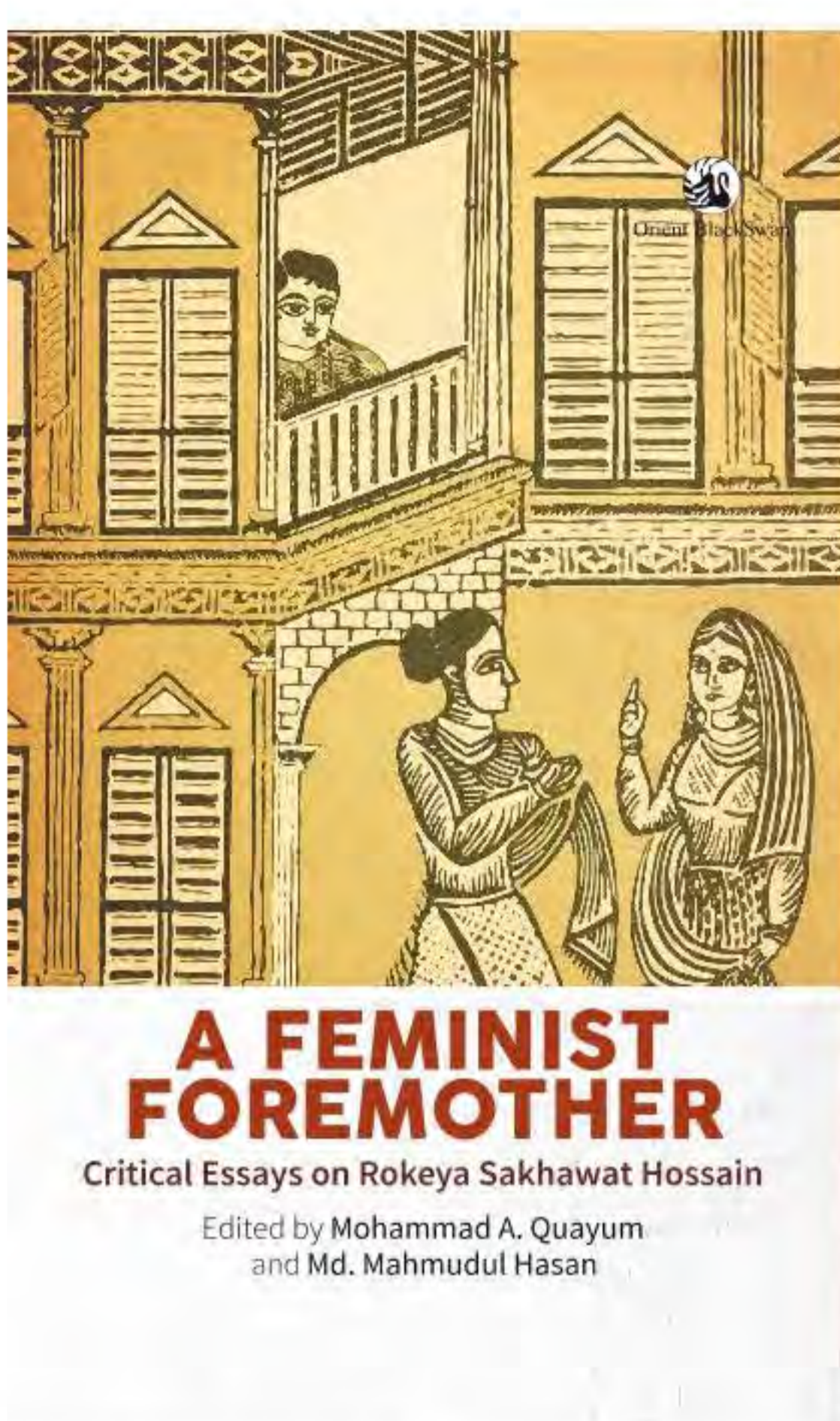


Book Extract: A Feminist Foremother: Critical Essays on Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain

We present here an extract from *A Feminist Foremother: Critical Essays on Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain*, a collection of perspectives on the life and work of Bengal's earliest feminist writer. Through her spirited writings and her activism, Rokeya challenged the two pillars of patriarchy – hierarchical family structures and religious dogma. She demanded that the 'family' be restructured on the basis of gender equality. A devout Muslim, she asked that women be recognised as human beings in their own right within practices of Islam.

The excerpt below is extracted from the second chapter of the volume, titled 'Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and the Gender Debate among Muslim Intellectuals in Late Colonial Bengal' by Mahua Sarkar.

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In a sharp departure from most reformist agendas of her time, which focused on women's welfare within their conventionally defined roles as 'wife and mother' (Hosseini 1998: 15), Rokeya, who was born into an orthodox Muslim aristocratic family and grew up observing strict purdah, firmly believed that in order to really stand up to male oppression women had to be economically independent, even seek employment outside the household if necessary. Not surprisingly, she faced tremendous criticism for her essays – in which she questioned what it means to be a Bengali Muslim woman – as well as her efforts to facilitate women's education, especially amongst Muslims in Calcutta.

While much can be, and has been, written about Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, I would like to foreground two elements of her argument-making that, in my opinion, place her work in a realm quite apart from that of her contemporaries – Muslim as well as Hindu. First, the consistency with which Rokeya explores, especially in her early work, the relational nature of gender privilege/oppression – i.e. the links between men's privilege and women's subordination – and, second, her insistence on women's agency, not only in terms of its supposed emancipatory potential, but rather more strikingly, its complicity in perpetuating women's subservience to men.

We will begin with her (in)famous essay 'Amader Abanati' [Our Downfall] (1904), and its subsequent revised version, 'Streejatir Abanati,' [Woman's Downfall] in which Rokeya argues that women's oppression should be understood as a direct consequence of unfair, male-centric 'social injunctions' embodied in all religions, and not merely as a by-product of the misplaced conservatism of a few orthodox mullahs. In her memorable words:

[Whenever a woman] has tried to raise her head, [she has been]... crushed with the excuse of religion or the holy texts... [and we have gradually] come to accept [such repression] as religious injunctions... Even our souls have become enslaved... Where the bond of religion is slack... women are in a state as advanced as men... I have to say that ultimately "religion" has strengthened the bonds of our enslavement: men are lording over women under the pretext of religion. Hence I am forced to [raise the issue of] "religion." For this[,] religious people will forgive me. (Quadir 1984: 11–12; Akhtar and Bhowmick 1998: 19–20)

Note that in referring to 'religion' in the abstract, Rokeya implicated the social construction of all religions in the oppression of women, highlighting the universality of the problem of gender inequality at a time when, with few exceptions, Muslim intellectuals engaged in the reform debates throughout the first half of the twentieth century were unwilling to go beyond the customary claim that Islam granted enough rights to women.

'Amader Abanati' incensed even the 'liberal' thinkers of that time, men and women, Muslim and Hindu. By the time it was reprinted in 1904 as part of Rokeya's first anthology, *Motichur*, Volume I, its title had been changed to 'Streejatir Abanati,' and it had lost five provocative paragraphs that dealt frontally with male agency in both the social construction of religions and their manifold use in the subordination of women. Rokeya would not tackle this difficult topic until much later in her career, but the theme of discrimination of women by men would continue to inform her understanding of the social and political issues of the day, including her views on community. So, for instance, in the 1920s, amidst rising communal polarisation of Muslims and Hindus, Rokeya denounced communalism for facilitating the exploitation of women, as exemplified by the vicious campaign around the issue of 'abductions.' As she wrote in a powerful essay titled, 'Subah Sadek':

For some time now our masters have considered us akin to valuable ornaments. So... many kinds of "Women's Protection League" are being set up. Truly, since we are living luggage, there must be a need for alert guards to ensure that we are not stolen. My unfortunate sisters! Do you not feel insulted by this? If you do then why do you suffer such... ignominy in silence? (Quadir 1984: 345–358)

By treating the abductions as only one problem among many that the 'women of Bengal' faced at that time, Rokeya effectively moves our attention from the prevalent communalised meaning of 'abductions' – viz. Muslim men abducting Hindu women – being touted by Hindu nationalists to its significance as a tool of male oppression writ large.

In her subsequent writing, Rokeya focused increasingly on the problem of women's culpability in their own continued subordination to men, and the need to encourage a desire for self-reliance in women. As Rokeya saw it, the lack of opportunities for engaging in any meaningful activity produced a state of permanent idleness among women and fed their dependence on men. Rokeya's critique of women's 'mental enslavement' (Quadir 1984: 26–27) is particularly sharp when she discusses the importance of jewellery in a woman's life – a theme she had touched upon in an essay published in 1903 to produce a veritable furor, but which she proceeds to develop further in 'Amader Abanati.' To quote her,

And our beloved jewellery – these are [nothing but]... badges of slavery. [P]risoners wear iron shackles... we lovingly] wear chains made of gold and silver.... And how eager women are for [these signs of bondage]! As if life's happiness and enrichment depend solely on them.... No matter how destructive alcohol is, the alcoholic does not want to give it up. Likewise, we feel proud when we bear these marks of slavery on our bodies.... (Quadir 1984: 11–12)

Rokeya's comments drew angry responses – many of them from women – labelling her as misguided, almost anti-feminine. Indeed, taken in isolation, her vitriolic attacks of women's love for jewellery may seem somewhat extreme. But a closer look reveals that her critique in fact anticipated something of the late twentieth-century Western feminist critique of the impossibility of questioning masculine rule – i.e. a husband's god-given sexual claims on the wife's body – based on perceived notions of essential differences between the sexes and the 'natural subjection' of women, bolstered in turn by pseudo-religious texts. Her attacks on women's love of jewellery should, therefore, be read as a critique of what she thought was a sign of their willing submission to masculine rule – i.e. their husbands' unquestioned access to and control over their bodies.

Note also that Rokeya's criticism is directed at a certain normative vision of femininity – docile, inactive, and ultimately serving to strengthen male dominance both at home and in the world – that was underwritten by middle/upper class privilege. In my reading, Rokeya's focus on jewellery may indeed be suggestive of a complex understanding of gender as 'a constitutive element of social relationships' – an understanding that is typically ascribed to late twentieth-century feminist thinking (Scott 1999: 41–42).

No other Muslim author, either before or after Rokeya, addressed these thorny issues quite as openly as she did. Indeed, as one commentator pointed out fifty years after Rokeya's death, no contemporary Hindu/Brahmo woman is known to have written such powerfully critical essays (Shibnarayan Ray, cited in Akhtar and Bhowmick 1998: 5). Even those authors who were committed to women's 'awakening' in that era did quite wish for the kind of critical consciousness that Rokeya embodied or for the self-reliance that she already advocated for women in the very first decade of the twentieth century when she wrote,

We have to establish that [we are not slaves]. To achieve equality with men we will do whatever is needed of us. If we have to earn [our own]... livelihood... we will do that also.... Why should we not earn? Do we lack hands, or feet, or intelligence? What don't we have?... Educate the daughters and let them join the [paid workforce]... let them earn their own food and clothing. ('Streejatir Abanati,' in Quadir 1984: 21)