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## A Comparative Study of English Women Writers and Bangladeshi women Writers in 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Virginia Woolf and Begum Rokeya

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the opportunities and rights of women experienced, portrayed and also the similarities with especial reference to Virginia Woolf and Begum Rokeya. The writers through their works sail to explore a new region of women's rights. In this study both the primary and secondary sources are used. Virginia Wolf and Begum Rokeya belong to a different culture but in their writings we see similarities of discrimination faced by women. Both of their writings highlighted on women's education and financial freedom and equality. Women writers have been vocal against the gender inequity and they expressed it through literature. Till today we see women do face the challenges and pressure in the society. Throughout their writings Virginia Wolf and Begum Rokeya uttered their personal opinion on women's self discovery, individuality, significance and roles in the society in the form of literature. It is not easy for a woman to establish her values in a male dominated society.

**Keywords:** Virginia Wolf, Begum Rokeya, Women, Gender, Challenges, Discrimination, English Literature, Bangladeshi Literature.

## I. Introduction

Women should be permitted the equal rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way. Literature deals with the rights of women that assure their true positions and roles in every part of their lives. Woman is an independent, unique individual in her own right but this truth is almost absent in the attitudes of our society and culture due to discrimination. Women writers' try to demonstrate the picture of women in society from beginning in their literary works and want to break the discrimination of gender in literature and every sector of life. Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) and Begum Rokeya (1880-1932) are two major figures in literature where they explore women's situation from their respective society.

## II. Literature review

In Virginia Woolf's time, patriarchal, repressive Victorian society was not in support of women to attend universities or to participate in intellectual debate. Virginia Woolf in her *A Room of One's Own* portrays how women are being suppressed or oppressed by the male and male dominating society as a whole. She asks a few fundamental questions in terms of the rights of women. In Mrs. Dalloway, Virginia Woolf gives a clear image about the position of women at that era and their apparent insignificance. Women were unable to express their mental suffering because they were afraid and rejection of society. In 20<sup>th</sup> century women of this subcontinent would not think themselves useful for the society. Begum Rokeya is the founding pillar of women rights in Bangladesh. She deals with the basic issues of women in a different way where she has shown interest in opening up the inner world of women so that they can understand that the patriarchal society treats them as their own convenience. *Sultana's Dream* (1905) and *Padmarag* (1924) are fascinating examples of utopia. *Sultana's Dream* is a utopia that explores time and space and the inner self of a woman. In *Sultana's Dream*, women are shown confident, educated and financially independent. *Padmarag* portrays a significant reflection of male domination in the society. Here the author advises women on learning and teaching crafts to get financially independent and become confident. She wrote bravely against limitations and boundaries of women to promote their liberation. Begum Rokeya's struggle for women's emancipation against a male dominating society, her articulation for the rights of women in the light of women's rights in Islam is indeed the testimony of her writings.

The oppression of women in male dominating society has always been of attention and an issue in the intellectual world. In this regard, an excess of research has been carried out to explore the difficulty of women in European and Asian context, especially, their sufferings, pain, misery caused by the patriarchal rules over them as reflected in the literary pieces. Apart from the difficulties generated from the lack of privacy and fortune, a lady could not get supportive environment to become a writer because of the biased and prejudiced attitude of the patriarchal society. "The indifference of the world which Keats and Flaubert and other men of genius have found so hard to bear was in her case not indifference but hostility. The world did not say to her as it said to them, Write if you choose, it makes no difference to me. The world said with a guffaw, Write? What's

the good of your writing?"<sup>1</sup> (A Room of One's Own, 2181) Charlotte Bronte's personal experience deepens Virginia Woolf's claim regarding how the lack of money, self-dignity, privacy destroys the prospective genius in women, "She left her story, to which her entire devotion was due, to attend to some personal grievance. She remembered that she had been starved of her proper due of experience- she had been made to stagnate on a parsonage mending stockings when she wanted to wander free over the world. Her imagination swerved from indignation and we feel it swerve."<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf's personal experience with her social injustice as a writer increases her bitterness at the English society- that how could they claim to be the center of modern civilization- blessed with a lady the Shakespeare, where a single lady in the 20th century is not permissible to enter a library alone to discover the intellectual world?

### **III. Women in Virginia Woolf and Begum Rokeya**

According to the writers, the reason for the women's suppression is the male predominance in the social, political and philosophical life. This predominance has an authoritative tone. The passivity of females in the novel can be attributed to it. Mrs. Fanny Elmar did not get the chance to discover her thoughts, opinions and life. She was compelled to live her political and philosophical lives through a man." She took Jacob her ideal. She imagined him as a Turkish knight or an emperor. Fanny was facing an emotional struggle between her ideal and actual Jacob. Yet, she refused to see Jacob as anything more than a frame for her dreams."<sup>2</sup> Apart from *A Room of One's Own* and *Jacob's Room*, almost same kind of suffering, trauma on the part of women is shown in *Mrs. Dalloway*, where we see, Lucrezia, the wife of Septimus Warren Smith, suffers from post-war misery with her insane husband.

Begum Rokeya's "passionate call to women" almost 200 years back, "we are half of society. If we lag behind how will our society advance? If one leg of a person is fastened, how long will she go limping on the other? Our interest and men's interest is one and the same. [...] For a child both mother and father are equally needed. We [women] should possess required qualities so that we can go with them [men] abreast in both spiritual and material spheres. [...] In this world a nation whose men and women worked together reached the zenith of development. It is imperative we [women] should be complementary partner of men instead of being a burden for them."<sup>3</sup>

To wake the undeveloped female society, Begum Rokeya's *Padmarag* and *Sultana's Dream* could play revolutionary role, not only to vocalize the pain of women in male dominating society, but also to dream of and to show the way of establishing feasible projects that could literally alleviate the passivity of women in building up busy, vibrating, constructive, productive, progressive social life.

<sup>1</sup> Woolf, Virginia. (1929). *A Room of One's Own*. London, United Kingdom: Hogarth Press.

<sup>2</sup> Woolf, Virginia. (1922). *Jacob's Room*. London, United Kingdom: Hogarth Press

<sup>3</sup> IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) Volume 21, Issue 2, Ver. I (Feb. 2016) PP 31-38 e-ISSN: 2279-0837, p-ISSN: 2279-0845. www.iosrjournals.org

In this regard, Syeda Afsana Ferdousi, in her “A Social Reformer is peeping through –*Sultana’s Dream*” highlights the significant history of Begum Rokeya’s biography, “Through a minute observation on *Sultana’s Dream* it’s clearly identified that it’s a path shower of an ideal, hygienic, educated class of generation with aesthetic sense of beauty. It is an example of agriculturally developed, scientifically modern generation as an idol to be copied. This feminist utopia by Rokeya has become the pioneer observer of all basic problems of that contemporary society. As a social worker she has dedicated her life especially after the death of her babies and the tragic death of her husband, where there was no place for her own recreation. In a letter on 19 of August 1915 to Marium Rashid she wrote she could not take any personal time because she dedicated her life for the development of the society.”<sup>4</sup>

Begum Rokeya puts sufficient highlight not only on women’s education but also on creating dedicated, workaholic female manpower to run the society smoothly. On this point, Syeda Afsana observes, “Sara is an example of an ideal working class as Sultana observed she could manage to do all sorts of works. It’s an encouragement for Rokeya’s own state. She takes care of office and also does home decoration and even does “needle work” so she asked Sara to give us a clue how we can manage to be manpower for the society - Sultana asks: “How can you find time to do all these? You have to do the office work as well?”<sup>5</sup>

In lady land the behavior on human is broadminded as she said- “It is our duty to love one another and to be absolutely truthful.”<sup>5</sup> There is no punishment like “killing creation of God, especially a human being.”<sup>5</sup> The punishment is set intellectually as a human being “we are the best creation.” Again, if we think about *Padmarag*, it could be taken as another example to change the entire society, especially to ease the pain of tormented women.

According to Barnita Bagchi, “Rokeya’s vision in this novella is courageous and bold, showing that Hindus, Brahmas, Muslims, and Christians, black women and white women, all suffer from patriarchal oppression, and all need to receive refuge and education from communities of competent women working together to reform society. In this novel, the vivid tales of heart rendering sufferings of almost all the women living at Tarini Bhaban is not the end of the story, there is an echoing question at the end of it, as Barnita Bagchi translates, “Siddika asks: Is there no medicine to cure these running sores of society? .... Is there no remedy for this? Soudamini replies, in a ringing manifesto of the novel, there is! That remedy is the „Society for the Alleviation of Women’s Suffering“ in Tarini Bhaban. Come, all women who are abandoned, pauperized, neglected, helpless, oppressed-come all. Then we declare war against society. And Tarini Bhaban is our fortress.”<sup>6</sup>

Begum Rokeya who struggled to educate girls especially the Muslim girls in her time as the conservative society spread the misleading notion that for women education is not necessary and their duty is to remain

<sup>4</sup> Ferdousi, Syeda Afsana. “A Social Reformer is peeping through-Sultana’s Dream”. IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS). Volume 19. Issue 4. Ver. I (Apr.2014). PP 68-73.

<sup>5</sup> Rokeya, Begum. *Sultana’s Dream*. New Delhi, Penguin, 2005. Print.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Barnita-Bagchi/publication/23529152>.

<https://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/papers/Vol.%2021%20Issue2/Version-1/E021213138>

bound to the family and serve them. The society in Begum Rokeya's time the conservative society believed that without practicing 'purdah' system women commit sins; actually it was in general patriarchal attitude to make them helpless.

The society was ruled and controlled by men who used many tools to have the women surrender to them. Like Begum 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).<sup>7</sup> Kazi Nazrul Islam 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 the hallmark of liberation for women.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi alias Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), the finest political and ideological leader of India and the revolutionary figure of peaceful movement, inspired women to play an effective role in public affairs. He motivated them to stand on their own feet in order to live in dignity. Women should not believe themselves lesser or inferior to men as they have equal position as human beings. Education and economic freedom is the key to diminish discrimination.

### **Objective:**

This paper comparatively studies two writers of 20<sup>th</sup> century Virginia Wolf and Begum Rokeya, which aims to redefine and restate the status of women in an orthodox society; to ascertain points between earlier women writers in the rest of the world and the Bangladeshi women writers through a process to identify independence and self establishment. This study will help to investigate and collect knowledge about women writers in Bangladesh and their views on challenge of gender roles and discrimination in their significant writings. The purpose of the study is to discover the obstruction women face regarding role difference, as also to study the social policy and programs and issues that directly have an effect on equal rights. The main objective of the study will explore the work behavior, views of gender discrimination according to the women writers in Bangladesh who have attempted to break stereotypes of women.

### **Methodology**

The author has written this paper with the help of secondary sources. The author has gone through different books, journals, magazines, newspapers, and reports in Bangladesh and abroad. Data is also collected from various web sites.

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<sup>7</sup>[https://www.academia.edu/44641822/Emancipation\\_of\\_Women\\_through\\_Education\\_and\\_Economic\\_Freedom\\_A\\_Feminist\\_Study\\_of\\_Begum\\_Rokeyas\\_Utopias](https://www.academia.edu/44641822/Emancipation_of_Women_through_Education_and_Economic_Freedom_A_Feminist_Study_of_Begum_Rokeyas_Utopias)

## Findings and Conclusion

Here are some remarkable similarities between the Bengali writer Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) and English writer Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) that makes us think that every great soul that has ever lived similarly and experiences the same length of realism in different form. Both are authors of fiction and non-fiction works and wrote in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Begum Rokeya and Virginia Woolf was self-taught person who conquered the lack of formal training by developing themselves, self-education and experience, as they were deprived from any access to formal institutional knowledge.

Education can play an influential role to change the mindset, attitude of both men and women to create a peaceful civilization. Women's education is essential for a country's progress; development and it plays a bigger role in reduction of poverty. Now-a-days women are trying to free themselves from the obstacle of patriarchal society and women in urban middle-class educated families enjoy greater flexibility and have improved access to family possessions and opportunities of life.

Life of a Bangladeshi woman, from birth until widowhood, is not easy at all – she is neglected, deprived, underprivileged, endangered by violence; sometimes she is even considered as an outsider. Although half of Bangladesh population is women but still their social position both in rural and urban areas remains low. Even educated women are not permissible to come out from the barrier of the patriarchal society.

Isolated life of women comes to be known as the 'purdah life'. 'Purdah system' in "*Abarodhbashini*", Begum Rokeya reports 46 incidents that show the horror of that system. Women are confined to home and tied by duties of performing domestic responsibilities, bearing and rearing up children and serving the husbands and the elders.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Begum Rokeya through her passionate writing tried to abolish the miserable condition of women highlighting importance of education and economic freedom. For women formal education considered necessary because they were dependent on men and had no work outside of home.

We see that in many Bengali folk literatures the Bengali women are portrait as 'abala', helpless, underprivileged, they are deprived from basic rights and tortured by the male-dominated society. As history and custom, a woman has always been under the pity of male-dominated society and it has been continuing differently in different societies.

We feel Begum Rokeya's voice in Kazi Nazrul Islam when he expresses his fundamental preferences in the poem "Nari". Kazi Nazrul Islam wanted 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.

Begum Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* portrays a utopian society where the power is given to women not men. The patriarchal order is upturned and males are kept in mardana. The men lost their place because they believed in muscle power more than intellectual power. The inversion of male power and patriarchal order is totally contrasted to the society of Begum Rokeya's time. The picture of Begum Rokeya's society was women's unquestioned destiny is confined with house hold duties. It is also believed that men had sharper brain than brain. But in *Sultana's Dream*, "Women's brains are somewhat quicker than men's. Ten years ago, when the military officers called our scientific discoveries "a sentimental nightmare," some of the young ladies wanted to say something in reply to those remarks. But both the Lady Principals restrained them and said, they should reply not by word, but by deed, if ever they got the opportunity. And they had not long to wait for that opportunity." [p- 6, Sultana's Dream].<sup>5</sup>

Virginia Woolf is one of the women writer who wrote about women rights and discrimination they face in their everyday life. Virginia Woolf's anger for the women of her age for not getting the chance to educate them is admirable; her disappointment is completely justified when she came to know about the absurd rule that a single woman cannot enter the library alone.

Similarly visionary like Begum Rokeya who explored the pain, torment of women and secondly she identified the root cause of their misfortune, as she articulates, "You have neglected the duty you owe to yourselves and you have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interest."<sup>5</sup> In *Sultana's Dream* "The women in her country should be educated. Accordingly a number of girls' schools were founded and supported by the government. Education was spread far and wide among women. And early marriage also was stopped. No woman was to be allowed to marry before she was twenty-one."<sup>5</sup>

According to Barnita Bagchi, "Education is for Begum Rokeya, as it has been foe post-enlightenment feminists all over the world, the key way in which women can breach the public and the private spheres."<sup>8</sup> The women of all societies have experienced suffering from social mistreatment in terms of unequal educational and social amenities, violence and verbal abuse inequity of social reaction to their suffering.

Begum Rokeya and Virginia Woolf portray almost same circumstances of social situation of the women then in England and Indian sub-continent. Virginia Woolf's reference from Professor Trevelyan's History of England, we come to know that, "women –in the fifteenth century –were locked up, beaten and flung about the room. Two hundred years later, it was still the exception for women to choose their own husbands, and when the husband had been assigned, he was lord and master."<sup>1</sup> Then Virginia Woolf resentfully questions: "how could Bronte, who would never get her genius expressed whole and entire, help but die young, cramped and thwarted?"

<sup>8</sup> Bagchi, Barnita. "Inside Tarini Bhavan: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's Padmarag and the Richness of South Asian Feminism in Furthering Unsectarian, Gender-Just Human Development." www.igidr.ac.in/.../WP-2003-00

The characters in Begum Rokeya's creation Tarini Bhaban, should have committed suicide for ruthless suffering, mistreated and tormented inside but they didn't, because of the courage they have, the faith they hold and the stage they have accomplished. In Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, she foresees, had there been a sister of Shakespeare named Judith, she would have committed suicide for ruthless social inequality in terms of unfair social and biased ill-treatment by the men in the society.

Begum Rokeya and Virginia Woolf is the essence of improvement of women's situation in the society and they wanted to demolish social, political barriers women face in their life. Their dreamt for women to acquire a new individuality, identity in the society.

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