



**The Writings of Rokeya Hossain:
A pioneer of her time whose writings hold relevance today**

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Preface

I chose to write on the subject of Muslim women because of three significant events in my own personal life. The first incident was after September 11, 2001, when my mother was harassed by neighbors and strangers on the street. At the time she would wear the hijab (head scarf) and after 9/11 the climate in New York was tinged with hysteria and hate. In fear for her safety and her family, my mother made the decision to stop wearing the hijab. After 9/11, we moved to North Carolina in 2003. This is where the second significant event took place. For a week, a police car parked outside our home and watched us until my father reached out to his colleagues in law enforcement about being unnecessarily monitored. Eleven years later, the final significant event was the Chapel Hill shooting and the biased media coverage. I clearly remember local news outlets reporting that this was a “parking related incident.” There was only one source that reported that Craig Hicks invaded Deah and Yusor’s apartment and then shot them fatally. The problem of media bias is another topic to explore, but in this paper I want to write from a place where war propaganda has not touched the mind. This paper reflects a continuing struggle of what many Muslim women have experienced. In essence, this paper will explore the representations of Muslim women that I have questioned for over a decade as a Muslim American.

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Abstract

The goal of this paper is to analyze selected works of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and to discuss the importance of her works and her impact on the feminist movement in India before partition. Rokeya Hossain was born in 1880 and died in 1932. She did not receive traditional schooling due to a variety of factors including culture, religion and seclusion practices. However, she was tutored by her brother and later supported by her husband in her writing endeavors. In this paper, I will examine her translated works and discuss her impact on Indian society. As a Muslim woman in the early twentieth century, Rokeya Hossain faced multiple challenges from members of the Muslim community and members of Indian and British society. Despite facing this backlash, Rokeya Hossain successfully founded a school for girls and was part of a transnational movement that championed women's rights. After discussing the contributions of Rokeya Hossain in Indian society, I will discuss the impact of her work as a Muslim woman who was a feminist, educator and social reformer. Finally, I will discuss what Rokeya Hossain's writings have to offer the West and why her writings have been relatively absent from literary circles. From the perspective of a Muslim woman, I will also point out how Rokeya Hossain shatters the stereotypes of Muslim women being perceived as weak and veiled victims.

Rokeya Hossain Selected List of Literary Works

Motichur Volume 1: (1904)

Istrijatir Abanati (Women's Downfall)

Ardhangi (The Female Half)

Griha (Home)

Sultana's Dream (1908)

Motichur Volume 2: (1922)

Gyanfal (The Knowledge Fruit)

Nari-Srishti (The Creation of Woman)

Srishti-Tantbo (The Theory of Creation)

Murder of Delicia

Padmarag (The Ruby) (1924)

Avarodhbasini (The Secluded Ones) (1931)

Introduction

Rokeya Hossain and her works are still relatively unknown in the United States. One of the goals of this project is to introduce her works and her activity during a movement that brought the condition of Indian women to the forefront. Rokeya Hossain's writings were a reflection of a grassroots movement to address the lack of education amongst Muslim women in British India—specifically Bengal India. The caricature of Muslim women in the early twentieth century has ties to stereotypes of Muslim women today. The depiction of Muslim women in mainstream Western media is that of women who are oppressed and need emancipation by their Western counterparts. Under the guise of women's rights, the United States has invaded Iraq and Afghanistan to liberate Iraqi and Afghani women. The ideology that Muslim women need to be saved has contributed to perpetual wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Middle East region.

The hijab, also known as the veil, has been a symbol of oppression in the West. Further examination of historical context can help non-Muslim readers understand how Muslim women are continuously depicted as women who have little freedom, are docile, and lack free will. It is necessary to reevaluate these perceptions by analyzing the writings from Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (R.S. Hossain). Her writings will help open up possibilities for new perceptions and for understanding across Muslim and non-Muslim women. Rokeya Hossain's contributions also provide insight into Indian feminist dialogue and address underlying Western feminist arguments that Muslim women need saving through Western feminist ideology. Rokeya Hossain uses Islamic feminism to protest patriarchy in society and calls upon Muslim women to challenge the patriarchal interpretation of religion. She argues that Islam views men and women as equals and that women should mobilize to reassert this position. Her primary goal was to inspire women from all backgrounds and create an environment of sympathy and solidarity. She believed that India's Independence movement would benefit greatly if Indian men and women would work together to

overthrow British rule. Hossain's works inspire me—a Muslim woman in America, to address the narrative about Muslim women that has for too long been steeped in Islamophobia and Western feminism.

It is important to discuss the historical context of in, which Rokeya Hossain was writing her works. She was writing in the early twentieth century and belonged to a literary movement known as the Bengal Renaissance. Two areas in India became a hub for writers; this included Northern India and Bengal. Rokeya Hossain was writing in the same time period as Rabindranath Tagore—who later received the Nobel Peace Prize for his writings. The Bengal Renaissance was key in mobilizing India's independence movement and emancipation from England.

Throughout multiple chapters, I will explore a series of translated works by Rokeya Hossain. The first chapter will provide background information about Rokeya Hossain and details pertaining to her personal life as provided by her biographer: Roushan Jahan. The second chapter will delve into her translated works. Specifically, I will analyze *Avarodhbasini* and *Padmarag* to discuss areas of intersection and Rokeya Hossain's purpose in writing *Avarodhbasini* and *Padmarag*. Chapter three will discuss Rokeya Hossain's first foray into writing in English. Specifically, I aim to discuss *Sultana's Dream* as a feminist utopia. I will continue to explore Rokeya Hossain's writings in chapter four by evaluating her essays that were published as a collection known as *Motichur*. For the purposes of this paper, I will analyze selected works that were published in two volumes of *Motichur*. Rokeya Hossain's writings are a window into her activities as a Muslim woman in Bengal India. The final chapter will discuss Rokeya Hossain's contributions to society and how her writings are important in addressing the caricature of Muslim women. The final chapter, Rokeya Hossain—A Muslim Woman and The West, will discuss how she shattered stereotypes during a time where

women did not have the tools to pursue a proper education. In the conclusion, I will wrap up the paper by discussing the significance of her contributions in society and her legacy.

Chapter 1: Rokeya Hossain Biography and Literature

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was born sometime in 1880 in the district of Rangpur in a village called Pairaband in British Indian Empire. She was also known as Roquiah Khatun at birth. Her father Zahiruddin Mohammad Abu Ali Saber was well educated, bilingual and a landowner. Rokeya's father had four wives and her mother was Rahatunnessa Sabera Chowdhurani. Chowdhurani birthed two sons and three daughters, of which Rokeya was one. Chowdhurani's presence is felt in one of Rokeya's works called *The Secluded Ones*. This is the only book Rokeya dedicated to her mother. (Jahan, 2006, p. 23)

Figure 1: Rokeya S. Hossain a.k.a. Begum Rokeya



She grew up in a household where women were told to conform to purdah (veil) observance. From the age of five, women had to keep themselves sequestered from men and

strangers. Rokeya writes about the nature of purdah repeatedly in her works, but this account describes the strict nature of the custom:

I had to observe purdah even from woman from the age of five. I did not understand why it was improper to meet somebody, but I had to observe purdah. The inner side of the house was out of bounds for the menfolk; so I did not have to suffer by their presence. However, women freely entered the house, and I had to hide myself before they could see me. As soon as any woman of the locality would come, somebody of our house would give a signal with the eye and I would run pell mell and hide myself anywhere—in the nook of the kitchen, within the rolled up pallet of the maid-servant and sometimes under the bedstead. I had to run and hide myself just as the chicks do when their mother gives them the signal against a kite. But while the chicks had a definite place—their mother's wings—to hide, I had no such place. Moreover, the chicks understand their mother's signal instinctively. I had no such instinct, and if I failed to understand the signal of the eye and came across somebody, the well-wishing elders used to say "How shameless the girls have become!" (Joarder, 1980, p. 6)

Gender roles were strictly defined, and education was limited to reciting the Quran and etiquette lessons. During this time, the Muslim community was behind in areas of education and employment opportunities, which were primarily secured by the Hindus. This created economic and social strain that led to antiquated views towards women. During this time, the fight for India's independence against the British Empire created an environment where nationalistic interests superseded the rights of women. The British created a system in India where only a select population could hold positions of power in government. Primarily, elite men held these positions of power and designed the laws to suit their interests. When the British came to India, they came as colonizers and brought academics and intellectuals that would help make policies for the East India

Company. These group of British men were divided into two groups: Anglicists and Orientalists. Anglicists argued that government education in India should be solely taught in English, while the Orientalists argued that the government should continue instruction in Sanskrit, Arabic and English. The government decided to support the ideas of the Anglicists through the arguments of Thomas Babington Macaulay. Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859) made these arguments:

We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population.

(Hasan, 2012, pp. 181-183)

The British wanted to create a class of native informants that would imbibe British values and convince the indigenous population to accept colonial rule. The oppression under colonial rule created an environment in which Muslims and other minority groups were marginalized. This is one of many reasons why Rokeya Hossain created a movement for women's education because she did not have access to educational institutions. (Hasan, 2013, pp. 53-54)

Hossain had five siblings and grew up in a Muslim household where the women in the household were not encouraged to seek knowledge outside of the home. The case was different for Rokeya's brothers, as they were encouraged to seek higher education and went to college. The treatment of her eldest sister, Karimunnessa left a mark on Rokeya. Karimunnessa defied customs by learning Bangla. She would squat in the courtyard of the house and draw the Bangla alphabet with a stick as her younger brother taught her. One day, Karimunnessa's father discovered her reading a book in Bangla. At first, her father let her read but, after the malicious criticism of

relatives, she was sent to the estate of her maternal grandparents and married off by the age of fifteen.

After Rokeya saw her elder sister's potential squashed, she strengthened her resolve and began her fight against blindly observing customs, developing an insatiable thirst for knowledge. With the help of Ibrahim Saber—her elder brother, she learned Bangla and English and was fortunate to continue her educational pursuits when she married Sakhawat at the age of sixteen in 1896. Ibrahim Saber left an indelible mark in educating her and tutoring her at the cost of being discovered by their father. To prevent the ire from relatives and their parents, Ibrahim tutored Rokeya at night when the household would be asleep. With a deep sense of gratitude, Rokeya dedicated a paragraph of her only novel called *Padmaraga* with the following words: “You have moulded me from childhood...your love is sweeter than honey which after all has a bitter after-taste; it is pure and divine like Kausar [the stream of nectar flowing in heaven mentioned in the Quran]” (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 1988, p. 39).

Before we can begin to discuss Rokeya's works, it is important to discuss her life and what led her to become an influential feminist writer. Her literary career took place during the later part of the Bengal Renaissance. She was writing during the same time as Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), but her literature was focused on feminism. In the previous paragraphs, we have discussed Karimunnessa's life and the impact this had on Rokeya. Rokeya Hossain's life and writings have best been captured through Roushan Jahan's research. Roushan Jahan is a literary scholar and feminist researcher who examined writings by Rokeya Hossain and women's issues in Bangladesh. She taught English at The University of Dhaka, in Bangladesh, and studied at The University of Chicago. After teaching, she left in 1973 to cofound Women for Women, a research and study group in Bangladesh.

According to Jahan, Rokeya was determined to get an education and her brother was in favor of educating her because of his changing thoughts on women's rights to education. Rokeya's parents were fairly orthodox in making sure she limited her mental faculties to housework and memorizing the Quran. However, her brother hired a tutor to teach her skills beyond housework. To avoid the scrutiny of family members, Rokeya would only be tutored at night. Ibrahim Saber knew he wanted to steer Rokeya away from the fate of his eldest sister. A few years later, Ibrahim Saber met Sakhawat Hossain and played a role in having Rokeya marry him. In 1896, Rokeya married Khan Bahadur Syed Sakhawat Hossain, who was a Deputy Magistrate in The Bengal Civil Service. Eventually the couple settled in Bhagalpur, Bihar. Sakhawat was a widower and a man in his early thirties. Despite the age gap, he treated his wife with love and sympathy and encouraged Rokeya Hossain to write. By her description, he was unlike Rokeya's father. Sakhawat Hossain's educational background and his openness to Western thought enabled Rokeya to pursue her goals. He also encouraged Rokeya to meet with women of her class, including Hindu and Christian women. (Jahan, 2006, pp. 51-52)

Rokeya also gives great credit to her husband as a supporter of her writing: "If my dear husband had not been so supportive, I might never have written or published anything" (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 1988, pp. 2-3). On the insistence of her husband, Rokeya continued honing her writing skills and eventually, in 1903-1904, published articles in journals in Calcutta on the oppression of women. She was aware of the fact that women in all patriarchal societies are exploited and oppressed, but felt a need to shed light on women of her group. After losing two children in infancy, Hossain faced deep loss. But she was persuaded by her husband to continue her intellectual pursuits. With continued support from her husband, she published and wrote extensively. She garnered attention when *Sultana's Dream* was published in 1905 in *The Indian Ladies Magazine*.

Despite her literary success, Rokeya was devastated in 1907 when her husband was diagnosed with diabetes. An excerpt from one of Rokeya Hossain's letters describes her evolving role from wife to caretaker on April 30, 1931:

In childhood, I was deprived of my father's love, while my married life was devoted to nursing my husband through his illness. Every day, I checked his urine, prepared his food and wrote to his doctor. Twice, I became a mother, but the joy of holding my babies to my breast was short-lived. One left me at the age of five months; the other died when it was four months old. And for twenty-two years, I have been suffering the torment of widowhood. (R.S. Hossain & Bagchi, 2005, pp. vii-ix)

His condition continued to worsen and his eyesight began to fail him. This left Rokeya the task to take care of his official and personal correspondence in English. In 1909, Rokeya's husband passed away in Calcutta, and he left Rokeya a sum of money to start a girl's school in Bhagalpur. Almost a year later, Rokeya severed ties with her husband's family in Bhagalpur to settle in Calcutta due to increasing hostility. From her husband's side of the family, relatives were not supportive of her wishes to create a girl's school and enmity between relatives forced Rokeya to reconsider her stay in Bhagalpur. In 1911, Rokeya opened the Sakhawat Memorial Girl's School in Calcutta on March 16 with eight pupils. Rokeya briefly stayed with her mother in Calcutta up until her death and later met her younger sister Humaira. Humaira Chowdhury was a widower and later became Rokeya's companion in Calcutta. With no teaching experience, managing the girl's school constantly proved a challenge for Rokeya. She did not let this faze her, as she visited girl's schools in Calcutta to learn from the principals and observe how to run a school.

Upon the success of the girl's school in 1915, Rokeya created the Bengali Muslim Women's Association also known as Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam. This association gave women a chance to congregate and discuss important women's issues. She especially reached out to women

of the poor class and offered financial assistance to poor widows, rescued and sheltered wives that were victims of domestic violence, and provided matrimonial and educational services. With eighty-four students compared to the eight students four years prior, Rokeya relocated to a bigger building and managed all aspects of the school from teaching to transportation. By 1930, the girl's school became a high school where the curriculum included subjects such as physical education, handicrafts, sewing, cooking, nursing, home economics, and gardening, as well as courses in Bangla, English, Urdu, Persian and Arabic. Vocational training was also provided, because Rokeya believed that this would enable girls to use their gifts to help, rather than to be considered a burden to their families. After struggling to attract people to support her cause, the girl's school was later visited by prominent figures such as Lady Chelmsford, who was the wife of the Governor General and Viceroy of India. Rokeya Hossain was in a position where she kept abreast of feminist movements abroad and was familiar with European feminist movements. Other distinguished visitors included: Agha Khan, Sir Abdur Rahim and Moulana Mohammad Ali. A majority of Rokeya's efforts were met with criticism from traditionalists, men, and women. A criticism of Rokeya Hossain was that she was from the landowning elite and she had the resources to write about women's issues and create a school. She also had a network where she could work with women from different backgrounds to further her cause. However, the fruits of her labor paid off, and the Anjuman's activities made prominent figures notice her work and dedication towards the girl's school.

These visitors participated at the girl's school and helped Rokeya in 1917. Eight years later, she presided over the Bengal Women's Education Conference in Calcutta. She called out both Muslim men and women for paying little respect to the fact that female education was part of a religious duty to acquire knowledge. At the time, opportunities for female education were so extremely low that there was not one Muslim female amongst the score of college graduates. Her presidential speech painted a grim picture of female education for Muslims in Bengal: "Why are the

Muslims who are ready to sacrifice their lives for supposed insult to the prophet (or to a piece of brick of an old mosque) reluctant to obey his command (in respect of female education)?” (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 1988, p. 40).

Along these lines, Rokeya calls out Muslim men for not following the teachings of Islam; justifying misogyny through the guise of religion. She continues in the next passage and holds Muslim men responsible for failing to do their part in maintaining gender equality. In the quote below, she denounces the idea that women are inferior to men and adds that the oppression of women goes against Islamic teachings:

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

(Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 1988, p. 41)

She concluded that “men are using religion as an excuse to dominate us at present....Therefore we should not submit quietly to such oppression in the name of religion” (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 1988, pp. 41-42). Rokeya saw men as cowards when they went against female education. The same view was held for women that were unsupportive of Rokeya’s cause. Her thoughts are best summarized here when she talks about collecting shells across India and also collecting complaints from other folks: “While travelling in Karseong and Madhupur I collected beautiful coloured stones. And from the sea shores of Orissa and Madras, I picked up shells of different sizes and colours. But I picked up only the curses of the kath-mollahs after rendering social services for twenty-five years” (Joarder, 1980, p. 23). The hullabaloo after the publishing of *Sultana’s Dream* led to Rokeya publishing another short story titled *Sristi Tawtho (Theory of Creation)*. In this short story, she details a story of a deity and its efforts in creating females and males. Males are

described as complex with reptilian and predatory features, whereas females are described as created from light and wholesome materials. Rokeya's most important comments on education were based on the belief that women are equal to men, and that being independent thinkers would give women control over their lives instead of being a burden to their husband or family. She says the following on the path women must take towards independence:

We shall do whatever is needed to be done to attain equality with man. If earning our livelihood independently ensures our freedom, we shall do that. If necessary, we shall be lady-clerk, lady-magistrate, lady barrister, lady-judge—everything. Fifty years from now, there will be a lady-Viceroy who would transform all the women into 'queens.' Why should we not earn? Don't we have hands, feet, intelligence? What is that we don't have? Could not we direct the labour that we give in keeping the husband's house to run an independent business?

If we can not get employment in the offices of the government, we will take to agriculture. Why do you cry for not being able to find a bridegroom for your daughter? Give proper education to your daughters and let them earn their own livelihood. (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 1988)

In the final years of her life, Rokeya delivered a speech at the Sakhawat School titled: "The Bengali Muslims on Their Way to Decline." In 1932, Rokeya led the Indian Women's Conference in Aligarh. She died on the 9th of December that year. At fifty-two years old, she wrote her last piece titled *Narir Adhikar (Rights of Women)*. She was mourned by many Hindu and Muslim social workers. Burial services took place, and she was buried at Syedpur in a Muslim cemetery near Calcutta. After her death, *The Monthly Mohammadi* published a special memorial issue.

Through her writings, Rokeya challenged long-standing notions about women and argued that providing education for women would be advantageous for society. She strongly believed that an educated woman would be beneficial to her community and her family. Her writings are a reflection of her thoughts on the plight of the Indian woman. Her literary activities spanned three decades, from 1903-1932, in which she became an influential speaker for the rights of women and living example of her works. She mainly focused on women's issues and discussing and solving social problems relating to Bengali Muslims. One of these issues was a woman's right to education. Rokeya placed great importance on education and addressed antiquated attitudes from Muslim men here:

Most of the people are so prejudiced against female education that the very term makes them shudder with all the possible evil effects. The society might forgive the pitfalls of uneducated women, but the slightest mistake—real or imaginary—on the part of a woman with some education is magnified hundredfold, and laying all the blame at the door of education they shout in one voice “down with female education” (Joarder, 1980).

She also believed that education was a necessary mental exercise that was important for a woman's development. In her words, “God has given us hands, feet, ears, mind and ability to think. If we strengthen our hands and feet through exercise, do good work through our hands, make use of our ears and develop our ability to think that is true education” (Joarder, 1980, p. 24). Rokeya would often focus her writing to address the immediate need for women's awakening, Muslim awakening in Bengal and Bengal's awakening in matters of women's rights. Rokeya writes about the degraded status of women in *Stree Jatir Abanati*, about the evolution of man into a being who subordinates women through intellectual and physical prowess. (Joarder, 1980, p. 20) In a series of reports, Rokeya also depicted the degraded status of women in *Griha (Home)*, *Ardhangi*, *Muktipal*,

Aborodbbhasini, Padmarag (Ruby), Bbrata bbagni and Nari Sristi. If one were to summarize Rokeya's writings, the essays of *Motichur* could be condensed as such:

1. Even though women are economically dependent on men, women are not inferior to men. With equal opportunity, women can easily be equals to men.
2. By secluding women at home, men are depriving women of opportunities through which they can enrich their minds and gain employment. Continued seclusion of women only makes women dependent and inferior.
3. By using social control, men dominate over women through methods of seclusion and socialization.
4. Men deprive women of their rights by using laws and taking advantage of a woman's vulnerabilities.
5. Depriving half of the society of personal development and growth is detrimental to the entire society.
6. Continued seclusion and deprivation of education makes women unable to think critically. Also, this makes women physically weak and unable to fulfill their roles as housewives and mothers sufficiently.
7. To end the appalling state that women are in, women must have access to education, and freedom from purdah that is rooted in seclusion.
8. Society will benefit from women that are educated; they will be more useful to society and men (Joarder, 1980, p. 21).

This later led to addressing a multitude of women's issues in Bengali society. Rokeya Hossain addressed issues from matrimonial rights, education rights, property rights as well as tying the upliftment of women to India's independence movement. She strongly believed that women would be key in India's independence movement, as it would take the entire nation to overcome

colonial rule. She later mobilized by forming the Anjuman, and tackled social issues from literacy to health. Her views on females getting higher education was published in a long story titled *Sourajagata* (*The Galaxy*). In this story, Rokeya makes a father of nine girls the main protagonist that is championing for female education. The parents want to send their children to a school run by missionaries. However, superstitious characters such as Jafar and Nurjahan oppose the idea of having their nieces get an education because of the fear of their converting to Christianity. However, Rokeya concludes her story by emphasizing that being educated does not mean stepping away from religion. She argues that the beauty of education is being able to understand and comprehend one's religion by exercising our mental faculties given by God. She remarks here: "God has given us hands, feet, ears, mind and ability to think. If we strengthen our hands and feet through exercise, do good work through our hands, make good use of our ears and develop our ability to think that is true education" (Jahan, 2006, p. 27).

Her main concern was the stress and change of Indian Muslims under colonial rule. In 1903 Rokeya published five articles titled: *Strijatir Abanati* (*The Degradation of Women*), *Ardhangi* (*The Female Half*), *Sugribini* (*The Good Housewife*), *Borka* (*The Cloak*), and *Griha* (*Home*)—which discussed purdah and seclusion extensively. These works were later collected into a book in 1908 titled *Motichur*. Other works included *Pipasa* (*Thirst*), *Murder of Delicia*, *Padmarag* (*The Ruby*), *Sultana's Dream* and *Abarodh Bashini* (*Those Behind the Curtain*). Impressively, Rokeya translated Corelli's *Murder of Delicia* to relate to struggles of women in the West. The conclusion Rokeya reaches in regards to treatment of women in the West is best captured here: "Alas, law aids those who have money and influence. It is not meant to help vulnerable women like us" (Jahan, 2006, pp. 27-28).

Her collection of essays and short stories were published in two volumes. The first volume of *Motichur* was published in 1905. Stories in this volume addressed issues such as the mental and physical degeneration of women and the excesses amongst women and men. In *Griha*

(Home), Rokeya agrees that there is no place like home, but male relatives try to diminish a woman's right of her home. The second volume was published sixteen years later in 1921 and was dedicated to her elder sister. Stories included a translation of Corelli's *Murder of Delicia*, and three folk tales known as *The Fruit of Wisdom*, *The Creation of Women* and *The Fruit of Deliverance*. A long story was also published called *Nurse Nelli* on the topic of childcare. Three books—*Padmarag*, *Abarodb Bashini* and *Sultana's Dream* – also followed. In *Padmarag (Ruby)*, Rokeya places importance on the economic independence of women. *Abarodb Bashini (Those Behind the Curtain)* details 47 reports of women in confinement and the inhumanity of life in seclusion. *Sultana's Dream* is a feminist utopia in which Rokeya reverses the purdah system in which women are the primary decision makers. *Sultana's Dream* was an innovative, imaginative science fiction approach to women's social issues.

Her concern for Muslim women also led her to become well informed about exploitation and oppression of women in other groups. Rokeya Hossain discusses the oppression of women in *The Secluded Ones*, in which Rokeya details purdah of Muslim and Hindu women. Her views on purdah were as follows: “By purdah I mean covering the body well, not staying confined” (Joarder, 1980). Bringing women out from seclusion was one of Rokeya's priorities. Naysayers repeatedly thwarted her continued efforts, but eventually attitudes towards purdah grew more moderate. Rokeya did not limit her social struggles exclusively to women's rights; she was known as a social reformer. She was distressed to see the suffering of peasants and social practices that were harmful to society (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 1988).

One particular case was her thoughts on the condition of the peasantry. Specifically, she remarked about the fact that villagers were willing to pay more money to buy cloth that the British were producing mechanically. This cloth became known as Assam Silk, which was exported to India by the British. Sarcastically, Rokeya says: “We began to consider it fashionable to buy suits made of Assam silk from the fashionable stores in Calcutta as our great masters—the masters for

one hundred and fifty years—prepared their coats and skirts with it” (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 1988, p. 52). Rokeya Hossain was pointing out the misplaced priorities of the Indian elite. The Indian elite placed their priorities by chasing after superficial pursuits instead of helping impoverished Indian peasants.

After Rokeya’s death, information about her life has been scarce. *Rokeya Jiboni (the life of Rokeya, 1937)*, *Rokeya Rachanabali (1973)*, and *Rokeya Parichiti (1965)* are the only works available about her life. According to Roushan Jahan, a scholar who translated *Sultana’s Dream*, students and researchers have neglected Rokeya Hossain. Rokeya Hossain has a college named after her, but Bangladeshis pay lip service to her memory; only a selected number of essays are taught in schools and colleges. In a short amount of time, Rokeya published extensively, yet it seems there is more that must be uncovered about her writings in the West.

Chapter 2: Analyzing Avarodhbasini and Padmarag

This section of the paper explores two works by Hossain titled *Padmaraga* and *Avarodhbasini*. I explore these texts here due to their difference in writing style. In *Avarodhbasini*, I will examine the reports Rokeya Hossain compiled to describe the plight of Indian women in society. Later in this section, I will discuss the significance of *Padmarag* as being a work where Rokeya Hossain makes a case for women's independence being tied to India's independence from England. In *Padmarag*, Rokeya Hossain hints at a feminist movement that is grassroots and is based upon sympathy and solidarity amongst all women and points out that patriarchal oppression is present everywhere. It is also important to examine that Rokeya Hossain faced backlash from her community for her beliefs that women should be given the equal opportunity to pursue an education like a man. *Padmarag* also known as *Padmaraga*, was published in 1924 in Bengali and was Hossain's lesser known work. *Padmarag* is a feminist utopia that follows the lives of women in Tarini Bhavan. These women come from different backgrounds and Hossain purposefully makes her characters diverse. She endeavors to show that all these women are subjected to patriarchal oppression. In this novella, Hossain aims to show how education and philanthropic efforts of running a girl's school helps to bring women together to become providers. (Jahan, 2006)

If one talks about *Padmarag*, it is also important to discuss *Avarodhbasini*. *Avarodhbasini* was published in 1931 in Calcutta, India. At this time, Hossain was established as a writer and *Avarodhbasini* became a revolutionary piece. *Avarodhbasini* was a collection of forty-seven reports documenting purdah and seclusion customs all over Northern India, and quickly became dubbed as "the first history of the oppression suffered by the secluded women of India" (Begama Rokeyā, 1981). If *Padmarag* captured the plight of the women in Tarini Bhavan, then *Avarodhbasini* was a series of reports that addressed the issue of seclusion and purdah to the Bengali Muslim society (Joarder, 1980). *Padmaraga* is a fictional work, and *Avarodhbasini* is a nonfiction work that

captures the daily life of women. Comparing and contrasting these works above will provide a lens into Hossain's writing as well as give insight into her personality.

Avaroddbasini, translated as “*Inside Seclusion or The Secluded Ones*,” was published in a periodical magazine called the *Monthly Mohammadi* in 1929 and later published in 1931 in Calcutta. The translation by scholar Roushan Jahan provides a look into the writings of Rokeya Hossain. Jahan best summarizes the importance behind *Avaroddbasini* here:

The *Avaroddbasini*, the only book documenting purdah practices to be written in Bengali by a Bengali Muslim woman, is a source book of immense value. It is unique as it offers an insider view of purdah as it was practiced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal. There are accounts of seclusion left by foreign men and women. But Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Avaroddbasini* was a critical account written by a purdah nashin [observing] Muslim woman. As such, it deserves to be better known and widely circulated. (R.S. Hossain & Bagchi, 2005)

In 1931, *Avaroddbasini* was published as a book in Calcutta and was met with mixed reviews. In the introduction of the text, Rokeya Hossain was congratulated and seen as courageous for writing a book that will be eye-opening for society. However, she was also met with criticism that led to critics discrediting her work as fictitious. While *Avaroddbasini* addressed the issue of seclusion and purdah in a collection of eyewitness accounts, *Padmaraga*, published in 1924, was a work of fiction and a feminist utopia that addressed the issue of seclusion and purdah through storytelling. (Begama Rokeyā, 1981) provides a condensed review of Hossain's *Padmarag* in the following words:

She manifested this vision in the novella *Padmarag* or *Ruby*, an extraordinarily realistic feminist utopia, the story of which revolves around an institution called *Tarini Bhavan* which caters to oppressed and battered women from diverse religions, regions, and ethnicities who

have nowhere else to go. It is founded and run efficiently by women who have striven hard to rise above their circumstances. These are the women who have seen it all –cruel and cunning husbands and in-laws, indifferent parents who don't spare a thought for their daughters' education or welfare, and scheming relatives and landlords who have no qualms about duping women of their property and inheritance. Tarini Bhavan is a nunnery or ashram like asylum comprised of a school and a workshop or training institute where all destitute women get training on a veritable compendium of the various marketable skills such as bookbinding, sewing, spinning, sweet-making, typing, nursing and even teaching so that they can use their skills in the real life world to earn a living for themselves.

(Begama Rokeyā, 1981)

From this point, it is important to compare this passage to her personal goals. Tarini Bhavan served as a blueprint for women's emancipation for Rokeya Hossain. Upon further analysis, Tarini Bhavan was more than a place where women could seek independence. In the beginning of the novella, Rokeya Hossain emphasized the importance of the women's movement for independence being tied to India's freedom from England. She espoused her nationalistic views by taking a more secular approach to Indian independence. She explained her thoughts by equating the major religions to different levels in a house. Each level had a religion and factions amongst those religions. However, the final floor of the house was a place where everyone believed in God. According to this analogy, she believed that the Indian community should focus on the similarities instead of the differences. She emphasized that the similarities between Indian people would help create a united movement for India's independence. Rokeya Hossain argued that the Indian community use religion as a reason to unite instead of divide and tear each other apart. (R.S. Hossain & Bagchi, 2005)

When Rokeya Hossain was operating her school, she specifically designed her school as a place where women could become self-reliant and this similarity or inspiration can be tied back to Rokeya Hossain's writing about Tarini Bhavan in *Padmarag*. Specifically, comparing these texts by Rokeya Hossain helps readers to understand her as a writer. *Padmarag* is fiction and Avarodhbasini is nonfiction, yet both texts address seclusion, purdah, women's rights and the treatment of women. The first instance where both texts come to a crossroad is the establishment of a school for women. In the fictional work of *Padmaraga*, an excerpt on Dina Tarini mirrors Hossain's aspirations for women's education. In *Padmaraga* we learn about the valiant efforts of Dina-Tarini here:

Going against the wishes of her brothers-in-law, the older and the younger, and those of other relatives, Dina-Tarini set up a home for widows. She named it Tarini Bhavan.

Encouraged by its success, she established a school and formed a society called the Society for the Upliftment of Downtrodden Women. Located at one end of the huge mansion housing Tarini Bhavan was the girls' school; at the other end stood the home for widows.

But as time went by, Dina-Tarini also felt impelled to found a Home for the Ailing and the Needy next to it. (Miah, 2014)

Dina-Tarini is an important character in *Padmaraga* that also faces backlash from members in her society. Dina-Tarini is a reflection of Rokeya Hossain and her battles against members in her community. In the chapter titled "Holding Court in School," the criticisms and complaints flung towards Dina-Tarini are evident:

Tarini: 'Spare us Padmarag! Leave aside the terms of address. Just read out parts of the letter and the name and address of the sender.'

Siddika: Why did my daughter, Urmila, not receive a prize this time? Your stock answer is: 'She hasn't come first or second in the exam.' But whose fault is it that she didn't? You

know how to extort money all year long, but are unaware that there are attendant duties as well. I won't take this as far as I could, simply out of deference to your status as a woman.

Letter Number Two: My daughter, Zuleikha, has been a student of your school from the age of five. Every year, she would come first in the annual examination. Since she has been absent from school for around nine months this year, you have not given her a prize. What sort of judgement is this? With this kind of inferior intellect, only to be seen in women, how do you expect to make any progress? Now, had a man been a member of the school's executive committee, he could have shown you how a school ought to be run.

Letter Number Three: Please strike the name of my daughter, Nirupuma, off the rolls. A teacher of yours called Bibha had glared at her on prize-distribution day because she had been talkative. If I could get a hold of that teacher, I would put out her eyes...

Letter Number Four: Why set up a school if you don't know how to run it? Only to make a name for yourself? My daughter, Prabhati, has been a student there for three months. She has neither been promoted nor has she received anything from the school except a doll.

Letter Number Five: My daughter, Abbasi, has been studying in your school for three months; she still hasn't learnt how to spell correctly.

Letter Number Six: My daughter, Atifa Begum, still wets her bed. Can't you discipline her a bit? If not, what kind of education are you giving them at school?

Letter Number Seven: It is unfortunate that the government has no authority over your school. Otherwise, I would really show you what's what. My daughter, Manorama, has been going to school for the last two months. Till date, she hasn't learnt to dot her i's and cross her t's.

Letter Number Eight: My daughter, Prajnasundari, is disobedient. She abuses her mother. The state of her reading and writing, like her conduct, leaves much to be desired. It would be better if such famous schools as yours did not exist.

Letter Number Nine: My daughter, Saramasundari, is a student of the matric class in your school. A certain junior teacher of yours called Sarada struck her because she quarreled and fought with the other girls on the day of the prize distribution. Sarada could have reported the matter to you. Why did she take the law into her own hands, instead? Because of this serious criminal assault on Sarama, I am compelled to file a criminal case against Sarada and name you as witness. PS: If you mete out appropriate punishment to Sarada and render your apologies to me, I may let you off.

Letter Number Ten: My darling child, Lila, has received nothing but a doll from your school. She has cried her eyes out. Your school does not come under the purview of the government-run institutions. Otherwise, I would have exposed what kind of school you run! The uncle of the father-in-law of the second cousin of my uncle by marriage is the education minister's own brother-in-law. (Miah, 2014, p. 7)

Dina-Tarini is lambasted and seen as unfit to run a girl's school. None of her efforts are appreciated towards creating a place where women and girls can prosper. By including these letters in *Padmarag*, Rokeya Hossain provides insight into the unrealistic expectations from her community. Rokeya Hossain chooses to write about letters in this form to showcase the struggles that come with being an administrator in a school. For instance, letter number six relates to a behavioral problem in which the child wets her bed. Letter number nine and ten show the behavior of the parents as threatening, unappreciative and disrespectful. The criticism she faced from her community was an important part of her writing.

A similar criticism is also seen in *Avarodhbasini* when Hossain recounts her experience of running a girl's school in report 13 :

Dear readers, I would like to let you know of something that has happened today (June 28, 1929). The father of one of my students has sent a letter of complaint to me. He writes me that the school bus does not enter their street. Therefore, his daughter, Hira, has to walk home with her maid from the corner where the bus stops. Yesterday, on her way, she was pushed by a man who was carrying a cup of tea. The tea spilled and stained her dress.

I asked one of the teachers to enquire into the matter. Her report (in Urdu) is as follows: "I found out that Hira's burqa had no opening in front. The other girls reported that she was usually led and almost carried home by her maid. Since Hira's burqa is a "blind" one, she was unable to walk properly. Another time, she stumbled against a cat. On the day in question, it was actually Hira herself who stumbled against the fellow carrying a tea cup."

Just imagine! Hira is a girl of nine only! Even a little girl like her must use a "blind" burqa— or else we flout the great custom of purdah! (R.S. Hossain & Bagchi, 2005, p. 27)

The mounting criticism and lack of support from members in her society comes to the forefront in report 47 of *Avarodhbasini*. In this report, Hossain recounts:

In the words of a poet:

Not fiction, not poetry, this is life.

No theatre this, but my real house!

[Source unknown]

Only three years ago, we had our school bus. The day before the bus came, one of our teachers, an English woman had gone to the auto depot to inspect the bus. Her comment was, "This bus is horribly dark inside...Oh no! I'll never ride that bus!" When the bus

arrived, it was found that there was a narrow lattice on top of the back door and the front door. Excepting these two lattice-work, three inches wide and eighteen inches long, the bus could be called completely “air tight!”

The bus reached the girls to their homes that first afternoon. The maid, accompanying the girls, reported after she came back that it was terribly hot inside the bus. The girls were very uncomfortable. Some of them vomited. Some of the little girls were whimpering in the dark...

The next evening, I had four letters.

The writer of the letter written in English had signed himself, “Brother-in-Islam.” The other three were in Urdu. Two of these letters were anonymous. The third one had five signatures. The import of all four letters was the same—all of them were from well-wishers. For the continuing welfare of my school they were informing me that the two curtains hanging by the side of the bus moved in the breeze and made the bus purdah-less. If something better was not arranged by tomorrow, they would be compelled, for the benefit of the school, to write in the various Urdu newspapers about this purdah-lessness and would stop the girls from riding in such a purdah-less bus.

What a dilemma I was in—

If I don’t catch the cobra

The King will have my head—

If caught carelessly

Surely the cobra’d bite me!

I do not think anyone else had tried to catch such a cobra [the irate critics] to satisfy the whims of such a king. [the equally irate guardians]. On behalf of the women imprisoned in seclusion, I wish to say—Oh, why did I come to this miserable world,

Why was I born in a purdah country! (R.S. Hossain & Bagchi, 2005, pp. 134-136)

Hossain articulates her frustration in the final report of *Avarodhbasini* above, much differently than Dina-Tarini does in the chapter “Holding Court in School.” In this report, Hossain is fed up between trying to please the parents of the girls enrolled in her school and the religious well-wishers. She comments about being between a rock and a hard place in *Avarodhbasini* when she says: “If I don’t catch the cobra, the King will have my head.” The amount of pushback Hossain received when running the girl’s school is a major point in her writings. Her insistence in including her experiences in *Avarodhbasini* and *Padmaraga* paints two pictures. Hossain in *Avarodhbasini* is weary towards the end of her reports about life in seclusion, but through the character of Dina-Tarini in *Padmaraga* one can see a determined woman who does not let the critics stop her from doing what she wants. After Dina-Tarini reads all the letters, she addresses the concerns by being determined to answer the letters criticizing her ability to run a girl’s school (Begama Rokeyā, 1981, pp. 46-47).

From the excerpts above, we can see the similarities between *Avarodhbasini* and *Padmaraga* as works that are complementary. *Avarodhbasini* brings to attention the plight of Indian women in a society that has ignored their needs for too long. *Padmarag* serves as a continuation of a wider narrative that sets a plan in motion for women to gain independence through education that will be helpful to them and their families. *Padmaraga*, also known as *Padmarag*, narrated the story of multiple characters living in Tarini Bhavan. In this novel, Hossain discusses the relationship between a man and woman and the role society plays in the well being of a woman. This dynamic is seen through the characters of Siddika and Latif. In *Padmarag*, Hossain creates a character unlike the current women in her society. Siddika is well-read, educated and realizes her potential without the need of a man by her side. Siddika’s role in *Padmarag* is best summarized in a journal article titled: *The Begum’s Dream: Rokeya Hossain Sakhawat Hossain and The Broadening of Muslim Women’s Aspirations in Bengal*. Yasmin Hossain describes Rokeya Hossain’s fascination with making her main characters

strong females despite the stifling environment of seclusion. Hossain (1992) summarizes that: “The heroines in her fiction also act as role models. Siddika in *Padmaraga* is one such professional woman held up for emulation, as are the women in *Sultana’s Dream*, *Saura Jagat*, and *Bhrata Bhagini*, where she presents here readers with strong, independent and active characters. All of Rokeya Hossain’s heroines are educated women living out of seclusion, in relatively relaxed households or communities” (Begama Rokeyā, 1981, pp. 79-81).

If *Padmarag* is a narrative of women’s lives, *Avarodbbhasini* is Hossain’s way to question the practice of purdah and seclusion. In her reports in *Avarodbbhasini*, Hossain discusses the dire consequences of women living a life in seclusion. It is in report eleven that Hossain says the following during a visit to her granddaughters:

I could not stay in Mangu’s “cell” for long—I felt suffocated in that close room. I opened the windows but within a couple of minutes a haughty Begum walked over and closed the window, remarking curtly, “The bride is in the draught.” I had to leave the room. I failed to stay in Sabu’s cell even for a minute. Those poor girls, at that time, had already stayed in those rooms for six months. Ultimately, Sabu had a spell of acute hysteria. This is how we are trained to endure seclusion. (R.S. Hossain & Bagchi, 2005, p. 139)

Report eleven is one example of the effects of seclusion on women. Hossain addresses the custom of seclusion before marriage [maiya khana] in report twenty-seven here:

I am going to talk about something that happened only ten years ago...One such girl was compelled to stay in the maiya khana for six months. Her family neglected her. The people of Behar, generally, do not take regular baths. Who, then would bother to see that the girl confined in maiya khana has a daily bath? After all, some one would have to carry the girl to the bathroom since a prospective bride is forbidden to walk. Her movements are totally restricted. The whole day, she sits on a bed holding her head down. At night, she sleeps on

the same bed. Since she may not open her eyes, someone else has to feed her. Her hair may get all tangled—but she is not permitted to brush her own hair. She has to depend on others for the simplest of things. The eyesight of this girl was severely impaired because she kept them closed for such a long time. (Y. Hossain, 1992, p. 5)

Throughout multiple reports, Hossain describes the condition of women from being baggage to being of little importance to men and their families. This is narrated in report 22 when a gentleman on the train mistakes a passenger's wife for rolled up bedding. (Begama Rokeyā, 1981, p. 45)

Reports 26 and 30 also talk about women being married off without consent.

Avarodhbasini provides a grim picture of members in her society. Some of her critics were members in her own community, specifically conservative Muslims. (Begama Rokeyā, 1981, pp. 57-58) provides more details about Rokeya Hossain and her frustration with religious clerics on the issue of women's rights here: "She knew how Maulvi Abdul Hakim of the Calcutta Madrassah disagreed and summarily dismissed the idea of educating Muslim girls in an academic setting maintaining that the education provided at home was sufficient when the issue first raised at an assembly of the Bengal Social Science Association in 1867." This is why it is not surprising that another critic accused her of being influenced by Western thought. The critic said: "To her everything Indian is bad and everything Euro-American is good" (Begama Rokeyā, 1981, p. 54).

This view of *Avarodhbasini* is cursory and quite the opposite of what Rokeya Hossain was trying to accomplish. For further clarification, we can turn to *Padmarag* and the character of Helen Horace. Helen is one of the only characters in *Padmarag* that is an English woman or non-Indian. Helen's story of marriage and her failed relationship is narrated through Sakina:

Sakina: Helen-di had known Joseph Horace for three years before she married him. Having known him for so long, she trusted him completely and married him. They spent a year

together in utter bliss. She did not know at that time that all that glittered was not gold, but merely a temporary semblance of it.

From the second year of their marriage, Horace took to drink and other related vices. He would return home after midnight and seize on Helen as the butt of his drunken rages.

Subjecting her to his wrath and abuse was an everyday occurrence. At times, beatings would also ensue. Even today, she bears those scars on her person. She endured this physical and mental torture silently and tried her utmost to put his life back on track. Whenever he got the chance, he would escape. She would search high and low for him and bring him back home.

Siddika: Why did he escape?

In the excerpt above, Rokeya Hossain is using the story of Helen Harris to describe the continuing issues that women face in all societies. In the case of Helen, she is an Englishwoman that lives at Tarini Bhavan, Rokeya Hossain is addressing two issues. First, Rokeya Hossain is drawing similarities across race, class and societies by inferring that women are oppressed in every culture. Second, she is making a point about the treatment of English men towards Englishwomen. In Helen's narrative, Rokeya Hossain is stating that Englishwomen may have the freedom to make decisions, but English men have created a legal system that reasserts patriarchal oppression towards Englishwomen by treating them as property to men. Helen marries Horace after "having known him for three years," but what follows next is a relationship that keeps Helen chained to her alcoholic abuser. Rokeya Hossain continues describing details of Helen Harris' life in *Padmarag* here:

Sakina: To seek his own hell. He would drink himself unconscious. She would bring him back in that state. When he finally escaped from Hazaribagh, she could find no trace of him. Years later, a rumor made the rounds that he had killed a man in Kanpur and had been arrested by the police. Didi made her way there. When she arrived, she heard that a man

named Horace, proven to be incurably insane, had been shipped off to England. Helen-di too sold off all her worldly goods in desperation and followed in her insane husband's wake. When she arrived in England, she learnt that Horace had been caught in flagrante delicto with a young woman by the name of Riva Sanders and that after killing another man, had been locked up in Broadmoor Lunatic Asylum... (Miah, 2014)

Hossain's detailed description of Helen Horace continues and reaches a peak with Helen's unsuccessful attempts to obtain a separation from her murderous husband. Sakina narrates Helen's story once more: "In other words, English law was unable to release Helen-di from the embrace of a lunatic. Helen would have to endure the terrible consequences of living with a madman. What greater injustice or oppression could one possibly think of? This England –this noxious, putrid England—claims to be civilized!" (Begama Rokeyā, 1981, p. 28)

The characterization of Helen in *Padmarag* is Hossain's way of addressing her critics. It is clear that Hossain did not believe all was well for the Englishwoman; in fact she wanted to point out the hypocrisy of England and the way women were treated by men. Rokeya Hossain's argument was that the condition and treatment of women was not limited to her homeland. It was a global issue. Yasmin Hossain takes it a step further by describing Rokeya Hossain as such: "By depicting similarities between women everywhere, Rokeya Hossain aims to inspire a feeling of affinity and the need to act, not just for one's own, but for women of other countries and religions" (R.S. Hossain & Bagchi, 2005, pp. 95-96). Even though Helen Horace was depicted as having equal status with her husband, she was still at the mercy of English laws that were created by men. It is also at this point that Rokeya Hossain questions England's role as a civilized culture. Rokeya Hossain in *Padmarag* is clear about her thoughts on colonialism in her country and emphasizes the importance of history rooted in nationalism. Rokeya Hossain hints at an education system without the influence of the British system in *Padmarag* here: "The students were not forced to memorize

misleading versions of history and end up despising themselves and their fellow Indians. Greater emphasis was laid on ethics, religious studies and the inculcation of sound moral values” (R.S. Hossain & Bagchi, 2005, p. 96). On her thoughts about the British Empire, Rokeya Hossain was careful about her association with the British Empire. She made it clear that she did not want to continue the legacy of colonialism: “Special care was taken to ensure that handouts were not accepted from the ruling aristocracy of native Indian states that had declared their allegiance to the British Empire” (Y. Hossain, 1992, pp. 3-4). In *Padmarag*, Rokeya Hossain’s allegiance towards an India free from British rule is also as important as her struggle for female empowerment.

At this point, it is important to reiterate the differences and similarities between *Padmarag* and *Avarodhbasini*. In *Avarodhbasini*, Rokeya Hossain provides a firsthand account about the lives of women under seclusion. Hossain provides a lens into understanding life for women in seclusion and the negative effects this has on women. It is a call to conscience that strikes a chord and asks the reader to question the deplorable practice of seclusion. These reports, considered alone, leave much more to be desired. This is where we can turn to *Padmarag* for clarification on Rokeya Hossain’s views of her people and her ultimate goal. It is in *Padmarag* we can see Rokeya Hossain trying to portray the fight for women’s rights as universal. If *Avarodhbasini* provides factual reports, the role of *Padmarag* is a reminder for what needs to be done for women across lines of race, class and especially religion.

Rokeya Hossain envisions a world for women in *Padmarag* and *Avarodhbasini* in which women from all backgrounds have autonomy to make choices for their well-being. She envisions a place for women outside the “maiya khana” [a bride’s seclusion before her wedding] and being able to dedicate oneself to community without the fear of seclusion. Explicitly, Rokeya Hossain discusses adapting to changing times, and emphasizing Indian identity over British identity. In her thinking, a woman adheres to cultural practices but challenges her mind to battle mental slavery. Through

Padmarag, Rokeya Hossain provides the tools towards making a society for women where their contributions are appreciated. The sobering accounts in *Avarodhbasini* serves as a reminder of challenging the notions of seclusion when they interfere with a woman's ability to be a productive member in society.

Chapter 3: Sultana's Dream—A Feminist Utopia

In the previous section, we explored works such as *Padmarag* and *Avaroddbasini* to compare Rokeya's writing style and the different publications. In this chapter, we will continue to explore Rokeya Hossain's writings—specifically, *Sultana's Dream*. In *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya Hossain calls out the practice of seclusion as a form of protection as being ludicrous. In my analysis of *Sultana's Dream*, she is holding men accountable for creating a system in which men subjugate women on the basis of religion. Rokeya Hossain argues against a system that oppresses women and gives power and hierarchy to men. *Sultana's Dream* was one of Rokeya Hossain's English-language publications. Published in 1905, *Sultana's Dream* was featured in the *Indian Ladies Magazine* that was based in Chennai, India. Kamala Saththiandhan started *The Indian Ladies Magazine* in July 1901 and its audience was primarily women in India who could read in English and wanted to keep abreast of women's issues. (R.S. Hossain & Bagchi, 2005, pp. 30-31) Kamala Saththianadhan described the goal of *The Indian Ladies Magazine* in her first editorial here: "The main object of the magazine will be to help advance the cause of the women in India...The main influences that are at work in this land, have not appreciably affected the women, the men having benefitted more largely than the women in the matter of education and social development. If the people of India are to advance, they should realise that: 'the women's cause is man's; they rise or sink together'" (R.S. Hossain & Bagchi, 2005, p. 31).

Issues of the magazine were published late into 1910 and writers were women who had graduated from The University of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. In Rokeya Hossain's own words, *Sultana's Dream* was originally an act of idle exploration: "To pass the time, I wrote the story" (R.S. Hossain & Bagchi, 2005). *Sultana's Dream* was Rokeya Hossain's first foray into writing in English and it left an indelible mark as one of the only feminist utopia works to be published before her Western counterparts in English. The work also attracted reasonable attention on the issue of

seclusion, purdah and women's rights (Forbes & Forbes, 1999, p. 265). *Sultana's Dream* was considered a work "ahead of its time" and was published before Charlotte Gilman's Western, feminist utopian work *Herland* (1915). Gilman was an American feminist reformer from 1860-1935; she wrote essays and short stories on the topic of women's rights. In *Herland*, Charlotte Gilman removes men from society and envisions a world where women do not need men to reproduce. Gilman relies on pathogenesis to continue a society of women, whereas Rokeya Hossain places the men in seclusion and transfers power and privileges to women.

Sultana's Dream is a novella with a writing style reminiscent of *Gulliver's Travels* (1796). Researchers Anwar Dil and Afia Dil in *Women's Changing Position in Bangladesh: Tribute to Begum Rokeya* describe *Sultana's Dream* here: "It is a beautifully and powerfully written story against the oppression of women in the form of a delightful fantasy about a Utopian "Ladyland" where men rather than women were kept in seclusion. Women like men in other societies run the affairs of the country" (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 1988; Begama Rokeyā, 2013). Both have done extensive research on Rokeya Hossain and her writings.

For Rokeya Hossain, to write in English was an anomaly. She acknowledges her brother in teaching her English and consistently tutoring her in language. Yet *Sultana's Dream* became a pivotal and famous work in her career. Rokeya Hossain originally wrote the piece to pass the time until her husband would come home. When her husband did come back, she did the following:

"When Sakhawat came back after two days, the first thing he did was to ask casually what she had been doing in his absence. Rokeya then showed him the story and, wrapped with curiosity, Sakhawat read the whole piece without caring to sit down. When he finished, he mumbled, "A terrible revenge."

Sakhawat Rokeya Hossain was very impressed by his wife and took it upon himself to forward the story to ??? McPherson. McPherson was the divisional commissioner of Bhagalpur and commented on *Sultana's Dream* and replied to Rokeya Hossain's husband in a letter commenting his views here: "The ideas expressed in it are quite delightful and full of originality and they are written in perfect English...I wonder if she has foretold here the manner in which we may be able to move about in the air at some future time. Her suggestions on this point are most ingenious" (Dil & Dil). Rokeya was flattered by these comments and her husband was proud of his wife's attempt at writing in English. After receiving the encouraging remarks from McPherson, Sakhawat persuaded her to send the story to *The Indian Ladies Magazine*, which published the piece in 1905. Rokeya Hossain gained enough confidence as an author to submit *Sultana's Dream* for publication as a book. S.K. Lahiri and Company, based in Kolkata, published *Sultana's Dream* in book form in 1908.

On page fifty-seven of *Sultana's Dream*, I will summarize her story as a simple story of a woman that is dreaming and happens to visit a land where men are confined in a system called *mardana* and women bear the responsibility of advancement in society. The land is called "Ladyland," where there is law and order. The land is devoid of violence, corruption and crime. The people of "Ladyland" have learned to appreciate Nature and treat each other with respect and love. In "Ladyland," child marriage is banned and education is encouraged amongst women. Quayum, the editor of *The Essential Rokeya*, explains *Sultana's Dream* here: "In other words, the people of this land do not care about any extra-terrestrial power or adhering to a set of senseless rituals, but only the values that are directly beneficial to the human community and to the human soul" (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 1988, pp. 1-2).

Reactions to the publication of *Sultana's Dream* varied. One of her critics, Abul Hussain, compared the book to *Gulliver's Travels*. Admittedly, Rokeya Hossain referred to the book

in her essays, which can be referenced in *Motichur*. Hussain commented on the seclusion of men in “Ladyland” here:

It is a reaction to the prevailing oppression and vulnerability of our women.... Perhaps Mrs. R.S. Rokeya Hossain wrote this to create a sense of self-confidence among the very vulnerable Bengali women.... That women may possess faculties and talents equivalent to or greater than men—that they are capable of developing themselves to a stage where they may attain complete mastery over nature without any help from men and create a new world of perfect beauty, great wealth and goodness—this is what *Sultana’s Dream* depicts.... I hope the male readers of *Sultana’s Dream* would try to motivate the women of their families toward self-realization. Begama Rokeyā (2013)

It is important to examine Rokeya Hossain’s purpose in writing the novella. Rokeya Hossain wanted to motivate Bengali Muslim women towards a process of self-realization and lift the obstacles away that hindered women and society. *Sultana’s Dream* captures many issues regarding women’s rights, and reflects a relentless and lifelong battle against people in her society that limited women from being able to control their fate. “Ladyland” is Rokeya Hossain’s ideal of a place where women are free to be a part of society and innovate to their hearts’ content. It is a place where men are put in the zenana [seclusion] and where Rokeya Hossain addresses the contrast of personality between men and women.

Rokeya Hossain narrates the story through three main characters: Sultana, Sister Sara and The Queen. The first important part in *Sultana’s Dream* is the description of “Ladyland.” The setting in *Sultana’s Dream* is equally important as Rokeya Hossain describes the main character slumbering in a zenana [seclusion]. Sultana wakes up to find Sister Sara and follows her outside. This is where “Ladyland” is introduced to readers:

“Where are the men? I asked her.

In their proper places, where they ought to be.

Pray let me know what you mean by 'their proper places.'

O, I see my mistake; you cannot know our customs, as you were never here before. We shut our men indoors" (pp. 8-9).

Rokeya Hossain sets the tone of *Sultana's Dream* and the setting of "Ladyland" as a refuge where women have successfully freed themselves from the control of mankind. This is where you begin to see Rokeya Hossain envisioning a society for women where women are free to practice scholarly pursuits. *Sultana's Dream* is a form of continuing banter between Sultana and Sister Sara. In the excerpt below, both characters discuss the tradition of seclusion. The dialogue between Sister Sara and Sultana seems intentional. Rokeya Hossain is arguing about the shallow beliefs about women as being weak and the zenana [seclusion] as a form of protection for women. In the excerpt below, Rokeya Hossain cleverly makes this point below through Sister Sara:

But, dear Sultana, how unfair it is to shut in the harmless women and let loose the men.

Why? It is not safe for us to come out of the zenanas [seclusion], as we are naturally weak.

Yes, it is not safe so long as there are men about the streets, nor is it so when a wild animal enters a marketplace.

Of course not.

Suppose some lunatics escape from the asylum and begin to do all sorts of mischief to men, horses, and other creatures: in that case what will your countrymen do?

They will try to capture them and put them back up into their asylum.

Thank you! And you do not think it wise to keep sane people inside an asylum and let loose the insane?

As a matter of fact, in your country this very thing is done!

Men, who do or at least are capable of doing no end of mischief, are let loose and the innocent women shut up in the zenanas [seclusion]!

How can you trust those untrained men out of doors?

We have no hand or voice in the management of our social affairs. In India man is lord and master. He has taken to himself all powers and privileges and shut up women in the zenanas [seclusion]. (pp. 2-3)

It is interesting to note how Rokeya Hossain discusses the issue of power and how men hold dominion over women. The terms “lord” and “master” is a chilling reminder of Rokeya Hossain’s crusade against the subjugation of women and the status of women during her time. Rokeya Hossain also brings to attention the issue of power and privileges. Another aspect that Rokeya Hossain discusses how men unfairly use their power to keep women secluded physically, but also mentally. She argues this creates a situation for women where they cannot contribute to society and become burdens to their families. Rokeya Hossain uses an accusing tone that questions the practice of seclusion as being too steeped in superstition. The indignation present in Sister Sara and Sultana’s dialogue is present as if Rokeya Hossain is arguing the unjust system of seclusion. Rokeya Hossain is sympathetic to the plight of the women, but also a critic in the following excerpt below:

Why do you allow yourselves to be shut up?

Because it cannot be helped as they are stronger than women.

A lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race. You have neglected the duty you owe to yourselves, and you have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interests. (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 1988, pp. 8-9)

This excerpt above is representative of Rokeya Hossain’s writing style. Rokeya Hossain manages holds women accountable for their situation. This paragraph is important, as Rokeya Hossain is a harsh critic of women purposefully choosing to be subservient to men. The

analogy between the human and lion reveals two things: strength does not equal power and believing one is weak is walking away from the duty of pursuing self-interest. Another way of discussing this passage is that Rokeya Hossain is holding women accountable for their misery. In the same breath, she is also saying that ‘shutting your eyes to your own interests’ is one of the many reasons women have been unable to rise up from a deplorable state. Rokeya Hossain continues this style of banter between Sister Sara and Sultana. When Sultana asks about the creation of “Ladyland,” Sister Sara provides a brief history here:

Let me tell you a little of our past history, then. Thirty years ago, when our present Queen was thirteen years old, she inherited the throne. She was Queen in name only, the Prime Minister really ruling the country. (p. 9)

Our good Queen liked science very much. She circulated an order that all the women in her country should be educated. Accordingly a number of girls’ schools were founded and supported by the Government. Education was spread far and wide among women. And early marriage also was stopped. No woman was to be allowed to marry before she was twenty-one. I must tell you that, before this change, we had been kept in strict purdah. How the tables are turned, I interposed with a laugh.

But the seclusion is the same, she said. In a few years we had separate universities, where no men were admitted. (pp. 9-10)

While the women of Ladyland were engaged in scientific researches, the men of this country were busy increasing their military power. When they came to know that the female universities were able to draw water from the atmosphere and collect heat from the sun, they only laughed at the members of the universities and called the whole thing ‘a sentimental nightmare!’ (p. 11)

In the passages above, Rokeya Hossain emphasizes her interest in educating girls and women, but also terminating the practice of early marriage. In “Ladyland,” Rokeya Hossain sets the marriageable age at 21. This is no coincidence, as Rokeya Hossain also shed light on the cultural practice of child marriages in *Avarodhbasini*. The curricular emphasis on science explains Rokeya Hossain’s fascination with a place where only women could run a government or make scientific discoveries. The idealism of “Ladyland” as a place where women can innovate comes into question by the men. The men belittle the achievements of the women and Rokeya Hossain describes the men of “Ladyland” as those interested in “increasing their military power” and being dismissive towards the achievements of the women in Ladyland.

Intentionally, Rokeya Hossain created “Ladyland” to be an antithesis to her homeland of India. As Roushan Jahan, a biographer of Rokeya Hossain, notes:

Women in Ladyland are powerful, but to portray a society where women are in position of power, Rokeya did not find it necessary to eliminate men or to propose anything so drastic as Charlotte Perkins Gilman did a few years later in *Herland*, in which pathogenesis was the means for continuing a unisex society. In Ladyland, men are part of the society but are shorn of power, as women were in Rokeya’s India. They live in seclusion and look after the house and the children, again, just like the women in Rokeya’s India. Women, the dominant group in Ladyland, do not consider men fit for any skilled work, much as Indian men thought of women at the time. (p. 11)

Indeed, Rokeya Hossain wanted “Ladyland” to portray women at their best and at the same time exact revenge on a male population that had taken delight in shutting women indoors. Rokeya Hossain purposefully removes men from power to show that the power in women’s hands can be used more efficiently than by men. This role reversal is intriguing, and it is not shocking that Rokeya Hossain chose to write *Sultana’s Dream*. She wanted it to be a feminist utopia that contained

elements of fury, cynicism and revenge. Despite her scathing portrayal of men in *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya Hossain's revenge on men was not to get rid of them. Instead, Rokeya Hossain subjected the men of "Ladyland" to the same conditions they placed on the women of "Ladyland." Hence, it came as no surprise that Rokeya Hossain chose to include the clash between the men and women in "Ladyland":

Women's brains are somewhat quicker than men's. Ten years ago, when the military officers called our scientific discoveries 'a sentimental nightmare', some of the young ladies wanted to say something in reply to those remarks. But both Lady Principals restrained them and said they should reply not by word but by deed, if ever they got the opportunity. And they had not long to wait for the opportunity. (pp. 12-13)

In the passage above, it is interesting to note that Rokeya Hossain chooses the words 'sentimental nightmare' to describe the innovations being made by the women. She has also described the men as war-like and more interested in military affairs than making innovations that will help society. Sister Sara narrates: "While the women were engaged in scientific researches, the men of this country were busy increasing their military power" (p. 12). This difference of approach towards the advancement of society is clearly made in this passage. Rokeya Hossain continues to describe the innovations in science by the ladies in universities in Ladyland:

In the capital, where our Queen lives, there are two universities. One of these invented a wonderful balloon, to which they attached a number of pipes. By means of this captive balloon, they managed to keep afloat above the cloudland, they could draw as much water from the atmosphere as they pleased. As the water was incessantly being drawn by the university people, no cloud gathered and the ingenious Lady Principal stopped rain and storms thereby. (pp. 13)

Rokeya Hossain portrays the women in “Ladyland” as individuals who would use their skill and wit to create something for the good of society instead of engaging in warfare. The water balloon is one example of the inventions that help reduce the frequency of rainstorms and disease caused by the mosquitos nesting in standing water and mud. Rokeya Hossain presents an interesting narrative where women are depicted as using their power to innovate. Ladies at another university find a way to collect heat that can be used for cooking and other purposes. When “Ladyland” comes under attack from The King, Rokeya Hossain takes this opportunity to present the dilemma of physical strength of men and women here:

Then the Lady Principal of the second university (who had collected sun heat), who had been silently thinking during the consultation, remarked that they were all but lost; and there was little hope left for them. There was, however, one plan [that] she would like to try, and this would be her first and last effort; if she failed in this, there would be nothing left but to commit suicide. All present solemnly vowed that they would never allow themselves to be enslaved, no matter what happened. (pp. 13-14)

This is a sobering section where the women of Ladyland have incurred defeat from the male forces in their land. The collection of sun heat as an invention has become the only lifeline that can guarantee victory. The failure of the men became an opportunity for the women in “Ladyland” to use their scientific pursuits to work together and unleash sun heat upon enemy forces. This is one of the sections where Rokeya Hossain alludes to the change in power between men and women in “Ladyland.” In the passage below, the inability of the male army in fighting off enemies becomes an opportunity for the women to propose the following arrangement here:

The Lady Principal rose again and said, ‘Before we go out the men must enter the zenanas [seclusion]. I make this prayer for the sake of purdah. Yes of course,’ replied Her Royal Highness.

On the following day the Queen called upon all men to retire into zenanas [seclusion] for the sake of honor and liberty.

Wounded and tired as they were, they took that order rather for a boon! They bowed low and entered the zenanas [seclusion] without uttering a single word of protest. They were sure that there was no hope for this country at all. (p. 14)

Now that they are accustomed to purdah system and have ceased to grumble at their seclusion, we call the system mardana instead of zenanas [seclusion]. (p. 14)

One could call this an excellent political move on part of the ladies in “Ladyland.” However, it is only the beginning of the reversal in status of men in “Ladyland.” Rokeya Hossain’s choice in placing men under seclusion can be characterized as ‘purdah reversed’ and a ‘fitting revenge.’ In this section, Rokeya Hossain manages to destroy notions of strength associated with men. The lady warriors have bested the men by using their weak state to place them in a system that they were subjected to for the longest time. It is a fitting revenge because neither arms nor brawn is used to seclude the men; it is through shrewd thinking that men are led to believe that seclusion is the best option for them. *Sultana’s Dream* reaches its climax when Sister Sara explains why “Ladyland” no longer deals with men:

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 thousandfold brighter than the Kohinoor, 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 [that] Nature has kept in store for us. We enjoy Nature’s gifts as much as we can. (pp. 14-15)

The passage above is an indication of Rokeya Hossain’s thoughts towards men that have systemically oppressed women. Rokeya Hossain argues that men and women are fundamentally different. Rokeya Hossain characterizes the men as warlike and thieves as they ‘covet

other people's lands and 'fight for a piece of diamond.' On the other hand, Rokeya Hossain characterizes women as being curious individuals that 'dive deep into the ocean of knowledge and 'enjoy Nature's gifts as much as possible.' Rokeya Hossain purposefully explores the personalities of men and women to show the differences and depict women as individuals striving for the common good of society. There is plenty of criticism in *Sultana's Dream*, but Rokeya Hossain also declares a call to action amongst the women in her society. She calls out the Indian patriarchal system for making women unable to have a voice in their life choices and also holds women accountable for not organizing and working together to improve the social condition of women.

Towards the end of the passage, she argues that women are as good as men and can be better if given the same opportunities that are given to men. Rokeya Hossain manages to challenge prevailing notions concerning male superiority, seclusion, child marriage and a woman's right to education. Rokeya Hossain's goal in *Sultana's Dream* is clearly to outline a continuing struggle towards the improvement of the condition of women and call out proponents of male superiority by cleverly turning the tables of seclusion on them.

Chapter 4: Motichur Volume I and Motichur Volume II

In this section, we will delve into Rokeya Hossain's collection of essays that were published in 1904 and 1922. In both volumes of *Motichur*, I will analyze Rokeya Hossain's use of religious themes to address male justification for oppressing women. She also ties the fight for women's education as a fight for India's independence. Rokeya Hossain argues that an educated group of women are better equipped to teach the next generation and prepare them for independence. Rokeya Hossain also assigns blame to women as becoming complacent and urges them to speak out. She warns women to create their own grassroots movement instead of following the Englishwomen missionaries. We will first examine selected works from volume one of *Motichur* (1904). In this volume we will look at essays titled: *Istrijatir Abanati* (Woman's Downfall), *Ardhangi* (The Female-half) and *Griha* (Home). Finally, we will assess volume two of *Motichur* (1922) that consists of the following essays: *Gyanfal* (The Knowledge Fruit), *Nari-srishti* (The Creation of Woman), *Nurse Nelly*, and *Srishti-tawtho* (The Theory of Creation) and *Murder of Delicia*. Through a close reading of this collection of essays, we will look at Rokeya Hossain's growth as a writer and her ability to articulate issues of importance in essays. Both volumes of *Motichur* were published in Bangla and later translated by Ratri Ray and Prantosh Bandyopadhyay in 2015. I will be referring to this text as well as *The Essential Rokeya* to discuss Rokeya Hossain's essays.

Motichur Volume One (1904)

Istrijatir Abanati (Women's Downfall)

Istrijatir Abanati, translated as *Women's Downfall*, was first published in the summer of 1903 and was seen in *Mahila* Magazine. A year later, it was republished in another issue called *Nabanur*. Originally published in the language Bangla, a translated version was made available by

Abdul Quadir in *Rokeya Rachanabali*. We will be using this version to discuss Rokeya Hossain's purpose in writing this essay. According to Barnita Bagchi, who is a scholar on Rokeya Hossain, Rokeya Hossain makes social commentary on women's jewelry. (Bagchi, 2009) She equates women's jewelry as a marker of slavery in which:

. . . prisoners wear iron handcuffs and women wear bracelets made of gold and silver to which they have become accustomed. They do not realize that the jewelry is nothing but the advertisement of their husband's wealth . . .

(p. 12)

In her essay, Rokeya Hossain offers a scathing opinion to women about their condition and asks her readers why women are accepting of their condition. In the form of a letter, Rokeya Hossain first begins asking her female readers why women are treated as slaves in the twentieth century. The discussion continues as she proceeds to address the source of women's degradation in society here: "Can any of you explain the cause of such world-wide degradation of women? Perhaps lack of opportunities is the main reason for it" Dil and Dil (2014). Rokeya Hossain does not believe lack of opportunities is the sole reason for decline amongst womankind. She brings attention to relationships with men, and discusses how women have taken steps backward to become dependent on men and male relatives for everything. Hossain summarizes "therefore, we have become slaves of indolence and, by extension, of men. Slowly, even our minds have become enslaved" (p. 22).

Rokeya Hossain argues that the inability to practice one's mental faculties has led to the deterioration of women. An interesting aspect of this essay is her ability to keep abreast of women's issues on a global level. Quoting from *Japan, the Land of the Rising Sun*, Rokeya addresses commonalities in patriarchal settings. She approaches the issue of a woman's condition from a cross-continental view, discussing how men view women as inferior and subservient:

The five worst maladies that afflict the female mind are: indocility, discontent, slander, jealousy and silliness...such is the stupidity of her character, that it is incumbent on her, in every particular, to distrust herself and to obey her husband. (p. 22)

Here, Hossain addresses commonalities in patriarchal settings by noting that the caricature of a woman being inferior to man and being lifeless and puppet-like transcends borders.

Towards the end of her essay, Hossain talks about the role men play in advancing the interests of women. She argues here:

The interests of men and women are not different, but the same. Whatever their aim or purpose in life is, so is ours. A child needs both parents equally. We ought to have such qualities in us so that we can walk side by side with men in both the material and spiritual spheres of life. (p. 32)

Hossain finishes the essay on a hopeful note in which she urges women to reexamine their state in society.

Ardhangi (The Female Half)

Ardhangi is Rokeya Hossain's essay that provides the prescription for the state of women in Bengal India. *Ardhangi* was published in 1904, and picks up where *Istrijatir Abanati* discusses the issue of women's degradation in society. In this essay, Rokeya Hossain outlines the importance of identifying the state of women's degradation by performing a diagnosis. Rokeya Hossain clarifies that there is still more to be done to liberate women from the state of bondage. Comparing *Ardhangi* to *Istrijatir Abanati*, Rokeya Hossain begins to craft her concerns about the role of purdah and confinement in women's lives. However, she is very careful about generalizing the issue of purdah and seclusion here: "There is reference to the entire female race in that essay. Do

women of all societies live confined in purdah? Or did I say that they are fully civilized only because they have relinquished the purdah? My focus was on the enslavement of the mind (p. 33).”

Rokeya Hossain clarifies her stance on purdah and seclusion. She is not aiming to demonize the practice of purdah. Rather, she wants to bring attention to the negative effects seclusion has had on women. The most important note Rokeya Hossain makes in this essay is that she does not equate the liberation of women with abandoning the purdah. She provides an example of the Parsi women and the Parsi men’s poor attempt at imitating the West here:

Parsi women have come out of purdah indubitably, but have they overcome their mental slavery? Certainly not! What mark of their intelligence do we see in their act of renouncing the purdah? The Parsi men in their blind imitation of the Western civilization have brought their wives out of seclusion. It doesn’t demonstrate the vitality of the women themselves in any way—they are still the same inanimate beings that they were before the change. When the men kept them confined at home, they lived there without argument. By the same token, now that the men have dragged them out into the world by their noses, they have stepped out of purdah with the same docile acquiescence. What is the credit of women in that? Such abdication of the purdah is never advisable. (p. 34)

In the passage above, Rokeya Hossain says that, if women are to be treated as equals, they must come out of seclusion on their own terms. To reiterate this point, Rokeya Hossain talks about making the “female half” of society capable of standing side by side with a man. In the end of her essay, Rokeya Hossain argues that lack of opportunities and lack of education has made women lazy and bitter. She argues that liberation of women can only begin by examining their roles at home.

Griha (Home)

Griha, translated as *Home*, is the final essay in *Volume One of Motichur*. Published in 1904, *Griha* picks up where Rokeya Hossain recommends addressing the condition of women by looking at the perception of home in *Ardhangi*. Rokeya Hossain places emphasis on making the perception of home where women can pursue their interests and in the long run be beneficial to their homes and families. Rokeya Hossain chooses to discuss the concept of home because the easiest way to make a change in the condition of Indian women is to start in the home. She begins by stating:

Home is a place for rest, comfort and peace, where the householder can return tired and exhausted at the end of the day and relax. Home protects its members from sun, rain and winter. Even birds and animals have homes; they too consider themselves safe in their respective homes. (p. 41)

Rokeya Hossain defines home as a safe refuge from the elements and a place where one can be at comfort and peace—a place where one can be happy. However, all that glitters is not gold. Rokeya Hossain sheds light on the perception of home by bringing to attention the social condition of women here:

Allow me to say a few words about the state of our homes. If we observe our social conditions, we see that most women in India are bereft of the happiness of home. For those who live in subjugation and do not have the right to consider the house of their “keeper” as their own residence, home is like a prison. For one who is not happy in family life, and dares not to consider herself a member of the family, home cannot be a place of peace.

Daughters, wives, widows—women of all kinds are in this miserable state. (p. 41)

In this passage, Rokeya Hossain discusses a divergent viewpoint on the definition of home. Rokeya Hossain, in her previous essays, addressed the role women need to play in their destiny. In 1904, Rokeya Hossain is calling out men to “lift the purdah from some parts of the zenana [seclusion]” (p. 41). In this section, Rokeya Hossain is not advocating removing the veil. She is arguing that

seclusion and subjugation are a type of illness amongst Indian households. In order to understand the condition of women and to change this condition, Rokeya Hossain is emphasizing that men need to reflect on the state of their homes by making the home a place where women and men can seek happiness. Rokeya Hossain continues comparing the issue of women's seclusion to that of an ailment in society that needs a cure.

To make a valid point, Rokeya Hossain narrates the condition of different women from a queen to women in Hindu and Muslim communities. First, Rokeya Hossain uses the example of Hasina and Jamila to talk about the seclusion of the home, but also seclusion from meeting family. Rokeya Hossain portrays this condition as a bruise that is present in different households. The families may be different such as Hasina, Jamila or Kalim, but the hapless existence of women in zenana [seclusion] is depressing. However, Rokeya Hossain also talks about the deplorable condition of the zenana [seclusion] as one that is not a norm. She says here: "The good news is that we have many men who allow their wives to live in peace and homely happiness. But, regretfully, we have to acknowledge that in many families, the husband acts wrongfully and deplorably as the "master" (p. 49). Rokeya Hossain is being specific in addressing her message to households where men subjugate women and use the home as a means to seclude them from society. The men who seclude their women from society are doing it for personal gain and are wreaking havoc within their own homes.

Rokeya Hossain offers a ray of positivity, but also confirms a stark truth: "We are homeless in this wide world" (p. 49). She continues to explain that, despite the circumstances, a woman lives in a house under her protector. Fear of losing that protector ostracizes a woman from her family and loved ones. In *Griha*, Rokeya Hossain makes a major point about the condition of women in her society. She emphasizes a sense of otherness and destitution here: "Therefore, I say, we do not even have a little hut to call our home. No other creature in the animal-world is destitute

like us. Everyone has a home—only we don't” (p. 50). The homelessness that Rokeya Hossain is referring to is the seclusion and subjugation that women face from their husbands and families. Specifically, Rokeya Hossain is addressing the fact that the continued rejection of a woman's right to education represents a state of homelessness in which very few care about uplifting women from their degraded status.

In *Motichur Vol. One*, Rokeya Hossain begins her essay with *Istrijatir Abanati* to bring women into a discussion and reflect upon the state of women's issues in India. She equates the subservient status of women to slavery and points out that the jewelry women wear is a marker of an enslaved person. Rokeya Hossain suggests a full diagnosis, and does exactly that in *Ardhangi*. In *Ardhangi*, Rokeya Hossain clarifies her stance on purdah and seclusion by reiterating the fact that the “female half” in society is afflicted with mental slavery and a lack of opportunities. She talks about the failure of communities and a lack of resources for the advancement of women. Her diagnosis is not limited to mental slavery. Rokeya Hossain addresses the origin of women's mental slavery as one tied to home. Finally, *Griha* is an essay where Rokeya Hossain brings the discussion of women's rights full circle. After identifying the state of women's condition and offering a diagnosis, Rokeya Hossain concludes that the concept of home is what matters. She argues that women should not live in subjugation to men. Instead, men and women should live in a home where both feel content, safe and valued. For some women, Rokeya Hossain explains, home is a prison that keeps women in a hapless and essentially homeless situation. For some women, home has become a prison that purposefully keeps women in a degraded status by the influence of their husbands and families. Home should be a place where women feel safe just as their male counterparts and free to pursue activities that will give them the opportunity to develop talents. Overall, Rokeya Hossain manages to come to a conclusion in which changing the perception of ‘home’ is the remedy in helping women advance in society (p. 45).

Motichur Vol. 2 (1922)

Previously, we examined a selected group of texts from *Motichur Vol. 1* to understand how Rokeya Hossain used these essays to be an advocate for women's causes. She argued that prolonged neglect of one half of society is detrimental in a society of men and women. Rokeya Hossain clarifies in this set of essays that women in every culture and country are oppressed by patriarchal structures. She argues that women should create an environment of sympathy and solidarity to address injustices against women. Rokeya Hossain also clarifies that women should reach out to each other instead of look down upon each other and the struggle for gender equality. She states the importance of a grassroots movement and makes a case for creating an education system without colonial influence. Rokeya Hossain makes it clear that she has no intention of imbibing British values; chastises the English missionary women that prey upon impressionable minds in her community. She emphasizes the fact that the future of India's independence movement is in the hands of Indian women. For Rokeya Hossain, education is the key to creating Indian women that are strong able to stand side by side with Indian men to overthrow British rule. In the next group of essays, we will explore a series of social commentary from Rokeya Hossain. She interweaves religious texts to prove a point about the cause of women's subjugation. *Motichur Vol. 1* set the foundation for women's rights and *Motichur Vol. 2* is an exploration of the roles women play in society and what consequences they face. *Motichur Vol. 2* consists of *Gyanfal (The Knowledge Fruit)*, *Nari-sribsti (The Creation of Women)*, *Nurse Nelly and Sristi Tantho (The Theory of Creation)*.

Gyanfal (The Knowledge Fruit)

Gyanfal was first published in 1922 and written as a fairytale. Rokeya Hossain makes a disclaimer in this story that no reference is made to the stories in the *Bible* or the *Quran*. She draws inspiration from the Biblical story of Adam and Eve for this allegory. It tells the story of Adam and

Eve in which women are given the responsibility of guarding the knowledge tree and the problems a community faces when women are deprived of the right as being nurturers. She specifically exposes “the British colonial atrocity against India through the fairy narrative of the fair-looking jinns plundering the resources of Kanak island” (Dil & Dil, 2014, p. 63). This is the first of her essays that involves religious and political themes. Rokeya Hossain retells the story of Adam and Eve when they first ate the fruit of the forbidden tree.

A summary of her story here will be helpful. Adam and Eve bemoan their loveless, workless, and inactive life and aim to find a life of freedom and joy. After disobeying God, Adam and Eve are banished down to Earth. The couple experiences life on Earth and they have children. Eve’s girl children flourish in contrast to Adam’s sons. After discarding the seed of the forbidden tree, a giant tree blooms on Earth, providing flowers and fruits, and creates a business relationship between the fairies of Fairyland and the jinns. The jinns exploit the Kanak Island and plunder its resources. Eventually, this leads to a disagreement where the men on the island deprive the women of knowledge to sate their greed. This causes a panic and a downward trend between the Kanak people. The exclusion of women from the knowledge-fruit leads to a decline amongst the Kanak people and the knowledge tree dies. In the form of a dream, a solution is given in which women hold the key to the prosperous rise of the Kanak people. After women are given access to the knowledge tree and its fruits, Kanak Island prospers and becomes successful again.

In this fairy tale, Rokeya Hossain provides commentary about a community that bars women from tending to the knowledge tree and ends up in dire straits. In *Gyanfal*, Rokeya Hossain continues to explore themes in which she argues that the success of a community is based on the inclusion of women in society. She argues that women and men must work together to get rid of the presence of the jinns. Rokeya Hossain gives details, describing the side effects of a community that did not let women tend to the knowledge tree:

About two hundred years ago, the narrow selfish savants of the land forbade women from taking the knowledge-fruit. Gradually that proscription became the law and men made the fruit their sole prerogative. Women, being prevented from culling and consuming the fruit, became indifferent to looking after the tree. In course of the time, the tree died for lack of care and maintenance from the women's tender hands. (p. 21)

Rokeya Hossain does not leave Kanak Island in despair. Kanak Island awakens from its nightmare when a man wakes up from his slumber to share his dream by saying: "Men have acted most ungratefully by depriving women of the knowledge earned by them; this is the definite outcome of that!" After the men on the island realize their faults, they invite the women on the island to help them garden the seeds on the island and share the burden of caring for the knowledge-fruit. Rokeya Hossain's purpose in writing this short fairytale was to continue emphasizing the importance of keeping men and women side by side instead of depriving women the right to be beneficial to each other and their respective communities.

In *Gyanfal*, Rokeya Hossain uses the story of Adam and Eve as a backdrop to address the consequences of depriving women—in this case being deprived of the knowledge fruit. Kanak Island is a reflection of society that has deprived women of the rights to the knowledge fruit and in turn created their own demise. An important reason why Rokeya Hossain wrote *Gyanfal* is to address the advancement of her society. The lesson of Kanak Island's failure and eventual return to success is linked to the women of Kanak Island regaining their status as nurturers of the knowledge tree. Rokeya Hossain's interpretation of Adam and Eve is an attempt to address women's degraded status and the role of colonization. In *Gyanfal*, Rokeya Hossain makes it her prerogative to link the success of Indian society with the advancement of women's education as a cause that will help in getting rid of colonial rule.

Nari-sribsti (The Creation of Woman)

This leads to the next tale of *Nari-sribsti*. *Gyanfal* and *Nari-sribsti* share similar religious undertones, but both differ. *Gyanfal* borrows elements from the story of Adam and Eve in the *Bible* and *Nari-sribsti* borrows themes from *The Puranas*. *The Puranas* are a set of Hindu religious texts that are told in the form of a narrative and often address historical, philosophical and religious concepts. (p.57) *Nari-sribsti* was first published in 1918 as a magazine article in a monthly magazine called: *Sangat*. Afterwards, *Nari-sribsti* was published in the second volume of *Motichur* in 1922 and translated into English in *Rokeya Rachanabali*. *Nari-sribsti* follows the story of a writer correcting the English translation of *The Creation of Women* and follows the process of Tvastri [Viswakarma] in creating a woman for man. In this essay, Rokeya Hossain comments on one of Ingersoll's speeches, Colonel Robert Green Ingersoll was a Civil war veteran and an American political leader. Ingersoll lived from 1833-1899 and gave lectures that defended his ideas on atheism and was a critic of the Bible's interpretation on the creation of women. (Begama Rokeyā, 2013, pp. 57-58)

Rokeya Hossain addresses Ingersoll's misguided views about *The Purana's* retelling about the creation of women. Ingersoll believed the *Puranic* tale to be more sophisticated and profound compared to the *Bible*. Rokeya Hossain came across Ingersoll's piece through *The Chicago Time's Herald* and wanted to clarify Ingersoll's misconceptions about Hindu mythology. (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 2014, p. 203) Rokeya Hossain narrates the essay from the perspective of a writer that has fallen asleep after reading a translation of the *Puranic* tale. During the corrections, the reader falls asleep and wakes up to find Tvastri—a Hindu god who created the universe. Tvastri creates woman after running out of material when creating man. Tvastri uses thirty-three interesting materials to create a woman and gifts a woman to man. Man comes to Tvastri and complains about the woman as being a burden. After hearing man complain about his creature, Tvastri takes the

woman back from man. Eight days later, man comes back to Tvastri and complains about loneliness and how he cannot live without his life-companion.

Looking at man's misery, Tvastri hands the woman back to man. Unfortunately, man is still not happy with his woman. In a state of confusion, man does not know if his woman is a delight or a sorrow and goes back to Tvastri to complain about her. Finally, Tvastri becomes fed up with man's behavior and the woman has to live as "man's burden and curse" (Begama Rokeyā, 2013). In this essay, Rokeya Hossain continues her commentary on how man whines and complains about women, but also cannot live without her. In this essay, the woman lacks a sense of pride and is repeatedly tossed between man and Tvastri. She is seen as an object or as a puppet that can be passed around for enjoyment. Rokeya Hossain crafted this essay to make a comment on the condition of women and make a statement about how women are caught between their husbands and society (Begama Rokeyā, 2013, p. 15). Rokeya Hossain alludes to the patriarchal culture that is discussed in *Istrijatir Abanati* and *Griha*. After retelling this *Puranic* tale with added translations, Rokeya Hossain wants the reader to understand that the polytheistic narrative on the creation of women is far from as sophisticated and profound as that described by Ingersoll. Rokeya Hossain addresses the bias in the version of events in the *Puranic* tale to be rife with masculine superiority and reducing women down to being a "man's burden and a curse that man can not live without" (p.59-60). Rokeya Hossain criticizes the patriarchal elements existing in religion and specifically addresses the Hindu culture and religion as being active in stereotyping women. In her footnotes, Rokeya Hossain remarks that: "God Tvastri obviously knew that such a dumb wooden puppet would be the most suitable home-maker for men" (p.60). At this point, Rokeya Hossain has criticized the patriarchal elements in Christianity, but is also pointing out to Ingersoll that "the pagan sacred texts" are also guilty about caricaturing women (Begama Rokeyā, 2013, pp. 56-57).

Srishti-Tawtho (The Theory of Creation)

The Theory of Creation was first published as *Purush Srihstir Abatarona* as an issue in the quarterly magazine called *Bangiyo Musalman Sahitya Patrika*. After a revision of the work, the title was changed to *Srishti-tawtho* and published in *Motichur Vol. II* in 1922. In this essay, Rokeya Hossain picks up where she left off with *The Creation of Women* and examines the role religion plays in keeping women subjugated by men. In the previous *Puranic* tale above, Rokeya Hossain calls out the caricaturing of women and how this negatively impacts women as being perceived as “things” rather than individuals (p.59). Tvastri makes another appearance in this short story and discusses the creation of man. Three characters: Noni, Bina and Shirin have a conversation with Tvastri about the ingredients used to create man. Tvastri, the Hindu god, reminds his audience about the state in which he created a woman in which he was limited in materials. The case is different with man as he has an ample supply of materials to create man. At one point in the essay, Tvastri narrates his story on the creation of man:

You know, girls, I had no ingredients in hand while creating woman. Therefore, I had to take fragrance from one object, taste from another and only steam from something else. But I didn't have to worry at all while creating man. I had an abundant supply of all the ingredients I needed—whatever my hands could reach, I would use it. For example, in creating teeth I took the snake's poison-fang root and branch; in making hands, feet and fingernails, I took the whole of the panther's paw; to fill the cells of the brain, I used the donkey's brain intact. In creating woman I took the radiance of fire only, but in the case of man I took the blazing fire itself. Child, write as I say (Begama Rokeyā, 2013, p. 61).

The excerpt above presents another example of Rokeya Hossain's use of witty remarks and a characterization of man. Rokeya Hossain did not spare any religion from being lampooned in matters pertaining to women and the treatment of women. Hinduism and Hindu culture is used to

discuss the creation story of man and woman. There is a reason why Rokeya Hossain chooses to describe the creation of man in such a manner. The ingredients such as ‘snake’s poison-fang’ and ‘panther’s paw’ characterize man as animalistic and ‘donkey’s brain’ is added on as an insult. The crude description of man is grisly and the very reason why Rokeya Hossain depicts man as ugly in nature compared to women. To add insult to injury, Rokeya Hossain uses Hindu mythology to describe the nature of man here: “Therefore, we see men described in their own language at one moment as:

His forehead shining like a flame,
Which illumined the vacant land,
Taking the fierce form of Rudra,
He rumbled, with a trident in hand” (Ingersoll, 1986).

According to Vedic Mythology, Rudra is a Hindu god and is described as “the terrible” and “the destroyer” (Begama Rokeyā, 2013, p. 77). Rokeya Hossain chooses her words carefully to depict man as destructive and two-faced. The two-faced nature of man is discussed here: “But the next moment (of course, ‘giving up his anger, following Durga’s words’):

With a smile on his face, he said to Indra,
Killing and dismembering the demons is unbecoming of me.”

A constant pattern in Rokeya Hossain’s writing is interweaving religious texts. This is present in *The Creation of Woman* and *The Theory of Creation*. Interweaving texts from the *Bible* to Hindu scriptures, Rokeya Hossain explores issues within religion that relate to interpretation. Her interpretation of religion, specifically the male version, shows the detrimental effects towards women. In essence, Rokeya Hossain argues that man is being destructive to his own cause and advancement in society by subjugating women in the name of religion. (Bisschop; Srinivasan, 1983)

In the conclusion of *The Theory of Creation*, Rokeya Hossain discusses Hindu folklore and describes man as destructive, callous and vain. With words like: “with a smile on his face,” Rokeya Hossain characterizes man as finding joy in destruction. She even implies that man is aware of his behavior, yet chooses to be destructive. She argues that man’s selfishness becomes his biggest weakness and ultimately becomes detrimental to him and his community.

Nurse Nelly

Nurse Nelly is a different story from *Gyanfal*, *Nari-srishti* and *The Theory of Creation*.

Nurse Nelly was first published as *Agrahayan* in November of 1919 in *Sanghat* magazine. Later on, the story was reprinted in *Motichur* in 1922 and translated into English in *Rokeya Rachanabali*. Rokeya Hossain published *Nurse Nelly* as a story inspired by true events, which is a shift from her fairytale-like essays. Rokeya Hossain narrates the story of *Nurse Nelly* as a woman fallen on hard times. Yasmin Hossain, a scholar of Rokeya Hossain, describes *Nurse Nelly* as “a story battling secular ideas on women’s right to education and the fear of conversion to Christianity” (Y. Hossain, 1992). Rokeya Hossain tells a compelling story about a woman who wants an education and sacrifices her family and religion to be able to read and write. However, Rokeya Hossain is careful in the characterization of Nayeema. Nayeema marries young and is unsatisfied with her life in matrimony. Her dissatisfaction leads to a request in which Nayeema gets an education from missionary women. Nayeema falls into the trap of learning about the *Bible* and does not read the *Quran*. She learns from the missionary women that her religion is what keeps her from becoming a learned woman. Missionary women blame her religion and religious text for her degraded status. For all the wrong reasons, she demands a divorce and walks away from her family to assume a life with the missionary women. The missionary women feel superior to Nayeema and subject her to taxing labor. She is

given the Christian name of Nurse Nelly and sent to work at a hospital, where she is treated horribly.

It is during this time that Nayeema reads the *Quran* for herself and realizes the consequences of her actions—she was quick to assume the worst and did not give herself the chance to read the *Quran* on her own terms and make judgments. The grief of losing her family eventually leads to Nayeema's death. Rokeya Hossain's purpose in writing this story is to show the consequences of an education with foreign influence. Rokeya Hossain is clearly making a statement of the importance of education that relates to the needs of its community and that is mindful of biases that may create issues in the future. Nayeema falsely believes that giving up her faith for Christianity will make her a learned woman. However, Nayeema's story serves more as a cautionary tale about the biases present in the education system. The story urges care in distinguishing between religion and cultural practice. Rokeya specifies that the Bengal Muslim community must set up its own education system that meets the needs of Muslim women. She argues that an education will not distance the community from religion. The indigenous education of women will strengthen ties amongst the community and make them better equipped to resolve problems in their own community in the future. Rokeya Hossain carefully addresses Muslim clerics that want to ban education in the name of religion with the following quote from *Ardhangi*: "If Prophet Muhammad inquiries, "How have you done justice to your daughters?," what will be your answer?" (p. 38)

By asking this question, Rokeya Hossain wants to address the consequences of bias in a system where women can pursue an education. She argues that the use of religion by men is not only stifling, but contradicts the teachings in the *Quran*. Her concluding argument (in both *Nurse Nelly* and *Ardhangi*) is that it is necessary to look past religious identity and to be respectful of one another. Removing women from seclusion and giving them an education that is cognizant of

religious differences is one step in progressing society and uplifting women and men from “backwardness” (p. 40).

Murder of Delicia

Marie Corelli wrote *The Murder of Delicia* to address the issue of British men trivializing British women. She was a British novelist who lived from 1855-1924. (Bagchi, 2010) In her translation, Rokeya Hossain compares and contrasts the treatment of women in India and England. Specifically, Rokeya Hossain delves into observing the social condition of women in England and India and examines the condition of women in patriarchal societies.

Corelli’s story follows Delicia and Lord Carlyon and ends in tragedy. Delicia is an ambitious and successful writer whereas Lord Carlyon is a cad. Delicia marries Lord Carlyon even though he has no wealth of his own. After the marriage, Delicia is engrossed in writing and bringing income into the house while her husband spends her money. Eventually, rumors about her husband force Delicia to confront a cruel reality. She learns her husband is cheating on her on their wedding anniversary. Delicia gathers up the courage to leave Lord Carlyon only to realize she will never be free of him according to the laws in England. She cannot secure a divorce because “in order to have a divorce she will have to prove the disloyalty of her husband and be separated for two years” (Y. Hossain, 1992). When she moves away from her husband, Delicia deteriorates in health and dies. Delicia’s death is not a murder. There is no gun or bloodshed. Instead, Corelli argues that the cause of Delicia’s murder is rooted in the laws and subjugation in England. Despite having the freedom to choose whom one can marry, Delicia is chained by the laws to remain by her husband’s side. No matter what a man does in society, a woman cannot leave him.

When Rokeya Hossain read *The Murder of Delicia*, she wrote an essay commenting on the condition of women. Her approach was to compare and contrast the social condition of Indian

women and English women in patriarchal societies. In a way, Rokeya Hossain is retelling *Murder of Delicia* with her footnotes. Rokeya Hossain begins her commentary by describing the life of an Englishwoman here: “We think of them as being free, educated, equal with men, honoured by society—and we see many brilliant images of their happiness and prosperity in our mind’s eye” (Begama Rokeyā, 2013, p. 61).

However, this sterling image of the Englishwoman is later tarnished when Rokeya Hossain remarks on the condition inside an Englishwoman’s home as “a shame.” The supposed paragon of civilization essentially portrays women as “powerless” and “weak” (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 2014, p. 184). After Rokeya Hossain comments on the condition of women in England, she also discusses the differences and similarities among Indian women and English women. While referring to Indian women as *Mazluma* and Englishwomen as *Delicia*, Rokeya Hossain remarks that *Delicia* is free compared to *Mazluma*. *Mazluma* is enslaved to the ruling class and secluded within her home. Despite these differences, Rokeya Hossain argues that there is not a significant difference between the women. Both women are oppressed in their respective societies. Rokeya Hossain later discusses the difference between *Mazluma* and *Delicia* regarding their education and self-esteem. Rokeya Hossain’s notes reach an interesting point when she discusses the role of money between *Delicia* and *Mazluma*:

There is a lot of difference between the money of *Delicia* and that of *Mazluma*. The money frittered away by the profligate husband of *Mazluma* was not earned by herself; it was inherited. In other words, it was the money of her ancestors, who were males. One can somehow bear the fact that the wealth of one man is wasted by another. But it is unbearable that the hard-earned money of *Delicia* should be wasted like this—it is the inexcusable action of a coward. When analysed like this *Delicia*’s condition is more wretched than that of *Mazluma*’s. Yet the English claim to be civilized. Is this civilization? Is this chivalry?

(Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 2014, p. 169)

During this time, Englishwomen could not divorce their spouses unless they could prove physical marks of domestic violence. In addition, an Englishwoman would have to prove she had been separated for two years. Essentially, Rokeya Hossain argues that despite the progressive condition of Delicia as being a breadwinner and having self-respect, she is not free to spend her money as she chooses. Due to these laws, Delicia's condition is more pitiful than Mazluma. Delicia is powerless to control her fate. In the end, it is Lord Carlyon who is the victor, because the law is designed to be in his favor. Delicia's condition is best explained here when Lord Carlyon realizes that she is permanently chained to him: "What law is this! It is made by men. It has been invented by men for the advantage of themselves only. It is not a crime to trample over the hearts of women or to ruin their lives" (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 2014, p. 169).

Upon examining the text further, Rokeya Hossain brings to attention an exchange between Lord Carlyon and Delicia when Delicia leaves him. Lord Carlyon's words are an indication of the mindset of men in England:

The government is right in curbing the rights of women. If you got all you want then there will be no end to your tyranny. Women should be quiet and modest. If they are lucky enough to be rich then their money should be spent for the welfare of their husbands. This is the law of nature. Women are meant to serve men. Problems come up when they don't want to do it. (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 2014, p. 177)

In this context, Rokeya Hossain expresses her lack of faith in men in her own community.

However, she also points out that the enslavement of Englishwomen through laws written by English men invalidates an English claim as the more civilized people. Rokeya Hossain spares no barbs in pointing out the "meanness" of the English men and the pretense of empowering their own women. At one point, Rokeya Hossain pointedly remarks that the condition of Delicia is worse

than that of Mazluma, because Mazluma can at least revoke her blind devotion to her husband.

Rokeya Hossain best captures Mazluma's emotions with the following quote: "Is it a glorious thing for the powerful to be pitied by the powerless?"

As with all her texts, Rokeya Hossain reaches the conclusion of her essay by stressing the importance of bringing about a change in education. This change will empower India's Mazlumas and stop the practice of secluding women into becoming beings that are silenced. Regrettably, Rokeya Hossain admits that it will take the sacrifice of a few Mazlumas to shed light on the deplorable conditions of women in Bengal India. Rokeya Hossain goes on to encourage her readers to strive for a better education and opportunities. Again, she stresses that this is important for both genders for the future of their region. The flip side is a world with neither justice nor God – a place where women will be in a world that is Hell (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 2014, p. 184).

In her previous text, *The Creation of Woman*, Rokeya Hossain addresses the existing bias created by men to subjugate women and stereotype them into objects. In *The Creation of Theory*, Rokeya Hossain discusses the nature of man as being two-faced and being destructive to his own cause. The retelling of texts from the *Bible*, *Quran* and Hindu scriptures is to bring to attention how religious texts have been twisted to justify male dominion over women. In her later works such as *Nurse Nelly* and *Murder of Delicia*, Rokeya Hossain shows the damaging impact of patriarchal culture on women and underlines the mistake of confusing religious practice with cultural practice. In *Murder of Delicia*, Rokeya Hossain addresses the hypocrisy in England in regards to women. She concludes that women in all parts of the world are stereotyped and subjugated by men.

In the section above, I discussed the essays and short stories Rokeya Hossain published in the two volumes of *Motichur*. The essays in *Motichur Vol. 1* and *Motichur Vol. 2* provided insight into Rokeya Hossain's writing style. Rokeya Hossain uses a mix of direct voice and gets

straight to the point. The tone in her writings can best be described as lucid and at times caustic when addressing her male readers. A theme that is constant in her works is the importance of knowing the difference between religion and cultural practice. She addressed the Muslim community in India that progress for women is tied to education, and that they should not see education as a tool that will distance them from religion. Another theme that I came across in Rokeya Hossain's writings was her transnationalism on the topic of the condition of women across cultures. From her writings, Rokeya Hossain observed that women were victims of a patriarchal system that deprived them of rights and equality. An overarching theme to her works is that men and women should take responsibility in getting past superstitions to advance in society. A final theme in Rokeya Hossain's writings is pushing past religious differences and advancing society through a grassroots movement. In her writings, Rokeya Hossain was skeptical of the British rule in colonial India. She advocated that indigenous movements at home would be more beneficial than a simple imitation of the West.

Chapter Five: Rokeya Hossain—A Muslim Woman and The West

In the final section of this paper, I will discuss the implications and importance of Rokeya Hossain's works today. (Deo, 2012, p. 150) In this project, I have discussed the literary contributions of Rokeya Hossain and the impact on Indian society. As a pioneer, she championed education for girls and worked to provide human services to people in her community. Within her community, she transcended boundaries to work with Hindu and Christian women and be part of a feminist movement in the All-India Muslim Ladies' Conference (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 2014, p. 189). As a Muslim woman, she overcame the odds, running a school for girls in a culture where seclusion and purdah were a norm. Despite these achievements, there continues to the present day a portrayal of Muslim women as weak, veiled and in need of rescue. This caricature of Muslim women has existed for centuries and is relevant in an era post 9/11. This depiction of Muslim women can be traced to orientalism, which is defined as describing The East as a place of barbarism and harems – a society in which women are oppressed. (Edward W. Said, 1979; E. W. Said, 2012) The latest example of the continuing perception of Muslim women as victims was apparent as media sources narrated the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan as a mission to liberate women from the Taliban. The same media sources worked overtime to portray the invasion of Iraq as a duty of the United States to liberate Iraqi women and lead them to a path towards empowerment. (Kumar, 2004, p. 298)

Lambert-Hurley (2004); Macdonald (2006), is an author who published: *Representing Women: Myths of Femininity in the Popular Media*, discusses the influence of the media in depicting Muslim women as victims:

In the run-up to both the Afghanistan and Iraq invasions of this century, the Western media again used women's bowed and veiled bodies to confirm the urgency of rescuing them from

their fate. Without historical enquiry into the reasons for women's poverty and misery, or the role of Western powers in enabling these conditions to prevail, the popular press graphically depicted the plight of female and child victims. (Macdonald, 2006, p. 10)

Having analyzed multiple works from Rokeya Hossain, I address in closing the continuing caricature of Muslim women. Rokeya Hossain's writings may help to shatter the stereotypes that exist regarding Muslim women. She created a blueprint for women's independence by working with women from different religions and socioeconomic backgrounds. Despite her educational background, she successfully created a school for women that later became a college. After seeing what happened to the Parsi women, Rokeya Hossain knew that Englishwomen missionaries looked down upon Indian women and their freedom was chained to the British Empire. Instead of looking down upon other women, she advocated that women from different backgrounds come together in solidarity to fight against patriarchal oppression. The most important aspect of Rokeya Hossain is that she was part of a grassroots movement that met the needs of Indian women. In my future studies, I am eager to continue asking why her writings have been relatively absent in Western feminist audiences. I believe it is important to continue considering the impact of Rokeya Hossain's writings as they may contribute to correct the perception of Muslim women in the West.

Despite significant odds, Rokeya Hossain managed to form a girl's school and be part of a movement that championed women's rights and the right to an education for girls. Even though her initial audience was her community in India, she championed for the rights of all women. In her writings, Rokeya Hossain repeatedly made calls for action amongst men and women in India to improve their way of life. Rokeya Hossain was also mindful of the condition of the Muslim community in colonial India. Compared to the Hindus, the Muslim community in India had fallen behind in areas of education and social standing due to the mandate in which the British made English an official language in India. Rokeya Hossain talked about the lost opportunities here:

About sixty years ago, [our Muslim brothers] were opposed to the study of English even for males; now they are reaping the harvest of their bitter experience. In India almost all the doors to wealth, health, and wisdom are shut against Muslims on the plea of inefficiency. Some papers conducted by Muslims may not admit this—but fact is fact—the Inefficiency exists and stares us in the face! (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 2014, p. 192)

Rokeya Hossain's contributions are seen today in Bangladesh, but her writings are relatively unheard of outside Southeast Asian literary circles. One reason why her writings have not been extensively discussed in Western literary circles is the fact that Muslim writers and their writings are generally overlooked. Mohammad M. Hasan (2012) is a English Language and Literature professor at International Islamic University in Malaysia argues, "An analysis of the existing literary studies indeed suggests that the representation of Muslim women writers of the past and present, compared to that of their Hindu sisters, has been limited" (Hasan, 2012, pp. 180-181). The lack of Muslim women writers invites the question: "Are their writings purposefully ignored?" Hasan (2012) continues with the following assertion:

In this growing mass of critical appreciation, however, many South Asian Muslim writers in English are somehow missed out and/or not given adequate recognition. I consulted dozens of books on this literary tradition but regrettably, most of them do not even mention Rokeya, or the many other important South Asian Muslim writers who made great contributions to the bulk of Indo-Anglian literature. Their omission from critical work on this literary tradition is highly surprising. (p. 184)

The continuing marginalization of Muslim women writers is a problem that may feed into the current caricature of Muslim women. When you look at some literary feminist circles in the West today, this problem of Muslim women as veiled victims still persists. Recently, a book titled:

Do Muslim Women Need Saving by Lila Abu Lughod was published to address the question of whether or not Muslim women need saving from themselves, others or the veil. (Thobani, 2007)

I suggest the writings of Rokeya Hossain be further examined in literary circles in the West. This project is my initial appeal for a literary and political discussion to address the current caricature of Muslim women. Rokeya Hossain led a grassroots movement for providing a place where girls could get an education. She was very specific in the approach towards being part of a movement that involved a diverse class of Indian women. Rokeya Hossain's writings can be used as a starting place to have a dialogue that sheds light on feminist movements across the world. The most important contribution of Rokeya Hossain's writings is changing the perception of Muslim women in mainstream media. Muslim women come from different countries and it is a disservice to continue viewing them as veiled victims. It is important to disassociate the link between oppression and the veil and be respectful and sympathetic of feminist movements across the world.

Throughout this paper, I have analyzed her works to get a glimpse into her life. Rokeya Hossain's literary works are a testament to her legacy today. Today, Rokeya Hossain's legacy lives on in the form of her works and her school. Rokeya Hossain's vision was to be an individual that went beyond speaking for women's rights. Her vision was to be a social activist and educator that encouraged Indian women to challenge the shackles of patriarchy. She convinced women that being an educator and fighting for a cause was dignified pursuit. Rokeya Hossain's impact is most noticeable as being the first Muslim woman voice in the Bengal Renaissance.

Rokeya Hossain's works serve as a roadmap to her social activism. *Avaroddbasini* was an important step that helped shed light on the issue of seclusion and purdah in Indian communities. The reports were a moment where she wanted men and women in India to reflect their condition under the British Empire. *Padmarag* was an example of how Rokeya Hossain wanted women to progress. She believed that having a place where women are supportive of each other

and helped each other grow. *Sultana's Dream* was Rokeya Hossain's answer to addressing patriarchy and shattering the myth that men were superior to women. She argued that women could run affairs outside the home just as well as men. She encouraged women to pursue every career possible in order to become self-reliant.

In *Motichur Volume 1*, an overarching theme in her essays was to bring to light the problem of women's degraded status in the Indian community. She strongly suggested that women remedy the issue by knowing the difference between purdah and seclusion. Rokeya Hossain identified seclusion as the root of problems for women, leaving women in a state where they had very little opportunities outside the home. She suggested that women would have to come out of seclusion on their own terms by examining their role in the home. Rokeya Hossain challenged women to question the system in place and encouraged them to create their own identity.

After challenging women to create an identity, Rokeya Hossain covered a variety of topics in *Motichur Volume 2*. In her collection of essays, Rokeya Hossain offered a critical perspective towards patriarchy. She argued that the patriarchal interpretation of the religious texts gave men the justification to treat women poorly. Rokeya Hossain took the opportunity to reiterate that women would have to challenge notions of patriarchy that contributed to their degraded state. She was also specific in arguing that modernization would play a key role in improving the state of women's rights. Modernization to Rokeya Hossain consisted of developing an education system that would teach girls languages of the region and provide an opportunity for women to go to college.

However, she was clear in her mission that imitating the West would be a mistake. She wanted women to advance their causes on their own terms and at the grassroots level. A significant lesson from her essays is that Rokeya Hossain viewed the struggle for women's emancipation as a cause that transcended boundaries. She recognized that women globally had a long road ahead in attaining equality – that very region had its own share of unique patriarchal

structures. In essence, Rokeya Hossain addressed her community by stressing that change would only take place if men and women viewed each other as equals in an effort to modernize and, in the long run, to gain freedom from the British Empire. Therefore, Rokeya Hossain was part of a movement challenging patriarchal structures by creating an education system for girls that would help create a national identity. She shattered the stereotype of being a veiled victim by using her abilities as a writer and educator to be part of a movement that championed women's causes.

Conclusion

Rokeya Hossain's legacy lives on today through her school and literary contributions. Today, her school is a government-funded institution. She did not limit herself to women's rights, addressing related topics such as religion and politics. Rokeya Hossain advocated for a collective identity and was a pivotal force in advocating multiculturalism and challenging colonialism. Through her literature, Rokeya Hossain tirelessly believed in attaining equality for women and empowering people in India. Through *Avarodhbasini*, she shed light on the situation of women in India. Through *Padmarag* she established the importance of women having an environment where they can be self-sufficient.

For Rokeya Hossain, *Sultana's Dream* was an imaginative vision of a world where women could successfully run government. She also took the opportunity to speak to the men, showing them that seeing women as inferior was harmful to both genders. In her collection of essays, *Motichur Volume I* sheds light on the despondent state of women in India. To remedy women's situation, Rokeya Hossain suggested that women gain more education to distinguish between religion and cultural practice. Specifically, she called on women to differentiate between seclusion and purdah and question these practices. She advocated for modesty, but digressed in the purpose of seclusion. In her final collection of essays in *Motichur Volume 2*, Rokeya Hossain specifically named that seclusion and women's decline was linked to patriarchal structures. She also made the case that religion was being used as an excuse to justify the ill treatment of women. *Nurse Nelly* was an important work that showcased how colonial missionaries exploited Indian women by preying upon their vulnerabilities. The lack of education among Indian women gave colonizers free reign to exploit Indian women into believing that freedom and emancipation were possible only if they renounced their culture and religion. Rokeya Hossain worked tirelessly to push back against this flawed message, reminding women that Englishwoman's liberation was tainted by their own

patriarchal structures. She argued that patriarchy existed everywhere, and that the British were far from perfect regarding the treatment of their own women.

While women's empowerment was an important cause that Rokeya Hossain championed throughout her life, uniting her community was just as important to bring about anti-colonial nationalism in India. Rokeya Hossain used her writings to protest against the West, specifically colonial rule, and shatter the stereotype of the weak, veiled woman. Her contributions were important then and are inspiringly relevant today. Her struggle for women's independence in India helps dispel the myth that a Muslim woman is docile and needs saving from her people. Rokeya Hossain proved through her struggles that she was a monumental force, protesting patriarchy in all forms. Her life and work offer a clear word: indigenous women's movements can bring about change on their own terms.

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