

An Open Access, Widely Indexed, Peer Reviewed Referred
Journal
Vol. 3 No. 1, June, 2026

The Vision of Female Worth in the Writings of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: feminism,
female education, sense of
worth, anti-sectarian
thought, self-reliance,
humanism, progressive
mentality.

Received : 30.01.2026

Revised : 15.06.2026

Accepted: 25.06.2026

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ABSTRACT

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain is not only a writer but also a social worker and educationist. She was born in Rangpur, one of the districts of the present day Bangladesh, and passed a considerable portion of her life in Kolkata and Bihar, situated in the present day India. She is similar and comparable to stalwart feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Nawab Faizunnesa. Among the many themes that are handled by Rokeya in her writings, her vision of female worth is the most prominent one. In this paper I intend to portray a picture of Rokeya's idea of the sense of worth, and side by side, I also show the impediments in the path of attaining the sense of worth depicted by Rokeya. It is not my intention in this paper to depict the dilapidated condition and suffering of women, rather I intend to portray a picture of the vision of Rokeya in order to emancipate women and in this respect her vision of female worth is the key point.

INTRODUCTION

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain can be mentioned as one of the early feminist women writers, and is widely respected and intensely criticized. For this reason, Mohammad A. Quayum et al in the Introduction of the book *A Feminist Foremother* describes her as the “feminist foremother” (xxi). They evaluate her as the “part of a larger cultural movement of the time, known as the Bengal Awakening or Bengal Renaissance” (xxii). In this connection, Mahua Sarkar in “Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and the Gender Debate among Muslim Intellectuals in Late Colonial Bengal” observes that “The specificity of her approach to women’s subordination and its possible solutions thus cannot be explained simply in terms of her frustrations as a purdahnashin Muslim women, . . .” (36).¹ Sarkar indicates something else, and that is her vision of female worth, and in her oeuvre, Rokeya provides valuable insights about this. She has tried to transmit this sense of worth to women in her role as a writer, feminist, polemicist, teacher, school administrator and social worker. The target of Rokeya’s sense of female worth is to educate, enlighten, advance, emancipate, empower, and ultimately to reach in a position in which they are not just women but humans who can contribute to establish an ideal and more gender-just society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Though there is profusion of scholarly works on the writings of Rokeya, in respect of her vision of female worth there is inadequacy. Empowerment of women has been shown as the ultimate target by several critics. In this regard, critics like Sameena Shabnam, Md Najimuddin et al, Rimpa Mondal have discussed the necessity of self-reliant and active life of women. Rokeya’s vision of education, a factor connected to female sense of worth, has also been dealt by a lot of critics. For example, Antara Mitra, Nitu Khatun, Pratiti Shirin, Hossain Al Mamun have shown that women’s emancipation and empowerment can be attained through education. Mohammad Moniruzzaman Miah indicates the benefit of non-sectarian attitude manifested in Rokeya. In spite of the existence of such discussions, a congregated picture covering all the qualities of the sense of worth suggested by Rokeya is a rarity. Apart from this, most of the works mentioned above are conducted by considering a narrow range of the works of Rokeya. In this paper, I extend this range of consideration. Rokeya’s prioritizing of intellectual aspects rather than material is an issue which has not been properly evaluated by the critics.

DISCUSSION

Before entering to the main discussion, I need to talk on the obstacles in the path of achieving the sense of worth. In her writings, Rokeya shows

subjugated, commodified, objectified, suppressed and backwarded situation of women. In *The Zenana Women* she presents a reality in which women are like baggage, luggage, and item.² They are devoid of any identity and hence suffer from identity crisis. Consequently, the infiltration of negative ideology and physical habit create psychological and physical paralysis. In "Woman's Downfall", she comments, "The reason for it is that woman's higher faculties being stymied for a long time, her body, soul, head and heart have all become accustomed to slavery" (30). Purdah is considered by Rokeya as the greatest physical obstacle. In her address as the President of Bengal Women's Educational Conference, she argues that purdah cannot ensure women's dignity; on the contrary, it creates undignified life for women (130). In a similar way, in *The Zenana Women*, she writes, "Having lived in purdah for a long time, we have grown accustomed to the secluded life" (80). Against this accustomed life, in her writings, Rokeya offers a different kind of sense of worth.

Inefficiency is shown by Rokeya as an important obstacle for women in the path of attaining sense of worth. For instance, in *The Zenana Women*, she writes, "The packed women in the house had no other virtue except for their "nobility"" (102). It is the observation of Rokeya that apart from the aristocratic lineage, they were not equipped with any skill, intellectual or vocational, and this reality had made their life vulnerable. In *Padmarag*, while staying in Tarini Bhavan, Siddika understands that she is not expert in any skill, and this fact has been mentioned by Barnita Bagchi in the Introduction to *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag: Two Feminist Utopias*, "... she is shocked to discover that having been bred as a typical Bengali lady of leisure, she has no functional skills that can be put to use in the institution" (xxii). It is the proof that the society provides non-functional and irrelevant skills to women.

In order to emancipate women, the vision of worth is necessary. About purdah system, Muhammad A. Quayum in "Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain: A Biographical Essay" comments, "She considered it as a silent "killer" that helped to obliterate the mind of its victims slowly and silently" (xvi). I think that the vision of worth is essential to restore the obliterated mind. Realizing the existence of this obliterated mind, in *The Zenana Women*, Rokeya asks, "Indeed, what was the point for the zenana women to live on earth?" (106). In order to bring point to the pointless existence of women on earth, she suggests a clear vision throughout her writings. In a similar fashion, she raises the question, "Where is the glory of being a zenana woman if one couldn't endure suffering?" (82). This is the traditional idea that woman should bear suffering. Rokeya writes, "She who can keep most secluded and remains hiding in the corner of the house like an owl is the more honourable" (80). This is the traditional sense of honor about women in the society among both male and female. Throughout her writings,

Rokeya deconstructs these normative impressions by providing alternative sense of worth.

As a consequence of the absence of knowledge, the sense of worth is not created, and consequently, such persons are prone to fall in trap of the vested group. This fact has been manifested in "Nurse Nelly". By this story, Rokeya shows that as an impact of the intellectual backwardness, Nayeema becomes the victim of the Christian missionaries by converting herself into Christianity. Later in her life she realizes that her conversion to Christianity is a wrong decision. But at that time there is no way to return. Her intellectual poverty is the actual cause of this wrong decision taken by her. As a consequence of the lack of intellectual strength, Nayeema becomes Nurse Nelly by losing both her religion, worldly possessions, relatives and family members. In this regard, Rokeya comments, "Nayeema didn't know anything about the philosophy, science and history of her own religion – thus the teachings of these missionaries created a deep mark on her impressionable mind easily. . . . To one who has never seen light, the glow of a firefly seems as luminous as the sun" (66). The actual reason of Nayeema's conversion to Christianity is indeed infatuation, and the reason behind this infatuation is the lack of knowledge, judgment, and experience, that is to say the lack of the sense of worth. In the following section, I will discuss the qualities and virtues proposed by Rokeya in her oeuvre in order to fulfill this lacking.

Self-reliance is considered to be the cardinal virtue by Rokeya, and by her writings, she wants to create the spark of self-dependence and self-development in the minds of women. Sarkar shows "the need to encourage a desire for self-reliance in women" (34) in the writings of Rokeya. In respect of attaining these virtues, traditional impression of and expectation from women are major obstacles. In this connection, she observes that ". . . Rokeya's criticism is directed at a certain normative vision of femininity – docile, inactive, and ultimately serving to strengthen male dominance both at home and in the world. . ." (35). This normative impression of women is also found in Virginia Woolf's "Professions for Women". Her idea of "The Angel in the House" is very much similar to the impression that Rokeya expresses, and the similarity lies in the fact that both confine women. Against this, Rokeya suggests self-reliance to women. In a similar way, Bagchi shows that self-reliance in *Padmarag* is the outcome of community living (xxiv).

Rokeya considers that male role as the protector of women acts as an impediment for the creation of the virtue of self-reliance. In the essay "The Dawn" she writes, "That's why we see many types of "women's watch associations" being formed everywhere. Really, since we are like living luggage, it's important to have vigilant watchmen so that we don't get stolen" (136). As a

consequence of this protective shield, Rokeya argues in "Woman's Downfall" that "... maidens of Bengal could have increasingly become slender, delicate, overwhelmingly timid. . ." (25). In such kind of situation, Rokeya pleads, "Do us this favour, do not do any favour to us" (25). In order to remove the weakness, Rokeya suggests the qualities like courage, confidence, will, self-reliance (25). In addition to these qualities, at the end of her conversation with Sister Sara, Sultana discovers that purity, sagaciousness and farsightedness are the common virtue among the women in the Ladyland. Rokeya suggests these qualities in order to show that such qualities were rare among the women of her time, and she urges that in order to survive and develop, and in an extended reality, in order to achieve self-reliance, these qualities must be attained by women.

According to patriarchic notion, women are considered naturally weak both physically and intellectually, but Rokeya finds potential strength in this apparent weakness among women. In this respect, Muhammad A. Quayum in the Introduction to *The Essential Rokeya* opines, "She [Rokeya] believes that women are essentially as good as men, if not better" (9). Bearing in mind the condition of women during her time, Rokeya is bound to accept the physical weakness, but she does not agree with the claim of intellectual weakness of women. She suggests that in order to attain freedom and in order to protest patriarchal suppression, women should not apply physical power but "brain" or intellectual capacity. In *Sultana's Dream*, she encourages women of their worth and capabilities, "An elephant also has a bigger and heavier brain than a man has. Yet men can enchain elephants and employ them, according to their own wishes" (164). She further argues that "Women's brain are somewhat quicker than men's" and "... they should reply, not by word, but by deed, . . ." (164). As an example, she shows that when men are defeated against the enemy country of the Ladyland, it is the women who rescue the country by using the concentrated solar energy.

Though Rokeya uses searing invectives and scathing remarks against patriarchy, she suggests the mutual co-existence of men and women, that is to say, her ultimate target is to attain humanism. This utterance in "The Dawn" is an apt example of this: "Sisters, wake up, open your eyes wide, and march forward. Say, mother, pounding your chest, we are not animals! Say, sister, we are not property! Say, daughter, we are not items of ornament to be enclosed in iron safe. Say, all in unison, we are humans!" (137). Similarly, in her address as the President of Bengal Women's Educational Conference, she comments, "Men and women are like two sides of the colossal body of society" (127). Similar kind of comment is delivered in the essay "The Female-half".

However, Rokeya deals with the issue of humanism in an ambivalent way in *Sultana's Dream*. According to patriarchal convention, the word "mannish" is

considered as a positive virtue, and the word “womanish” is connected to shyness, timidity and weakness. But Rokeya in *Sultana's Dream* uses these two words in a reversed way. In the Ladyland, mannish qualities are indicative of imperfection. It is my opinion that by introducing these two words in a reversed sense, ultimately she wants to come out from gender-biased connotation of the words, and to uphold a larger vision which can be mentioned as “humannish”. In a similar fashion, by using the words “mardana” and “zenana”, she indicates the abolition of both these two. Indeed, by presenting the reversed picture, she talks against the confined duty of men and women.

In the realm of intellectual excellence, power of imagination is very important and in Rokeya's vision it occupies a prominent space. By the story of *Sultana's Dream*, it is indicated that in order to reverse any situation, power of imagination is a must, and imagination outlines the road to freedom. In a certain time, the ladies of the Ladyland are successful in imagining a land in which women are free, and later that has become realistic. About the power of imagination, she writes in “The Mysteries of Love”, “There is no limit to imagination” (144). The message is that the enchained entities are bound to imagine their freedom, otherwise freedom never comes.

Activity and dynamism are suggested as the essential virtues by Rokeya. In this regard, for both Rokeya's personal life and the fictitious world in *Padmarag*, Bagchi comments, “The ambitious array of development-and-welfare-oriented activities” (x). This sentence in “Women's Downfall” expresses Rokeya's exhortation for active and dynamic life: “First we must have the will and an unwavering resolve to work alongside the men in all affairs of life” (31). In “The Knowledge Fruit”, Rokeya asks, “Was this paradise? Was this loveless, workless, inactive life, heavenly bliss?” (51). This sentence indicates that love, work and activity can ensure worthy and blissful life. In spite of having bleak past, all the female characters of the novel *Padmarag* in Tarini Bhaban have satisfaction and fulfillment, and they have achieved this by involving themselves in active life, by contributing something for society and humanity which was completely absent in their past life.

Rokeya suggests that woman worth lies in the protest against social injustices. For example, in *Padmarag*, Saudamini utters this insurgent speech, “Come, all you abandoned, destitute, neglected, helpless, oppressed women – come together. Then we will declare war against society! And Tarini Bhavan will serve as our fortress” (104). Bagchi points out that this statement is the result of “matrimonial despotism” and “familial oppression” (xvi). It is also true that protesting, insurgent and rebellious attitude is connected to Rokeya's vision of female worth. For instance, in “Home” she suggests women not to moan and

lament, rather she proposes, "Such shedding of tears in seclusion has reduced us to our present hapless state" (49). Thus, in her writings the spirit of non-compliance with patriarchal ideals is clearly evident, and she wants to transmit this spirit to women.

Rokeya's life and works are basically stoic, realistic and unromantic, and the cause of such representation is that she does not want to convey any fabricated reality. Throughout *The Zenana Women*, she portrays the harsh reality, and it is her intention to suggest that in order to face such harshness women will have to be intellectually developed. But the task is difficult because as a consequence of intellectual and physical bondage, women have become acquainted with such situation and that has become normal to them. An unromantic metaphor is used by her in order to show this reality, "Having lived in purdah for a long time, we have grown accustomed to the secluded life. . . . If a fishwife is asked, "rotten fish smells foul or fair," what would she answer?" (80). In this same writing, Rokeya quotes two lines of an unnamed poet which are unromantic in temperament:

This life is not poetry or fiction,

Nor is it a theatre, but a habitat of reality. (114)

The necessity of scientific mentality and practice is visible and prominent in *Sultana's Dream*. By introducing the aspect of science fiction, i.e. the use of solar energy, the use of the balloon to draw water from the atmosphere, the involvement of women in scientific research, tilling of land by means of electricity, the use of aerial conveyances rather than road and rail, she puts forward the humanitarian end of science. Bagchi considers *Sultana's Dream* as "a dream of female virtue and the scientific spirit in women" and the importance of "familiarization themselves with the world of science" (xii). She comments that the Ladyland is a place "where science, technology and virtue work together in perfect harmony" (xiii).

Anti-sectarian vision is one of the major aspects of the writings of Rokeya. It is shown as a force which can strengthen women as well as the whole human race, and hence being free from any kind of sectarian consideration is considered by Rokeya as worthy initiative. Quayum et al opines that ". . . both Tagore and Rokeya, coming from two different religious communities, crossed their respective socio-cultural borders to embrace the 'other' in an inclusive spirit and sought to create greater mutual understanding and harmony between Hindus and Muslims, . . . " (xxiv). In Rokeya's fictitious and non-fictitious writings there is the congregation of women of different kinds of races and religions. The best example of such congregation can be found in *Padmarag*. In it, she describes the three-storeyed mansion of a dervish and offers a journey from the ground floor

to the top floor. In the ground and first floor, there is religious and racial discrimination, but in the top floor there is no division, only human beings. The metaphorical implication is that by this she proposes a secular world, and her indication is that a secular world can create equality and justice for all kinds of races, religions, castes and classes. About the Tarini Bhavan, Bagchi opines that the benefit of shared humanity and non-sectarian welfare-oriented activities by rejecting the discrimination of caste, creed, race and gender is that it is convenient for self-respect and self-reliance among the residents of Tarini Bhavan. It is the lesson forwarded by Rokeya that by establishing this fellow feeling and bond, oppressed women can ensure better chance of survival.

Rokeya's anti-sectarian attitude is further expressed in this statement of the narrator of "The Mysteries of Love", "I have loved people of all religions – Hindu, Christian, Muslim, . . ." (143). The relationship between the narrator and the untouchable baby girl Champa is another proof of this. Furthermore, the translator, Mohammad A. Quayum shows another example of anti-sectarian attitude of Rokeya as well as of that time in a foot note: "However, it is customary for the Bengali Hindus to use 'Didi' more frequently, while the Bengali Muslims prefer 'Apa'. It should be noted that the narrator, although a Muslim, addresses her sister as 'Didi,' which is an indication of how the line between culture and religion has always been fluid among the Bengali people" (146). The use of the salutation "Namaskar" by the Muslim narrator is also shown by Quayum (147). At the very beginning of "The Theory of Creation", Rokeya provides a scene in which several women are involved in one kind of chitchatting. The characters of that chitchatting are Ms. Nonibala Dutta, Shirin Begum, Jaheda Begum, Mrs. Binapani Ghosh, and in this non-sectarian gathering she brings the Hindu God Tvastri. For this reason, Quayum concludes, "Rokeya never saw herself exclusively as a Bengali or a Muslim. She always emphasized her Indian identity above all else" (14).

Rokeya proposes love as an antidote to sectarian belief. It is manifested wonderfully in *Sultana's Dream*. By sketching intellectually and morally prosperous Ladyland governed by women, she offers another vision of female worth which places love and truth at the peak by denying the ritualistic aspect of religion. Sister Sara informs, "Our religion is based on Love and Truth. It is our religious duty to love one another and be absolutely truthful" (167). In this way, love and truth are posited as the most important ingredients in the vision of female worth. The secret of the success of Ladyland lies in its philosophical foundation which is based on love. The supremacy of love and truth frees Ladyland from sectarian conflict which is the most ruinous force in any kind of development. In respect of the punishment of any crime and sin, Sister Sara

informs, "We do not take pleasure in killing a creature of God – specially a human being" (167). There is always scope of forgiving and sincere repentance.

In "The Mysteries of Love", the narrator, Tahera, mentions her love for an untouchable girl Champa and an unnamed sick woman. Both these love are not germinated from any kind of self-interest. The surrounding people consider this love as unusual, but she finds genuine happiness. None of these two characters are long-time known to her, nor are they family members or relatives to her. The narrator concludes the essay by providing the definition of love, "A lover's heart is soft like jelly. But also hard like rock. Sometimes we see love very firm but other times weak", and "All we know is that love is infinite; its mysteries are unfathomable" (148-49).

While love is suggested to practice by Rokeya, fear and greed are considered as negative qualities. She suggests to be free from fear and greed in *The Zenana Women* by quoting a comment of Hazrat Rabeya Basri: "Oh God, if I pray for the fear of hell, throw me into hell; and if I pray for the sake of attaining heaven, preclude me from entering heaven" (79). In this way, she suggests that in order to be worthy, women should avoid fear and greed.

In order to achieve the above-mentioned qualities, education is suggested throughout Rokeya's writings as one of the most important factors. She worked in two fields about education: by establishing Sakhawat Memorial Girls' High School and by writing on education. Bagchi considers this school as "the most enduring testimony to Rokeya's vision and competence as an educationist" (ix).

In respect of her vision of education, Rokeya is progressive and advanced. In "Educational Ideals for the Modern Indian Girls," she emphasizes the importance of progressive mentality in determining educational policy. In this context, she values highly "changed circumstance" and the necessity of modifications "to make it suitable to us" (174). Strict morality and vigorous discipline are suggested. She tells that instead of sticking to age-old educational goal, we should experiment "new fancied ideas" (171). In this essay, she shows extreme secular aspect as well as extreme spiritualistic aspect of education. After showing these two tendencies, she proposes a blended form, "Our aim should be to harmonise in due proportion the two purposes, spiritual and secular, in the education we impart" (172). This blended ideology is not only applicable for educational sector but in life in general. One very important aim of education is mentioned by her, "We should by all means broaden the outlook of our girls and teach them to modernize themselves" (173). She also pinpoints that "... service

should be their watchword, . . ." (174). In this essay, she envisions one kind of education in which apart from book-learning, physical development is also emphasized. Luxury is clearly discouraged in respect of equipment and infrastructure of education. This simplicity is also suggested by Rokeya in the novel *Padmarag*.

Apart from these, her insight on education is scattered throughout her writings. In "Woman's Downfall", she comments that "We do not consider the pursuit of academic degrees as real education" (29). Rather, in "The Dawn" she talks about the aim of education:

By education, I mean wholesome education; . . . I want that education which will enable them to earn their rights as citizens; . . . Education should cultivate both the body and mind. They should know that they have not come into the world merely to decorate themselves as beautiful dolls by wearing attractive saris, clips and expensive ornaments; instead, they have been born as women to fulfill a specific duty in life. Their lives are not meant to be thrown away just to gratify their husband-lords. (137)

In "Nurse Nelly", in order to show the impact of education on human achievement, Rokeya refers to Nur Jahan Begum. Rokeya argues that she has been made immortal, radiant and renowned by the grace of education (72).³

Patriarchy has a tendency of condemning female education. For example, in "Nurse Nelly", it is argued by the relatives of Nayeema that women's education is responsible for her sad plight, i.e. her conversion to Christianity and the resultant suffering; but Rokeya's temperament is that improper education is responsible for her suffering. In order to support this, Rokeya writes, "No matter how much the misogynists rage against woman's education, the triumph of truth is inevitable. Education is vital for both men and women. Just because fire has the potential to burn down a house, can any householder do without fire?" (72). In "The Female-half", she clarifies the fact that education does not instigate renouncing religious belief: "To progress mentally, a Hindu doesn't have to renounce her Hindu identity or a Christian her Christian identity. We can liberate the mind while retaining our respective ethnic differences. The cause of our backwardness is the lack of education, that's all I want to say" (40).

Rokeya prefers mother language as the medium of education. Though she was bound to use Urdu in her family for everyday communication, and in Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School the medium of instruction was also Urdu, for her writing she selects Bengali and English. In the President's Address in Bengal Women's Educational Conference, she highlights the teaching of religious

scriptures by the mother tongue, not in their original (131). In "The Hidden Jewel", she mentions that reciting Quran without understanding its meaning is a waste (133). In this connection, Quayum et al comments that "She found fundamental contradictions between the Islamic articulation of women's rights and the condition of women then prevalent in Muslim society" (xviii). The pseudo-Islamic scholars do not want to expose this contradiction. This fact is exposed by Rokeya in "In a Land of Seven Hundred Schools": "Our Pir Saheb has said that the reading or knowing the meaning of the Qur'an is sinful; it tarnishes one's faith" (140). Going against this shrewd preaching, she suggests reading Quran in Bengali translation in order to understand the actual teaching of Islam.

Though in her writings Rokeya scathingly attacks purdah system, her ultimate intention is to make women aware of the necessity of intellectual excellence which can ensure the proper sense of worth. In "The Female-half", she clarifies that she is against the fanatic practice of purdah, but in respect of her animosity against purdah, she is not extremist in nature. She considers the enslavement of purdah as secondary; on the contrary, she identifies her primary concern by mentioning that "My focus was on enslavement of the mind" (33). She argues that emancipation from purdah does not ensure the intellectual excellence by giving the example of Parsi women, "Now the Parsi women come out of purdah indubitably, but have they overcome their mental slavery? Certainly not!" (33). She mentions the necessity of the emancipation from mental slavery, "In the Christian community, although there are many opportunities for women's education, the women still fail to realize their identity fully. They cannot rid themselves of mental slavery" (37).

In her works, Rokeya discusses the necessity and power of knowledge. In "The Knowledge Fruit", she highlights knowledge by showing that in the tug of war between the Kanak Island and the "jinns", the people of Kanak Island have become successful in respect of saving themselves from disaster only using knowledge properly. The protective power of knowledge is expressed by Rokeya thus, "They [citizens of Kanak Island] could no longer be tricked by magic because the women were given charge of the garden of knowledge" (57). By this essay, Rokeya proves that knowledge is essential everywhere, in heaven, in hell, on earth; and knowledge shapes the relationship between different groups competing for and sharing power. For example, she shows that in the relationship between the people of Kanak Island and the "jinns", or the relationship between God and Adam/Eve in heaven, knowledge is the determining factor. The power of knowledge is so tremendous that even the powerful entities are afraid of it, as it has been portrayed by Rokeya in the essay

that God feels uncomfortable for the possession of knowledge by Adam/Eve. It proves that the power of knowledge is above all the power of the whole universe.

Negative tendency towards knowledge and progression is another reason of the lacking of the sense of worth among women. Rokeya opines that intellectual faculty needs constant culture and nurturing, and women lack this practice. For example, in "Women's Downfall", she writes, "We do not nurture our intellect, so it has lost its vigour" (32). In "The Knowledge Fruit", in a paradoxical way, she proposes that consciousness and disquiet should take the place of ignorance and joy (51). She talks of the reality that consciousness brings disquiet and ignorance brings joy, even then she suggests consciousness by ignoring the resultant disquiet it brings. She argues that however arduous the path of achieving consciousness is, women should go for that.

In "Woman Worship", Rokeya shows a model of intellectual excellence to be practiced by women. This essay is remarkable for the fact that in it several female characters are involved in evaluating and judging the position of and attitude towards women in different historical times and it shows their intellectual practice and capability. Their arguments and counter-arguments are the proof of their intellectual excellence. Such kind of intellectual argumentation is rare and to some extent utopian during the time of Rokeya. In addition to this, in this essay, she argues that remarkable female characters like Damayanti, Sita, Savitri, Lilabati, Khana have not become renowned for the generosity of the patriarchy; on the contrary, they have become successful in being remarkable for their "personal virtue" (120).⁴ They were successful in becoming a "person," not as a woman. In this way it is indicated that in order to have the sense of worth, women should practice and develop personal virtue. By denying the gender consideration, they should think and act like a human being.

On several occasions in her writings, Rokeya provides deconstructed image of some traditional and familiar facts and stories. About her representation of the eating of the forbidden fruit by Adam and Eve in "The Knowledge Fruit" and its impacts on female intelligence, Quayum comments, "Thus, the timid, foolish, sinful woman is transformed into a laudable individual possessing her own intelligence and volition; her act of eating the fruit is a boon rather than a curse" (6). I think that Rokeya was aware of the fact that in order to inject the sense of worth in female psychology, reversal of the patriarchal ideology is a must, and for this reason, she has provided the deconstructed explanation of the traditional myth of Adam and Eve. Similar is the case for Rama and Sita in "The Female-half". In "The Creation of Woman", Rokeya refers to the ancient Indian myth of the thirty three ingredients by which women are made by Tvastri (Viswakarma) (59). I opine that in that list there is nothing intellectual; the

ingredients are connected with either physical beauty and attractiveness or some negative and poisonous characteristics which are unworthy for women.⁵

Rokeya values knowledge and intellectual excellence more than material gain. About the motivating philosophy of the Ladyland, the Queen tells, "We do not covet other people's land, we do not fight for [a] piece of diamond though it may be thousand-fold brighter than the Koh-i-Noor, nor do we grudge a ruler his Peacock Throne. We dive deep into the ocean of knowledge and try to find out the precious gems, which Nature has kept in store for us" (168). Rokeya wants to transmit the spirit of this comment of the Queen to all the enchained women who want to be emancipated. Physical luxury is often considered as a negative quality as it fails to satisfy the desire of soul. In "The Knowledge Fruit", she finds the physical luxury of heaven as ineffectual:

This blissful playground – this sweet-smelling, saffron-coloured flowerbed that is layered with verdant grass, these diamond-flower decked creepers, these plants embellished with emerald-leaves with a lotus flower at the top – they please the eyes no doubt but how do they satisfy the soul's desires? Ambrosia can meet the thirst like the sweet water of a lake, but how can it palliate the yearning of the heart? Why do we need such heavenly splendor? (52)

Hence, "soul's desires" and "yearning of the heart" are valued high by Rokeya and I opine that these two are important ingredients of ensuring proper sense of worth of women.

In this "yearning of the heart", women's fascination for jewelry plays a discouraging role. In her writings, Rokeya discusses the view of patriarchy regarding jewelry as a matter of reward and her view of it as a worthless substance. In "Woman's Downfall", she puts forward the patriarchal notion that "The widow who has lost the right to wear bangles is wretched like none other on earth" (23). Rokeya argues that such kind of impression takes women far from the authentic sense of worth. She considers jewelry as opium or drug or addiction to women. For example, she comments, "In spite of the fact that opium is unpleasant in taste, it is a fond object for the opium-addict" (23). In the same way, in spite of its worthlessness, women are fond of jewelry. She considers jewelry as "markers of our slavery", "badges of slavery" (23), "insignia of slavery" (24) and compares fetters/anklets made of gold or silver with the iron shackles worn by prisoners, bangles with handcuffs, chained necklace with dog collar, the perforation of a woman's nose for wearing nose-ring with the perforation of the nose of a cow for harnessing it (23). In *The Zenana Women*, she shows that women wear dress to please the eyes, not to fulfill necessity (105).

Rokeya provides quite a different interpretation of jewelry in her writings. In "The Hidden Jewel", she talks of Mrs. Karimunnesa Khanam, her sister who is considered as hidden jewel because of the fact that she struggled against adverse situation to attain education. Her yearning for knowledge is considered by Rokeya as the precious jewel. Karimunnesa was a poet and her writings are her real jewelry. In the President's Address in Bengal Women's Educational Conference, Rokeya suggests that "The money they spend on the purchase of jewellery and on dowry during their daughters' wedding – a part of that can be spent on their education and on the care of their health" (131-32). It is my opinion that Rokeya considers purdah and jewelry as opium used by patriarchy to divert the attention from the path of becoming conscious of women's rights. In "Woman's Downfall", she shows, after precise calculation, that a newlywed woman is bound to wear eight seers of gold apart from the "pleated and thickly layered linen salwar" and "double-folded wrapper covering the upper part of her body" (27). I opine that it is next to impossible for the women to make the sense of worth after tolerating such tremendous weight of purdah and jewelry.

CONCLUSION

I want to conclude this paper by providing some ideal characters having worthy life and Rokeya suggests following these characters in the path of attaining sense of worth. In her address as the President of Bengal Women's Educational Conference, she informs that "A woman has been elected as Deputy President of the Madras Legislative Council this year. Of late, a woman in Rangoon became an accomplished barrister. Lady Barrister Ms. Sorabji is also well-renowned" (127). In her biographical piece "The Hidden Jewel", she offers the name Karimunnesa Khanam as an ideal hidden jewel. In "The Dawn", she emphasizes the necessity of involving women in different kinds of professions for declaring "... war against all kinds of social injustices – rising to the level of education minister, doctor, philosopher, scientist, defence minister, chief of army, writer, poet and so forth – ... " (136). It is my parting proposal that the sense of worth developed in this paper needs to be followed and imitated by all the women across the world who are lagged behind.

END NOTES

¹The meaning of "purdahnashin" is a person who maintains purdah.

²Muhammad A. Quayum has translated Aborodhbasini as The Zenana Women.

³Nur Jahan Begum acted prominent role in the court of Mughal Emperor Jahangir in respect of state decision and she was the de facto ruler behind the throne. She was self-educated.

⁴Khana's tongue was cut by her husband for uttering the maxims. The life of Khana and her maxims are shown as one kind of ideal for women here.

⁵Example of some of the ingredients: parasitism, tremulousness, slenderness, beauty [physical], dewiness, timidity, pliability, ruthlessness, absentmindedness, inconstancy, inertness, etc.

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