'Convention grounds' and the 'Principle of non-refoulement'. As per the International Refugee Law, 'Convention grounds' are the reasons established in the *1951 Refugee Convention* as one of the elements of refugee definition. It requires that a person's fear of persecution be linked to one or more of the following five grounds: race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. These five grounds are known as the 'Convention grounds' (UNHCR 2006: 85). And, 'Principle of non-

refoulement' is the core principle of the International Refugee Law that prohibits the forcible return of refugees in any manner whatsoever to countries or territories where their lives or freedom would be at risk for reasons of conventional grounds (race, religion, and nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion). The 'Principle of non-refoulement' is also part of customary international laws and is therefore binding on all countries, whether or not they have signed on to the *1951 Refugee Convention* or its *1967 Protocol*. The 'Principle of non-refoulement' is also part of the International Human Rights Law and the International Humanitarian Law (UNHCR 2006: 90).

By providing a safe refuge to the asylum seekers and by taking a strong position of not forcefully returning them to their country of origin where their lives at risk, the Queen of the Lady Land actually sets an example of managing refugee issues in a very good manner which, I see that is in line with the modern International Refugee Law. This further reiterates the sagaciousness and far-sightedness of Rokeya who could think of the essences of the refugee law well in advance before the birth of the formal law. She wrote the fiction in 1905 when the refugee issue was not a great deal in the world politics. Refugee issue has become a concern of international politics after the first world-war held in 1914. The Refugee Convention was adopted many years later, in 1951, in the aftermath of the second world-war.

2.3. Abarodh Bashini:

Abarodh Bashini refers to women living in seclusion. This volume is a collection of true cases of women living in seclusion in the first half of the twentieth century in Bengal. The piece is a set/collection of true case studies where Rokeya presents forty seven (47) sketches drawn from the lives of women. These are all facts/true stories that Rokeya had experienced in her own life and noted down. These are stories of violation of basic human rights of

women and children. In other words, by noting down the stories, Begum Rokeya for the first time has written the history of the miseries of the secluded women of Bengal, as commented by Abdul Karim in the foreword written for the piece (Karim 2008: 305).

In this thesis, I will discuss about some of the sketches. Sketch number twelve (12) is a story about a Hindu woman who went to a religious bathing ceremony with her husband and mother-in-law to the Ganges. When they were returning from the ritual bath, the woman lost her companions in the crowd. However, suddenly she saw someone wearing a yellow-bordered *dhoti*. She caught hold of that *dhoti* thinking this person as her husband. Few minutes later, police stopped them blaming the man for abducting another man's wife. Then it was revealed that the woman actually never had a good look at her husband. All she knew was that her husband normally wore a yellow-bordered *dhoti* so she thought this gentleman as her husband. This story shows that not only Muslims but also Hindu women were living in seclusion. Though they did not to wear *burqa*, Hindu women had to follow certain social norms that forced them to live in seclusion.

In sketch number twenty nine (29), Rokeya depicted different types of humiliation of a lady whom she met at Aligarh at a ladies' conference. When Rokeya praised the *burqa* the lady was wearing, she stopped Rokeya and shared with her at least five incidents of humiliation because of the *burqa*. One of the incidents was that once the lady attended at a wedding ceremony of a Bengali gentleman while she was wearing a *burqa*. Then she noticed that all the children attended the ceremony become very frightened at seeing her with the *burqa*. Then the lady went on describing other incidents. By citing different incidents of humiliation, she informed Rokeya that these had happened only due to wearing the *burqa*. This sketch gives us the message that women would not wear *burqa* because of the religious rules and

regulation but were forced by the patriarchal society to wear this peculiar thing that finally would cause humiliation.

In sketch number thirty eight (38), Rokeya talks about the exaggeration of the practice of seclusion which existed in the Muslim society of the early twentieth century Bengal. She presents a story told her by a Hindu lady doctor name Miss Saratkumari Mitra. One day a man came to Miss Mitra and informed her that he was sent for calling a lady doctor for a married lady patient who was suffering from a toothache. Miss Mitra was in Bhagalpur and she was called to a place Jangaon which was like a village, far from Bhagalpur. Miss Mitra thus took necessary medicine and equipment needed for toothache. When she arrived at her patient's house, she observed that it was not toothache but labour pains that troubled her patient. Due to the distance and lack of necessary vehicles, it was very difficult to get back to Bhagalpur and return with medicine and equipment required for labour pains. Miss Mitra asked the mistress of the house why she was not properly informed about the real scenario of the patient's case. The mistress of the house replied that because it was a matter of shame as she had sent a male servant to her. The mistress of the house rather accused the lady doctor for not understanding what people mean.

Sketch number forty seven (47) refers to Rokeya's own life experience. We know that Rokeya used to run a girls' school. This sketch is about the management of transport of the school. The sketch delineates that when the first motor-driven bus of the school was ready to take off, the bus had been covered with netting in order to make it seclusion friendly, making it terribly dark inside the bus. As a result, some girls inside the bus fainted and vomited during the travel. When this was reported to the school management by one of the employees of the school, the management removed the netting and put curtains instead of that in order to

help the girls with air and lighting. However, this action resulted in two reactions. On the one hand, the step taken was not good enough for the ventilation thus the parents of the girls blamed the school management for covering the bus. On the other hand, some ‘Brothers-in-Islam’ dared the school management to transport girls in vehicles that were not fully covered. This example shows how the practice of seclusion creates hindrances towards women’s education and development of the society.

It is to be noted that these forty seven (47) sketches of Rokeya’s *Abarodh Bashini* were first published in fragments in different issues of a journal called *Masik Mohammadi* in between 1927 to 1929. Clearly these sketches were feminist critiques. As a result these texts generated a huge debate among the readers in the orthodox and patriarchal society of early twentieth century Bengal. Shaheen Akhtar and Moushumi Bhowmik (2008: 3) observed in the 1930 issue of *Masik Mohammadi*, a certain writer commented about Rokeya’s *Abarodh Bashini* as undesirable stories. The commentator said: ‘Perhaps the readers would have been more pleased if the writer had not dipped into undesirable stories while condemning the practice of seclusion.’

2.4. Stree Jatir Abanati:

Stree Jatir Abanati (The degradation of women) is an amended essay by Rokeya which was published in the first volume of *Motichur*. The original essay was titled *Amader Abanati* (Our degradation) and published in a journal called *Nabanoor* in 1904. *Amader Abanati* hit the society strongly and generated a huge protest that proclaimed ‘women can never be equal to men in all respects—that would be going against nature’ (Akhtar 2008: 3). Later five important paragraphs from the original essay were omitted and the amended essay with the amended title was published.

In *Stree Jatir Abanati* Rokeya analyses the causes and consequences of the degradation of women in the society. About the piece, Professor Firdous Azim (1998: xii) comments that this 'introduces the collection, speaks of women's enslavement. A civilizing impetus is at work here. The metaphor of slavery portrays this situation as not particular to Muslim women alone. It calls for liberty and freedom. Our enslaving devices are our very ornaments, and the call to awakening could be made to any group of women.'

In this essay, Rokeya looks into the problem of the degradation of women scientifically and from different perspectives. Firstly, she presents the sorry state of women in early twentieth century Bengal. Referring to the abolition of the slave trade, Rokeya mentions that though the slave trade had been abolished, slavery still exists and the status of women in the society is like slaves. However, she also mentions that in the ancient times, the condition of women was not as bad as it is today. This, on one hand, means that civilization enables men to take control over the means of production and women to lose control over it. On the other hand, this indicates that there is a scope to reverse the situation.

Secondly, Rokeya identifies that women have a love for their badges of slavery, which is their jewellery. She thinks that jewellery is one of the causes of women's subordination.

About this Rokeya (Hossain 2008a: 7) has made her comments in the following way:

A keeper of cattle pierces the nose of a bullock to make it wear a 'nose-rope'. Similarly, in this country, our husbands put nose-rings on our noses! The nose-ring indicates that the husband is alive. Therefore, as you just saw, sisters, your precious jewels cannot be anything other than badges of slavery. Funnily enough, the more the number of these badges of slavery, the more respected and distinguished the wearer becomes in society!

Thirdly, in this piece, referring to a daughter-in-law in a rich Bihari Muslim family, Rokeya shows how the use of jewellery make women physically weak, inert and senseless material. She mentions that the daughter-in-law was sitting in a dark room and covered with heavy jewellery. She explains in detail which part of the body of that daughter-in-law carried exactly how many *bharis* of gold. Rokeya (Hossain 2008a: 11) then notes that due to wearing heavy jewellery, the daughter-in-law's 'health gets utterly ruined for not engaging in any physical labour. Moving from one room to another tires her feet, making them ache. Her hands are totally incapable of doing any work. Indigestion and a lack of appetite are her constant companions.' Rokeya (Hossain 2008a: 11) further noted that 'when the body lacks energy, so does the mind. So the minds and brains of these women are always diseased. And everyone knows how painful it is to carry the weight of a life that's forever suffering, given the state of one's health.'

Fourthly, referring to cowardice of some women, Rokeya mentioned about women's fear of cockroaches or leeches. She (2008a: 10) noticed that in our society 'a little boy of nine or ten amuses himself by showing a leech trapped in a bottle to the women in the household who get scared. The women, who are weak, scream and run, as the boy laughs and runs behind them, bottle in hand.' Rokeya thinks that it is nothing but a farce and a matter of great shame.

Fifthly, this essay suggests that in order to overcome women's social subordination, emphasis should be given on women's education and employment. She mentions that women's education needs to spread. For this, gender friendly and adequate schools and colleges need to be set up. She thinks that the labour that women normally put in the household should be invested to run an independent business. For the parents lamenting the dearth of grooms

when there is a daughter to marry off, Rokeya advises not to do this, rather to educate the daughters and expose them to the professional fields so that they can earn their own living.

Sixthly, referring to different perspectives of development in the essay, Rokeya tries her best to raise the consciousness of both men and women in the promotion of women's education and employment. She advises women that in order to overcome the condition of slavery, the first thing that women need to do is believe that they are not slaves. Rokeya also advises women to make all efforts for awakening. Referring to Galileo, the great Greek philosopher, she (Hossain 2008a: 15) wrote: "I have said that no good work can be done easily. Even after he came out of prison, Galileo said, '...but nevertheless it [the earth] does move.' We too shall go through various tortures of that sort for the sake of awakening."

And last but not the least she trusts that women have not been created to bear the burden of a good-for-nothing doll's life. She further believes that women will discuss about these issues among themselves, and even if women do not launch a movement, they will think about this a little deeply.

2.5. Ardhangi:

Ardhangi is an essay. The Bengali word *Ardhangi* refers to wife/partner/better half. The message disseminated in this text is a part and continuation of Rokeya's effort to empower women. At the beginning of the piece, Rokeya confirms that this essay has a link with her another essay titled *Stree Jatir Abanati* where she partly discussed about the degradation of women. She further mentions that in this essay she is going to discuss about the enslaved mind of wives and its consequences or impact on the overall progress of the family and society. In the piece, Rokeya explains how a society gets a deformed or distorted feature

when one part of society (men) makes progress and another part (women) cannot do the same due to their enslaved minds. She thinks that this (enslaved mind) is a social disease and thus also prescribes medicine for the disease.

Among other issues, in this piece, Rokeya reconfirms her position towards purdah and talks about gender equality. She says clearly that she is not against purdah. She only wants to change the enslaved mental condition of her sisters and give them freedom. Rokeya says that those who are thinking that she is against the purdah, either misunderstood her, or she has failed to express her intention in a better way. She further says that giving up purdah cannot ensure liberty from mental slavery. In this regard she provides an example of the Parsee women of her time. She mentions that though they had given up purdah, their minds are still enslaved because we do not see any intellectual reflections from the Parsee women.

This essay also refers to Hindu mythology. Rokeya mentions that Hindu Goddesses i.e., *Kali*, *Shitla* are women, and Hindu men fear them and do the worship of these Goddesses. However, this does not mean that they show a good respect to women. Rokeya says that as like as *Kali* and *Shitla* some fierce animals like tigress, lioness, serpent virgin etc. as the form of Goddesses get the worship too. Thus, Rokeya urges to note who is getting the worship— lady *Kali* or the demon *Kali*?

Rokeya further refers back to the Hindu mythological tale of Ram and Sita. She notes that Sita is presented as an idol for women. Of course Sita was not a *pardanishin* (who practice purdah) woman, Rokeya mentioned. Sita was a better half, lover, queen and partner of Ram Chandra who was a lover, a religious figure—everything. Rokeya analyses the relationship between Ram and Sita from a feminist point of view and opines that this can be compared

with the relationship between a boy and his doll. If the boy wishes he can love his doll; he can be sorry if the doll is lost or stolen; he poses a threat to the person who steals the doll; he can be very happy when he gets back the doll which was stolen; if he wishes, he can throw out the doll onto the mud. But the doll can do nothing to the boy. Because instead of having hands and legs, the doll is an inert object. Ram Chandra showed his masculinity in all aspects but Sita did not show her femininity, rather behaved like a total submissive wife whose only wish was to make her husband happy under any circumstances.

Rokeya then refers to the Christian society and mentions that though women enjoy a comparatively better opportunity for education in that society, they do not enjoy hundred percent rights due to their enslaved minds. She observed that in the Christian society husband and wife passed their lives together but not all the better halves can understand their partners. She notes that in many cases when a husband is thinking about the debt, wife is found thinking about a new bonnet. Because she was taught to be like poetry, she does not have the faculty to understand the prosaic condition of her indebted husband.

Rokeya also made references to Islam and Muslim society. She mentions that whenever anarchy and lawlessness of a society reached an extreme level, Prophets appeared, ruled the society and re-established law and order and human rights. She further mentions that in the Arabian Peninsula, when anarchy reached its highest level and when the Arabians were killing their new born daughters, then Mohammad (Sm.) appeared as the protector of the women. Rokeya recalls that Mohammad (Sm.) not only established various rules and regulations to protect women, but also established an ideal on how to rear a daughter. He loved his daughter Fatema very much which cannot be compared with anything else.

In this piece, Rokeya mentions that gender inequality is not God given or natural. It is artificial and socially constructed. Referring to breast feeding, she argues that a mother does not discriminate between a son and a daughter while she feeds them. Both children get equal access to breast milk. She further argues that if there is no discrimination in the mother's mind, God cannot do discriminate either.

However, remedies are there as Rokeya prescribes. The first thing we need to do is to spread women's education in order to cultivate women's minds. There is no alternative to higher education. Many say that higher education is not required for women. It is enough if they can cook well, read books and communicate with the outside world. Rokeya refutes the idea strongly in this essay. She says that higher education for women is required for the betterment of family and society. A child can easily be enlightened if the mother is enlightened. Rokeya mentions that in our society some male minds are not enlightened and broad, even if they pass F.A/B.A. It is because their mother's minds were not enlightened.

Women should also have the eagerness to acquire higher education. Rokeya observes that many girls are happy when they get married thinking that now they have escaped from education. This attitude needs to be changed. In this piece, Rokeya advises wives to try their best to be equal in quality to their husbands. She thinks that this will make them the proper better halves and ensure the progress of the family and society.

2.6. Burqa:

Burqa is an essay. In this essay Rokeya analyses the discourse of the veil which is associated with the concepts of purdah and *burqa*. The central argument of this essay is two fold: one is to ascertain that the system of purdah is not a hindrance to women's liberation, and another is

to oppose the exaggeration of the system which may act as an impediment to women's education and development.

This essay can also be evaluated as a very good effort on one hand to protect the purdah system, and on the other hand to remove the hindrances (as seen as emerged from purdah system) towards progress. It is important to consider that this essay was written in a social backdrop where a group of people were rejecting the need for women's education and employment for the sake of purdah. And, another group of people were rejecting the purdah system in a mere imitation of Europe and considering the purdah/burqa as a hindrance to development.

In this essay Rokeya explains the meaning of purdah. She (2008b: 21) thinks that purdah means to cover the body; 'not simply seclusion within the four walls of the women's quarters.' She explains that 'those who go out of the house, to the market or elsewhere, properly clad, observe purdah far better than those who expose their bodies in a half-naked state to their servants, even though they are within the seclusion of their homes.' Rokeya further says that true meaning of purdah lies in the understanding that purdah is required for one's own need of privacy. In this respect Rokeya draws references of European ladies. She (2008b: 22) says as follows:

Occasionally, even European ladies ask me, 'Why don't you give up purdah? How tiresome this is! Can one really give up seclusion? According to these people, purdah means simply remaining indoors. If only they acknowledged that they too were unable to escape from their own need for privacy (which is the true meaning of purdah!), then they would not speak in this way.

Rokeya further compared the meaning of purdah with the modesty maintained by the European ladies. She notes that no one can enter their bedrooms—even their drawing

rooms—without permission which is not seen as wrong and no one is accusing them of lack of modesty (Hossain 2008b: 22).

Rokeya then explains that *Burqa* is one of the means to observe the system of purdah. It is a kind of cloth used by Muslim women to cover their body and face when they go out of their homes. ‘Some feel that the burqa is very heavy. Compared with the enormous hats worn by English ladies,...burqa is less burdensome,’ Rokeya (Hossain 2008b: 21) wrote in the piece.

In this essay, Rokeya refers to the history of civilization and finds the link between the practice of seclusion/purdah and the concept of civilization. She thinks that there is no conflict between civilization and purdah, rather purdah is a by product of civilization. The system is based on morality and thus reflects the state of civilization of a society. In this regard she made the following entries in the essay (2008b: 21):

The practice of seclusion does not exist in the natural human state, but is based on what we make of morality. Animals do not practise seclusion, after all. As human beings became civilized, they adopted many ‘unnatural’ practices. While it is natural to walk, human beings have developed many modes of transport so that they do not need to walk. It is natural to cross a stream by swimming across it, but man has created many types of sailing vessels. With the help of these, oceans may be crossed easily, even if one does not know how to swim. Similarly, it is ‘unnatural’ human civilization that created the secluded space (or the inner rooms) meant for women.

Rokeya further mentions that ‘there is no real conflict between the purdah system and progress.’ She clearly says that progress does not exist outside purdah. One can study and do other necessary works while maintaining the purdah. Rokeya (Hossain 2008b: 24) says that ‘if necessary we will wear the burqa and go for a stroll in the park, no harm in that. If we go to the hills on grounds of health, the burqa may accompany us.’ This essay also shows ways

of obtaining higher education of women, which is required for progress, while maintaining the purdah. In this respect, Rokeya (Hossain 2008b: 27) made her notes in the following way:

The purdah system does not stand as an obstacle in the path of education. We do not have lady teachers. If this deficiency is removed and separate schools and colleges for women are set up, higher education can be acquired despite the purdah. Possibly no Muslim would like to move forward on the path of education if this requires disobeying the necessary rules of purdah.

However, Rokeya points out that there is a conflict between the artificial forms of purdah and progress. Therefore she takes a very strong position against the artificial forms of purdah in this essay. She strongly says that ‘the practice of all rites must be within certain limits’ (2008b: 24). In order to free society from artificial forms of purdah and to ensure progress, Rokeya has given some advice. Firstly, young women should show an eagerness to acquire knowledge rather than jewellery or other ornaments to enhance their physical beauty. Because, on one hand proper education is required to cultivate the minds; on the other hand, society will not progress without proper education. Secondly, all necessary measures should be taken to change male perceptions towards women’s education and work. Finally, all necessary measures should be taken to ensure gender equality in the family and society. Rokeya says that as long as women are equal to men in the spiritual world, ‘the mere hope of progress is nothing but a mirage.’ ‘Man and women together form one unit. Therefore one cannot reach the highest level of progress leaving the other behind,’ she further reiterates (2008b: 26).

2.7. Sugrihini:

This piece is an essay. The Bengali word *Sugrihini* means a good housewife. In this piece, Rokeya observed that at her time the central interest or imposed central interest of a woman was to be a good house wife. Thus often women feel alienated in academic settings and

experience formal education as either peripheral or irrelevant to their central interests and development. As a result the need for women's education was ignored. Rokeya was against this idea and successfully linked formal education with the central interest of women, i.e., to be a good house wife. In her piece *Sugrihini*, she states that one cannot be a good house wife without proper education.

In *Sugrihini* Rokeya talks about mental culture: intelligence, taste, manners etc. She says that as mental culture is required for men in order to earn money, so it is required for women to be good house wives. She further reiterates that this mental culture cannot be achieved without higher education. Rokeya noted that in her society the rationale for women's higher education was not found because at that time women were reared only to be good house wives. Thus, in this essay by examining the qualities of an ideal house wife and setting up the link between mental culture, higher education and a good house wife, Rokeya made her efforts to establish the rationale and need for women's higher education.

In this piece, Rokeya classified all domestic works into six broad categories: (a) keep clean and arrange neatly the house and household goods; (b) accomplish the household activities efficiently with a limited financing; (c) perform the duties of family commissariat; (d) knitting and crochet activities; (e) nursing the family members; and (f) child rearing. Rokeya then argues that mental culture is required to accomplish the above mentioned domestic works in a good manner and like a good house wife.

Rokeya further argues that it is important to show promptness in a case of family emergency. Promptness or ready-wittedness is an essential quality of a good house wife, but many women do not have this quality. She says that instead of showing the promptness, rather it is

a common tendency of women to start crying in a situation of family emergency. In many cases, it has been observed that the patient is struggling in thirst but instead of helping the patient with drinking water, the nurse is crying with various tones. In this regard, Rokeya gives an example of a house wife who was extremely devoted to her husband. One night the husband got pain in his chest. In tension the wife could not sleep the whole night. In the morning the doctor came and advised that the pain is severe now but it was lower at night and would be removed easily by polishing mustard oil on the chest. If the wife had the mental culture and the promptness, instead of crying the whole night she could rather help her husband with mustard oil. Even it would not be necessary to call the doctor. Only education can bring this promptness, Rokeya opined.

In this essay, Rokeya also talks about cutting the coat according to the cloth. She says that it is one of the essential qualities of a good house wife. In this regard she (Hossain 2007a: 35) quoted a statement of an English Countess who says that ‘the first point necessary to consider in the arrangement and ordering of a lady’s household, is that everything should be on a scale exactly proportionate to her husband’s income.’ She further comments that one cannot make proper use of money without proper education. She also shows the link between good cooking and general knowledge of horticulture, theory of heat, chemistry and medical science. In the piece, she encourages women to broaden their faculties on those issues in order to cook quality food. Rokeya further explains how an ill-cooked food creates various diseases. In order to encourage women for quality cooking, Rokeya (Hossain 2007a: 35) quoted another statement of that English Countess who said:

Bad food, ill-cooked food, monotonous food, insufficient food, injure the physique and ruin the temper. No lady should turn to the more tempting occupations or amusements of the day till she had gone into every detail of the family commissariat and assured herself that it is as good as her purse, her cook, and the season can make it.

The piece doesn't directly say anything about gender equality or inequality. But indirectly it advises action required for ensuring gender equality. The action is to educate women. It says that mental culture is needed to be a good housewife and for mental culture there is no alternative to higher education. If a house wife is properly educated, maladies like lack of interest, derision, indocility, discontent etc. will be removed from her family. It is to be noted that at the outset these maladies are responsible for creating gender inequality in the family. Simultaneously, through the family settings they infiltrate into the greater society. Thus, removal of the maladies from the family will eventually contribute to society. In this way, in this essay Rokeya makes a good housewife a gender activist and an agent of change/development.

Interestingly this piece accepts the politics of the division of domestic labour. In this essay, Rokeya does not talk about male participation in household activities but defines the roles of a good housewife and make her responsible for all domestic work. Why does she do this? It is because she has no other choice. In the beginning of the essay she mentions that her texts *Stree Jatir Abanati* and *Ardhangi* are not well understood by women readers where she talks about gender equality and the need for women's education. It is because the aim of life of her sisters to be good housewives not to be equal to their husbands. Therefore, she has written the piece for those women who want to be good housewives. In this context, she has to accept the politics of the division of domestic labour. Despite accepting the dilemma, Rokeya is successful in imparting the message that women's education is a must even if one wants to be a good housewife.

2.8. Shristee Tattha:

It is a short story. The Bengali phrase '*Shristee Tattha*' can be translated into English as 'the story of creation'. In this story, Rokeya makes fun of the idea that men are better than women and that they are made by the creator with better materials. She makes a clear distinction and names the different ingredients used to create men and women. She says that on the one hand, women are made with ingredients which are soft and smooth in nature. These are smell, taste and moisture of different sources; heat of fire and the cold of snow. On the other hand, men are made of raw materials which are rough and tough in nature. These are poison-fang and root of snakes, tiger claws, donkey's brain, burning coal and chunks of ice. In the story, Rokeya passes this message to her readers by creating a character called Lord Tvasti. In the story, we see that Lord Tvasti is informing the above message to the writer and her companions in the following way (Hossain 2008d: 24):

Do you know, my dears, I had no raw material in hand when I was creating women: I had to collect the smell, taste and moisture from different sources. But while creating men, I did not have to worry at all. I had huge stocks of all the ingredients in the store. I put out my hand and used whatever it touched. For example, I used the poison-fang of snakes; including the root, to make teeth. To make hand and toe nails, I used tiger claws. I used a donkey's brain, entirely to fill the brain cells of men. I took heat from fire to create women, I used only a piece of burning coal to make men.....To make women I used only the cold of snow, while to make men I used chunks of ice; in fact, the whole Kanchendzongha (part of Himalayas) peak.

By saying the above, Rokeya takes here a radical feminist position that is associated with the concepts of separatism and man-hating. On the top of these notions, the key site of struggle in the radical feminism is the female body itself—its representation and the meanings attached to the bald fact of biological difference (Pilcher & Whelehan 2006: 144). *Shristee Tattha* encapsulates these radical feminist ideas.

Rokeya begins the story in a women only space/setting. This story does not describe whether the women's space is a ladies hostel or a rented house. The writer herself is the protagonist of the story. Apart from her, there are other characters. They are Miss Nanibala Datta (Nani), Zaheda Bugum, Shirin Begum (Shirin), Mrs. Binapani Ghosh (Bina), Afsar, and Maro, the maid servant. The story also does not describe the back ground or history of the women characters used in this story, i.e., their actual marital status, economic and social position, religious back ground etc. However, their names indicate that Nani is unmarried and Bina is married. These names further indicate that two of them are Hindu: Nani and Bina, Maro could be a low caste Hindu or a woman from a marginalized ethnic group. Nonetheless, this kind of setting with women from different walks of life reminds us about 'Tarini Bhavan' of the novel *Padmaraag* where the aim of the women is to serve humanity. Now, let's go back to the main story.

Rokeya describes that one night it got quite late when they were sat chatting and speaking about their experiences of seeing and hearing about djinns, fairies and ghosts. Once the chatting was over, everybody went to bed but the writer was still sitting on a sofa. She was not sure whether she fell asleep or not. However, suddenly she heard a terrible noise from the top of their house at which other women of the house got startled and woke up. It was raining heavily outside. Bina opened the window to see what had happened. When she did that, 'a gust of wind and rain swept in and drenched' them and along with it a big ball of fire entered the room. They were dumbstruck at seeing that and could not decide what to do. Gradually, the ball of fire became a radiant human figure. It seemed to the writer that she had seen him somewhere but could not remember. The strange figure assured them not to be worried and introduced him as the Lord Tvasti. The writer then remembered that she had seen this great soul in Calcutta when she was writing a piece called 'The Creation of Woman'.

Bina wanted to know the reason of the arrival of Lord Tvasti that night. Lord Tvasti said that the writer had made a mess by translating the history of creation of women into Bengali. The fact was that ‘The Creation of Woman’ was published in a monthly journal called *Saugat* omitting two foot notes. These foot notes were very important in order to understand the meaning of the whole essay. As a result, the readers who encountered difficulties reading the piece had become dissatisfied, and summoned him from heaven by doing a planchette. He continued that on that particular night while he was returning from this mortal world, his steam-driven chariot got entangled in a dome on their roof. So the moment Bina opened the window, he had entered the house in order not to get drenched. This was the reason of his arrival, he answered.

However, Nani wanted to know about the elements Lord Tvasti used to create man. At the outset the Lord wanted to avoid the question and to leave. But finally he had to answer the question when he was cornered by the women of the house. At one stage the great Tvasti left and everybody in the house including the writer went to their respective beds. But the writer fell down on her way to bed. This made her wake up with a start and she found herself still on that sofa where she was sitting and chatting with other women of the house at the beginning of the night. She further realized that the night was over. She asked herself whether the story of creation was a dream.

Wrapping up Chapter Two:

This was an overview of some selected texts by Rokeya. Before I wrap up Chapter Two, I would like to mention that *Nabanoor*, *Sawgat*, *Masik Mohammadi*, *Bulbul*, *Al Eslam*—these journals/papers of the early twentieth century refer to the concept of gender equality especially in relation to the rights of the women which emerged as one of the hot issues of

debate/discussion/writing among the Muslim philosophers/thinkers of that period. Rokeya was the pioneer contributor to that debate. Each and every piece of her writing refers to the key concepts in gender studies in various ways. Especially the texts that I have discussed in this chapter are not random and value free selections, but represent an account of the importance of gender equality; types, causes and consequences of gender inequality; and strategies for eradication of gender inequality from society. In what ways and how these texts refer to these issues will be examined in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE:
AN EVALUATION OF ROKEYA’S WRITING IN THE LIGHT OF
THE CONCEPT OF GENDER EQUALITY

I have observed that among various issues of gender studies, the texts by Rokeya that I have discussed in Chapter Two, explain the importance of gender equality, classified the types/forms of gender inequality, analyzed the causes and consequences of gender inequality, and suggested strategies for eradication of gender inequality. It is to be noted that among different pieces of Rokeya’s writing, *Sultana’s Dream*, *Ardhangi* and *Burqa* refer to the importance of gender equality. *Sultana’s Dream* explains the importance of gender equality from development and political perspectives. *Ardhangi* particularly refers to the importance of gender equality from development perspective. *Abarodh Bashini* refers to the types and causes of gender inequality. A specific type of gender based inequality, i.e., denial of equal access to property rights is found in *Ardhangi*. The consequences of gender based inequalities are discussed in *Stree Jatir Abanati*. Rokeya also discusses them in detail in *Ardhangi*. *Padmaraag* and other texts refer to the recommendations/strategies of eradication of gender inequality. In this chapter, I will present these findings in the light of the concept of gender equality.

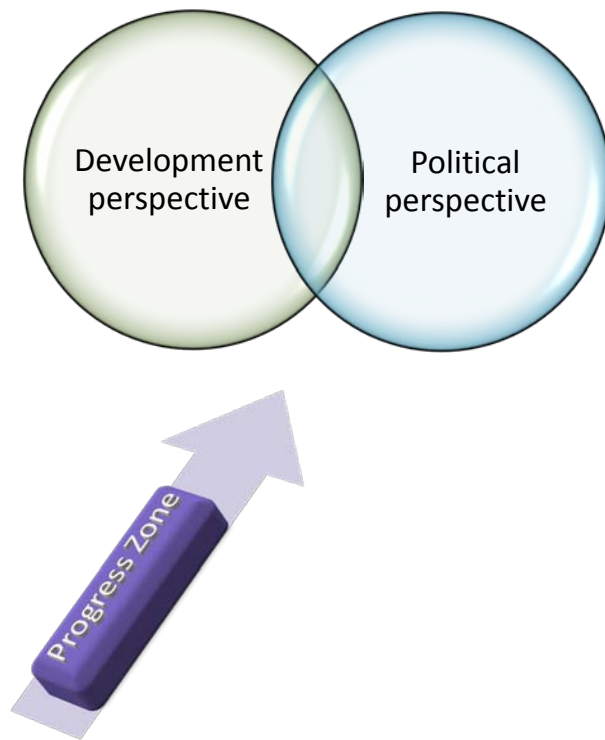
3.1. Importance of gender equality:

Rokeya’s writing speaks about the importance of gender equality in all spheres of life which includes gender issues on liberty, nationalism, education, and so on. Before I go to these points, let me just recall what I have discussed in Chapter One about the meaning of gender equality.

Gender equality means fairness of treatment of men and women. Regardless of the differences in the gender division of labour, resources, opportunities, treatment and potential and other factors, the rewards accruing to men and women for similar work, skills and knowledge, have to be of the same quality and reflect their contributions. Outcomes that show similar or equal inputs, just and fair evaluation of men and women's effort lead to gender equality, justice and fairness. The outcomes must reflect the intention as well as the realization of fairness and justice. Thus when women argue for gender equality, they are not necessarily referring to the need for men and women to be allocated the same quantities or objects and resources as men. Rather, they are demanding the same quality and quantity of opportunities, support and treatment as those accorded to men in similar circumstances so that they too, can fulfil their aspirations no matter how similar or different from men's their values and opportunities might be (Mahtab, 2012: 131).

The above self-explanatory meaning of gender equality indicates its own importance of which Rokeya was well informed. The importance of gender equality as explained by Rokeya in her writing can be evaluated from political and development perspectives. Rokeya's writing explains that if gender equality exists in a society then at one point politics and development intersect with each other and create a 'progress zone' as shown in the diagram below.

Diagram 2: Different perspectives of the importance of gender equality



3.1.1. Political perspective:

Recent theories of political science suggest that a truly representative government cannot be established unless gender equality is ensured. They further suggest that women's equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in development. I find that in her writing Rokeya speaks about these notions as well. In *Sultana's Dream*, Sultana tells Sister Sara that they (women in India) 'have no hand or voice in the management of ...social affairs' and that in 'India man is lord and master' who 'has taken to himself all powers and privileges and shut up the women in the zenana.' In reply Sister Sara says that it is because women have neglected the duty they owe to themselves and they have lost their natural rights by shutting their eyes to their own interests (Hossain 1905: 3).

In this way, *Sultana's Dream* evolved into a magnificent short story that shows the importance of women's participation in politics. It is to be noted that Rokeya's arguments with regard to women's involvement in politics were very specific and clear cut. In order to get to the point, we need to analyze the underlying meaning lies in between the lines of the fiction.

The story also presents a picture of a peaceful and democratic handover of power from men to women. However, it is to be noted that women were always part of the decision making process in Lady land even when the military and administrative authorities lay in the hands of the men. The Queen was the Head of the State and Government in Lady land from the beginning of the story. As the story progresses, we see how the country was attacked by its neighbouring state, and how it won the war by using the technology invented by the women of the Lady land. Then, after the war, all the positions of the state were taken over by the women. In Lady land, the division of labour ensured that all men were involved with physical labour and women were involved with mental labour. I do not see any official position of a King in Lady land. However, the Queen certainly had a husband since she had a four year old daughter when Sultana met her. In the story Sultana says (Hossain 1905: 9) that she 'had seen from the air-car the Queen walking on a garden path with her little daughter (who was four years old) and her maid of honour.'

3.1.2. Development perspective:

Rokeya understood that a society cannot develop without achieving gender equality. And, in order to achieve gender equality, one has to start from one's family. If the husband and wife in a family don't enjoy the same status and opportunity then the family cannot move forward. That is why Rokeya writes in her piece *Ardhangi* (the better half) that 'the vehicle in which

one tier is bigger (husband) and another is smaller (wife) cannot move far' (It is my own translation from the original piece written in Bengali, ref: Hossain 2007b: 28).

The importance of gender equality from development perspective has also been explained in other parts of her writing. *Burqa* (the veil) is one of those texts where Rokeya has expressed her opinion about the link between gender equality and development. Here she says that 'man and woman together form one unit. Therefore one cannot reach the highest level of progress leaving the other behind.' She further reiterates that she will repeat it a hundred times if necessary (Hossain 2008b: 25).

In *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya indicates that gender equality is required for the effective international trade and commerce, peace and prosperity, and for the overall economic development of a country. This idea is revealed through a conversation between the Queen of Lady land and Sultana in the end part of the story. Rokeya presents this in the following way (Hossain 1905: 9):

She had no objection to permitting her subjects to trade with other countries. But...no trade was possible with countries where the women were kept in the zenana (confinement) and so unable to come and trade with us. Men, we find, are rather of lower morals and so we do not like dealing with them. We do not covet other people's land, we do not fight for a piece of diamond though it may be a thousand-fold brighter than the Koh-I-Noor (considered as the best diamond in the world), nor do we grudge a ruler his Peacock Throne. We dive deep into the ocean of knowledge and try to find out the precious gems, which nature has kept in store for us. We enjoy nature's gifts as much as we can.

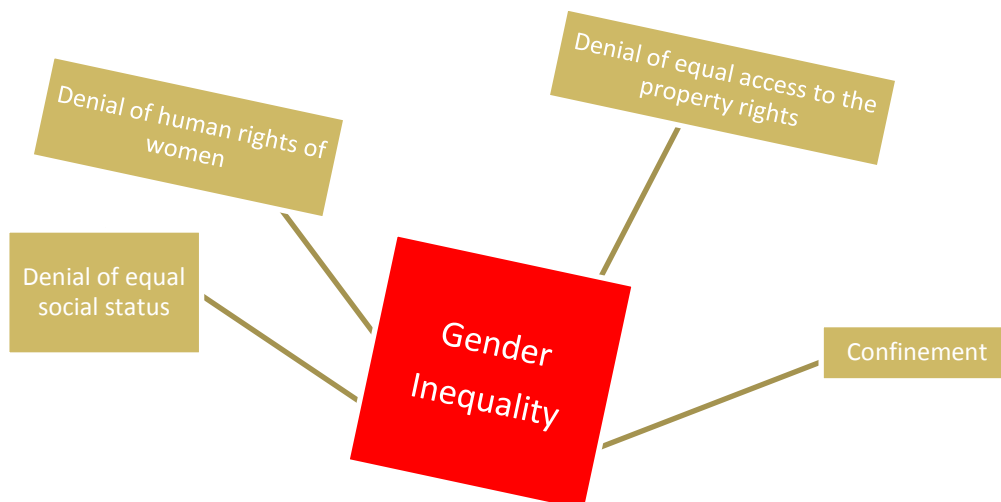
3.2. Types of gender inequality:

The most obvious distinctive feature of feminist social research is that it focuses on gender and inequality. Feminist assume that there is widespread oppression of women by men and

by patriarchal social patterns. They further believe that this oppression is not natural or inevitable but can be addressed. Recent research also considers multiple inequalities based on race, class, and other factors. These theoretical assumptions imply a strong political and moral commitment to reduce inequality (Mahtab, 2012: 91).

Similarly, Rokeya's writing was committed to analyse gender and inequality. In her texts, Rokeya scientifically analyzed the situation of gender inequality or women's subordination in the family and society of early 20th century Bengal. She artistically depicted her findings into different scenarios that broadly refer to slavery, seclusion, and obstacles to education, work and development. Rokeya also cited a number of real life examples and real incidents to illustrate her findings. Findings of gender-based inequality from Rokeya's writing can be further classified into four categories as presented in the diagram below:

Diagram 3: Types of gender-based inequality



3.2.1. Denial of equal social status:

Denial of equal social status refers to putting difficulties and/or denial of equal access to education, health assistance or remunerated employment; denial of equal access to exercise and enjoy civil, social, economic, cultural and political rights, mainly of women. In her writing, Rokeya showed gender based inequalities of similar kinds. I have observed in Rokeya's writing that in early twentieth century Bengal, there was serious inequality between men and women. Thus Rokeya depicted the social status of men and women as two opposite classes, where men were like lords and women were like slaves. In *Stree Jatir Abanati* Rokeya (Hossain 2008a: 5) has written: 'For reasons not yet known, as one part of humanity (men) began to gradually progress in various fields, the other (women), because they could not progress to a similar extent, instead of being comrades or companions of men, became their slaves.'

3.2.2. Denial of human rights of women:

Another example of gender inequality that I find in Rokeya's writing is the denial of human rights of women. In *Abarodh Bashini* (the secluded women) she sketches the violation of human rights of women and children. In Chapter Two, I have already discussed some of the sketches. I hereby would like to present sketch number thirty nine (39). This is a classic example of denial of human rights of women. In the sketch, Rokeya shows that for the sake of *purdah*, female children at her time were deprived from playing and expressing emotions. This sketch talks about Tahera, an eight year old girl. One day Tahera saw a small ladder leaning on the roof of their kitchen. She was curious and started climbing the ladder. Suddenly her father snatched her down. Climbing the ladder was considered as a violation of the rule of *purdah*. Tahera was a beloved daughter but was not allowed to violate the rule of seclusion. Tahera became scared at this sudden and furious attitude of her father. She started

trembling and wet her dress. As a result she had to take a bath late in the day. This then caused a serious fever. She suffered three days. The doctor was called but finally Tahera died (Hossain 2008c: 36).

3.2.3. Denial of equal access to the property rights:

It is one of the basic forms of gender inequality that exists in almost every society and time. In many cases women are deprived from any kinds of access to property. Rokeya depicted this type of gender based inequality in her writing. She refers to the Muslim inheritance law. According to that law, Muslim women inherit half of what men get from their father's property, e.g., if a family has one (1) son and one (1) daughter, the son gets half of the father's property whilst the daughter receives half of what the son gets. Furthermore, if a man has only daughters and he does not distribute his property as gifts to his daughters, during his life time, then the property is shared by the family members of the father after his death (Mahtab, 2012: 46). Rokeya, however, without commenting on whether the law itself is discriminatory or not, comments that the implementation of this law is not in practice. In her essay titled *Ardhangi*, Rokeya pointed out that at her time Muslim women were deprived of getting their inheritance, and that the Islamic inheritance law was not properly followed by the Muslim society of her time. In *Ardhangi*, she puts her grievances in the following way (It is my own translation from the original piece written in Bengali, ref: Hossain 2007b: 30):

You can see in the Mohammadan Law that a daughter has a right to get fifty percent of her brother in their father's property. However, the rule is only limited to the books. If you take some labour to observe the real division of property of a rich Musalman (Muslim) or a zaminder (Landlord), you will find that actually the daughter is getting zero percent or a very nominal amount.

3.2.4. Confinement:

Purdah or Seclusion is a fundamental concept in Islam. According to Islamic law, seclusion is mandatory for both men and women. However, we see that at Rokeya's time the practice of *purdah* was severe on women, which falls under a particular gender-based inequality called 'confinement'. It refers to isolating a person from friends/family, restricting movements, deprivation of liberty or obstruction/restriction of the right to free movement. In her writing, Rokeya shows that the perpetrator of confinement is anyone in a position of power and control; often it is spouse, intimate partner or family members in a position of authority. In *Burqa*, Rokeya gives an example of confinement during early 20th century Bengal. I would like to take the opportunity to quote the example below (Hossain 2008b: 23):

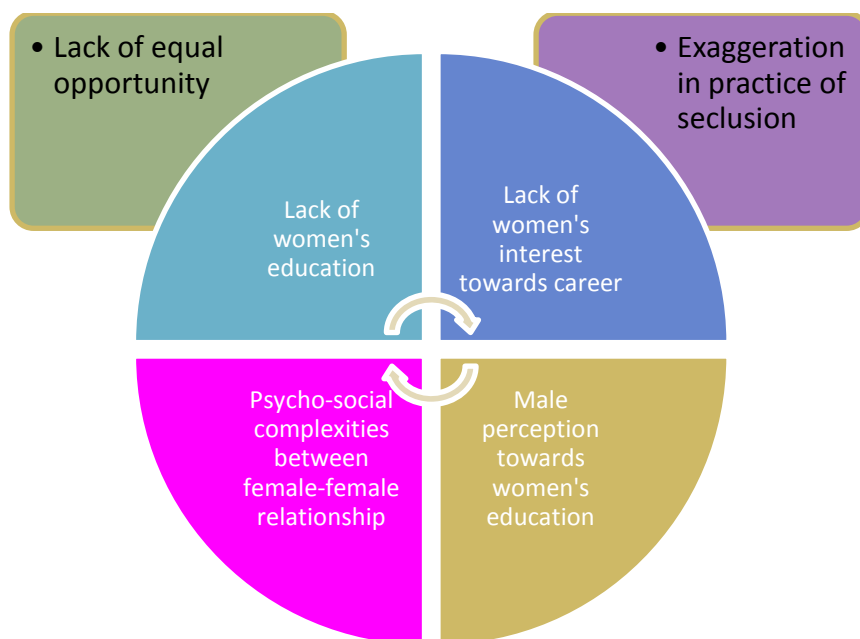
The practice of *purdah* has become a bit too severe in our country. For example, young unmarried girls are made to observe *purdah* even in presence of other women. A nine-year-old girl is reluctant to step outside her home in the fear that she might meet the lady next door. And being confined indoors takes a toll on her health. Secondly, this is an impediment to the education of girls. They never get to meet anybody except their very close female relatives. Whom would they learn from in such case?

3.3. Causes of gender inequality:

Rokeya not only noted down the examples of gender inequality but also identified its root causes. She observed almost a hundred years back from now that the causes of gender-based inequality were rooted in socio-cultural norms of gender inequality. In *Sultana's Dream*, she raises the question of whether men and women are essentially different, or, they are different because, they are socially constructed as different. In the story, when Sultana was walking with Sister Sara in the unknown city, she found that the streets were full of crowds of women only. As she was feeling shy, some passers-by criticized her as being very mannish, 'shy and timid like men.' By providing this example Rokeya explains that women's position in a society is not natural but socially constructed.

Rokeya chalked out six interlocking causes of gender-based inequality as presented in the following diagram:

Diagram 4: Causes of gender inequality



3.3.1. Lack of women's education:

Rokeya thinks that lack of women's education is the main reason of gender inequality. It is also the main hindrance to social progress, she believes. Rokeya explains this message in each piece of her writing, directly or indirectly. In *Burqa*, Rokeya (Hossain 2008b: 25) says: 'Unless we receive higher education, society will not achieve progress. As long as we are not equal to our men in the spiritual world, the mere hope of progress is nothing but a mirage. We must cultivate all branches of knowledge.' In the same piece she points to the politics working against women's education and further says (Hossain 2008b: 25): '...because of our lack of education...we are unfit to be independent. And being unfit, we have lost our

independence. We were deprived of education in order to serve the interests of some short-sighted men.’

This message is further vivid in her piece *Stree Jatir Abanati* where she also provides a definition of education. She says that education does not mean to follow a particular nation or cultural norms. God has given us many faculties and education means to cultivate that natural faculty by hard work and exercise. It is our duty to ensure the proper use of our faculties. God has given us hands, legs, eyes, ears, mind and, the ability of thought. When we do goodworks with our hands, observe with the eyes, listen with ears and can think reasonably, that is called education (Hossain 2008a: 13).

In the same piece, she also provides different examples of observation power and how that can be enhanced. In this way she urges women to enhance their observation power and to be educated in a proper way so that women’s faculties are better developed.

3.3.2. Lack of equal opportunity:

Rokeya figured out that lack of equal opportunity between men and women in the competitive development arenas especially in the field of education, literature and politics is one of the reasons of the gender disparity in the society. In *Stree Jatir Abanati* she explains that due to lack of adequate opportunity men have become masters of women. She first asks her readers the reasons of women’s degradation and then she herself provides the answer.

The phrases are as follows (Hossain 2008a: 6):

Can anyone give reasons for our downfall, the world over? Perhaps the lack of opportunity is the major reason. Women, who did not get adequate opportunities, stopped participating in worldly activities. Men, finding that women were incapable and incompetent, started helping them. Gradually, the more men offered support, the more incompetent women became. Our

state could well be compared with the beggars of our country. The more the wealthy philanthropists keep distributing alms for religious reasons the number of lowly beggars seems to increase. Gradually, begging became a part-time occupation for lazy people who are no longer ashamed to accept alms.

In *Ardhangi*, Rokeya reiterates that women could prove themselves if they would get equal opportunities. She comments that women lag behind due to lack of opportunity in the field of education. In the same piece, referring to gender discrimination, she mentions that women do not get half of the opportunity to develop themselves in comparison to men. She argues that the father, who assigns four teachers for his son, does not assign two teachers for his daughter.

3.3.3. Lack of women's interest towards career:

Rokeya observed that while her brothers were serious about their careers, her sisters were not interested at all in career development. In her writing Rokeya rightly pointed out this phenomenon as one of the root causes of the miseries and slave and/or beggar like situation of women. In *Stree Jatir Abanati*, she comments that women do not hesitate to accept charity, having lost their sense of self-respect. Therefore, they have become slaves of laziness, and, in a way, of men. Over time, even their minds have become enslaved (Hossain 2008a: 6).

Rokeya further observes that women don't have interest in career because many of them actually don't want to be awakened. By providing different examples, Rokeya makes issues to motivate her sisters and make awaken them to understand that employment/career is one of the means of self-reliance and emancipation. In *Stree Jatir Abanati*, Rokeya (Hossain 2008a: 15) made below comments:

We know awakening for the very first time could be difficult. We know that society would be outraged. We know that the Indian Muslims will slap a death sentence on us, and the

Hindus will advocate death by fire! (And we also know that not too many of our sisters wish to be awakened!) But we need to wake up for the sake of the welfare of society.

3.3.4. Exaggeration in practice of seclusion:

The practice of seclusion or purdah is a fundamental rule in Islam which is equally applicable to both men and women. It has a certain limit and to certain extent it is in fact necessary for the development of civilization as Rokeya explains in her piece *Burqa*. Therefore, the necessary practice of seclusion does not create any gender based inequality since it equally applies to both men and women. However, the exaggeration in the practice of seclusion creates gender based inequalities in different forms and at various degrees across societies since it does not apply equally to both men and women. This refers to the inequalities that men have freedom of movement but women do not; that men have rights of education and work but women do not; that men have rights to enjoy health care facilities but women do not, and so on.

In *Abarodh Bashini* and in *Burqa* Rokeya encapsulated a number of examples of the different forms of exaggeration in practice of seclusion or purdah in the Muslim Bengal society of her time which eventually resulted in gender disparity in the greater society. I can see in *Abarodh Bashini* and *Burqa* that on the one hand, men were allowed to meet people for the sake of work and education. On the other hand, women were not allowed to meet unknown people; even in certain families, young girls were not allowed to meet women except their very close family relatives.

3.3.5. Male perception towards women's education:

During Rokeya's time, male attitudes were very against to women's education. Patriarchal society was not in favour of women's education and work. Society maintained a double standard in this regard. Rokeya herself was a victim of this attitude. Her father was against her formal education but the person wanted that his sons would get the higher education. As a result two of Rokeya's brothers got the higher education while she was deprived. This type of perception or the double standard plays by patriarchy is one of the key reasons of creating gender inequality in society. Primarily this perception hampers and even stops women's education. At the second stage this contributes to defer the overall progress and development of society. And finally, this view resulted in gender disparity/inequality in the society. Male attitude towards women's education is best encapsulated in *Stree Jatir Abanati* where Rokeya (Hossain 2008a: 13) notes that 'most people are so superstitious about the subject that whenever they hear the words women's education, they visualize a spectre in the future called 'the bad effects of women's education' and shudder.'

3.3.6. Psycho-social complexities in female-female relationships:

In our traditional family settings, the relationships between different female in-laws (mother-in-law vs. sister-in-law; sister-in-law vs. sister-in-law; step mother vs. step daughter etc.) are complex from a psycho-social point of view. In many cases this leads to gender based inequality making the women responsible. In her writing, Rokeya doesn't hesitate to point to this aspect. In *Padmaraag*, she shows how some women are largely responsible for the predicament of other women. The indictment is posed in the novel against Saudamini, Sakina and Usha of Tarini Bhavan, as a testimony to that predicament.

Saudamini's tale is that of a woman unfairly burdened with the reputation of being a typically cruel stepmother. The machinations of her husband's sister-in-law from his first marriage are largely responsible for her predicament. Sakina's marriage is doomed because her prospective bridegroom's mistress claims on the wedding day, moments before the auspicious exchange of glances between husband and wife, that the bride is plain, resulting in her rejection by her groom. Usha, on the other hand, is abducted from her home by robbers to whom her cowardly husband offers no resistance, and subsequently is rescued by strangers. When she returns home, the morning after, she is turned out by her in-laws (female) on the grounds that having spent the night with strange men, she is no longer respectable (Bagchi 2005: xv-xvi).

3.4. Consequences of gender inequality:

Rokeya's writing indicates that the consequences of gender inequality broadly refer to the low participation of women in the field of education which in the long run undermines social development. Rokeya has mentioned about the consequences of gender inequality in many parts of her writing. However, these have been best demonstrated in her texts titled *Stree Jatir Abanati* and *Ardhangi*.

In *Stree Jatir Abanati* Rokeya notes that due to the existing gender inequality women do not get equal opportunity to develop and explore themselves in the fields of education and work. Thus they stopped participating in worldly activities and as a result, they could not progress to a similar extent like men, and instead of being comrades or companions of men, became their slaves. She further mentioned that over time women minds have become enslaved too. Rokeya (Hossain 2008a: 6) says that having acted as slaves for a long time, women have become accustomed to slavery. In this way women's 'mental faculties—self reliance or

courage—nipped in the bud over and over again for the lack of exercising them, now perhaps do not even germinate.’

Another consequence of gender inequality is the beggar like situation of women. In the same piece Rokeya mentions that when men found that ‘women were incapable and incompetent, they started helping them. Gradually, the more men offered support, the more incompetent women became’ which, could be compared with the beggars of the country. Like them now women ‘do not hesitate to accept charity, having lost’ their ‘sense of self-respect.’

The most common and vivid consequence of gender inequality is the low participation of women in the field of education which ultimately undermines social development. Referring to this type of inequality, Rokeya made her comments in *Stree Jatir Abanati* in the following way (Hossain 2008a: 12):

Just as sunlight does not enter our bedrooms, the light of knowledge, too, cannot enter the chambers of our minds, since there are almost no schools and colleges good enough for us. Men can study as much as they want, but will the treasure-chest of ambrosial knowledge ever be fully open for us? If a great and liberal soul is kind enough to come forward and offer a helping hand, there are thousand people to create obstacles in the way.

Rokeya mentioned that gender inequality ultimately ruins the potential progress of the society because women comprise half of the social body, so how can a society progress without women. She mentions that the interest of men and women are not different rather they are same. Referring to the needs of a child, Rokeya says that ‘a child needs his father and mother equally’.

The social and economic consequences of gender inequality are further echoed in *Ardhangi*. In the piece, Rokeya discusses fourfold consequence. Firstly, it has a direct connection with women's education. Gender inequality hampers women's education resulting into the enslaved or uneducated mind of women. Secondly, a husband cannot be happy with a wife with an enslaved or uneducated mind, because this wife cannot be a good life partner or better half. Rokeya comments that in order to be a good partner of a husband, a wife should have equal knowledge and qualifications. Thirdly, a family cannot make good progress if the husband's mind is enlightened and the wife's is enslaved. And finally, since family is the basic unit of a society, with a wife having an enslaved or uneducated mind, a society cannot make progress.

3.5. Strategies as advised by Rokeya for the eradication of gender inequality:

Stree Jatir Abanati, *Padmaraag* and *Burqa* contain recommendations for the eradication of gender inequality. Rokeya's writing indicates that eradicating gender inequality requires changes in gender relations (the socially prescribed roles, responsibilities, expectations, limitations, opportunities and privileges assigned to persons in the society based on their sex) within the society. Therefore she has advised certain strategies in order to transform the socio-cultural norms. Rokeya has recommended five strategies for eradication of gender inequality as presented in the following diagram:

Diagram 5: Strategies for eradication of gender inequality



3.5.1. Spread women's education:

In order to achieve gender equality, we should spread women's education widely. Almost every piece by Rokeya speaks about the importance of women's education including *Stree Jatir Abanati* and *Ardhangi*. In *Stree Jatir Abanati*, Rokeya says that women's education is required to enlighten the enslaved mind of the women so that their slavery like situation can be removed and gender equality put in place. In *Ardhangi*, she echoes the same thought so that wives can be appropriate partners of their husbands. In both pieces, she mentions that men and women should have equal status and opportunity for social development. For this women's education is a must. In order to spread women's education Rokeya also advises to set up separate schools and universities for women.

3.5.2. Strengthen community networks:

Targeted and focused activities need to be undertaken in order to achieve gender equality and to strengthen community networks. Rokeya showed how these jobs can be done by an NGO. In her novel *Padmaraag* she describes a development organization named Tarini Bhavan, where women from diverse races, regions and religions with personal histories of patriarchal oppression band together, united by the common goal of fulfilling an educational and philanthropic purpose. Their activities include imparting formal education and teaching crafts to underprivileged and marginalized women, so that they can learn to be financially independent, and care for the sick and destitute (Bagchi 2005: xiii).

In the novel, I have observed that Rokeya geared all endeavours towards inculcating in the residents of Tarini Bhavan the all-important mantra of self-respect through self-reliance and the universalist concept of shared humanity that admits no inequality of caste, creed, race or gender (Bagchi 2005: xviii). It is to be noted that the functions of the Tarini Bhavan are similar to a modern day NGO.

3.5.3. Empower women:

In *Stree Jatir Abanati* Rokeya notes that women are regarded as subordinate to, and are rendered dependent upon, men. Modern social science explains that these unequal power relations leave women at a double disadvantage: women are at greater risk of physical and psychological abuse; and if subjected to such abuse, they generally have few options for redress. Rokeya understood this problem very well. She further understood that women need to be empowered in order to address this problem. Because it enables a woman to exercise freedom, capacity to identify her strengths, power to use her resources, skills to challenge and change her life situation, make own choices and decisions, and control over surroundings that

has an effect on her life (Mahtab 2012: 280). Therefore, she described all necessary strategies in her writing to empower women. In her several pieces, Rokeya indicates that women's empowerment cannot be achieved without proper education and employment. She noticed that women were not serious about their careers. In fact they did not think of a career. Rokeya marked this as a vulnerable condition and thus advised women to be serious about their career and to take all necessary steps in order to be equal with their male counterparts in the field of employment. In *Stree Jatir Abanati*, she encouraged women to participate in different fields of works that are generally dominated by men. She advised women to be clerks, magistrates, barristers, judges and entrepreneurs. She dreamt that after fifty years a lady would be the viceroy of this country (Hossain 2008a: 16).

3.5.4. Rectify the unnatural practice of seclusion:

Rokeya was not against the Islamic rule of *pardah*. She maintained *pardah* throughout her life. However, she was against the unnatural practice of the rule or the exaggeration of the actual rule. In her piece *Burqa*, Rokeya advised us to rectify the unnatural practice of seclusion or, to stop the exaggeration of the practice of seclusion/*pardah* that prevailed in the Muslim society of her time. In the essay, she cleared her position that she was not in favour of abolition of the Islamic practice of seclusion, but wanted to remove the artificial and exaggerated part of the practice.

In the essay, Rokeya clearly explains what is meant by artificial forms of *pardah*. In certain families young girls never get to meet anybody except their very close female relatives—It is an artificial form of *pardah*. According to the social customs, for the first few months after marriage, the newly married girls are forced to behave like inanimate dolls—that is another form of artificial *pardah*. In brief, any kind of practice of seclusion that may create hindrance

to women's education and work or to gender equality should be considered as artificial form of purdah. She comments that these artificial forms of *purdah* must be made more moderate. She further says that it is desirable that more women should emerge from seclusion and mix with one another. Men get to know persons from all walks of life and we women should do the same (Hossain 2008b: 24).

3.5.5. Get men involved and change their perception towards women's education:

Rokeya's writing refers that if male perception is averse to women's education, the project of creating gender equality will never see the light of success. That is why she tries her best in her writing to create a favourable male perception towards women's education. Rokeya cites different examples in her different pieces and shows how an educated wife is helpful for the family and what advantages this has in comparison to an uneducated wife. In *Burqa*, she makes a request to the men that instead of blindly wasting money on buying objects like gold and pearl ornaments to deck up their daughters, an effort should be made to use that money for their education, which would indeed be fitting ornament for them (Hossain 2008b: 26).

Through her writing, Rokeya tries her best to change knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of men in favour of women's education and development. However, she requests men not to treat women with charity that ultimately deprive them 'of the ray of knowledge and pure air, thereby pushing them towards a slow death.' Rokeya makes her appeal to men in this way (Hossain 2008a: 9): 'Please be charitable enough to not treat us with charity.'

Wrapping up Chapter Three:

It is to be noted that Rokeya's thought on the importance of gender equality, forms of gender inequality, causes and consequences of gender inequality, and recommendations for

eradication of gender inequality were not limited to what I have discussed in this chapter. This is only a partial reflection of Rokeya's gender thought what I have observed by reading some of her selected texts. In order to explore Rokeya's gender thought to a full scale, one needs to research all of her texts.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

This thesis tries to explore Rokeya's writing and see it in the light of the theories of gender equality. I have observed that she has a dream regarding gender equality, i.e., establishing equal rights of women vis-à-vis their male counterparts in the society and politics of Bengal. Her dream urges women's liberty. Rokeya notes that liberty cannot be achieved without economic empowerment, and in order to achieve economic empowerment, there is no alternative to education. That is why she emphasizes on women's education in her writing.

I have noticed that Rokeya's writing is not merely a fiction. It represents the socio-economic condition of Bengal of the late 19th and the early 20th centuries. I have further noticed that her writing contains a long run mission and a revolutionary vision of achieving gender equality. As a result, study on Rokeya has never stopped. Rather, during the last two or three decades this has significantly increased.

Humanitarian, human rights and development workers can observe in Rokeya's writing the factual statement of gender based inequality of that period. This will help them to compare what progress has been made so far in order to eradicate existing gender inequalities, and what limitations still exist. To this end I hope that apart from the academic purposes, this dissertation will be useful for the professional purposes too.

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