Emancipation of Women through Education and Economic Freedom: A Feminist Study of Begum Rokeya’s Utopias

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Abstract

This article explores the world of women in South Asia, especially in Bangladesh, in light of Begum Rokeya’s utopias Sultana’s Dream and Padmarag. The article studies the utopias to seek the emancipation of women from the shackles of patriarchy and thereafter their empowerment through education and economic freedom. The condition of women in South Asian country like Bangladesh continues to be dismal. About one hundred years ago the abject plight of women, believed to have been created and justified by men, arose in the mind of Begum Rokeya, who being an educationist, social worker, and reformer, appeared as the redeemer for women. As an iconic figure and celebrated feminist Rokeya emphasized on women’s education and economic freedom for their emancipation from the manacle of ruthless male-dominated society. Now women are looking forward to shaping their own lives, households, communities, and nations despite the restrictive gender ideologies and practices. The study concludes that education and economic freedom form the foundation for women’s empowerment. This paper also investigates the nature and extent of women’s empowerment and emancipation through education and economic freedom in the form of self reliance as Rokeya delves into in her utopias: Sultana’s Dream and Padmarag.

Key Words: Economic Freedom, Education, Emancipation, Empowerment, Patriarchy, Utopia

Introduction

In Bangladesh large-scale inequalities still have a profound impact on women’s lives; gender issues represent a complex challenge here. Men are poor, women are poorer and the latter bear the brunt of coping with the consequence of poverty and they are still struggling for basic rights. Feminism seeks to analyze the conditions which shape women’s lives. Begum Rokeya (1880-1932) refuses to accept that inequalities between women and men are natural and inevitable. She has engaged issues like gender equity, education and economic freedom in her utopias: Sultana’s Dream (1905) and Padmarag (1924). In the beginning of 21\(^{st}\) century women experienced improved access to services and credit markets and education. However, despite the recent economic growth and changing social norms, women are not able to enjoy freedom as they are always under the pity of male-dominated society. The progress of a society depends on the overall progress in every sector including educational and economic sectors. Both men and women, in this respect, play their role from their own situations. But the patriarchal society has created an unseen hurdle to sideline the women from their contributory activities and so the society is not having symmetry of cooperative contributions by both men and women as the former treat the latter in a degrading way. Observing such imbalance and having practical experiences of torments, Begum Rokeya played the bugle through her utopias to awaken the women from slumber in order to stand as individuals.
Feminism

Feminism is a discourse that involves various movements, theories and philosophies which are concerned with the issue of gender difference; it also advocates equality for women and campaigns for women’s rights and interests. Feminist theory is associated with the analysis and explanation of women’s subordinate social situation. It seeks to analyze the condition which shapes women’s lives and to explore cultural perception of what it means to be a woman. In the early twentieth century there were some important feminist thinkers: Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935), Simone de Beauvoir (1908-86) and Betty Friedan (1921-2006). Like them Rokeya also appeared as a strong voice of feminism. She raised the issues of women’s rights with her strapping voice which took place in her seminal works like Sultana’s Dream and Padmarag. The women especially in South Asian countries feel inspired and turn courageous through following their role model Begum Rokeya. They feel assured of their worth as individuals in the society.

Feminists often differ in opinion over the sources of inequality, how to attain equality, and the extent to which gender and gender-based identities should be questioned and critiqued. Modern feminist political activists commonly campaign for a woman’s right to bodily integrity and autonomy on matters such as reproductive rights including the right to abortion, access to contraception and quality prenatal care, for protection from domestic violence, against sexual harassment and rape, for workplace rights including maternity leave and equal pay, and against other forms of discrimination. These concerns do not always match with those of the classical feminists because the world has got many changes with the pace of time and so the demands of humankind in general and those of women in particular have been different and new in congruity with the time and place. Women are forced to believe in and cope up with their limitations fabricated by the society controlled by men. Simone de Beauvoir invokes in the famous first sentence in part two of The Second Sex (1949), “One was not born a woman; rather, one becomes a woman” (qtd. in Barry 130). The society enforces women to live as inferior beings, lower than men in status, and they yield to their destiny. The patriarchal society starts reshaping them after their birth as the ones to serve the male.

Feminism incorporates diverse ideas. Gender is a social construction, which had been shaped by patriarchy, which oppresses women. Women often become feminists by becoming conscious of the misrepresentations of women. Elaine Showalter (1941 –), an American literary critic, feminist, writer on cultural and social issues, and founder of gynocriticism, replaced the traditional periods of literary history with an alternative three-stage process:

- feminine, feminist and female. Feminist is ‘a political position’, the female is ‘a matter of biology’ and feminine is ‘a set of culturally defined characteristics’. The representation of women in literature is one of the most important forms of ‘socialization’ and it provided the role models which indicated to women and men to constitute an acceptable version of the ‘feminine’. (122)

There are three waves of feminism: the first wave was in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the second was in the 1960s and 1970s and the third from the 1970s to the present. The first wave refers mainly to “women’s suffrage” movements (mainly concerned with women’s right to vote). The second wave refers to the ideas and actions associated with the “women’s liberation movement”. The third wave refers to a continuation of, and a reaction to, the perceived failures of, second-wave feminism. It is noteworthy that:

- the women’s movement of the 1960s was a renewal of an old tradition of thought and action already possessing in classic books like A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97), Women and Labour (1911) by Olive Schreiner (1855-1920), A Room of One’s Own (1929) by Virginia Woolf, and The Second Sex (1949) by Simone de Beauvoir. (121)

Critical attention was given to the books by male writers in which influential or typical images of women were constructed. In the 1980s, firstly, feminist criticism became much more electric. Secondly, it switched its focus from attacking male versions of the world to exploring the nature of the female world and outlook, and reconstructing the lost and suppressed records of female experience. Thirdly, attention was switched to the need to construct a new canon of women’s writing by rewriting the history of the novel and of poetry in such a way that neglected women writers were given new prominence.

When we explore feminism of gender-rights from the perspective of Begum Rokeya, we find that she deals with the basic issues of women in a different way than most other feminists. Rokeya has shown interest in opening up the inner world of women so that they can understand that the dogmatic patriarchal society treats them as subhuman for their own convenience. As a feminine transcendentalist, Rokeya has refuted this belief and transcended her mortal desires to elevate her “self” to an intellectual state of being where her work and philosophy of the emancipation of women will shape the world for future generations of Bangladeshi women, thereby affording her a form of immortality. In her Sultana’s Dream Rokeya, like the Victorian feminist Virginia Woolf, introduces the
ideas of transcendence. Rokeya’s feminist stance proves that women need to be economically free through ample opportunities of achieving proper education which may ensure their self confidence. In this respect they will be able to protest against all forms of suppression designed and applied by men. Virginia Woolf, likewise, holds the view that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction (13). Both Rokeya and Woolf believe that the emancipation of women is possible when they can get a world of their own to think freely, breathe in comfortably, and earn money to lead their lives without slavish dependence on men. Rokeya argues that the fulfillment of human potential must be judged, not in terms of happiness, but in terms of freedom. Freedom is something more than maintaining one’s existence in comfort and quietude. To be free a person must transcend the animal part of his or her life and stick to a rationalist mind-over-matter objective in life. Bangladeshi women follow the role model of Begum Rokeya as she truly advocates the sound means for the emancipation of women.

Utopia

Utopia is generally defined as a place of perfection. It is a dreamland where one wants to go and live for peace, love and security. The land of nightingale might be termed as a utopia for John Keats (1795-1821), the great poet of romanticism, as he strove to go there in order to escape the unbearable burdens of worldly life. Keats also visited the world of nightingale with help of the wings of imagination and found what he expected. The place gave him peace of mind, the unknown pleasure of living, a rare sense of beauty. Such a place where everything turns out to be pleasing and beautiful is defined as a utopia. People being tired and bored of their place reiterate their high expectations of exploring a utopia again and again. It is referred that utopia is:

- a European concept and a Greek word which has been used with great richness by feminists, is most of all about embodying a dream, a dream of ‘eu-topia’, the good place, which is also ‘ou-topia’, no place, a place which has no existence until it is imagined into existence by those fired with the dream. (Bagchi 5)
- The word ‘utopia’ was first used in the book *Utopia* (1516) by Thomas More (1478-1535) who was an English lawyer, social philosopher, author, statesman, and noted Renaissance humanist. It is imagined into existence by those fired with the dream. Utopia, in another sense, means an ideal community or society possessing a perfect socio-politico-legal system. The term has been used to describe both intentional communities that attempt to create an ideal society. A perfect balance between the individual and society is one of the basic elements of utopia. Utopia, furthermore, refers to an idyllic state where all is ordered for the best for humanity as a whole and where all forms of evils in society, such as poverty, corruption, misery, are eradicated. Utopia is also “used to explore the ramification of gender being either a societal construct, or a hard-wired imperative” (“Utopia”, wikipedia.org). A state or society where gender differences are deplored and considered harmful for humankind can be termed a utopia. It does not approve of any discrimination between the rich and poor, black and white, and above all male and female. A utopia is, moreover, a perfect place where nothing bad happens.

Education and Economic Freedom

Emancipation of women from the male-dominated society is related to education and the process is an invariable and undeterminable “dialectic inherent in the very etymology of the word education, between ‘ex’ or a movement outwards towards freedom, and ‘ducare’ or leading, guiding, and control” (Bagchi 10). Education offers women a guided and supervised set of rigorous skills. At the same time, it liberates the self enabling it to evolve and roam with freedom by infringing the barrier of rigid patriarchal and sexist norms. Rokeya is a saint and model for the revolution of the emancipation of women through education. Real education, Rokeya believes, does not mean blind imitation to any particular race or nation. Rather it is the development of human faculties of senses through natural knowledge or power which God has provided. It always moves human beings forward with motivations of changing the society stagnant in narrowness.

Education substantially brings about qualitative change and the development of basic instincts of an individual. Education holds the key to empowering people and widens the bliss of life which Begum Rokeya’s works emphasize. Rokeya remained grateful all her life to her brother who inspired and helped her in education because she belonged to a conservative family. In gratitude, she dedicated *Padmarag* to her brother. Education is one of the weapons to fight against loneliness, discrimination and above all patriarchal society. At a very early age, Rokeya made up her mind to fight against the inconsiderate observance of customs. In *The Celebration of Women* Roquiah (Rokeya) asserts:
I worked and I wrote. I wrote about the evils of society. I wrote about the evils of Purdah, about the foolishness and cruelty of customs…. I wrote about the laws that restrict women, and I wrote about the weakness of Bengalis. (Zaman 18-19).

Rokeya lived in strict ‘purdah’ and she was fully veiled while communicating male acquaintances. In “Abarodhbashini” (The Secluded Ones, 1931), she reveals the then-prevalent system of ‘abarodh’ or female isolation among Muslims. Rokeya states in the essay “Abarodhbashini” in Rokeya Rachonabali the cry of agony on behalf of women imprisoned with ‘purdah’, ‘Oh, why did I come to this miserable world, why was I born in a country of purdah” (Hossain 334)! Rokeya was highly concerned about the plight of women because of their death-in-life situation for purdah that almost set them in a darker world. Purdah symbolically works as a tool of the men who do not want women to come out with their potentials. It also played a role in incarcerating women in Rokeya’s time.

Begum Rokeya stands against the conservative society where she laments for her birth. She expresses her torments in a disappointing tone seeing the deplorable condition of women in the society. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-91), the key figure of Bengal Renaissance, also grieves at women’s miserable condition. His remarks are put in Purushtantra Nari O Shiksha, “O women! I can’t say for what sin you were born in this subcontinent” (qtd. in Hossein et al 54). It is an agonizing cry from the bottom of heart by a great educator, philosopher, reformer and philanthropist of Bengal. The sufferings of women have turned so extreme and unbearable that literature has covered it in an intrepid way. Great persons were born to write or speak on the issues of women in different times to see that the women are free and honoured by the people in the society because women have undergone a lot of sufferings since time immemorial. The history records that the extent of oppression against women by the male-chauvinist society surpasses many other kinds of oppressions.

Niaz Zaman, Professor of English at Dhaka University and the author of many famous books, writes in A Celebration of Women:

I thought of Roquiah Sakhawat Hossein, who rose above personal tragedy to found a school for Muslim girls and who spoke boldly against superstitions and taboos which kept women backward. (5)

Roquiah here refers to Begum Rokeya who struggled to educate girls especially the Muslim girls in her time as the conservative society spread the fallacy that education for women is not necessary and they should remain at home and serve the family. The society in Rokeya’s time held the belief that without practicing ‘purdah’ system women commit sins; actually it was the part of overall patriarchal mindset to make them powerless. The society was ruled and controlled by men who used many tools to have the women yield to them. Like Rokeya, Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976), the national poet of Bangladesh, persists on the equal rights of men and women that he states in his poem “Nari” (Woman):

I sing of equality.
I don’t see any difference
between a man and a woman.
Whatever great or benevolent achievements
there are in this world,
half of that was by woman,
the other half by man. (1-7)

Nazrul wants to see women as the part of the “figured world” (Langley 169) where they would be recognized and valued for their contribution to the society. Education is one of the hallmarks of the emancipation of women. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi alias Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), the pre-eminent political and ideological leader of India and the pioneering figure of nonviolent movement, encouraged women to play an active role in public affairs. He inspired them to stand on their own feet in order to live in dignity. Women should not consider themselves subordinate or inferior to men as they have equal status as human beings.

To diminish discrimination and empower women through education and economic freedom is the key to the feminists. In a conference, hosted by the Bangladesh chapter of Soroptomist International Club, Dr. Ranjana Banerjee from Loreto College, Calcutta University addressed, “It is difficult to change the mindset that’s been confirmed for generations, but education is a tool which can bring about social change” (Kullab, “A Global Voice”). Education can play a vital role in shaping the mindset of both men and women to build a peaceful society. Women’s education is necessary for a country’s development and it contributes in a larger scale to poverty reduction. Given its limited resources, the government has put high priority on girls’ education. A survey marks the initiative of an organization in advancing education:

Bangladesh has succeeded dramatically in expanding basic education in the last two decades, especially among girls. In 1996, BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee), the largest NGO based in Bangladesh, educates 1.2 million children, mostly girls, in 34,000 one-classroom/one-teacher model schools. Their techniques are
innovative and learner centered and they have enjoyed marked successes in reaching girls and the poor. These schools also ‘feed’ poor girl graduates into the official system. (Muhith 143)

Feminists think that women’s economic dependence on men makes them women. Now-a-days women are trying to swerve themselves from the barriers of patriarchal society and women in urban middle-class educated families enjoy greater mobility and have better access to family resources and opportunities of life. A number of programmes were undertaken by the government and the NGOs like Grameen Bank, BRAC, Swanirvar, ASA to engage women in self-employment. It is worth mentioning that some steps have already been taken to uphold female education in Bangladesh. Measures which helped in promoting primary education among girls include: i) raising recruitment of female teachers in primary schools, ii) generous financial and technical assistance. The condition of women having access to education is rapidly changing day by day. It is aspiring that the dreams which Begum Rokeya saw in her life time and which she incorporated in her utopias are gradually coming true but the picture on the other side is getting darker as the patriarchal society, still existent in other forms, is using different tools to confine and bring new miseries to women.

Sultana’s Dream

*Sultana’s Dream* (1905) is an intriguing example of a feminist utopia – an imagined world of ladyland, “free from sin and harm. Virtue herself reigns here” (Hossain, *Sultana’s Dream* 4), where science, technology and virtue work together in perfect harmony and where women socially and politically govern and dominate men and that supremacy is seen as natural. Rokeya’s leading objective is to demonstrate that women are able to work with the level of efficiency that men, in the form of prejudice, mark only as their own. It is clearly understood that women are capable of running a government as successfully as men. Here the driving force of the utopian feminist country of ladyland is women’s education which holds the key to women’s empowerment and progress. Here women are free in all respects. It means that Rokeya imagined women’s emancipation from ‘purdah’ through education and economic freedom, as she gathered bitter experiences in her practical life. That is why her feminist approach has been prevailed in *Sultana’s Dream*. In this utopia, Rokeya stresses that men are “accustomed to the purdah system and have ceased to grumble at their seclusion, we call the system ‘Mardana’ instead of ‘Zenana’” (11). Women are shown confident with their education and sound financial condition whereas men are accustomed to doing many services. Here lies the true spirit of a feminist author that extensively contributes to the emancipation of women through education and economic freedom. Education and sound economic condition are the integral part of freedom that a woman needs most to lead a life with honour and valour. In South Asian respect the educated women who are usually economically self dependent do not suffer the humiliation and malignance of their counterparts. Begum Rokeya works as an inspiring force behind this because she highly emphasizes on female education.

In the unconventional, inverted world of *Sultana’s Dream*, men remain safely secluded in “their proper place” (4) or ‘Zenana’ and perform the daily mundane chores, while women, headed by a queen who is ably supported by her deputies – the female principals of the two women’s universities – use their superior intellectual ability to govern the country wisely and well. Men go into ‘Zenana’ to protect women’s modesty! After the battle is won, the men voluntarily agree to stay in seclusion in ‘Zenana’, while women rule the kingdom, which comes to be known as Ladyland, the utopia. Here “women’s brains are somewhat quicker than men’s” (9). In two women’s universities no men are admitted and the women are engaged in scientific researches. To them men are “fit for nothing” (6) and women are fighting against men with their brain. The biographical note in the Feminist Press edition of *Sultana’s Dream* describes Sakhawat Hossain’s reaction to the story: he read the whole thing standing up, and uttered, “A terrible revenge!” (xii). The story was soon published in a Madras journal. The utopia “*Sultana’s Dream* is cheery, cunningly cocks a snook at male militarism, and shows that the intelligence of women helps them triumph” (Bagchi 6). Begum Rokeya is quite corrosive about treating the men in *Sultana’s Dream* because she was the victim of a society in which men considered women incapable of producing anything significant in the world. Rokeya saw how a girl had to stop going to educational institutions, how she had to agree to marry at the earlier stage of life, how she had to believe that she was inferior to a male child of her parents. A girl had to endure many more kinds of horrible experiences like these ones which compelled her to stand in favour of women and take pens against the destructive mindset of men. However, the women at present societies of South Asian countries especially Bangladesh enjoy more freedom and it has been possible because of the fiery writings of Begum Rokeya.
Padmarag

Resonant with autobiographical hints, *Padmarag* (1924) is both a powerful reflection of male oppression and a celebration of Rokeya’s faith in a universalist society where women reject the diktat of a tyrannical patriarchal society in favour of a life devoted to improving their status. Here the author focuses on formal education and teaching crafts to get economic freedom and self dependence of women. *Padmarag* is a feminist utopia “delineating”, as Bagchi claims, “the thousand little details of an actual, real-life female-led reformist project” (6). As “egalitarianism” is present in Tarini Bhavan, Muslims, Christians, Brahmas and Hindus – all work in harmony. Particular care is taken to the girls so that “they become self-reliant and not lifeless puppets, burdens on their fathers, brothers, husbands or sons” (Hossain, *Padmarag* 31). They are given an idea that they are growing up as individuals to contribute to the society like all other members of the society irrespective of gender differences. They are not going to be the troubles for the world. Through the image of Tarini Bhavan, Rokeya has tried to create an impression on the minds of the readers that a society, a state and above all the whole world should be an ideal place so that everyone can live in peace and harmony breaking all forms of barriers, especially the barrier of gender discrimination.

The portrayal of office life of women engaged in professional activity is a wonderful feature of *Padmarag*. The neglect of Bangladeshi girl child comes through the graphic description. Siddika, nicknamed Padmarag, the ruby or the mysterious heroine, keeps the reader in suspense. The process of Siddika’s evolution, from a solitary, secretive and melancholy young girl to a competent, self-assured woman ready to face the future, begins when she enters Tarini Bhavan. The constant dichotomy between the functional or vocational aspects of education and its ornamental or “liberal” ones create a serious problem even today. *Padmarag* draws to a close that Siddika has internalized the process of self-development and the fervent quest for a useful vocation that will help her to survive well. It echoes with the triumphant notes of hope and resolute optimism, but is no less responsive to the minor keys of anger, pain, loss and desolation. It incorporates “Rokeya’s faith in women’s education as holding the key to a world where women are happy and powerful” (Bagchi 6). Siddika is the representative of a land where a girl understanding the brute picture of society struggles to grow as a successful woman. The land provides her with the opportunities of becoming a human rather than a woman. Rokeya intends to bring Siddika before the people so that Bangladeshi girls may get inspiration to stand on their own feet as most of the girls in Bangladesh have the experience of being the victims of cruelties by the patriarchal social system. The author has the insight of building Bangladesh as a country where a girl will have the scopes to turn away from melancholy, loneliness, and agonies and build a respectable life.

**Relating Education and Economic Freedom to *Sultana’s Dream and Padmarag***

*Sultana’s Dream* and *Padmarag* reveal Rokeya’s brand of feminism, her creativity, the focus of her intellectual musings. She illustrates her individual sympathy, humanity, humour, creativity and pragmatism in her works. It is acknowledged by all that “in the history of women’s emancipation and education in South Asia...a figure such as Rokeya is a diamond” (Bagchi 11). Rokeya was keenly aware of the vital link between every woman’s self-development and emancipation and education of millions of young girls who, even today, lack access to schooling. The problem of education for girls in Bangladesh today is still distressingly acute. There are many places in Bangladesh where the same picture which we saw in Rokeya’s time is prevalent. The female children are still dependent on the mercy of parents, brothers, husbands and again their own male children and grand children. It is a cycle of cruel patriarchy that is still working on the minds of Bangladeshi men. Women are either servants of men or objects of sensual world; they are degraded in diverse ways. Men lay some strategic rules, with the help of prejudice, superstitions, dogmatic religious customs, that convince women to remain inferior to them staying uneducated and economically insolvent. It is unfortunate that they can not understand the cunning treatment of men because of their lack of education.

Begum Rokeya becomes a great voice in the form of a saviour to the unfortunate, helpless and disadvantaged women of South Asia especially Bangladesh. She is relevant today when we see the deplorable condition of women in the society. When we see that girl is married off in her early stage of life, we remember Rokeya; we try to study her utopias. When it is found that a girl is degraded in different ways even in the form of acid throwing, a woman falls victim of her husband’s cruelty, a woman lives an accursed, secluded life, we seek the cry of Rokeya through *Sultana’s Dream* and *Padmarag*. If a girl suffers in silence because her family, a patriarchal family indeed, stops her from going to school, college or university, Rokeya appears as a blazing comet before us. Her utopias have, in true spirit, made the way to awaken these women from their confined world. A woman carrying a baby does not receive proper care and if a woman gives birth to a female child, the husband and his family show anger and disrespect to the woman. The women, in these ways, suffer both physically and psychologically. In such cases, Begum Rokeya
comes forward as an inspirational figure. *Sultana’s Dream* and *Padmarag*, the most discussed works of Rokeya, appear as the gateway to the emancipation of these women from the shackle of men.

**Women in Bangladesh**

The life of a Bangladeshi woman, from birth until widowhood, is not easy at all – she is unwanted, underprivileged, threatened by violence; she is even marked as an outcast. Although women constitute a half of Bangladesh population, their social status both in rural and urban areas remains low. Even educated women are not allowed to come out from the manacle of the patriarchal society. Secluded life of women comes to be known as the ‘purdah life’. Begum Rokeya reports 46 incidents of horrors of ‘purdah system’ in “Abarodbhashini”. Confined to home, women are assigned duties of performing domestic chores, bearing and rearing up children and serving the husbands and the elders. Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), an Indian religious, social, and educational reformer, challenged traditional Hindu culture and fought against Hindu practice of widows’ burning themselves with their husbands’ corpses. The cruelty of patriarchal mechanisms reached such an extent that women had to die alive along with their dead husbands. Many young Hindu girls sacrificed their lives just after their marriage as their husbands passed away. They became simply the objects to have been used, modeled and remodeled at the convenience of the patriarchal society.

Vidyasagar revolted for the widow marriage. After a long struggle in 1829, suttee was stopped and a law was passed for establishing widow marriage. At the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century Rokeya tried to remove the miserable condition of women through her ardent writing emphasizing on education and economic freedom. As women were dependent on men and had no outdoor function, no formal education was considered necessary for them. If we look to some surveys on this matter, we can experience a horrible picture:

In 1901 Census, one Muslim woman out of every thousand could read and write. In 1941 Census, literacy rate among Muslim women was 0.2 percent. After liberation of Bangladesh, the rate stood at 16.4 percent and in 1974 Census as against 36.6 percent for male. (Ahmad 6)

Since women’s duties consisted of services to the household, girls were married before their proper age for marriage. Ramesh Chandra Majumdar (1888-1980), an Indian historian of great repute, testifies to the immense popularity of child marriage. The average age of marriage was seven to eight for girls and fourteen to fifteen for boys. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was forced by his father to marry a girl aged 11 when he was 23 years old. Unfortunately Rokeya was married at the age of 16. It is a common knowledge that though there is a law that minimum age of marriage for boys and girls are 21 and 18 respectively, it has failed to a disappointing level and child marriage is not being controlled.

Theoretically men and women are equal in Bangladesh. The constitution of People’s Republic of Bangladesh declares in ordinance 28:

1. The state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.
2. Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the state and of public life. (qtd. in Ahmad 4)

Constitution further guarantees equal opportunity to men and women in respect of employment under the Government and participation in any occupation or vocation. In practice, however, women and men are not equal. Tradition depicts women as physically weak and intellectually poor requiring constant protection of the men who are in turn physically strong and intelligent. Dependence of inferior women on superior men has a long historical tradition. In ancient India Manu, the great lawgiver of Hindu Dharma Shastra, clearly assigns woman a subordinate position to man:

During childhood, a female must depend upon her father, during youth, upon her husband, her husband being dead, upon her sons; if she has no sons, upon the near kinsmen of her husband; in default, upon those of her father, if she has no parental kinsmen, upon the sovereign; a woman must never govern herself as she likes. (Gupta 6)

Major changes occurred during the first few decades especially from the seventies. In 1976, Government of Bangladesh founded ‘Jatiya Mahila Sangstha’ as a national organization for the purpose of social, economic, educational and cultural welfare of the women of Bangladesh. In the same year a full-fledged Ministry of Women Affairs was created. At international level, Bangladesh attended all conferences held on women’s development issues and attempted to implement all resolutions and decisions at the international and regional level. Winston E. Langley in his book *Kazi Nazrul Islam, the Voice of Poetry and the Struggle for Human Wholeness* states:

United Nations sponsored four conferences (the 1975 conference in Mexico City, Mexico; the 1980 conference in Copenhagen, Denmark; the 1985 conference in Nairobi, Kenya; and the 1995 conference in Beijing, China) by 1995 to focus on women and their right to equal treatment with men. United Nation’s target was to the liberation of over half of humankind from the oppression. (167)
Traditionally, a woman has been called ‘abala’. In Sanskrit and many other Indian languages ‘bala’ means strength and ‘abala’ means one without strength. If by strength we do not mean brutish strength, but strength of character, steadfastness, endurance, she should be called ‘sabala’, strong. When a woman, whom we call ‘abala’, becomes ‘sabala’, all those who are helpless will become powerful. Such empowering may not be bestowed upon them by legislation or assistance only offered by men. The women who think of themselves as weak must gather strength to survive with self-esteem. In all branches of folk literature and Bengali literature, we see that the Bengali women are ‘abala’, helpless, deprived of their basic rights and tormented by the male-dominated society. It is observed that “… male-dominated society could not place her in any higher place without thinking her slave. … Rather they suppressed them. So women told that if Sita (the main woman character of Ramayana) dies, pain will dissolve’ (Chakraborty 35). Sita in Ramayana fully depends on Rama (her husband) and as an “ideal woman” she tolerates the pains throughout her life. Sakuntala remarks, “Sita, as pure as she was, was repudiated by Rama because she had been abducted by Ravana” (Zaman 11). As history and tradition record, a woman has always been under the mercy of male-dominated society and the legacy continues in different forms in different societies.

A man of the male-dominated society likes women like Sita, Sabitri and Sakuntala. Binodini stresses, “Why must men want women to be pure like Sita – or humble like Sakuntala?” (11). Someone blesses a woman like “be Sati Sabitri” or “be like Sita” (Chakraborty 55) because they tolerated a lot of pains in the male-dominated society and they are the symbols of ideal women to men. Radha and Draupadi do not get any place here. Poverty and the socio-cultural and the communal practices had confined women. We feel Rokeya’s voice in Kazi Nazrul Islam when he expresses his radical volitions in the poem “Nari”. Nazrul expected that women would break up their veils and chains into pieces and come out raising the voice against all forms of discriminatory issues regarding men and women.

It may be stated here that though Rokeya’s dream is unflinching and time-winning, many instances in South Asia especially in Bangladesh augment depression. We may refer to the harrowing story of Arzina who became the victim of the claws of her husband. The story was published in The Daily Star on 6 August 2008:

Her husband, Kamruzzaman Kamu, who teaches at a college, set fire to Arzina chasing in the kitchen and locked the room to ensure death. Before being freed with the help of neighbors, she had already 57% burns of her body. Suffering serious burns in her face, breast, abdomen, both arms, back and part of thighs and struggling for life at DMCH, Arzina, a master in Geography from Rajshahi College who passed the 27th BCS exams in 2007, turned a victim of a beast incarnate. (Ashraf and Mollah 16)

As Arzina raised her voice against her husband’s adultery, she had to face a holocaust like this. Arzina is fit educationally and free economically; she has educated herself in higher institution. Yet she can not escape such torments. It is regrettable that even educated men can not change their mind which had been set by the patriarchal society. Women face numerous challenges and discriminations emanating from social prejudices. A three E-approach – enabling environment, education and equality – can be applied to empower women. Men and women relationship is not a master slave relationship because women are dependent on men and vice versa. Suppressed women are becoming more conscious and active. We need to reduce or eradicate the violence against women. It is relevant to say that poverty and illiteracy are the main factors responsible for violence or repression against women.

Effective initiatives undertaken by the concerned agencies in improving women’s education, skill acquisition, training and access to information can enhance women’s empowerment in order to achieve gender equality and development at all levels. Actually Rokeya dreamt about the very basic human rights for women. She did not want any sympathy for women from the male-dominated society. Rokeya’s dream for the emancipation of women from the outmoded patriarchal contention of men is the dream of every woman. This dream will come true if traditional outlook and approach of men towards women is changed and the women are taken into consideration as not the “other” but rather as the friends of men and contributors to society. Bangladesh will soon mark its strength as a nation that will ensure equality of men and women in every sphere of life. Discriminating mindset between men and women ought to be turned away from thought and action in order to materialize the utopian beliefs and views.

Conclusion
dreams and expectations (women’s emancipation from male-dominated society through education and economic freedom) of Begum Rokeya in South Asian countries especially in Bangladesh. Rokeya is, above all, a crusader for girls’ education and economic freedom; her strong stance to ameliorate the condition of women in the society is reflected in her writings. The women will be able to recuperate from the rigorous patriarchal society, make self development, and lead a happy and valuable life when their emancipation through education and economic freedom is ensured as Rokeya’s utopias Sultana’s Dream and Padmarag address the issues for overall healthy atmosphere between men and women in the society.

Works Cited