

## Emancipation of Women and Society in Early Twentieth Century Bengal: Rokeya's Writings and Activism through Marxist Lens

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### Abstract

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a writer and activist in the early twentieth century Bengal, pioneered women's rights and education and struggled her entire life for the emancipation of women in a society that was largely against education and empowerment of women. She wrote and fought against all kinds of oppression, exploitation, and discrimination of women imposed by the capitalist patriarchal society and promoted the rights of education, economic and social independence for them. With remarkable clarity, she depicted the prevalent social, political, and economic issues of her time and linked the progress of society and the nation with the advancement of women's emancipation. This paper utilizes a Marxist perspective to scrutinize the literature and activism of Rokeya by examining how her literary works depict and expose the inherent flaws and shortcomings of the existing society and analyses the correlations of her views and thoughts with that of the Marxist ideology, especially on women issues. In this article it is shown that Marxist thoughts for women's emancipation and social progress were very present in many of Rokeya's writings. This article largely provides textual analysis reverting to classical Marxist ideas to support the viewpoint.

**Keywords:** Women, Marxism, Capitalism, Feminism, Society

Capitalism is responsible for creating divisions and hierarchies within the workforce, while perpetuating an ideology that promotes the superiority of one group over another. Among these divisions, one of the most rudimentary is the binary categorization of individuals into male and female, which renders women subservient to men. The history of capitalist societies reveals the persistent subjugation of women, resulting from patriarchal social structures, economic exploitation, and religious censure of freedom. In underdeveloped societies, these entrenched patriarchal traditions continue to flourish within the capitalist system, obstructing the genuine

emancipation of women and impeding progress for society (Lerner, 15). Martha E. Gimenez wrote on “the inequality between men and women in capitalist societies” (11) through the lens of Marx’s. She argued, “Marx’ views on the logic of inquiry are important to help us theorize the capitalist structures, processes and contradictions that underlie the observable phenomena called the oppression of women or gender inequality” (Gimenez 18).

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) was born in a society that was under colonial hegemony and the predominant culture of the then Muslim society was extremely conservative. In general, formal education was less prevalent in the British India, with literacy rate as low as 7 % in between 1891-1921 with male literacy at about 14 % and woman literacy at meager 0.7% to 2%. The main reason for this low rate of literacy was the economic one along with lack of access to education but the huge gap between male and female literacy accounted for mostly for prevailing condition of the social belief and norms regarding woman education. (Nurullah and Naik 430). Although the common attitude for woman education was mostly the same for both Muslim and Hindu population, it was more unfortunate for Muslim women with stricter denial due to the observance of ‘purdah’ that essentially barred Muslim women from the public sphere. The participation of women in any outdoor activity in the presence of men was socially unacceptable and regarded as taboo. As Mahua Sarkar researched, “As the debates around issues such as higher education for women in the last two decades of the nineteenth century show, the only context in which women would be allowed visibility and agency was under the guardianship of men, and to further the nationalist cause in some way. Any agency shown by women that fell outside these acceptable limits was liable to be ridiculed, denounced, and ultimately given short shrift within nationalist historiography (229-30). Rokeya dedicated her entire life to advancing the progress of her society, with a particular focus on improving the status of women. She criticized the existing societal backwardness and concomitantly laid down ideas, remarkably progressive and quite rare for a Muslim woman of her time, and strongly instigated and spread the impetus to societal changes that continued for the next century.

Rokeya is perceived and acclaimed as the foremost and pioneer feminist of the sub-continent due to her lifelong dedication to advancing women's emancipation. She has been termed a “feminist foremother” (Jahan 7). In her writings “she expressed her feminism, creativity, and commitment to female education” (Bagchi 68). However, the objective of this paper is to depict Rokeya as a Marxist-feminist rather than simply a feminist, as her feminism

was not limited to women's issues alone. Rokeya also directed her efforts towards addressing the various other social problems of her time, with the goal of bringing about societal transformation and progress. According to Clara Zetkin, a German communist, and a Marxist-feminist, “the question of the emancipation of women is not an isolated one but rather constitutes a part of the great social question” (Zetkin 46). Rokeya did not isolate women’s emancipation from the emancipation of the society, rather she urged for women’s emancipation for the emancipation of society. Marxist feminism refers to a set of theoretical frameworks that have emerged out of the intersection of Marxism and feminism. Marxism and feminism examine forms of systematic inequalities that lead to the experiences of oppression for marginalised individuals (Ehrenreich). Different forms of inequalities, oppression, suppression, and exploitation of marginalised people in a capitalist and colonised society have been portrayed clearly in her writing. In addition to her work for women's rights, she also wrote on a variety of contemporary issues, including social, political, economic, and scientific topics, advocating for a progressive agenda. “She had managed to bring women into politics and scientific world, both traditionally male-dominated bastions” (Chakrabarty 33). In addition to portraying the condition of women in a capitalist society, Rokeya's views on other contemporary social and political issues also aligned with Marxist ideology. Rokeya's writings, touched upon various issues that are crucial to understanding the intersection of gender, class, and other social, economic, and political structures in a subtle nuance. In the following sections, relevant allusion and textual references will explain these in more detail. Her work not only focused on women's issues but also highlighted the prevailing class discrimination and exploitation within the capitalist system. She critiqued the colonial and imperial powers that perpetuated these structures along with the prevalent religious practices that reinforced them and called for revolutionary sacrifices to alter the status quo. As stated, she “contested both patriarchy and imperialism through her work” (Bagchi 743). She also advocated for reformation in the education system, promoting science consciousness and secularism, rejecting communalism, and prioritizing national self-reliance. Moreover, she criticized consumerism and raised issues related to protecting domestic agriculture and industry from imperial aggression. Salimullah Khan commented, “Rokeya’s criticism was not limited for the patriarchy only. She continued her struggle against the subjugation of her country also” (Khan 254). Despite her privileged upbringing as a member of the religious upper-class with a childhood in a feudal environment, which would normally

signify her being aligned with the ruling class colonial power, Rokeya's writings and activism regarding class discrimination, exploitation, anti-colonialism, education reform, and more, indicate that she had a declassed intelligentsia perspective and illustrate her alignment with Marxist feminism.

This paper will analyze Rokeya's depiction of women's position in contemporary capitalist and colonized society through a Marxist lens. It will explore through the literary expression and attitude of Begum Rokeya of her portrayal of capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, and fundamentalism contributing collectively to oppress, exploit, and deprive women. The article will analyze through different Marxist allusions to uncover various underlying socioeconomic, cultural, religious, and political reality that formed her views and convictions for promoting women in an emancipated status. This paper will analyze the idea of social transformation, women's emancipation, and economic justice through the envisioned reality of women by Rokeya aligning with the Marxist notions of equality, progress, and justice. It will use both textual and contextual analysis using Rokeya's literature, socio-political environment, and life experience in the context of Marxist theory to support this position.

The time when Rokeya was fighting for women's education and emancipation was a dark era in history in this part of the world. Women were imprisoned within the confinement of four walls; the whole society was overcast in the cloud of babbity. Despite having an extremely conservative early life with strict "purdah" ritual without any chance of formal education, she emerged as a fine self-educated and self-conscious person with the help of her siblings and husband. She became a free-thinker and rationalist expressing a very progressive and enlightened outlook and vividly demonstrating it in her writings and activities. She worked mostly for rising Muslim women, one of the most backward social classes, as well as for the emancipation of all the women of the society. She realized "the necessity of uniting all Indians for creating a holistic national identity" (Quayum 186). Moreover, she expressed, "concerns about the worldwide marginalization of women and for awakening and uniting women of all societies towards liberation" (Hasan 183).

Along with women's emancipation, Rokeya was concerned with the greater social emancipation and in her writings, she expressed her views about an egalitarian society free from discrimination and injustice and she vowed her position against domination. Rokeya never declared herself a Marxist publicly. However, her writings reveal that she might be influenced by

Marxist thought, either consciously or subconsciously. Many early Marxists and revolutionaries wrote in the same literary magazine, like “Saogat” with Begum Rokeya. "Saogat" magazine, under the editorship of Mohammad Nasiruddin, was an influential platform in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Bengal that published works by various writers advocating for social reform, anti-colonialism, and progressive ideologies, including Marxism from writers as Mozaffar Ahamed (Founding member of Communist Party of India), rebel poet Kazi Nazrul Islam (companion of Mozaffar Ahmed) etc. The early twentieth century, the era the mature Rokeya belonged to writing her stirring literature and engaging in social activism, was also a restive period in history of Bengal. It was a time of great political and social upheaval. The revolutionaries in underground revolutionary organization “Jugantor” and “Anushilon Samity” in the second and third decade of twentieth century were fervent nationalists and was the prime example of active revolt in Bengal, often violent, against the British rule. Many of these revolutionaries were the early Marxist and founders of the Marxist political organizations (The Communist Party of India, Hindustan Socialist Republican Association, Congress Socialist Party, and Revolutionary Socialist Party) (Chowdhuri). Through their involvement Marxist ideas were permeating to the intellectuals and common people. From the mid-twenties of the twentieth century these political developments took centerstage for the educated Bengali intelligentsia primarily based in Calcutta, the base of Begum Rokeya. Rokeya was a politically conscious writer who was deeply engaged with the social, political, and economic issues of her time. It is therefore reasonable to assume that she was familiar with Marxist thought.

Through the Marxian lens, literature itself is manifested from the existing socio-political and economic base stratum. The in-situ reality is reflected in the writing not just to portray the reality alone but to engage it with the view to impact for any positive outcome. According to Marx and Engels,

The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness (qtd in Eagleton and Milne 31).

Rokeya’s literature exemplifies this statement. In the following sections of the article, I would discuss with textual references that Rokeya’s literature was a product of that surrounding social and political environment. It was the prevailing context of her time, which molded her

intellectual activities and influenced her thoughts and perspectives. The bleak and deeply inhuman situation of the women of her time, bound by myriads of blockades and restrictions in all aspects of social life, which she experienced personally during her childhood and young age, developed a strong sense of pro-activeness in her and therefore, she relentlessly strode to make a point through her writings to bring a positive change in society. Her literature did not arise from her imagination or any romanticism beyond reality; it was the dilapidated, sickened social condition that made her take up the pen. Despite her bourgeois upbringing, she could attain the class-consciousness of the proletarian common people. This norm of the declassed intelligentsia, exemplified in her lifelong struggle, evidently exposes her to be treated with the Marxian appraisal.

Literary works have been viewed, according to Barry, a Marxist literary theorist, as a product of their “Social Context” and he argued that “a writer’s social class and its prevailing ‘ideology’ (outlook, values, tacit assumptions, half-realized allegiances, etc.)” can strongly influence the literary outcome of a writer. The Marxist view on the work of art isn’t just about the ‘genius’ and creativity of an ‘inspired’ individual but rather they are the result of the interaction in a social context (Barry 152). It was not the artistic aspects of the literature of what Rokeya was concerned with but her social responsibility to bring a change in the society, which was the objective for which she struggled throughout her life. Socialist realists, who are strongly inspired by the Marxism, saw literature as, “social criticism and analysis” and viewed artists as, “a social enlightener”. Their view on literature is that it, “should disdain elaborate aesthetic techniques and become an instrument of social development. Art reflects social reality and must portray its typical features” (Eagleton 41). Rokeya’s writings are not considered as a portrayal of aesthetics of expression or of any intricate exposition of literary display. She is generally viewed as a propagandist of her views. Her entire literary approach is directed and dedicated to the advancement of the society and especially for the woman emancipation. This strongly indicate Rokeya to be considered in line with a Marxist definition. However, it is obvious that this alone cannot establish the claim unless the core Marxists ideologies are reflected in the writing of Rokeya which is gradually provided in the following descriptions of the article.

Rokeya’s literature clearly portrays what was going on in the society, in that particular part of India, at that particular time. Like a true revolutionary, she did not just fulfil her responsibility by depicting the society, rather she called for the transformation of the rotten,

worn-out society, engaging herself in an unflinching lifelong struggle to change the status quo, and her pen became her most powerful weapon. This can be related to a well-established treatment of Marxism stated as, “Whereas other philosophies merely seek to understand the world, Marxism, as Marx famously said, seeks to change it” (Barry 150). Rokeya viewed women's emancipation as a part of the emancipation of society. She believed that women's empowerment is indispensable for creating an equitable society. She urged the women to take responsibility for their own emancipation and to actively work towards the betterment of society. She invoked the women to wake up and said,

It's not easy to rise first, I know; society will make a great uproar, I know; Indian Muslims will sentence us to death and Hindus will arrange pyre for us, I know! (And sisters also do not wish to rise, I know!). But for the welfare of society, we have to rise (Rokeya 20).

Lenin talked about the “inseparable connection between the social and human position of the woman” and “the woman question as a part of the social question” (qtd in Zetkin para. 26). Rokeya realized that without the advancement of women, the society too cannot advance. She said, “We are the half portion of the society. If we remain fallen, how will society progress?” (Rokeya 22). “As early as 1844, in his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, Marx argued that women's position in society could be used as a measure of the development of society as a whole” (qtd in Brown para. 5). And it was Rokeya's conclusion, “If all Indian women do not rise, India will never rise” (Rokeya 31). It is clear that on social positioning of women Rokeya was very much inline with the Marxist core values. Her characters in her novels like Sultana in “Sultana's Dream”, Dina Tarini and Siddika in “Padmarag” all were way ahead of their peers in society and not only did they lead a life of moral fortitude but also fervently worked for pull up the life of fellow women to a moral high ground and day to day leaving. She imagined Sultana in world of woman supremacy in a gender reversed society. Rokeya portrays Tarini not only as an emancipated individual but as a force of emancipation and source of inspiration and fight against the societal oppression and denunciation of the gender role.

In a Marxist model society can be seen as structured by a bases (the material means of production, distribution, and exchange) and a superstructure (the cultural world of ideas, art, religion, law, societal norms etc.). The superstructure is essentially built on or shaped by the base structure's economic relations (Barry 152). In Rokeya's literature we find that the portrayal of

the charters in her novels as well as the depiction of the society were all struggling with the existing male dominated public sphere where she reiterated the economic dependency of women as a prime source of subjugation and exploitation and the women condition of that era were shaped by the prevailing political and economic circumstances of contemporary time.

Marx and Engels said that every form of society has been based on the antagonism of oppressing and oppressed classes (7). They said, “In bourgeois society, capital is independent and has individuality, while the living person is dependent and has no individuality” (23). Rokeya had the economic consciousness to identify the evil effects of capitalism in her society, where money, not humanity or justice, was considered the most powerful. She said, “The person who has money, has the power, has the law” (Rokeya 52). She pointed out the poisonous outcome of capitalism, where most of the assets were accumulated in a few people’s hands and where most of the people were starving. She asked the most fundamental question, “Among the 30 crores men and women in India, how many people can get food to fill their stomachs twice a day? How many people have the certainty of livelihood?” (Rokeya 211). As Marx and Engels said,

In your existing society, private property is already done away with for nine-tenths of the population; its existence for the few is solely due to its non-existence in the hands of those nine-tenths (23).

Rokeya’s society was an agrarian society, where agriculture was the basis of the economy. However, farmers were the most neglected and most deprived part of the society. Rokeya depicted the oppression and exploitation stricken capitalist social system where the farmers produced food for all by working in the field day and night. In Rokeya’s words, “They continue to burn in the scorching sun in the cornfields, they continue to carry the plough” (Rokeya 214), but ultimately, they starved. She raised the question to the society, “Farmers are the backbone of society and yet, why don’t the farmers get food?” (Rokeya 214).

Under this capitalist system, women become objects of deprivation, discrimination, oppression, and exploitation. The subjugated and enslaved position of women in a particular society is not unconnected to the social and economic system of that society; rather it is the outcome of the particular social and economic system. As Hartmann said,



A materialist analysis demonstrates that patriarchy is not simply a psychic, but also a social and economic structure. We suggest that our society can best be understood once it is recognized that it is organized both in capitalist and in patriarchal ways (2).

Rokeya could rightly relate capitalism to patriarchy by showing patriarchy as a by-product of capitalism. So she could conclude, “The society which created kings and subjects, and the society which created a disparity between police lords and viceroy lords would subordinate women under men” (Rokeya 605). Marx discussed, “the interdependent relationship between class and gender” and pointed to “the unique ways in which economics and the specifically capitalist form of patriarchy interact to oppress women” (qtd in Brown para. 30).

Marx and Engels said,

The bourgeoisie has made the country dependent on the towns, it has made barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependent on the civilized ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the East on the West (17).

Colonialism, for capitalist expansion, controls the supply of raw materials and markets in underdeveloped countries and dominates the country politically. Under British colonisation, India was subjugated in political, social, economic and intellectual spheres and the people were deprived of their freedom. The subjugated condition instilled a revolutionary spirit in Rokeya to utter fearlessly, “We are not a slave nation, we have to believe that firmly” (Rokeya 21). Her uncompliant attitude to the exploiter colonisers and her valiant protest manifests Marxist spirit in her. Karl Marx also condemned the exploiting nature of British colonisers saying, “British East India Company, forming a more monstrous combination than any of the divine monsters” (Marx para. 5). He criticized, “England has broken down the entire framework of Indian society, without any symptoms of reconstitution yet appearing” (Marx, para. 6). About the capitalists’ insatiate greed for embezzling assets, Marx and Engels said,

The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe ... All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed (16).

The gradual plundering of Indian national assets by British colonisers made Rokeya very much concerned about saving the local industries from the colonisers. Through her writing, she strived to make people conscious of protecting the local industries, like Andy (silk) industry, as it was crucial for the economic interest of the country. The deplorable condition of the local industry

under a colonial rule made her say, “With the spread of civilisation, local industries have been extinct gradually” (Rokeya 217). In this regard, Marx said, “It was the British intruder who broke up the Indian hand-loom and destroyed the spinning-wheel” (Marx para. 8). Rokeya’s uncompromising and strong stance regarding national interest were also exhibited in her acute criticism of the compromising politicians. She questioned the compromising politicians in a protesting voice, “Why have you allowed the foreign colonials to sit on the throne of India?” (Rokeya 610). In a mocking tone, she condemned the servile psychology of some of her native people. She censured them by satirising,

It’s easier to take part in a mourning meeting of foreign rich than to feel empathetic for the poor neighbours’, ‘It’s easier to beg to America than to work hard for removing famine from the country (Rokeya 24).

As a woman in her era, Rokeya had to undergo the evil effects of colonialism. In a colonised society, women are viewed as “doubly colonized” and “the voice of the gendered subaltern is doubly oppressed inside and out by masculinist nationalism on one hand and capital globalization on the other” (Yu 586). As a woman, she was subordinated; as a Muslim, her religion made her even more subordinated, and her widowhood in a colonised, capitalist, patriarchal society furthered her experience of being marginalised and ostracized. Regarding her initiative for establishing a girls’ school, she had to hear, “This young widow is advertising her beauty and youthfulness by establishing a school” (Sufi 48). However, despite being a descendant of the upper-class society, she led a life full of rebellion and denounced the existing status quo of oppression, suppression from the political and social power and staunchly directed her mighty pen and activism for the suppressed women and the proletariat mass of her time.

In a capitalist society, religion has always been used by the powerful sects of the society for their interest. As Lenin said, “We know perfectly well that the clergy, the landowners and the bourgeoisie invoked the name of God to further their interests as exploiters” (290). Rokeya has shown how in that capitalist society of her time, religion was used as a weapon in the hands of the patriarchs and the fundamentalists to oppress, exploit, deprive, and confine women. Rokeya said,

We could never raise our head against slavery, the main reason is, whenever any sister tried to uplift her head, it was instantly crushed in the pretext of religion or by the weapon of scriptures’ sayings (Rokeya 610).

Rokeya identified that the misinterpretation of religion by the patriarchs and the fundamentalists was one of the main impediments in the way of women's emancipation. She stood against the abuse of religion against women during the mighty patriarchs and the fundamentalists and declared, "Men are dominating over women in the pretext of religion. So I have become bound to argue over religion" (Rokeya 612). Her progressive outlook was manifested by her rational explanation of religion and her criticism of prevalent empty religious practices.

Engels said,

The peculiar character of the supremacy of the husband over the wife in the modern family, the necessity of creating real social equality between them, and the way to do it will only be seen in the clear light of day when both possess legally complete equality of rights. Then it will be plain that the first condition for the liberation of the wife is to bring the whole female sex back into public industry (39).

Rokeya rightly identified the real cause behind the oppression and exploitation of women, the dependence on the male members of the family economically. She realized that economic self-dependence is the key to bringing equality between women and men in family and society. She said,

We will do whatever is needed to be equal to the men. If independence can be achieved now by earning independently, then we will do that. If necessary, we will be everything, starting from the female clerk to the female magistrate, female barrister, and female judge. After 50 years, by becoming a female viceroy, we will make every woman of the country "queen". Why should we not earn? Don't we have hands, feet, and intelligence? What are the things we don't have? With the labour which we spend on working in the husband's home, won't we be able to make an independent profession? (Rokeya 21).

In her time, women had to depend on the male members for their livelihood. Although they worked tirelessly in their husband's homes, they were often subservient and unrecognized for their hard labour. In this social context, Rokeya's struggle was not for women's education only; she called the women to be self-reliant economically so that they would not have to depend on anyone for their living. She said "Make the girls well-educated and leave them in the field of work; let them earn their living" (Rokeya 21). Enduring the tormented life by the husbands just for some food was so abominable to her that she made the urgent call to the women,

Be prepared for the struggle of life! I will prepare you with that necessary education of life so that you would not have to depend on any immoral man for only a handful of rice (Rokeya 343).

Engels said, “Among peoples where the women have to work far harder than we think suitable, there is often much more real respect for women” (27). This real respect towards self was the consciousness that Rokeya strived to bring to the women. She showed them this self-respect could only be gained by economic independence and self-reliance. She said, “It’s certain that we have not been created to bear a worthless doll’s life” (Rokeya 22). Her ardent effort was to make the women wake up from the blindness of their life, to make them perceive that their life is purposeful, their life is not to be wasted by the useless activities, and their life is not to be passed only to please their husband. They have more important roles to play for the family and society and they deserve more respectable positions in family and society. And they have to achieve that by being economically self-reliant. She said, “Their life is not to be sacrificed for only entertaining their husbands! They should not be dependent on anyone for their livelihood” (Rokeya 242).

However, in Rokeya’s time too, the lowest order of the social class had plenty of working women, earning a wage to run their family. Marx and Engels said,

Differences of age and sex have no longer any distinctive social validity for the working class. All are instruments of labour, more or less expensive to use, according to their age and sex (18).

Though the women were considered as important workers, as they had to work equally as the men, they would fall victim to discrimination and exploitation in terms of wages. After working equally hard, they had to accept fewer wages than the male workers. Rokeya pointed out this discrimination clearly,

In case of service too, men’s labour is pricier, women’s labour is sold cheaper. In similar work, while lower-class men get 2 taka monthly salary, women get 1 taka. For servants, the monthly cost of food is 3 taka, while for maidservants 2 taka (Rokeya 21).

Though both men and women are victims of capitalism, women had to endure the most. As Marx said, “Capital finds these workers particularly valuable since they are from an oppressed group that can be compelled to work for less” (qtd in Brown para. 13).

Marxists were aware of the hardships women's labour force participation meant for women and families, which resulted in women having two jobs, housework and wage work. Under socialism housework too would be collectivized and women relieved of their double burden (Hartmann 3).

Only participating in economic activities which is crucial for women to be emancipated does not relieve them from domestic drudgery. So they become doubly burdened with two types of responsibilities, working for a wage and working for the house. And they have to continue to shoulder the unbearable burden of so much work pressure in the capitalist society. Therefore, the actual emancipation has not come into reality. The women can enjoy emancipation truly when they can be free from this inhuman burden of housework. In this regard, the conditions in Soviet Russia have been described by Lenin,

We are establishing communal kitchens and public eating-houses, laundries and repairing shops, nurseries, kindergartens, children's homes, educational institutes of all kinds. In short, we are seriously carrying out the demand in our programme for the transference of the economic and educational functions of the separate household to society. That will mean freedom for the woman from the old household drudgery and dependence on man. That enables her to exercise to the full of her talents and her inclinations (qtd in Zetkin para. 38).

This shows us a ray of hope for the true emancipation of women in a socialist society. We can hear an echo of this concern in Rokeya's voice too. Rokeya did not consider it worthy for the women to limit themselves to the kitchens. She said, "Whatever it is, life should not be confined to the kitchen only" (Rokeya 31).

About home and family life, Rokeya had a very lofty conception. She did not want to see women confined to the kitchens and four walls of the house, nor did she want them to confine their thoughts and imaginations to the narrow boundaries of their own home and family. She wanted them to elevate their thoughts to a wider sphere where they would think beyond the limitations of their own home and family and extend their periphery of thought to a broader space. They would think about social and national issues and contain the consciousness of nationality and patriotism. She said,

We should remember that we are not only Hindu or Muslim, Parsi or Christian, Bangalee, Mandraji, Marwari or Punjabi – we are Indians. First, we are Indians, then we are

Muslim, Sikh or anything else. A good housewife will circulate this truth within her own family. As a result, petty self-interest, envy, malice will be removed gradually from her house (Rokeya 39).

This is the image of an ideal housewife who circulates this consciousness in her home and who does not isolate her home and family members from the surrounding social and political circumstances. As Lenin said about

an extension and exaltation of motherliness from the individual to the social sphere' and proposed that 'all the awakening social life and activity of women must be encouraged so that they can discard the limitations of their philistine individualist home and family psychology (qtd in Zetkin, para. 15).

Lifelong campaigner of education, Rokeya could not be content about that contemporary education system. She was critical of common people's perception of education. She said, "Most people, nowadays, think education only as the way to get a job" (Rokeya 18). Rokeya campaigned not for this education, but for real education, education for enlightenment, education which makes someone both internally and externally capable and strong. She said, "By education, I mean the genuine education; Just to be able to read some books or to be able to write two lines of poetry is not education. I want that education – which will enable them to get their rights as a citizen and make them ideal daughters, ideal sisters, ideal wives, and ideal mothers. Education should be both mental and physical" (Rokeya 242). Rokeya sought reform in the education system imposed by colonial rule. She said, "Education does not mean blind imitation of any race or nation" (Rokeya 19). Marx and Engels said,

The Communists have not invented the intervention of society in education; they do but seek to alter the character of that intervention and to rescue education from the influence of the ruling class (24).

Rokeya put her philosophy of education in her "Tarini Bhavan" (Tarini House), where the existing education system was not followed; rather they made their education system according to their ideology, the ideology which believed in real learning and patriotism. In "Tarini Bhavan,"

Financial aid from the government is not accepted in the school. So no textbook listed by the government is studied in the school. By consulting with the well-educated women of the country, Deen-Tarini selects the textbooks by herself. Female students are not made

dolls of luxury by being taught just to read a little to shape themselves in the mould of the university. Science, literature, geography, history, and maths – all are taught to them, but the system of education is different. By making them memorise false history, they are not taught to hate their own country and country people. Ethics, moral education, and character building are given more attention. Girls are taught to become the most ideal daughters, wives, and mothers and they are taught to love their country and morality more than their own life. Especially, they should become self-reliant, and in future, they should not depend as a burden on their father, brother, husband or son as a wooden doll; this thing is observed particularly (Rokeya 269-270).

This was Rokeya's philosophy about real education, and this girls' school was the model of ideal school Rokeya dreamed of, and Rokeya would advocate this pro-people, pro-country education system throughout her life. And this school became a perfect example of equality, the communist way of living together equally, "What an ideal equality! – Muslim, Hindu, Brahma, Christian, all are working together by cooperating as they are one blood siblings of one mother" (Rokeya 269). Tarini House is a "Communitistic, exploitation free, women-directed refuge, set up in the middle of a patriarchal society" (Amin 255) and a "utopia where Rokeya's feminist and communist ideals have been reflected in every corner" (Amin 256).

Rokeya was a social revolutionary. Throughout her life, she fought against society to instil the revolutionary spirit into the women of her time. She passed her life in an unending venture to make the women perceive that they are not just women, they are human beings. She made the passionate call to the women,

Sisters! Wake up rubbing your eyes – Move forward! Knocking your heart, Mothers, say!  
We are not animals; Sisters, say! We are not furniture; Daughters, say! We are not to be  
locked in the iron chest as heavy ornaments; Every Woman, say together, we are humans!  
(Rokeya 242).

The call she made that day has been stimulating women's thoughts and perceptions till the time and enkindling their spirit to fight against all the injustices inflicted by the patriarchal society. Throughout the time, Rokeya's ideals have been followed in enlightening the women of the country and her words worked as sparks behind all the women's revolutionary movements in Bangladesh. As Sufia Kamal, a foremost poet, social, and political activist in Bangladesh

proclaimed, “one day in the future society will recognize the value of [Rokeya’s] efforts, and scores of people will follow her in her footsteps” (qtd in Akhtar 298).

This paper has explored women’s status in a capitalist society in early twentieth-century Bengal in Rokeya’s writings and her views on those issues through a Marxist perspective. This paper has delineated Rokeya’s lifelong struggle for women’s emancipation against the patriarchy and the fundamentalists in a capitalist-colonised society. Women’s marginalised condition has been depicted in the light of Marxism by textual analysis of Rokeya’s writings and activism and by relating them to the classical Marxist views in the context of deprivation of education, economic dependence, victimisation of religious fundamentalism, non-recognition of housework, overburden of housework, wage discrimination, exploitation in work etc. Other social, political, economic and intellectual issues of the contemporary time as a subjugated condition of India under British rule, the deplorable condition of local industries under colonisation, compromising mentality of some politicians and submissive mentality of many native people under colonisation, poor people’s helplessness by the moneyed class in the capitalist system have been discussed in juxtaposition with the Marxist thought. Moreover, the impoverished condition of the farmers in a capitalist society, education system reformation, women’s struggle for emancipation in their private life have been analysed in the light of Marxism. It was elucidated that the Marxian thoughts for women’s emancipation and social progress were reiterated repeatedly in Rokeya’s writings, and she exhibited, as a truly declassed and class-conscious personality, the spirit of a Marxist thinker and activist. Finally, it can be said that, in interpreting Rokeya’s activism and literary works, Marxist analysis is highly relevant.

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### **Bionote**

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