

An Analytical Review of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's Feminist Thought on Gender, Education, and Patriarchy

Habiba Akter^{1*}, Md. Jahir Uddin²

¹Lecturer, Department of Bangla, Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Sylhet, Bangladesh

²Assistant Professor, Department of Public Administration, Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Sylhet, Bangladesh

*Corresponding Author

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100500233>

Received: 27 April 2026; Accepted: 04 May 2026; Published: 28 May 2026

ABSTRACT

This paper is an analytical literature review of the feminist thought of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932), widely recognized as the pioneering feminist intellectual of colonial Bengal and a foundational figure in the discourse of feminist liberation in South Asian countries. The review also systematically analyses the academic interpretation of the major writings of Rokeya- including *Sultana dream* (1905), *Matichur* (1904), *Padmarag* (1924), and *Avarodhbasini* (1931). Based on over thirty primary and secondary sources covering feminist theory, women education advocacy, criticism of patriarchal social systems, theorisation of the agency of Muslim women, and utopian fantasy, this review identifies five thematic clusters of existing scholarship: the feminist ideology of Rokeya, her advocacy of women education, her critique of patriarchal social systems, her theorisation of the agency of Muslim women, and her utopian imagination. Through analysis, there is a great deal of scholarly consensus around the foundational importance of Rokeya as well as the identification of the critical gaps: the relative neglect of her economic thought, the underexplored of her subaltern intersectionality, the limited engagement with her prose essays in Bengali and other languages, and the absence of sustained transnational feminist comparative analysis. The paper concludes that the feminist corpus of Rokeya is in need of a new interdisciplinary approach and serves as a highly valuable, largely untapped resource in the current gender, postcolonial, and Islamic feminist theory.

KEYWORDS: *Feminism; Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain; Women's Education; Patriarchy; Colonial Bengal*

INTRODUCTION

Rokeya sakhawat hossain (1880-1932) is the only woman to hold a special place in the intellectual history of south asia (hasan, 2013). Born into a conservative muslim zamindari family, rangpur, bengal (now bangladesh) she challenged the structural and ideological limits of the social world in which she found herself (hossain, 1905; islam, 2001). Rokeya expressed a systematic, broad-ranging and philosophically advanced critique of the oppression of women by their patriarchs at a historical moment when the purdah system imprisoned the vast majority of muslim women in domestic seclusion, when female literacy was being stigmatised as socially transgressive, and when the encounter with the colonial experience had produced complex, often contradictory possibilities of gender reform (bagchi, 1990; hossain, 1931). Her work is not only a landmark personal historical document but an intellectual resource that is a living entity and is urgently relevant to the current feminist discourse (mitra, 2024).

Although the scholarly appreciation of the significance of rokeya has been increasing, the literature on her feminist thinking has been characterised by the high degree of unevenness. Certain of her works, especially 'sultana dream' have received a lot of scholarly attention, giving rise to rich interpretive debates as to what this utopian feminism was, and what its boundaries were (paxton, 1994; mohsin, 2002; hossain, 1905). Other aspects, such as her economic thinking, her community organising practice, her subtle engagement with islam, her writing in the bengali language in the form of prose essays are relatively under-explored (ahmed, 1992;

jahan, 1988). What is created is a partial, piecemeal scholastic portrait that is too narrow in portraying the full complexity and theoretical ambition of her intellectual project.

This literature review discusses the aspect of that fragmentation. Its main aim is to make such a systematic, analytically organized study of available literature on the feminist thought of rokeya, as to identify the main thematic and interpretive strands which run through this literature, so as to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of existing scholarly approaches, and to identify the gaps in research which most urgently demand attention in the future. The review is informed by four main objectives: (i) to trace the development of the feminist ideology of rokeya within the context of its historical and intellectual context; (ii) to analyse the applications of her thought by scholars on feminist ideology in relation to women education, critique of patriarchy, agency of muslim women, and utopian vision; (iii) to assess the theoretical frameworks that scholars have applied to her works on feminist ideology in terms of women education, critique of patriarchy, agency of muslim women, and utopian vision; and (iv) to identify the most important underexplored dimensions of her corpus.

Methodology: literature review approach

The research paper uses an analytical narrative literature review as its research methodology. As opposed to systematic review, which puts more emphasis on exhaustive, protocol-driven search processes optimised to synthesise empirical studies, the analytical narrative review is designed to focus on literature that is interpretively rich, theoretically diverse, and not reducible to statistical aggregation (snyder, 2019; jesson, matheson & lacey, 2011). Since the research work on rokeya sakhawat hossain has been across a variety of disciplines, such as literary criticism, feminist theory, postcolonial studies, islamic gender discourse, and south asian history, the analytical narrative approach is the most suitable methodology to use in this inquiry.

Type of review

The orientation of the review is analytical and interpretive orientation. Instead of simply summarising the individual sources, it attempts to compare scholarly positions, identifying convergences and tensions in interpretation, to position the thought of rokeya within the context of broader theoretical debates, and exercise a critical judgement as to the relative persuasiveness and adequacy of the various readings (torraco, 2005). This strategy is aligned with the aim of creating a publishable review article that adds new analytic value and not an annotated bibliography.

Sources used

Multi-database search involving jstor, scopus, google scholar, mla international bibliography, and proquest dissertations and theses were used to assemble a literature base used to complete this review. The primary texts, i.e. The self-written works in english and in bengali by rokeya form the bottom layer of analysis (hossain, 1905; hossain, 1904; hossain, 1924; hossain, 1931). Peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly monographs, edited collections, and book chapters are all types of secondary sources. The necessary scaffolding of the context can be obtained through biographical and historical studies of the colonial bengal and the bengal muslim community borthwick, 1984; sarkar & butalia, 1995). The analytical schemata that explain how the work of rokeya is evaluated, are provided by theoretical literature in feminist theory, postcolonial studies, and islamic feminist thought (spivak, 1988; mohanty, 1988; mernissi, 1991; wadud, 1999).

Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Sources were selected based on the following criteria:

(I) Relevance to the life, writings or intellectual legacy of rokeya sakhawat hossain.

(II) Relevance to the themes of south asian feminist thought, female education, female agency or agency of women or utopian literature.

- (III) scholarly rigour as indicated by peer review, institutional affiliation or citation record.
- (IV) accessibility in english or bengali.

Sources were also filtered out as purely journalistic, mostly biographical, and not much analytical content; or focused solely on other aspects of bengal history unrelated to gender (jesson et al., 2011). There was no strict date limit, as the works on rokeya are founded over several decades, but especially since 1990, when the maturation of postcolonial and islamic feminist theoretical framework takes place bagchi, 1990; mernissi, 1991; spivak, 1988).

Thematic analysis procedure

After gathering and critically reading the sources, a thematic coding process was used to sort the literature into interpretative theme (braun & clarke, 2006). This process resulted in five major themes: feminist ideology, women education, critique of patriarchy, agency of muslim women and utopian vision. These themes are not the sole areas of the most intense scholarly activity and the most theoretically important aspects of her work. Each of the themes has individual sources that are summarized, compared and critically assessed and the primary texts of rokeya are directly engaged to anchor interpretation to textual evidence.

Review of literature: thematic analysis

Feminist ideology: reform or revolution.

The issue of how to describe the feminist ideology of rokeya as reformist or radical, as liberal or radical, as native or derivative has given rise to one of the most substantive debates in the scholarly literature (rashid, 2018). According to islam (2001), rokeya is positioned as a reformist feminist who, on the one hand, developed the strategy of gradual change of muslim social practice through education and moral persuasion instead of structural confrontation. This reading is based on the moderate, conciliatory tone of some of the essays of rokeya, her regular appeal to the islamic principle as a source of gender equality, and the fact that she is ready to act within the framework of the existing social institutions. The interpretation of islam has been widely quoted and used as an important corrective to the anachronistically imposed western radical feminist frame on the specific islamic context of south asia (islam, 2001; ahmed, 1992). Anyway, the radical reading of bagchi (1990) suggests that the feminist vision of rokeya, especially in the form of the sultana in her dream and in the form of the searing social criticism of 'avarodhbasini', is more of a fundamental challenge to the patriarchal social order than it is a cry of its gradual adjustment (bagchi,1990)). The reversal of gender power that rokeya fantasizes about a world where men are relegated to the domestic sphere as women take control of the public life is not just a playful literary conceit, but a genuinely subversive ideological act that reveals the arbitrariness of patriarchal arrangements (hossain, 1905). Borthwick (1984) offers a valuable historical supplement to this debate placing rokeya within the longer history of the bengal women movement, and demonstrating that her radicalism was not simply due to individual genius but emerged as a response to particular colonial and social conditions which made certain types of feminist thought both possible and necessary.

More recent criticism has gravitated towards a synthetic position, that recognises that the feminist ideology of rokeya was neither simply reformist nor simply revolutionary but strategically plural in its register and intensity to particular audiences, occasions, and objectives (mohsin, 2002; jahan, 1988). Mohsin (2002) makes a convincing case that rokeya used what can be termed as a two-layered discourse writing in measured, persuasive styles when addressing conservative muslim audiences and writing in more radical terms of gender reversal and women autonomy in the literary and fictional languages. This interpretive paradigm is theoretically fruitful in the sense that it sees the apparently contradictory aspects of the corpus of rokeya without reducing her thought to any one ideological stance (mukherjee,2013). It also echoes postcolonial feminist understandings of the strategic aspect of subaltern speech in situations of structural inequality (spivak, 1988; mohanty, 1988). What comes out of this intellectual dialogue is an image of rokeya as a feminist intellectual of impressive ideological refinement - one who realised that the process of dismantling deeply entrenched patriarchal systems required not one but a diversified repertoire of intervention, imagination,

organisation and education (hasan,2018). Her feminist theory cannot be dismissed to the single western feminist school; it could be perceived as the contextually specific, theoretically innovative response to the combination of the oppressions of colonial domination, the hierarchies of a class, and the subordinations of a gender (ahmed, 1992; sarkar & butalia, 1995; spivak, 1988).

Women's education: the ultimate key to freedom.

One of the most practically expressed and at the same time the most theoretical of all the themes of the feminist thought of rokeya is her devotion to women education (shirin, 2015). It is this dedication that led her to establish the sakhawat memorial girls school in calcutta in 1911 - an institution that not only provided a viable means through which women could be empowered, but also served as a living representation of her feminist ideas (jahan, 1988; islam, 2001). The school was also functioning under the condition of a rather high level of social hostility, with many conservative muslim families initially refusing to enrol their daughter, but rokeya still had to struggle through personal canvassing of families and what jahan (1988) aptly describes as a form of grassroots feminist organising never before seen in the muslim community of bengal. Scholars have singled out a number of separate strands in the educational thought of rokeya (low, 2025). The first and the most fundamental one was her insistence that not only is the ignorance of women not natural but even made, but that it is the deliberate product of the institutions of male dominance that is designed to perpetuate female subordination (hossain, 1904; bagchi, 1990). In matichur, she posits that the very social forces that deny women an education will use their resulting ignorance as the evidence of their incapacity, and that this creates a vicious circle of oppression that can be only broken by unconditional access to knowledge (hossain, 1904). This intuition prefigures freirean critical pedagogy and feminist standpoint epistemology by several decades, suggesting the impressive intellectual prescience of the educational thought of rokeya (freire, 1970; harding, 1986).

The second strand deals with the subject of the education of women. Rokeya insisted that the education of women could not be limited to home economics or to the development of traditionally feminine values but must include the whole gamut of intellectual, scientific, and civic knowledge (quayum, 2016). The women of ladyland in sultana in the dream are smart women: scientists, engineers, their intellectual accomplishments are the key to the functioning of the utopian society (islam, 2001; hossain, 1905). Such a vision of women as being able to accomplish the highest intellectual and scientific success in general was so counter cultural in the context of rokeya, where the dominant ideologies only allowed women to be educated to a basic level of literacy at best (hossain, 1905; paxton, 1994). The third thread of the educational thought that rokeya expressed has also not been neglected by the scholars: its expressly collective aspect. To rokeya, women education was not just an individual good but a precondition that women had to undergo to bring about social transformation collectively (borthwick, 1984; jahan, 1988). Educated women would not just be able to improve their personal lives, they would form the front line of a more feminist movement, able to challenge the structures of patriarchy at the societal level. This collectivist aspect of the educational vision of rokeya makes it stand out against a liberal feminist approach to education that would place more emphasis on the individual opportunity (mohanty, 1988; wadud, 1999).

Critique of patriarchy: naming, analysing and exposing the system

Perhaps the most analytically rigorous aspect of her feminist thinking and the most direct prefiguration of modern feminist theory, is the critique of patriarchy as formulated by rokeya (ray,2013). Long before the term of feminist theoretical interest in the west, the concept of the institutionalization, naturalization and reproduction of male power across various social domains, the family, religion, law, economic life and cultural representation were all in rokeya's active field of interest (bagchi, 1990; hossain, 1931). The longest single exercise in patriarchal criticism that she ever made was avarodhbasini (the secluded ones, 1931), a series of forty-seven vignettes in which she documented the absurdities, indignities, and overt violence with which the purdah system oppressed bengali muslim women. This text has been analysed by scholars in several perspectives (hossain, 1931; islam, 2001). It is read by mohsin (2002) as a kind of feminist empirical sociology - a systematic record of the actual implications of patriarchal ideology, which is designed to make visible what social convention had made invisible. It is placed in the wider context of nationalist and communal discourses of the late colonial period, in which rokeya is argued to have critiqued the colonial representations of the

backwardness of the muslims, as well as a critique of the patriarchal system in islam (chowdhury,2019). The combination of these two critical goals: to confront both internal patriarchal oppression and external colonial misrepresentation is reflective of the theoretical complexity of rokeya feminist positionality (sarkar & butalia, 1995; spivak, 1988).

One of the most striking features of the patriarchal critique by rokeya is that it focuses on what we would call today ideological reproduction the ways in which the patriarchal values are internalized by their victims and reproduced through the process of female socialization (bagchi, 1990; ahmed, 1992). She was very conscious that it was the women themselves who so often acted as instruments of patriarchal oppression, policing the behaviour of other women and passing on restrictive norms to their daughters (jahan,2018). This understanding, which is parallel to the later analysis of the complicit woman by simone de beauvoir in the second sex (1949) and foreshadows the more recent analyses of internalised misogyny by contemporary feminist theorists has shown the theoretical richness and sociological accuracy of the feminist analysis provided by rokeya (de beauvoir, 1949; mernissi, 1991). The application of satire and irony as means of patriarchal critique have also been pointed out by scholars (miah, 2014). Her method of reversing gendered structures putting men in the role of isolated domesticity and women in the role of public authority and intellectual influence not only acted as literary entertainment but also served as a potent analysis tool to show the contingency and irrationality of the current gender inequalities (paxton, 1994; hossain, 1905; mohsin, 2002). Rokeya engaged in what feminist philosophers would subsequently term a "denaturalisation" of gender - one of the most fundamental processes of critical feminist thought (butler, 1990; bagchi, 1990).

Agency of muslim women: islam, reform and the feminist subject.

Probably the most theoretically controversial aspect of rokeya work in modern scholarship is the connection to islam and her theorization of the agency of muslim women (debnath, 2025). Rokeya herself was a strictly practicing muslim, and her feminism was aimed not, as some secular feminist readings have suggested, at islam as such, but at certain patriarchal interpretations and practices carried on in the name of islam. This difference is crucial to a theoretically sufficient explanation of her feminist project (ahmed, 1992; wadud, 1999; mernissi, 1991). One of the most compelling approaches to placing rokeya in the context of the islamic feminist discourse can be found in the landmark study by leila ahmed entitled women and gender in islam (ahmed,1992). There has always been, ahmed argues, an ethical voice within islamic tradition, an egalitarian moral vision with its roots in the prophetic tradition, a voice that is in tension with the establishment voice of the institutional islamic jurisprudence, which has historically transmitted the male privilege (ahmed, 1992). Read this framework, the feminist islam of rokeya is not an apostasy, or a compromise to western liberal ideas but a recovery and amplification of the egalitarian ethical voice within the islamic tradition itself (dasthakur, 2017). A similar argument is developed by wadud (1999) in her qur'anic feminist hermeneutics, and the echoes between her approach to interpretation and the earlier approach of rokeya suggest a fruitful genealogy of islamic feminist thought which scholarship has only begun to trace (wadud, 1999; mernissi, 1991).

The stance of the agency of muslim women as taken by rokeya was however more subtle and inwardly complicated than can be adequately captured in either purely secular or purely religious feminist frameworks (islam, 2001). She both appealed to islamic authority to justify the right of women to education and equal moral status, and placed certain islamic social practices, purdah, polygamy, the restriction of women to domestic space, among others, under the microscope of harsh critical criticism (jahan, 1988). This two-sided movement is an indicator of a complex awareness of the strategic resources that feminist thought could utilize within the context of muslim majority societies, where any arguments based in islamic legitimacy will command an audience that cannot be reached by arguments grounded in secular feminist thought (mernissi, 1991; ahmed, 1992). It projects by almost a century the speculative and practical policy of modern islamic feminism as practised by such figures as amina wadud, fatima mernissi, and ziba mir-hosseini (wadud, 1999; mernissi, 1991). This idea of agency, is the focus of this aspect of the thought of rokeya. In opposition to the prevailing images of muslim women as passive victims of a backward religious culture, rokeya emphasizes the potential of muslim women in terms of self-determination, intellectual performance, and social leadership (mohanty, 1988; spivak, 1988; hossain, 1905). Those women of ladyland in the dream of sultana are not emancipated by the male benefactors, or even by the western intervention; they liberate themselves with a collective intellectual and moral effort. This image of female agency created and generated by themselves and

collectively is one of the most politically important and theoretically innovative components of rokeya as a feminist thinker (paxton, 1994; bagchi, 1990).

Utopian vision: sultana in her dream and the politics of imagination.

The most widely known and, by far the most widely discussed text in her corpus is the short story sultana has a dream published in 1905 in the indian ladies magazine (hossain, 1905; paxton, 1994). The narrative is about a dream in which the narrator goes to ladyland which is a utopian society where women rule all the public and intellectual life, men are placed in a domestic seclusion and the country prospered under the application of female scientific genius and moral virtue. Various and occasionally divergent academic readings have been attracted to the text (bhattacharya & hiradhar, 2019). The most influential reading is that by paxton (1994), who places the dream of sultana within the genre of feminist utopian fiction and argues that it represents one of the earliest and most radical instances of the genre ever produced anywhere in the world. Paxton focuses on the strategic reversal of the situation in the story - instead of being an attack on purdah, rokeya uses purdah as an instrument against men, which forces her readers to see the ridiculousness of the gender confinement (paxton, 1994; hossain, 1905). This interpretive gesture of reading the text as a political satire by way of inverting the genres involved has been incredibly fruitful and has established sultana's dream as a canonical text of early feminist writing.

There is, however, an important critical question about this reading: to what degree does the act of celebrating the utopian imagination of the person whose issue we are reading here in her less-celebrated prose writings? The point is that the international canonical status of sultana in dream has attracted scholarly attention to the expense of that richer, messier, and more sociologically specific body of bengali-language writing in which the feminist thought of rokeya is most fully developed (mohsin, 2002; islam, 2001). This is a methodologically significant warning: the history of reception of any body of feminist thought is conditioned by the politics of translation, accessibility, and academic fashion, and the forces that shape it may not necessarily correlate with the inner logic or with the most important dimensions of the thought itself. The framework of feminist epistemology that harding (1986) developed to understand the feminist movement is a productive way to read the utopian aspect of the work by rokeya. The ladyland vision is not just a fantasy, it is an exercise in what can be termed as feminist standpoint; it is an act of imagining a world which was organised on the perspective and experience of women instead of men (harding, 1986; bagchi, 1990). In this way it fulfils more of an epistemological than a political task: it will show that the social world looks fundamentally different when the experience of women is taken as the starting point of inquiry. In this interpretation the utopian imagination is not escapism but a stern cognitive and political as well (paxton, 1994; butler, 1990).

Discussion

Generalization of main learnings

The thematic analysis of the previous section shows a body of scholarship that is both increasingly sophisticated and broadening theoretical ambition. This early literature on rokeya was biased towards hagiography, not the critical analysis that was to be given to her thought in the decades after her death (jahan, 1988). The academic literature of the 1980s and the like can be seen as a decisive shift toward oriented engagement since feminist theory, postcolonial studies and the gender discourse of islam provided new frameworks in the light of which the work of rokeya is to be interpreted with a greater degree of critical rigour (bagchi, 1990; ahmed, 1992; borthwick, 1984). A number of connecting threads are found passing through the thematic clusters found in this review. First, throughout all five themes, there is a pervasive tension between readings that place rokeya in the context of western feminist traditions and readings that insist on the specificity and autonomy of her south asian islamic feminist vision (mohanty, 1988; islam, 2001; spivak, 1988). The most theoretically fruitful scholarship, such as that of ahmed (1992), mohsin (2002), and bagchi (1990), negotiates this tension by recognizing both the universal dimensions of the feminist issues that were voiced and the specific historical, cultural and religious contexts that defined both the expression and application of these feminist issues.

Second, throughout the scholarship, there is a steady acknowledgment of the inseparability of the theoretical aspects of rokeya and her practical activism. Contrary to many feminist intellectuals who limited themselves to the pen, rokeya established and operated a school, recruited students herself in the face of societal intolerance, and engaged in controversial issues with her conservative opponents (jahan, 1988; borthwick, 1984). This combination of theory and practice what feminist thinkers, following gramsci, would describe as the work of an organic intellectual is at the core of her feminist success and must be interpreted as belonging to her intellectual legacy, not merely a biographical addition to her intellectual legacy (islam, 2001; sarkar & butalia, 1995).

Theoretical significance

The theoretical value of rokeya is applicable in a number of dimensions. Within the framework of feminist theory, she shows that the high-order and multi-dimensional feminist thought was not necessarily a monopoly of the west but rather arose independently in the colonised societies as a reaction to the local circumstances of gender oppression (mohanty, 1988; spivak, 1988; ahmed, 1992). Her work prefigures some of the defining concepts of second and third-wave western feminism - the social construction of gender, the criticism of patriarchal ideology, the politics of women's knowledge, the significance of collectively - without being based on western sources. This prospective nature lends her work a certain theoretical interest: it provides evidence that the findings of this analysis are not culturally specific but rather the responses to the structural aspects of the patriarchal domination that extend beyond the cultural setting (wadud, 1999; mernissi, 1991; ahmed, 1992).

The importance of rokeya in the context of the islamic feminist thought is as follows: rokeya was the first feminist to demonstrate that feminist critique and islamic faith are not mutually exclusive resources of women liberation but rather resources of women oppression. This argument which has been central to islamic feminism since mernissi wrote the veil and the male elite (1991) has been a longstanding argument of islamic feminism that has been articulated by rokeya in the early twentieth century - a historical fact that the scholarship has not yet fully absorbed (islam, 2001; mohsin, 2002).

Contemporary Relevance

The feminist concepts stated by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain are still valid and have a multi-layered significance in today's scenario which is not just about Bengal in the colonial era. The body of knowledge of Rokeya in Bangladesh is a historical example of women's resistance in the face of the competing demands of women's rights activists, entrenched religious conservatives, and ongoing gender-based violence, and a repository of culturally specific intellectual materials. This dual role is especially strategic, with Rokeya's feminist concerns being a natural outgrowth of the Islamic intellectual tradition, thus making her arguments clearly more resistant to the elimination and marginalization of a politically disabling charge of 'Western cultural imperialism' that is often used to discredit feminist movements in postcolonial Muslim majority societies (Jahan, 1988; Islam, 2001). Rokeya's work not only serves as a historical precedent but also a methodological template for non-apologetic and non-extraneous feminist approaches to Islam. Her use of Islamic discourse and insistence on women's full spiritual and intellectual capacity anticipates the more systematic feminist discourse of subsequent feminist scholars such as Amina Wadud (1999), and foreshadows a body of rich and contentious feminist Islamic scholarship.

Her educational mission the belief in the total intellectual parity of the sexes and the social imperative of women's empowerment through education is unfinished agenda not only in Bangladesh but in the whole of South Asia and Muslim world (Freire, 1970; Harding, 1986; Wadud, 1999). The structural constraints that Rokeya highlighted and theorized that woman be confined to their homes, that education for women be denied, and that the institution of purdah create material constraints for them are now weakened but not abolished in this last century since her writing. The structural conditions that Rokeya was addressing, especially related to women's literacy, education and working status, are still present, though in a new and new forms in contemporary South Asian and Muslim world data. In this regard, her work has not only historical value, but it is also conceptual tools for present-day feminist analysis and action. The other aspect of Rokeya's work that is also coming under renewed scholarly focus is its utopian imaginative dimension. Her well-known feminist utopian novel, Sultana's dream (1905), is part of a larger tradition of speculative feminist world-making which

has been recognized as an important mode of feminist political writing (Paxton, 1994; Butler, 1990; Mohanty, 1988).

RESEARCH GAPS, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN THE STUDY OF ROKEYA SAKHAWAT HOSSAIN

While the number of scholarly works on Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain has increased significantly during the last few decades, a systematic review of the literature shows a few significant and ongoing shortcomings that should be considered as priority areas for future research inquiry. Each of these gaps is taken up in turn, with recommendations put forward in the literature and an attempt to build on and extend analytic frameworks that can and should be used to productively address them.

Economic Dimensions of Rokeya's Feminist Thought

The one that stands out to me the most is that the economic aspect of Rokeya's feminist critique is almost entirely overlooked in the existing scholarship. In reading her major works such as *Sultana's Dream* (Hossain, 1905), *Padmarag* (Hossain, 1924), and *Avarodhbasini* (Hossain, 1931) carefully, it is clear that she has maintained a constant and analytically complex focus on the material and economic condition of women's subordination. Rokeya was very conscious of the economic burden of the institution of purdah, not only on the women under its purview but also on their families, households and society at large. Her arguments were frequently very well-informed and she tried to make them intelligently available as a fact to everyone involved in the struggle. She maintained that the exclusion of women from the productive economic sphere was enormous and largely unrecognized drain on the social resources, and that the participation of women in the economy was not only a question of right to action, but a precondition for overall social development (Hossain, 1904 & Hossain, 1931).

Though analytically rich, the following economic arguments have yet to be subjected to systematic scholarly examination of which the writer is aware anywhere published. Literature could be productive in placing Rokeya's economic analysis in the wider context of the intellectual history of feminist economics, such as the use of the capability approach by Amartya Sen (1999) and application of this framework to the analysis of gender inequality, or the economic arguments of her western counterparts like Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1898). Furthermore, Rokeya's work can be studied from an economic point of view with immediate policy implications in the current context. Much scholarly work has been done on Bangladesh's phenomenal achievements in closing gender gaps in education and increasing the participation of women in the labor market in recent decades (Kabeer, 2000; Jahan, 1988).

Subaltern Intersectionality and Class Analysis

Another important lacuna in the existing literature that has not been explored is the intersectional aspects of Rokeya's feminist framework, especially in relation to the particular situations of lower class and subaltern women. Rokeya was sensitive to the manner in which the experience of women's confinement was marked and amplified by class position and caste location, so that however much the feminist subject of her work has been seen as relatively uniform in essence the educated, middle-class Muslim woman of colonial Bengal – existing literature has devoted analytic attention to that paradigm alone (Spivak, 1988; Sarkar & Butalia, 1995). Her portrayals of the specific circumstances of poor women – their heightened material precarity, the extra indignities they faced, and how poor women were subject to simultaneously heightened forms of suffering because of their class status and their gender status are permeated by an analytical awareness that makes the feminist reading of her class blindness and elitism much more complicated than it might appear (Hossain, 1931; Bagchi, 1990). An analysis of this kind would have to draw on the overarching theoretical concepts of intersectionality offered by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991), and the postcolonial feminist critique of Spivak (1988) and Mohanty (1988). The application of these frameworks to Rokeya's work would infuse the feminist movement with new study on her feminist vision as well as add to the larger feminist initiative of creating feminist theory from non-Western intellectual sources, which is still so much needed if feminist theory is to move beyond its persistent, albeit recently challenged, Eurocentrism.

Bengali-Language Writings: Towards a Complete Scholarly Edition

Another gap in current literature that is especially significant is the tendency for Bengali-language and English-language academic productions to neglect Rokeya's Bengali-language works. *Sultana's Dream* is the only work that Rokeya actually wrote in English, and it has received far more scholarly attention than any other, leading to a substantial and often misleading skewing of scholarly understanding of her work. The majority of her writing is in Bengali and includes essays, fiction, social commentary and educational writing, ranging widely and with great sophistication, which is only just beginning to be accessible to English-language scholars and is remarkably underrepresented in Bengali-language scholarly literature (Islam, 2001; Mohsin, 2002). The linguistic divide also poses wider methodological challenges to knowledge production in post-colonial South Asian studies, and to the hegemony of English as the dominant language in the global academy, especially marginalization of intellectual traditions that are created in other languages. An important contribution the study of Rokeya can make to the broader sense of self-reflection in the disciplines is a critical reflection on those conditions of knowledge production, and a commitment to research practices that can meet those conditions and the linguistic biases they produce (Chakraborty, 2000; Harding, 1986).

Transnational Comparative Feminist Analysis

The existing literature on Begum Rokeya has been largely confined to a comparison of her ideals with those of her contemporary women leaders, hardly ever placing her ideas in the history of global feminism (Mernissi, 1991; Wadud, 1999; Mohanty, 1988). Comparing her ideas with those of other Muslim women thinkers from other Muslim majority and colonized societies, like Huda Shaarawi, feminist constitutionalists in Iran, the early Turkish reformist feminists, and Pandita Ramabai, would bring out the universal and context-specific aspects of her feminist ideas (Jayawardena, 1986; Enloe, 1989). This would help to foster a more international feminist intellectual history than one that is dominated by the West. Likewise, the relationships between Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) would highlight important commonalities and differences in feminist visions of the future that arose from different colonial and cultural settings. This would not only allow Rokeya to be read as a peripheral character, but as an independent voice in a global tradition of feminist speculative writing.

Reception History, Commemoration, and the Politics of Legacy

Another research gap is on the reception history of Begum Rokeya's work and the interpretation, institutionalization and mobilization of her legacy by the feminist scholars, political actors and cultural institutions of Bangladesh and West Bengal. This is one aspect of the history of south Asian feminist thought that is little explored, as Jahan (1988) and Borthwick (1984) have pointed out. Politics of Rokeya's commemoration is especially noteworthy because her canonization often has focused on her educational activism and symbolic role, while downgrading more radical elements of her thinking—such as her attacks on religious conservatism, economic inequalities and class and caste inequalities. An in-depth examination of such selective commemorative practices would also be a valuable addition to the sociology of feminist knowledge and feminist intellectual traditions and processes in light of political and ideological contexts (Chakraborty, 2000; Bagchi, 1990).

Implications for Policy and Educational Advocacy in South Asia

In addition to their academic relevance, these lines of research hold significant relevance for policy and educational advocacy in South Asia and the Muslim world as a whole. With this systematic recovery of Begum Rokeya's economic ideas, culturally based intellectual tools will be available for modern day gender equality movement, especially in areas where western feminist ideas are considered as culturally imperialist (Kabeer, 2000; Sen, 1999). The creation of an intersectional agenda for Rokeya's thoughts in particular on class and caste marginalization would also enhance policy perspectives on the vulnerabilities of marginalized women in South Asia. This would link the modern conception of development policy with traditional feminist knowledge practices that have in the past dealt with overlapping forms of disadvantage. The educational implications are also very important. The incorporation of Rokeya's texts in the school, university and Islamic educational curricula would introduce the students to an indigenous tradition of feminist thinking, which integrates with

Islamic beliefs and equality and critical thinking. The making of pedagogical tools, such as textbooks, pedagogical guides, critical editions or digital archives would thus be a significant contribution to the move towards gender-sensitive education and feminist scholarship in the region (Freire, 1970; Harding, 1986).

CONCLUSION

The paper has provided an analytical literature review of feminist thought by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, organised around five thematic clusters that are interconnected, namely, feminist ideology, women education, criticism of patriarchy, agency of muslim women and utopian vision. Through all these themes, the review has revealed that Rokeya was a feminist thinker of remarkable depth, strategic sophistication, and theoretical originality - one whose intellectual achievements were both the product and the surpassing of the possibilities of her historical moment. The review has also established the increasing theoretical maturity of scholarship on Rokeya, certainly since the 1990s, as feminist theory, postcolonial studies, and Islamic gender discourse have been able to present more analytical frameworks through which to engage her work. Simultaneously, it has also found considerable gaps: the failure to consider her economic thought, the relative lack of attention to her corpus of writings in Bengali, the relative absence of intersectional readings, and the lack of long-term transnational comparative analysis. These gaps stand as an agenda to future scholarship with an intellectual richness that is quite considerable.

This review has a triple contribution to the larger fields of feminist studies, postcolonial gender scholarship, and the Islamic feminist thought. It offers, in the first place, a thorough, critically organized summary of the existing literature - a resource to scholars seeking to place their own work within the field. Second, it proposes certain interpretive claims regarding the nature, complexity and theoretical importance of the feminist thought of Rokeya, and it serves to make analytical claims on a subject, rather than simply enumerating existing positions. Third, it traces a research agenda to pursue which would go a long way in enriching our knowledge of one of the most valuable feminist thinkers of the modern era. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain wrote in a context in which she was extremely constrained - a colonised society, a conservative religious community, a patriarchal family structure - and against those constraints she created a feminist vision of extraordinary ambition and enduring relevance. She envisaged a world where women are liberated in their thoughts, not bound to their bodies and their societal contributions are appreciated and honoured. Over a hundred years after her authoring, that vision is still yet to be achieved in full. The intellectual challenge of comprehending and spreading her thinking is therefore not just a scholarly activity, but a way of contributing to the continuing battle of gender justice to which she has helped to give birth.

REFERENCES

1. Ahmed, L. (1992). *Women and gender in Islam: Historical roots of a modern debate*. Yale University Press.
2. Antara Mitra, D. L. M. (2024). Begum Rokeya and the Quest for Women's Rights: A Historical Perspective. *International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development (IJTSRD)*, 8(1), 308-314.
3. Bagchi, J. (1990). Representing nationalism: Ideology of motherhood in colonial Bengal. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25(42-43), WS65-WS71.
4. Bhattacharya, A., & Hiradhar, P. (2019). The sentimental nightmare: The discourse of the scientific and the aesthetic in Rokeya S. Hossain's "Sultana's Dream". *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 55(5), 614-627.
5. Borthwick, M. (1984). *The changing role of women in Bengal, 1849-1905*. Princeton University Press.
6. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
7. Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
8. Chakraborty, D. (2000). *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference*. Princeton University Press.
9. Chowdhury, S. (2019). *Understanding the discursive context: Production of muslim women as invisible in the written history of colonial Bengal* (Doctoral dissertation, Brac University).

10. Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167.
11. Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299.
12. Dasthakur, S. (2017). Mohammad A. Quayum and Md. Mahmudul Hasan, eds. < i> A Feminist Foremother: Critical Essays on Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain< i. Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature, 11(1).
13. de Beauvoir, S. (1949). *The second sex* (H. M. Parshley, Trans.). Jonathan Cape. (Original work published 1949)
14. Debnath, P. (2025). Negotiated agency and the sacred feminine: theology, domesticity, and feminist selfhood in Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban* and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream*. *International Journal of Research in English*.
15. Enloe, C. (1989). *Bananas, beaches and bases: Making feminist sense of international politics*. University of California Press.
16. Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Herder and Herder.
17. Gilman, C. P. (1898). *Women and economics: A study of the economic relation between men and women as a factor in social evolution*. Small, Maynard & Company.
18. Gilman, C. P. (1915). *Herland*. The Forerunner.
19. Harding, S. (1986). *The science question in feminism*. Cornell University Press.
20. Hasan, M. M. (2013). Commemorating rokeya sakhawat hossain and contextualising her work in South Asian muslim feminism. *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature*, 7(2), 39-59.
21. Hasan, M. M. (2018). Early defenders of women's intellectual rights: Wollstonecraft's and Rokeya's strategies to promote female education. *Paedagogica Historica*, 54(6), 766-782.
22. Hossain, R. S. (1904). *Matichur [Crushed pearls]* (Vol. 1). Syed Nawab Ali Chowdhury Press. (Original work published in Bengali)
23. Hossain, R. S. (1905). *Sultana's dream*. *Indian Ladies' Magazine*.
24. Hossain, R. S. (1924). *Padmarag [Ruby]*. Sakhawat Memorial Press. (Original work published in Bengali)
25. Hossain, R. S. (1931). *Avarodhbasini [The secluded ones]*. Sakhawat Memorial Press. (Original work published in Bengali)
26. Islam, S. (2001). *Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and her feminist writings*. Bangla Academy.
27. Jahan, R. (2018). Men in seclusion, women in public: Rokeya's dream and women's struggles in Bangladesh. In *The challenge of local feminisms* (pp. 87-109). Routledge.
28. Jayawardena, K. (1986). *Feminism and nationalism in the third world*. Zed Books.
29. Jesson, J. K., Matheson, L., & Lacey, F. M. (2011). *Doing your literature review: Traditional and systematic techniques*. SAGE Publications.
30. Kabeer, N. (2000). *The power to choose: Bangladeshi women and labour market decisions in London and Dhaka*. Verso.
31. Low, R. Y. (2025). *Rokeya's dream: Speculative writing and the making of an unreal education*. Hope, wisdom and courage: Teaching and learning practices in today's schools and beyond.
32. Mernissi, F. (1991). *The veil and the male elite: A feminist interpretation of women's rights in Islam* (M. J. Lakeland, Trans.). Addison-Wesley Publishing.
33. Miah, M. M. (2014). A feminist critical evaluation of how Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's language of protest deplored patriarchy and social anachronism in the British Bengal. *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 3(10), 41-51.
34. Mohanty, C. T. (1988). Under western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Feminist Review*, 30, 61–88.
35. Mohsin, A. (2002). Language, identity and the politics of difference: Rokeya and the making of Muslim women's subjectivity in colonial Bengal. *Journal of South Asian Development*, 17(1), 23–48.
36. Mukherjee, S. (2013). *A Not So Banal Evil: Rokeya in Confrontation with Patriarchy*. *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature*, 7(2), 82-94.
37. Paxton, N. L. (1994). *Feminism under the raj: Complicity and resistance in the writings of Flora Annie Steel and Annie Besant*. *Women's Writing*, 1(2), 215–228.

38. Quayum, M. A. (2016). Gender and education: The vision and activism of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. *Journal of Human Values*, 22(2), 139-150.
39. Rashid, H. (2018). Feminist Ideas of Begum Rokeya and Its Holistic Explanation. *Social Science Review Journal, The Dhaka University studies. Part B*, 35(2), 1-22.
40. Ray, B. (2013). A feminist critique of patriarchy: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932). *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature*, 7(2), 60-81.
41. Sarkar, T., & Butalia, U. (Eds.). (1995). *Women and the Hindu right: A collection of essays*. Kali for Women.
42. Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.
43. Shirin, P. (2015). *Rokeya's Dream: The Purpose of Women's Education in Bengal Renaissance and Beyond* (Master's thesis, University of London, University College London (United Kingdom)).
44. Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research*, 104, 333–339.
45. Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.
46. Torraco, R. J. (2005). Writing integrative literature reviews: Guidelines and examples. *Human Resource Development Review*, 4(3), 356–367.
47. Wadud, A. (1999). *Qur'an and woman: Rereading the sacred text from a woman's perspective* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.