Title: Women of Agency:
The Penned Thoughts of Bengali Muslim Women Writers of
the Late 19th and Early 20th Century
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Introduction:

With the profusion of postcolonial literature and theory arising since the 1980s, unearthing subaltern voices has become an admirable task that many respected scholars have undertaken. Especially in regards to South Asia, there has been a series of meticulously-researched and nuanced arguments about the role of the subaltern in contributing to the major annals of history that had previously been unrecorded, greatly enriching the study of the history of colonialism and imperialism in South Asia.

The case of Bengali Muslim women in India in the late 19th and early 20th century has also proven to be a topic that has produced a great deal of recent literature. With a history of scholarly texts, unearthing the voices of Hindu Bengali middle-class women of late 19th and early 20th century, scholars felt that there was a lack of representation of the voices of Muslim Bengali middle-class women of the same time period. In order to counter the overwhelming invisibility of Muslim Bengali women in academic scholarship, scholars, such as Sonia Nishat Amin, tackled the difficult task of presenting the view of Muslim Bengali women. Not only do these new works fill the void of representing an entire community, they also break the persistent representation of Muslim women as 'backward,' within normative historical accounts by giving voice to their own views about education, religion, and society.

However, any attempt to make 'invisible' histories 'visible' falls into a few difficulties. In a process of recovering 'women's voices,' the context in which their voices are presented are often in reaction to literature that has already been produced. As scholar Joan Scott describes:

The 'herstory' mode of rewriting history, which characterises much of this [subaltern] literature, tries to simply 'fit a new [or previously ignored] subject – [in this case, Muslim] women – into received categories, [such as modern, or liberal, or feminist] interpreting their actions in terms recognizable... within the dominant historiographic tradition in question.2

2 Ibid. 2.
In order to situate the new historical topic into a previous framework of understanding, the newness and complexity of this recently uncovered story is compromised and flattened to some degree. The descriptive labels, such as 'liberal' or 'feminist' that are already in usage in academic scholarship, are applied to the attitudes of Bengali Muslim women, naturalizing their struggles in terminology that may not necessarily apply in their cases. While some similarities may certainly exist in women's roles, their different modes of negotiation and self-representation should not be overlooked, in an attempt to 'fit' the new topic into an already understood schema of historical understanding.

The problem that may arise in the unearthing of literature written by Muslim women is the frequent use of and relationship to the idea of 'feminism'. As a scholar of Bengali Muslim women, Roushan Jahan, notes in her introduction to Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's story *Sultana’s Dream*, ‘feminist sentiments [can] grow from indigenous roots, without depending on foreign influence.'\(^3\) The preoccupation with applying the term ‘feminism’ to the context of Bengali Muslims as a measure of women’s agency, only accentuates the idea that modernizing impulses for change and ‘progress’, including those affecting women, originate in the West and must be imported through Western terminology and culture in a unidirectional path towards the indigenous society.

This preoccupancy with using understandings of Western 'feminism' in the context of non-Western societies highlights the more widespread issue of some scholars concluding that the 19\(^{th}\) century Bengal renaissance was inspired entirely by the infusion of western ideas. Scholar Sunita Sarkar, for example, suggests that Rokeya, in conceiving the world of Sultana in her utopian work *Sultana’s Dream*, may be regarded as a contemporary of the feminist writers of utopias such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman (in *Herland*, published in 1915) and Virginia Woolf (in *Three Guineas*, published in 1938). While there are certainly thematic similarities in the way in which each author placed women in direct relationship to science, Sarkar compared Rokeya to authors who not only came after her temporally but who also had no direct influence on her writing. In contrast, the reformers of

\(^3\) Ibid. 38-39.
the Bengal Renaissance, such as Raja Rammohun Ray, Keshub Chandra Sen, and Rabindranath Tagore, who actually had a greater influence in shaping Rokeya's creation of Ladyland, were given no acknowledgement. Why does Sarkar feel obligated to cite women authors of a different period and a different location, when there were men and women in Rokeya's immediate community who influenced her work much more prominently. While Western ideas certainly contributed to some reformist tendencies in Bengali society, it is difficult to trace the path to self-definition of a colonized society and must not be automatically ascribed to liberal ideas of the West.

The second issue that may arise in the study of non-Western societies may be in the distinction drawn between visible actions of resistance and by contrast, passive moments of non-action. While it is common to extol stories of women braving social ostracism in their fight against seclusion and purdah in colonial India, the preoccupancy with such instances of public resistance may overlook the hundreds of other collective, seemingly 'passive' forms of agency and negotiation that women employed within their private homes. While active forms of individual resistance may be more visible, by using such actions as benchmarks of progress, the numerous acts of collective agency within the home gains much less recognition in scholarly analysis. For example, Bengali Muslim women who did not wish to pander to their liberal husbands' desire for appropriately 'modern' consorts seem to get routinely glossed over in retelling the story of the Muslim Women's Awakening because such private acts of resistance seems to disrupt the normal development process of women moving towards a progressive, publicly exhibited feminism.

The third problem that scholars must be cautious of is the idea of linear progression. Even Sonia Amin, a respected scholar of Bengali Muslim women, has a difficult time avoiding this pitfall. For example, Amin states that:

a Brahmo bhadramahila, a Muslim bhadramahila and an English lady . . . would have much ultimately to say to each other—much in terms of territory gained or lost in their struggle for 'emancipation' . . . [The] modern, urban dwelling, middle-class Muslim bhadramahila had

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4 Ibid. 52.
emerged (though much later than its British or Brahmocounterpart).\textsuperscript{5}

While Amin certainly does not intend to create a hierarchy of progression, her analysis indicates an instance of what Johannes Fabian has termed the denial of coevalness. The denial of coevalness is a consequence of ordering social and cultural differences that exist in a common temporal present into a hierarchical sequence of historical epochs or evolutionary stages. Difference, in such formulations, is understood as points on a vertical scale of inferiority/superiority, presence/lack or advancement/backwardness, rather than on a horizontal field of plurality in which no point has definitional advantage over the others.\textsuperscript{6} In this particular case, Amin's comment suggests that British, Brahmo, and Muslim women were emancipated at different periods of time, alluding to the idea that public emergence over time was the standard by which evolution of women should be judged. While this comment is not indicative of Amin's overall work, which distinguishes between various types of public and private negotiation of identities by Bengali Muslim women, nonetheless, it falls into the denial of coevalness.

The final pitfall that must be avoided is that of the trope of the veil. The idea of the veil as a site that does not allow for female choice is an idea that is remarkably unchanged within liberal feminist discourse until recent decades. Consequently, the representation of the purdah in Bengali Muslim society may be perceived as a technique of subjugating Muslim women, and exceptions will conversely be perceived as instances of feminist consciousness out of time/place. However, I will argue, similar to Rokeya, that the zenana itself and purdah [modest cover] were not instances of women's oppression. Rather, it was the extreme forms of seclusion [abarodh] that was debilitating to Muslim Bengali women in society.

In conclusion, while it is not necessary for modern scholars to entirely stop using familiar
\textsuperscript{5}Amin, Sonia Nishat. \textit{The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939}. E.J. Brill: Leiden, 1996. 44.
terminologies of feminism and liberality/conservativeness to draw points of comparison, it is imperative that each remain conscious of the incongruity of applying these terms without conscious reflection. Additionally, while comparison of various women's groups should not be avoided altogether, such comparisons must be presented without subscribing to an understanding of linear evolution based on Western notions of progress.

A Word of Caution to Postcolonial Subaltern Scholars

Such cautions are directed only at Western scholars but also at postcolonial scholars, who are now also part of the venture to categorize and objectively document the stories of subaltern voices. In the fields of post-colonialism studies, the term subaltern identifies and describes “the man, the woman, and the social group who is socially, politically, and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure of the colony and of the colonial Mother Country.” In the context of Bengali Muslim culture, the subaltern in this thesis refers to the Muslim Bengali women who do not have a voice, insofar as they have not been studied within academia.

Deriving from the work of Antonio Gramsci, the term subaltern arises from the theory of cultural hegemony. This theory identifies the social groups who are excluded from a society’s established structures for political representation. Given that political representation is the only way to make sure that one's interests are heard within society, those without political capital are thus are rendered voiceless, becoming a subaltern subject. In the 1970s, the term subaltern was applied to South Asian historiography to represent the voices of the colonized peoples of the South Asian Subcontinent, who would be voices for an alternative history written from the perspective of the colonized rather than the imperial colonizers.

While subaltern scholars of South Asian history have produced brilliant work, many such

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scholars now reside and write from countries of the West, such as America, Britain, and Canada. Inasmuch as they attempt to avoid the imperial gaze, are Subaltern Scholars repeating the process by which colonizers reified and essentialized the culture of the colonies by attempting to objectively study these subaltern stories? Are these Subaltern Scholars the new generation of 'gazers'?

As Lord Macauley in the 19th century stated, there may now be “a class of persons Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” who as 'gazers' continue the process of colonial mimicry, a theory put forth by Homi Bhabha. While not a Subalternist himself, Bhabha's theory of mimicry applies to the case of Subalternist's own positionality as well. While Subalternists may perceive themselves as different from the earlier English imperial chroniclers, as residents of the West, they themselves may be the new class of persons that Macauley earlier described. Bhabha describes colonial mimicry as “a desire for a reformed, recognizable other, as a subject of a different that is almost the same but not quite.”

While Subaltern Scholars may imagine that they are creating an entirely new strand of postcolonial representation through their unearthing of subaltern voices, they may be engaging in a process of colonial mimicry by producing accounts of 'lost, heroic' voices that may not actually be revolutionary in content but may be following the same terminology, such as 'liberal' or 'feminist', as earlier 'Western' scholars. While postcolonial writers easily criticize the 'ethnocentric universalism' or 'sanctioned ignorances' in the work of scholars from the geographic West, but often, they do not recognize that they themselves are often also part of the guild of “Western writers,” who easily fall into liberal Western constructions.

This critique of Subaltern Scholars does not detract from the valuable and important work that they have produced in the last few decades. Despite whatever gaze may be inherently involved in an objective study by Subaltern and non-Subaltern scholars alike 'the power of the gaze is by no means

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solely in the hands of the colonizer, in the objectification of the scopic drive; there is always the threatened return of the look."\textsuperscript{10} The subaltern may indeed speak on its own; though interpreted by scholars and writers, the original voices of certain subaltermay emerge. This is the phenomenon that this thesis explores as it delves into the original writings of Bengali Muslim women of the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century.

The Notion of Agency

Before delving into such a historical discussion the role of Bengali Muslim women writers, however, it is imperative to analyze the idea of agency in greater depth. As it was alluded to in the introduction, agency is not just resistance tethered to emancipatory politics (i.e. politics that assumes that agency is only present when subverting the traditional way in which society is structured). Rather, in this term of analysis, agency is understood as the capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individuals or collective). It is the humanist desire for autonomy and self-expression that may take various forms.\textsuperscript{11}

Instead of romanticizing resistance as acts of agency and ascribing feminist consciousness to those who may not be aware of it in their time period,\textsuperscript{12} agency is defined as a) the capacities and skills required to undertake particular kinds of moral actions that are b) bound up with historically and culturally specific disciplines through which the subject is found.\textsuperscript{13}

Some Bengali Muslim women writers, though they may not been revolutionary in their demands for complete elimination of purdah, nonetheless, exhibited agency. Even when they affirmed the traditional modes of society, through their moral actions to improve the lot of women in their particularly situated society, these women were agents of minute, yet important changes within their

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid. 9.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid. 8.
society.

The following thesis will trace these important voices of Bengali Muslim Women Writers. Following an extensive background that describes the world in which these women were situated, provided in Chapter 2, the world views of three Bengali Muslim authors will be analyzed through an analysis of their literary works. The analysis of the life and works of Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein, the beacon for the Awakening of Bengali Muslim Women, (Chapter 3) will be followed by chapters on the life and work of Shamsunnahar Mahmud and Sufia Kamal (Chapter 4), proteges of Rokeya. Chapter 5 will trace the lives of Fazilatunnesa and Mahmuda Khatun Siddiqua Bengali Muslim women writers and reformers whose personal lives showed that writing and agency were not necessarily correlated with religious belief.

Issues of education and social work, religion, and political representation will be the themes that guide the analysis of the works of each of these women writers, highlighting the importance of such topics in the lives of Bengali Muslim women of the late 19th and early 20th century. The analysis of the lives and works of these Bengali Muslim women writers will also demonstrate how these Bengali Muslim women reclaimed their identity and reemphasized their agency.

Methodology:

Meera Kosambi says that colonial Western India 'enjoyed...a wealth of women's articulations...and the problem has been not their paucity but their retrieval and incorporation as source materials of social history.'14 This is as true as of other regions in colonial India as well. In the case of Bengali Muslim women, there is also a great deal of literature that has recently been uncovered through translations of Bengali text into English. During the course of this thesis, such translations were invaluable. Additionally, it was necessary to translate certain passages of works in order to supplement

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the Bengali translations that are already present. This work of finding the correct translation was extremely important in order to bring the works of Bengali Muslim women authors to the public spotlight.
Chapter 1: The World of Rokeya:

In order to understand the world in which women writers, such as Begum Rokeya, and her proteges were writing in, it is important to understand the landscape of political, religious, and cultural factors that shaped such a world.

Late 19th Century Bengal was a complex religio-cultural environment. In order to entangle the webs of relationships, it is important to understand that there were three major historical trends affecting Bengali Muslims in the Colonial Era:

1) socio-economic upheavals generated by land-redistribution and urban-based education systems that created a new elite
2) religious communalism (Hindu and Muslim) and
3) cultural reform forged from native and foreign philosophical traditions—Bengal Renaissance (borne out of Hindu and Christian genealogies of rationality and spirituality) and Islamization of Bengal (pan-Islamic religious culture and pre-British imperial affiliations).

The following section will address each of the three major historical factors affecting Bengali Muslims.

Socio-Economic Upheavals and the Rise of Religious Communalism

The Indian rebellion of 1857 was a large-scale rebellion by soldiers employed by the British East India in northern and central India against the Company's rule. These indigenous soldiers, both Hindu and Muslim, were brutally suppressed by the British government, who took over control of the East India Company and eliminated many of the grievances that caused the mutiny. The British government, now known as the Raj, was also determined to keep full control over Indian territories, so that no rebellion of such size would ever happen again. Thus the power was transferred from the East India Company to the British Raj in the post-Mutiny era.

The British Raj favored the princely states that helped suppress the rebellion, and they tended to
favor Muslims, who, in their viewpoint, were less rebellious than the Hindus who dominated the 1857 rebellion. In addition to the divide and conquer tactics of creating divisions between Hindu and Muslim communities by offering varying degrees of governmental patronage and economic support to the two communities, the British also introduced a land taxation system called the Permanent Settlement. This system introduced a feudal-like structure in Bengal, often with zamindars, or landowners would tax their tenants and pay part of the tax to the British Raj. Many of the zamindars, incidentally, happened to be Hindu, while the peasant tenants were often poor Muslims.

In addition to the introduction of the Permanent System, the relatively favored position of the Hindu community over that of the Muslims by the British Raj was further exacerbated by the abolition of Persian as the language of the Court. Having survived from the Mughal Era in 15-mid 17th century, Persian was not replaced with English as the medium of instruction. With the Hindu community more able and willing to adopt English customs and language than the Muslim community, many government posts effectively favored the growing Hindu middle class, accelerating the process of their decline for Muslim communities in India.¹⁵

The reason that the Hindu Bengali community, post Bengali Renaissance, were much better equipped to deal with the contingencies of changing laws than Muslims, who had not participated in the reforms of the British, was because the Muslims had been unwilling to engage in the process of modernization as enthusiastically as had their Hindu counterparts. The Bengali Hindus were willing to undergo process of liberal modernization that British imperialists, such as Mills and Macauley proposed. By establishing colleges, such as the Hindu Presidency College, that taught Hindu youth the curriculum of the West, Hindu Bengali youth were groomed to enter the British Civil service, while Muslim Bengali youth, and Indian Muslims in general lagged behind. The overrepresentation of Hindu Bengalis in the Civil Service may have indicated a British preference for Hindu candidates, therefore,

creating a new professional class of Hindu elites in Bengal, who became known as the bhadralok.

Such economic factors, such as quotas for civil service positions, exacerbated the communal divide between Hindus and Muslims alluded to previously. The Permanent Settlement, as well created a situation in which vast tracts of land were owned mostly by Hindu zamindars who ruled over Muslim peasants. Because the British had put a fixed tax rate on the lands, Hindu zamindars were incentivized to expand the farms for greater growth and profit, imposing harsher taxes on Muslim peasants, and thus exacerbating Hindu-Muslim communal tensions.

Creating Further Communal Tensions within Indian Muslims: The Ashraf and the Atrap

In 1872, the colonial government also published the first census reports, followed by settlement reports in an attempt to enumerate and categorize Indian populations. In these reports, the British made a crucial distinction between the “foreign-born” ashraf or supposedly “authentic/original” Muslims, and the atrap or “low-caste converts” from Hinduism. According to these official accounts, the atrap apparently formed the bulk of the Muslim population in colonial India. They were mostly low-caste Hindus who had converted to Islam in order to improve their socioeconomic standing in society by rejecting the caste system. The ashraf, meanwhile, were perceived as foreign-born Muslims who migrated to India and set up settlements, which promoted Muslim culture. These ashraf were viewed as “authentic Muslims,” while the atrap were viewed as merely Hindu converts attempting to emulate the sharif.

In order to prove the original “hinduness” of the majority of Indian Muslims, the atrap, the British introduced the ethnographic scale of measurement, the Cephalic index. The cephalic index or cranial index measured the ratio of the maximum width of the head of an organism multiplied by 100 divided by its maximum length in order to categorize differentiate human populations, such as the ashraf and the atrap. W.W. Hunter’s book, The Indian Musulmans, published in 1872, furthered intensified this racialized discussion by creating pressures among Muslims and Hindus alike to calcify
identities that were relatively fluid until then. Religion, thus, emerged as a complex combined code for class, caste and race in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in colonial India.\textsuperscript{16}

It was in this context of economic and communal tensions that the third major factor took place—that of cultural reform of the Hindu Bengali community and the Muslim Bengali community, changes which shaped the social and cultural world of women in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century.

An Attempt to Modernize: The Bengal Renaissance

The Bengal Renaissance was a socio-cultural and religious reform movement during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, which occurred primarily in the Hindu Brahmo community, though the impact of it spread to all of India. The Bengal Renaissance is said to have begun with Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1775–1833), and it was a revival of the positives of India's past while also rallying against Hindu superstitions including sati, infanticide, polygamy, child marriage, caste-division, inter-caste hatred, and untouchability.

The manner in which the Hindu Brahmo reformers were able to modernize, even while retaining a unique cultural and religious identity was through three mechanisms:

a) rationalization of scriptures
b) evocation of a golden age and
c) creation of a new woman embedded in a selective modernity

Reformers such as Raja Rammohun Roy, Vidyasagar, and Keshub Chandra Sen, were pragmatists in that they realized that religion was an integral part of the way in which the Hindu community defined itself. Therefore, instead of trying to overcome religion, the reformers began a process of rationalizing scriptures in order to bring about social change. Raja Rammohun Roy, who was a major proponent of outlawing sati, argued that sati was not written in the religious texts, but

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid. 42.
rather a man-made institution, which should be terminated. Men such as Keshub Chandra Sen also created a new dialogue on the issue of widow remarriage by arguing that marrying widows was not against the Hindu religion. Along with rationalizing scriptures as a way to make social reform less jarring, intellectual reformers of the time also attempted to evoke a golden age of Hinduism in the modern age by rewriting stories of Ram, Sita, and other Hindu gods and characters in mythology in order to rewrite a positive history of India, against the denigrating onslaught of British imperialist history taught to the new generation of Hindu youth.\(^{17}\)

A reformed discourse on the issue of women was also a third most important factor of this process of modernity. In an attempt to counter the British assertions that Hindu men oppressed their women, Hindu men evoked the image of the Mother Goddess, in order to demonstrate how Indian culture respected women. Much of the impetus for the movement to create this “new woman” derived from the upper castes of Hindu Brahmo society, whose social reforms centered around the issue of women. The preoccupation with these women-centered issues was because the standard by which the progress of Indian society was measured by British imperialists was through the Woman question.\(^{18}\) This is a topic that will be addressed in depth in a later section of this chapter. However, what is important from this discussion about the Bengali Renaissance were two factors. The creation of a new woman was embedded in a selective modernity, which did retained the elements of Hindu religion and cultural understanding even while giving way to some social reform. The second important point is the relatively early occurrence of the Bengal Renaissance within the Hindu Brahmo community, in relation to the Islamic movements for social reform which occurred at a later time.\(^{19}\)

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The Impetus for Reform within the Muslim Community in India

The impetus for reform within the Muslim community in India occurred in the late 19th century. Realizing that the Hindu community was far-advanced both economically and in terms of social progress, measured by rates of education, the Muslim elites of India began a process of selective reform, similar to their Hindu counterparts. With the establishment of Aligarh University in 1873 by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (1817-1893), Indian Muslim youth finally had a school in which they could prepare for entry into the civil service while also maintaining their religious identity. Even while exposed to European languages and science, Islamic practice was the central feature of Aligarh University, demonstrating how Western education could be acquired without giving into the imperial designs of the British, which attempted to weaken indigenous culture in India.  

In response to this Anglo-oriented college, a group of learned theologians, led by Maulana Muhammad Qasim Nanautawi, established the Darul ‘Uloom Seminary in the town of Deoband, in order to preserve Indo-Islamic culture and train the youth in Islamic knowledge. Deoband did not teach 'Western' subjects because it was seen as submitting to the Western powers. Rather, the pedagogical philosophy of Deoband was focused on teaching revealed Islamic sciences, to the Indian Muslim population, according to the Hanafi School of Islamic jurisprudence. The faculty instructed its students primarily in Urdu, the lingua franca of the urbanised section of the region, and supplemented it with study of Arabic (for theological reasons) and Persian (for cultural and literary reasons). In due course, it also unwittingly cemented the growing association of the Urdu language with the north Indian Muslim community, an important historical factor that influenced the development of the Bengali Muslim community.

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21 Ibid. 45.
The Emergence of the Bengali Muslim Identity

While these two schools focused on the development of Indian Muslim youth, by extension, their educational curriculum played a process in the solidification of a non-Bengali Indian Muslim identity. At the same time that the *ashraf* communities of North India, who spoke primarily in Urdu, were creating their religio-cultural identity, a Bengali Muslim identity was also emerging.

A process of Islamization initiated by Faraizi, Wahhabi, Taaiyyuni, and Ahl-i-Hadith reformist groups attempted to cleanse Islam in Bengal from all Hindu influences. The reforms of these Islamist groups gave a cohesive character to Bengali Muslim society by removing syncretist traditions and spreading the knowledge of Islamic concepts within ignorant village communities. This syncretist tradition, in fact, had emerged because of a dearth of competent imams and a general ignorance of Islam, which was discovered in 1883 when many rural Bengalis demonstrated that they could not pray in Arabic. In order to remedy this lack of Islamic orthodoxy in rural Bengal, there emerged an orthodox *ulama* (clergy) in late 19th century Bengal, who began to shape the process of creating a Bengali Muslim identity.

What was interesting about this class of orthodox clergyman was its degree of cooperation with the English-educated Bengali Muslim *ashraf* such as Nawab Abdul Luteef (1828-1893) and Syed Ameer Ali (1849-1928). These two groups worked in conjunction to create a Bengali Muslim identity that allowed for the preservation of Muslim culture, even while benefitting from material changes through their interaction with the British. The twin process of Islamicization and Modernization were intertwined. While the new class of Bengali Muslims was open to European knowledge and science, having established close contacts with Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (1817-1893) and Aligarh University, they also never discarded the process of Islamicization. Like the Hindus, the Bengali Muslims demonstrated the ability to selectively modernize, holding on even more ardently to their Bengali Muslim identity, while simultaneously using Western knowledge to qualify for civil service jobs and acquiring greater material benefits.
This process of selective modernization, which had great political impact, was further complicated by the distinction between *ashraf* and *atraf*, a racialized dialogue that had emerged in earlier decades. The Census of Bengal in 1881 indicated that of a total population of about 70 million, Muslim comprised half of that population in Bengal Proper (areas of Calcutta and Dhaka, major urban areas of Bengal). Amidst the 35 million Bengali Muslims, however, there was a polarization between high born *ashraf* (who claimed origin from the distant Middle East, Iran, and Turkey) and the *atraf* (indigenous Bengalis who had converted to Islam once it arrived on the Subcontinent). This polarization is important because many *ashraf* often spoke Urdu or Persian, while the *atraf* used Bengali as their medium of language. This intra-religious divide, based on supposed origin and linguistic differences, would play a major role in the formation of separatist versus syncretist ideas in the early part of the 20th century.

Having understood the development of the Bengali Hindu and Bengali Muslim identities, it is important to analyze their interactions with one another. This process of interrelationship is significant because it is the context in which literary traditions emerged. Ultimately, this is the climate in which the Woman Question, especially as it pertained to Bengali Muslim women, played out.

The Interaction of Hindus and Muslims in Literary Discourse

Many of the Hindu elite ‘distorted the Muslim character’ in their novels or poems. The words 'Jaban,' 'Mlechha,' 'Nere,' were Bengali works with decidedly negative meanings, which were coined to demean Muslims in literature and social dialogue. The increasing interest in representing Muslims as the ‘‘inferior other’’ at the end of the nineteenth century should be read as part of the Hindu middle class’s attempts to establish and salvage its legitimacy as leaders of the nation within a rapidly shifting discursive and material context. With the rapid advancement of Muslim education even within a

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decade, with an increase from 14.7% student attendance in 1871 to 23.8% attendance in 1881, the Muslim elite were beginning to threaten the Hindu dominance over limited civil service jobs. This sense of competition led to the misrepresentation of Muslims in works written by many Hindu authors. Hindu authors, such as the famous novelist, Bankim Chandra staunchly defended the existing structure of the Permanent Settlement, even when it was apparent that it was primarily Hindu Zamindars extracting labor from poor Muslim peasants through oppressive measures.

In this context of socio-economic competition, even the literary efforts of the Hindu _bhadramahila_ were significant in contributing to this communal misrepresentation. Early Brahmo and Hindu women writers produced Muslim women as the "backward" other, and thus, bolstered their own image as "liberated/modern." In response to their misrepresentation in Bengali literature, the Bengali Muslim elite, in turn, strongly condemned the Hindu authors for bringing the Muslim women out of their inner apartment by tearing their veil, and for painting 'imaginary characters of Muslim women falling in love with the Hindus.' They accused the Hindu authors for the deterioration of the relations between the Hindus and the Muslims, and authors, such as Pandit Mashahdi and Delwar Hosaen did not hesitate to enjoin Muslim to immolate cows, without regard to Hindu religious injunctions (which traditionally reveres the cow and calls for abstinence from beef).

Writing, therefore, was not just a literary endeavor in this period, but was a vehicle for far-reaching political ramifications as well. Neither Hindus nor Muslims wanted to write a commonly accepted history of India. Hindus believed that the Muslim Mughals were marauding invaders who took over the indigenous Hindu customs, while Muslims believed that Hindus were attempting

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25 Ibid. 231.
disenfranchise Muslims in India. The lack of reconciliation between the two communities clearly found voice in the extremely divisive literature of the times.

**Breaking the Hindu Muslim Binary:**

A few authors, however, did resist this tendency towards demonizing the adherents of the other faith. A few Hindu authors protested against this tendency to fabricate histories to fit the increasingly dominant story about Hind India’s glorious past. In an article entitled “Gotadui Katha” (A Few Words) published in 1904, Nirmal Chandra Ghosh commented on the unfair representations of Muslims by Hindu authors.

Muslim authors, such as Mir Mosharraf Hossein, also responded to the misrepresentation of Hindus by taking on a stance of 'liberal humanism,' which called for Muslims to kill goats, not cows, in order to respect the religious sentiments of their Hindu neighbors. Other authors, such as Kazi Imdadul Huq wrote in his novel, *Abdullah* (1925): “Be a man, a real man, so that you can forgot to hate each other—a Hindu can accept a Muslim and a Muslim can welcome a Hindu as his near and dear one.”

Muslim authors, such as Muhammad Lutfar Rahman (1889-1936), Kazi Imdadul Huq (1882-1926), and Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) worked hard to fight against this communal violence in literature. Their writings, which called for improved Hindu Muslim relations, inspired younger writers, such as Kazi Abdul Wadud and Abul Husain, who established the *Muslim Sahitya Samaj* (the emancipation of the intellect movement) in Dhaka in 1926. These young Bengali Muslim authors took up the crusade to overcome religious communalism in favor of a united Bengali identity. The literary giant, Rabindranath Tagore, himself a Brahmo, praised Wadud and the *Muslim Sahitya Samaj* for declaring crusade against religious orthodoxy and obscurantism in favor of an united Bengali

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This struggle over religious identity and cultural identity was a leitmotif in much of the literature of the early 20th century and well into the late 20th century. There were two distinct sets of Muslim identity that emerged in Bengal. Some Muslim Bengalis, including many \textit{ashraf} families, advocated for a separatist Muslim identity that emphasized a pan-Islamic religious identity, while other Bengali Muslims, sometimes \textit{atrap}, advocated for a syncretist identity that emphasized Bengali cultural unity over that of religious divides between the Hindu and Muslim community. This struggle between the separatists and syncretists took shape in the form of different social movements, such as Pan-Islamism and the creation of a separate Bengali Muslim literature, which will be analyzed in the next section.

\textbf{Pan-Islamic Identities: Separatist Tendencies}

Many Muslim leaders supported the British in the earlier part of the century because the British were giving greater preference to recruiting Muslims in government service. Especially when Bengal was partitioned in 1905, many Bengali Muslims benefitted by receiving a higher quota of jobs from Muslim Bengal, without having to compete with the Hindu Bengalis. Hence, the annulment of the partition of Bengal in 1911 caused great resentment among a large section of elite \textit{ashraf} Bengali Muslim loyalists to the British government, because they no longer benefited from jobs that had earlier been reserved for Bengali Muslims.\(^{28}\)

Despite such loyalists' tendencies on the part of the Muslim \textit{ashraf}, the defeat of Turkey in the Balkan War of 1912 hardened anti-British sentiments and gave a spurt to pan-Islamist tendencies amongst Muslims in India. With the respected Muslim leader, Jamal Al Din Afghani's visit to Bengal

\(^{27}\) Ibid. 13.

in the early 20th century, pan-Islamism movement began to grow stronger. With a decidedly anti-British slant, Indian Muslims looked more and more towards the Islamic community outside India for moral support, opposing British war efforts and joining in anti-colonial campaigns at an all-India level. Muslims from Deoband took part in the anti-partition agitation (1905), as well as in *swadeshi*, non-cooperation movements. This pan-Islamist, nationalistic fervor for independence crystallized with the signing of the Lucknow Pact between the Muslim League and the Congress in 1916. The joint efforts of the Muslims and Hindus against the colonial government found expression shortly afterwards in the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation movements, all of which were aimed at ousting the British from India.  

While solidifying a pan-Islamic identity amongst all Indian Muslims, which emphasized religious identity over cultural identity, pan-Islamism in the 1920s was aimed at ending the British rule in India, even if it meant working alongside Hindus. However, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, this pan-Islamic trend gave rise to separatist ideas, which eventually led to the creation of East Pakistan and West Pakistan, instead of allowing for an undivided India, finally free from British rule.

**Development of the Bengali from: A Separatist Tendency**

While the pan-Islamic movement ultimately reflected a separatist tendency, the development of Bangla literature, though seeming to represent a syncretist trend towards a greater Bengali cultural identity, was nonetheless a separatist movement as well. For decades, Bengali had been written with a great deal of Hindu influence, with references to Hindu mythology and Hindu gods and goddesses. The quest for a separate Bengali that reflected its Muslim origin was a part of the greater quest to form a separate Bengali Muslim identity from that of Bengali Hindus. Literature was a major mechanism through which this separate Bengali Muslim identity emerged.

*Punthis*, or religious poetry, provided the first articulation of a Bengali Muslim linguistic

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identity. Though often written in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu, *punthis* began to be written in Mussalmani Bangla. While using Bangla as the main language of the text, sprinklings of Arabic, Persian, and Urdu, also traced the origin of the Bengali *punthi* to Islamic influences.

The development of *shuddho* Bangla (chaste Bangla) was also a new literary phenomenon. Literary works, such as Sheikh Abdur Rahim's *Hazrat Mohammader Jiban Chait O Dharmaniti* (the Life and Religion of Prophet Muhammad), published in 1887, demonstrated how Bengali could be used to write about Islam as well. While many Urdu-speaking *ashraf* viewed Bangla as a language polluted by the influence of Hinduism, the emergence of a Mussalman Bengali demonstrated that Bengali could be just as much a language of Islam, as Urdu or Arabic.

What is remarkable is that the emergence of a Mussalman Bengali was supported by a few Hindu Bengali authors. Bhai Girish Chandra Sen, in fact, translated the Quran from Arabic to Bengali in the period 1881-1886, while Keshub Chandra and Swami Vivekananda respected Islam; these interactions showed that religious identity did not necessarily need to be tied to communal violence. Neither did belonging to the same religion lead to mutual respect, as can be shown by the tensions between the Urdu-speaking *ashraf* and the Bengali-speaking *atrap* Muslim communities.

The History of the Emergence of Bengali Muslim literature:

Marginalized both by the majority Hindu and the mostly upper-class Urdu-speaking Muslims, many Bengali Muslim authors felt alienated from the literary traditions surrounding them. Many Hindu authors did not like the usage of Bengali to write Islamic texts, while many Urdu-speaking Muslims still regarded Bengali as a language polluted by Hinduism. Therefore, Bengali Muslim authors started forming literary associations of their own.

The *Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Samiti* (Bengal Muslim Literary Society) was formed in 1911 and the society’s mouthpiece, the *Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Patrika* (1918) and quite a few other periodicals like the *Moslem Bharat* (1920) and *Saogat* (1918) engaged in the language question and
fought for the recognition of Bengali as the mother tongue of Bengali Muslims. While acknowledging that Urdu was the vehicle of Islamic glory in India, these organizations also wanted to spread the glorious message of Islam through their mother tongue. The Muslim world outside India and the place of women in Islam became two of their main concerns.30

This emphasis on the woman question as a measure of progress emerges repeatedly amongst each of the communities attempting to modernize. The following section will analyze why the woman question was such an essential part of the political discourse of the late 19th and early 20th century.

The Woman Question

Central to the criteria by which James Mill judged the level of a civilization was the position it accorded its women. A denigrating onslaught on the culture and history of the colonized was a strategy of the colonizing powers” to assert their superiority over the cultures that they colonized. Therefore, using the oppression of women as a justification for their continued interference in indigenous matters was the strategy that the British used to retain their political power in India.31

According to the British, the oppression of women was apparent in both the Hindu and Muslim communities of India. The Hindu Brahmo community committed sati, prevented widow remarriage, and exercised child marriage. The Muslim community as well exercised child marriage as well as enforcing the strict practice of purdah. Western observers saw female seclusion, which was in fact rigidly practiced only by a minority of women, as the dominant social custom regulating the relations between men and women because it fitted in with late-Victorian sex roles, which firmly located women


in the private sphere of the household. The particular attack against female seclusion occurred in Bengal, which was exposed to its position on the forefront of, first, colonial cooperation and, later, nationalist opposition. The province's social problems, that is, female issues and conditions in the so-called private sphere, therefore, emerged into the center of colonial discourse because the woman question became the standard by which the British could measure progress. Because of the conservative mindset of both Hindu and Muslim patriarchal societies, however, which would prevent a great deal of progress for women, the British could continue to use the woman question as a justification for their continued political rule over India.

The Inner and the Outer Worlds

Indeed, the British were correct in their assessment of the conservativeness of both Hindu and Muslim communities. Both Hindu and Muslim males refused to allow encroachments by the colonizer into the inner sanctum of their private worlds. While these emerging professional elites, the bhadralok, were willing to imitate and adapt to Western norms through the establishment of schools such as the Hindu Presidency College and Aligarh, the entrance of the British into their home was tantamount to annihilation of one's very personal identity. By thus separating the social space into the ghar and the bahir, the inner and outer worlds, indigenous men were able to continue with the process of selective modernization.

This separation of the outer and inner worlds was possible because of the separate understanding of what the outer and the inner world constitute. The outer world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. In contrast, the home represents one's inner spiritual self, one's true identity that

cannot be compromised, and it is often the domain of the female. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world and must retain the spiritual distinctiveness of its culture, and since woman is the representation of this inner world, she must remain unaffected by the social reforms of the outside world. As women maintained a nation's true identity, men in the outer world could make all the compromises and adjustments necessary to adapt themselves to the requirements of a modern material world. Therefore, the nationalist paradigm supplied an ideological principle of selection. It was not a dismissal of modernity; rather, it was an attempt to make modernity consistent with the nationalist project in the late 19th century and early 20th century.

In this nationalistic ideology, it was recognized that women could play a new role. Even as women remained as maintainers of the hearth and home, women could also become companions for the newly emerging professional class of bhadralok. The female counterpart, the bhadramahila, therefore, emerged in order to assist the bhadralok in this nationalistic project, and she became the “New Woman,” who could maintain tradition as well as assist with the rise of the upper middle class.

Education became the means by which the new bhadramahila class of women assisted in the nationalist endeavor. In order to demonstrate that progress was indeed occurring and that nationalism was therefore a viable path, Hindu and Muslim men crafted a careful system of education for the new women. This new woman, the bhadramahila, would be ready to adapt to the contingencies of the modern world, even while maintaining the essentially unchanged nature of their religion and culture.

Education would allow women to learn the skills of orderliness, thrift, cleanliness, the practical skills of literacy, accounting, hygiene, and most importantly, the ability to run the household according to the new physical and economic conditions set by the outside world. The New Woman would also receive some idea of the world outside the home into which she could even venture as long as it did not

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34 Ibid. 124.
threaten her femininity.

This new woman, therefore, could demonstrate her newly acquired freedom, which she attained through her own efforts. By displaying her various skills, she could demonstrate the social progress that was occurring within her religious community, even while maintaining her superior national culture. This was the central ideological strength of the nationalist resolution of the women's question. The new patriarchy advocated by nationalism conferred upon women the honor of a new social responsibility, that of demonstrating the superiority of their indigenous culture through their limited education. By associating the task of female emancipation with the historical goal of sovereign nationhood, the *bhadramahila* was bound to a new, and yet entirely legitimate, subordination.

The Woman Question in the Muslim Community:

Fatima Mernissi, a scholar of women's history in Islam, has hypothesized that most Muslim societies undergoing change in the face of colonial encounter have been unable to generate a competent ideology designed to cope with the accompanying economic, social, and political changes. Therefore, amidst a great deal of social and economic, Muslim communities viewed the private sphere of home as a place for maintaining tradition. Muslim Bengali women became 'the site of tradition,' which had to be closely guarded, no matter what economic change occurred in the course of colonial negotiation. The home, the private, the personal—becomes the ideal site of tradition.³⁵

In the context of such colonial negotiations, Jan Hjarpe in his article “The Attitude of Islamic Fundamentalism towards the Question of Women in Islam” explains that four major trends in Islamic society vis a vis interpretation of the Koran and the Sharia that emerged during the late 19th and early 20th century. While Hjarpe's study is focused on the Middle East, Sonia Amin, a scholar of Bengali Muslim women, argues that such trends were also applicable in Bengali Muslim society: traditionalism, modernism, secularism, and fundamentalism. These four methods are important to analyze because it

shows how Bengali Muslims were adapting to the social changes in the late 19th century, especially as it pertained to religion and its treatment of women.

Amongst the four trends of adaptation, traditionalists believed that injunctions in the scriptural sources had to be followed to the letter. In Bengali Muslim society, the old order remained entrenched, amongst many high-class families, who remained wary of Western liberal, utilitarian ideas of Bentham and Mills that was so popular at the time in more liberal circles. The fundamentalists, however, differed because they did not simply follow the status quo but offered an explanation for women's seclusion in society based on explanations drawn from the Quran and the Sunna. They did not believe that custom or secular legislation could provide valid justification for the state of society, so they used religious texts to offer a rational explanation for women's status in society. The Deobandis, Islamic neo-reformists of the time, encapsulated the fundamentalist outlook and wrote powerful social tracts, such as the Bihisti Zewar, a book of manners and learning for Muslim women which significantly shaped the way in which Muslim women were raised in the late 19th century.

The Deobandi, fundamentalist approach was perhaps most powerful in maintaining the traditional ideals of women's place in the home and countered the modernist trend which offered a rational and enlightened interpretation of Islam as a private affair. The new sharif bhadralok (professional Bengali Muslim elites) interpreted scripture in the light of rational-utilitarian principles, believing that some reform was necessary in the way that women were raised religiously. Given the bhadralok's increased exposure to British liberal ideas of Bentham and Mills through their professional interactions as lawyers, civil servants, and government agents, the bhadralok Reformists were highly influenced to reform on the 'Women Question' because of their colonial encounters. This new class of Professionals were derisively termed the "Mill Bentham addicted New Muslims (nabja Muslim, nabja dal, nabja Muslim sampraday) by the traditionalist and fundamentalist community who perceived them as being
overly influenced by the colonial oppressors.\textsuperscript{36}

The aspiring bhadralok elite of the Bengali Muslim community, therefore, in order to counter the view that they were simply agents of the British imperialists, had to validate their claim to modernity (rational-utilitarian-liberalism) and at the same time establish the dignity of their own past tradition. They drew on two sources to effect this reform—the Middle Eastern reinterpretation of Islam (pan Islamic identity) and the Hindu Brahmo reformist agenda, which had taken place a few decades before the Muslim Awakening; both these reformist trends made the "Woman Question" their measure of modernity. Women became the standard by which the quest for modernization was measured, and Bengali Muslim women of this aspiring bhadralok professional class, therefore, had to demonstrate their modernity by becoming more educated. At the same time that they took on the identity of the "bhadramahila" (female counterpart of bhadralok), they also had to prove that they were the cup-bearers of tradition. The reformist Muslims, both men and women, had to prove themselves twice—once to the colonial overlord, and again to the reformist Hindu community who had already undergone this process of reform.\textsuperscript{37}

This complex process of negotiation was the context in which these Bengali Muslim women authors framed their writings. Bengali Muslim writers understood that their writings were taking place within the modernizing ideology of the so-called Muslims Awakening, which first sought to create the new woman and then legitimize her subjection.\textsuperscript{38} The dominant ideology in the late 19th century which framed their writings was that of anti-colonial nationalism for Hindus and an identity seeking modernism for Muslims, both of which hinged on 'the Woman's Question.' It is crucial to understand the impact of these writings in the context of these wider ideological frameworks of nationalism and countering colonial dominance because women became such a crucial element in both these identity-seeking formations. The writings of Bengali Muslims women writers, such as Begum Rokeya

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid. 3.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid. 31.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid. 31.
Sakhawat Hossein, Shamsunnahar Mahmud, Sufia Kamal, Mahmuda Khatun Siddiqua, and Fazilatunnessa, therefore, gains even more prominence in showing how women negotiated these various ideological frameworks in their writings, especially in terms of how they navigated their religious and cultural identities.\textsuperscript{39}

Muslim Women’s Relative Invisibility in Late Bengal

When the question of women's representation is a universal concept, why focus on Bengali Muslim women of the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century?

The answer lies in the fact that there is a lacuna of historiography about Bengali Muslim women. While a few scholars, such as Sonia Nishat Amin, and Mahua Sarkar, have started the careful analysis of the role of Bengali Muslim women, much of the existing literature, focuses on the experience of Bengali Hindu women with the process of modernization during this period.

The second reason for the emphasis on Bengali Muslim women is because of the representation of Muslim women as ‘‘backward/victimized’’ in the literature of the time. In much of the Brahmo/Hindu women's writings of this period, Muslim women are represented as 'backwards,' and cat in the role of the Other. The representation of Bengali Muslim women as backwards is intimately related to the production of the Hindu, upper caste/middle class woman as the liberated/modern ‘‘ideal Indian woman.’’ While this dichotomy is not illogical, since identity categories often depend on one to delineate the other, this analysis will attempt to complicate this dichotomy of representation. By focusing on the writings of Bengali Muslim women themselves, much of this victimization of Bengali Muslim women will be recast through a representation of their own voices.

The third reason for analyzing the writings of Bengali Muslim women is because the experience of being a woman is mediated through the simultaneous workings of factors other than gender. In

order to complicate the idea of just one “feminism,” the focus on Bengali Muslim women will bring to the forefront ideas of race, class, nationality, sexuality, and religion. Since these factors are mutually constitutive, the interplay of these various interrelated identity categories will produce multiple nuanced narratives of Bengali Muslim women’s identity. The focus on multiple identity categories will also demonstrate how gender, religion, and class oppressions are relational, an idea put forth by Kamala Visweswaran, a South Asian feminist scholar.

Fourthly, the analysis of Bengali Muslim women's writings will bring to the forefront the voices of poor women. Many of these poor women, who had to seek work outside the domestic sphere could not possibly meet the standards of refinement and chastity required of the bhadramahila and find themselves simply written out of the new nation’s normative history. However, while focusing on the writings of upper-class, Bengali Muslim women presents the danger of ignoring the voices of poor Bengali Muslim women, it is quite remarkable that the writings of these upper class women actually present the voice of these poor women instead of ignoring them.

Finally, the only context in which women would be allowed visibility and agency was under the guardianship of men, and if they furthered 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. In order to highlight the writings of Bengali Muslim women who were not self-proclaimed nationalists, but nonetheless provided greater services for their community, this analysis will separate the idea of nationalistic fervor from social responsibility towards one's community.
Women's Spaces

The importance of women's spaces is another theme that this work will highlight. As Virginia Woolf writes:

women writers influenced each other, act as inspirations for each other, and form a sisterhood of writing; even more crucially, they help us trace a line of descent--a history in which to place ourselves. For we write through our mothers, if we are women.

Women's writing is particularly important in the context of Muslim Bengali women because they faced great opposition for writing and publishing their work. Writers such as Sufia Kamal remembers how:

we were ashamed of the fact that we wrote. Bengali Muslim women writing in Bengali was considered to be a shameful act. Even if they wrote, they did not publish their work. It is not known how many women writers have disappeared into oblivion. If a woman was writing in our times, it would be a talking point—why is she writing in Bengali? 40

With the identity of Urdu as a Muslim language reinforced in India and the high-born *ashraf* looking down upon Bengali as a Hindu language in Bengal, the women of upper-class Muslim families in the province were caught in a double bind. Being mostly taught to read the Koran in Arabic without understanding it, they were severely chastised if they learnt to read and write secretly in their mother tongue. 41

Thus for Bengali Muslim women writers, having a network of other women writers was extremely important for the development of their work. With very spaces for women to publish, the emergence of *Saogat* magazine, under the editorship of Naseeruddin Shah, was a particularly important milestone in the history of Bengali Muslim women writers. It was not a magazine for these women, but a very important space in which they came to define their identity as Muslim women and as Bengali women. Writing in Bengali, each of these authors also affirmed the emergence of Mussalman Bengali, a movement that had started a few decades prior to their writings.

Saogat Magazine:

When *Saogat* first started in 1918, it was considered anti-Islam. Naseeruddin Shah recalls how in those days, showing outsiders anything handwritten by a Muslim woman was considered a sin. Rigid mullahs raised a hue and cry over unveiled women's photographs appearing in print.

Because of such controversy, *Saogat* had very few subscribers at this time. Few Hindu readers would buy a magazine edited by a Muslim, and Muslims were hardly interested in a literary-social magazine. A combination of all these reasons forced *Saogat* to close down in three years, after incurring a big financial loss. However, due to the efforts of women, such as Begum Rokeya, Fazilatunnessa, and other proponents of women's education, a more liberal atmosphere was created. *Saogat*, therefore, reopened in 1926, establishing not only a women's space for writing, but a network of women writers, who could support one another.\(^\text{42}\)

Though *Saogat* took a leading role in fashioning the ethno-linguistic identity of Bengali Muslims and that of the Muslim gentlewoman, it was not a self-enclosed world of Muslim writers only. Hindu writers contributed to the journal from the inaugural issue of 1918. Short stories by Anurupa Devi, Prabhabati Devi Saraswati, Jyotirmala Devi, Ashapurna Devi and others appeared, as well as poetry by Priyamvada Devi, Sarasibala Basu, Radharani Devi and many other writers.

Women, both Hindu and Muslim, wrote regularly in the monthly *Saogat*, and in addition, they also contributed to the *Mahila Saogat* (the Women's *Saogat*). After the first issue of *Mahila Saogat* in 1929, seven other such issues were published in the 1930s and 1940s in which many Bengali Muslim women found a voice of their own.

Women's writings were therefore a new sign as well as a novel site for the dismantling of the basic opposition between the sexes, a transcending of the primal 'lack' that had all along dominated social constructions of womanhood.\(^\text{43}\) While women's magazines may have exploited gender

\(^{42}\) Ibid. 253.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 252-253.
differences to create a separate journal or publication, they still provided a much needed women's space for writing.

Clubs as Women's Spaces:

Women's clubs also provided a space for women to gather and provide inspiration for one another. Because the clubs qualified as kinds of domestic spaces, it was well within the bounds of propriety for a woman to belong to such organizations.

Women used these clubs as a transitional space between the domestic and the public spheres, recognizing that clubs and other associational forms helped them prepare for a more political or socially-oriented life. Clubs served as training grounds for greater public participation, bridging the private and public spheres and turning club participation—usually a domestic and private affair—into a public and nationally oriented service.44

Conclusion:

Women’s spaces served to show women as historical actors within their own rights. While it is easy to dismiss women shut up in their homes as individuals without agency, this was not true in the case of Bengali Muslim women of the late 19th and early 20th century. These women developed spaces, such as the andarmahal, women’s magazines, such as Saogat, and women’s club to express their views on the social and cultural issues of their time. These women did not derive their strength despite their ‘constriction,’ but because of their position as women who were privy to a unique experience within the Bengali Muslim world of this time period.

Chapter 2: The Life and Work of Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain:

Begum Rokeya has rightly received the epithet, “Mother of the Bengali Muslim Women's Movement in Bengal.” A fierce advocate for women’s education, a teacher, principal, prolific writer, social activist, and mentor for the new generation of Bengali Muslim women, Begum Rokeya was one of the leading reformers of her age. Though having been raised by a conservative Muslim family and maintaining the practice of purdah throughout her whole life, Begum Rokeya, nonetheless, played an integral role in extending public education for Bengali Muslim women in the early 20th century.

In order to shed light on how it is that Begum Rokeya came to have such progressive views, it is important to analyze her origins and her spheres of influence. Having been born in 1880 to a family of zamindars (land owners) in the Rangpur District of what is now Bangladesh, Rokeya had the privilege of being born into an upper middle class Muslim family. Her father, Zahir Mohammad Abu Ali Saber, however, was against the education of women, especially about women learning Bengali. His orthodox stance on education, however, did not prevent Rokeya's older brother, Ibrahim Saber, from helping her learn English. Ibrahim himself had been educated in the western system, under the tutelage of men such as Ameer Ali Khan, who were pioneers of Western education amongst the Bengal Muslims. Due to such tutelage, Ibrahim had been exposed to the idea that women's education was a necessity in order for society to progress, and influenced by such ideas, Ibrahim taught English to his younger sister, Rokeya, in secret. Being an eager student who craved knowledge, Rokeya also learned Bengali from her older sister, all unknown to her father.\(^45\)

At the age of 16, Rokeya was married to a widowed civil service officer, Syed Sakhawat Hossain. Hossain was an enlightened man who believed in the education of women, and it was under his influence that Rokeya became to write about her thoughts on social issues of womanhood and women's degradation. Throughout her lifetime, she produced a multitude of works, including:

“Alankara” (Badge of Slavery)—1903 later called *Streejatir Abanoti* (The Degradation of Women) published in *Mahila* Magazine

“Ardhanghi” (The Other Half)—1904

“Sugrihini” (The Home Maker)—1904

“Griha” (Home)—1904

“Burqah” (The Veil)—1904

*Motichur Anthology*—1905: combined these first five major essays

*Sultana’s Dream*—1905

“Bhrata Bhagni” (Brother and Sister)—1905

“Kupomonduker Himalaya Darshan” (A Frog in a Well Sees the Himalaya)—1904

“The Worship of Women”—1906

“The Fruit of Freedom” and “The Fruit of Knowledge” (1920s)

*Padmarag* (The Ruby)—1924

*Abarodhbashini* (The Secluded Ones)—1929

“Narir Adhikar” (The Rights of Women)—1957—published posthumously

With a style both incisive and philosophical at the same time, Rokeya was not afraid to use her writing as a platform for social change. Having witnessed the sufferings women within the Bengali Muslim community, Rokeya believed that it was her duty as a practicing Muslim woman to right the wrongs of society. One of the major wrongs that Rokeya identified was the lack of education offered to Bengali Muslim women of the age. She herself had to struggle, often surreptitiously, in order to acquire the education that she cherished, and she wanted to ensure that she left the legacy of education for young Muslim women of the coming ages. Despite great personal struggles, Rokeya devoted her life to the cause of women's education through the establishment of her school, the Sakhawat Memorial
School in Calcutta in 1911.⁴⁶

Education:

Having been widowed at the age of 29, Rokeya received a legacy of Rupees. 10,000 by her husband, Syed Sakhawat Hossain, to start a girls' school. While Rokeya initially planned to start the school in Bhagalpur, the city where she lived with her husband, her husband's family drove her out of the city due to their personal problems with her. Moving to Calcutta, Rokeya, a young widow, who lost the shelter of her husband, nonetheless started a school in 1911.⁴⁷

On February 10, 1913, Rokeya wrote to the Editor of the Mussalman newspaper with a call for funding. In a “Proposed Girls' School,” Rokeya wrote: “I intend to start a girls’ school in Calcutta in strict observance of purdah, at an earliest opportunity possible,” and asked for private donations from supporters of Muslim women's education.⁴⁸ What is significant about Rokeya's efforts to build her school is it's vision of a completely separate but equal system of education for boys and girls. As a strict, purdahnashin [purdah-following] woman herself, Rokeya advocated for a separate system of public schools for educating Muslim girls in society, effectively calling for the creation of a women's space in society that would have its own female teacher, principals, and educators to create the next generation of Muslim Bengali women.

In order to fulfill this vision, Rokeya, in addition to using forms of media to garner support for her school, also walked from door to door assuring guardians about the safety, curriculum, and strict observation of purdah that her school would maintain. Though the numbers were minute, with only 8 students in 1911, every year the student population grew. There were 27 students in 1912, 30 students in 1913, and 39 students in 1914. Though public education for Muslim girls was a highly controversial topic of the time, the reputation of the school and Rokeya's own strict observance of purdah convinced

⁴⁷Ibid. 25.
many guardians that girl's education, especially when maintaining purdah, was not un-Islamic.\(^49\)

In order to maintain the reputation of her school, Rokeya started the school with classes in English, Bengali, Urdu, Persian, nursing, first aid, and even knitting. She offered a free bus for the students, which she made sure was within the dictates of purdah. By fitting the windows of the bus with shutters, she wanted to ensure that purdah was maintained; however, due to the lack of ventilation, by the time that the girls reached the schools, many of them would have fainted. Mrs. Mukherjee, a friend of Rokeya, described the bus as a 'moving black hole,' and in order to make sure that the girls did not faint, Rokeya replaced the shutters with curtains. However, she was criticized harshly for this measure, receiving angry letters from parents condemning this arrangement.

Rokeya also faced criticism for struggling to keep the Bengali section in her school active. Letters to the *Mussalman* by writers indicated that there was great divide between Urdu-speaking Muslims and Bengali-speaking Muslims about which language was more appropriate for their daughters to learn. Since most parents in the school wanted their daughters taught in Urdu, it became economically unfeasible for Rokeya to maintain a Bengali section, which she closed down. However, a certain R. Rahman criticized Rokeya for not teaching in Bengali at her school, as revealed by his latter to the *Mussalman* newspaper. was These small instances highlight the day to day struggles Rokeya had to face as she ran a school for Muslim girls at a time when each of her actions was scrutinized by a society reluctant to allow its daughters to receive public education.\(^50\)

In addition to such struggles over purdah and over which language was to be taught, the school also struggled financially for some time. The myth of a benevolent British imperial government supporting female education was incorrect,\(^51\) and though Muslim Legislators, such as Hussein Suhrawardy asked for female education, there was very little governmental support. Reports such as


Resolution No. 155 in 1917 presented by the Committee on Mohammedan Education in Bengal called for the following measures:

a) at least one special school for Muslim girls in every subdivision and called for
b) these schools to be aided schools in the sense that they should be under control of local committees, but Government-funded;  

However, it was apparent that educators such as Rokeya gave up much of their own private incomes in order to run their educational institutions with little governmental support. The Indian nongovernmental and private expenditure on women's education from 1850-1920 was as high as 52.22% (for female primary and secondary schooling), and the majority of the cost for running schools was borne by private contributions not by the government. A Report published by the Sakhatwat Memorial School in 1931 showed that the British government only gave funds intermittently—Rupees. 5000 in 1926, and Rupees. 4725 in 1928 for buying school-buses. Only after Rokeya's death did her school become fully governmentally funded, but during her lifetime, it was a struggle for Rokeya to financially support her school. 

However, Rokeya's struggles slowly paid off. Many educationists, such as Sarojini Naidu, who read about her school in the Indian Ladies Magazine in 1916, complimented her for her vision and hard work. The slowly rising number of girls in her school was also testament to the slowly changing character of the Bengali Muslim community, which was more willing to educate their daughters as the beginning of the 1930s and 1940s. In fact, the first four decades of the 20th century were significant for Muslim women. Bethune College, which had only allowed Hindu students, started allowing a handful of Muslim girl students in the last years of the 1930s, and the beginning of the 1940s saw a considerable number of Muslim girls admitted to Lady Brabourne College, which was established by

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52 Ibid. 745.
54 Ibid. 30.
the Chief Minister of East Bengal, A.K. Fazlul Huq in 1939. Education, Rokeya's lifework, slowly but surely produced the next generation of women leaders that Rokeya had worked so hard to create. They began to pursue education not just for marriage, but for education's sake, as Rokeya had envisioned in her dream of a better society.

Religion:

In order to keep her school running, Rokeya also had to overcome many religious critics. Though she was a prominent writer for Saogat, the women's magazine run by Naseeruddin Shah, who asked for her photograph to appear with her articles, Rokeya spoke to him from behind the purdah and refused to give her photograph. She admitted that if she discarded the purdah and allowed her photograph to appear in Saogat, her dream of the school would never come true.55 Such a small story highlights how much of Rokeya's struggles with her school was intertwined with her struggle to define what was truly religiously dictated by God, and what was a man-made law that prevented Muslim women from receiving public education. Rokeya used her writing as a way to differentiate between true religion and what she seemed to consider man-made religion.

What is incredible about Rokeya's writing was its remarkable critique of some practices of religion, which was a sacrosanct matter at the end of the late 19th century and early 20th century. In her original article entitled “Amader Abanati,” published in Nabanur magazine, Rokeya wrote the following paragraphs, which were later censured by the publication company, when her article appeared in her first anthology, Motichur. The reason for such censure was because of the powerful critique of religion that Rokeya presented:

Men have published these scriptures as commands of God to keep us [women] in darkness...in ancient times whoever had become renowned to others by his own merit made himself known as a god or a god-sent messenger, and he tried to educate the uncivilized barbarians. Gradually,

as the intelligence and perception of the inhabitants of the world increased, the prophets (that is, God's messenger) and gods also became more and more clever. So you see that these religious scriptures are nothing but regulations made by men. The thing that you hear in the prescriptions of the sages might be contrary in regulations made by a lady sage...anyway, in the name of religion now we should no longer bear the unjustifiable mastery of the males with heads bowed down.\(^\text{56}\)

Fiercely and unabashedly critical of the inequality present in religious society, Rokeya's writings revealed her frustration with the inequality between men and women in Muslim Bengali society. From her observations, Rokeya understood that men held the keys to power because they were the ones who controlled the means of knowledge production. While initially these self-proclaimed prophets tried to delude people into believing that they were gods, people soon came to see through the facade. Rokeya describes this historical parable as a way to parallel the situation of Muslim women in society, whom she sees as also living in a facade. Restricted by man-lade laws which they believe to be sacrosanct, Muslim women submit themselves to their male masters, never having the chance to question unequal religious doctrine that has become enshrined as divine law. Rokeya wanted to break this facade and inform women that Islam did not promote inequality between the sexes—rather, it was man-made interpretations that subjugated Muslim women in society.

Rokeya's writings created an uproar in the traditionalist Muslim community. Al Musabhi, a Muslim Bengali leader responded to Rokeya's writings in a 1904 Bengali periodical of the time, Nabanur: “women can never be equal to men in all respects—if that happens, it will be something against nature.”\(^\text{57}\)

Nauser Ali Khan Yusufzai, another well-known prominent Muslim Bengali politician, also responded to Rokeya's religious critiques as 'irrelevant utterances.' Though a great proponent of women's rights, having worked hard to end child marriage, Yusufzai was not ready to accept Rokeya's statements. His strong critique of Rokeya's work indicated that this reformist was unwilling to face a

\(^{56}\) Ibid. 6.

\(^{57}\) Ibid. 7.
revision of Islam: “you become free [he responded to Rokeya], that is well and good. But we only ask that you do not misuse your freedom.” For Yusufzai, Rokeya’s harsh critique of Islam as an essentially misogynistic religion was incorrect.

To such critiques of why Rokeya ‘sullied the name of Islam’ in her analysis of women’s state in society, Rokeya countered in Abarodhbashinini (the Secluded Ones):

Religion has made our bondage of slavery more firm in the end. Men are now ruling over women in the name of religion. That is why I have been compelled to drag in religion. For that the religious persons may forgive me.59

Despite the fact that Rokeya highlighted the inequalities within the practice of Islam amongst Bengali Muslims, her argument was not that Islam was an essentially misogynist religion, as Yusufzai claimed she had stated. Rather, Rokeya pointed out the very Islamic behavior of Prophet Muhammad, who had laid down laws to stop the oppression of Arab women and had shown great affection to his own daughters. Rokeya laments that such just treatment of women was no longer occurring under Islam, and uses such an example of the beloved Prophet to appeal to Islamic precepts and traditions in order to affirm women’s rights within Islam. Instead of attempting to subvert Islam, Rokeya attempts to point out how un-Islamic it is to deprive women of rights and justifying such oppression in the name of religion.60

Abarodh:

Rokeya was also a powerful critique of abarodh, the extreme purdah forced onto a majority of Muslim women of the time by conservative patriarchs. In order to retain control over female sexuality, some Muslim men used religion to justify virtually shutting up women in their homes for their entire lives through the practice of abarodh.

58 Ibid. 7.
59 Ibid. 7.
60 Ibid. 6.
Another important reason for the strict purdah observance among Bengali Muslims, especially among the rich, was social and economic. Observance of strict purdah did not only entail arranging for women to live in secluded living quarters in the house. It also required that women were guaranteed their invisibility in the public spaces, an invisibility which was achieved by arranging covered transport and the *burqa* (the cloak). All of these measures required considerable expenses, which only the affluent could afford, thus making purdah a sign of status in a poor country. Thus, it was reasons of status, not necessarily religion, which prompted rich Muslim families during Rokeya's time to resist sending their daughters to school.61

Rokeya is well-aware of such non-religious reasons for holding on the strict practice of *abarodh* [seclusion], which she argues is entirely un-Islam.62 In a series of forty-seven gruesome, yet slightly comical stories, published in *Abarodhbashini* in 1926, Rokeya offers a harsh critique of this outdated practice. Drawing from her personal experiences as well as her observations of Muslim women's experiences with *abarodh*, Rokeya offers a few graphic stories. One is a story of her aunt-in-law, who tripped on her *burqa* and fell down on the train tracks; despite an approaching train, because of the aunt’s express wishes, the maid did not permit anyone to help her up from the tracks because it would defy *abarodh* (Report 14). Another story speaks of an eight-year-old girl, Tahera, who died of a fever, induced by the shock of her father’s anger, after he found out that she had broken purdah and climbed a ladder (Report 39).63

Such horrific instances of extreme *abarodh* gives relevance to Rokeya’s argument that there should be a distinction drawn between *purdah* and *abarodh*. Rokeya argues that while purdah allows women to retain their modesty and is enjoined by Islam, *abarodh* is an extreme form of seclusion,

which is completely non-Islamic and could be compared to the deadly carbonic acid gas. Since carbonic acid causes death painlessly, people do not bother to guard against it. In the zenana [inner quarters] too, hundreds of inmates are dying pointlessly, little by little, killed by what can be called the gas of the seclusion system.  

Through her powerful imagery, such as her comparison of abarodh to carbonic acid gas, Rokeya was able to mount an attack on the perverted religious injunctions used by some patriarchal mullahs [male religious leaders] to retain their power over women. Her attackers claimed that she was anti-religious, but Rokeya was herself a woman who remained in purdah for her whole life and of her own volition. Therefore, her critique of 'so-called' Islamic practices was not an attack on Islam but a redefinition of it. Instead of becoming a slave to the words in the scriptures, Rokeya wanted to follow the essence of Islam, which was based on justice and equality between men and women.

Rokeya responded to her attackers by stating that “purdah does not mean deprivation of all rights and confinement within four walls. Have you [educated male readers] read at all the Quran Sharif? Or, do you just hang it around your neck?” Due to her powerful writings, her books and articles were strongly opposed by the conservative elements of society, and her incendiary attacks on abarodh established her as a powerful social critic of non-Islamic practices within Muslim women's lives.

Rokeya's Sources of Inspiration:

A critic of Rokeya's essays about religion stated, “according to her, everything of ours is bad whereas everything of Europe and America is good.” While it is true that Rokeya admired the rights

65 Ibid. 292.
that some Western women were able to enjoy, Rokeya was against the adoption of Western culture without understanding its value in a different social setting. She compared a person who relinquishes her own cultural belonging and unwittingly adopts elements of different cultures within herself to the image of a disfigured, strange animal. However, Rokeya is not unwilling to accept the critiques of the West, if they will propel social change through furthering the education of Muslim women. When Katherine Mayo's book, Mother India, a harsh, neo-imperialist critique of both Hindu and Muslim culture was published in 1927, Rokeya enthusiastically endorsed her book in a letter to the Muhammadi. Though Rokeya certainly was a nationalist who did not buy into the propaganda of the British as saviors of the Indian woman, she nonetheless used the furor over Mother India to catalyze further change in promoting women's education amongst Bengali Muslims.

What was interesting is that much of Rokeya's inspiration did not derive necessarily from the British, as it may be believed, but from nearer sources. Rokeya was influenced by the reforms of Brahmo reformers in the Hindu community, who preceded her by a few decades. The rationalism of Raja Ram Mohan Ray, who outlawed sati, and the efforts of Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and Keshub Chandra Sen, who worked hard to enjoin the custom of widow remarriage and women's education, were certainly instances of indigenous reform that allowed a community to move forward. Rokeya also gained inspiration from the stories of Islamic women in history, such as Ayesha, who had been a learned scholar and an active women leader, despite maintaining her piety within Islam. Rokeya also learned the stories of Turkish women, who fought alongside their men during World War I, and who showed that being a Muslim woman in the modern century did not prevent them for engaging equally alongside their husbands in society.

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Rokeya's actions against aborodh, though they may not have been revolutionary in the context of the changes occurring the world, were nonetheless revolutionary in the Bengali Muslim society that Rokeya was part of. In order to understand how difficult it was for Rokeya to argue against this custom, it is once again important to analyze the historic precedent of such a behavior. The following section will trace the emergence of the private spheres for women and how such a strict separation was a way to maintain women as the sites of tradition. Ironically, however, what may have emerged from this separation was the creation of separate women's spaces.

The Inner and Outer Worlds: Creating Women's Spaces

In 19th century Bengal, the separation of the private and the public spheres among respectable Muslim families was spatially manifest in separate spheres—*andar* (inner part) and *sadar* (outer part) of the house. Female members of *sharif* (upper class, well-born families) would hardly venture out of the *andarmahal* or *antahpur* (inner mansion) because it was not appropriate for them to step outside this private sphere of protection. The private became a fortress of Islam in a sea of hostility, and traditional Bengali Muslim families, enforced such a spatial separation very strictly.71

Rokeya recollects in her book *Abarodhbashini*, how “from the age of five, we girls had to observe purdah even from those our own sex. Men were not allowed in the Antahpur, so I did not to suffer their oppression.”72 In this passage, Rokeya does not complain of the strict purdah; rather she seems to prefer that men were not allowed into the inner quarters, where women could freely rule. She also goes on describe, almost longingly, the textures of her childhood in purdah:

where may one find a comparison to our house and its grounds, shaded by forests on all sides?...we rise to the cry of the morning birds; the call of the foxes signals the maghreb (evening) prayer is near...our childhood passed in bliss in the midst of shady forest in rural Bengal73

72 Ibid. 43.
73 Ibid. 45.
Similarly, another Bengali Muslim author, Syeda Monowara, recollects her memories from living in the *andarmahal*, the inner spaces, at the turn of the century:

Mother used to love listening to songs. Sometimes after the Zohr [afternoon] prayers, she would summon all the maids to the verandah and bid them to sing...Mother would sometimes request particular songs...about weddings, bridal toilette, the coming of the groom, songs of farewell. Sometimes Mother wanted to hear spiritual or marfati songs, or ancient ballads, etc. Many of us would cry with emotion, at the beauty of the legends—the pathos...such as that of Princes Kamalmani.74

The significance of this passage is not so much in its lyricism, but in its positive reflection of the *andarmahal* as a female space, not of captivity but one of creative culture and communal living. While it is easy to imagine that the *andarmahal* was a prison, which Bengali Muslim men created to hold their women in captive, such accounts from the women themselves, complicates this dichotomous construction of inside and outside. Inside did not necessarily mean captivity; it could also create a space for women to learn and live together.

However, such idyllic scenes also were countered by accounts of severe purdah being imposed on the women. Bengali Muslim writers, such as Rokeya, present a realistic view of what being on the inside meant. While Rokeya, herself, willingly maintained purdah by donning the *burqa* (a garment used by orthodox Muslim women to cover her body from head to feet), she was well aware of how far such ideas of modesty could be stretched. She argues that all rules should have limits and that it is essential to moderate the artificial customs of purdah...“we shall keep only the essential purdah and give up unjust purdah.75

Rokeya sees no contradiction between in maintaining modesty, while promoting women's progress within religion, and therein is her brilliance. Rokeya is not a radical, no matter how her critics construe her writings. She is a pragmatist, who realizes that separation between men and women

74 Ibid. 41.
75 Ibid. 10.
should be maintained to preserve social order. However, she advocates for female teachers and separate schools, colleges and universities for women because she knows that realistically, "no Muslim will perhaps advance in the field of education by relaxing the essential purdah."\textsuperscript{76}

Instead of allowing religious restrictions to curtail her call for religious reform and women's education, Rokeya instead uses religious precepts of justice and women's rights to argue for a less restrictive separation of women from all forms of life. Effectively, she calls for the creation of women's spaces, outside of the andarmahal, that would allow Muslim women to pursue education.

Creating More Women's Spaces: Social Work and Women's Activism

Along with her writings about issues of education and religion, Rokeya also understood the value of creating women's networks, especially in the cause of social work. She established the Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam in 1916, an organization which gave middle-class women a chance to visit the slums of Calcutta in order to educate the poorest of women, both Hindus and Muslims, in order that they could have a better life. Keenly aware of the elitist nature of formal education in Bengal, Rokeya wanted to help poor women impeded by poverty to acquire an education. Through Anjuman, she devised an adult literacy program for the slum women, which would be implemented by members of Anjuman. These Anjuman women, both Hindus and Muslims, would visit the homes of the slum women to teach them the basic rudiments of reading, writing, personal hygiene, and childcare.\textsuperscript{77} Through such efforts, Rokeya used her women's organization to serve other women, highlighting the importance of how effective a women's space could be in the betterment of society.

Rokeya herself was also part of a greater network of women social activists. She was aware of work by women such as Pandita Ramabai in Western India, who also worked to established homes for

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid. 10.

poor, destitute women. Inspired by such examples of women social activists, Rokeya became President of Narishilpa Vidyalaya (Women's Arts and Industry School) and Narithirtha (Women's Institution for Destitute Women and Prostitutes). She was also part of the Bengal Women's Education League (BWEL) founded in 1927, which was a forum for women educators from all denominations in Bengal.

Though Rokeya was highly involved in these regional women's clubs, she never forgot that the focus of her work was in her local Bengal base. Despite how well-versed she was in the work of international women scholars and educationists, quoting from women writing as far away as Britain and Turkey, Rokeya did not make trips abroad and neither did she correspond with women activists outside of India. Her very successful local efforts, however, proved that “women belonging to the 'peripheries' of the British empire thus could and did exercise highly articulate agency for women's education in the colonial period. The transnational character of the British empire facilitated the emergence of a strong women's movement (which paradoxically took an anti-imperial slant)” that allowed for women across India to work to alleviate the suffering of poor women throughout their communities by utilizing the education and organizational power of women's clubs.

Politics:

These regional women's organization were not without power struggles, however, as was apparent in the way in which the 1919 regional conference of the All India Muslim Ladies Conference, hosted by Begum Rokeya and the Anjuman Khawatin Branch in Calcutta proved. Because the Secretary of the All Indian Muslim League, Nafis Dulhan, had some personal animosity towards Rokeya, she changed the location of the conference only a few days before the conference, without

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consulting Rokeya and the Anjuman Khawatin leaders. Even though the Anjuman Khawatin had sent out cards months before to ensure high attendance at this conference, the change of venue led to a dismal turnout, causing Rokeya and the Anjuman Khawatin's reputation to suffer. Such examples of political maneuvering between the regional and national chapters showed how even well-minded intention to promote education and social work were not without instances of political jockeying.80

Based on such experiences, Rokeya preferred to work on the local level to encourage women to participate in politics. In her essay “Sugrihini,” Rokeya argues that a good housewife should inculcate the idea that 'we are first and foremost Indians, then Muslims, or Sikhs,” affirming the idea of a national identity before a religious identity in the cause of independence. She also called for women to exercise the right to vote. Frustrated that only four Muslim women voted since the 1926 franchise, Rokeya held up the example of the Turkish women, who participated in political life alongside their men, and encouraged Bengali Muslim women to emulate them.81

Many of Rokeya's works, such as “The Fruit of Freedom” and “The Fruit of Knowledge” written in the 1920s, in the midst of the nationalistic fervor, also demonstrate how Rokeya used her writing to call for Indian independence. However, her works show that though she was a nationalist, she did not necessarily support the male-dominated nationalist leaders, who only gave lip-service only to women's empowerment. In order to ensure that the cause for women's education and political enfranchisement was not was not engulfed by the cause of independence, Rokeya chose to keep her movement separate from the larger nationalistic movement.

_Sultana's Dream_, another one of her most famous utopian short stories, also affirms her idea that women could be very effective political rulers. In order to understand the complex, multifaceted


argument that Rokeya presents in *Sultana's Dream*, it is necessary to take a closer look at Ladyland, the place where women have achieved political and social equality.

Literary Analysis:

**Sultana's Dream: A Redefinition of Modernity**

*Sultana's Dream* was one of Rokeya's earliest written pieces, written in flawless English and with incisive wit. Rokeya wrote it while her husband was away on an official tour, and about 25 years after its publication in 1908, Rokeya recalled the condition of its production:  

My adorable late husband was on a tour; I was totally alone in the house and wrote something to pass my time. After coming back, he asked me what I was doing during those two days. In reply to his query, I showed him the draft of *Sultana's Dream*. He read the whole piece in one go while standing and exclaimed: “A Terrible Revenge.” Then he sent the draft to the then Commissioner [of Bhagalpur] Mr. McPherson for possible [language] correction. When the writing came back from McPherson, it was noticed that he did not make any pen-mark on the draft. Rather he sent a note attached that read: “The ideas expressed in it are quite delightful and full of originality and they are written in perfect English […]. I wonder if she has foretold here the manner in which we may be able to move about in the air at some future time. Her suggestions on this point are most ingenious.”

Written and published with the support of her husband, *Sultana's Dream*, represents Rokeya's dream of a future in which women can serve as political leaders of a land. The plot is simple: essentially, the men of a certain nameless country engage in futile and incessant warfare, thereby exhausting themselves and their country's precious resources. The women, on the other hand, are devoted to cultivating their minds, thanks to their queen, who decrees universal female education. Two universities, built exclusively for women sponsor many scientific project, such as allowing water to be drawn directly from the clouds, and enabling solar hear to be collected, stored, and concentrated.

While the women continue to discover useful scientific methods, the men begin to lose the

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82 Ibid. 253-254.
battle against invading enemy. In light of this invasion, the female principals of the universities step into the breach, stipulating that the men must withdraw into the murdana [the inner quarters] as a precondition for the women agreeing to defend the country. Once the men agree, the women leaders use the concentrated solar heat that they had discovered as a missile to rout the enemy, thus becoming the political leaders of Ladyland.

What is significant about this story is the many literary inversions and moments of irony that Rokeya employs in order to create this women-run utopia. The first inversion is that the heroines of Ladyland are women educators, who achieve their victory by combining science and technology, rather than being dependent on warfare. Their story emphasizes the idea that education can overcome physical strength or violence.

This idea of inverted biology is emphasized in the exchange between Sultana and Sister Sara, her guide through Ladyland.

[Sultana], the visitor said 'man's brains are stronger than a woman's,' Sara replies that 'a lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race'.
[Sultana says once again] "men's brains are bigger and heavier than women's. Sister Sara responds: "Yes, but what of that? An elephant also has got a bigger and heavier brain than a man has. Yet men can enchain elephants and employ them...women's brains are somewhat quicker than men's."

This exchange emphasizes the way in which education and knowledge is emphasized over ideas of biological superiority. Sister Sara points out that the men of Ladyland were not forced or tricked into these murdanas; rather, they had no choice but to allow the women to sequester them because women had superior brain power to those of the war-crazy men.

The second inversion that occurs is the seclusion of men not women. Sister Sara explains: It is not safe so long as there are men about the streets, nor is it so when a wild animal enters a marketplace...[yet] in your country, this very thing is done! Men, who do or at least are capable of doing no end of mischief, are let loose and the innocent women shut up in the zenana! How

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can you trust those untrained men out of doors?87

Sister Sara explains that men have the capacity to be violent and destructive and often are; thus, in her opinion, it is the dangerous men who should be sequestered for the protection of society, rather than have the innocent women secluded without having committed any crime. This inversion of the idea of seclusion is further emphasized by a 'literary insurrection'.88 The zenanas are called murdanas, and this linguistic subversion emphasizes the inverted pattern of gender dynamics in Ladyland, in comparison to the reality of abarodh that Bengali Muslim women had to endure back in the 'real' world. Just as Ursula K. Le Guin speaks of the creation of a "Mother Language" that overcomes the "Father Language," the replacement of the zenana by the murdana is the symbol of a linguistic insurrection subverting the very patterns of gender separation that society practices.

The replacement of patriarchal power with matriarchal power is the greatest subversion of all. As Sultana admires the atmosphere of virtue and purity that reigns in Ladyland, she notices that:

Some of the passers-by made jokes at me. Though I could not understand their language, yet I felt sure they were joking.
I asked my friend, "What do they say?"
The women say that you look very mannish.
"Mannish?" said I, "what do you mean by that?"
They mean that you are shy and timid like men.

Perhaps this is the moment where the subaltern sets herself free. Through the subtle irony of changed behavior patterns, patriarchal control gives way to matriarchal power, and the voiceless woman finds her ability to articulate herself.89

The audience realizes after reading this story of inversions that the main message of Ladyland is what Sister Sara says to her visitor, and through her, to Hossain's own society: "you have neglected the

duty you owe to yourselves, and you have lost your *natural rights* by shutting your eyes to your own interests, by failing to capitalize on the opportunities beyond marriage." This direct, yet highly insightful message is directed to the audience, who is not the normative male subject but women readers and exhorts them to pursue education rather than simply pursing marriage. Just like the leaders in Ladyland, education should be for society's betterment and defense, rather than simply as an asset for marriage; only by realizing the value of education will women reclaim the natural rights they are granted and find the utopia that Ladyland envisions.

The Significance of a Dream:

The reason that Rokeya was able to construct such a radically inverted society was because she used the format of a dream to create this utopia. It is crucial to remember that Sultana begins and ends dreaming in the same chair in her bedroom, and having the two ends firmly planted in the bed-chamber of Sultana's home does not allow us to neglect or forget reality. However, through the format of a dream, Sultana, the subaltern, can find a way to dream of a better world. The format of a dream also "serve[s] as a safe form of polemics which critiques present and actual society." Yet what is significantly different about "Hossain's text is [that it is] not only a critique of society but a direction towards another one altogether." Because the story is told in a dream format, Rokeya can be a radical, advocating for women's empowerment and societal progress, through the extension of science education for women, an irreligious society, and a society ruled by women leaders.

Science

*Sultana's Dream* radically envisions the place of women scientists and educators in society.

When Sultana gets the tour of Ladyland, she meets the Queen in her Garden, where she is transported

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90 Ibid. 25.
by an air car, an aerial transport that is a cross between a helicopter and a hydrogen balloon. She is also shown Sister Sara's bathroom where water comes down through pipes from a balloon that ingeniously collects rain/cloud water. The room's roof is removable to facilitate the operation.92

The symbolism of science in *Sultana's Dream* is connected with Sultana's attempt to create her own text of liberation and possibilities, and science is the means through which this is effected.93 At a time when Bengali Muslim women were not allowed to study modern subjects like science, history, and philosophy, let alone receive education at all, in the case of many women, this radical vision of women scientists and leaders was far ahead of its time. Like Charlotte Perkins Gilman's “Herland,” published in 1915 and Virginia Woolf's “Three Guineas” published in 1938, in which women also have a direct relation to science, Rokeya's Ladyland creates a world of unexplored possibilities.

What is significant about *Sultana's Dream* is that despite its similarity to the works of Gilman and Woolf, it was published before their stories were written. Despite many assertions that ideas of modernity and progress expressed in the works of South Asian authors often derives from their exposure to Western works, such originality as *Sultana's Dream*, produced from the pen of a Bengal Muslim women author in a remote corner of the world only emphasizes what a remarkable mind she had. It also reflects on in the incredible support her husband provided in ensuring that this highly creative, yet subversive piece was published.

**Religion:**

Along with its vision of science, this utopian world is also radical in that envisions a world without religious divides. When asked about faith, Sister Sara says

Our religion is based on Love and Truth. It is our religious duty to love one another and to be absolutely truthful. Liars are requested to go into permanent exile, and there are no executions

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93 Ibid. 117.
or forced deaths. Women’s relationship with men is based on a liberal, trusting morality, “a distant cousin [being] as sacred as a brother;

This world without religion introduces a relatively more expanded sense of freedom in relations, in a context were Hossain had to be careful of the manner in which she was advocating more freedom. Though Ladyland certainly remains a virtuous place, as Sultana observes repeatedly, it is religious dictates as much as natural morality that guides this utopia. *Sultana's Dream* is radical because it leaves out the concept of conventional religion altogether.\(^9^4\)

The very nature of the guide, Sister Sara, also shows that there is no nationalism bound to particular cultures. Sister Sara is not necessarily Christian, but the sisterly form of addressing her creates an image of a women's space where each can refer to each other as a sister. Though there is no valorization of Muslim women warriors, female mystics, or queens in the state of Ladyland, as there was in many of the myths of Muslim women published at the time that this story came out, there is a semi-mystical quality about the strong, companionable relationship of women within Ladyland. Even without religion, they maintain morality through the bonds of an a-religious, a nonsectarian, sisterhood.

**Politics:**

Along with a different characterization of religion, what is significantly different in Ladyland is that the women, particularly women scientists and educators, serve as political leaders. At the time when this story was written, women's status was severely limited within the inner walls of *abarodh*, a subjugation which parallel the larger political domination of India by a British imperialist power. This dual colonization of Indian women by men, and of all Indian men and women by the British is not ignored in the construction of *Sultana's Dream*. The subalterntakes into account this dual domination, and this dual authority and subverts these authorities quite craftily. The women of Ladyland overcome

the warmongering men in their society through offering a better solution to defeat the invading men; the women also employ their intelligence against the invading men who are from the military. Through their constructive scientific research, the women of Ladyland are able to over the dual domination that existed in Ladyland.

However, the realities of the dual domination that Bengali Muslim women of the time faced were harder to overcome. 1905 was indeed a time when the partition of Bengal became a possibility, when sectarian and communal violence threatened the semblance of order that was there in Bengal. Tagore wrote “Home and the World” that mentioned the British might, and there was talk of increasing the military strength of the British to suppress the ever growing nationalistic tendencies in British India. While there were no incredible Bengali Muslim women scientists to solve the problem of the British or the problem of women's subjugation, Sultana's image, nonetheless provided an image of hope. It was a dream of final empowerment that was not only a release from the first colonization by the British, but from the equally dehumanizing colonization of men over women.

Literary Analysis:

Padmarag: The New Woman

While Ladyland was a story rich in literary devices of inversion, Padmarag is a much grittier vision of the life of a woman. Located in the metropolis of Calcutta, Tarini Bhaban, the House of Tarini, is not quite an utopia like Ladyland, but rather is a set of grim realities.

Tarini Bhavan is a shelter [ashram] for women, founded by a Brahma woman named Tarini Sen, who was widowed early in life, just like its creator, Rokeya. The Residents of Tarini Bhaban are called 'sisters,' and the Nari Klesh Nibarani Samili (Society for the Alleviation of Female Suffering) is

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96 Ibid. 116.
an important constituent of this organization. This shelter for women gathers women from various creeds and classes, and also shelter both married and unmarried women; there are examples of Brahma, Hindu, Muslim, and a British Christian women residing there.

The Bhaban also offers an integrated paradigm of action by women, with education at the center: adult women are trained in income-generating schemes, disabled and homeless individuals are given refuge, and of course, girls are given schooling. Interestingly, as a reflection of the author's nationalistic impulse, the school in Tarini Bhaban does not take funds from Indian states pledging allegiance to the British. Neither does it teach students the colonial version of Indian history that teaches them to disdain their past and culture. Written in 1926, the nationalistic agenda is apparent in this story, even though the focus is on the new construction of womanhood in the modern era, showing how the woman question was inherently tied up in the process of political representation.

To return to the story, however, at first reading, it seems that Tarini Bhaban is simply an elaborate household where women's lives revolved round numerous domestic chores. However, Tarini represents a human incarnation of a woman providing salvation to other women, whose lives have become so unbearable that death seems to be their only alternative. Tarini, which literally means boatman in Bengali, has the greater symbolism of someone who steers those in danger out of troubled waters to safety. It is a name with religious and spiritual connotations, and many Bengali songs are addressed to Dina Tarini, the Divine Being. Old women would often pray to God in the incarnation of Dina Tarini, to be steered safely to heaven. Just so, Tarini Sen, the founder of Tarini Bhaban, also serves as a 'saviour of those in distress,' by offering a shelter for the abused and needy women of Calcutta.

Tarini Sen's activities, however noble, nonetheless frowned upon by her family who ostracize

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98 Ibid. xviii.

99 Ibid. xvii.
her and vilify her for supposedly consorting with riffraff—prostitutes, lepers, and orphans with no
know antecedents. The mother in law of one of her former students alludes to her as a whore.
Although her work involves addressing the injustices of society and attempting to eradicate them, its
members, including the families of those who benefit directly from her project, do not spare her from
abuse. Dina Tarini is a social outcast, just like each of the women she shelters in her home.

The very arrival of the heroine, Padmarag (Ruby), to this shelter was, therefore, seen as the
arrival of another social outcast. However, the details of Padmarag's story were shrouded in mystery.
Even her name is amorphous: she is known Padmarag to the inmates of Tarini Bhaban, Ayesha Siddika
to the outside world, Zainab to her relatives, and all three to Latif, her admirer and husband. It is only
as the story progresses that we learn Siddika's tragic story.

Siddika, married to the brilliant barrister, Latif Almas, Siddika appears to have a happy future
with her husband. However, an avaricious and conniving uncle manages to intervene and prevent the
consummation of the marriage. Latif, falsely convinced by the uncle that Siddika and her family do not
want him, is then compelled to take a second wife—Saleha. Siddika feels rejected, but braces herself
for a life of independence by joining Tarini Bhaban. She emerges as a New Woman—educated,
capable, enlightened, chaste, and independent of spirit. However, in order to understand what a New
Woman means in this context, it is necessary to provide a brief background of the concept of the New
Woman.

**Historical Background: The New Woman**

The concept of the New Woman originally emerged in Victorian England (1837-1901) and
reached fullness in the Edwardian age (1901-1910). The New Woman meant the blend of good wife,
mother, and companion, woman who is educated and competent, though living in a sphere separate. In
the quest for modernization and the quest for identity in a new age, she plays an equal and
complementary role to her husband, who is also attempting to redefine himself in the modern age. He
becomes known as the bhadrarluk, as the new class of professional gentry which emerged after Indian men became educated in the British system and entered the Civil Service and governmental services in India.

Parallel to this creation of the bhadrarluk class, there was an emergent bhadramahila class as well. This process of creating the bhadramahila, which was synonymous with the New Woman, took place in the latter half of the 19th century amongst the Brahma elite in India as well. The New Woman, was referred to in Bengali in multiple terms: nabina, adhunika (which had a negative connotation), naba nari, and finally, the bhadramahila (literally ‘polite women’ in Bengali). The parameters of a bhadramahila's role came to be described the best through literature: the heroine in stories would be described as 'independent,' but they would certainly also be chaste, romantic, and selfless. To what extent his literature shaped the mentality of the Brahmo perceptions of bhadramahila or the subsequent bhadramahila of the Bengali Muslim culture is difficult to ascertain. However, what is clear is that just like the effect of Victorian literature, described by Martha Vicinus, a scholar of English literature, in *The Widening Sphere*, the literature of the New Woman in Bengal also

functioned as both an expression and a shaper of the culture and its conflicts. For many men and women reading...was a means of managing the emotional ambivalences they felt in regard to their changing roles. Art gave order and understanding of the conflicting demands places upon individuals (Martha Vicinus, *The Widening Sphere*, xii).

In the dual quest for modernization and the quest for identity, the ashraf in Bengal looked to the seats of sharif in the north for inspiration. Literature, such as Urdu novels had a wide readership, and Urdu authors such as Hali, Nazir Ahmed, and Rashidul Khairi preceded the authors of Muslim Bengal, such as Nojibur Rahman. Nojibur Rahman articulated the role of the Bengali Muslim New Woman through his moralistic and instructional novels, such as Anowara, and Goriber Meye, thereby using literature as

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a powerful agency of the Muslim Bengali quest for modernity, especially as it pertained to women's roles.¹⁰¹

For the New Woman in Bengali literature, “the home was to be a cherished goal—it's preservation one of her sacred duties. This duty was now no longer supposed to be an oppressive burden imposed by patriarchy, but an integral part of a partnership (matrimony) willingly gone into.”¹⁰²

In the case of Siddika in Padmarag, she represents the New Woman at the beginning of the novel when marries Latif. Since the New Woman is a composite of many women, so Siddika as the heroine had various names, such as Ayesha, Siddika, Zainab, and Padmarag.

However, because of the unfortunate circumstances described, she ends up in Tarini Bhaban, with a 'biye fail' (biye means marriage in Bengali), experiencing the pathos of a failed marriage and the failure to get a BA, a college degree. Rokeya once again uses linguistic word-play to emphasize her point that women in the new age have an extra obligation thrust upon them, i.e. to be highly educated, even as they retain their primary role as chaste wives and mothers. Since biye in Bengali means 'marriage,' and BA refers to a Bachelor of Arts degree, a 'biye fail' suggests the inability of a young woman to satisfy society's new expectation of being both an educated woman and a married woman, thus a failure and a social outcast, like many of Tarini Bhaban's residents.

Siddika, a social outcast because of her failed marriage, nonetheless meets Latif once again in Tarini Bhaban through an elaborate plot twist. Latif compares Siddika to his second wedded wife, who is described as a coarse woman, who beats the servants. In comparison, Latif perceives Siddika to be both educated and accomplished—her English poems fetch prizes, while her management of her brother's estate is highly successful. Latif is not aware that Siddika is his legitimately wedded wife, and therefore, after falling in love with this perfect embodiment of the “New Woman,” Latif proposes

¹⁰² Ibid. 139.
to Siddika. What is remarkable is that Siddika renounced Latif in the end:

Siddika: I had set my goal in life long ago...I understood God did not decree the life of a household for me.
Latif: I cannot take this as your last word. Do you have anything against me?
S: No.
L: Then will you be my wife? Guardian of my home and earth?
S: No. You must go your way and I mine.

Siddika's rejection of Latif's proposal of marriage is quite revolutionary in the context of the New Woman whose primary goal is still marriage, despite the New Woman's modern expectation to acquire education. Siddika, though she loves Latif, provides a political reason for her decision to reject Latif in the closing pages of the story: she wanted the world to know that some women at least would not allow themselves to be treated like puppets whose fates could be played with. Perhaps she did not want to enter a polygamous relationship with Latif, or perhaps she simply wanted to remain independent from the expectations of a wife. The reason is not clear, but Siddika's rejection does send a clear message: education does not necessarily need to lead to marriage, but rather an independent woman, who is able to use the struggles in her life as a way to become a stronger woman, ready to contribute to improving society. Siddika does so, by staying on at Tarini Bhaban and helping the poor, destitute women of her society.

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Summary:

Both *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag* represent Rokeya's more radical writings. Though many of her domestic pieces, such as the *Motichur Anthology*, certainly included critiques of abarodh and women's ignorance, they were certainly not as subversive in nature. While they advocated for social change through the mechanisms of

a) rationalizing scriptures

b) evoking a golden age of Islam by referring to stories of educated Muslim women and

c) creating a new woman embedded in a selective modernity

these domestic pieces, ultimately, affirmed the existing system of religion and culture, although advocating for a few major changes.

However, because of the fictional nature of the two pieces analyzed in depth, Rokeya was able to use these writings not only as a way to critique society's subjugation of women, but also to offer an alternative vision of what the new, 'modern' world could look like. Therein lies the radical nature of these two fictional works.

Both stories created women's spaces: Ladyland in *Sultana's Dream* and Tarini Bhaban in *Padmarag*, which allowed women of all creeds, colors, and socioeconomic classes to find a system of support and independent living that did not have to depend on their relationships to men. The universal idea of embracing diversity and extending education for all, particularly women, is remarkable, as is the emphasis on women leaders, both political, as in Ladyland and social, as in Tarini Bhaban.

The universality of the stories also reflects on Rokeya's intersectional identities as well. As an Indian, Bengali, and South Asian woman, Rokeya embraced her overlapping identities. Though she was born in present-day Bangladesh, undertook her mature educational activism in present-day India, and is recognized today as an iconic figure in all of South Asia, at the time, Rokeya had to work hard in order to remain a practicing Muslim woman in purdah, even as she espoused liberal humanist ideas about education, interfaith understanding, and social services to the poor. Because of her ability to
balance her various commitments, while maintaining her deep belief in women's ability to learn and transform society, Rokeya was not just a feminist, as the term has been later applied to her, but a deeply patriotic women. Always aware of her Bengaliness, her Muslimness, and her femaleness, Rokeya did not compromise on who she was in order to achieve the milestones that she did during her lifetime. Neither did she necessarily ascribe to any labels, such as nationalist or feminist, though she was both in her actions. For Begum Rokeya, action spoke louder than words, and it is through both her incisively witty, nuanced, and highly intellectual writings as well as her social contributions that we continue to remember her as Begum Rokeya, the Mother of the Bengal Muslim Awakening.
Chapter 4: Proteges of Rokeya

Rokeya's death in 1932 was mourned by many, but her vision for a better world for women continued through the work of her proteges, such as Sufia Kamal, poet and social worker, and Shamsunnahar Mahmud, her student and biographer.

Sufia Kamal (1911-1999): Poet and Social Worker

Sufia Kamal was one of the last women who had direct interaction with Rokeya, who once told her: 'You write pretty poems, but even poets need to work for society.' This observation by Rokeya became the creed by which Sufia Kamal lived her life. Now affectionately known as 'Khalamma' (Aunty) in Bangladesh, Sufia Kamal published 15 books and acted as President of 16 Associations. She also received almost 35 award from all over the world for her work in literature, the Bengali Muslim women's movement, and humanist movements in the later half of the 20th century.

While Sufia Kamal's contributions are well-noted, it is her beginnings as a writer that presents a more arresting story and presents a more realistic understanding of the struggles that Bengali Muslim women had to undergo in order to become writers in their age. As Christiane Rochefort notes in her essay “Privilege of Consciousness,” she considers women's literature “as a specific category, not because of biology, but because it is, in a sense, the literature of the colonized.” In an age when being a Bengali woman writer was shameful, as Sufia recollects in a later interview, it took a great deal of courage for Sufia to write her stories and poems.

Though born in an educated family, in which her uncles were well-known scholars, it was not unusual that the family was not particularly interested in women's education. Nonetheless, Sufia learnt Bengali from her mother, who had learned it from her father, watched performances like jatra and milad mehfil, which occasionally took place in her house, and read Bengali books in secret. In her

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uncle's house, which had the second largest private library in the region, she first discovered the writings of the famous Bengal author, Tagore.

Sufia's thirst for education was not unnoticed by her family, and failing to resist her urge for education, Sufia's guardians sent her to school dressed as a boy. However, Sufia was married soon after the age of twelve and went to live with her husband's family in Barisal. She continued to read and write in secret, and after her first written piece, 'Sainik Badhu' (Wife of a Soldier), appeared in Tarun (Youth), a weekly magazine in the area, everyone in household was angry. At the time, it was a shame for a girl from a respected purdahnashin (followers of purdah) family to write and publish:

Actually we were ashamed of the fact that we wrote. Bengali Muslim women writing in Bengali was considered to be a shameful act. Even if they wrote, they did not publish their work. It is not known how many women writers have disappeared into oblivion. If a woman was writing in our times, it would be a talking point—why is she writing in Bengali?

The shame and outrage associated with writing was because women were supposed to be protected and hidden away from society; however, the very act of publishing exposed this respectable woman to society's comments. Though the intention to protect women may not have been malicious in intent, in practice, this overprotectiveness prevented women from being educated.

However, in Sufia's case, a few judges and magistrates of Barisal said to her uncle, in response to her first published work: 'We've heard a girl from your family is writing plays. This is a matter of great pride for us. Why do you discourage her?' These were some of the first male supporters of Sufia's writing in society, and throughout her life, Sufia expresses a great deal of gratitude for the many men who supported her writing career, despite society's critiques of them.

Even Sufia's husband came to support her writing. When Naseeruddin Shah, the Editor of


107 Ibid. 344.
Saugat, published her poem, Sufia's husband asked her to write more, and told her to do whatever the Editor would say. Sufia, distressed at created turmoil within her husband's joint family by having her poem published, traveled to the Saogat office in Calcutta to meet the Editor. Coming in with a burqa, she stated to Naseeruddin Shah: “I am Sufia, and you have created a havoc in my home by publishing my poem!” Despite her protests, however, Naseeruddin Shah continued to encourage Sufia's writing, by creating a niche for her poems to be published in Saogat, while other famous writers of the time, such as Kazi Nazrul Islam and Rabindranath Tagore, also offered praises and encouragement for her writing as she evolved into a mature author.

Sufia's writing, however, changed from a purely literary endeavor to a means for her to earn a livelihood once her first husband, N. Hossain, died in 1933. Instead of staying at her uncle's house in Shyestabad, in the period 1933-1939, Sufia made the brave decision to choose the uncertainties of a life in Calcutta. Naseeruddin Shah helped the widowed Sufia find a teaching job at Corporation School in Calcutta for a salary of Rs.50 a month. Supplemented by having her writing published in journals, Sufia, even without any formal education, was able to support her mother and young daughter for nine years solely on her income.

However, such hard work took a toll—Sufia became sick, and eventually, her friends arranged her marriage to Kamaluddin Khan, after which she became known as Sufia Kamal. Even with many familial obligations, and having to raise four more children, however, Sufia did not give up her writing career.

Social Service:

Along with continuing her writing, Sufia also followed Rokeya's call to help society by joining Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam, the organization established by Rokeya in 1916, to conduct social service work within the slums of Calcutta. For four years, Sufia worked under Rokeya's supervision.

108 Ibid. 340.
with the many young Hindu and Muslim women who joined Anjuman. Sufia recollects how:

We, the Muslim women, visited the slums wearing a burqa. Begum Rokeya would say organizing meetings among a few women was not enough, women needed to work in the slums. I, too, had worked in the slums of Calcutta. [Begum Rokeya] led us towards the path. That was the first time I witnessed the sufferings of people living in a slum. They lived in such terrible conditions! Often men did not allow us to enter the slums. They wanted to turn us out. There were many Urdu-speaking people in Calcutta's slums. They would say, 'They are Hindus, they are Bengalis.' It was disgusting. We tried educating the slum women. We taught them certain vocational skills like stitching, pottery, and handicrafts. I was with Anjuman-e-Khwatin-e-Islam for a long time. After Partition, I came to Dhaka.”}

Sufia really took Begum Rokeya's vision for social service and education for women to heart. Although leaving purdah to do social service work was considered demeaning to the family honor, Sufia made an active decision to pursue a path of service, undeterred by disparaging comments from her greater family. As a consequence, Sufia and her mother became completely disassociated from their family in 1933, who “out of utter shame and disgust, did not want to see our faces ever again” (346). Despite such ostracism, however, Sufia understood that middle-class women, such as herself, had to take an active part in changing the abject conditions of poor men and women in society, regardless of their creed or their socioeconomic status in life. By teaching these slum women useful vocational skills, such as stitching, pottery, and handicrafts, Sufia and her peers were effectively using education as a way to empower poor women and their families.

What is most striking about Sufia's involvement with Anjuman is how she worked alongside Hindu and Muslim women to begin this process of educating other women. These women overcome many class and religious boundaries in a greater cause for service. What is ironic is that the very slum dwellers whom these Anjuman women served were well-aware of the communal tensions. As Rokeya remembers, the Urdu-speaking slum dwellers would disparage the Anjuman women for serving Hindu Bengalis, a sentiment which Sufia found abhorrent. For her, service to the needy was without class and religion, and in this, she was truly Rokeya's disciple.

109 Ibid. 345-346.
Though Sufia was a religious women, she did not support the communal divide that men created in the name of religion. “It hardly mattered whether we use burqa or veil or we wear saree or pajama. Our main intention should be to notice that our Muslim sisters who are tortured within the family for being women could gradually overcome these hurdles of life.” Instead of focusing on religious differences, it was more important to improve the lives of women in all of society by granting them access to education and opportunity.

Though Sufia wore burqa, she eventually discarded the heavy burqa, at the suggestion of Naseeruddin Shah and her husband. In response, Sufia was accused by ultra-conservative critics of asking Muslims girls to leave purdah; Sufia sharply denied this false criticism and furthermore negated this attack on her by pointing out that her accusers were themselves wearing burqa worth 300 rupees over sarees worth 1000 rupees. Instead of using their wealth to benefit society, these ultra-conservatives instead criticized others who attempt to help society, a hypocrisy that Sufia was not afraid to expose.

Sufia's courage in standing up to religious extremism was also apparent much earlier in her career when she wrote a letter in response to an attack on Kazi Nazrul Islam on the 4th of July, 1927. A brilliant young Muslim writer, Nazrul, was unorthodox in that he advocated Hindu-Muslim harmony and taught music to Hindu households. On his way back from one such lesson, Nazrul was attacked by boys in the village, an attack which prompted Sufia to write a letter to Naseeruddin Shah, asking for his help defending Kazi Nazrul Islam. She exhorted Naseeruddin Shah by saying that:

the prestige of the entire Muslim society, particularly its intellectuals like you, is at stake.

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111 Ibid 421.
...there are very few, in fact, who care enough for others to come forward to work for society or in national interest. Otherwise, how can we possibly explain the utter neglect of Kazi, the single bright light in the Muslim literary world?...If you fail [to defend Kazi], it will be a shame for Kazi himself, and for each and every one of us, Muslim writers and thinkers...Some time in the future, a second Rabindranath might come along, but there will never be another Kazi Nazrul Islam.  

Such a defense of a brilliant young Muslim writer against the attacks of a conservative society, which was attempting to silence him, spoke of Sufia's own courage. By invoking the solidarity that Muslim writers and intellectuals should uphold, Sufia emphasized the importance of writer's networks and highlighted her firmly held belief that men and women could be part of this literary society. Without the equal participation of Muslim men and women in furthering Bengali Muslim thought and creativity, there would be very little progress. Another Brahmo intellectual like Rabindranath Tagore may easily arise, supported by his community, but if the Bengali Muslim literary community failed to support Nazrul, they would be the worse off for it in the future.

Politics:

Sufia was a woman who had a vision to improve the society in which she lived in, and she was not afraid to speak out against extremist religion, or in support of the Bengali nationalist movement. In 1952, when the Pakistani government opened fire on Bengali students, Sufia could not condone the government's actions. Nor could she accept Urdu as the national language. She published many poems in support of the 1952 Language movement, which were later published in an anthology, Ekusher Sankalan: Granthapanji (The Collection of 21: A Bibliography).

In later years, during the 1971 War of Independence for Bangladesh, Sufia once again proved her courage by providing active help and refuge to the freedom fighters. Though she could have been easily murdered by the Pakistani military, her national popularity prevented such an action. Along with

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helping the Freedom Fighters, Sufia also capitalized on her reputation by becoming one of the strongest voices against atrocities committed against women in Bangladesh. She did not forget her original inspiration, that of Begum Rokeya, who taught her to stand up for the rights of the downtrodden.

For ages women have been made into mere puppets and thrust to the background. They have silently endured countless atrocities. Writing a few pages on the subject is not the way to avenge these wrongs. The real answer lies in bringing about a revolution. The obvious questions that arise are who is going to rebel and against whom? I would answer: It is women who will do so, against men...the few women who emerged out of the darkness of our Muslim society, in search of light, are being led by Mrs. R. S. Hossain (Begum Rokeya). She has had to endure countless hardships for the courage she has shown. I have faith, however, that one day in the future society will recognize the value of her efforts, and scores of people will follow in her footsteps.113

Though Sufia recognized that writing alone could not achieve change without being paired with action, her writings, nonetheless, leave a legacy that is part of the revolution that Begum Rokeya called for. In addition to writing in Saogat, Sufia also later became editor of Begum magazine, the special women's edition of Saogat that began in the 1940s and continued to write poems and stories, such as “the Winner.”114 In the following section, analysis of “The Winner” provides insight into how Sufia Kamal fought for the rights of women in society through her literary work.

Literary Analysis:

From the outset, this short story seems like a conventional love story. However, through the story of Masuma and Kasem, Sufia questions the double standards that apply to men and women in society and criticizes the harm that materialism can produce.

The story begins with Kasem, an older gentleman, being carried home by Azmat Ali, an old friend of Kasem who finds him in a state of ill health and brings him home, so that he can recover. Arriving in a state of delirium, Kasem catches sight of Masuma, a family friend of Azmat Ali’s. He

114 Ibid. 346.
becomes startled at her image and asks Kasem who the woman is. Azmat Ali replies it's his sister, Masuma, a name which prompts Kasem to recount the story of his unrequited love for a young woman named Masuma.

When Kasem was a young man, he fell in love with a distant relative called Masuma; however, because her family was not as well to do as his family, his father did not allow his marriage to Masuma. Kasem soon forgets his young love for Masuma and marries a young, rich wife, Asema, while Masuma, in her turns, also gets married happily to Ali, a young but poor schoolmaster.

Kasem, though blessed with great fortune and a beautiful wife, does not realize that he is unhappy until he meets Masuma and Ali once again. Though not as well off as he and Asema, Masuma and Ali share a happy life, which Kasem envies. He realizes that though “Asema was a magnificently made cut-glass ornament [who] had polish and an acquired glitter, but she couldn't begin to compete with Masuma's natural radiance.” Kasem realizes that despite Masuma's relative poverty, her happy marriage was a lot more valuable than his rich, but unhappy marriage.

Soon after Kasem's realization, he learns that Ali dies. Infatuated by his love for Masuma, Kasem resolves to leave his wife, Asema, and marry the widowed Masuma. However, instead of seeing a grieving widow, Kasem finds Masuma

a woman almost removed from the mundane world by the radiance of her strength and dignity...Ali was dead, but his presence in the house was palpable...I did not stop seeing Masuma...[however], she seemed to have detached herself completely from me and withdrawn into a private world, the key to which was consistently denied to me. I tried stubbornly to help her with money, so that she became dependent on me in some concrete way, but Masuma refused politely each time.”

Masuma, though having lost her beloved husband, remains independent and refuses to become dependent on a man who may begin to ask favors of her. Instead, she gets a job teaching embroidery, which angers Kasem because a job means Masuma's economic independence from him. In his

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115 Ibid. 356.
116 Ibid. 319-320.
frustrations, Kasem reveals his love for Masuma, to which she replies: “If you loved me so much, why didn't you marry me?...if you wish to get married again, whom do you blame it on, but your wives? Never ever do you [men] look at your own weaknesses.”  

In her gentle but direct manner, Masuma rejects Kasem's advances; Kasem, in his anger and jealousy of her close relationship with her brother-in-law, accuses her of philandering with him. Though completely unfounded, this rumor circulates around the city, ruining Masuma's reputation. Perhaps, because of her insecurity living in the city as a single woman, she leaves Calcutta to go back to her village. 

Masuma's situation reveals the double standards that society has for men and women. Even though Kasem is the married man who is making advances on a widowed woman, it is his constant visits and the false rumor about Masuma's reputation that indicts her. In addition to the fact that Kasem is never blamed for his advances, when he contemplates leaving his wife, he doesn't blame himself, but only his wife for his unhappiness, a hypocritical action that Masuma points out. She also asks him why he didn't marry her, if he did love her, to which he responds that he couldn't marry her because of her family's economic status; this response further reveals Kasem's unfounded value of money over substance. 

The story, however, though critical of Kasem's actions, does not leave him without redemption. Kasem, in remorse for his actions, wanders for years, attempting to find Masuma and ask for her forgiveness. Having arrived at Asmat Ali's house and made his confessions, he realizes that the Masuma that he meets at Asmat Ali's house is indeed the same Masuma of his past. He asks for her forgiveness, which Masuma gives, saying: “I've left all that behind me, and I wish you would forget everything too. Asmat Bhai has taught me that everyone has something to contribute to the world. Life is too precious for a single person to ruin it.”

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117 Ibid. 322.
118 Ibid. 328.
Masuma has indeed transformed herself. Kind, educated, and chaste, Masuma leaves behind the ignorance, double standards, and mistreatment of women in society. Even when offered the chance of a second marriage, she refuses, remaining loyal to the memory of her husband and refusing to engage in a polygamous marriage with Kasem. Instead, Masuma, helps the needy and poor of her society, emerging into a world as an independent, educated woman who works hard for the betterment of her society. This is the New Woman of Literature that Sufia Kamal envisioned, and the Woman that she herself embodied in all aspects of her life, creating a world, both in reality and in literature, that her mentor, Begum Rokeya, would be proud of.

Shamsunnahar Mahmud (1908-1964): Biographer

Education and Religion:

Shamsunnahar Mahmud was another Bengali Muslim woman writer, who embodied the woman that Rokeya envisioned when she spoke of educated women in society. Rokeya wanted girls to be educated, not just by attaining B.A. and M.A. degrees, but by also becoming good daughters, wives, and mothers for their society. Shamsunnahar Mahmud represented such a model—amidst great difficulties, Nahar received her B.A. From Bethune College in 1932 and completed her M.A. from Calcutta University in 1942, even while raising a family, serving as a lecturer of Bengali at Bethune College, and writing the biography of Begum Rokeya.

Born in 1908 in Noakhali District to an educated family, in which her grandfather Maulavi Fazlul Karim was the first Muslim graduate from Noakhali, Shamsunnahar studied up to Grade 6. Since her father had died, she lived in her maternal grandfather, Khan Bahadur Abdul Aziz's, house. Though Khan Bahadur was a great proponent of women's education, having been one of the founders of the Muslim Suhrid Sammelani (Society for Improvement of Women), along with her paternal

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grandfather, Fazlul Karim, their views on women's education did not mean that they rejected purdah. Shamsunnahar, therefore, attended Khastogir Girls' High School of Chittagong only until Grade 6 when customs of purdah dictated that she stop attending public school. Nahar remembers how:

At the tender age of nine, I had to leave school. From then onwards, I spent my educational life at home. Years passed by, my classmates, those who were Hindus, Brahma, and Christian all moved about freely. Some of them went to Calcutta after their matriculation and were admitted to Bethune College and the Diocesan College. They wrote to me frequently describing the new world in front of them. I felt that we the Muslims were residents of a dark world whereas they were of the colourful world...

Shamsunnahar's passion for education helped her overcome the difficulties of purdah, and she convinced her family to allow her to continue her education, like her Hindu, Brahma, and Christian peers. However, remaining observant of her faith, Shamsunnahar studied at home with a curtain separating her from her elderly Hindu tutor. She and her tutor sat on either side of the curtain, and Nahar listened to what the tutor read out loud. The teacher set her tasks, and having finished her work, she would pass it across the screen to her tutor. In such a manner, Shamsunnahar placed in the first division in all four subjects—English, Math, History, and Science in the 1926 Matriculation Exams, a great achievement for a woman who managed to maintain her religious obligations, even while furthering her education.

In order that Shamsunnahar could continue her education, her family married her to the liberal Dr. Waheeddin Ahmed, who supported her in her quest for further education. Shamshunnahar passed her B.A. in 1932 from Bethune College, at which time, Begum Rokeya hosted a graduation party for her on behalf of Anjumane Khawatine Islam. Begum Rokeya honored Shamsunnahar by emphasizing that:

1985.


Nahar stands apart from the rest of the graduates—she had to achieve all these besides being involved as a wife paying attention to her husband, her children, and to the total family household, which are not mean achievements. I hope the girls in our society will follow Nahar's footsteps.\footnote{Alam, Tahmina. “Bengali Muslim Women in Post-Rokeya Period: Samsun Nahar Mahmud and Fazilatunnessa” in Women in Changing Society edited by Sahai, Srinath. Mithai Publications: 1985. 120.}

Begum Rokeya recognized that education does not have to be mutually exclusive to a family life. Though she ultimately believed that education was for the sake of education only, and not for the ultimate purpose of marriage, she nonetheless, encouraged girls to pursue both education and marriage. Shamsunnahar represented such an ideal—not only did she maintain a family life, Shamsunnahar started her career as lecturer in Bengali in Lady Brabourne College, Calcutta, in 1939 and completed her M.A. from Calcutta University in 1942.

Politics:

Additionally, Shamsunnahar also became involved with Anjuman-e-Kawatin-E-Islam, and joined \textit{Nikhil Bharat Mahila Sammelan} (the All India Women's Association). On behalf of this organization, Shamsunnahar began agitating for women's legislative representation after 1935, when the British government passed the Government of India Act, which enfranchised women. Shamsunnahar wrote on ‘Women’s Political Rights’ (\textit{Mahila Saogat}, 1935) after literate women or wives of propertied men had obtained voting rights with the passing of the Government of India Act of 1935. Her contention was that in the matter of seat allocation for women, the Bengal Council had been given short shrift and she urged for more representation of women from Bengal.\footnote{Gupta, Sarmistha Dutta. "Saogat and the Reformed Bengali Muslim Woman." \textit{Indian Journal of Gender Studies} . 16. (2009): 329-358. Web. 335.} As a result of her representation before the Indian Delimitation Committee in Calcutta, along with other strong women leaders, a few seats were reserved for women in the Legislative Assembly.
Shamsunnahar also represented Muslim women from Bengal in the International Women Conference held in Calcutta in 1936 under the auspices of International Council of Women. Delegates from Britain, Belgium, Denmark, Greece, China, and many other countries assembled to discuss the major issues affecting women of their day, and Shamsunnahar was an articulate speaker for the plight, yet the slow progress that Bengali Muslim women were making in terms of educational achievement.

On a more local level, Shamsunnahar was associated with Begum, the art and literary magazine that Sufia ran, and served as President of Begum Club, the first cultural oriented institution, meant for women in East Pakistan.124

Shamsunnahar's social involvement in women's clubs emphasized how women's spaces were a powerful tool through which social and legislative change could occur. Though maintaining the tradition role of wife, mother, and a religious women, Shamsunnahar went far beyond, by serving as a teacher, writer, and social activist, who tirelessly worked for greater education and opportunities for women.

Literary Analysis:

In order to better understand how it is that Shamsunnahar promoted her ideas, it is necessary to analyze her writings.

Her first published work was her book Punyomoyi (Virtuous Lady), which was published in 1925, when Shamsunnahar was only seventeen years old. Punyomoyi offered a portrait of seven different Muslim women characters, one of whom was Rabeya, the female ascetic, who as a slave girl, showed her heroism by sacrificing her leg in front of some guests of her master who were anxious to know the structure of skeletons. Though a somewhat gruesome story, the sacrifice of Rabeya's leg is

indicative of the way in which virtuous women were willing to sacrifice time and effort for the sake of knowledge. Rabeya was also an example of a religious figure who remained unmarried her whole life, devoting herself to spiritual prayer. Such a positive portrayal of an unmarried, yet educated, religious women disrupted the idea that women were only successful if they married. The life of religious devotion was an alternative path that this story revealed, though to what extent, girls were actually expected to be ascetics, was uncertain.

Another character whom Nahar highlighted in her book was the Prophet's beloved wife, Ayesha. Ayesha was not just a devoted wife, but also a scholar and Mother of the Believers. Ayesha, though a deeply pious woman, did not languish under strict purdah, but supported her husband, even by following him to battle. Nahar represented Ayesha as the symbol of a courageous women and as a co-partners of her husband on a footing of equality.125

It is interesting that though Shamsunnahar maintained purdah during the period in which she wrote this book, in her short preface to Punnyomoyi, entitled 'Atma Katha,' (The Talk of the Soul), Shamsunnahar called for higher education for Bengali Muslim women and the abolition of the burqah. This call for abolition seems contradictory with the content of the book, which only affirmed the validity of Islam's treatment of women. However, in her subtle way, Shamsunnahar interpreted the lives of each Muslim woman to be examples not of submission to the man-made custom of purdah, but to the pursuit of education and piety through Islam. Though she was not against Islam, she was against the unnecessary struggles that the burqah caused for women in the path of education, and thus she called for its abolition. It was not until 1932, when the second edition of the book was published, that Shamsunnahar referred to the gradual development of female education in the Muslim Bengali community that she had advocated for in the preface of the first edition, showing the progress that efforts of women such as Begum Rokeya had created in the interval of 8 years.

Shamsunnahar's other pieces as well, continued to advocate for women's education. In her essay, 'Nari Jagaran' (Women's Awakening), Shamsunnahar deplores the seclusion and illiteracy of Bengali Muslims, which made them ignorant in relation to human civilization.126 'While the husband calculates the distance of the sun and the stars from the earth, the wife calculates the length and breadth of the pillow cover,' she notes ironically, pointing out how depriving women of education made them unfit companions for their educated husband.127 In “Shishur Siksha” (Education of Children), Shamsunnahar turns to the topic of the necessity of education for a mother. She compares a child to a blooming bud and considers it a crime to obstruct a child who is trying to develop her humanity from receiving an education. Couching her argument in maternalistic feminism, she urges mothers to educate themselves so they could be better teachers to their children. In order to assist these mothers, she offered a compilation of biographical sketches of Pathan and Mughal women, which could be used to instruct young Muslim children.128

Though not a radical writer, Shamsunnahar's effective use of characters and symbols from Islamic history, allowed her to make arguments in favor of women's education, while reaffirming the value of Islam in the lives of Bengali Muslim women. By striking the perfect balance between a revolutionary and traditionalist, Shamsunnahar's writings, exhorting women to be better wives and mothers, were quite effective in urging society to educate their daughters. Her extremely popular biography of Begum Rokeya's life, serialized in 1937 as “Rokeya Jibani” (Life of Rokeya) in her magazine, Bulbul, also raised greater awareness about education and the incredible legacy that Begum Rokeya had left for aspiring Bengali Muslim girls.

Men Helping Create a Women's Space

In addition to all her accomplishments, Shamsunnahar was also co-editor of the magazine,
*Bulbul*, with her older brother, Habibullah. It was one of the few magazines, run by brother and sister, that was such a successful endeavor, testifying to the support men, such as Habibullah, provided to women writers and editors of the time, in order that they could succeed. Just like Sufia, Shamsunnahar was grateful to all those in her life, especially her family, who supported her literary and professional endeavors.

Having been “touched deeply by the lines of her [Begum Rokeya's] immaculate expressions, which spoke about life's journey towards a new horizon,” Shamsunnahar traveled towards this new horizon, charting a path for many young Bengali Muslim women to follow.

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Chapter 5: ‘Liberated’ Women

Fazilatunnessa, M.A. (1905-1975)

Begum Rokeya, Sufia Kamal, and Shamsunnahar Mahmud were all Bengali Muslim writers, who understood that change could happen only from within society. Though they criticized extreme religious injunctions of abarodh [seclusion] that prevented women from pursuing their education, these women, nonetheless, in practice, these women writers lived within the religious dictates of their society. Fazilatunnessa, however, was an example of an independent-minded women, who expressly did not follow religious dictates of society to pursue her education and to live her life. Though she was criticized for her unorthodox lifestyle, she still remained an example of how far women could pursue her education—she received her postgraduate degree from London in Mathematics in 1937 and became a teacher of Math in Bethune College, Calcutta.

Born in a small town in Tangail, Fazilatunnessa's father, Abdul Wajid Khan held minor job on a zamindar's estate. Though a man of modest means, Abdul Wajid Khan recognized his daughter's intelligence and took her to Dhaka for her education. At a time when a Bengali Muslim women's education was still a novel idea, the farsighted of Fazilatunnessa's father is quite a testament to the liberal values that prompted parents and male guardians to provide education for their daughters and female relatives.

Fazilatunnessa finished her Matriculation exams from Eden School, in 1921, and she passed her Intermediate Exam with distinction from Bethune College under the auspices of Calcutta University. She pursued her education under great difficulties. Because she went to class in a sari, and not in burqah, she was stoned on her way to college. Despite such humiliating conditions, her drive for education gave Fazilatunnessa the determination to continue. When she finished her intermediate education, she wrote to Naseeruddin Shah, Editor of Saugot, who was known as a liberal man in support of women's education:

You must have heard the extent of torture I had to withstand during the course of my mission to
complete my post graduation. Now I wish to go abroad for higher education. But I have no
capital other than my gritty determination. The Dhaka University has declined to send me
abroad as I am a Muslim woman. They fear that Muslim society will react to this, with
violence, as it is against religion.130

With not enough economic means to support herself abroad, Fazilatunnessa had to depend on
outside sources to support her further education. However, Dhaka University did not want to be
criticized by the conservative elements of society for encouraging a woman to break purdah and study
abroad. Many conservatives felt that sending women to study abroad was against Islam; however, they
did not remember the Quranic injunctions which commands believing men and women to go as far as
China for the sake of education. Clearly, it was not Islam itself that prevented women from pursuing
higher education; it was the incorrect interpretation of Islam that produced such a violent reaction to the
idea of Fazilatunnessa studying abroad.

Not knowing where else to turn, Fazilatunnessa reached out to Naseeruddin Shah to plead for
his help. Naseeruddin, however, faced great pressure for his efforts to send Fazilatunnessa abroad.
Nurjahan Begum, Naseeruddin Shah's daughter, reflects on the incredible courage her father displayed:

How did he manage to send Fazilatunnessa abroad? She was the first Bengali Muslim girl to do
so. He thought that even if one Muslim girl went abroad for higher studies, it would widen the
way for Muslim women's education in general. As a result of facilitating Fazilatunnessa's
studies, Father was harassed tremendously, and there was a possibility that he might get killed.
But he did his job, unflinchingly."131

Once again, Fazilatunnessa's success as the first Bengali Muslim women who earned a postgraduate
degree in 1937, was only possible because of enlightened men, such as Naseeruddin Shah, who faced
great personal risk in order to widen the path for women's education. He realized that once the taboo
was broken, more women would be able to pursue higher education; because of his farsightedness and

130 Alam, Tahmina. “Bengali Muslim Women in Post-Rokeya Period: Samsun Nahar Mahmud and
Fazilatunnessa” in Women in Changing Society edited by Sahai, Srinath. Mithai Publications:
1985. 95.
131 Shaheen Akhtar and Moushumi Bhowmik (eds.) Women in concert: An anthology of Bengali Muslim
Fazilatunnessa’s determination, Bengali Muslim society slowly began to be more receptive for women’s education.

For Fazilatunnessa herself, pursuing a higher degree in Mathematics, was an incredible feat. While abroad, she also broke precedent by choosing her own husband, Sham-us-Zoha, the son of the Minister of Education, who had gone to England to study law. Returning to Calcutta at the conclusion of her degree, Fazilatunnessa joined Bethune College, Calcutta, as a teacher of math. Soon afterwards, she was chosen as the vice-principal of the School, a position which she served in until after Partition, at which time she moved to Dhaka and became the principal of Eden Women’s College.

Fazilatunnessa did not fit the stereotype of teachers and educationists of her time. She wore sleeveless blouses, drank and smoked in public, and projected a very westernized image. Though she highly criticized for her unorthodox choices and faced a great deal of social alienation, nonetheless, she was an excellent teacher and administrator. She introduced science and opened the Humanities department at the graduate level at Eden College and left some lasting changes in the educational curriculum that Bengali Muslim women could pursue.

Literary Analysis:

Though Fazilatunnessa’s career as a teacher and administrator was more prominent than her legacy as a writer, nonetheless her two essays that were published in Saogat in 1924 and 1926, provide an incisive analysis of Bengali Muslim society.

In her essay, “The Need for Education Among Muslim Women,” Fazilatunnessa like her peers before her, wrote about the importance of educating women. She argues that: “By education, I do not refer only to the degrees one earns from colleges and universities. We need education that removes the prejudices from men’s minds and widens them.”

Though herself an educated women with prestigious degrees, Fazilatunnessa is not arrogant of

132 Ibid. 215.
her educational attainments. Rather, she sees education as a path towards a more unselfish and more moral society. She argues that the influence of educated mothers takes society forward on the path of progress, and it is because of the ignorance that Muslim Bengali women are subjected to that their society does not progress.133

Religion:

Though Fazilatunnessa was not a religious woman, she did not reject the importance of religion in society. She argues that “religious texts and words of wisdom help enhance our sense of intellectual and moral judgment. [However,] if our intellect and conscience are warped or dimmed by religious texts, they become worthless.”134 Even though Fazilatunnessa is not against the morality that religious belief generates, she does not condone the blind obedience to religion that many individuals practice that leads to the detriment of society, particularly as it pertains to women's education.

Fazilatunnessa, though respectful of religion, does not hesitate in pointing out the inconsistencies between Islamic ideals and Islamic practice:

Islam does not direct women to stay cocooned. It rather directs women to acquire knowledge. The system of purdah under false pretension of religion is the best of the worst weapons to kill women. It is a strong deterrent against women enlightenment and employment. Such social blockades and lack of education are pushing the women to the doorway of death.135

Fazilatunnessa was well-aware of the fact that Islam does not prevent the pursuit of knowledge for men and women; rather, it is the use of Islam as a tool to subjugate women that prevents women from pursuing enlightenment and employment. It is only through the false pretense of complete seclusion that women's sexuality and freedom is controlled. In reality, “Muslim religious texts do not sanction

133 Ibid. 209.
134 Ibid. 219.
men keeping women in a cage; rather women are promised their lawful rights...I am not against the study of Arabic. But I feel that if any language, including that in which holy texts are written, is read without comprehension, it is pointless.”

Though Fazilatunnessa is not against Islam, she is firmly opposed to following religion blindly. She makes a nuanced argument that distinguishes between religious ideals from incorrect religious practice and argues that religion can be a very beneficial element in society if it inculcates openmindedness and generosity. In the midst of communal violence, she believes that religion can have the impact of reducing communal violence and tension, but only if it is practiced correctly within a liberal mindset. She quotes Maulvi Mujibar Rahman who says: “you will not bear ill-will towards the members of other communities...that would be un-Islamic. That you have no untouchability amongst you, that your very religion teaches you universal brotherhood, goes to show that it is not at all the desire of Allah that human beings should entertain hatred towards another.”

What is powerful about Fazilatunnessa's arguments is that instead of simply expounding her personal views, she uses religious texts as a way to argue for a more liberal society that accords equal rights to all men and women.

Politics:

While critical of the religious extremism within her society, Fazilatunnessa, however, was a firm nationalist, who affirmed her Bengali identity through writing. She makes a strong argument that Muslim children “must clearly understand that their motherland is not Arabia, Persia, Turkey, or Egypt...they are Indians. Nationalism is not founded upon a common religion, but open [sharing] a

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137 Ibid. 217.
common homeland...religion is never of greater importance than nationality."138 Amidst ideas of Pan-Islamism that were prevalent in the 1920s, Fazilatunnessa counters this trend by affirming a cultural nationality over a religion transnational identity. Her decidedly nationalistic argument was part of the syncretist vs. separatist argument that was first being articulated in the political discourse of the time. While separatists believed that Islam could be the unifying factor that could justify the creation of a separate entity that would later become Pakistan, syncretists, such as Fazilatunnessa affirmed the idea of a united Indian identity that could overcome religious differences. This argument between the syncretists and separatists would continue, and Fazilatunnessa's writings on nationalism, as well as freedom and society were precursors of ideas that would come into the foreground in the later decades of the 20th century.

On Freedom and Society:

Along with Fazilatunnessa's views on education, religion, and politics, it is necessary to analyze her ideas about freedom and society because they were so relevant to the way that Fazilatunnessa lived her own life. For her, “the primary need [for society] is education because true education inflames the desire for social freedom by creating freedom of thought."139

Education's end goal was not to prepare women for marriage or even to create pious individuals, but to allow men and women to have freedom to think new thoughts and articulate great ideas. Perhaps because of her education in England, Fazilatunnessa was influenced to a greater extent by the ideas of the foremost intellectuals of the world like Romain Rolland and Bertrand Russell [who] propagate the truth that what a human being most desires is personal freedom. So far, society has sacrificed the individual at the altar of the group, but that age is over. The mantra of the new age is, 'it is wrong to sacrifice the individual for the good of society.' Societies that gave individuals the greatest opportunities to blossom have progressed the most. In most societies today, this individualism is apparent."140

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138 Ibid. 209.
139 Ibid. 213.
140 Ibid. 214.
Fazilatunnessa understands that differences in thought were not the sign of disunity but rather a sign of progress. Individual differences should not be condemned in society for the sake of greater conformity, but should rather be embraced in order to allow for great thoughts to be articulated. Only when diversity of thoughts is embraced is a society able to progress.

Though Fazilatunnessa's definition of progress seems to rest upon a rejection of collective social thoughts, a careful reading of her writings complicates this unilinear definition. Fazilatunnessa calls for the harmonious development of all our faculties—mental, physical, and moral, within the context of society. Although she is opposed to sacrificing the education of a woman or a child for the sake of so-called 'religion,' she does not necessarily reject community's collective actions for one another. Education should be for the sake of collective caring, she argues, even as it should promote individual freedom. For her "Freedom...implies freedom of the spirit. And freedom of the spirit implies using one's independent, individual thought to serve society and the nation and let's one intellectual and moral judgment guide one's actions."

Though her critics have painted her as a radical, Westernized woman, who broke religious traditions to pursue education, Fazilatunnessa was not a radical. Though she could have rejected Bengali Muslim society, she chose to work within the very society that condemned many of her actions in order to 'serve society and nation' through her individual freedom of spirit. A great nationalist and proponent of women's education in society, Fazilatunnessa was indeed, as Maulvi Abdul Karim described her in the 1928 reception that Saogat hosted:

the only Muslim woman in Bengal so far to cross the geographical boundary and go abroad with such huge felicitations. I'm amazed to see the exceptional bravery of this Muslim girl shining like an angel from this other darkness of ignorance and resistance."141

Despite great resistance and alienation for much of her life, Fazilatunnessa lived her life courageously, setting a precedent vis a vis education and purdah for later Bengali Muslim women to follow. Like her writings, Fazilatunnessa combined individual freedom, thought, and action with a desire to serve her society. Her life serves as an example of a moral, though not necessarily religious individual, who made the choice to sacrifice individual comfort for the sake of positive societal change.

Mahmuda Khatun Siddiqua (1906-1971), Poet:

Like Fazilatunnessa, Mahmuda Khatun Siddiqua was an unorthodox Bengali Muslim woman, who was devoted to changing her society through writing and education. Born in 1906 to an educated family, Mahmuda's father, Khan Bahadur Mohammad Solaiman Siddiq, a divisional school inspector and pioneer of the women's literary movement, made sure that his daughter was educated. As a child, she was tutored by the author of Anwar, Najibar Rahman, and also studied in a missionary school, during which time she was taught by foreign teachers.

She also started writing a young age. At age twelve, Mahmuda's first poem was published in a magazine from Calcutta called *Al-Islam*, and since then, Mahmuda contributed to magazines, regardless of whether they were Muslim or Hindu in character. She also attended literary meetings in both Pabna and Calcutta, sitting on the dais, in full public view, besides visiting male literati. At a time when the women of Pabna attended such meetings from behind a bamboo screen, Mahmuda did not follow purdah.

However, even though her family was more liberal than other families and had a tradition of educating its women, the family also followed the customs of purdah and child marriage. Once Mahmuda reached Class VIII in school, she could no longer continue going to public school, and like each of her sisters, Mahmuda was also married at a young age. Perhaps because her mother had died, her father, though a proponent of women's education, married his daughters early on to ensure that they had security later on in life.
However, Mahmuda was unwilling to accept her marriage and later walked out of her marriage. Because she was extremely independent-minded, she could not tolerate anything being said against her family. Neither was she willing to give up her right to travel on her own. For many reasons, she walked out on her husband and severed links with her parents-in-law. She was guided by her own, independent thought. 142

She was given shelter and financial support by her father, who perhaps felt remorseful that he had married his daughter so early. Her father remained supportive of Mahmuda's actions throughout her life, and Mahmuda was able to use her independence to write poetry and engage in many social welfare activities, such as running a free clinic for homeopathy treatment and getting involved in the Swadeshi movement.

Mahmuda also did not wear the burqah. As Naseeruddin Shah, Editor of Saogat, recollects “In those dark days of orthodoxy and superstition (1932), when Muslim women were strictly confined to the fortress of the purdah, I saw this young woman who wore modern clothes and had her hair cut in a bob—I was surprised.” 143 Even for Naseeruddin Shah, a liberal proponent of women's education, the degree of freedom with which Mahmuda lived her life was unusual. To be a single woman out of purdah in the early 20th century was difficult, but Mahmuda Siddiqua understood the value that women's networks could provide in encouraging other women to pursue their education, regardless of the religious or social obstacles that they had to face.

Women's Writing:

As a great proponent of women's networks, Mahmuda worked hard to provide support for women writers in order that they could exercise their independent judgment and use their literary creativity to express their views on society. She was inspired by watching the women's movement take

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143 Ibid. 322.
shape in Saogat, and she wrote for the magazine for 30 years.

Nurjahan Begum, her niece, remembers how:

Mahmuda Khatun Siddiqua was a natural poet who had a generous heart...she encouraged me tremendously. She would always tell if she liked anything I wrote. More importantly, she would bring along women writers, whenever she found one. She went knocking at different publishers' doors, urging them to publish books by a lot of women writers. Most of them still remember her.

Mahmuda understood that it was very important to support women in their literary endeavors. In a time in which women were not encouraged to pursue a literary career, a women's space was extremely necessary, and Mahmuda realized that Saogat offered such a space. She remained one of Saogat's biggest contributors and supporter throughout the thirty years that she wrote for the magazine.

Literary Analysis:

In order to understand how it is that Mahmuda was able to create such a strong literary voice of her own, it is necessary to analyze her literary works. Her poem, “The Song of Unity” is particularly enlightening, as are her essays: “Literature and Art,” “A Woman's Responsibility Towards the Village Community,” as well as “Women's Responsibility Today.”

Religion:

In her essay “A Woman's Responsibility Towards the Village Community,” Mahmuda courageously attacks the idea of extreme seclusion. She speaks of the destitute condition of women's education in villages and cites the “the unjustified and unreasonable purdah system” as one of the major reasons for this condition. Mahmuda writes that the unfortunate practice of the purdah sabotages the very foundation of women's education and also remains the main reason why men remain apathetic to the cause of women's education. Though some of her frustrations with the purdah system derived

144 Ibid. 340.
from her personal experiences, Mahmuda's observations of the way in which purdah was used as a way to justify women's ignorance also prompted such an attack on a preciousely-guarded so called 'religious' institution. Braving social critique, Mahmuda, like Fazilatunnessa, and Begum Rokeya before her, was not afraid to use her writing as a platform for social change.

In addition to critiquing the worst elements of religion, Mahmuda also emphasizes the importance over national identity over that of religion. Her poem, the “Song of Unity,” published in Gulistan in 1933, speaks of how religion is not as important as national identity. Though the Bengali is difficult to translate, the following English translation provides an approximation of the beautiful lyrics that Mahmuda writes in her poem:

Sons of the same mother, Hindu and Mussalman
Destined to be brothers we are, destined to be one.
Cradled by this dark earth,
Tied to this land by birth,
We drink in the same water, play in the same sun,
Speaking in the same tongue,
Songs of love that we have sung.
In deep forests, in our blood, streams of poetry run.
Sons of the same mother we are, Hindu and Mussalman.
From our flowers to our skies,
A spring of love will rise,
Silently, within our souls, its presence we must learn.
Hatred, anger, bitterness
Will cast us to a wilderness.
End of love in a land of death from where we can’t return,
Sons of the same mother we are, Hindu and Mussalman.¹⁴⁶

Mahmuda, through her lyrical poetry, talks about the unity that should exist between Hindus and Muslims. She speaks of how Hindus and Muslims are brothers, tied to each other by the land that they were born in and by the language that they speak. For Mahmuda, language was a much more important factor of identity that religion, which only created communal violence through 'hatred, anger, and bitterness.' This communal violence means the “ends of love in a land of death from where we can't

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. 221.
¹⁴⁶ Ibid. 225.
return,” creating a rift between the brothers of the land, Hindu and Muslim.

Though repetition, vivid imagery, and a flowing rhythm, Mahmuda's poetry makes the reader reflect on what constitutes an identity. Is it religion, or is it being born in the same land? The Bengali Muslims of the early 20th century would continue to grapple with this question of self-identity well into the 1970s, when Bangladesh would eventually carry out its War of Liberation in order to define itself as a Muslim country that is also proud of its Bengali heritage.

The Value of Art (Writing) and Morality

Mahmuda's own self-definition was certainly based more on cultural identity than religious affiliation. It was through writing that she was able to reconcile her liberal ideology with the conservative dictates of society. In her Essay on the “Literature and Art,” published in Masik Mohammadi in 1928, Mahmuda struggles to reconcile morality with the liberal ideals that 'modern' literature presents. She disapproves of the modern literature in which

we read about a woman leaving her husband to serve the country, or a mother sacrificing her morality for the sake of her child's welfare. These I cannot accept as ideals. For when women do such things, overwhelmed by idealism, such 'ideal' can only be called disruptive and negative...when writers speak about women's bodies...147

For Mahmuda, modern literature does not necessary have to create horrible, immoral characters, in order to provide a contrast to a beautiful, moral character. Neither does modern art and literature entail giving up morality. Rather, in Mahmuda's perspective, “art is what keeps our ideals intact, takes us to the road of progress and yet manages to impress with its beauty.” Mahmuda, though not religious, affirms the idea that morality is the foundational value of society and that art and literature must work to strengthen these moral codes. She is well aware of the idea that writers are responsible for the material that they publish and that their writings are not limited within themselves alone. Because of the public nature of their work, writers have a responsibility to improve society, and

147 Ibid. 235.
Mahmudawas well-aware of such a task when she confronted issues of the state of women's education and economic rights within society, and the obligation for well-off, middle-class women to work towards improving these conditions.

**Education and Social Work:**

In her essay, “A Woman's Responsibility Towards the Village Community,” published in *Gulistan* in 1933, Mahmuda calls on middle class women to be aware of their responsibility towards their poor village communities. She speaks of how a third of Hindus and Muslims live in the villages, which are filled with festering ditches and ponds that are the breeding sites for mosquitos. Disease-ridden and backwards, these villages are ignored by women because of their lack of education and awareness that such a problem exists. She calls on women to think about the welfare of the village people. Though she realizes that the actual labor of filling ponds and ditches and clearing forests must be undertaken by men, she believes that middle class women can play their part in starting Muslim primary schools and educating the girls of the villages about the problems that their communities face. By extending education to villages, the lack of progress amongst Muslim society could finally be remedied, and Mahmuda urges middle class women to take up their social responsibility to bring about this process for change.

In her essay, “Women's Responsibility Today,” published in *Moazzin* in 1931-1932, she also calls on women to achieve economic independence through education. Mahmuda understands that women in society are often controlled by men through economic means. She points out that in order

To save herself from this horrible existence, a woman must be capable of earning a living—so that she never feels completely helpless and weak, so that a man never thinks 'a woman cannot survive without me.'...the confidence that comes from one's ability to earn helps keep one's souls alive. Weakness is a sin. Women must be free of this weakness.”

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148 Ibid. 232.
149 Ibid. 238.
It makes sense that Mahmuda makes such a strong case for economic independence for women. When she left her husband, it was only because of her father's financial support that Mahmuda was able to remain independent from her husband and his family. Thus, she advocates for women to learn skills through education that will allow them to be free from their economic weakness. She does not associate women's weakness with biology, as many male authors of the time tended to do, (cite?), but rather associates women's weakness with lack of economic independence.

Though an unorthodox woman in the way that she lived her life as a single woman out of purdah, Mahmuda, like Fazilatunnessa, also did not reject the values of the society in which she lived. Rather, she chose to use literature and social advocacy as a way to reject harmful practices such as women's extreme seclusion and promote women's education and economic empowerment.
Conclusion:

The works of many of the Bengali Muslim authors brings to mind the question: what do these Bengali Muslim women show about identity, agency, and continuity? Does being Bengali mean having to reject the Muslim identity, or does agency imply active resistance?

Firdous Azim in his article on “Women, Islam, and the Nation in Bengal” writes about how “the veiled woman is read as a sign of rejection of the Bengali aspect of national identity.” However, he poses the question: can the veil be equally seen as a merging of the Muslim with the Bengali?

Azim’s article reveals how women, veiled or otherwise, continue to form part of a national cultural debate. Just like in the colonial era, when the woman question, became the standard by which society’s progress was judged, even in the 21st century, women remain sites of negotiation in modern day Bangladesh. However, the writings of Bengali Muslim indicate that women were historical actors in their own right who negotiated their own identity, while maintaining their agency.

The Relationship of the Women and National Identity:

Not only in its colonial rendering, but even in the Bengali nationalist understanding of women’s position, the Bengali woman is pitted against the Muslim, the former being the ideal representative of the modern nation. Just like the syncretist idea emphasized the cultural identity, just so the Bengali women represents the continuation of Bengali culture. However, the woman’s identity as a Muslim seems to evoke the separatist ideal of emphasizing religion over culture.

The reason for these two conflicting modes of identification has further been exacerbated by the recent history of Bangladesh. Bangladesh’s coming-into-being is traced to its struggles against the Pakistani state, culminating in the 1971 War of Liberation. This event is typically seen as part of an assertion of a Bengali identity because the Bengali people rose up against the Pakistani government which was oppressing them. Despite their pan-Islamic identity, Bengali and Pakistani found no unity in religion. Rather, culture, and intimately tied to it, language was the factor that separated Bengalis
This cultural Bengali identity is perceived to be in contradistinction to a Muslim one, which pertains to being Pakistani. The denial of the primacy of a Muslim identity is celebrated in Bangladesh history as part of an assertion of Bengali modernity – Pakistan being seen as Islamic and hence atavistic, and the emerging Bengali as secular and modern.\textsuperscript{150}

However, must these two strands—syncretist and separatist, and therefore, the Bengali and the Muslim identities, remain separate?

Pakistan, of course, does not need to co-opt the religious identity of Islam, while Bangladesh does not need to appropriate Bengali culture. Rather, the overlapping categories of religious and cultural identity are hard to separate. While religious may play a more prominent role when issues of religion are at stake, culture may play just as prominent a role when International Language Day is celebrated each year. These overlapping identities are constantly being negotiated by Bangladeshi women, and the veil is an external symbol of such a negotiation of multiple identities.

In recent eras, Muslim women, especially those who are veiled, still continue to be characterized as oppressed and backward, repeating the process of Othering that late 19\textsuperscript{th} century and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century Hindu literature was so adept at engaging in during its process of misrepresenting Muslims. Muslim Bangladeshi women are still being denied the notion of agency by well-meaning nonprofits and human rights organizations.

In fact, NGOs have been characterized as ‘Trojan horses’ through which ‘Western imperialists’ attack local culture, education and religion. These critiques of NGO and development activity are not limited to Islamist groups alone, but are often voiced by the Left as well. This conflict between development and Islamist groups experienced a head-on collision in the mid 1990s, especially with attacks on NGO schools. Though this process of violence is certainly not condonable, it does indicate

that the question of representing the voices of 'oppressed woman' must be dealt with carefully.

Women, though still experiencing great hardships and inequality within society, nonetheless cannot be empowered through a single definition—that of Western feminism. Though the East and the West still remain valid terms for characterizing cultures of Western countries, such as America, Britain, and Canada, and cultures of the East, such as India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, this terminology is outdated. In reality, there is no real geopolitical meaning to the arbitrary classifications of East and West. Many Easterners have now become part of the West, just as many Westerners have made the East their home. Such insufficient terminology can no longer be used to categorize the complex modern interactions between countries and regions, yet the continued demarcation of the West as progressive and the East as backward continue to create an environment where violence, such as the attack on the NGO schools, continue to occur.

What must be understood by development workers as well as Islamic organizations, but particularly by liberal, do-gooder organizations, is that there is no one definition of progress or modernity, especially as it pertains to women. The conservative Jamaat party may have its own definition of women's empowerment, as may women themselves. The hundred other factors of race, religion, class, age, and socioeconomic status also complicate the world of developmental politics, ensuring that careful study must be conducted before 'feminist empowerment' can occur.

As Saba Mahmood explains in her book *the Politics of Piety*:

> we still continue to ascribe to the normative political subject of post-structural feminist theory [which] often remains a liberatory one, whose agency is conceptualized as the binary model of subordination and subversion...in doing so, this scholarship elides dimensions of human action whose ethical and political status does not map onto the logic repression and resistance.\(^{151}\)

We must detach the notion of agency from progressive politics. Only then, will women be viewed as actors with agency who do not necessarily have to rebel against society in order to enact their agency. Through the writings of Bengali Muslim women, it is clear that these women reaffirmed their identity,

both as Muslim and Bengali, reshaped their agency, and finally reemphasized continuity, with each generation of Bengali Muslim women inspiring the next. The works of Bengali Muslim women remain part of this continuum, and it remains an enlightening view of how writing can serve as a powerful tool of expression, even for the so-called 'subaltern.'
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