The Essential Rokeya

Women and Gender

The Middle East and the Islamic World

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The Essential Rokeya

Selected Works of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932)

Edited, Translated, and with an Introduction by

Mohammad A. Quayum

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For Natasha and Sasha

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ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Dr. Mohammad A. Quayum has taught at universities in Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Malaysia, Singapore and the US, and is currently Professor of English at International Islamic University Malaysia and Adjunct Professor in the School of Humanities at Flinders University, Australia. He has published 25 books in the areas of American literature, Bengali literature and Postcolonial literatures, as well as numerous articles in some of the most acclaimed literary journals around the world. Quayum is the recipient of several awards for teaching and research, and is widely recognised as one of the most distinguished literary scholars in South and Southeast Asia.

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To my late father, Abdus Salam, and late mother, Rawshan Ara Lily, my appreciation is beyond expression for everything they did to instil an inexhaustible love for life and literature in me. I am particularly grateful to my mother for telling me the story of Rokeya's life when I was still a little boy. It is her narrative, of how Rokeya learnt English and Bengali in childhood and how she came to challenge the patriarchal *status quo* on women in the subcontinent, that fired my imagination to undertake this project so that others could also share my interest in Rokeya and her heroic mind.

I can't imagine a life without my wife, Natasha, and daughter, Sasha. It is their love and encouragement that keeps me going with my reading, writing and research. Partly, it is also to understand and appreciate them better that I immersed myself in Rokeya's life and thoughts for the last three years. The book is therefore dedicated to them as a return for their abiding and enduring love.

A CHRONOLOGY OF ROKEYA'S LIFE

1880 Rokeya is born in the village of Pairaband, in Rangpur district, Bengal, India.

1885 She has her first encounter with English alphabets, from a European governess at her elder sister Karimunessa's house in Calcutta.

1896 She is married to Khan Bahadur Syed Sakhawat Hossain and settles at her in-laws' house in Bhagalpur, Bihar. (Here Rokeya gave birth to two girl-children, but one died at the age of four months and the other at the age of five months.)

1902–1903 Rokeya begins writing and publishing in various literary magazines in Calcutta. "Pipasa (Muharram)," her first publication, appears in the *Chiatra-Baishakh* 1308–1309 (April–May 1902) issue of *Nabaprabha* (Eds. Harendralal Roy and Ganendralal Roy).

1904 Her first book, *Motichur*, Vol. I is published by the manager of *Nabanur* magazine in Calcutta.

1905 Rokeya's first English publication, "Sultana's Dream," appears in *Indian Ladies Magazine* (Eds. Kamala Satthia and Sarojini Naidu).

1907 Second edition of *Motichur*, Vol. I is published by Sri Gurudas Chattopadhyay, 201 Cornwallis Street, Calcutta.

1908 *Sultana's Dream* appears in the form of a book, published by S.K. Lahiri & Co., 54 College Street, Calcutta.

1909 Rokeya's husband, Khan Bahadur Syed Sakhawat Hossain, dies in Calcutta, on May 3.

Rokeya establishes the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School in Bhagalpur, on October 1, with only five students.

1910 She leaves Bhagalpur permanently on December 3 and settles in Calcutta.

1911 Rokeya restarts the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School in Calcutta, on March 16, with only eight students.

1912 Rokeya's mother, Rahatunessa Sabera Chadhurani, passes away in Calcutta.

She receives donations for her school from His Highness Aga Khan and B.M. Malabari.

She also receives the first monthly instalment of Rs. 71.00 in April from the Government of British India.

1913 Rokeya's father, Zahiruddin Muhammad Abu Ali Hyder Saber, dies in their village home in Pairaband.

1915 She wins the first prize in an English poetry writing competition in September.

The school becomes a High Primary School (up to class V), and is relocated at 86/A Lower Circular Road, Calcutta.

She purchases two horse-drawn carriages for the school.

1916 Rokeya founds the Anjuman-i-Khawateen Islam (Muslim Women's Association). The number of students at her school increases to 105.

1917 The school is upgraded to a Middle English School.
Lady Chelmsford, wife of the Governor General and Viceroy of India, visits the school.
A Bengali section is introduced in the school from the beginning of the year.

1919 The sixth annual meeting of the All India Muslim Ladies Conference is held in Calcutta at the initiative of Rokeya, but it ends up in a fiasco owing to a family feud among two local factions of the association. Rokeya writes several letters to the editor of *The Mussalman* to explain why and how her initiative failed.

1922 *Motichur*, Vol. II, is published on March 10 by Rokeya herself.

1924 *Padmarag*, Rokeya's first and only novel, is published by the author herself.

1926 Rokeya's elder sister Karimunessa dies in Calcutta, on 6 September.

1927 The school is upgraded to a High English School.
A new kindergarten section is introduced in the school.
The total number of students at the school increases to 128.

1930 Rokeya flies in an aeroplane with the first Muslim pilot, Murad, on December 2. Lady Jackson, wife of the Governor of Bengal, Stanley Jackson, donates Rs. 250.00 to Rokeya's school.

1931 Publication of *Aborodhbasini* in Calcutta.

1932 Rokeya is elected president of Anjuman-i-Khawateen Islam.
The school is relocated to 162 Lower Circular Road in June.
Rokeya drafts her last piece, "Narir Adhikar" (Rights of Women), on the night of December 8, and dies of a massive heart attack at her Calcutta home on the morning of December 9.
Rokeya is buried at Saudpur, near Calcutta.
A message of condolence is sent by the Governor of Bengal, Sir Anderson.
A condolence meeting is held on 15 December at Calcutta's Albert Hall, attended by many leading educational and political figures and Bengali writers of the time.

ROKEYA SAKHAWAT HOSSAIN: A BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

Soon after the death of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820–1891), a pioneering figure of the Bengal Renaissance and the father of modern Bengali language, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), Asia's first Nobel Laureate, reverentially wrote about him: "One wonders how God, in the process of producing forty million Bengalis, produced a man!" ("Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar"). Perhaps one should begin with a similar tribute to Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932) and say, with slight modifications of Tagore's words, "One wonders how God, in the process of producing millions of Bengalis, produced a woman!" Indeed, Rokeya was a phenomenal figure of her time in many ways. As the Bengali writer and critic Mohitlal Majumdar (1888–1952) once said, she was the embodiment of the "soul and consciousness"[1] of her age (qtd. in Syed 17; Hasan 12); and in the view of Shibnarayan Roy, no other writer, Hindu or Muslim, had ever written with the kind of conviction that Rokeya did (Syed 19). According to Muhammad Abdul Hye, a literary historian, "Of all the Muslim women who became famous as Bengali writers during the Tagore period, Begum[2] Rokeya was the first and the best" (Syed 36). Her biographer, Shamsun Nahar Mahmud once described her as a "spider mother" who sacrificed her life to nurture the future generations of Bengali women, and added, "The fate of the Bengali Muslim women has changed radically within the space of half a century, and there is no way to deny that this benevolent woman played the most significant role behind it" (Shamsun Nahar Mahmud 67). More recently, Roushan Jahan has labelled her as a "feminist foremother" whose presence testifies that "feminist sentiments grow from indigenous roots, without depending on foreign influence" (vii); and Barnita Bagchi has dubbed her "Bengal's earliest and boldest feminist" who is "revered" as a "crusader on a pedestal" (vii) for her pioneering works for the advancement of Indian women.

However, Rokeya's achievements as a writer, educationist and social activist didn't come easily. From the moment of her birth, she had to struggle

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[1] Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Bengali in this essay are by me.

[2] "Begum" is an honorific used for respectable or aristocratic Muslim women; a lady.

against many odds. She was born in 1880 into a rich zamindar (large landholder) family, in the village of Pairaband in Rangpur district in British India, which lies in present-day Bangladesh. Her father's name was Zahiruddin Muhammad Abu Ali Hyder Saber, who, according to Rokeya scholar Motahar Hussain Sufi, was the descendent of Babar Ali Abul Babur Saber Tribezi, who migrated to India from Tribez, Iran in the sixteenth century and settled in Pairaband sometime in 1583 (18).[3] Rokeya's mother was the daughter of Hossain Uddin Chowdhury, also a zamindar, of a place called Baliadi in the district of Dhaka (Sufi 17). This aristocratic birth was not necessarily a boon for Rokeya, as in those days the Muslim aristocrats were extremely conservative and tradition-bound, often, as Rokeya explains through a series of anecdotal narratives in her book *The Zenana Women* (Aborodhbashini, 1931), enforcing the strictest form of purdah on their women. Satirising this practice, in "Bengal Women's Educational Conference," Rokeya writes:

> Although Islam has successfully prevented the physical killing of baby girls, yet Muslims have been glibly and frantically wrecking the mind, intellect and judgement of their daughters till the present day. Many consider it a mark of honour to keep their daughters ignorant and deprive them of knowledge and understanding of the world by cooping them up within the four walls of the house. (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 227)

Rokeya herself was a victim of this senseless, demented pseudo-religious practice. At the beginning of her essay "Bengal Women's Educational Conference," which was originally delivered as Rokeya's Presidential Address at the inaugural session of the Association in 1926, Rokeya writes in a tone of self-ridicule:

> I express my sincere gratitude to you for the honour you have shown me by electing someone as insignificant and ordinary as myself as the president of the Society. But I must say that your choice has not been an ideal one, since all my life, as a victim of the stringent purdah system in society, I have lived in an iron vault. I have never been able to interact in society freely, or even cultivate the emotions that are required of a president of an organisation. (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 225)

Underneath the assumed modesty and self-mockery, there is Rokeya's seething anger against a practice that she thought was utterly deadly. She considered it a silent "killer" that helped to obliterate the mind of its victims slowly and silently, somewhat like the Carbonic acid gas: "The purdah practice can be compared more accurately with the deadly Carbonic acid gas.

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[3] This information is also available in Bharati Ray's *Early Feminists of Colonial India* (17).

Because it kills without any pain, people get no opportunity to take precaution against it. Likewise, women in purdah are dying bit by bit in silence from this seclusion 'gas,' without experiencing pain" (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 229).

In her "Author's Introduction" to *The Zenana Women*, in which Rokeya provided her most outrageous exposé of the purdah system as it was practiced by the aristocratic Muslims in India at the time, she again reminds us how she herself was a victim of the system: "Having lived in purdah for a long time, we have grown accustomed to the secluded life. Therefore, we, especially I, have nothing to say against it. If a fishwife is asked, 'rotten fish smells foul or fair,' what would she answer?" (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 385). With that ironic understatement, Rokeya goes on to reveal her own experience of purdah in childhood, at least in two episodes of the book (episodes 1 and 23), in both of which she explains that she was forced to live in segregation from the age of five, not only from the men but also from women outside her family circle.

Given such a horrendous social environment, it comes as no surprise that Rokeya was never allowed any formal education by her parents. Rokeya's father had four wives, one of whom was a European (Ray 17),[4] yet for some reason he was averse to his daughters, including Rokeya, learning the English language. Abu Ali Saber was also opposed to the Bengali language, as in those days the Muslim elites, especially those of migrant descent such as Rokeya's family, saw "Arab and Persian traditions [as] authentic Islamic culture [and] local traditions, including the languages … as un-Islamic" (Ahmed 9). Thus Bengali was looked down upon by this migrant or *ashraf* Muslim community of Bengal as a "non-Islamic inheritance" (Ahmed 6). Rafiuddin Ahmed explains:

> The real problem was one of acceptance and recognition: Bengali background and cultural symbols continued to be stigmatised, and neither the ʿulema nor the immigrant *ashraf* were keen on expanding the cultural boundaries of Islam. (12)

To mark their superiority over the "low-born" *atraf* Muslims, who were seen to have converted from Hinduism and readily accepted Bengali as their mother tongue, this elite *ashraf* community chose to speak Arabic, Persian and Urdu, rather than Bengali, in their daily life.[5] This bizarre practice of

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[4] Ray explains that one of the wives was childless; the other three had between them nine sons and six daughters (17).

[5] The following statement by A.H.K. Yusufzai, a nineteenth century Bengali Muslim, found in Sonia Nishat Amin's *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876–1939*, sums up the sentiment of elite Bengali Muslims towards the Bengali language: "… they (Muslims)

living in the land but not learning the language, and even considering it as inferior and un-Islamic, drew angry responses from members within the community, but it was not enough to alter this deeply entrenched custom. For example, Shah Abdul Hakim, a seventeenth century Muslim poet, and author of several didactic Bengali works, wrote a deprecation of the community's negative attitude towards Bengali:

> Whatever language a people speak in a country, the Lord understands it …. Those who hate the Bengali language despite being born in Bengal cast doubt on their birth. The people, who have no liking for the language and the learning of their country, had better leave it and live abroad.
>
> (qtd. in Ahmed 14)

Lucky for Rokeya, she had an elder sister, Karimunnesa (1855–1926), who used to think like Shah Abdul Hakim. In her biographical piece on Karimunnesa, "The Hidden Jewel" [Lukano Ratan], Rokeya describes how her elder sister learnt the Bengali language entirely through her own efforts, defying the customs and expectations of the time. According to Rokeya, the only thing Karimunnesa was taught was recitation of the Qurʾan like a parrot, without the benefit of understanding its meaning. But obviously she was not satisfied with it, so she started learning Bengali and Persian entirely on her own initiative. She even began to learn Arabic at the age of 67. Rokeya recollects how Karimunnesa learnt to write the Bengali alphabets by drawing marks on the ground in their courtyard, under the keen supervision of her brother Ibrahim Saber. This eventually led her to become a Bengali poet, as she was, in Rokeya's words, a "born-poet." According to the literary historian, Nazrul Islam Muhammad Sufian (1906–1982), Karimunnesa had left behind two unpublished volumes of poetry, *Dukka Tarangini* (Billowing Sorrow; composed around 1878) and *Manas Bikash* (Sprouting Imagination; composed around 1881), both of which were subsequently lost by her nephew, Amir Hossain Chowdhury (Syed 11–12); and in the view of Abdul Mannan Syed, "Karimunnesa Khanam was probably the first Muslim female poet in Bengali in the modern era" (12). In "The Hidden Jewel," Rokeya explains how her sister loved composing poems but never wanted to publish them, and how once Rokeya got a few of them published in a local newspaper, anonymously, as per her sister's advice, with a byline that read, "by a daughter from the Saber family" (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 233).

These creative aspirations of Karimunnesa and her love for the Bengali language obviously created a lasting impression on Rokeya. It is from her

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are not interested in the Bengali or Sanskrit languages. On the contrary, they show hatred, malice, indifference and ignorance regarding these" (20).

that she learnt Bengali and developed the desire to become a writer in the language.[6] In "The Hidden Jewel," Rokeya acknowledges, "[Karimunnesa had to] experience profuse denigration and calumny [from society] for teaching me the Bengali alphabets … without her support and the patronage of my beloved husband I would have never dared to write openly for the newspapers" (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 233). As a mark of gratitude, Rokeya dedicated her book, *Motichur* (A String of Sweet Pearls), Vol. II, to Karimunnesa, explaining how much she owes to her:

> I learnt to read the Bengali alphabets in childhood only because of your affectionate care. Even if my other relatives didn't have much objection to my learning Urdu and Persian, they were fiercely opposed to my learning the Bengali language. Only you supported my cultivation of Bengali. After my marriage, it is you who expressed the fear that I'll forget the Bengali language.[7] That I had not forgotten Bengali during my long fourteen years of stay in Bhagalpur, where there was none to speak the language, was only because of you. After returning to Calcutta I have been running an Urdu medium school for the last eleven years. Here too—the administrators, students and teachers—speak Urdu. I have to interact with everyone from morning till night in Urdu only. Let me say it again, that I have not forgotten Bengali in spite of so many challenges, is only because of your care and concern and encouragement which have continued to motivate me to write in the language. As a mark of deep appreciation and respect, I dedicate this book to you. (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 57)

If Rokeya grew up to be a Bengali writer because of Karimunnesa's benevolent grooming of her younger sister, it was Ibrahim Saber, Rokeya's elder brother, who initiated her into the world of English. Abu Ali Saber, Rokeya's father, was orthodox when it came to the education of his three daughters by his first wife: Karimunnesa, Rokeya and Humaira; but thankfully, he was more open-minded when it came to his sons' education. His two sons by the first wife, Ibrahim Saber and Khalil Saber, were both sent to the prestigious St. Xavier's College in Calcutta, in the hope that they could

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[6] It should be pointed out that Rokeya's family language was Urdu, and, side by side with Bengali, she spoke Urdu almost all through her life. Urdu was also the language in her in-laws' household. Therefore, she was fluent in the language and gave speeches in it at many occasions and even wrote articles for Urdu magazines, such that she has been included in Gail Minault's *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India*, as one of the Urdu-speaking *sharif* (elite) pioneers of reform for education of Muslim women in the subcontinent.

[7] This is because Rokeya's husband was from Bihar, where the spoken language is Urdu and not Bengali. After her marriage, she moved to Bhagalpur, Bihar and lived there with her husband's family for about 14 years.

learn English and enter the civil service. Equipped with modern education, Ibrahim Saber came to recognise the value of women's education, and he took it upon himself to teach English to young Rokeya. One day he brought an English book with him, and opening it before Rokeya, he said, "Sister, if you can learn this English language, then the world's treasure will open before you" (Shamsun Nahar Mahmud 11). This was enough to incite Rokeya to begin learning the language from her brother, who would spend hours teaching the little sister. But the lessons could not be conducted during normal hours as it would anger the parents; being a girl, learning English was forbidden to Rokeya, as it would taint her Muslim identity and her faith. Therefore, the lessons took place at night, after the parents and relatives, most importantly her father, had gone to bed. In this regard, Rokeya's biographer and close associate, Shamsun Nahar Mahmud, recollects how, when everyone had gone to sleep, the brother and sister would sit with their books under a candle and "the brother would teach … [and] the sister would drink the nectar of knowledge to her fill" (Shamsun Nahar Mahmud 23).

It is amazing that Rokeya, who acquired the English language in such trying circumstances, eventually took it up as a creative medium and successfully wrote her most famous piece, *Sultana's Dream*, a feminist utopia, as well as several other prose pieces and letters in it. Rokeya acknowledges this uniquely warm-hearted and selfless gift from her elder brother, and his unfailing interest in tutoring her, in the following passage:

> I have never stepped inside a girls' school or any school or college; whatever education I have acquired is owing to my elder brother's infinite love and mercy. All my other relatives, instead of giving any encouragement, would taunt and ridicule my efforts for education. Yet I never gave up. Brother too never felt disappointed by the scornful remarks from others and stopped teaching me. (Shamsun Nahar Mahmud 21)

Moreover, in her dedicatory note to her only novel, *Padmarag* (Ruby, 1924), addressing her brother, she wrote:

> Dada [Elder brother],
>
> I have been immersed in your love from childhood. You have groomed me in your own hand. I have never experienced the love of a father, mother, an elder or a teacher; I have known you only …. You have always encouraged me and never rebuked me. Your love is sweeter than honey. Even honey has a bitter after-taste, but yours is ambrosial; pure and divine like Kausar [the stream of nectar flowing in heaven mentioned in the Qurʾan] ….
>
> Your little sister, Roku (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 261)

This statement is revealing in multiple ways. It shows not only the depth of Rokeya's love and respect for and gratitude to her elder brother, but also how she was treated with indifference by her parents in childhood. This parental negligence could have been a reflection of their habitually reticent nature, but more likely it was an expression of their contempt for a girl child, as it was a social norm at the time to look down upon a girl child and see her as a burden, sometimes even as a curse, upon the family—something that Rokeya emphasises again and again in her writing. In her opening essay, "Woman's Downfall" (Strijatir Abanati), for example, women are described as "slaves" and "bondmaids"; in "Home" (Griha), women are seen as being worse than animals, since animals have homes but Indian women have none; they always have to be dependent on a man for shelter. In "Woman Worship" (Nari-puja), again, women are described as being "no better than slaves" and that sometimes they are treated as even worse than "cows" or "a pet dog"; and in "Bengal Women's Educational Conference," women are described as "the lowliest creature in India." In this polemical essay, Rokeya tauntingly comments:

> You might be surprised to learn that I have been crying for the lowliest creature in India for the last twenty years. Do you know who that lowliest creature is? It is the Indian women. No one has ever experienced any anguish for them .... If a dog is hit by a car, we hear an outcry in the Anglo-Indian media. But there is not a single soul in the whole of this subcontinent to mourn for incarcerated women like us. (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 226)

These searing invectives and scathing remarks are no doubt Rokeya's responses to what she generally saw and witnessed in society; but, on a more intimate level, she is perhaps writing back to her parents, responding to their icy treatment with fire and anger—feelings that perhaps ate into her heart for every moment of her life.

Rokeya was married in 1896, at the age of sixteen,[8] to Khan Bahadur Syed Sakhawat Hossain, who was nearly forty at the time. Rokeya was Sakhawat's second wife. It was Ibrahim Saber who recommended Sakhawat to the family as Rokeya's potential husband. Ibrahim knew that Sakhawat was a widower, yet he had no qualms in arranging his most beloved sister's

[8] Critics disagree on the year of Rokeya's marriage. Her biographer, Shamsun Nahar Mahmud, as well as the editor of Rokeya's letters, Moshfeqa Mahmud, suggest that she was married in 1898, at the age of 18 (*The Life of Rokeya* 27; *Knowing Rokeya Through Her Letters* 2). However, Motahar Hossain Sufi persuasively argues that the marriage took place in 1896, when Rokeya was 16 years old. Jahan (39), Bagchi (viii), Ray (17i) and Amin ("The Changing World of Bengali Muslim Women" 141) concur with this view.

wedding with him. This is because Ibrahim Saber knew Sakhawat Hossain personally; he had met the latter when he was a Deputy Magistrate in Rangpur. He noticed that Sakhawat Hossain, who had, like Ibrahim, studied in England, was, like him, generous, progressive, had a liberal and modern outlook, and believed in the significance of women's education. He came from an elite family like theirs, but was still caring, thrifty and modest; and although he was not a Bengali, he was eager to learn the language, and even know more about the literature and culture of Bengal.[9]

Ibrahim Saber's reading of Sakhawat Hossain's character proved to be right and the latter turned out to be another benevolent influence on Rokeya's life. Sakhawat Hossain was from Bhagalpur, Bihar, and after her marriage Rokeya moved there to live with him and during this period she began publishing essays in various literary magazines, actively supported and encouraged by her husband, who also became her ardent champion. Rokeya lived in Bhagalpur for fourteen years, until 1910, and during this period she had published numerous essays and articles, as well as two books: *Motichur*, Vol. I, which came out in 1905, and *Sultana's Dream* in 1908.

Sultana's Dream, first published in *Indian Ladies' Magazine* in 1905, was Rokeya's first work in English. Published ten years before Charlotte Perkins Gilman's feminist utopian novel, *Herland* (1915), it has been widely acknowledged as Rokeya's most outstanding work, a true testament to her creative genius and farsightedness. Rokeya recollects how she wrote the piece in a state of loneliness when Sakhawat had gone outstation. "To pass the time, I wrote the story" (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 252), she recalls in one of her later essays. When Sakhawat came back after two days, the first thing he did was to ask casually what she had been doing in his absence. Rokeya then showed him the story and, wrapped in curiosity, Sakhawat read the whole piece without caring to sit down. When he finished, he mumbled, "A terrible revenge" (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 252). He said those words with utmost pride, as Rokeya had envisioned a society in the story—an arcadia—that was far superior—capable, honest, just and peaceful—than what humanity had been able to accomplish in thousands of years of recorded history.

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[9] In this context, Shamsun Nahar Mahmud quotes from a college friend of Sakhawat, Mukundo Dev Mukhopadhyay, whom Sakhawat had met at Hoogley College in West Bengal where the latter had come for his undergraduate studies: "We gave up using English for our daily interaction on Sakhawat's advice. He said, 'You should learn to speak Hindi. I wish to pick up spoken Bengali; it would be a shame to live here and not learn the language. But I'll probably never have enough facility to read in the language. I'll try to know about Bengali literature as much as possible from our daily chitchat'" (23).

Sakhawat then enthusiastically sent the story to Mr. McPherson, the divisional commissioner of Bhagalpur, for language correction. But there was nothing to correct, and McPherson sent back the story to Sakhawat with the following comments:

> 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. (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 253)

However, while her marriage turned out to be happy and she was beginning to realise her literary talent, Rokeya didn't find fulfilment as a wife and mother. She gave birth to two baby daughters but both of them died early, one at the age of five months and the other at four months old. Sakhawat also began to fall sick. He was diabetic, and by 1907 it became so acute that his eyesight began to fail. In 1909 Rokeya took Sakhawat to Calcutta for treatment but he died there on May 3.

The demise of Sakhawat left the childless Rokeya utterly lonely in the wilderness of life. Sakhawat perhaps envisaged this before his death, and knowing where Rokeya's heart lay, he left behind, in addition to her lawful share of the inheritance, Rs. 10, 000 for his wife to set up a school for girls after his death. Accordingly, to fulfil her husband's wish, Rokeya set up a school at Bhagalpur the same year, albeit with only five students. But Sakhawat had a daughter by his first marriage and things became unpleasant with her. The fact that Rokeya had inherited money from her husband (which was unthought-of in those days, as Rokeya explains in her essay "Home"[10]), and that she also dared to spend it on women's education (which was also almost taboo in the Muslim community at the time), outraged her and her dogmatic, chauvinistic husband. They became so mean and hostile towards her that Rokeya was forced to close down the school and move to Calcutta permanently in 1910.

On 13 March 1911, Rokeya set up a new school, Sakhawat Memorial School for Girls, at 13 Waliullah Lane, Calcutta, with only eight students. There were two other schools for Muslim girls in Calcutta when Rokeya embarked on her mission—one established in 1897 under the patronage of Begum

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[10] In this essay, Rokeya writes, "According to the Mohammedan law, women can inherit their fathers' property, and even 'own' a house. But what does it matter—the actual owner is always the husband, son, son-in-law, younger brother-in-law or some other male relative in the family. In their absence, a government officer or attorney becomes the owner. The female proprietor becomes a puppet in the hands of the attorney; whatever the attorney says, the ignorant, illiterate proprietor accepts that."

Ferdous Mahal, the Begum of the Nawab of Murshidabad; and the other in 1909, under the patronage of Khojesta Akhtar Banu, mother of the well-known Bengali Muslim leader and one of the co-founders of modern-day Pakistan, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy (1892–1963). This definitely speaks volumes on the premier and pioneering role Rokeya played in the education and modernisation of Bengali Muslim women.

Opening the school was a daring move for a recently widowed, single woman. But she wanted to stay true to her husband's wish. Besides, it was something that moved her as her inner calling. Even in her first essay, "Woman's Downfall," published in 1903, years before Sakhawat's death, she had fervently argued that lack of education was the root cause of women's suffering; the servitude and bondage that had been inflicted on them, had been possible only because of their ignorance. Therefore, if women wanted to claim their rights and responsibilities in society and enjoy equal opportunities with men, they must venture into the world of knowledge and remove their "purdah of ignorance." "Just as the sunlight cannot penetrate our bedrooms, similarly the light of knowledge cannot penetrate the chamber of our mind. This is because there are no suitable schools or colleges for girls. Men can study as much as they want, but will the gates of our ambrosia treasury of knowledge ever fully open for us?" (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 18), Rokeya had cynically argued in the essay. Here was her opportunity to alleviate the situation, no matter how minimally, and she took it up in full tilt and with the fullest of devotion.

But while the noble intention and the volition were there, there were many impediments too. Rokeya had had no formal education in childhood, so she had no clue as to how to run a school. She even did not know how one teacher could teach several students at the same time. "When I first began the school with five students, it seemed most surprising to me as to how one teacher could teach five students together and at the same time" (Shamsun Nahar Mahmud 32), she recounted to Shamsun Nahar Mahmud. To overcome this problem and to gain experience in school administration, she visited several *Brahmo* and Hindu schools in Calcutta, where she met leading Bengali educationists of the time, such as Mrs. P.K. Roy and Mrs. Rajkumari Das (Sufi 44) and gained first-hand experience of classroom teaching from them (Shamsun Nahar Mahmud 35).

However, Rokeya's greater problem was getting students. Since the Muslims were averse to female education, she found it difficult to attract students for the school. Rokeya is scathing of this anachronistic attitude of Bengali Muslim men, as she wholeheartedly believed that female education was an integral part of Islam. Caustically, she writes:

> ... the first person to ever mandate giving equal education to both men and women as a duty was our revered Prophet. He advised that attaining knowledge is an obligation for every human being, whether man or woman. Thus the law of compulsory education was decreed for Muslims thirteen hundred years ago. However, our community has never followed it, instead violating it forever and even considering its breach a matter of family pride.
> (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 227)

She then goes on to lampoon the religious fanatics and ask deridingly:

> But the question is—the same Muslims who are willing to lay down their lives in the Prophet's name (or even at the insult of a piece of brick at a dilapidated mosque), why are they reluctant to follow an authentic guidance from the Prophet? What has happened in the past can be forgiven, but even in this twentieth century when they are being reminded of women's education again and again, and that our Prophet has made it obligatory to give education to our daughters, why are they still so indifferent to the education of girls?
> (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 227)

Rokeya's conclusive statement in this regard was, "Those *mullahs* who give *fatwahs* against female education, are devils in disguise" (Shamsun Nahar Mahmud 37).

However, her untiring dedication and hard work, attempts to prod as well as to persuade the Muslim parents, slowly began to pay off; and by the end of 1915, four years after she had embarked on the school, the number of students had increased from eight to eighty-four and the school was relocated to a bigger building at 86/A Lower Circular Road. By 1930 it was elevated to a high school, having all ten grades. The curriculum at the school included all kinds of subjects, as a close associate of Rokeya, Fateha Khanam, explained in a letter to the well-known Bengali writer Abul Fazal (1903–1983): "Everything is taught in her school, from Qur'an recitation and its *tafsir* [exegesis] to English, Bengali, Urdu, Persian, Home Nursing, First Aid, Cooking, Sewing and whatever else are essential for Muslim girls to learn" (Sufi 47). She then goes on to add in the same letter, in a rather revealing statement, "The girls from the north are availing the opportunity eagerly, but the Bengali girls have no interest in it whatsoever. Of the 114 students only two are Bengalis. Now you understand what state we are in Bengal" (Sufi 47). This statement explains why Rokeya had so much difficulty in introducing Bengali as a subject at the school and attract enough students for it, even when it was opened at a financial loss. In a letter to Mujibur Rahman, the editor of a leading Muslim periodical at the time, *The Mussalman*, Rokeya wrote regretfully in 1917:

> We have at present only three girls reading Bengali whole time .... We shall probably be compelled to abolish the Bengali section from next year if we fail

> to get at least twenty students by the end of this year. It is quite beyond our means to go on paying the salary of the Bengali teacher month after month when there is not sufficient work. (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 524)

Yet she did not close down the Bengali subject easily, as it was vital to her Bengali identity, something she had picked up intentionally by learning the Bengali language in childhood on her own, against her father's wishes, and by valiantly pursuing it as an artistic medium. Therefore, she continued offering the subject until she was eventually forced to abolish it in 1919. In a letter to the same editor, in December 1918, again, she wrote:

> At present there are only 3.5 pupils in our Bengali section; 3 are whole time Bengali girls and one is a girl from Urdu section learning Bengali as an optional subject. The eldest amongst them being "grown up," will leave school at the end of this session. It is beyond our means to have the responsibility of the Bengali section on our shoulders and to go on paying a mistress month after month for the sake of 2.5 girls only. We have therefore decided to abolish the Bengali branch from the beginning of January next.
>
> (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 525)

Part of the problem for Rokeya in introducing Bengali at her school and keeping it afloat was, as I have explained earlier, the very prejudicial attitude of the *ashraf* Bengalis themselves towards the language; in their myopia, they saw it as being of Hindu origin and therefore contrary to their Islamic identity.

Once Rokeya began the school in Calcutta, it slowly became the centre-piece of her life. She had to look after everything associated with the school, from teaching to running the administration to the hiring and grooming of teachers to the wellbeing of the students and everything else. In a letter to her cousin, Mariam, written in 1915, she explains apologetically why she had not been able to respond to her letter in time: "The only reason I couldn't answer to your letter is because I have little time. By Allah's grace we have 70 students studying in five classes [the school was a primary school at this time]. We also have two horse-drawn carriages, two pairs of horses, a syce and a driver. I have to keep an eye on everything. I even have to make sure that the horses are regularly massaged in the evening" (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 499). In another letter to Mariam, dated 24 March 1930, she explains why she could not take up her cousin's invitation to visit her during summer that year: "Sister, I cannot afford to go anywhere during the summer. Who will then attend to the piles of office work at the school? In fact, I have no time to attend even an invitation from God" (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 504).

This preoccupation with the school also affected her writing: we notice a long hiatus after the publication of *Sultana's Dream* in 1908, and her

third book, *Motichur*, Vol. II which came out in 1922. There could have been intermittent essays or articles published in the local periodicals during this period, but there was nothing substantial before the publication of *Motichur*, Vol. II. Rokeya published only two other books after this, *Padmarag* (Ruby), a novel, in 1924 and *The Zenana Women* (Aborodhbashini), a body of 47 anecdotal narratives on the purdah practice among Bengali women (Hindus and Muslims), published in 1931. She also left behind a handful of poems, several uncollected essays and stories published in various newspapers and magazines, and a body of letters written both in Bengali and English. This is not a sizable volume compared to the works of her contemporaries such as Rabindranath Tagore and Sarat Chandra Chattapadhaya (1876–1938), yet they are so full of intensity, ingenuity and depth that she has often been dubbed as the best female writer of her generation, which is also known as the Tagorean era in Bengali literature or the period of Bengal Renaissance and Bengal Awakening. For example, in a glowing assessment of Rokeya's work, Kazi Abdul Wadud (1896–1970), a younger contemporary in Bengali literature, maintained soon after Rokeya's death:

> Among those living and dead, very few stand out as genuine Muslim writers—Mir Musharraf Hossain, Pandit Reazuddin, Kazi Emdadul Haq and Mrs. R.S. Hossain [in her lifetime, Rokeya was popularly known as Mrs. R.S. Hossain]. Perhaps history will recognise Mrs. R.S. Hossain as the best among them. Mrs. R.S. Hossain occupies a lofty place not only among the Bengali Muslim writers but among all the female writers in the language; I am not entirely sure if she is the very best, but that is what I think from time to time. Her level of creativity and intellect is rare in Bengal. (Syed 9)

A few years later, Abdul Quader (1906–1984), another well-known Bengali writer, and whose edited compilation of Rokeya's work I have used for this research, said, in a similar tribute, but even more pointedly and poignantly, that Rokeya was the "greatest female writer in modern Bengali literature, irrespective of whether they were Hindus or Muslims" (Syed 10). Such a tribute becomes even more meaningful, when one comes to know that it places Rokeya even above Tagore's sister, Sarnakumari Devi (1855–1932), who is often credited with the founding of the Bengali novel among the female writers and considered a cultural icon of her time.

In 1916 Rokeya founded the Anjuman-i-Khawateen Islam (Muslim Women's Association, or also known as Calcutta Mohamedan Ladies Association).[11] She knew that to find emancipation for women it was important

[11] The first significant association of Muslim women, Hyderabad Ladies' Association, was founded in 1902, by Begum Khedive Jung, the first woman graduate of Hyderabad. There was

to unite them and address the issues of prejudice, oppression and illiteracy collectively; women needed organised effort to build public opinion in favour of female education. This organisation extended Rokeya's sphere of activity, as it brought her in closer contact with the underprivileged in society. Rokeya's school and her literary writing were basically intended for the upper and middle classes, but the activities of the Anjuman took her farther afield to the homeless and slum population in the community. The objectives of the Association were to offer financial assistance to the poor widows, rescue and provide shelter to the physically or sexually abused wives, help the poor families to marry off their daughters and, above all, run literacy programmes among the slum women, both Hindu and Muslim. In this regard, Bangladeshi writer Sufia Kamal (1911–1999) recalls how, when she was involved in the activities of the Anjuman, Rokeya would send them to the slums of Calcutta to help out the women and how sometimes the hostile men would prevent them from entering the area; sometimes, the Urdu-speaking Muslims thought that the Hindus had come to work with them (Akhtar 267–268). These volunteers, comprising both Hindu and Muslim women, went from door to door to teach the women the rudiments of reading, writing, sewing, embroidery or matters related to child care and personal hygiene. Depending on the linguistic character of the area, they would carry out the instructions in either Bengali or Urdu.

Such daring social work made Rokeya an inspiring figure nationwide. In a personal letter to her, written from Hyderabad, India, on 16 September 1916, Indian independence activist and poet, Sarojini Naidu (also known by the sobriquet "The Nightingale of India" [1879–1949]), hailed Rokeya for her extraordinary work on women's education and women's emancipation, and commended her in the following words:

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also a Women's *Anjuman* (Association) established in Lahore in 1906, which held meetings at the residence of Sir Muhammad Shafi (1869–1932), to discuss and formulate proposals for the spread of education for women and for securing of rights for Muslim women as provided for in Islam. In 1912, Suogra Humayun Mirza, along with Begum Khedive Jung, formed the Anjuman-i-Khawateen Deccan. Rokeya founded her organisation in 1916 inspired by the grandiose inauguration of All India Ladies Conference at Aligarh in 1914. Rokeya's organisation was autonomous but also allied with these other groups, who were invited to Calcutta for a meeting in 1919. The controversial outcome from this attempt is recorded in Rokeya's letters written to the editor of *The Mussalman* of Calcutta, included at the end of this volume: letters dated 21 February 1919 and 4 April 1919. For further details on the role of these organisations in the emancipation of Muslim women, see Gouri Srivastava, *The Legend Makers: Some Eminent Muslim Women of India* and Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India*.

> The mission of spreading education among Muslim girls that you have undertaken and the sacrifices you have been making for such a long time to achieve its success is truly astounding. I am writing this letter only to convey my heartfelt respect and admiration for you .... It is intended to let you know how often this sister of yours canonises your ideology and social work from a distance. May God bless your tireless endeavour for the wellbeing of Muslim women!
> (Sufi 45)

But every light has its shadow; every joy, its sorrow. Rokeya's fame didn't come at a small price. As she was attracting more and more adulation and admiration for her literary and social works, she was, correspondingly, also drawing fierce criticisms from certain quarters. The *mullahs* (ultra-clerics) were constantly on her back with their mock-*fatwahs*, as obviously, being a woman and a widow she was an easy target for them; "the hidebound, bigoted Muslim clerics in the country think that it is their religious duty to oppress women" (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 203), Rokeya remarks bitingly in one her essays. Then there were the conservative literary critics, who found her thoughts and arguments too radical for their taste and tried to stigmatise her in every possible way. They accused her of "whipping" the society (ctd. in Anisuzzaman 49), of being overly Western and Christian in her imagination (ctd. in Sufi 78) and of telling stories that were absurd and unreal (ctd. in Sufi 171). One critic complained, "[To her] everything Indian is bad and everything Euro-American good" (qtd. in Tharu 342). Another critic accused that Rokeya's works were influenced by the Madras-based Christian Tract Society and their publications on Indian reform (ctd. in Sufi 79); yet another (and a female critic) said that the singular aim of Rokeya's writing was to persecute the men (ctd. in Anisuzzaman 49). Pointing to her first essay, "Woman's Downfall," in which Rokeya describes women's jewellery as an insignia of their imprisonment and slavery and advised the women to discard it, a critic notoriously asked, "She has tossed aside all the jewellery ... but could she be truly civilised without getting rid of the clothes as well and becoming naked?" (qtd. in Anisuzzaman 49). Challenging Rokeya's protestation that she was exposing the evil of excessive purdah in her journalistic vignettes in *The Zenana Women*, a critic said dismissively that her representations of purdah culture were "false," "unreal" and like "grandma's fable"; "if she would have read her own depictions carefully enough, she would have realised that she has fabricated reality into cock-and-bull stories" (qtd. in Sufi 171), the critic said in a pungent remark.

Such nefarious comments were emotionally devastating for Rokeya, as she was a devout Muslim who said her prayers regularly, read the Qur'an

every morning and practiced the purdah even in old age. In fact, she had defended the purdah in one of her earlier essays as an "ethical" choice for mankind (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 41) and practiced the custom herself in her daily life, such that at school meetings she would sit behind a curtain rather than sitting together with the rest of the members of the committee who were mostly men (but at the same time criticising its excessiveness, which forcefully segregated the women from the larger society). Therefore, for others to accuse her of deliberately lying or distorting, or being overly Western and Christian in her imagination, was quite hard for Rokeya to swallow. It came to her as a mortal blow. But the ugly elements of society were not done with her yet. They started spreading scandals against her. Many accused that "a young widow had set up a school only to show off her beauty to society" (Sufi 84). Others "alleged that her companions were prostitutes and the scum of society. Some even branded her a woman of loose morals" (Bagchi x).

The sensitive Rokeya could barely withstand such irrational, unfounded and vitriolic remarks. She began to feel weak and lonely, and even started to give up hope in life. In one of the letters to Mariam, Rokeya complained, "Do you know what I get for all the hard works I do for society? They keep on looking for the little mistakes I make" (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 499). In a letter to Yasin, she wrote, again, lamenting her lonesome state, "I wish there were a few more gentlemen like you, whom I could call friends of poor helpless women who are no better than the animals imprisoned in zoological garden" (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 514), and added in another letter to him, "I am so helpless and friendless; even my nearest relatives are so heartless that they do not hesitate in trying to deprive me of my daily food" (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 519). It only continued to get worse with time. Her body began to fail and she was now almost ready to embrace death. In a letter to Khan Bahadur Tassadaq Ali, on 16 August 1931, she complained of ill health, of stomach and kidney problems, and a few months later, in a letter dated 24 April 1932, this is what she had to say:

> All my life I have been striving to do something for the freedom of women, and I believe God will help me in this; God is my only hope. He has been testing me by inflicting lot of pain and sorrows, but I am hoping that He will show mercy on me soon. (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 511)

"Time's winged chariot [was] hurrying near." Rokeya didn't live much longer after writing this letter. On the morning of 9 December 1932, she succumbed to heart failure. Yet in spite of her frail state of body and mind, she had never given up on her mission. Even on the night before her death she was busy

working on an essay, "The Rights of Women." Rokeya had once said, "No, I am not unfortunate provided this school works well and I can achieve my literary talents" (Syed 8). Needless to say that both her school and her literary works have survived the test of time; both serve as enduring testimonies to Rokeya's genius and vision as a writer, educationist and social activist—all centring on her utmost wish for the Bengali/Muslim/Indian women to break the shackles of patriarchy and find dignity and identity of their own. Three years after her death, Rokeya's school began to receive government grants and it now thrives as a government-funded institution in Calcutta. As for her literary works, she is now recognised as the first Muslim female voice in the Bengal Renaissance.

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INTRODUCTION

This book contains some of the best work by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, popularly known as "Begum Rokeya." Begum is an honorific accorded her posthumously by her readers in Bangladesh and West Bengal (India) to express their admiration for her and her legacy as a writer, educationist and social activist; she is now widely recognised as one of the leading figures of the Bengal Renaissance, together with such prominent culture icons as Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833), Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820–1891), Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824–1873), Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) and Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899–1976). Rokeya wrote, over a period of more than 30 years, in both Bengali and English, and in genres ranging from poetry, polemical essays, fiction, allegorical narratives to social satire, burlesque, letters and journalistic vignettes. Her first piece, "Pipasa" [Thirst], an interrogative narrative of the tragic tale of Muharram (martyrdom of Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Hussein ibn Ali), was published in a Bengali magazine, *Nabaprabha* in 1901, and her last piece, "Narir Adhikar" [The Rights of Women], found incomplete on her table after her death, was published posthumously in *Mahe-Nao* in 1956. Rokeya generally published her work in various newspapers and magazines before considering them for inclusion in her books. Accordingly, she published in some of the best journals and newspapers of her time, such as *Nabaprabha*, *Mahila*, *Nabanur*, *Bharat-Mahila*, *Bangeyo Muslim Shahitya Patrika*, *Swagat*, *Sadhana*, *Dhumketu*, *Al-Islam*, *Mohammadi*, *Sabujpatra*, *Muazzein* and *Mahe-Nao* in Bengali; and *Indian Ladies' Magazine* and *The Mussalman* in English.

Rokeya has left behind five books and scores of uncollected essays, stories, poems and letters. The books are: *Motichur* (A String of Sweet Pearls), Vols. I (1904) and II (1922); *Sultana's Dream* (1908); *Padmarag* (Ruby, 1924), and *Aborodhbashini* (The Zenana Women, 1931). In this collection I have put together selections from *Motichur*, Vols. I and II, and two of her books in full, *Sultana's Dream* and *The Zenana Women*. I have also included some of her essays and stories from her uncollected works, and a handful of letters which were written to the editor of *The Mussalman*. However, I have left out her only novel, *Padmarag*, because it was recently published in English translation by Penguin Books. I have also left out all her poems because Rokeya never had the native genius of a poet, and her poems hardly measure up to her prose works which were more in keeping with her temperament

and sensibility as a writer. Besides, although principally a writer in Bengali, Rokeya also occasionally wrote in English. To separate her output in the two languages, I have organised the material in the book into two sections; the first section provides a selection of her Bengali work, translated into English by myself, and the second section brings together selections of her work in English. Thus, in the first section we have English translations of several essays and stories from the two volumes of *Motichur*, several pieces from her uncollected work and all the 47 journalistic vignettes included in *The Zenana Women*. In section two we have two essays, Rokeya's second book and her most immortal work, *Sultana's Dream*, and several letters, all of which were written originally in English. In all, these selections give us the best representation of Rokeya as a writer, both in terms of her artistry and her moral imagination; and encapsulate, as stated in the book's title, the essential Rokeya.[1]

Rokeya was primarily a realistic writer. She depicted the society around her as she saw it, impartially and objectively, without any attempts to glorify or magnify the truth. She never dwelt in the realm of divine illusion or wrote in the vein of, to borrow Matthew Arnold's words for describing the English Romantic poet P.B. Shelley, "a beautiful ineffectual angel beating in the void his luminous wings in vain" ("Shelley: Unacknowledged Legislator"). Nor did she write merely for the sake of giving pleasure or entertaining her readers. She believed in the ethical function of literature; that literature should arouse sympathy for the oppressed and the exploited in society and heighten the consciousness of readers to the reality of the human condition; she wrote for the practical wellbeing of her society, mainly for the Muslim community of her time, who were, in Rokeya's words, "ship-wrecked" for "earnestly neglecting the feminine portion of the society" (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 537).

One of her precursors in Bengali literature, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838–1894), once said, "If you think by writing you can do some good for humanity or create something beautiful, then you must write" (Syed 73).[2] This is the spirit Rokeya inherited, although her heart was more in doing good for humanity than in creating beauty. Her imagination was essentially practical and she wrote more for the edification of her readers than for mere aesthetic or literary purposes. There is a recurrent tendency to moralise in her writing, because she saw literature as a tool or medium for reforming

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[1] Translation of Rokeya's work in this book is based on the text in Abdul Quadir, ed. *Rokeya Rachanabali* (The Collected Works of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain).

[2] All translations from Bengali in the Introduction are by me.

and improving society. She was sceptical of emotion and enthusiasm, and reason and logic were her guiding stars. That is why she succeeded as a prose writer but failed as a poet. Her poems scarcely deserve any critical attention, because they are short of imagination, spontaneity, feeling, delicacy and beauty, which we expect in any good poetry. Her poems, like her essays, are intended to instruct rather than to move and delight. Because she wrote in a matter-of-fact style, she shows hardly any splendour or elegance in her poetic work. Even in her stories, Rokeya is not so much preoccupied with the technicalities, structural devices or the exquisiteness of her narrative and composition, as she is with her ideas and objectives. Moreover, as in Realistic literature, her stories are character driven and more focused on the psychology of the actors than on the symmetry of the story's plot. Her strength lay in writing polemical prose, characterised by clarity, directness, forceful reasoning and a strong intellectual presence of the author-narrator.

In a sense, artistically, Rokeya can be seen as the polar opposite of her contemporary, also the most acclaimed writer of her time, Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore was essentially a poet; he began his career by writing poetry, and it is for his poetic work, *Gitanjali*, that he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913. However, being a myriad-minded man, he also wrote short stories and polemical prose like Rokeya. In his short stories in particular, he claims to be a realist, emulating life as he saw it among the downtrodden people in rural Bengal; and although he was touched by their sufferings, especially the plights of women—who were ruthlessly oppressed by the prevailing patriarchy of the time—he never wrote with the intention of overtly moralising or allowing his practical agenda to overshadow his artistic end. In an open letter to one of his readers, published in 1918, Tagore claimed that his stories were "artistic creations," intended primarily to give "enjoyment" to his readers, and not written with the overt intention of acting as "a teacher" or giving "moral lessons" (Das 737–741). Besides, even in his prose, Tagore wrote poetically, using florid and figurative language, for which he was once forced to defend himself against charges of grandiloquence by his critics. In an article published in May 1941, a few months before his death, Tagore explained:

> You speak about my language, and say that even in my prose I am a poet. But if my language sometimes goes beyond what is appropriate in a story, you can't blame me for that, because I had to invent the Bengali prose myself. My language was not there; I had to create it gradually and in stages .... I had to create the prose of my stories as I went along. Foreign writers like Maupassant that you often speak of, inherited an already made language. If they had to create their language as they wrote, I wonder how they would have fared.
>
> (*Galpaguccha* 8501–8551)

Contrary to this, Rokeya writes in an ostensibly simple and transparent style. She uses familiar diction, simple sentences and a deliberately unadorned prose. Tagore's objective was to arouse the reader's imagination and passion; Rokeya's, on the other hand, was to appeal to the reader's intellect and influence his/her judgement with a compelling train of thought.

Tagore and Rokeya are different in one more way. Both employ humour in their writing, but often for opposing effects. Tagore uses humour in several of his short stories mainly to have a good laugh at human frailties, without meaning to hurt his readers. For example, in stories such as "The Path to Salvation," "The Professor," "Privacy" and "The Auspicious Sight,"[3] we see him playfully criticising various human weaknesses such as excessive piety, self-righteousness, vanity, jealousy, overweening arrogance and so forth, using gentle irony and a sympathetic tone. They are meant to divert the reader and serve as comic relief in his otherwise emotionally intense stories, and testify that in spite of his seriousness of temperament, Tagore also had a humorous side to his imagination; he could laugh light-heartedly at the ridiculous and ludicrous in himself and his fellow beings, without being unduly strident, abrasive or harsh.

Thus, Tagore's humour tends to be "straight," recreational and non-satirical, while Rokeya's is often satirical, contemptuous and scornful. While Tagore likes to employ a tender laughter at some lopsided aspect of his fictional character, Rokeya's attack on the decadent aspects of her society, especially those that deprive the women of the opportunities of life and force them into an orbit of ignorance and social incarceration, is full of invective, moral indignation and ridicule. Tagore's irony is gentle; Rokeya's is militant, and often pessimistic and savage. For example, when Tagore makes fun of an ambitious young man who wants to write a grand epic without having the necessary talents of a writer ("The Professor"), or a young husband who thinks only women are capable of getting sexually jealous but becomes jealous himself when his wife shows interest in the acting talents of another young man, ignoring her husband's performance in the same play ("Privacy"), we laugh heartily, knowing that these are common human weaknesses that prevail in us all. But when Rokeya describes women as "slaves" and compares them to dogs, horses and prisoners for wearing jewellery ("Woman's Downfall"); or when she describes men as "swines" ("The Creation of Woman") and "Yahoos" ("The Mysteries of Love") who are

[3] These stories are available in Mohammad A. Quayum, ed. and trans. *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Short Stories*.

intellectually and morally inferior to women but reign over them through cunning and coercion; or when she has her men-folk confined to a "mardana" (men's quarters; indoors) in *Sultana's Dream*, and forced to carry out the chores that are traditionally done by women—we laugh no doubt, but we know that her emphasis is on social reform; she is not talking about some common human frailty but about some deep-seated vices that are eating into the very fabric of society. Therefore, after the laugh we are left with a bitter taste in the mouth and forced to re-evaluate ourselves and our surroundings. In other words, Rokeya's humour is not meant for comic relief or tender amusement but rather for a profound moral purpose; it is intended to improve the condition of Muslim/Bengali/Indian society and make it more dynamic, inclusive and even-handed towards all its members, in spite of gender, class or religion.

It is interesting that Rokeya mentions Swift and the Yahoos in her work, because there is a Swiftian quality in her use of satirical humour. In many places, she is as hard-hitting and mordant as Swift. For example, in "In a Land of Seven Hundred Schools," "Three Lazy Men" and "Marriage-crazy Old Men," she is belligerent and blistering in her reprobation of the corruption, superstition and decadence overwhelming the Bengali society, and ferocious in her criticism of the men who shamelessly exploit the marriage institution and victimise young girls at will for the sheer gratification of their lust. In particular, the way she pokes fun at the selfishness and sexual obsession of old Muslim men in "Marriage-crazy Old Men" is incisive and virulent. She is equally trenchant in her exposition of the bizarre purdah practice among both Hindus and Muslims in Bihar and Bengal, in her anecdotal narrative, *The Zenana Women*. For example, when we read about how four- or five-year-old girls are forced into seclusion and forbidden from walking into the presence of not only men but also women outside their family circle, or how small girls are forced to live in a "myakhana" for months before their marriage so that they can get accustomed to the life of seclusion after marriage, or when thieves break into a house and take all the jewellery from the women without any resistance, as the women are more concerned about their purdah than their pride and possessions, or when women are made to walk inside a mosquito net at the Railway platform or in their own courtyard or in a paddy farm so that no other men can see them, or when a doctor has to check a patient's tongue and pulse sitting on the other side of a curtain or a mosquito net, we laugh instinctively at something so senseless and ridiculous, before we pull ourselves together and realise the full gravity of Rokeya's attack on the barbarity of the Bengali culture in which women have been dehumanised and reduced to inert objects or prized possessions for

the men, utterly stripped of their identity, dignity and will, and of the power and say in determining their own fates.

Rokeya also uses religious satire to bring home her arguments. In "The Female-half" she takes a swipe at the story of Rama and Sita from the Sanskrit epic the *Ramayana*. Rama and Sita are often viewed as a sacred couple, as Rama is the embodiment of Vishnu ("the preserver" in the Hindu trinity) and Sita is an incarnation of Lakshmi (the Hindu goddess of fortune), the consort of Vishnu. They stand for an ideal matrimonial relationship to be emulated by all Indians. However, in "The Female-half," Rokeya takes the story and turns it upside down. She depicts Rama not as a god or an ideal husband, but instead as a capricious little boy who treats Sita whimsically, without any love or respect for her. Sita, on the other hand, is like a doll, an inert object, with no voice of her own. Thus, in Rokeya's eyes, Rama and Sita are no better than the average Bengali/Indian couple, in which the husband acts as the master and keeper, while the wife remains meek, silent and submissive, totally at the mercy of her husband—similar to what Rokeya argues in her essays such as "Woman's Downfall," "The Female-half" and "Home," or in her reportorial sketches in *The Zenana Women*.

Rokeya also ridicules the Biblical story of Adam and Eve in her allegorical narrative "The Knowledge Fruit," again by turning the story on its head. In the Bible, Eve is portrayed as a weakling and Adam's underling, responsible for Man's fall from the Garden of Eden; however, in Rokeya's feminist imagination, she becomes the paragon of female virtue; strong, self-willed and courageous, Eve is the role model for every woman. Adam, on the other hand, is a weak, effeminate husband, who likes to be led by his wife. In the Bible, the gullible Eve is tempted by Satan into eating the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. In Rokeya's story, though, Eve eats the fruit "absentmindedly" and not from an external inducement, and after eating it gives one of her leftover fruits to her husband, who takes it without any protest. Thus, the timid, foolish, sinful woman is transformed into a laudable individual possessing her own intelligence and volition; her act of eating the fruit is a boon rather than a curse, as it helps redeem humanity from the sheltered life of sloth and ignorance in paradise, and empowers them with knowledge. This exaltation of Eve and repudiation of Sita is Rokeya's way of mocking religious stories that she thinks have interpreted the world largely from a male point of view, subjecting women to an eternal male dominance, male supremacy and male subservience.

Perhaps the only places where Rokeya is rather light-hearted in her use of humour are the two reciprocally related stories on the creation of woman and man, "The Creation of Woman" and "The Theory of Creation." In "The

Creation of Woman," she comically narrates the Puranic tale of woman's creation via the process of translating Mr. Bain's English rendition of the Sanskrit story into Bengali. Rokeya deliberately creates an atmosphere in the story which is funny, as she falls asleep from the boredom of translation and is visited by the Hindu god of creation, Tvastri. Tvastri appears in her dream to rectify Mr. Bain's truncated list of ingredients for the creation of woman, as he had unwittingly left out twelve of the thirty-three ingredients used for woman's creation. We are told that Tvastri had run out of material while creating woman, so he had to enter into a meditation to come up with an answer to the enigma and then eventually make do with the taste, flavour and essence of various ingredients, in the absence of anything solid. This is Rokeya's way of laughing at the dainty aspect of the female body, which tends to be slight, slender and supple, instead of being solid in build. Tvastri then goes on to recount the full list of ingredients and begins by mentioning items which are used for making "chutney" (Indian relish), which is a hilarious way of pointing out the tartness of the female personality. But what is important is that women have been given a rounded character template; if they are tart, salty and pungent, they are also sweet, beautiful and gentle; being the last, woman is also Tvastri's best creation: "When people strain their brains the most to make something, they come up with a complete product; but when someone gains the expertise by making something again and again, the last item of that product is also the best" ("The Creation of Woman"), explains the narrator.

Up until this point in the essay, Rokeya seems to be in a blithe mood, teasing both men and women—men by implying that they are not as good as women; and women by pointing out their many weaknesses, in spite of their overall fullness of character. However, towards the end of the narrative, when it comes to Tvastri offering his finest creation as a gift to man, Rokeya's mood suddenly changes and she dismisses god's act as "casting pearl before a swine" ("The Creation of Woman"). Comparing men to swine is a good indication of the extent of Rokeya's anger against men who have failed to appreciate how much they have been enriched by the presence of women. Instead of taking women as friends and companions, men have been ignoring them and treating them with apathy and disdain. This attitude of men affronts Rokeya as she concludes her narrative with a vituperative remark, "Since then woman has been living as man's curse and his burden"—curse and burden not because women are not good enough but because men being "swines" are not deserving of such a gift—thus caustically reducing men's vanity, arrogance and egotism to mere vulgarities in their nature.

Again, in "The Theory of Creation," Rokeya begins in a light mood, as she has Tvastri crash into a house with his steam-driven vehicle while returning from the human world to the stellar region. We laugh as Tvastri explains why he had no choice but to visit the world at such an odd hour and bad weather. We also laugh when he recognises the narrator from his last meeting with her when she was writing "The Creation of Woman." It becomes more hilarious when the girls in the house start pressing the god Tvastri to narrate how he had created man. God is reluctant because he is sleepy, so one of the girls, Shirin, offers to get him a cup of tea. Shirin calls up her maid, Mariam, with her shortened name, "Maro," to help her make the tea. This frightens Tvastri as he mistakes "Maro," the name, with the same word in Bengali, which means "to beat." This titillates the girls in the house and they break out in laughter. We also laugh with the girls as we see the absurdity of the situation, where a god is showing fear of physical abuse by some mortal creatures, and a handful of girls to boot. Besides, this god seems to understand Bengali as he is frightened by his misunderstanding of a Bengali word. After the tea, god begins to narrate his story of creation of man, but he is still sleepy so he has to repeat and rectify in places, and pretend alertness by being loud from time to time so that the girls don't understand that he is sleepy.

However, as god Tvastri continues with his narrative, Rokeya abandons her comic style and returns to her habitual use of wit as a weapon. God describes his creation of man in the following words, "… in creating teeth I took the snake's poison fang root and branch; in making hands, feet and fingernails, I took the whole of the panther's paw; to fill in the cells of the brain, I used the donkey's brain intact" ("The Theory of Creation"). Immediately we know where Rokeya's knife is pointed. She is no longer light-heartedly poking fun at men, but taking a swat at them by associating men with animals such as the snake, panther and donkey. If women are moderate and multifaceted in their personalities, men are extreme and one-dimensional; the weaknesses in women are compensated by certain good qualities in them; for example, if women are timid, vain and cunning, they also have the "beauty of the flower," "brightness of the sun" and "pleasant taste of honey." But men have no redeeming qualities in them; with the teeth of the snake, paws of the panther and brain of the donkey, they are venomous, cruel and dumb. The only laugh we hear here is Rokeya's sniggering laugh of revenge at men for their senseless oppression of women.

We can hear echoes of similar cynical laughs in Rokeya's memorable piece, *Sultana's Dream*. It is a simple story of a woman who visits a land in her dream where women rule and men are confined in the inner quarters of the

house called the "mardana." This Ladyland is neat and clean like a garden, and it is beautifully and most efficiently maintained. Moreover, it is free from violence, corruption and crime, and is both intellectually and morally prosperous. People here have tamed nature and tapped its energy for the good of the community. They do not fight with one another and nor do they fritter their time away smoking and chatting. Child marriage is banned here, and female education is actively encouraged. Those who lie are asked to leave the land but if they repent wholeheartedly they are allowed to return. At one point asked by Sultana, who is visiting the Ladyland in her dream, what their religion is, Sister Sara, a resident of the land who has come to take Sultana for a tour of the place, explains, "Our religion is based on Love and Truth. It is our religious duty to love one another and be absolutely truthful" (*Sultana's Dream*). In other words, the people of this land do not care about any extra-terrestrial power or adhering to a set of senseless rituals, but only the values that are directly beneficial to the human community and to the human soul.

This beautifully crafted story has an easy-to-understand plot, and on one level it is amusing, amazing and entertaining and reads like a pleasant fantasy. But it is also a "self-consciously feminist piece" (Jahan 1) in which Rokeya presents a feminist utopia in the form of a sugar-coated quinine; it is sugary outside but bitterly pungent underneath. In the narrative, Rokeya has cleverly turned the table against the men and made them suffer the same fate that they have inflicted on the Muslim/Bengali/Indian women for centuries. After reading the story Rokeya's husband had admiringly mumbled, "A terrible revenge!" What better way to take revenge than to beat the men in their own game and give them a dose of their own medicine! In India women are seen as useless and forced into a life of seclusion; in the Ladyland, men are deemed useless and tricked into a life of mardana. As Sister Sara caustically says, "[Men] should not do anything, excuse me; they are fit for nothing. Only catch them and put them into the zenana" (*Sultana's Dream*). In India, men consider themselves intellectually superior to the women; in the Ladyland, it is the women who are acknowledged as superior; they have trapped the men into their present confinement not by brawn but by brain. This role reversal in the story and Rokeya's clever empowerment of women is humorous and delightfully funny, but it is also her most lethal (albeit astutely disguised) attack in her *jihad* against male dominance and male supremacy in the Indian patriarchal system.

Rokeya's argument on the question of women is simple but honest and profound. She believes that women are essentially as good as men, if not better. But women have been deprived of all opportunities in life for a

long time, especially the opportunity for education; therefore, they have become subservient to men. They have lost their self-confidence and sense of dignity, and become excessively dependent. They are both physically and mentally weak, timid, ignorant and lazy. Men are largely to blame for it, because on the one hand they deprive the women from education and work but, on the other, they pamper them with silly, romantic thoughts. Child marriage is also a serious impediment to women's progress. However, women themselves are equally culpable as they have accepted the customs and traditions introduced by men too easily and have thereby contributed to the process of their enslavement. Now it is time for women to wake up and not sleep any longer. "Rise we must for the sake of society," Rokeya proffers in "Woman's Downfall." In "The Dawn," using the religious metaphor of prayer and the Muslim call for morning-prayer, she further adjures, admonishes and urges the women in a clarion call:

> Wake up, mothers, sisters, daughters; rise, leave your bed and march forward. There, listen, the Muezzin is calling for prayer. Can't you hear that call, that command from God? Don't sleep any more; wake up, the night has ended, it is dawn now; the Muezzin is calling for prayer. Whilst women of the rest of the world have awoken and declared war against all kinds of social injustices—rising to the level of education minister, doctor, philosopher, scientist, defence minister, chief of army, writer, poet and so forth—we, the women of Bengal are still sleeping profoundly on the damp floors of our own homes, where we are being held captives, and dying in thousands as victims of consumption.

Indian women must wake up for two reasons: to break the shackles of serfdom and restore their identity, honour and dignity in society; and to help the society realise its full potential. Women's ignorance and protracted "sleep" have had a profound negative effect on their identity. They are now seen as a curse and treated like beasts, even worse than beasts. In "Woman's Downfall," "The Female-half," "Home," "Bengal Women's Educational Conference," "Woman Worship" and *The Zenana Women*, Rokeya remonstrates repeatedly how women in India have been reduced to a state worse than animals. In "Home" she furiously comments, "… we do not even have a little hut to call our own. No other creature in the animal world is destitute like us. Everyone has a home—only we don't." Women in India are homeless because, Hindu or Muslim, every woman has to depend on a man for shelter and cannot enjoy free living even if she inherits property from her parents or husband. In "Woman Worship," giving the example of a Hindu widow who was neglected by her family even as she was mortally ill, Rokeya comments sarcastically, "Perhaps the master of the house wouldn't be without a worry even when the family's cow was sick …. Perhaps even a pet dog or a cat doesn't die without

treatment ….” In “Bengal Women’s Educational Conference,” a lecture which she gave in her capacity as the President of the Association, Rokeya tantalisingly comments:

> I have been crying for the lowliest creature in India for the last twenty years. Do you know who that lowliest creature in India is? It is the Indian women …. There are people also who feel for animals, so we see animals’ rights groups everywhere. If a dog is hit by a car, we hear an outcry in the Anglo-Indian media. But there is not a single soul in the whole of the subcontinent to mourn for incarcerated women like us.

This miserable state of Indian women needs to be urgently redressed and remedied so that they can enjoy their human condition and live in freedom, dignity and equality with the men. “By freedom, we mean nothing short of a successful life like the men …. We’ll do all we have to in order to attain equality with the men,” Rokeya affirms unequivocally in her essay, “Woman’s Downfall.”

Women need to overcome their present miserable state for the sake of society as well. “Men and women are like two sides of the colossal body of society,” Rokeya argues in “Bengal Women’s Educational Conference.” Therefore, how can a society move forward if its two sides are not equally developed? In “The Female-half,” she explains the same point, using the metaphor of the carriage: “If one wheel of the carriage is big (husband) and the other small (wife), it cannot go very far; it keeps rotating in one place (inside one’s home). That’s why Indians have not been able to advance in life.” Proportion and balance as well as harmonious and synchronous growth of both men and women are vital for the steady growth of a society. Moreover, women are mothers. How can a society have mentally and physically strong children if their mothers are weak, timid and ignorant? “The courage or cowardice of the ‘masters’ [i.e., men] lies in the volition of the mother,” Rokeya snaps in “The Female-half.” In “Bengal Women’s Educational Conference,” she makes the point through a scornful remark on the Muslim community who, she argues, are so poverty-stricken and backward only because of their arrogant indifference towards their women:

> There are ten million beggars in India; of that, the majority are Muslims. So, how can they compete with other people? We too boast of nobility! Begging is the meanest of livelihoods, and Muslims outnumber other groups in this occupation. This is because they have rendered their female population totally useless by depriving them of opportunities to fulfil their physical and mental potentials. As a consequence, the children born of their womb become lazy and unwilling to work. So what else can they do to make their families proud except to beg?

Here, Rokeya is trying to sway us into realising that neglecting women has a high price. If the women are weak or timid or dumb, so will their children be; if they are meek, unworthy and servile, their children will also end up as loafers and sluggards. Rokeya then suddenly raises the stakes by arguing that the ignorance of women doesn't affect just the family and the community; indeed, it has a bearing on the entire nation. Using a Tagorean logic, she contends:

> As long as the Muslim men pay no heed to the aspirations of their women, the two hundred twenty million other Indians will pay no heed to them; and as long as those two hundred twenty million people ignore the eighty million Muslims in the country, the British government also will not yield to their demands.

In other words, India won't be able to attain freedom from its colonial rule until the Muslim women (and by implication, of course, all Indian women) are free to pursue their own futures. This is similar to Tagore's claim that India does not deserve to break away from the colonial shackle so long as it continues to oppress its own women, minorities and depressed classes.[4] In other words, the emphasis of both Tagore and Rokeya is on the element of justice; in order for Indians to get freedom from external rule, they must first rise above all forms of internal oppression, abuse and injustice.

Rokeya's answer to the issue of women's enslavement, and its concomitant effect on the Muslim community and India's sovereignty as a nation, is women's education. If women are allowed to pursue education, the whole nation will become spirited and enlightened. Moreover, it will bring economic emancipation for the women. In other countries, women are becoming scientists, doctors and lawyers, but in India women are busy measuring the size of a pillowcase for sewing and weighing food items for cooking. Women should go into all kinds of professional work and, if need be, even take up business and farming. They should not throw away their lives merely to "gratify their husband-lords. They shouldn't depend on anyone for their basic necessities like food and clothing," Rokeya argues in "The Dawn"; and in "Woman's Downfall," she asks challengingly, "Why shouldn't we be gainfully employed? What do we lack—hands, legs, intellect? The labour that we expend in the household work at our 'master's' house, can't we run an independent business with that?"

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[4] For a full discussion of this issue, see Mohammad A. Quayum, "Imagining 'One World': Rabindranath Tagore's Critique of Nationalism."

However, education should not be merely for attaining a degree and finding a job. It should be for more. It should cultivate the innate faculties of the individual and bring fullness to the character. Human beings have been created with huge potentials; education should help to fructify those potentials and add grace and radiance to them. The real purpose of education is not "the pursuit of academic degrees" or "to blindly imitate a community or a race;" it is "to develop the innate faculties of the individual," Rokeya argues in "Woman's Downfall," and adds, "God has given us hands, legs, eyes, ears, imagination and the power to think. If we strengthen our hands and legs through exercise, do virtuous deeds with our hands, observe attentively with our eyes, listen carefully with our ears, and learn to make our thinking ability more sophisticated through reflection, then that is true education." In "The Dawn," she adduces:

> By education, I mean wholesome education; the skill to read a few books or write a few lines of verse is not true education. I want that education which will enable them to earn their rights as citizens; that which will make them into ideal daughters, sisters, wives and mothers. Education should cultivate both the body and mind.

Rokeya earnestly believed that on the issue of women's education, the Muslims were the most backward. The Brahmos and the Hindus were relatively ahead. They were taking necessary measures to emancipate their women, a point she makes in "Bengal Women's Educational Conference" and "God Gives, Man Robs." In "Bengal Women's Education Conference," for example, she postulates, "The good news is that, after so many eons, Lord Krishna himself has shown clemency towards our Hindu sisters and, therefore, there is a new awakening among the zenana women of different castes within the Hindu community." This tardiness of the Muslims infuriates Rokeya and she returns to the issue again and again to prick and prod and punish her fellow Muslims. She explains why the Muslims are so backward, dogmatic and conservative. They have too many "tireless 'religious' troopers" who take it as their religious duty to oppress the women. These *mullahs* are ignorant, hardly read the Qurʾan, and live by superstition and deformity of the faith; yet they are relentless in issuing *fatwahs* (religious edicts) against women's education. They are worried that education will derail the women. Therefore, they are sworn against women learning anything beyond reciting the Qurʾan like a parrot, and have enforced a deadly purdah on them which is slowly "killing" the women, like Carbonic acid gas kills without pain. Rokeya's reply to such scaremongering *mullahs* is, "Just because fire has the potential to burn down a house, can any householder do without fire?" ("Nurse Nelly").

Rokeya is outraged by the fact that Islam is a progressive religion and yet Muslims remain in such utter darkness. She argues that Prophet Muhammad was a custodian of the female race. He showed how caring he was towards women through his love, affection and devotion to his daughter Fatema. Moreover, Prophet Muhammad made education compulsory for both men and women. "He advised that attaining knowledge is an obligation for every human being, whether man or woman. Thus the law of compulsory education was decreed for Muslims thirteen hundred years ago" ("The Female-half"), Rokeya remonstrates, casting a verbal shaft at the Muslims. She is baffled as to why the Bengali Muslims should turn their backs on such an authentic teaching of the religion and yet falsely claim a moral and spiritual high ground. She finds the whole situation very ironic, almost contradictory and blames it on the ignorance and hypocrisy of the Muslim men. Calling it a "crime," Rokeya challenges these pseudo-religious charlatans "to show the authority on which they prevent their girls from acquiring education … quote from the Qurʾan or hadis any injunction prohibiting women from obtaining knowledge" ("Educational Ideals for Modern Indian Girls").

Rokeya's energy and imagination were focussed primarily on women's education, women's enlightenment and women's emancipation, but she was also interested in the issue of nationalism and India's future as a nation. Brought up in an extremely conservative Muslim family and writing at a time when the Hindus and Muslims in Bengal were locked over the contentious issue of the partition of Bengal (which occurred in 1905) and were beginning to search for separate political identities for themselves (as evident in the formation of the Muslim League, a separate national political party for the Indian Muslims, in 1906), Rokeya never saw herself exclusively as a Bengali or a Muslim. She always emphasised her Indian identity above all else. In her essay, "Sugrihini" [The Good Housewife], she categorically stated:

> We ought to remember that we are not merely Hindus or Muslims; Parsis or Christians; Bengalis, Madrasis, Marwaris or Punjabis; we are all Indians. We are first Indians, and Muslims or Sikhs afterwards. A good housewife will cultivate this truth in her family. This will gradually eradicate narrow selfishness, hatred and prejudice and turn her home into a shrine; help the members of her family to grow spiritually. (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 56)

She successfully overcame such "narrow selfishness, hatred and prejudice" in her personal life, and shunned sectarian outlook to wholeheartedly embrace India's multicultural and multi-religious ethos. She saw differences in religions as something outer, in form only, not in essence; in the end all creatures lived in one God. Rokeya crystallises this idea through an

anecdotal narrative from her brother, in the dedicatory note to her novel *Padmarag* (Ruby):

> A religious person once went to a dervish to learn about meditation. The dervish said, 'Come, I'll take you to my guru.' This guru who was a Hindu, said, 'What will I teach? Come, I'll take you to my guru.' His guru was, again, a Muslim dervish. When the disciple asked the dervish about this free mingling among the Hindu and Muslim priests, the dervish replied, 'Religion is like a three-storied building. In the lowest floor there are many quarters for Brahmins, Kshatriyas and other castes among Hindus; Shi'ites, Sunnis, Shafis, Hanafis and other sects among Muslims; and, likewise, for Roman Catholics, Protestants etc. among Christians. If you come to the second floor, you will find all the Muslims in one room, all the Hindus in one room, etc. When you reach the third floor, you will notice there is only one room; there is no religious segregation on this floor; everyone belongs to the same human community and worships one God. In a sense no differences exist here, and everything dwells in one Creator only.' (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 263)

Rokeya not only preached such sublime ideas in her writings but also practiced them in her own life. Therefore, we see her being familiar with all the Hindu religious texts and introducing several Hindu characters in her narratives. In "Home," Rokeya gives examples from both Hindu and Muslim communities to show how Indian women, in spite of their differing religious identities, are equally helpless and equally dependent on the mercy of men. In "Woman Worship" she depicts Hindu and Muslim characters having an exchange on the fate of women in various religious communities. In "The Creation of Woman" and "The Theory of Creation," she is retelling the Hindu Puranic tales to argue her ideas on the attributes and temperament of both men and women. In *The Zenana Women*, while narrating the deadly purdah practice imposed on the Indian women, she gives examples from both the Muslim and Hindu communities. Likewise, there are many references to Christianity as well, but she concentrates largely on Hindus and Muslims because they form the two largest religious communities in the subcontinent.

While she was keen to unite the Indians, Rokeya was also interested in India's freedom from colonial rule. In "The Knowledge Fruit," an allegorical story, she exposes the British colonial atrocity against India through the fairy narrative of the fair-looking jinns plundering the resources of the Kanak Island. In the story, Rokeya cleverly fuses her feminist sensibility with her nationalist sentiments, by suggesting that the only way Kanak Island can get rid of the defrauding and domineering jinns is by having all men and women unite in planting and protecting the tree that yields the knowledge fruit, i.e. by allowing equal access to education for both men and women.

The nationalist theme is also evident in "Nurse Nelly," a touching story in which a young Muslim woman becomes a victim of the colonial Christian missionaries, who convert her to Christianity and force her to abandon her family, only for her to die tragically from an overwhelming guilt and loneliness. The story is meant to show Rokeya's scorn for the colonisers who were destroying the web and texture of Indian culture and society through their fraudulent ways and canny imposition of alien ideas, but it also interweaves the issue of Rokeya's concern for women, as Nayeema, the story's main character, has been successfully victimised by the colonial missionaries only because she is an uneducated woman, totally ignorant of her own culture and religion. Again, as in "The Knowledge Fruit," Rokeya's answer to the unscrupulous exploitation of vulnerable Indian women by the colonisers is women's education and women's empowerment.

Rokeya had a multifaceted imagination. She was interested in Hindu-Muslim unity; in buttressing India's national identity by finding freedom from the colonial rule; and in ensuring that Bengali Muslims would accept Bengali, and not Urdu, as their mother tongue. But she never strayed from her primary mission, which was the empowerment of Muslim/Bengali/Indian women (and, indeed, all women) through education, and finding their equality, dignity and freedom in society. She tirelessly propagated this idea in her writing, and put the ideology to practice by establishing a school for girls in Calcutta, Sakhawat Memorial School for Girls (1910), and a woman's organisation, Anjuman-i-Khawateen Islam (Association of Muslim Women; 1916). The letters I have included in the book show how fervently Rokeya was involved in the activities of these two organisations and how intimately they were entwined with her spirit and being.

Rokeya enjoys considerable popularity in her native Bengal. She is often revered in both Bangladesh and West Bengal for her boldness of vision and courage of conviction. She was writing at a time—and fighting for women's rights, freedom and equality—when women in the subcontinent were forced to live within the confines of home. She herself was raised in a similar environment, which she so furiously condemns in *The Zenana Women*. For her seminal contributions to the cause of women's education and women's emancipation, she is now regarded as a "foremother" of Indian feminism, an embodiment of the soul and conscience of her age and a female icon par excellence. As Roushan Jahan comments, "every educated [Bengali] woman is a living memorial to this remarkable woman" (55). It is to be hoped that this book will help readers outside Bengal and India to take a fresh look at her work and appraise as well as appreciate how much she has contributed to the cause of women's awakening globally, and in germinating

the seeds of multiculturalism and anti-colonial nationalism in South Asia even before the arrival of Gandhi in India's political scene.

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TRANSLATED WORKS

FROM *A STRING OF SWEET PEARLS*, VOL. I (1904)

Woman's Downfall[a]

Dear female readers, have you ever thought about the condition of your misfortune? What we are in this civilised world of the twentieth century? *Slaves*! I hear slavery as a trade has disappeared from this world, but has our servitude ended? No. There are reasons why we are still in bondage.[1]

It's true that nobody knows the history of the primitive times, and yet it seems that in the ancient age when civilisation didn't exist, when social ties didn't prevail, our situation was not like it is now. For some unknown reason, as one half of mankind (male) continued to flourish in different spheres of life, the other half (female) failed to keep up with the pace and so, instead of becoming the companions or partners of men, they ended up as their bondmaids.

Can any of you explain the cause of such world-wide degradation of women? Perhaps lack of opportunities is the main reason for it. Unable to get on, the female sex had pulled back from all affairs of life and, considering them to be weak and inefficient, men began extending a helping hand to them. Gradually, the more the womenfolk received support from men, the more incompetent they became. We can jolly well be likened to the beggars of this land. The more that the wealthy give alms with a religious mission, the greater the number of low-life beggars that are on the rise. Eventually, begging has become a profession for the indolent. They are now no longer ashamed of taking alms.

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[1] Some of us might think that it's God's wish that women should live in the subjugation of men. He first created man, and later, to serve him, He created woman. Here, however, we will not discuss views of any of the scriptures but only express what we understand from common sense. That is to say, I am only voicing my own opinion.

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[a] First serialised as "Alankar na Badge of Slavery" (Jewellery or Badge of Slavery) in *Baishakh*, *Jaishtha* and *Ashar* 1310 (May, June, July 1903) issues of the monthly magazine *Mahila* (Ed. Girishchandra Sen), it was republished with certain modifications as "Amader Abanati" (Our Downfall) in *Bhadra* 1311 (2.5; September 1904) issue of *Nabanur* (Ed. Syed Emdad Ali), and included with a new title, "Istrijatir Abanati" (Woman's Downfall), in *Motichur* (A String of Sweet Pearls), Vol. I, published in the same year. This translation is based on the text of the essay in Abdul Quadir, ed. *Rokeya Rachanabali* (11–22).

Likewise, with the loss of our dignity, we feel no trepidation in taking favours from men. Therefore, we have become slaves of indolence and, by extension, of men. Slowly, even our minds have become enslaved. Being serfs for centuries, we have now become used to our serfdom. In this way, our higher mental faculties of self-reliance and courage, having been nipped in the bud over and again for lack of cultivation, have probably stopped sprouting altogether. Consequently, men have found it appropriate to suggest: "The five worst maladies that afflict the female mind are: indocility, discontent, slander, jealousy and silliness … such is the stupidity of her character, that it is incumbent on her, in every particular, to distrust herself and to obey her husband" (*Japan, the Land of the Rising Sun*).

Then there are those who say, "Exaggerations and lies are accessories of the female tongue." Some consider us foolish and others, unreasonable. Because of such flaws in us, they have begun to consider us as inferior. But that is quite natural. Let me give you an example. Sons-in-law are much loved in our country; even a witch loves her son-in-law, and yet a son-in-law who moves in with his parents-in-law is not viewed with affection. Thus, when we lost our ability to differentiate between freedom and captivity, progress and stagnation, slowly, from being landlords and masters of the house, men, in stages, ended up being our lord and proprietor.[2] And,

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[2] "Although the Japanese wife is considered only the *first servant of her husband*, she is usually addressed in the house as the honourable mistress … acquaintance with European customs has awakened among the more educated classes in Japan a desire to raise the position of women" (*Japan, the Land of the Rising Sun*).

Some women may object to the use of the word "slave." But let me ask, "What does the word 'husband' mean"? If one who gives charity is called a "giver," the person who receives it must be described as a "receiver"; likewise, if we describe one as "husband, lord, master," what else can we call the other but "slave?" If you claim that wives have dedicated themselves to the service of their husbands from love, then of course nobody can complain against such selfless devotion. But haven't men also taken a similar vow of support and service to their family from a bondage of love? Even when the poorest of workers receives his meagre wage after a day's work in starvation and goes to the market, he doesn't waste money on titbits to feed himself. Instead, he buys a little grocery with it and hands it over to his wife. When the wife serves the husband with a handful of rice after cooking it, the poor fellow is happy with it. What a remarkable self-sacrifice! And yet why does society describe married men as "husbands" rather than "love-devotees?" I remember one more important point here. Those privileged wives who feel offended by the word "slave" and often cite the examples of Sita and Savitri, don't they know that there are one or more aristocratic classes within the Hindu community who buy young girls at a price for marrying? One who is purchased with money, what else you could call her but a "slave?" In this context, some may of course point to the practice of grooms bargaining on their academic qualifications but, generally, there is no instance of male spouses being sold. Importantly, it is the groom's degrees that are sold but not the groom himself. But this argument doesn't apply in the case of brides because eight to twelve year

gradually, we have become like one of their domesticated animals, or some kind of a prized property.

With the inception of civilisation and various societal relationships, all regulations in the community were formulated according to the wishes of their leaders. That is customary. "Might is right." Now, I ask, who is to blame for our downfall?

And our most cherished jewelleries are the markers of our slavery. Now it is no doubt used to enhance our beauty but, in the view of many respectable and notable people, ornaments were originally badges of slavery.[3] Therefore, we see prisoners wearing iron shackles while we, being objects of affection, wear fetters made of gold or silver, i.e. anklets. Their handcuffs are made of steel; our handcuffs are gold and silver bangles. Needless to say, iron bangles are also not excluded. Our bejewelled chokers are perhaps modelled after the dog collar. Horses, elephants and other animals are bound in iron chains; likewise, embellishing our necks with gold-chains, we think we are wearing ornaments. A cow-owner perforates the nose of a bullock to put the harness; our masters in this country have made us wear a nose-ring set with a pendant. That nose-ring is the symbol of the master's being and presence. Thus, you see, sisters, your most precious ornaments are nothing but testimony to your slavery. And notice the irony of it; the more a woman wears the badges of slavery, the more she is revered in society.

There is so much eagerness in the female race for this jewellery, as if the happiness and prosperity of their whole life depends on it. Thus, poorer housewives, unable to afford gold or silver bracelets, fulfil their enslaved lives by wearing glass bangles. The widow who has lost the right to wear bangles is wretched like none other on earth. What boundless grace of habit! Because we are accustomed to slavery, we even love and admire the jewellery that marks our servitude. In spite of the fact that opium is unpleasant in taste, it is a fond object for the opium-addict. No matter how harmful

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old girls hardly have any distinctive attributes or academic qualifications that could fetch a price. In other words, it is the girls themselves who are being sold. Once I raised this issue in a conversation with an upper-class Brahmin woman and asked her, "Why do they have to buy girls, can't they find brides in their own community?" In reply the woman said, "Of course they can. But that is their custom. Someone will pay dowry to marry another's sister, and another will give dowry to marry his sister."

Our objective here was not to point out a particular class of people or a specific vice, but to counter the false arguments of the adversaries I had to give this example from one of the Slaves, alias the Lady. I regret doing it, but one's duty comes first.

[3] A well-known religious scholar from the north, Mr. Zakaullah, has said, "A nose-ring is an embodiment of the harness."

intoxicating drugs are for the body, the addictive person doesn't want to get rid of it. Similarly, bearing marks of slavery on our body, we feel proud of ourselves and swell with self-esteem and delight.

For what I have said about jewellery, some of our sisters might think that I am acting as an emissary of men. That is, I am adroitly creating disgust for ornaments in sisters to save their husbands' money from jewellers. But that is not the case. I only want to act as your voice. If the objective of jewellery is to squander men's money, then there are many ways of doing it. Let me mention one or two for you here.

Put that stone-studded choker around the neck of your pet dog. When you go out for a ride on a horse-drawn carriage, you could deck your horse with your invaluable necklace. Your bangles and bracelets could be used as rings for your drawing room curtains. That would be a proper way of being extravagant with your male partner's money, who now passes as your master. The primary aim of jewellery is nothing but to demonstrate wealth. Demonstrate it in this way. Why should you bear the marks of slavery on your own body? If you make the right use of jewellery in this way, people might at first dismiss you as a crazy person, but you might as well ignore that.[4] In this cursed society, what good has been achieved without pain? Even the noble Galileo was condemned to a mental institution for claiming "the earth moves around the sun." Which honest person has been able to express his/her views without trouble? That's why I say, don't pay heed to social gossip. No correct word, or action, is appreciated in this world at the time of its occurrence.

In reality, jewellery is nothing but an insignia of slavery. But if instead of taking it as a symbol of servitude, one considers it as a mode of adornment, would that be less humiliating? Isn't the attempt to augment one's physical charm an expression of mental weakness? Men see it as a sign of defeat. While disputing on a subject, they often assert, "If I can't prove my words I'll wear a bangle." To inspire the men, the celebrated poet Saadi[b] once said, "Oh, valiant men! Try to attain victory; do not put yourself in the attire of women." They feel belittled wearing our dress. Let's see what that dress is. The material we use is almost similar to that used by men. Is there

[4] Wearing jewellery and squandering money in the ways I have mentioned are no different. But I hope, instead of wasting it, spending it in the right way will be considered logical.

[b] Saadi, or Sa'di (1184–1283), is considered as one of the most significant poets in Persian literature, especially of medieval Persian literature. His best known works are *Bostan* (The Orchard, 1257) and *Gulistan* (The Rose Garden, 1258).

much difference in the size of a loincloth and a sari? Countries where men wear trousers, women also wear the same. We hear of ladies' jackets but also of men's jackets. But perhaps the expression "woman's blouse" implies feminine weaknesses rather than a garment.

Men often claim that they are shielding us from all harm with the armour of their utmost love, and threaten that we'll never get similar affection from the rest of society. We are also swinging along, heaving, bobbing and dissolving in that affection. In fact, their compassion is the source of our ruin. By cooping us up in their emotional cage, men have deprived us of the light of knowledge and an unadulterated air, which is causing our slow death. They also claim, "We'll bring everything for them with joy to make them happy—why should they have to endure sorrow while we are still around?" We thank these people for such generous thoughts, but brother, this wretched world is not merely a delightful fancy of poets—it is intricate, wicked and evil. Reality is not poetry:

> This life is not poetry or fiction,
> Nor is it a theatre, but a habitat of reality.

There lies the trouble. Otherwise, with your grace, we would have no want. Taking after your imagination, maidens of Bengal could have increasingly become slender, delicate, overwhelmingly timid, etc., until in an aerial body they would dissolve into the sky like steam. But the real situation is not so pleasant. Thus, I wish to humbly plead: "Do us this favour, do not do any favour to us."

As a matter of fact, many objects get destroyed from excessive care. When a dress is painstakingly put away in a confined place for too long, it becomes a provision for termites. The poet has aptly said:

> Why did the lamp extinguish?
> I covered it with zealous care,
> Waiting up all night,
> So has the lamp snuffed out!

Thus, it is apparent that careful and earnest attention is the source of our utter ruin.

Being constantly protected from the dangers and difficulties of society, we have lost our courage, confidence and will altogether. Renouncing self-reliance, we have become totally dependent on our husbands. When we are faced with the slightest of difficulties, we rush into the house and start wailing at the highest pitch. Honourable brothers, again, who doesn't know about the way you taunt us about our whimpering. And we suffer that

humiliation in silence. When I think of the way we have become so miserably timid, I feel that I am almost suffocating in revulsion and shame.[5]

Let alone a tiger or a bear, we are terrified at the sight of a cockroach or a leech. Some of us would even swoon at its sight. A nine or ten year old boy can intimidate all the women in the family with a leech trapped in a bottle and amuse himself. The women continue to scream and run and the boy chases them with the bottle in hand laughing. Haven't you seen such a ridiculous sight? I have, and I feel mortified in disgust and shame at the thought of it. Frankly, I felt amused too at the time, but now as I think about it, I feel enraged. Alas! At whose feet have we sacrificed all our physical strength and mental courage? And we don't even have the power to reflect on this dreadfully deplorable situation.

I have given an example of cowardice; now let me give you an example of physical weakness. We have become such insensate, inanimate objects that we are no better than mere drawing-room ornaments for men. Dear female reader, have you ever seen an inert thing in the form of a daughter-in-law in

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[5] The other day (dated 19th April) I saw in an Urdu newspaper that the Turkish women have appealed the following in a petition to the Sultan: "We have nothing to do except to remain confined within four walls. Let us be given at least so much education that we could protect our houses and the city with the right weapons during a war." They have listed the following advantages in support of their petition:

(1) The main advantage is that many soldiers employed in protecting the city during a war will reduce the number of soldiers in the battlefield. The harm arising from it will not happen in future (because women will protect the city).
(2) Children will be familiar with the science of war from childhood, and both parents being soldiers will ensure that the offspring will not be timid or cowardly.
(3) They will design a special type of uniform which will cover the whole face and body, except the nose and eyes.
(4) It has been decided in honour of the purdah system that, for the first three years at least, male soldiers in every family will train their female relatives. After that, the trained female soldiers will go around from house to house to train the other women in art of war.

Those women have also mentioned in their petition: "We'll not trouble the government with the cost of making the uniforms. We only expect them to give us rifles and other weapons." Let's see how the honourable Sultan responds to the petition.

Whether this report is true or not, the newspaper is responsible for it. However, we believe that such aspiration is not impossible in Turkish women. It is recorded in history that they have participated in war in the past. If we look up any book on the Muslim society we'll find (that while in war), "Joygun the daughter of the emperor became a war prisoner and so did many Arab mounted soldiers" etc.

I ask how those societal leaders in our country who are shocked at the suggestion of having female clerks, and cannot imagine women doing anything involving physical work except to dress up dolls and make wreaths with flowers, will respond if they hear about this proposal of introducing female warriors. Won't they collapse?

a rich Muslim family from Bihar? Allow me to depict the replica of this newlywed woman. The female race would have been duly honoured if she had been placed on display at a famous museum. In a dark room, there are only two doors, one of which is closed and the other open. Therefore, sunlight or fresh air (for the sake of purdah?) is barred from entering the room. In that little room, there is an ordinary rectangular bedstead decorated with red paper cuttings, and the girl that you see sitting on it, inanimate but bedecked with all types of gold jewellery, her lips ruddy from chewing betel leaf and a beatific smile spreading over her face; she is the bride (that is, the señora's daughter-in-law). Her body is covered with ornaments worth Rupees 10, 240. I find it necessary to spell out here how many grams of gold is present in each part of her body.

1. On the head (tiara), half seer (440 grams).
2. Ears (earrings), a little more than a quarter of a seer (275 grams).
3. Neck (necklace), one and half seers (1320 grams).
4. Soft upper arm (armlet), almost two seers (1760 grams).
5. Waist (waist ornament, like a scorpion), almost three-quarters of a seer (715 grams).
6. Ankles (anklets), exactly 3 seers (2640 grams) of heavy gold.

The nose-ring suspended from the bride's nose is four inches in radius.[6] Her wretched linen salwar, pleated and thickly layered with various gold and silver threads as well as spangles is drooping from its own weight. And the miserable newlywed is tired under the sheer mass of her salwar and the double-folded wrapper covering the upper part of her body.

It is impossible to move about with a load of eight seers of gold on her body. Therefore, what else can the hapless newlywed be, except a listless object? She has a constant headache, and there is a threefold reason for it: (1) Her hair has been combed too tightly and smoothly into plaits and onto her scalp, (2) there is a load of jewellery on the hairdo, (3) half of her head as well as the eyebrows are covered with silver sequins fastened with glue. Her forehead is speckled with variegated astral designs. Her body is an insensate mass; her mind is even more obtuse.

Living life in such a drab, objectified state is a mere mockery. For, the woman's health is wasted from lack of any physical activity. Her feet get wearied, exhausted and sore merely walking from one room to another. Her

[6] The radius of some nose-rings is six inches and their circumference more or less nineteen inches. They weigh about fifty-eight grams.

hands are utterly useless. Dyspepsia and lack of appetite are her constant companions. If there is no spirit in the body, there is also no spirit in the mind. Her head and heart are both perpetually weak. Everyone will understand how difficult it is to live in that condition of a forever sick person.

What do you gather when you come across an image like that? What we learn from our own experiences and those of others is the real religious teaching. Sometimes, lessons from the simple experiences of life are superior to bookish knowledge. What the brilliant Newton learnt from the sight of a falling apple was not available in any book in those days. By thinking about this newlywed woman I too have been able to depict this picture of the social condition of our land. Anyway, I felt terribly sorry for that bride and thought, "unlucky woman, her present and afterlife, both are ruined." If God asks whether she has made proper use of her head, heart and eyes, what will she answer? I then asked one of the girls in the house, "I see you doing nothing involving physical effort, how will you explain this to God?" She replied, "You are right," and added that she doesn't waste her time but goes out for strolls frequently. I said, "Loitering is not exercise. Run for about half an hour every day." The use of the word "run" made her laugh boisterously. I felt hurt and thought, "Goodness gracious, she has misunderstood me." They have even lost their capacity to appreciate new knowledge. There is little hope for our advancement; the only hope remaining now is the Saviour.

Just as the sunlight cannot permeate our bedrooms, similarly the light of knowledge cannot penetrate the chamber of our mind. This is because there are no suitable schools or colleges for girls. Men can study as much as they want, but will the gates of our ambrosia treasury of knowledge ever fully open for us? If a noble-minded, liberal person approaches to raise us by the hand, then thousands will create resistance.

It is not possible for a single individual to advance against a barrier mounted by thousands of people. That is why, no sooner than a little ray of hope begins to radiate, it vanishes again into the darkness of eternal despair. Most of the people have some kind of superstition against women's education; that's why the moment they hear of "female edification" they think of all the evils of education and shudder from an imaginary horror. Society doesn't hesitate to forgive all the errors of an uneducated woman, but even if a woman with a little education makes no mistake, the society will multiply an assumed mistake by her and, blaming it on her schooling, cry in a collective voice, "Halleluiah to the female enlightenment."

Nowadays, just about everyone thinks of education as a gateway to professional life. However, since it is inconceivable for women to pursue a

professional career, most people believe that female education is therefore inconsequential.

For the sake of futile argument, some local Christians might suggest that woman's appetite for knowledge is the root cause of man's downfall, as in Genesis it is mentioned that both Adam and Eve were ousted from the Garden of Eden because the primal mother Eve ate the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge.[7]

Anyway, the purpose of education is not to blindly imitate a community or a race. It is to develop the innate faculties of the individual, attributed by God, through cultivation. Proper use of these qualities is incumbent upon us, and their dissipation is a vice. God has given us hands, legs, eyes, ears, imagination and the power to think. If we strengthen our hands and legs through exercise, do virtuous deeds with our hands, observe attentively with our eyes, listen carefully with our ears, and learn to make our thinking ability more sophisticated through reflection, then that is true education. We do not consider the pursuit of academic degrees as real education. Let me give you an example of the flowering and enhancement of visual powers.

A scientifically trained eye sees charming and beauteous objects where an untrained eye sees only clay and dust. The earth that we trample on with contempt, taking it as mere soil, mud, sand and coal dust—scientists will, on analysis, find there four kinds of valuable items. For example, cultured sand results in opal; modified clay can be used in making porcelain or sapphire, and processed coal can make diamond. From water, we get vapour and mist. So you see, sisters, where an illiterate eye sees clay, an enlightened eye sees ruby and diamond. We keep such priceless eyes forever blind; how will we answer for it to God?

Imagine that you have given a scouring-brush to your maid and said, "Go and keep my house clean with it." Taking it as a charitable gift, the maid wraps it in an embroidered pillowcase and puts it away in a high place, and never uses it. In the meantime, your house becomes uninhabitable from accumulated rubbish. Then, when you take an account of your maid's work, how will you respond to the atrocious state of your house? Would you be happy if the maid had kept the house clean by using the scouring-brush, or would you be content with her admiration for it?

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[7] On the other hand, European Christians believe that Eve was cursed indubitably, but Jesus Christ came and redeemed woman from that scourge. They say, "Through woman came curse and sin; and through women came blessing and salvation." Man is not the father of Jesus, but woman have been honoured with the status of his motherhood.

Our conscience is making us aware of our degradation; now it is our duty to make an effort to move forward. We, ourselves, should initiate opening the door to our progress. Earlier I have said, "the only remaining hope is the Saviour." But we should remember that unless we raise our hand for help, even the Saviour will not come to our aid. God helps those that help themselves. Therefore, unless we think for ourselves, no one else will think for us. Even if they do, it will not be altogether propitious for us.

Many people think that since women live on the income of men, they must, therefore, accept their authority. This is generally true. Perhaps woman, first being incapacitated of physical work, was obliged to subsist on the wealth of another. That's why they had to capitulate. But now, since woman's soul has also been enslaved, we see families where poor women earn their livelihood by menial labour and support the husband as well as the children, yet there, too, the effete man acts as the patriarch. Again, a man who has no income of his own but marries an heiress of considerable wealth, he too lords it over his wife. And the wife does not object to his lordship.[8] The reason for it is that woman's higher faculties being stymied for a long time, her body, soul, head and heart have all become accustomed to slavery. Now there is nothing called autonomy and strength in her soul, or even the desire to accomplish them. So I want to say, "Rise, oh sisters, rise."

I know that it is not easy to rise at the beginning. I know too that society will create an enormous fuss about it. I know that Indian Muslims will be inclined to "slaughter" us (i.e. condemn us to capital punishment) and Hindus will drag us to the funeral pyre or to a fire of eternal affliction.[9] (I also know that our sisters have no intention to rise.) But rise we must for the sake of society. Haven't I said that nothing meaningful can be achieved without effort? Stepping out of the prison, Galileo said, "But nevertheless the earth does move." Likewise, we'll have to endure much afflictions and strife. Let me give you an example of the Parsi[c] women in this context. The following two passages have been translated from an Urdu newspaper.

The Parsi women have undergone a significant change in the last fifty years. The Western civilisation that they have acquired now, they were not

[8] The cry for freedom that we hear occasionally from women of some sections of the Bengali community is not true freedom; they are hollow words only.

[9] The reasonable men in society may not impose a death-sentence on us, but the unreasonable ones (who do not care for logic) will surely arrange for brooms and ice-bags.

[c] Members of a group of Zoroastrian community who migrated from Iran to India in the 10th century AD and made the subcontinent their home.

even familiar with it in the past. Like the Muslim women, they too lived in purdah (i.e., zenana). They couldn't carry an umbrella to protect against sun or rain. If they suffered excessive heat of the sun, they had to use their own shoes as a sunshade. They had to sit behind a curtain even inside a carriage. They were not allowed to speak with their husbands in the presence of other men. But now the Parsi women have renounced purdah. They can ride around in a carriage without having to cover their face. They can speak freely with other men. They can run their own businesses (mostly shopkeeping). At first, when a few men allowed their wives to step out of purdah, there was an outcry everywhere. Hoary wise men declared, "Doomsday is looming."

Well, the world has not ended yet! That's why I say, let's all move forward collectively to attain our freedom; the dust of anger will settle with time. By freedom, we mean nothing short of a successful life like the men.

The question may arise, how to reclaim the lost jewel? What will make us the deserving daughters of the land? Firstly, we must have the will and an unwavering resolve to work alongside the men in all affairs of life. We should also have a firm conviction that we were not born as slaves.

We'll do all we have to in order to attain equality[10] with the men. If earning a livelihood freely brings our freedom, then we'll do that. If need be, we'll begin by becoming clerks and then magistrates, barristers-at-laws, judges; we'll work in every profession. Fifty years from now, we'll have a lady viceroy in the country who will turn all the women into "empresses." Why shouldn't we be gainfully employed? What do we lack—hands, legs, intellect? The labour that we expend in household work at our "master's" house, can't we run an independent business with that?[11]

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[10] I am talking of equality with men only to explain the kind of success we want. What else could I compare it with? Man's achievement is the ideal for our progress. The kind of balance there should be between a son and a daughter in a family is what we want. Because man is society's son and we are the daughter. We are not saying that you should deck your daughter with a turban like the one on your son's head. Rather, we suggest that the care and expenditure incurred in making the son's turban should also be undertaken in preparing the head-scarf of the daughter.

[11] But why should we have to get into agriculture? Why should a landlord carry the plough while the peasant subjects are still there? Can't we do any other kind of lofty work except for being royalty? Clerks and so forth have been mentioned only as examples. As in the description of Eden, we have to say, there is no winter, no summer, but only an eternal spring prevailing there. In the paradise garden, diamond flowers blossom on the small winding tendrils of emerald. Likewise, to convey our ambition, if we do not give the example of lady-viceroy, what other metaphor could I use?

Let me add that the idea of having female clerks doesn't seem as shocking in other countries as it does in Bengal. In America, there is no lack of female clerks, female lawyers and so forth. And there was a time when in the Muslim communities in other countries there was

If we can't get employed in professional work, we'll take up farming. Why do we have to agonise over the lack of eligible men in India for having nubile daughters? Groom them to enter professional life and let them earn their own livelihood. No doubt, in the professional world, man's labour is worth more, and woman's work is considered cheap. If a woman does the same work done by an unlettered man, she will get half his salary only. A manservant's monthly pay is 3 rupees, and a maidservant's is 2 rupees. However, there are instances where women receive higher wages than men.

If we say that we are weak, ignorant, dull-witted women, who is to blame for it? Ourselves! We do not nurture our intellect, so it has lost its vigour. Now we will reinvigorate it through cultivation. The hands that have become delicate from lack of exertion, can't we make them strong again through utilisation? Let's try to foster knowledge once more and see if this dull head becomes sharp again.

In conclusion, let me emphasise that we make up half of society. How will society move forward if we remain inert? If we tie up one leg of a person, how far can he go hobbling? The interests of men and women are not different, but the same. Whatever their aim or purpose in life is, so is ours. A child needs both the parents equally. We ought to have such qualities in us so that we can walk side by side with men in both the material and spiritual spheres of life. Firstly, they moved ahead on the path to progress at an accelerated pace, and we stayed behind. Now reaching that advanced state, they realise that their soul-mate is not there alongside and so they have become lonely. Therefore, they are feeling obliged to take a step backward. In societies where men have advanced, taking with them their significant other, people there are reaching towards the pinnacle of civilisation. Our obligation is to abjure being a terrible burden on society and become the companions, co-workers and lovers of men and support them in whatever way we can. Surely, we were not born to live the life of a feckless mannequin.

I trust that our worthy sisters will examine this issue, and even if not rebel, at least ruminate on it deeply.

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no scarcity of female poets, female philosophers, female historians, female scientists, female orators, female doctors, female politicians, etc. Only in the Bengali Muslim community we do not have such worthy women.

The Female-half[d]

It's essential to carry out a full diagnosis of a patient before giving any treatment. Likewise, we have to comprehend the state of degradation of the female race in order to pave ways for their progress. In my essay, "Woman's Downfall," I have brought to our sisters' attention that we are in a condition called *slavery*. The cause and state of this condition has been explained in part earlier. Now I'll try to clarify how this situation has maimed our position in society. Prescriptions for "cure" will also be provided from time to time.

Here, I consider it necessary to say a few words for sisters who are fanatically in favour of purdah. I am not against the purdah system as such. If someone sees nothing but animosity against the purdah in my essay "Woman's Downfall," then I have to believe that either I have failed to put across my ideas clearly, or that the reader has not read it sufficiently carefully.

There is reference to the entire female race in that essay. Do women of all societies live confined in purdah? Or did I say that they are fully civilised only because they have relinquished the purdah? My focus was on enslavement of the mind.

I said that society becomes agitated whenever there is an attempt to reform tradition, but gradually it comes to accept the new practice; for an example of this, I mentioned the changed condition of the Parsi[e] women. At first they didn't have the right even to the use of an umbrella, but later their excesses crossed all limits; yet the world has not been ruined by it. Now the Parsi women have come out of purdah indubitably, but have they overcome their mental slavery? Certainly not! What mark of their intelligence do we see in their act of renouncing the purdah? The Parsi men in their blind imitation of the Western civilisation have brought their wives out of seclusion. It doesn't demonstrate the vitality of the women themselves in any way—they are still the same inanimate beings that they were before the change. When the men kept them confined at home, they lived there without argument. By the same token, now that the men have dragged them out into the

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[d] First published as "Ardhangi" (The Female-half) in three segments in *Shraban* (9.1), *Ashwin* (9.3) and *Kartik* (9.4) 1310 (August, September and October 1903) issues of the monthly magazine *Mahila* (Ed. Girishchandra Sen), and reprinted in *Bhadra* 1311 (September 1904) issue of *Nabanur* (Ed. Syed Emdad Ali), it was included unchanged and with the same title in *Motichur* (A String of Sweet Pearls), Vol. I, published in the same year. This translation is based on the text of the essay available in Abdul Quadir, ed. *Rokeya Rachanabali* (25–32).

[e] Members of a group of Zoroastrian community who migrated from Iran to India in the 10th century AD and made the subcontinent their home.

world by their noses, they have "stepped out" of purdah with the same docile acquiescence. What is the credit of women in that? Such abdication of the purdah is never advisable.

When Columbus resolved to discover America, didn't people call him insane? Likewise, when women in their quest for rights and dignity perceive themselves as equal to the men, what else can this be but madness?

We can never be fully content with the little appreciation we get from the men. It's true that people worship fierce goddesses such as Kali and Shitala.[f] But, do they also not worship fearful animals such as the snake, the tiger and the lion, bestowing them the status of deities? This shows who is getting the reverence—Kali the woman, or Kali the bloodthirsty goddess, wearing a garland of human heads around her neck.

Enlightened people often use Sita as a role-model for the instruction of women. But Sita never lived in purdah. She was Rama's wife, queen, mistress and companion; Rama was her lover, guide and all else. But the way Rama treated Sita goes to show that his relationship with her was almost like that of a boy with a doll. If the boy wants, he can love the doll with all his life, get restless from separation when the doll is lost, spend sleepless nights worrying about the doll, take up sword against the man who has stolen the doll, be beside himself with joy when the doll is found. But again, he can get into a huff with the doll for no reason and throw it into the mud. However, the doll can do nothing to the boy, because in spite of its arms and legs it is an inert object. The boy can throw the doll into the fire of his own free will, and can get into a fit of passion as well watching the doll being consumed by the fire.

In the *Ramayana*, Rama acted in a similar fashion, exerting his full "lordship" over Sita, but what about Sita? She showed that she had the power of volition by expressing the wish to accompany her husband into exile. Poor Rama was like a silly boy; he didn't want to recognise that Sita had the power of feeling, because that would compromise his authority over her, prevent him from being suspicious of her integrity and so inhumanely wreck her innocent heart.

Okay, in keeping with social tradition of the land and in tune with the expression of poets, let's assume that we are not the slaves of our husbands, but their female halves. We are their wives at home, faithful attendants in death (or at least, wherever they go for their occupation), equal partners in joy and sorrow, inseparable companions like a shadow and so forth.

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[f] Kali is the Hindu goddess of destruction while Shitala is the goddess of smallpox and measles.

But has anyone thought for a moment how crippled the men have become in the present age with a female-half like ours? It is a matter of regret (or perhaps a blessing for our "masters") that I am not an artist; otherwise, I would have drawn to show how deformed the men look for having this female-half.

Old, wise people often suggest that family life is like a two-wheeled carriage; one wheel of it is the husband, and the other is the wife. That's why wives are habitually described as partners and better-halves in the English language. The obligations of family life are not simple; rather, they are sobering:

> Very difficult is the domestic affair,
> Who can manage it in an orderly fashion?
> The laws and customs of running a state,
> Are finely embedded in this function.

Perhaps assuming family life as the foremost aspect of society, scholars have likened men and women to its organs. So let's see how that image looks like in the present age.

Imagine yourself standing in front of a giant mirror, in which you can see your entire body. Your right side is male and left side, female. Check yourself out in the mirror: Your right arm is long (thirty inches) and stout; the left arm is twenty-four inches in length and thin. Your right foot is twelve inches long; your left foot relatively tiny. The right shoulder is five feet in height, while the left shoulder is four feet. (That's why the head fails to keep erect and leans to the left, but it also stoops a little to the opposite side because of the weight of the right ear.) The right ear is large like an elephant's; the left ear is long like that of an ass. Watch! Watch carefully, how you look! If this picture is not to the liking of some people, let me explain the state of the two-wheeled carriage. If one wheel of the carriage is big (husband) and the other small (wife), it cannot go very far; it keeps rotating in one place (inside one's home). That's why Indians have not been able to advance in life.

Our customs have kept the women separate from the men. Male pleasures and pains are of one kind, and ours are of another. In this context, I find it essential to quote a few lines from Rabindranath Tagore's poem, "Love-conversations of a Newly-wed Couple":

> Husband: Why are you crying sitting in a corner, my beloved?
> Wife: I have left behind my pet pussy at home.
>
> Husband: What are you doing in the garden house in the forest?
> Wife: Idly munching some juicy jujubes.

Husband: Oh my boon companion, tell me what I should wrest for you,
From the vast world, dedicating my very life.
I am all at your beck and call.
Wife: Bring down a few more jujubes for me.

Husband: How will we ever cope with our separation?
Wife: By arranging a puppet-wedding.

This shows that women are not given the kind of education that could make them suitable companions of their husbands. There is no limit to the education of men, but a woman's education is often restricted to "attaining wisdom."

When the husband measures the distance of the sun and the stars from the earth, the wife measures the size of a pillowcase (for sewing). When the husband, through his flights of imagination, travels the solar sphere surrounded by the planetary system, measures the dimension of the sun on a beam of balance, and detects the movements of the comets, the wife loiters in the kitchen, weighs the food items for cooking and observes the movements of her kitchen help. I ask you, Mr. Astronomer, why isn't your wife beside you? Perhaps, if she travels to the solar planet with you, she'll dissolve into vapour before reaching there. In that case, it is better for her not to accompany you.

Many say that there is no need of higher education for women. If they can cook various items, do some needlework and read a few novels, that's enough. There is no need for more. But the physician says there is a need, because the child comes into the world acquiring the strengths and weaknesses of the mother. Therefore, we see that although many boys of our land pass their F.A. [equivalent to the current H.S.C.] and B.A. examinations by memorising their lessons out of fear of the teacher's cane, their minds keep roaming the kitchen with their mothers. An actual test of their knowledge will bring this truth to light.[12]

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[12] Here, I cannot resist the temptation of quoting a few examination answers published in the *Dasi* magazine:

Question: When was Cromwell born?
Answer: In the year 1649 when he was fourteen years old.
Question: Describe his continental policy.
Answer: He was honest and truthful and he had nine children.
Question: What is the adjective of ass?
Answer: Assansole.
Question: Who was Chandra Gupta?
Answer: Chandra Gupta was the granddaughter of Asoka.
Students were asked to translate "The mystery of examination continued to tease us,"

A friend of mine was teaching the use of a compass to a student. At the end of the lesson, he asked, "If your right hand is towards the west and left hand towards the east, which direction would you be facing?" The student replied, "My back."

Those who consider workout as unnecessary for their daughters, do they wish to see their grandsons become big and strong or not? Do they want their grandsons to answer a wrong or injury done to them in the same kind or not? If they wish so, they are then hoping merely to grow a jackfruit on a graceful rose-creeper. But if they want their grandsons also to not be robust, to meekly protest "Do not hit me, I am getting hurt," when they are being assaulted by someone, and after the beating, hurl lame threats at the assailant from a distance, i.e. "Why did you beat me, I am going to complain," then I have no choice but to rest my case.

In the Christian community, although there are many opportunities for women's education, the women still fail to realise their identity fully. They cannot rid themselves of mental slavery. Of course, husband and wife travel together in their journey of life to a certain extent, but not every better-half loses herself entirely in the thoughts of her partner. When the husband is mortified by a burden of debt, the wife is preoccupied with the thoughts of buying a new bonnet. She has been taught to embody the spirit of poetry, so she wants to live merely a dreamy, poetic life. She doesn't understand the prosaic reality of the load of debt.

Let's turn to the Muslim community now. In the Islamic tradition, a woman is viewed as half of a man; that is, two women are equal to one man. In other words, two brothers and a sister together will make two-and-a-half human beings. There is a provision in the Mohammedan law that a daughter will inherit half of what a son inherits of the parental property. However, this law exists for the records only. In reality, if you observe the distribution of wealth in a rich family or how landed property is passed down, you will find that there will be little or nothing in the daughter's share.

I'll now talk about noumenal wealth. Fathers' love, care etc. are noumenal wealth. Even in this respect there is excessive partiality. When do we ever get half the love, care and benevolence of our fathers? A father who employs four tutors for his son's education, does he engage two instructors for his

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from Bengali to English, and taking the expression literally (The mystery of examination continued to dazzle the plantains), one student wrote "roasted some plantations," another wrote, "roasted some Plantagenet," and yet another, "roasted some plaintiffs." Readers should not think that these answers have been fabricated. They were actually found as they are.

daughter? When a son is allowed to obtain three academic degrees (up to the bachelor's), is the daughter allowed to pursue one and a half (H.S.C)? The number of schools for boys is innumerable; the number of schools for girls is virtually non-existent. Where the brother becomes a "Shams-ul-Ulama,"[13] has the sister there become a "Nazm-ul-Ulama"? Our zenanas are full of beautiful "Nazmunessas" and "Shamsunessas," but we would also like to see a few "Nazm-ul-Ulamas" in the literary world.

A typical arrangement for the education of Muslim women in our country is like this: first we are required to learn the Arabic alphabets and then read the Qurʾan. But we are never taught the meaning of the Arabic words; only recite them from memory like a parrot. If a father is more benevolent, he tries to make his daughter a "Hafez." One who commits the whole Qurʾan to memory is regarded a "Hafez." That's as far as our Arabic education goes. If we wish to learn Persian and Urdu, we are asked to begin with stuff such as "Kareema be bakhsha-e bar hal-e maa" [O God! Have mercy on my condition; a line from the famous medieval poet Shaiekh Saadi Shirazi (1184–1283)], and [in Urdu] *Banat un Naas* [a reformist Urdu novel by Deputy Nazir Ahmad (1836–1912)],[14] without any foundation in the language. First, the script is unfamiliar and besides, we haven't had the necessary grounding in the languages; consequently, our reading facility develops at a rather sluggish pace. Many become nubile even before finishing reading these few books. Once married, the girl sighs in relief, "Thank God! I won't have to read any more." Some girls become deft in cooking and needlework. As a practice, many Muslim girls in Bengal are not taught the Bengali language. Some learn to read Urdu but lack the know-how of writing it. The utmost limit of education for many is to make patterned garments, embroidered with gold and silver threads and spangles, and knit woollen shoes, socks and other similar items.

If Prophet Muhammad inquiries, "How have you done justice to your daughters?," what will be your answer?

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[13] "Shams-ul-Ulama," is a title for religious scholars. The words can be translated as follows: "Shmsal," "sun," and "Ulama," (plural of "Alam"), "learned men." Likewise, "Nazm-ul-Ulama" should be taken to mean "Star of the learned men (or women!)."

[14] Here I remember the story of a ten year old girl. In the rural areas many households hire women for husking rice with a husking pedal. The girl found the task of these women easier than grasping the spelling of strange words in *Banat un Naas*. That's why, whenever she got the opportunity, she went to the husking pedal shed to waste a seer or two of paddy. Her husking would not separate the rice from the chaff fully, but, rather like the wholemeal flour it would result in an odd commodity with a mixture of paddy, rice and chaff. No doubt patients on a wholemeal flour diet will find this wholemeal-rice powder healthful.

In the chronicle of prophets, it is often found that whenever the world has been plagued by excessive immorality and oppression, prophets have arrived to quell the wicked and inspire the faithful. When women were being wantonly oppressed in Saudi Arabia, and girls were randomly subjected to parricide, Prophet Muhammad emerged as a custodian of the female race. He not only took several measures to redress the situation but himself set the example by raising a daughter singlehandedly. By devoting his entire life to his daughter Fatima, he showed how priceless a daughter could be to a father. It was a unique bond of affection and love.

Alas! We are in so much misery because he is no more with us. So, come sisters, let's say in unison: "Kareema be bakhsha-e bar hal-e maa!" Karim [God] will certainly have mercy on us. Since success lies in dedicated effort, we'll certainly earn His mercy if we seek it with devotion. We are not "half" of our brothers in the eyes of God and our mothers. Otherwise, there would be a natural arrangement that if it takes ten months to gestate a male child, it would take half of that to gestate a female child; the supply of mother's milk for the girl would also be half of that for the boy. But there is no such rule in nature. We enjoy our mother's love as much as our brothers do. There is no favouritism in the mother's heart. Then how can we say that God is biased? Isn't God far more merciful than the mother?

I hope no one will think I am against cooking and sewing for what I have said about them earlier. The most valuable items in life are food and clothing, so it is a must to learn cooking and needlework. But that doesn't mean we should confine our life to the kitchen only.

It's true that being physically weak, women depend on the men for help. But that should not serve to make men "masters." In this world everything needs help from another in some form; nothing can survive without the mutual help. As plants need the help of rain, so do the clouds need help from trees. Rain helps to fill the rivers, but again clouds are indebted to the river. Is the river then "master" of the clouds, or the clouds "master" of the river? If we turn from nature to society, we observe a similar law of mutual support. Some are carpenters, and some are weavers, etc. A barrister seeks the service of a doctor, and the doctor needs the barrister's help. Should we then consider the doctor as the barrister's "master" or the barrister as the doctor's "master"? If they refuse to consider each other as "master," why should our women consider their life-companions as their "masters"?

We are better halves, they are lesser halves; we are the female half, they are the male half. Women also hold the key to society's success, because unless the Indian women awake, India cannot rise. The courage or

cowardice of the "masters" lies in the volition of the mother. Therefore, let not our vain straitlaced men claim their superiority using the excuse of physical might.

We are lagging behind only because we do not have the equal opportunity for education and self-cultivation like the men. Wouldn't we also attain excellence if we had the equal opportunity? We have been treated with contempt from childhood; therefore, we now blindly submit to the superiority of men and consider ourselves worthless. Often, we look away from our son's shortcomings saying "after all, he is a boy," and laud him unjustly. There lies the problem.[15]

I want the best for my sisters, and do not intend to encroach upon their social and religious ties and bring them out into a wilderness. To progress mentally, a Hindu doesn't have to renounce her Hindu identity or a Christian her Christian identity. We can liberate the mind while retaining our respective ethnic differences. The cause of our backwardness is the lack of education, that's all I want to say.

Many of you might worry that I am trying to instigate a revolt against the husbands. Or that the women will come in droves to drive away the men from their offices and take over their occupations, plunder their outfits and legal documents. Or arrive on the farms in force, evict the farmers, occupy their cornfields and seize their farming implements. To them I want to say, rest assured!

We have become dysfunctional because men have deprived us of the opportunities for education. In India, beggars and the rich are two groups of people who are lazy, and our well-healed women work less than they should. Our love for an easy life has increased phenomenally. We do not make full use of our arms, limbs, eyes and minds. When a group of women get together, they show their ingenuity by tattling about one another, or by simply vilifying or valorising their own spouses. On occasions they also quarrel.

Hopefully from now on, the word "spouse" will be used in place of "husband."

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[15] Here I recollect the comment of a magnanimous Urdu poet who was interested in the wellbeing of women. In a monthly magazine in 1905, he wrote, "Reprobation against women has been sung at such a high pitch around the world, that eventually, accepting the view of the world, women have come to think, 'we are really not fit for education,' and submit to the consequences of ignorance in defeat." What an amazingly true statement! May God grant this poet a long life!

Home[g]

Home is a place for rest, comfort and peace, where the householder can return tired and exhausted at the end of the day and relax. Home protects its members from sun, rain and winter. Even birds and animals have homes; they too consider themselves safe in their respective homes. An English poet has sung in emotional exuberance:

> Home, sweet home;
> There is no place like home.
> Sweet sweet home.

If there is no thirst, water has no taste; likewise, we cannot fully appreciate the happiness of home, until we live away from it for a few days. Without the sorrow of separation, there can be no joy of union. Men do not travel all the time, yet being away from the family for the whole day, they are eager to return home in the afternoon; coming back, they sigh in relief.

A home has two parts to it, an outer area [drawing room] and a family area (or home). Making a home is natural; even two birds come together to build a nest. Jackals also have their dens. That nest and den can be considered a dwelling place but not an actual "home." Anyway, whether animals have a "home" or not is not for discussion here.

Allow me to say a few words about the state of our homes. If we observe our social conditions, we see that most women in India are bereft of the happiness of home. For those who live in subjugation and do not have the right to consider the house of their "keeper" as their own residence, home is like a prison. For one who is not happy in family life, and dares not to consider herself a member of the family, home cannot be a place of peace. Daughters, wives, widows—women of all kinds are in this miserable state. As evidence, I'll provide glimpses of some of these households. This attempt to expose the inner life of the zenana will obviously offend some of our brothers. But what to do; we have no choice but to operate on this festering ulcer. If it causes pain for the patient, he will have to endure it. If I don't remove the skin somewhat, how do I show the bruise inside? So I pray to my brothers for permission to lift the purdah from some parts of the zenana.

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[g] First published as "Griha" (Home) in the *Ashwin* 1311 (September 1904) issue of *Nabanur* (Ed. Syed Emdad Ali), and republished in the *Paush* 1311 (December 1904) of *Antapur* (Ed. Banalata Devi), it was included unchanged and with the same title in *Motichur* (A String of Sweet Pearls), Vol. I, published in the same year. This translation is based on the text of the essay in Abdul Quader, ed. *Rokeya Rachanabali* (46–54).

I am not saying that our society has no virtue at all. There are plenty of virtues, but drawbacks too. Imagine that a person has one good hand, but an ulcer on the other. Should he not seek treatment for the hand with the ulcer, just because the other hand is in good shape? To provide the treatment, it's essential to obtain a full account of the illness.

Today we'll discuss the ailment in the body of our society. Let the healthy part remain as it is. There are many happy families in our society; they are not the focus of our discussion. Let them continue to live in happiness. Come readers, let's visit a few secluded rooms behind the high iron gates.

1. Haven't I said that unless we go abroad we cannot experience the joy of returning home? Once we went to a town near Jamalpur, in the province of Bihar, for a visit. A friend of ours lived there. Since our male relatives were on friendly terms with the male members of that family, we were curious to meet the women of this Sharaft[16] lawyer's family. We found the ladies gentle and soft-spoken, albeit somewhat like frogs living in a well. They greeted us in a suitable way. Sharafat's wife Hasina, sister Jamila, Jamila's daughter, daughter-in-law and others were present there. Later when I invited Jamila to visit us, she said that she had never gone out of the house, and that was their family pride. They had never ridden in a carriage or any other mode of transport. On whether they had ever boarded a palanquin, I can't remember if the answer was "yes" or "no." In utter amazement, I asked, "Then how do you go to your in-laws' after marriage? How did your sister-in-law come here?" Jamila replied, "She is the daughter of one of our relatives. All the houses you see in this locality belong to the members of our clan." She then took me to another room and said, "This is my daughter's house. Let's go home now." She led me through a narrow lane (lined with houses on one side and a high wall on another), in a roundabout way. We visited all the rooms of her house. They seemed to be "out of bounds" for the sun. When she opened one of the doors, I met Hasina's daughter-in-law. Jamila said, "See, on that side of the door is my brother's house, on this side it is ours. Because the bride lives in that room, we keep the door closed. Now you understand why we never need a transport." We could visit all the houses in that way. But not interested to tour the whole precinct, we returned to our house, which was much more comparable to a home. Jamila said that she would travel to Mecca soon—she didn't wish to live in this sinful country for much longer.

[16] All the names in this essay are imaginary. They have been used mainly for narrative convenience.

We hope she will be able to appreciate the joy of returning home when she arrives back from Mecca.

Do the readers think that Hasina or Jamila is at home? Definitely not! Just living inside the four walls of a house doesn't make it a home. Bride-chamber is called "Khwabgah" in this part of the world, but it should actually be called a "tomb." The house belongs to Sharafat, and as it has a drove of sheep, flocks of ducks and hens, so also is there a group of women. Or the women could be described as "captives." Because they have no family life! Think of the situation at your own house; you'll then understand Hasina's condition.

2. It could be said about many of the families that things look glowing and glamorous outside, but inside all is dry and drab. That is, there are lots of ostentatious displays outwardly, as if the husband is the commander of seven thousand soldiers but, inside the zenana, the wife remains famine-stricken. Outside, there is the decorated lounge, animal stables and everything else, but inside the wife lacks a suitable place for prayer.

3. We'll now show the "bruise" inside the zenana. The male head of the family usually thinks that the house belongs to him, and the rest of the family are his dependents.[17] We have visited a family in Maldah several times, but we have never seen the head of the household, Kalim's wife happy. Her sad appearance attracts our quiet sympathy. She is unhappy because her husband has been in a dispute with her sister's husband for several years. That's why Kalim's wife is not allowed to visit her sister. She can't muster enough courage to say, "Of course my sister will come and visit me." Alas! The house belongs to Kalim. It is for him to decide who can or cannot enter there. On the other side too, Salim is the owner. Kalim's wife is barred from entering there.

It is needless to say that Kalim's wife has no lack of food, clothing or jewellery. But can jewellery mitigate the pain of estrangement from one's only sister, especially when the parents are no longer there? I have heard that she was not free from her husband's torture either. Can she then see her place of residence as "sweet home"? Does she not sigh in sorrow and

[17] Our focus here is not on any particular individual or incident. We have taken examples from several true incidents from different places to create a general picture of the situation. The presence of newly budded mango groves on one side of the river and snow-capped bare trees beside the Niagara Falls on another, should not lead the readers to think that the artist is ignorant, because the tree, the budded mango-groves, the snow-capped trees are all true.

say in private, "There is no other person more hapless and homeless than myself?"

4. Two brothers have a fight at some place; assume that the elder brother is "Hum," and the younger brother is "Sam." After the fight, Hum tells his daughter, "Hamida, as long as you live in my house, you are not allowed to write letters to Jobeda (Sam's daughter)." Father's command must be obeyed! But Hamida has loved her cousin from childhood; it is not easy for her to erase her from her mind so quickly. She begins to feel tormented by an excruciating pain. These two girls were entwined together by their childhood memories, strung into one by their letters even when they were far apart; by tearing apart those two flowers of the same stem, Hum has demonstrated that he is the true master of the house. By trampling on, and breaking the tender hearts of two helpless, innocent girls, the master of the house demonstrates his own power. It goes without saying that Jobeda is also not allowed to write to Hamida. If they somehow manage to send letters to one another, then Hamida's letter is intercepted by Sam and Jobeda's letter is crushed in the clenched fist of Hum. The suppressed tears and heartrending sighs of the two girls fizzle away behind their bedroom curtains. It is said that according to the law, the father has no right to intercept the letters of an eighteen (or a twenty-two?) year old daughter. But that law has no place in the zenana. The poet has rightly said:

> You keep sitting at the edge of the world,
> In futile affection. Not knowing how the rest of the world,
> Rages on –

Therefore, let the law be; how would Hamida or Jobeda benefit from it? So many other letters are intercepted likewise by fathers and uncles—who keeps count of them? A widow passes her time somehow in reading the letters from her brothers and sisters, but if the younger brother-in-law who has provided refuge to her after her husband's death is enraged by it, then there is no way she can continue receiving those letters. Only God can help these cursed zenana "inmates."

5. We have known Ramasundari for several years. She is a childless widow. Her late husband left behind a lot of wealth, even a few brick-built houses, at the time of his death. Now the husband's younger brother has inherited all that property. The younger brother-in-law is reluctant to provide her food and shelter. I said, "Perhaps she quarrels with her brother-in-law's wife." In reply, someone (who has known Rama for fourteen or fifteen years) said,

"Rama can do everything, except getting into a fight. She knows how to make strangers her friends, but not how to turn her family into strangers."

"Why can't she find shelter at her younger brother-in-law's home, when possessed of such noble qualities?"

"Because of her bad luck."

Ah, luckless women! You consider your own shortcomings as misfortunes, but when it comes to suffering you continue to bear the brunt of your own deeds. Your drawbacks are ignorance, inefficiency, infirmity and many more. Ramasundari said, "I live because I have to; I eat because I have to—our sati[h] practice was much better. The government has added to the sufferings of widows by abolishing that practice." Can't God hear those words of Rama? What kind of a merciful being is He?

6. Once we went to visit a palace when the king was away. He was a celebrated king, and his annual income was huge.

To use poetic language, the place was beautiful like the house of gods; the drawing room sparkled with many extravagant furniture and fittings. Silver-coloured chairs were scattered everywhere, all expectantly waiting for the king. A slender ray of light had fallen on a mirror in a corner; a reflection from it, falling on the chandelier, had transformed the place into a luminous world of light. In one of the rooms, the king's gorgeous silver bedstead, made up with a mosquito net and beautiful linens, was waiting for the absent king. Readers might ask, "Why doesn't the queen use the bed?" Well, in that case, wouldn't such a beautiful item remain beyond the sight of the king's entourage and his guests? After visiting the drawing room, we entered the queen's quarters.

The queen's rooms were also decorated with chairs, tables and teapoys, but they were all covered with dust. It didn't look like the king had ever stepped into any of those rooms. A few Bengali books were strewn around the queen's bed.

I was disappointed to see the queen. The image of her I had conceived upon visiting the drawing room … she looked just its opposite. She was an exceptionally beautiful girl (of sixteen/seventeen years of age), wearing an imported plain fabric with a red border. The only ornaments she wore were three glass bangles on each hand; her head was covered with dry, matted

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[h] A religious practice in some Indian communities in which a recently widowed woman would have to immolate herself on the funeral pyre of her husband. The practice was outlawed by the British in 1829, but it continued as a religious custom in many parts of India well into the twentieth century.

hair, which had not been touched by oil for fifteen days or so. She looked so sad that one could easily take her for an incarnation of sorrow. Many consider the eyes as the windows of the soul; the heart-rending emotions her eyes displayed were beyond expression.

The King was always away, in Calcutta mostly. He had no lack of celestial nymphs and voluptuous beauties there, while the queen lived in an eternal anguish of separation. She had an abundant supply of servants, maids, spiritual advisors, priests and all else; there was also plentiful joy and merriment in the house; only the queen's heart found no bliss. The palace felt more like a prison to her, as if she was living a cursed life of exile there with a troop of housemaids. One of our female companions said in an aside, "One who has such a beautiful palace and a fairylike queen, why on earth should he live away from home?"

The queen was well-versed in Bengali and spent most of her lonely time reading books. She was reticent and didn't say much, but the few words she spoke were admirable. One of our elderly female companions said, "You are the queen, why are you in such a shabby condition? Come, I'll tidy up your hair." The queen replied, "Being a queen is the curse of my life." She was right, although people may find a queen's status so enchanting.

What else can we call these wounds in the life of the zenana but festering sore? Does it have no remedy? A widow yearns for sati; what should a wife do?

7. According to the Mohammedan law, women can inherit their fathers' property, and even "own" a house. But what does it matter—the actual owner is always the husband, son, son-in-law, younger brother-in-law or some other male relative in the family. In their absence, a government officer or attorney becomes the owner. The female proprietor becomes a puppet in the hands of the attorney; whatever the attorney says, the ignorant, illiterate proprietor accepts that.

Mohsena, a home owner, has a fight with her husband and goes to live with Kasem, a distant brother-in-law. That house is her paternal inheritance, therefore, very dear to her. Her only daughter has also passed away, yet she has allowed her son-in-law (along with his daughters) to live there. In a situation like this, the son-in-law, Jamal, could be considered his mother-in-law's dependent. But strangely, when Mohsena returned to her house, the sentry stopped her from entering it. She got furious and said, "What? I cannot enter my own house? Bring a veil; I want to step out of the palanquin." The sentry replied, "I can't bring the veil; I don't have the master's orders." Mohsena asked, "Who is your master? Your only master is me."

"Please forgive my rudeness," answered the sentry, "but can you save me from his abuse? You live behind purdah, and we know Mr. Jamal only. Everyone knows that you are the real owner of this house but, please, have mercy on me and go back. If you step down here, I'll be punished; even madam herself will be insulted."

Anyway, the madam went back. She inquired with Kasem, "Is there no law which would allow me to take back the possession of the house?" Kasem said, "Yes, there is. You lodge a complaint and we'll help." In the meantime, hearing about this complaint, Jamal came to see Kasem. In a polite, honey-tongued language, Jamal explained to Kasem, "Well, if you help my mother-in-law now, you'll actually be indulging the women. If you are in a similar predicament later and someone comes to the aid of the women in your family, would you be happy? Think about it; is this what we want? Why make enemies for no reason?"

Kasem came to Mohsena's room and explained, "Litigation is too troublesome. Better not to go into such hassle." The poor woman was shocked, and wept in anger in silence.

There are many more examples. Khadija was the heiress of a vast fortune. Her husband, Hashem, was poor but an educated person. He embezzled the whole property by cunning and fraud and Khadija became penniless. Living in Khadija's own paternal home, Hashem married two or three more times and continued to torment her by forcing her to live with the co-wives. Without such humiliation of the wife, where is the pride of the all-powerful male? If Khadija expresses the slightest annoyance at it, the elderly women in the family condemn her for lack of devotion to the husband; some even bring out some ancient books (Bengali translations of the Prophet's teachings) and read from it, "Never open your mouth even if your husband chooses to decapitate you." Some sing in a modulated voice:

> Woman's morshed,[18] regard thy husband as sertaj,[19]
> A wife equal to the morshed, will ever worship her lord.

There is not one person to empathise with Khadija's sorrow. What else can we call it but infernal suffering? An Islamic scholar once said in a religious sermon, "Usually, women commit more sin; during his spiritual meeting with God, the Prophet saw that most of those burning in hell fire were women." We of course see it on earth that married women, especially those living in zenana, are often subjected to a hellish life.

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[18] Morshed: Guide, teacher, advisor.

[19] Sertaj: Crown—that is deserving of respect like a crown.

8. Who doesn't know about all the horrible tricks that are devised to deprive daughters of their paternal inheritance? No brother of course ever acknowledges it, because that would be humouring the women.[20] So we have to tell those lamentable tales ourselves. In many cases, daughters are given in marriage to opium-addicts, ganja-addicts, illiterates, the sick elderly—people who are incapable of claiming their share of the inheritance legally. Or, sisters are asked to sign a "no-claim" statement before marriage and, sometimes, even forced to stay as spinsters to be treated as slaves by the brother's wife. And if there is no son in a family, only daughters—six or twelve of them—then the lucky husband of the eldest sister tries to keep the remaining sisters unmarried. This is the festering sore of the society. Oh, revered Prophet, you tried to help us by giving us right to our ancestral property, but your cunning followers are trying to do harm to women in every way. The Mohammedan law remains confined within the covers of the book like the dark letters on its pages. He who has money, controls both power and the law. The legal system is not likely to work for the weak and illiterate women like us.

9. A new widow, Saudamini, took shelter with her two sons and a daughter at her brother's house. After nine or ten months, her two sons (15 and 12 years old) died within the space of ten days. Saudamini had some company documents with her worth ten thousand rupees.

When Saudamini was almost deranged in grief over the loss of her two sons, her brother Nagendra, taking advantage of the situation (that is, within a month of death of the two boys), asked her to deposit all the money in his name. He said, "There could be a problem if the money is put in a woman's name. After all, I am not a stranger." The sister was not in her right mind; whatever Nagendra asked her to write, she wrote accordingly. She thought, "If my two angelic boys are gone, what shall I do with the cursed money. Nagendra will certainly take care of Prativa's (her daughter's) marriage. Death is the only thing I cherish." Nagendra eventually got two of his own daughters married, but Prativa's marriage never crossed his mind. When she turned twelve, Saudamani became restless about the marriage; but the more she nagged her brother, the more he replied, "No suitable grooms are available."

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[20] An article with incidents of women's sufferings was sent for publication in an Urdu newspaper but the editor didn't have the courage to publish it. He said that printing such an article would infuriate the men. The good news is that Bengali publications have enough moral courage; otherwise, we wouldn't have the opportunity to lament for our sorrow either.

Prativa remained still unmarried at the age of fifteen. Would anyone believe that no groom could be found even with a dowry of ten thousand rupees? The neighbours began to criticise Nagendra and swear at him, "Such a worthless uncle. What a shame!" But it had no effect on him. Village calumnies and animadversions dissipate in the surrounding cornfields. Huge hogs could hide in those immense jute fields—couldn't a few words of criticism lie there in secret as well?

Saudamini realised that her husband's hard earned money had fattened Nagendra and helped him to marry his daughters; only her own Prativa remained unwed. A female poet, Mankumari [1864–1943], has sung:

> Moan, oh sisters. I too shall cry,
> If nothing else I'll shed a few tears,
> For you all, in loneliness.
> Whenever I see an elderly unwed woman,
> Not blessed with marriage—I shall cry,
> Whenever I spot a girl living with co-wives,
> Heart-broken, I shall cry;
> Whenever I see a woman a helpless dependent,
> I shall cry and pray for her death,
> This base, undignified life I wish to offer,
> To propitiate your life. So worthless I am,
> Only lament I can, and lament I'll for you, oh sisters, for ever.

I cannot of course agree and cry in unison with the poet. She wants to spend all her energy in moaning. Nothing more! Such shedding of tears in seclusion has reduced us to our present hapless state.

Readers of this essay will probably conclude that I have taken up writing only to demonise our brothers. Not so! I have not used caustic words against the men in any place, or condemned anyone as wicked, diabolic or heartless. I have only documented the distress of the women. Isn't there a saying, "narrating one's personal sorrow results in slander?" That is what has happened in this case. The chronicle of women's sorrow has somehow become a vilification of the men.

The good news is that we have many men who allow their wives to live in peace and homely happiness. But, regretfully, we have to acknowledge that in many families, the husband acts wrongfully and deplorably as the "master."

Now our worthy men will perhaps appreciate that I made no mistake in saying, "We are homeless in this wide world." Every letter of that statement is true. No matter in what circumstances we live, we always live in the house of our protectors. That home of the family head may not always shield us from sun, rain or winter, yet when the thatched roof of the dilapidated hut

gets worn out—its last bit of straw covering gets blown away by a cyclone, and we spend the whole night getting drenched by the dripping rainwater, the flash of lighting dazzles our eyes, the roaring of thunder causes tremor on earth and in our hearts, and we fear every moment if we will get killed by a bolt of lightning—we still live in our keeper's home.

When we live in a palace as a queen or a princess, still then we live in our keeper's home. Again, when that enormous edifice comes crashing in an earthquake—and we get injured while rushing down the stairs, and seek shelter in the cowshed, bloodied and almost unconscious—still then we live in our keeper's home.

Or, even if we live as wives, daughters or daughters-in-law in a middle-class family, we live in our keeper's home. And when, on the night of the new moon in the month of *Chaitra* [last month of the Bengali calendar], wicked people get into a fray and set the master's house on fire, and everything in it keeps furiously burning and we somehow save our lives by running and taking shelter under a tree, and continue to shiver—then too we live in our keeper's home. (I am not sure if we have to live in a keeper's home even inside the grave!)

I am using the word "home" in Bengali to mean what it stands for in English. The circumstances in which the queen, Rama, Hamida, Jobeda and others live, as shown earlier—do they live in the happiness of a home? Wherever there is health and happiness, that's where the home is. When one becomes a widow, the in-laws' house becomes unliveable in a sense, and the wretched woman looks to shelter with her father or brother. The adverse outcome of this is depicted in Saudamini's case. There is a saying in Hindi:

> When the house is on fire, I rush to the forest for refuge,
> But the forest is on fire too, what can the forest do,
> When my fortune is in flames?

Therefore I say, we do not even have a little hut to call our home. No other creature in the animal-world is destitute like us. Everyone has a home—only we don't.[21]

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[21] This treatise has not been written for sisters who live a happy family life. It is meant for those who are homeless.

The Knowledge Fruit[a]
(*A fairy tale*)

Adam and Eve lived in the Garden of Eden.[1] They lived in paradise in utmost happiness as a guest of God and had no want of anything. God had forbidden the couple only one thing: not to eat the fruit of one particular tree.

One day, loitering through the beautiful saffron-paved pathways of paradise, Eve came and stood under the shade of that forbidden tree. She continued to observe the beauty of the garden in an entranced gaze. Listening to the sweet chirping of the birds on the branches of the tree, she absentmindedly plucked a few fruits from it and ate one of them.

Eve became self-aware as soon as she ate the fruit and realised that although they were living a regal life as royal guests, they wore not a single piece of clothing to cover the immodesty of their naked bodies. She instantly wrapped her figure with her knee-long tuft of hair. A kind of new and strange sorrow made her feel melancholic.

At that time, Adam arrived there, and Eve asked him to eat one of the fruits from her hand. Eating his wife's left-over fruit, Adam also became self-aware and realised the full extent of his penury. Was this paradise? Was this loveless, workless, inactive life, heavenly bliss? Moreover, he was like a prisoner, who didn't have the freedom to step beyond the limits of the Garden of Eden. He lived in an exquisite palace made of gold and silver bricks and (instead of sand and cement) coral and pearl dust, but he didn't have an iota of anything that could be considered his "own"—he didn't even have a wrap to wear. What kind of royal treatment was this? He lost his heavenly peace rooted in ignorance, and came to feel the wakeful state of knowledge. Therefore, consciousness and disquiet took the place of ignorance and joy. He said to Mother Eve, "We were lost in ignorance all this while. How happy we were in that state."

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[1] This story has no reference to the stories in the Qurʾan or the Bible.

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[a] Included as "Gyanfal" (The Knowledge Fruit) in *Motichur* (A String of Sweet Pearls), Vol. II, published in 1922. This translation is based on the text of the story in Abdul Quader, ed. *Rokeya Rachanabali* (136–142).

Eve replied, "Exactly! This blissful playground—this sweet-smelling, saffron-coloured flowerbed that is layered with verdant grass, these diamond-flower decked creepers, these plants embellished with emerald-leaves with a lotus flower at the top—they please the eyes no doubt but how do they satisfy the soul's desires? Ambrosia can meet the thirst like the sweet water of a lake, but how can it palliate the yearning of the heart? Why do we need such heavenly splendour?" They became eager for some unknown change.

While taking a tour through the garden, God arrived at the spot and saw that Adam and Eve were hiding behind the trees, watching him. God called them, but they couldn't approach God in sorrow, guilt and shame. The omniscient Lord of the universe knew everything; he said furiously, "You want freedom? Then get out of here. Go down to earth and see how much joy is there in freedom."

The couple fell from paradise that day and came to earth. There, in the midst of dearth and comfort, joy and sorrow, disease and health, and through many other tests intermingled with light and shade, did they experience their true conjugal life. Eve loved the daughters more; she blessed them with a long life, happiness and peace at home, and a supply of infinite love stored in their hearts.

Adam, by the same token, loved the sons more, but because his will power was not so strong, he didn't grant any such boon to them.

With Eve's blessings, the number of girls continued to multiply and live longer, but the number of Adam's beloved sons continued to diminish as they suffered from ill-health (for being overly pampered) and died rapidly. If they didn't die a natural death, they fought and killed one another mutually in the pretext of war. Some rotted in prisons; others suffered in other ways.

From the seeds of the uneaten part of the fruit that the ousted Eve had thrown on to the earth, a giant tree grew on the eastern side of the planet. In time, its branches were filled with flowers and fruits. But people in those days didn't know how to care for the tree. Heaps of ripe fruits kept lying under the tree; jackals and crows fed on them. The remaining fruits began to accumulate on the shore of the nearby Shanta River; some of them also rolled into the river.

The water of the river, mixed with the juice of the knowledge fruit was gradually flowing into the ocean. On the other side of the wide ocean was the land of the fairies.

The inhabitants of the fairyland were beautiful looking, but except for their physical beauty they didn't have much to boast about. Their land was full of colocynth vines, and there was a shortage of proper food there. The

jinns[2] tilled the harsh, barren land with much effort and care, but they failed to produce the crops. The fairies lived in pleasure-houses comparable to heaven; they were surrounded by all kinds of luxury items, and possessed abundant wealth, yet they suffered the pangs of hunger. Such is the mystery of God's creation.

Once while bathing in the ocean, a few jinns drank a bit of the ocean's salt water, distressed by hunger. Instantly the veil of ignorance enshrouding them was lifted. The intricate issue of lack of food, which they had failed to resolve so far, was now solved in a moment, and they could see the way forward in the clear light of knowledge.

That day the jinns decided that they would travel to other countries for business and trade, and eventually, filling a vessel with the bitter-apple (colocynth) fruit, they embarked on a journey for commerce. After travelling to many places, the vessel finally arrived at a port on Kanak Island beside the sea, where a tribe of honest and wealthy people lived.

The jinns were stunned by the affluence of the city in Kanak Island. They used to think that no other place was as prosperous as their own; they had the power of transforming dust into gold, after all. But the soil of Kanak Island was filled with precious stones. Varieties of fruit trees grew there but, of them, mango-groves were the most precious. The cultured and spiritually inclined people of the island survived mainly on fruit. The jinn merchants thought, if only we could wheedle them for once! Soon they began to exchange their bitter-apples with the sweet-tasting mangoes of all kinds. Every year they came with a vessel filled with bitter-apples and went back with it full of mangoes. Gradually, the business began to thrive, but the more their business flourished the more the Kanak Island began to experience the scarcity of mangoes.

The following year, noticing the lack of supply of mangoes in the market, the traders became worried. Leaving the city, they moved to the rural areas in search of mangoes. In the village, they saw the autumnal paddy fields filled with golden crops. The farmers were returning home in joy, carrying heaps of paddy on their heads. Seeing this, the jinns sighed and said, "They don't know the pain of hunger." After a bit of hesitation, the jinn merchants asked the farmers to give them rice in exchange of their bitter-apples. At first, the farmers could not make out what they meant. Besides, groups of healthy little children stood in bewilderment encircling the jinns and began

[2] Jinn: male; Fairy: Female.

to scrutinise their handsome faces. The traders thought, "What nuisance! We seem to have become an object of farce for these peasant-children."

Anyway, the traders somehow conveyed their intentions to the farmers. At first the farmers declined to accept their offer, but one of the children said, "It's okay, you give. They are hungry. We have so much rice."[3]

The number of trading vessels in the scientifically advanced fairyland continued to increase every year. They had no lack of food now, so the fairies had no hardship. Sometimes these fairies travelled to the Kanak Island, riding magic chariots, to amuse themselves, and gradually they made friendships with the women of the island, who began to imitate their customs and costumes, but nevertheless couldn't grow the two pinions of the fairies.

Previously one or two boats of bitter-apples had been imported once a year. Later, countless vessels filled with bitter-apples came to the Kanak Island, three or four times a year, and took large amounts of rice away with them every time. The farmers were so obsessed with the bitter-apples that they lost self-control. They no longer stored rice for the whole year as they did in the past, and gradually it came to a point that the crop they harvested one day, would be traded for bitter-apples the next day. Soon an excruciating famine swept the Kanak Island.

During that period of bitter-apple trade, something of consequence happened. A beautiful guava tree grew by the ocean beach, and being nurtured by the water mixed with the juice of the knowledge fruit, the tree acquired some qualities of the tree of knowledge itself. The jinns and fairies collected those guavas carefully for themselves. But one day, as the merchants were stacking the vessel with bitter-apples, suddenly a few guavas fell into the boat from the tree. Those guavas got mixed up with the bitter-apples and were sold in Kanak Island.

A few fortunate inhabitants of Kanak Island ate those guavas brought from the fairyland and cast their seeds away. From there, guava trees grew on Kanak Island. In this way, hundreds of years passed.

Blessed by the guava fruit, some residents of the Kanak Island woke up from their nightmare, and what an awakening it was after hundreds of years of slumber! It was as if the blind were bestowed eyesight but still stuck in a darkness. They looked around in bewilderment and saw that the jinns had plundered their entire land in return for the bitter apple, and were still sucking the remaining blood from their bodies like a leech. Their hearts

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[3] Oh, alas! You waged your own food in return for another's,
What you got in exchange only enhanced your want!

broke into pieces at the sight of the indigence and suffering on Kanak Island: those mango-groves had vanished; none of the fruit trees had any fruit on them; the fields were empty of golden crops; the rich soil was reduced to dust. There was moaning and a cry for food everywhere. The farmers were no longer happy and healthy as in the past; they were all skin and bone, wearing tattered rags on them. The Kanak people had nothing else, only bitter-apples everywhere. The markets on both sides of the highway in the city were filled with bitter-apples; the village markets and even the grocery shops were stocked with bitter-apples; indeed, the whole country was packed with bitter-apples only. What was the solution now?

The curse of the Kanak people turned into a blessing; they had received a few knowledge-guavas along with the bitter-apples, so finding a way out of their crisis was no longer a problem. They vowed that they would no longer accept the bitter-apples; everyone took a firm pledge that they would no longer be cheated by their obsession for the fruit. Their rejuvenation wouldn't have been possible without an apathy towards the bitter-apple. For it, they thanked the jinns again and again.

As usual, the jinn merchants arrived at the port with their vessels filled with bitter-apples, but this time they failed to sell any of it. When they were at a loss with the commodity and heaps of it began to rot, they helplessly conveyed this message to the fairyland.

It created a huge row among the merchants in the fairyland; the noise of it shook even the calm waters of the deep sea. Then, an elderly jinn advised, "Find out why the residents of Kanak Island are hostile to the bitter-apple."

The jinn-traders travelled to many parts of the Kanak Island and, after listening to many gossips, concluded that those who had tasted the guava fruit were opposed to the bitter-apple. They instantly conveyed this message to the fairyland with their magic power, and the order came from their leader immediately, "Uproot all the guava trees in Kanak Island."

The jinn-traders again through their magic spell informed their leader, "It is impossible to root out such huge trees; what do you order now?" The jinn-leader immediately instructed, "Cut it at the trunk."

Hundreds of hatchets began to strike at the root of the trees. The Kanak people were at first surprised by it, but they gradually realised what the matter was. They pleaded with the jinn-traders not to cut their trees and even grovelled at their feet to dissuade them. But the jinns were adamant, so an uproar broke out in Kanak Island; the peaceful land was flared with unrest and agitation. Yet the jinns were unyielding and, instead, tried to assure the Kanak people, "Since God has forbidden the knowledge fruit to humanity, and since the aboriginal mother fell from paradise for eating it,

it's certainly unwholesome to human beings. That's why we are cutting the trees with such pain for your ultimate good."

The Kanak people were shrewd now and couldn't be deceived by cunning arguments. They replied, "Why do you eat that fruit then? First you go and cut all the guava trees in your land, and then you come and destroy ours. Besides, since the primeval mother forsook paradise for that fruit, it is easy to guess how valuable it is. Any fruit brought from heaven must be preserved with utmost care." But the jinns had no interest in that argument; it only defeated their purpose.

An interminable quarrel on the issue of cutting the trees began on Kanak Island. At this time, an octogenarian scholar advised, "Why do you fight over the deformed guava trees for nothing? It's an altered version of the original knowledge tree only. You look for that ancient tree planted by Eve. The scriptures say that it is on the eastern side of the planet. Come, let's go and look for it." As per the old man's advice, everyone relinquished the fracas and went in search of the ancient tree. But the old man didn't join them; he was happy to just give the advice.

After travelling for a long period, crossing many rivers, rivulets, townships, mountains, tracts of grasslands and forests, the inhabitants of Kanak Island arrived near a large dead tree. Later, they consulted the scriptures and considered all the myths and fables, to conclude that the withered tree was the original knowledge-tree. They felt heartbroken by it, and were stricken with anger, sorrow and frustration, that they had put in so much of effort, spent so many sleepless nights away from home and undertaken so much hardship to come here, only for a dead tree. The local people told them that the tree had died more than two hundred years ago. One of the visitors replied, "It's a relief that at least you have not used it up as firewood."

What could they do now? How could they revive the knowledge-tree? Some said, water it with utmost resolve; some said, moisten it with tears; some advised to soak it with blood. Many similar ideas came about; a few even thought that if immolation of one or two human lives would help to bring the tree back to life, then they were prepared for that too.

Everyone began to nurture the withered tree in different ways—tears, blood—they were willing to offer anything. But when did the dead ever return to life? When all their efforts failed they began to lament in sorrow. Exhausted from crying, one of them lay down at the foot of the tree, and he dreamt in his sleep that a hermit was saying: "My child, there is no point in crying. Not one or two, even if you sacrifice two hundred thousand lives, the tree will never return to life. About two hundred years ago, the narrow, selfish savants of the land forbade women from taking the knowledge-fruit.

Gradually that proscription became the law and men made the fruit their sole prerogative. Women, being prevented from culling and consuming the fruit, became indifferent to looking after the tree. In course of time, the tree died for lack of care and maintenance from women's tender hands. You go back to your country and plant the seed of the guava tree again. If the jinns wish to cut the guava trees, let them; you secretly store away a few seeds instead, and look after the new tree collectively, both men and women. Then the yield will be abundant. Be aware; don't deprive the women of the guava fruit again! Always remember, women have full rights over the fruit brought into the world by them."

When the man woke up, he narrated his dream to his companions. They all agreed that they should go back. One of them said, "Men have acted most ungratefully by depriving women of the knowledge earned by them; this is the definite outcome of that!"

The enthusiastic young boys of Kanak Island marked and cleared one corner of a garden, and then they invited the girls, "Come sisters, you also join us. We till the ground with our spades and you sow the seeds with your own hands. What an auspicious day is today; from now on we'll have our own tree." Amazed and stupefied, the jinns looked on silently; they couldn't prohibit the ceremony on Kanak Island. Let alone the jinns, even the demons couldn't interfere in this sublime occasion, undertaken with such resolve.

Henceforth, Kanak Island became affluent again, and the people continued to live in supreme bliss. They could no longer be tricked by magic because the women were given charge of the garden of knowledge.

> The fairy tale of Kanak Island is like nectar,
> A dead person hearing it will rise like a victor!

The Creation of Woman[b]
(*A Puranic*[c] *Tale*)

(Recently I read a wonderfully funny story on the creation of woman in an English newspaper. I can't resist the temptation of presenting it in Bengali to

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[b] First published as "Nari-srihsti" (The Creation of Woman) in the *Paush* 1325 (December 1918) issue of the monthly magazine *Sawgat* (Ed. Mohammad Nasiruddin), and reprinted in *Motichur* (A String of Sweet Pearls), Vol. II, published in 1922. This translation is based on the text in Abdul Quader, ed. *Rokeya Rachanabali* (142–144).

[c] The Puranas are a set of Indian religious texts, told in the form of a narrative, and often dealing with historical, philosophical and religious issues and concepts.

my sisters. Let me caution that I will not translate the story verbatim like a school girl, but only provide the essence of it. Therefore, no one should feel disappointed or upset by the disparity in the translation and the original.)

While giving his lectures on "The Mistakes of Moses," Colonel Ingersoll[d] loved to narrate an ancient story on the creation of woman. It gave him the opportunity to show how the sentiment in that ancient tale was far more profound and lofty compared to the narrative of woman's origin given in the Bible. But I am not sure if he would have considered the following Puranic tale the finest, had he heard it.

This classical text, written in Sanskrit, was discovered recently. It was translated into English by an English writer, Mr. Bain, and later published in the *Chicago Times Herald*. The story is as follows.

In the beginning, there was no earth, moon, sun, stars—nothing but darkness. It was the Hindu god Tvastri [also known as Viswakarma] who created the universe. At last, when it came to the creation of woman, Tvastri, the divine architect of the universe, realised that he had used up all the raw-materials in the creation of man. There was no tough or solid material left for him. Dejected and bewildered, Tvastri entered into a meditation.

At the end of his meditation, Tvastri stood up and began to collect the essence of a few unusual ingredients, such as the circular shape of the full-moon, slithering movement of the snake, parasitism of the tendril, tremulous motion of the grass, slenderness of the rose-creeper, beauty of the flower, lightness of the leaf, askance look of the doe, brightness of the sun, dewiness of the mist, briskness of the wind, timidity of the rabbit, vanity of the peacock, pliability of the wings of the weaver bird, firmness of diamond, pleasant taste of honey, ruthlessness of the tiger, sweltering heat of fire, frigidity of ice, delightful voice of the dove, chirping of the blue-necked bird …

At this point in my translation, I felt tired and began to rest holding the pen in my right hand and leaning my head on my left hand placed on the table. I am not sure if I had fallen asleep. Suddenly my room became exceedingly radiant, as if it were at once lighted by several suns. Looking

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[d] Colonel Robert Green Ingersoll (1833–1899) was a Civil War veteran and an American political leader, noted for his freethinking and defense of atheism. He was a self-proclaimed agnostic, who gave several lectures defending the scientific ideas of Charles Darwin and, later, of T.H. Huxley. "The Gods," "Some Mistakes of Moses" and "About the Holy Bible" were some of his acclaimed lectures.

up, I saw a luminous shape standing before me like a pillar of light. My eyes were dazzled by the sight, and I shut them immediately. The effulgent figure before me shouted out in a booming voice, "Listen girl, I am the divine architect of the universe, Tvastri. I am very much delighted that you are discussing the story of my creation of woman. I created woman with thirty-three ingredients in all. The English writer Mr. Bain forgot to mention twelve of the ingredients while translating the story from Sanskrit to English, and I have come to rectify that mistake today since it is not right to have such mistakes in a Puranic tale. Let me mention those twelve items and you record them." Dazed, I dipped the pen into the ink and began to write sluggishly: "tartness of tamarind, salinity of salt, pungency of chilli, sweetness of sugarcane …." Thinking that I was making a mistake I stopped, and gathering some courage I asked a little later, "Your Excellency, aren't these ingredients for chutney?"

With a faint smile on his face but firmly, Tvastri said, "Write what I say without any dillydally." I continued to write mechanically, without another word: "bitter taste of quinine, sophistry of the unreasonable, vanity of the quarrelsome, absentmindedness of the philosopher, cunning of the politician, fortitude of the callous, inconstancy of water and inertness of slumber."

Perhaps this interruption in the story will upset my female readers. But what can I do? It's difficult to have freedom while translating another's work; especially when recounting a historical tale one has to also curb one's imagination. Anyway, let me return to my translation. No, let me begin from the beginning, by mixing up both the translation and the word of god.

At the end of his meditation, Tvastri rubbed his eyes, stood up and began to collect the essence of a few very special ingredients, such as (1) the circular shape of the full-moon, (2) slithering movement of the snake, (3) parasitism of the tendril, (4) tremulous motion of the grass, (5) slenderness of the rose-creeper, (6) beauty of the flower, (7) lightness of the leaf, (8) askance look of the doe, (9) brightness of the sun, (10) dewiness of the mist, (11) briskness of the wind, (12) timidity of the rabbit, (13) vanity of the peacock, (14) pliability of the wings of the weaver bird, (15) firmness of diamond, (16) pleasant taste of honey, (17) ruthlessness of the tiger, (18) sweltering heat of fire, (19) frigidity of ice, (20) delightful voice of the dove, (21) chirping of the blue-necked bird, (22) tartness of tamarind, (23) salinity of salt, (24) pungency of chilli, (25) sweetness of sugarcane, (26) bitter taste of quinine, (27) sophistry of the unreasonable, (28) vanity of the quarrelsome, (29) absentmindedness of the philosopher, (30) cunning of the politician, (31) fortitude of the callous, (32) inconstancy of water and (33) inertness of slumber.

The god Tvastri created woman by blending the above thirty-three ingredients (and by whipping them finely with an egg beater). Needless to say that the universal workman had to encounter many challenges in creating woman; he had to undertake a lot of research, reflection and mediation, and work tirelessly. When people strain their brains the most to make something, they come up with a complete product; but when someone gains the expertise by making something again and again, the last item of that product is also his best. Therefore, there is no doubt that woman is the best of God's creations. Eventually, Tvastri gave that carefully made item as a gift to man.[4] After eight days, man returned to Tvastri and said: "God, the creature you gave me as a dower, she is making my life bitter. She chatters and moans all the time, and never gives me a moment's rest. She laments without any reason, and is, in a word, extremely troublesome." Tvastri took the woman back.

After another eight days, man came back to the god and said, "God, since I returned the creature you gave me, my life has become utterly lonely and insipid. I think of how beautiful she was, how she used to dance, sing and play before me—alas, so alluring! How she used to look askance at me! She was my playmate, my life-companion. I find her absence unbearable." Without a word, Tvastri handed over the creature to him.[5]

On the fourth day, Tvastri saw the man returning to him again, along with the woman. After making his obeisance, he said, "God, please forgive me, I can't decide if woman is a source of joy for me or sorrow. I find that her presence brings more sorrow than delight. Therefore, god, please relieve me of her."

This time Tvastri became furious and said, "Go and do as you like." The man whined and replied, "She is like a curse to me; it's impossible for me to live with her." Tvastri replied, "You can't also live without her."

Having no other choice, the man began to whimper, "What a trouble! I don't want to keep woman (this useless thing!) but also can't get rid of her!"

Since then woman has been living as man's curse and his burden.

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[4] It is like casting pearls before a swine.

[5] Woman is also like a lifeless, mindless wooden puppet—she doesn't mind being repudiated by the male creature or feel proud in being accepted back. God Tvastri obviously knew that such a dumb wooden puppet would be the most suitable home-maker for men.

Nurse Nelly[e]
(*Based on a True Story*)

I

My younger sister-in-law, Khuki, had been suffering from a mysterious illness for three years. At last, on her doctor's advice, she went to Lucknow [capital of Uttar Pradesh] for a change of air. I, too, went with her. God willing, several of us travelled together—Khuki's husband, son and a few other family members.

A friend of ours, Mr. Hem, was living in Lucknow. On hearing that his wife, Bimala Devi, was sick and had been admitted to a women's hospital, I went to see her. She was confined to her bed and had to depend on nurses to change her and to dress the ulcer wound on her arm. In short, she was wholly reliant on the nurses' supervision. I was there for about two hours and saw some five nurses attending to her various needs. But the one who took away the bucket full of discharges of blood and pus from her body … her face struck me as somewhat familiar.

I used to visit Mr. Hem's wife every alternate day but frankly, I was not so keen to see Bimala; I went there, rather, to take another look at that sad, haggard face of the nurse, this icon of sorrow. That face of hers, familiar yet unrecognisable, used to perturb me. One day Bimala asked, "Well, why do you look at Nurse Nelly so intently?" Hiding my real reason, I said, "Her haggard face makes me so sad."

Bimala said, "Yes she is very unlucky. I also feel for her. But what to do? It is impossible to help her with money. She gets only six rupees a month—not enough to feed herself. At first, I used to give her a quarter or a half a rupee coin but later I found out that Sister Riva would take it from her and divide it among all the hospital attendants—sometimes Sister Nelly would be lucky enough to get a fraction from it. How unfair of Sister Riva! All the dirty work is done by Nelly, but she gets barely enough to eat."

I asked if Nelly was from the sweeper caste.

Bimala replied, "No, she is a Bengali Christian. It is rumoured that she was a housewife in a middleclass Muslim family once. Some nuns coaxed her into converting to Christianity and leave home. They changed her name to

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[e] First published in the *Agrahayan* 1326 (2.1; November 1919) issue of *Sawgat* (Ed. Mohammad Nasiruddin), the story was reprinted in *Motichur* (A String of Sweet Pearls), Vol. II, in 1922. This translation is based on the text of the story in Abdul Quader, ed. *Rokeya Rachanabali* (145–157).

'Nelly.' She has been asked to look after us, I mean Bengali patients, because she knows Bengali.

"She is prohibited from visiting the Muslim quarters lest someone would convert her back to Islam. There is also a rumour that Nelly can even read the Qurʾan."

My misgivings multiplied when I heard that Nelly could read the Qurʾan. God knew which Muslim family she had disgraced to become an outcast. Alas, such humiliation of the Qurʾan! Christian Nelly—sweeper Nelly—she held the Qurʾan with the same hands she used to clean the waste bucket, full of the detestable blood and pus. As a matter of fact, Nelly did the work of a sweeper at the hospital, but her superiors called her Nurse Nelly only to please her.

I continued to come to the hospital as usual on the pretext of visiting Bimala, but I never found the opportunity to speak with Nelly as I would have liked. Nelly also came to us frequently with the excuse of work—or otherwise she would gaze at me from a distance with her beautiful wide eyes. If our eyes ever met accidentally, she would look down and walk away with a show of reluctance. Though I made several attempts, I didn't know how to get close to Nelly. On the rare occasion when I got the chance to ask her something, she would only weep uncontrollably. However, an opportune moment finally came for me to interact with Nelly.

At last it was decided that Khuki would undergo surgery on her festering wound. But I was determined not to let her be admitted to the hospital under any circumstance. I had a fierce argument with Khuki's husband on this; he tried in every way to make me understand the benefits of the hospital; he employed every art and science of reasoning, and even gave the example of Mr. Hem's wife to emphasise his point. But the ruin once caused by the hospital had scorched me to the core. That wound hadn't healed yet. I didn't explain these details to Khuki's husband, but finally I won through sheer persistence. Exclaiming "Long live women's whim," Khuki's husband gave up all arguments and conceded that the surgery would be performed at home.

A senior doctor from the hospital, Miss Folly, arrived with her team at the appointed time. She had two or three nurses with her as well. We were Bengalis and didn't know a whit of Hindi; therefore, Nurse Nelly had to come along to act as a translator. Everyone left after the surgery; only two of the nurses, Nelly and Lizi, stayed behind to take care of the patient.

The next day, during a leisure time after lunch and Khuki's medication, I asked Nelly discreetly, "Nurse, where are you from?" In reply, she fell at my feet and, somehow restraining her tears, said, "Bubujan [Elder Sister], couldn't you recognise me?"

What! My head began to turn, and suddenly I felt utterly exhausted. Yes, alas, I recognised her! What a brutal truth, a dreadful truth, I had come upon. Nelly recounted her long, miserable story, and every word of that account was washed in tears.

II

My parental home was in the village of … pur. After the death of my grandfather, my father and paternal uncle divided the inherited property between them in equal halves. With the exception of their servants and maids, there were only three people in my uncle's family—Uncle himself, his wife and their only daughter, Nayeema. In our family, with five siblings, we numbered seven in all. Yet all the time we used to hear Uncle didn't have enough money, he was in lots of debt, etcetera.

We were quite secure financially, and lived a happy life with plenty to eat and more than enough jewellery to wear. Where was the equal to our magnificent home? It was an immense dwelling standing in the middle of about one hundred acres of rent-free land and surrounded by a thick grove on all sides, with tigers, boars, jackals and all else harbouring in there. We didn't have a clock at home, but that didn't prevent us from keeping to our daily routine. In the morning, we got up from bed with the lilting calls of doves, Indian nightingales and other native birds. At sunset, the yelping of jackals alerted us that it was time for evening prayer. The loud cry of ospreys made us aware that it was three in the morning. Our childhood was spent in utmost happiness in a small village surrounded by lush nature.

After a period, my aunt passed away, leaving behind her only daughter of three years. My uncle was at his wit's end to cope with the situation. Bringing up his daughter was his main problem. One day my mother said to reassure him, "Why are you so worried? Nayeema's mother is no more, but I am still here. The same arms that have raised my three daughters, Jabeda, Hamida and Abida, won't they be able to care for Nayeema as well?" It was as if Uncle had found a sudden rescue in a boundless sea of danger. The next day he left Nayeema, with five maids, at our house.

Nayeema was the youngest of all our brothers and sisters, so we loved her immensely. Our parents also loved her more than all of us, I believe. In this way, Nayeema continued to grow up like a princess, showered with care and love.

We didn't care much about higher education in the village, and whatever little training we got, Nayeema also received it. In the opinion of our friends and relatives, nothing was more counterproductive in this world than the

education of women. Most of the time was devoted to learning things of practical, not academic value. Weaving reticulated bags, grooming hair, dicing areca nuts, shredding coconut, grinding cumin, making diapered bedcovers, etcetera, which were considered essential tasks to learn—Nayeema had gradually mastered them all.

Nayeema had been living with us since she was three years old. In the meantime, Uncle had passed away. He had squandered the entire share of his property, except Nayeema's mother's ornaments, which he had handed over to Father before his death.

After living away for eight or ten years, my eldest brother, Mr. Jamal Ahmed returned home, having been transferred and promoted to the post of District Magistrate. A few days later I came from my in-laws' house to see him, and so did several of our relatives. Our house was bustling with people.

One day, we four sisters were chitchatting when suddenly Bhaijan [Elder Brother] stepped into the room. Addressing us, he said, "Do you girls not study? How do you live with such obtuse minds? Oh, yes, Nayeema, what do you study?"

Nayeema replied, "I have read the Qurʾan. Now I am learning its translation from our eldest sister."

Brother snapped with a chuckle, "That's all! Don't you study anything else—a bit of Bengali or English?"

I narrated my life-experience of eighteen years and said, "Bhaijan, you have studied a lot of English and Bengali, gone to England, and have become a District Magistrate or a Collector, many years after returning home. What will Nayeema gain from studying English? Can she become a District Collector?"

Bhaijan replied, "If Nayeema gets a good education, she can become a Collector's wife. She'll get a good husband, be married to a good family."

We all began to giggle. I immediately informed mother of Bhaijan's strange remark. With a grin, I said, "Bhaijan thinks if Nayeema gets a good education she can become a Collector's wife." Listening to me, Mother's face grew solemn and she replied, "Okay, right, so will it be."

III

Our house was in a flurry. Bhaijan was getting married to Nayeema. We were ecstatic that our "baby doll" Nayeema was becoming our Bhabijan [Elder Sister-in-law]. Our youngest sister Abida was in a huff; she was utterly adamant not to touch Nayeema's feet in obeisance, because Nayeema was two years younger than her. Everyone taunted her about it to madness. In

the meantime, Bhaijan was also extremely annoyed, livid with rage, to be truthful. He was England-returned, strictly opposed to child-marriage; how could he marry a ten-year old girl and make a clown of himself? How would he show his face to Bengal's cultured community? He put all the blame on me and said, "Jabeda is the source of all mischief. I said something playfully the other day and she went and informed Mother about it, and now this horror."

Whether Bhaijan was angry or whatever else, his chief virtue was that he was never disobedient to our parents or relatives. A few pleasing words from Mother and some words of advice from Father made him yield easily. Mother protested that she had brought up the orphan girl with utmost love and care and wouldn't allow her to be married to a stranger, and so on. Bhaijan didn't object any more. Like an obliging, obedient boy, he prepared himself for the wedding.

A distant sister-in-law of ours said to me, teasing Bhaijan, "Well, aren't we going to paste henna on the England-returned gentleman's hands?" Bhaijan replied in a suppressed anger, "Do whatever you please! If smearing henna or something worse makes you happy, I have no objection. I have decided to bear everything without a fuss—torment me as much as you wish!"

I immediately made some henna paste and put it on his two hands. I didn't intend to keep it there for too long, but I got involved in something else and forgot about it altogether. When I returned after a long stretch, I saw poor Bhaijan still sitting there indifferently, resting his hands on the two arms of the easy chair. I quickly brought some water and began to wash his hands. Seeing deep red marks on his palms, Bhaijan became furious. He had acquired a lot of knowledge and had even studied Botany, but he was not aware of the peculiar efficacy of henna. In a flash, he pulled his hands away, went to the toilet and made generous use of soap and sponge on the marks. But the henna proved to be stubbornly unyielding.

IV

In a woman's hospital in … city, a Muslim woman from a privileged background had been staying for two months. Her six-year-old son, Jafar, was also with her. There was no lack of care for her at the hospital. All the senior and junior lady doctors and nurses looked after her by turns. In short, she was getting a royal treatment there. Her husband and younger brother-in-law came to see her every day. Her mother-in-law also visited her from time to time, with the woman's five year old daughter, Jamila. The patient was my sister-in-law Nayeema.

Mother was not willing to send Nayeema to the hospital. But when her health gradually continued to deteriorate, as a last resort Bhaijan said to mother, "Mother, I have never disobeyed you so far, but now since somebody's life depends on getting treatment at the hospital, please do not oppose it. I'll not be able to honour your word today." Bhaijan regretted transgressing maternal advice that day for the rest of his life.

In the next room, some missionary women were chattering and laughing. One of them bragged, "We'll see this time! Our damned critics won't be able to ridicule us any more that we convert only the famine-stricken, hungry, homeless people."

Second woman: "With a kill like this, even our Lord Bishop in Calcutta would be gratified."

Third woman: "Gee, you brag too much! How challenging can it be to lure a nineteen year old girl (even if she is a mother of two, she is still a juvenile) and convert to Christianity?"

First woman: "May not be difficult … but it will create a ripple—the whole of Bengal will be in a clamour. It's no joke to cajole a Collector's wife."

Second woman: "Come, it's getting dark. Today I'll sing devotional songs in Madam Nayeema's room. She'll be in the hospital for another month, so there is enough time for us."

A few missionary women visited Nayeema all the time. Attending and nursing patients was their highest doctrine, and Nayeema was easily charmed by their seemingly selfless, unassuming love. In the evening, they sang devotional songs in praise of Jesus's grace and mercy and thus convinced her of the way for her to save herself from hellfire. Nayeema didn't know anything about the philosophy, science and history of her own religion—thus the teachings of these missionaries created a deep mark on her impressionable mind easily. Her body began to recuperate, but her soul began to grow poisoned. To one who has never seen light, the glow of a firefly seems as luminous as the sun. Such was Nayeema's case.

V

After three months, Nayeema—no, my revered sister-in-law—returned from the hospital. But she had changed a lot; she was no longer the soft-spoken, sweet-smiling Nayeema. She was not affable with anyone any more. Everyone thought that her long bout of illness had made her peevish. Hoping that the fresh air of the countryside would bring back her affectionate, cheerful self, Bhaijan sent her to our village home with Mother. But it didn't work. She failed to forget her companions at the hospital and loathed the open air of the farmland.

One day, Nayeema demanded from her mother-in-law, why had she not been given higher education? What did they lack? What prevented them? Mother kept staring at her daughter-in-law in bewilderment. With an uncertain smile, she said, "What does the foolish girl say?"

Nayeema: "I am saying baloney! You have kept me in the state of a pure brute. You didn't give me a shred of education that would allow me to mingle with decent people. My husband asked that I be given education, but hearing it, you rushed into our matrimonial bondage."

Mother: "You were never such a harpy before, my child. Where did you learn such language? I brought you up since you were three years old. You were so precious to us; that's why we have kept you in the family, instead of marrying you to a stranger. And you call it bondage?"

Nayeema: "What do the illiterate know about the value of education? That's why you didn't think it important. All you knew was marriage."

Mother: "Child, we'll see how you give education to your daughter and turn her into a memsahib. I am not against education, but living in the countryside we didn't have the right facilities. There was no religious school, primary school or school for girls. Even good female teachers were not available to tutor at home. Now having lived in the city, if you can arrange for good education, that should be fine."

That's exactly what happened. There were hardly any facilities for women's education in the countryside, and even if there were some schools for Muslim girls like an oasis in the desert, why would the privileged class send their daughters there? What else could they do in the provincial areas? Therefore, several missionary women were appointed by turn for Jamila's education. In their customary way, they began their lessons by telling stories from the Bible.

Nayeema didn't seem satisfied with that. Eventually, a European governess was appointed for her daughter. By gradually spreading her influence, the governess became my Bhabijan's companion, Jamila's instructor and the guardian of the family, all at once. Miss Lawrence was now indispensable in the household; she had lured everyone in the family with her genial ways.

VI

There was a huge uproar in the area. The local court house was teeming with a vast multitude of people. Almost everyone living in the neighbourhood had gathered there. Why? What was the matter? District Collector Mr. Jamal Ahmed's wife, Mrs. Nayeema Khatun, had run away to the colonial mission house with 25,000 rupees worth of jewellery and 17,000 rupees in cash.

A complex lawsuit had been going on over it for a month. Both parties had engaged renowned lawyers. Nayeema had come to the courtroom in a palanquin. It was the day for the verdict.

Many newspaper journalists had gathered there; publishing such a sensational story would make their paper extremely appealing to readers.

Some came to watch the fun and cheer. Some came to mock and jeer. Some took the opportunity to give a pep talk against woman's education. A few others slammed the sheer notion of women's education. To add insult to injury, some congratulated the England-returned Mr. Jamal Ahmed on his daughter having attained the height of education.

Some, saddened by the incident, came to show genuine sympathy. Some came to console and express pity.

Some were terrified that if it were to continue it would be difficult to protect their own women. If a prominent Collector's wife could run away from home enticed by the missionary ladies, what could stop it from happening to them?

Nayeema herself acknowledged that she had embraced Christianity of her own free will. She had no desire to leave home, because she had nothing against her mother-in-law and her husband. But the lack of facilities for baptism had forced her to take refuge at the mission house. She had renounced her husband, daughter, son, home—in a word, everything—for the sake of religion, for the love of Jesus only.

The judge wanted to settle the case amicably by saying that now that Nayeema had been baptised she could return home. But Miss Lawrence stunned everyone in the courtroom by giving a long lecture on the inimical environment in the zenana generally and the adverse condition in the inner quarters of Nayeema's home in particular. She had become intimately aware of the secrets of the zenana by having frequented several private quarters in Bihar and Calcutta over the last ten years.

The final decree was that whatever money and jewellery Nayeema had brought with her would remain with her, but the son and the daughter would remain in the custody of the father. Nayeema tried really hard to win the custody of her son, but she didn't succeed.

VII

Nayeema was now living with the missionary women in the official residence of the British administrators in the area. There was no limit to pampering her. Where should they keep their proselytised memsahib—if they carry her on the head, lice attack her; if she is put on the ground, she is beaten by ants? It's astounding to have such piety, such extraordinary self-denial, in

a nineteen year old girl. She became the icon for the British missionaries; the jewel in their coronet and a cherished treasure. Such extreme indulgence and adoration by the missionary women befuddled Nayeema. But why was their beloved memsahib so disconcerted despite all the love?

Abdication from everything for the sake of Jesus seemed blissful only so long as she had not been separated from her cherished family. Gradually, as the lawsuit took an unfavourable turn and the glimmer of seeing her husband and children again vanished, Nayeema's exultation dissipated also. She began to feel contrite on her way back from the court with the pride of victory on her shoulders. Stepping out of the palanquin, Nayeema fainted. The missionary sisters murmured "too hot," and began to fan her, enclosing her in a circle. It was hot no doubt, like a heart-scorching heat!

On regaining consciousness, Nayeema confessed her sin, recited the basic article of faith in Islam again and again, and kept invoking Allah's name. But now it was all in vain. Late at night, she would think of escaping from the place to go and seek her husband's forgiveness. But, alas, she didn't know the way to return home. How far was the Collector Saheb's residence from the missionary house, and in which direction? Who would show her the way? Alas, oh alas! No one!

Eventually, feeding Nayeema also became a problem for the missionary women. Everyone worked there for a livelihood, went from house to house to teach or to preach. Why should Nayeema sit idly? At last, they asked her to work as a nurse at the hospital, but knowing that it would be unsafe to keep her in Bengal, they sent her to far-away Lucknow.

While leaving home, Nayeema had brought along a copy of the Qurʾan to show to the world, by rebutting every verse in it, that Islam was a hollow religion that bred fanaticism and orthodoxy. But now she had given up on such foolish ideas, and that very copy of the Qurʾan was now her only companion in sorrow. When everyone went to bed at night, she would get up, take her ablution, and sit down with the Qurʾan reverentially. But she could barely recite—the continuous flow of tears from her eyes wetted the pages, so that she had to keep some blotting papers handy to wipe them. Brought up in the lap of joy, Nayeema never knew before that crying in penance could bring such solace.

Thinking of her husband was Nayeema's main preoccupation now. He became the subject of her meditation, cogitation, and her rosary. She would pray, "Oh Allah, lead this miserable woman once more, just once, to the feet of her husband. You are omnipotent, capable of doing everything! Can't you do this little favour for me? The door of atonement hasn't shut yet; take me back, oh God, the most beneficent, the most merciful."

Nayeema became Nurse Nelly on arrival at the Lucknow hospital. During the day, she was busy taking care of patients and had little time for prayer or recitation of the Qurʾan. There were only the irrepressible tears! In the beginning, other nurses and even the lady doctors had tried to comfort her with various words of hope. But one who has lost both her religion and worldly possessions, in this life and the next; who has relinquished a free commonwealth to become a detestable sweeper; who has in her own hands set fire to a happy and prosperous home, where is the comfort for her? Therefore, at last, no one tried to console her any more.

In this way, seven long years had passed. Nelly hadn't spent a single day during this time without crying. She somehow continued to spend her days in her emaciated body, eagerly looking forward to the night. Her only solace was that at night she had more time to pray and recite the Holy Qurʾan. But on the day she was called for night duty, Nelly was deprived even of the bliss of prayer. Sobahan Allah, Glory be to Allah! There was so much peace in sitting up and praying late at night and in soaking the prayer mat with a flood of tears!

At first I couldn't recognise Nelly in her skeletal body, but when she said, "Bubujan, can't you remember me?" I was left with no more doubt. I felt as though I had been struck by a fire bolt, and instantly slumped to the ground. How could I not recognise my own cousin-sister who had grown up in my maternal care? No wonder she could recite the Qurʾan; how many Bengali Christians were capable of that? But alas! Who would have wanted to see the paradisiacal nymph Nayeema in the form of an infernal worm, in Nelly? The Nayeema, who came to our house in childhood with five maids, had now become a nursemaid to others.

> Alack, o destiny! The many tricks you play,
> You take us to the crest of happiness
> Only to push us into the pit of sorrow!

VIII

I couldn't restrain my tears while listening to Nelly's story. I reminded myself repeatedly that Nayeema's suffering was the result of her own sin; it was her due, and there was no reason for me to feel sad about it. But the story of Nelly's disgrace, told in a distressful tone, would have splintered even a stone to pieces; what more a human being?

After finishing her own account, Nelly kept quiet for a moment and then asked about the wellbeing of her family. I explained to her everything as briefly and calmly as I could. I said, "The day Bhaijan returned home

with a defeated face, having lost the lawsuit, mother heaved a sigh, 'Ah, Nayeema,' and instantly became bedridden. Her constant refrain to express her unbearable sorrow and anguish was 'Ah, Nayeema.' Bhaijan was a man and didn't show his grief outwardly, but like a wounded lion he bore all the humiliation, shame, resentment and anger in silence.

"Mother passed away after two months. Soon after that, poor Jamila fell ill. She didn't dare to go close to her father, noticing his solemn face. Her only refuge was her grandmother, and having lost her, the motherless child almost began to crumble.

"In the frenzy of high fever, Jamila would moan incoherently for her mother. She would whine, 'Mother, why have you gone to the hospital again? Come back! Jafar cries for you all the time. Grandmother is also not there.' Jamila didn't suffer for long; death took her up in its placid lap within a few days.

"Bhaijan was devastated by the death of Mother and Jamila in the space of days. He couldn't take it any more. Poor Jafar also began to cry a lot. Bhaijan kept a watchful eye on him, but how long could a motherless child of one year remain healthy? He too met his death within a month.

"Bhaijan never married again. His blissful family was reduced to names on a tomb, and his only surviving blood-relative was me. Imagine for once that graveyard of your own making, Nayeema, and picture your husband living in that cemetery." Before I could finish my words, Nayeema fainted and fell to the ground.

As I was planning to splash some water on Nelly's face, Khuki's husband knocked on the door and his grown-up daughter, Siddiqa, rushed into the room. I couldn't tend to Nelly any more in their presence. Siddiqa then led me to her mother by the hand.

IX

By God's grace, we returned home after Khuki regained her health. Before returning, we visited a few more cities in the north, especially Delhi, Agra and Lahore. The sight of Anarkali's tomb in Lahore evoked the images of Emperor Akbar's might and splendour on the one hand, and Prince Salim's unadulterated love on the other—and I saw both, simultaneously, in my mind's eye.[6f]

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[6] Prince Salim's beloved, Anarkali, was buried alive at the behest of Emperor Akbar.

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[f] Here, the author is making a reference to the legendary story of Akbar, his concubine

The sight of the Taj Mahal in Agra made me aware of something else. No matter how much the misogynists rage against woman's education, the triumph of truth is inevitable. Education is vital for both men and women. Just because fire has the potential to burn down a house, can any householder do without fire?

The monument of Taj Mahal is renowned worldwide and it is considered one of the seven wonders on earth. There are very few people who haven't heard about the Taj Mahal. Yet, how many have heard about Momtaj Mahal, the woman who lies buried in that far-famed mausoleum? Even the exquisite Taj Mahal, built with the most beautiful marble stones, has not made the queen buried in its womb unforgettable. And what about Nur Jahan Begum? Virtually nothing has been done to immortalise her; her humble, ordinary tomb lies neglected and covered with trees and shrubs in a little known place in Lahore. Many even don't know about its existence, yet Nur Jahan Begum's memory has become timeless. What is it that has made her immortal? Education! It is the grace of education which has made her a radiant and renowned figure. God forbid, the Taj Mahal can be destroyed by an earthquake or by war, but Nur Jahan's glory will last forever.[g]

Anyway, I should not deviate from the story too far. Even after returning home, I couldn't bring up Nelly's story with anyone. She had cried and begged at my feet, urging that I request Bhaijan to ask her to return home. She would be happy to spend the rest of her life as a humble maidservant or an abominable sweeper in her husband's home. Excessive crying had caused her consumption, and I knew that the poor woman wouldn't live for much longer. I went for a visit to my paternal—no, since Father is no more—fraternal home during the puja holidays.

Nadira Begum (dubbed 'Anarkali' for her rare beauty), and her incestuous relationship with Akbar's son Salim, who later ascended the throne as Emperor Jahangir. Historical information is scare on the incident. However, according to the British tourist and traveller William Finch, who came to Lahore during 1608 to 1611, when Akbar became suspicious that Anarkali, who was also the mother of his son Danial Shah, was having a secret relationship with Salim (Jahangir), he ordered her to be buried alive in the wall of Lahore Fort. It is believed that Jahangir built a splendid tomb in memory of his beloved, at the place where she was buried, after ascending the throne. The tomb survives till today and a couplet by Jahangir written on the grave in Persian reads, "If I could behold my beloved only once, I would remain thankful to Allah till doomsday." For further details on the story, see http://dawn.com/2012/02/12/legend-anarkali-myth-mystery-and-history/ and

http://www.wichaar.com/news/315/ARTICLE/16056/2009-09-01.html.

[g] Nur Jahan, meaning "Light of the World," was born of Persian parents, as Mehr-un-Nisaa, in 1577. She became the twelfth wife of the Mughal Emperor Jahangir (who was her second

One day, I saw Bhaijan in a somewhat jovial mood. Taking this opportunity, I sat by his feet and asked gently, "Bhaijan, let me press your feet." Pleased, he said, "Okay, but is there a motive?" This brought back memories of our happy childhood. In my girlhood days, I used to press Bhaijan's feet or snap his fingers to get his favour. That's why he asked me today if there was a motive. I revealed my purpose with considerable difficulty and in as direct and uncluttered a language as I could. Narrating Nayeema's heart-scorching story of sorrow, I said, "Tormented by guilt, Nayeema's love for you has now become like pure gold."

After hearing everything, Bhaijan replied, "Can I then expect to see Nayeema again? I have not died so far only because I wish to see her just one more time. I remember everything; I haven't forgotten a single bit of it in the long seven-and-half years. I remember the day Mother fell ill with a sigh, 'Ah, Nayeema,' and never recovered again. I remember the way Jamila used to cry for her mother, hiding her face in my arms; unable to mention her mother to me from fear, the poor girl used to whine in an untold sorrow in the pretext of one thing or another. Eventually, she died in my lap rambling incoherently about her mother. Moreover, I remember the day my blind man's prop and last recourse for support in life, Jafar, breathed his last while resting his head on my bosom. He never slept except in my arms, and it is in my arms too where he slept his last.

"After so much humiliation, I am still shamelessly alive, only because I wanted to see Nayeema just one more time. If I had given up my job, I would probably have been consumed by memory in my lonely life. I would probably have lost my health in a short while and died. The day Jafar died, I loaded this pistol because I wanted to commit suicide ….

Bhaijan took out a six-barrel pistol from his pocket and showed it to me. He then continued, "But I didn't kill myself. I am still alive, enduring memory's scorpion sting and suffering all the affliction and humiliation, only in the hope of seeing Nayeema one more time …."

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husband). It is believed that Jahangir had problems in running the affairs of the empire, owing to his addiction to opium and alcohol, and it is Nur Jahan who became the de-facto ruler behind the throne. After Jahangir's death, she fell from grace, as one of her stepsons, Khurrum, ascended the throne assuming the title Shah Jahan ("Ruler of the World"). Shah Jahan confined her to house arrest, and during this period, Nur Jahan spent her time in artistic activities, including composing Persian poems under the pen name Makhfi. Mumtaz Mahal ("Jewel of the Palace") was Nur Jahan's niece, who became Shah Jahan's third and most favourite wife. She was born in 1593 as Arjumand Banu Begum. Shah Jahan built the world's richest mausoleum, Taj Mahal, to commemorate his love for his "Jewel," after her death in 1631.

I looked up at Bhaijan's face with a bit of encouragement and hope. I thought Nayeema was lucky again, and perhaps would find shelter at the feet of her husband once more. But I became disappointed by the look on his face. He looked fierce; sparks of fire were emitting from his eyes. Holding the pistol firmly in his fist, he said, "Can you somehow bring Nayeema just for once in front of me? Then I'll settle my last score of life with her. That's my last wish in life. I want nothing else. I'll kill Nayeema—no, did you say she is now 'Nelly'—okay then, I'll kill Nelly by shooting her with this pistol. I'll kill Nelly with this pistol, firing six bullets one at a time, and then I'll hang in the gallows. But no, well, I can't do that! Nayeema has reaffirmed her faith in Islam and become a Muslim again. Then she cannot be subjected to homicide. It is forbidden to kill a fellow Muslim." With that, he put the pistol down on the floor.

Right then his servant boy brought in an urgent telegram. Bhaijan opened and read it.

The hospital authorities in Lucknow had written, "Keep a grave ready, Nurse Nelly's dead body has been sent."

The Theory of Creation[h]

We were chitchatting till late the other night. Our topics were jinn, fairies and ghosts. Someone had seen a grey bearded jinn praying, someone else had come across a fairy draped in white, and yet another had sighted a ghost eating fried fish. Ms. Nonibala Dutta went to sleep. I was still sitting on the sofa. Jaheda Begum asked me to go to bed, put the lamp out and left for her room. Shirin Begum lay down on my couch instead of going to her own room. The lamp was snuffed out, but a candle was still glowing at a corner, and the items in the room were clearly visible in its light. I am not sure if I had fallen asleep, but I believe I was awake. A bit later, there was a huge noise, and alarmed by it, Nonibala yelled, "What is that sound?"

"I am not sure," I said. "A few days ago I read in a newspaper that an aeroplane fell on a house in England because of engine failure and the pilot fell through the broken roof and landed on a bed in one of the rooms, totally

[h] First published as "Purush Srihstir Abatarona" (The Creation of Man) in the *Shraban* 1327 (3.2; August 1920) issue of the quarterly magazine *Bangiyo Musalman Sahitya Patrika* (Eds. Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah and Mohammad Mozammel Haque), and included in *Motichur*, Vol. II (1922), with a revised title, "Srishti-tawtho" (The Theory of Creation). This translation is based on the text of the story in Abdul Quader, ed. *Rokeya Rachanabali* (180–184).

unhurt. I hope no such plane has plunged on to our dilapidated, crumbling roof. Why not open the window and have a look?"

Mrs. Binapani Ghosh was still in bed as usual, savouring a deep sleep. Looking at her, I said, "Get out of bed, quick!"

Before I could finish, she hastily stepped out of the bed and asked, "What's the matter?" I repeated what I had said to Noni.

Noni said, "The way it's pattering outside, how am I to open the window? Besides, I am afraid. You were telling all kinds of ghost stories earlier."

"Okay, let me check," said Bina and opened the bay window.

Instantly, a gust of wind and rainwater splattered us. With it, a huge ball of light also entered the room. We were all stunned by it. Shirin was awaken by the noise, and Afsar and his wife rushed to the scene from another room; they too were shocked. Not sure whether we should scream to wake up all the others or run for our lives, we kept gaping at that ball of light.

The orb changed gradually into a luminous human form. I had a hunch that I had seen this godlike creature somewhere before, but I couldn't recollect it fully. This is because I am not in the habit of remembering human faces, and I have often been embarrassed by it. The luminescent stranger said, "Children, you all look terrified! Let me assure you, there is nothing to be afraid of."

Shirin said, "The other day a detective came to our house in the guise of a mute beggar. Are you one of them?"

Noni: "Well, you live so close to a Muslim religious scholar's house, that's why you are bugged by detectives so frequently."

The luminous form replied animatedly, "No, child, I am not anything like that. I am the divine architect of the universe, Tvastri."

Hearing Tvastri's name, Bina and Noni greeted him by prostrating at his feet. Then I remembered that while writing "The Creation of Woman" in Calcutta, I had once been visited by this supernal being. We warmly invited the deity to take a seat. Bina said, "Is it okay to ask why you are treading the human world at this odd hour?"

"The reason," Tvastri replied, pointing a finger at me, "is that girl."

Amazed, afraid and cautious, I said, "What do you mean, god, that it's me?"

Tvastri replied, "Yes, it's you! You have created a row by translating the history of my creation of woman into Bengali. But I shouldn't blame you fully, part of the fault lies with the *Sawgat* magazine office."

Noni: "How is that?"

"Then listen," Tvastri said. "This girl sent her article 'The Creation of Woman' to the monthly magazine office, *Sawgat*. The editor was away at that

time, so the witless staff published the article, leaving out two of her footnotes. The absence of the footnotes has made the piece incomprehensible in several places. Therefore, unable to understand it fully, discreet male readers cannot derive satisfaction from it. Then they say, 'Call this fellow, Tvastri. Let him explain whatever error there is in the piece.' That's why, you see, whenever they get hold of a planchette, they call me from the celestial realm and pester me. Listen to what happened today. A few youths have been induced by the ideal of *Satyagraha*. The government officials tell them, 'You forsake your quest for truth and embrace falsehood,' but they are like foolish boys and refuse to accept the right advice. Hounded by police for their rejection of 'falsehood,' two of the lawyers have taken refuge in Ranchi. They are staying somewhere close to your house. But you know, 'good counsel to a rogue bears no fruit.' They can't find peace even in this incessant rain and slime in Ranchi. During the day, they tenaciously preach against 'falsehood' and in favour of *Satyagraha*, adopting all kinds of disguises, and destroy the country's peace; and, at night, the two friends take up a planchette and interrupt the peace in heaven. Nagged by these lawyers, I have to remain on my toes even past midnight. At least on earth you have the police intelligence to attend to youths who transgress peace, but in heaven there is no such arrangement. That's why, you see, while returning from the house of these two lawyers, my steam-driven vehicle got stuck in your roof, but I somehow escaped as I was about to crash. Being old, I can no longer suffer rain, and that's why, the moment brave Bina opened the window, I stepped into the house."

Noni said, "But god, there are iron bars in the window."

Tvastri: "Forget about your corroded bars! Moreover, what can stop me?"

Noni: "God, we are very curious to know the various ingredients you used to create man."

Tvastri: "No, child, I have no time. I must go now. You also must sleep."

But we all kept pressing him. We were determined that we wouldn't let him go without hearing about the mystery of his creation of man.

Shirin said, "You are soaked in rainwater. Let me bring you a cup of hot tea! You tell the story and I'll go arrange for the tea." She then called out in a loud voice, "Maro!"[i]

Tvastri (startled): "What? Who does she want to beat?"

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[i] "Maro" is a Bengali word which means "to beat." Hence the misunderstanding, as Tvastri thinks Shirin is calling someone to beat him, but actually she is calling her maid with her abbreviated name which is "Maro" for "Mariam."

Unable to control her laughter, Shirin pulled the corner of her sari over her face and hastily left the place.

Tvastri: "Has she gone to get some hoodlums?"

Bina (controlling her laughter with immense effort): "No, she has gone to call her maid. Her maid's name is 'Maro.'[7] Now you tell us the story. There, Mrs. Shirin is back again."

Tvastri: "What to do since you won't give up? You girls are no less than those two lawyers. They at least abide by certain rules and regulations; you seem to heed nothing. You won't remember it, even if you hear it. Noni, you bring a pen and paper. I talk, and you write quickly. Look, you have to write fast."

While Noni was still looking for a pen, Bina came with a pencil and paper and said, "God, don't worry about the lack of time. You say, and I'll write in shorthand. I can write three hundred shorthand letters in a minute." God Tvastri was very pleased at this. He narrated, Bina wrote, and we listened and observed quietly.

Poor Tvastri looked awfully sleepy. Sometimes he was yawning and speaking in a low voice, with eyes drowsy. Sometimes again, he was rubbing his eyes and speaking in a loud voice to check if Bina was writing the story correctly. If there was any mistake, he asked her to cross it out and rewrite it accurately. He was being voluble just to prove that he was not sleepy.

At one point, he shouted, "You know, girls, I had no ingredients in hand while creating woman. Therefore, I had to take fragrance from one object, taste from another and only steam from something else. But I didn't have to worry at all while creating man. I had an abundant supply of all the ingredients I needed—whatever my hands could reach, I would use it. For example, in creating teeth I took the snake's poison-fang root and branch; in making hands, feet and fingernails, I took the whole of the panther's paw; to fill in the cells of the brain, I used the donkey's brain intact. In creating woman I took the radiance of fire only, but in the case of man I took the blazing fire itself. Child, you write as I say."

Bina wrote, "blazing fire."

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[7] The poor maid's beautiful name "Mariam" has been disfigured into "Maro." When I was living in Bihar, I have had the luck of hearing the names of a few women from an aristocratic family. They are, "Hasho," "Lato," "Dullu," "Ullu," "Jubba" etc. It will be unfair if I don't reveal the actual form of those names, and besides, the readers might also panic like the god Tvastri. Here are the actual names: "Hashmat Ara," "Latifunnessa," "Daulatunnessa," "Aliunnessa" and "Jobeda."

Tvastri said, "Girls, listen carefully. In creating woman I took the frigidity of ice only, but in the case of man I used the block of ice, and even flower stalks in full. Have you written it, Bina?"

Bina showed the god Tvastri that she had written "ice," "flower stalks."

Shirin said, "That volcanic fire and flower stalks have been used side by side, there is no doubt about it. Therefore, we see men described in their own language at one moment as:

> His forehead shining like a flame,
> Which illumined the vacant land,
> Taking the fierce form of Rudra,
> He rumbled, with a trident in hand.

"But the next moment (of course, 'giving up his anger, following Durga's words'):

> With a smile on his face, he said to Indra,
> Killing and dismembering the demons is unbecoming of me."

When the shorthand script was ready, Tvastri said, "Look, child, be careful when you rephrase it in simple language, so that not a word, not even s single punctuation mark is altered."

"So will it be," Bina replied, "don't you worry! I'll be careful. Otherwise, it'll cause our Lord infinite suffering. Now only the men send for you every so often; but if I make a mistake, then women will also torment you all the time."

Later, after Tvastri left, everyone went back to her/his own bed. But as I was about to get up, somehow I fell down. I was startled by the fall, and opening my eyes I saw that I was still sitting on the sofa. The candle was still flickering in a corner, and Shirin and Bina were both engrossed in sleep. The sound of cock-a-doodle-do in the distance indicated that the night was over. Was I then dreaming all this time?

THE ZENANA WOMEN[a]

Author's Note

The Zenana Women comprises some historical events as well as some incidents from contemporary life, with their shares of joy and sorrow. There is no doubt that readers will find the book pleasantly engaging in most places, but they will also feel compassion in several places, and I am confident that they will find it difficult not to shed a few tears at the untimely death of Mrs. Tahera.

Mr. Maulvi Mohammad Khairul Anam Khan has enthusiastically taken the full responsibility for the publication of *The Zenana Women*, and it is because of his keen interest that it is being published in the form of a book. I express my sincere thanks to him for this support.

I also express my heartfelt gratitude to the retired school inspector, the learned and most eminent Mr. Maulvi Abdul Karim, B.A., M.L.C, for kindly writing a Preface for the book.

I have gathered many precious gems during my visits to Karsing and Madhupur, shells of various colours and shapes during my visits to the seashores in Orissa and Madras, and, for dedicating twenty-five years of my life to the welfare of the people, I have been accumulating the curses of the pseudo-religious groups in the country.

Hazrat Rabeya Basri said, "Oh God, if I pray for the fear of hell, throw me into hell; and if I pray for the sake of attaining heaven, preclude me from entering heaven." God willing, I have the courage to say the same about social work.

Every bit of me is given to so many imperfections that I'll not ask for forgiveness of the reader for any flaws in the book.

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[a] The first 30 anecdotes of the book were originally serialised in the monthly magazine *Mohammadi* (Ed. Mohammad Akram Khan) in the following order: 1–7 in the *Karttik* 1335 (2.1; October 1928) issue; 8–17 in the *Bhadra* 1336 (2.11; September 1929) issue; 18–23, in the *Shraban* 1337 (August 1930) issue; and 24–30 in the *Bhadra* 1337 (September 1930) issue. The author added the last 17 episodes in it while compiling the work into a book in 1931. This translation is based on the text of the book in Abdul Quader, ed. *Rokeya Rachanabali* (379–414).

Dedication

This book is dedicated,
In profound admiration,
To the memory of my revered mother,
Late Mrs. Rahatunnesa Sabera Chaudhurani

My loving mother was an ardent supporter of the purdah tradition. Here, I remember an incident from childhood. In those days, we had to cross the rivers by steamer during our journey from Calcutta to Rangpur. Once we were travelling to Calcutta when my younger sister was only two years old. She and I were put into a palanquin with our mother. We were made to cross the river in the palanquin placed on the deck of the steamer. It was summer, and my baby sister started screaming inside the covered palanquin. My mother tried her best to appease her, but no one sitting by the litter thought it necessary to take the child out into the open. As a token of my admiration for her, I dedicate this book to her sacred memory.

Author's Introduction

Having lived in purdah for a long time, we have grown accustomed to the secluded life. Therefore, we, especially I, have nothing to say against it. If a fishwife is asked, "rotten fish smells foul or fair," what would she answer?

Here, I'll describe the personal experiences of a few women to our female readers—I hope they will find them intriguing.

It should be mentioned here that the cloistering of upper-class women, practiced in the whole of India, is not only to segregate them from the men but also from the women. Unmarried girls are not allowed to walk into the presence of any women except for close relatives and maids.

Married women also keep out of the sight of female magicians, jugglers and other itinerant professional performers and entertainers. She who can keep most secluded and remains hiding in the corner of the house like an owl is the more honourable.

Even urban women go into hiding in a rush when they see a European missionary woman. European women apart, even a sari-wearing local Christian or a Bengali Hindu woman is enough to make these urban sophisticates run inside and bolt the door.

(1)

Many years ago, in the zamindar's house in Pairaband, a village in the district of Rangpur, the zamindar's daughters were performing their ritual ablution before their *zuhr* [midday] prayer. They had all finished their ritual, except for "Miss A" who was still performing it in the courtyard. A maid, Alta's mother,[b] was pouring the water on to her hands from a pitcher, when a huge Kabuli[c] woman walked right on to the patio. Alas, what an alarming situation! The pitcher fell from Alta's mother's hands in fear and she started screaming, "Dear God, why is the man here?" The woman laughed and said, "What man? I am a woman." As soon as she heard that, Miss A ran to her aunt breathlessly and said panting, "Aunty, there is a woman in pyjamas in the courtyard." The landlady inquired anxiously, "Has she seen you?" Miss A moaned, "Yes." The other girls in the meantime interrupted their prayer and hastily bolted the door so that the Kabuli woman couldn't see them. Perhaps no one would shut the door in such a hurry even in the fear of wild animals.

(2)

This is also an event from the past. Many female guests had gathered at a wealthy person's house in Patna to attend a wedding. Many of them came in the evening; among them was Hashmat Begum.[d] The maids came, opened the doors of the palanquins and took the ladies inside. The palanquin bearers then removed each empty palanquin so that the next palanquin could be brought in. The bearer cried out, "Mama [maidservant], the passenger is here." The maids came at a leisurely pace, and by the time they reached Hashmat Begum's palanquin, the bearers had already removed the vehicle, thinking that the passenger had alighted. Therefore, when the next palanquin was brought in, the maids duly opened the door and received the guest.

It was winter, and all the palanquins that came were gathered under a banyan tree at one corner of the courtyard after the passengers had alighted. Nearby, the bearers were cooking dinner in a festive mood. They had

[b] It is customary in rural Bengal to address a woman as "so-and so's mother" or "so-and-so's wife" by people who are not related to her by blood or marriage.

[c] A "Kabuli" is one who is from Kabul or Afghanistan. Many Afghan businessmen and moneylenders used to frequent Bengal during the British colonial period. Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) has a fascinating short story about an Afghan character, entitled "Kabuliwala" (one who is from Kabul).

[d] A lady; often used as an honorific to describe a married Bengali Muslim woman.

received plenty of uncooked food as a gift from the host. They were happy because their work for the day was done; some were singing, some smoking and some were chewing tobacco. In the midst of such festivities, by the time they finished their meal it was two o'clock in the morning.

Meanwhile, when the women sat down for dinner, it was noticed that Hashmat Begum was absent with her six-month-old baby boy. Some said that perhaps she chose not to come because her boy was too young, others said that they had seen her getting ready to come.

The next morning, as usual, the guests began to leave. The empty palanquins came one by one and left with their passengers. When one such "empty" palanquin came and stood by the door, it was found that Hashmat Begun was sitting in there with her little child. She had spent the whole winter night in that fashion inside the palanquin.

The bearers had removed her palanquin from the courtyard before she could step down, but she didn't make a sound lest the bearers would hear her voice. She even made every effort so that the boy wouldn't cry—again, what if someone would open the door of the vehicle hearing the boy cry? Where is the glory of being a zenana woman if one couldn't endure suffering?

(3)

About forty or forty-five years ago, the women of several Bengali zamindar families—mothers, daughters, aunts (both maternal and paternal)—were travelling together for hajj. There were twenty to twenty-five of them in all. When they arrived at the Calcutta train station, their husbands went to conduct some business, leaving the women in the care of a responsible male relative. Everyone called him "Haji Saheb,"[e] so we'll also address him in the same way. Haji Saheb chose not to let the women sit in the waiting room. As per his advice, they covered themselves in thick burka and sat squatting on the station platform. Haji Saheb then spread a large durrie over them. The women were looking like little bags or bundles in that state. Keeping them covered like that, Haji Saheb was standing at a corner and watching over them steadily. Only God knows, how long those pilgrim women had to wait in that situation; and it's only because of God's grace that they didn't die of suffocation.

[e] A gentleman who has performed Hajj or religious pilgrimage to Mecca, which is one of the five main pillars of Islam.

When it was time for the train to arrive, an English employee said to Haji Saheb in broken Hindi, "Munshi,[f] remove your luggage from here. The train will arrive soon; only passengers can stay on the platform; all baggage must be removed." Haji Saheb replied apologetically, "Sir, those are not luggage, they are women." The employee shoved one of the "bags" with the tip of his shoe and said, "Yeah, yeah, please remove these items." For the sake of purdah, the women said nothing even after being poked by a shoe.

(4)

A man was living in a place called Rajkanika, in the state of Orissa, for his work. He had his mother, two sisters and his wife with him. It was the monsoon season. Four punkah-pullers took turns to work at his house day and night. The master of the family was away on an official tour, and one of the maids stayed the night with his wife. The sisters were sleeping in a separate room.

People in the area didn't use a lot of bedlinens in summer. The wife began to feel cold at night because of a heavy downpour, yet she didn't ask the maid to tell the punkah-pullers to stop. When the cold became unbearable, she first wrapped herself in the bedcover, but not finding it enough, she took out the durrie and the diapered bedcover and bundled herself in them. The awful punkah-pullers meanwhile began to pull the punkah even more vigorously. Having no choice, the young wife took shelter under the bed with all her layers of covering.

The next morning, a maid came to sweep the room, saw something in white under the bed and gave it a whack with the broom. Hurt by it, the wife turned on her side, and the poor maid was aghast at what she did.

(5)

A Bihari gentleman was travelling to the north with his wife on E.I. [East Indian] Railway. He let his wife be with him instead of sitting in a ladies' compartment, and bought second class tickets for both of them. The woman kept wearing a burka. At one point, the train stopped at a station when the husband was in the toilet. Finding no place elsewhere, a male passenger got into that compartment and sat next to the woman most hesitantly, putting his face out through the window. In the meantime, the other gentleman

[f] A title of respect used for elderly Muslim men.

returned from the toilet and found that his wife was missing. There was nothing much he could do at the time as the train was still moving. The stranger got off the train at the next station. The Bihari gentleman also went down to make a police report that his wife went missing between so and so stations.

The police sent out telegrams to different stations asking to look for a woman clad in a black burka. One of the constables said, "Why don't we carefully search the train first?" The constable looked under the husband's seat and saw something black, and as he pulled it out, the husband yelled, "Let go, let go, that is my wife." Later it was known that the woman went to hide under the seat when she saw the intruder.

(6)

A zamindar's huge brick residence in the Dhaka district once caught fire in broad daylight. Everything inside the house was ablaze; however, while rescuing as much of the furniture and fittings as possible, the idea of saving the women also came up. But where could they get the palanquins, especially so many and so suddenly in the village? Finally, it was decided that the women would remain under a coloured mosquito net and four men would bring them out holding its four corners from the outside. Eventually that is what they did; however, oppressed by the heat of the fire, the four men began to run, while the women inside the mosquito net, unable to keep pace with the men, stumbled, broke their teeth and noses, and ripped their clothes. Then, as they continued to move through the paddy fields and thorny bushes, their mosquito net also tore into several pieces.

What could they do now? The women spent the whole day sitting in the paddy field. In the evening, when the fire was put out, they were taken back home in a palanquin one by one.

(7)

About twenty-five years ago, a wedding was taking place at a zamindar's house in Bengal. The place was in a buzz with many guests. By the time the wedding banquet ended it was past midnight and everyone was ready to go to sleep. But thieves and burglars do not sleep at night; it was the time for them to burglarise.

A thief broke into the house by making a hole on its mud wall. Sensing the presence of a thief, the village watchman informed the matter to the

zamindar. The zamindars were five or six brothers; they all took an axe each and began to look for the thief. They would hack the burglar to pieces if they could catch him! How dare he break into their house!

Inside the house, the women saw the thief and crouched under the bedcovers in fear and remained there in hushed silence, as if they didn't even have the nerve to breathe. They were careful so that a stranger couldn't hear their sounds of breathing. The thief broke open the chest without any trouble and took out all the cash and jewellery. Then he took the jewellery that the women were wearing on them, one by one. When the women saw it, they gladly opened their earrings and necklaces and put them next to their pillows. This made the thief's task easier; he didn't have to unnecessarily search the nose, ears and necks of the women. There was a newlywed bride in the house; the poor woman had already opened and handed over her nose-ring, but her bell-shaped earrings and other ornaments got so badly tangled that she couldn't open them despite every effort. The noble thief waited for a while out of politeness and then took out a penknife, cut both the ears of the bride, stuffed the earrings in the jewellery bag and escaped through the same hole dug earlier for his break-in.

The men were waiting for the thief with axes in hand outside while such bizarre things happened inside the house. But the women made no protest lest the intruder would hear their voice. As soon as the thief left the house, they raised an uproar.

Dear female readers, this is how we usually show our deference to the purdah system.

(8)

A house was on fire. The mistress of the house wisely packed all the jewellery in a handbag and began to walk out of the house. When she came to the door, she saw that a group of men were trying to put out the fire. Instead of coming outside in their presence, she returned inside with the jewellery bag and hid under a bunk. She got incinerated there because she chose not to come out in the presence of men. Thanks to women's glorious purdah!

(9)

A Muslim religious scholar passed away, leaving behind his widow and only son. The man had left behind almost nothing, so the widow ran the family with much hardship. She got some jewellery made for her son's wedding

with considerable difficulty, and it was quite expensive too. Two or three days before the wedding, burglars broke into the house. The woman was sleeping there with her maid. Hearing the sound of thieves, the woman got up and secretly called up her maid. The thieves thought, we are done for, let's run!

But one of them said, "Why don't we wait a little and see what happens?" This led to a funny situation.

As per her employer's advice, the maid took a sari and hung it up as a screen on one side of the bed. Then, showing the bunch of keys, the woman said to the burglars, "Boys, don't come to this side of the screen; I'll give you anything you want from the chest." Accordingly, she took out all the costly raiment and jewellery and handed them over to the thieves. They browsed through the jewellery and said, "Where is the nose-ring? It must be in the safe?" On her mistress' advice, the maid said, "For God's sake, don't come to this side of the purdah! Madam has kept only the nose-ring because the wedding is day after tomorrow—how can there be a wedding without at least the nose-ring? If you want that too, here, take it—take the nose-ring, but don't step on this side of the purdah."

The thieves were ecstatic and left the place chitchatting with one another. It was near dawn, and the thieves were talking a bit loudly from the euphoria of easy success. On the way, the watchman heard them and gave chase. They all ran away, but one of the thieves stumbled and fell down, and was captured by the watchman. He was then forced to take the watchman to the house that was burgled. By then it was morning.

The watchman found the mistress of the house still hiding behind the purdah in fear that the thieves might come back and suddenly see her. She had even prohibited the maid from making noise, lest some men might walk into the house hearing it. She preserved the sanctity of purdah by wilfully surrendering everything to the burglars.

(10)

A zamindar's wife went to her younger brother's in-laws' house to fetch his wife. As she walked in, she saw the young bride being fed by the bride's sister-in-law. She noticed a green chilli on the side of the plate and asked innocuously, "Does our newlywed like chili?" The bride's sister-in-law replied, "Oh, she is a chilli buff."

Later, the woman returned to Calcutta with the bride by boat. They spent three or four days on the boat, and whenever she asked the maids to cook

a meal, she would always request them to put a lot of chilli in it. Actually, the bride didn't like chilli at all; she had only been taking the fragrance of a fresh green chilli to increase her appetite that day, so her sister-in-law had said teasingly that she was a chilli buff. Now the girl's life was on the line.

The magnanimous zamindar's wife mixed puffed rice with chilli and fed it to the bride with her own hands. The bride's eyes would shed tears relentlessly, her tongue would burn from the heat of chilli, and yet she would never tell her sister-in-law that she didn't like chilli. What a dire thought! She was a newlywed, and the woman was her elder sister-in-law; there was no way she could say anything even if it cost her life.

(11)

I went to Arrah [Bihar] in 1924. Two of my granddaughters, Moju and Sobu, were getting married on the same day and I went there to attend their wedding. The poor girls were living in a "myakhana" [a secluded place for women, or a female centre] at that time. In Calcutta, the girls are required to live the confined life of myakhana for five or six days before the wedding, but in Bihar the girls are forced into a solitary confinement for six or seven months until they are almost dead.

Whenever I visited Moju's myakhana, I couldn't stay there for long because of the feeling of suffocation in that confined space. One day I opened a window slightly. Instantly, one of the female superintendents came and said, "The bride will catch cold," and shut the window. Unable to take it, I left the place. It was impossible to spend a moment in Sobu's myakhana. But those miserable girls had to live there for several months. Finally, Sobu was afflicted with hysteria. This is how we are accustomed to the life of the zenana.

(12)

A Hindu wife from the north went to undertake the ritual of bathing in the Ganges with her mother-in-law and her husband. On her way home after the ritual, she lost her two companions in the crowd. She then started following one of the men. After a while, the police kicked up a row, and one of the constables grabbed the man and said, "You are running away with another man's wife." Suddenly looking back he saw, yes, someone's wife was following him clinging on to the fold of his dhoti. When the bride was asked, she said she always covered her head with a veil, therefore, had never seen

the face of her husband fully before. All she knew was that her husband was wearing a yellow dhoti. Since the colour of this gentleman's dhoti was also yellow, she began to follow him.

(13)

This is something that happened today (28 June 1929). The father of one of the students of our school [Sakhawat Memorial Girls School] had written a long letter to me saying that since the school bus did not go inside their lane, his daughter had to walk home with a maid, covered in a burka. Yesterday a man was passing through the lane carrying a teapot; he bumped into Hira (his daughter) and ruined her clothes by spilling the tea. I gave the letter to one of the teachers and asked her to investigate the matter. The following is a summary of the report she submitted in Urdu: "After inquiring, I found out that Hira's burka didn't have 'eyes.' The other girls have reported that they have seen the maid walking Hira home holding her very close to her body. Without the eyes in her burka, Hira cannot walk properly. The other day she knocked into a cat; often she stumbles and falls down. Yesterday too, it was Hira who collided with the man with the tea and spilled it."[1]

Think of it, Hira is only nine years old—why should such a young girl walk the streets wearing a "blind" burka? Is there a need to go to that length to show our admiration for the purdah?

(14)

It happened about twenty-one or twenty-two years ago. One of my aunts-in-law was travelling from Bhagalpur to Patna. She had only one maid with her. They were required to change train at the Kiul junction [Bihar]. My aunt-in-law got tangled in her huge burka while boarding the other train and fell between the train and the platform. There was no other woman at the station at that time except my aunt's maid. When the porters came rushing to help her get on to her feet, the maid warned, "Keep away! No one should touch madam." But the maid could not raise the woman on her own. Meanwhile, after waiting for half an hour, the train began to move.

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[1] I have just come across the following statement in an article by Mrs. Amina Khatun, in the *Monthly Mohammadi* magazine: "Moving around with the nose, face and eyes covered (it is possible to knock into unknown men in such kind of purdah), is contrary to the Islamic concept of the veil."

Knocked under the train, my aunt got all crushed; her burka and body were torn apart. The whole station, packed with people, witnessed this bloodcurdling event with horror, but no one was allowed to offer any help. Then her battered body was taken to a warehouse, where the maid kept moaning and fanning her madam. After eleven hours in that state, my aunt breathed her last. What a dreadful death!

(15)

Several married women had gathered in a room in a rich man's house in Hoogley, for the occasion of a wedding. At around midnight, it suddenly felt someone was pushing the door from outside, in varying ways—sometimes with force and sometimes lightly. The women got up from sleep and began to shiver in fear. Surely it was a burglar who was trying to break in. If he did, he would get to see all the women. A shrewd woman put on all the ornaments, hid the remaining ones in a bundle and then, covering herself in a burka, opened the door. She saw a female dog standing outside the door. Her two puppies were inside the room while she was outside. She was pushing the door to come in and be with her puppies.

(16)

A wealthy man from Bihar was travelling to Darjeeling. He had a dozen of "human-luggage" with him: seven adult women—maternal and paternal aunts etc.—and five girls from the age of six to thirteen. They had the palanquins pre-arranged every time the women had to move from the train to the steamer or vice versa. The palanquins were standing by at stations such as Motihari and Sakrigali [both in Bihar]. The women were packed in a palanquin and placed on the deck of the steamer. In the train, they were placed with their palanquins in a luggage van. But no palanquins were available along the Eastern Bengal Railway line. Then they were forced to sit in a reserved second class compartment on the train.

No palanquin bearers were available at the Siliguri [West Bengal] station as well. What a predicament—how would the women board the Darjeeling train? At last, four men held up the ends of two bed sheets to make a screen, and the women began to walk inside it. But the pathetic men were having difficulty synchronising with one another on an uneven, hilly road. At times, the right screen would move ahead of the left, and vice-versa. The women were also inept at walking—sometimes they would move ahead of

the screen and sometimes fall behind. Some lost their shoes on the way; some had their shawls blown away by the wind, and so forth.

(17)

About fourteen years ago, we had a teacher in our school from Lucknow [capital city of Uttar Pradesh]. Her name is Akhter Jahan. Her three daughters used to study in our school. One day while discussing the indecency of modern girls, she spoke about the improper behaviour of her own daughters and expressed regret. In the course of her conversation, she told a story of her own experience as a child-bride: She was married at the age of eleven. At her in-laws' house she had to remain in a secluded room. One of her younger sisters-in-law would come three or four times a day and take her to the toilet if required. One day, for some reason, the girl didn't turn up for several hours. In the meantime, the poor bride became uneasy due to the call of nature. In Lucknow, girls are given large copper betel-boxes as dowry. The largest of these boxes was there in her room. She opened the box, took out the betel container and poured all the nuts on to a handkerchief. Then she filled the container with something that I consider inappropriate to mention here and pushed it under the bed. When the maid who came with her from her father's house turned up in the evening to make the bed, the bride cried, hugging her, and explained to her the miserable condition of the box. To console her, the maid said, "Okay, don't cry, I'll get the box coated tomorrow. Let the nuts remain in the handkerchief for now."

(18)

The following is a narrative of a disenchanted doctor from Lahore,[g] about his experience of visiting female patients.

"During the rare visit of a doctor, two maids are asked to hold up a thick wrapper of plaited cotton cloth at the head and foot of one side of the patient's bed. The doctor is expected to examine the patient's pulse by reaching through any opening in the wrapper.[2]

[2] A woman who didn't believe in purdah, once asked, "What would you do if, in the absence of a female doctor, you had to show your tongue to a male doctor? Would you make

[g] Once a part of undivided India, Lahore is now the capital city of the Pakistani province of Punjab.

"Once a woman was suffering from pneumonia. I said, 'I need to check her lung and will do it from her back.' The reply I received was: 'The maid will help to put the chest piece of the stethoscope on the patient's body wherever you want it.' Everyone knows that it is possible to diagnose a disease by checking the lung from different areas of the body. However, having no alternative, I agreed to the husband's advice. The maid took the tube of the stethoscope inside the wrapper and put it on the woman's pyjamas, near the waist area. After a while, I was surprised that I could hear no sound of breathing in my earpiece. I took the courage, lifted a corner of the wrapper a little and looked through it and saw that the tube was attached to the woman's waist area. I was so appalled that I walked out immediately."

(19)

The following is the summary of a railway traveller's experience: "I did some computation in my mind after buying the tickets at the station. I was allowed up to one and half maunds[h] of luggage for buying three inter-class tickets, but the luggage I had would weigh no less than five maunds. After carefully considering, I decided not to book them in the freight compartment. 'Who will come to check the things if I put them in the ladies' compartment?' I thought."

"My son asked, 'Do you have any living luggage with you?'

I replied, 'What do you mean? I have a perfect pair of it. Both are old and haggard.'

The boy replied, 'There you go.'"

"When I woke up it was quite late at night.

"It appeared that the train was standing at one of the larger stations. I thought perhaps it was the Baharampur station [in West Bengal]. As I was about to open the door and step out of the train, I could hear someone repeatedly calling out my name, 'Tunu, oh Tunu, what a trouble we are in today, Tunu.'

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a hole in the wrapper and put the tongue out through it?" I ask my female readers to answer that question as well as the question that follows. If you were required to show your eyes, teeth and ears to the doctor, how would you do it?

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[h] A unit of weight in South Asia, equalling roughly 82 pounds or 37 kilograms.

"It was a woman's voice and sounded terribly sad. I hastily got out of the train and saw that the two ladies were wailing like anything. All our luggage was also out on the platform. They were surrounded by three or four porters.

"I lost my temper. I found it shocking that the TTCs or the ticket checkers would inspect the ladies' compartment at night and take down all my belongings. I scolded the porters harshly and asked them to carry the items back to the train. I scolded the porters a second time and said how I was going to lodge a complaint against the TTCs.

"Grandaunt said moaning, 'Tunu, we have arrived already.'

"Then one of the porters said with courage, 'Sir, you have reached your station.'

"Then I told my grandaunt, 'Well, then, the TTC didn't force you out of the train but we have reached our station—why didn't you say that earlier, and what is there to cry about?'"

(20)

A Punjabi woman wrote the following story in an Urdu newspaper.

We lived in a village for some time and were once invited to the house of a respectable man. I was shocked to see the kind of extreme oppression that the young girls were subjected to in the family.

On arriving at our host's residence, we asked where all the girls in the family were. We were told that they were in the kitchen. When I asked to meet them, I alone was invited to go in there. The kitchen was unusually hot, and small too. With no choice, I sat there and began to chitchat with those suffering but soft-spoken girls.

One of the kind women felt sympathy for us and said, "You may secretly go to the roof."

First I thought that the girls were asked to go secretly because there was the risk that they would be seen by the men, but later I came to know that the purdah was against the other invited female guests. As per that woman's advice, two female members of the family held up a thick bed sheet to make purdah and we walked behind it to go to the roof.

I found myself in more trouble going to the roof. I thought there would be a room to sit there or at least a shaded place. But it was just an open area, excessively hot because of the blazing sun and with no place to sit. Half-dried cakes of dung were scattered throughout the roof, and I found its stench extremely oppressive. A maid carried up a makeshift bed with a lot of effort and we all sat on that. There was a lot of music and festivity going

on downstairs, but like some sinners, these miserable unmarried girls were panting in the blistering sun, snuffing the stench of dungcakes.[i] Nobody had the least interest in their comforts or welfare.

(21)

A zamindar's family in Bengal was celebrating a religious occasion with dance and music. The large canopy under which the professional dancers were performing could be seen from the entrance hall of the house. But none of the married women of the family had gone there because women were not born with the luck of enjoying a happy occasion.

The zamindar had a three-year-old daughter. The girl was almost white. She was affectionately called "sugar puppet" by some and "cream puppet" by others. Her real name was Sabera. The symphony of senai[j] and other musical instruments in the morning had aroused the birds from sleep and they had begun chirping. Sabera's maid had also awakened. She suddenly felt the urge to go and watch the dance. But Sabera was still sleeping, so the maid took the sleeping child in her arms and went to the entrance hall to see the dance.

Where the fear is high, there we end up at night. The master of the family was returning from the men's quarters to the inner quarter of the residence. He noticed that the maid was watching the fun by lifting a corner of the venetian blind of the window with Sabera in her arms. He had a thick wooden staff in his hand and he started beating the maid with it. Hearing the maid's screaming, all his wives came running to the entrance hall. One of the strokes landed on Sabera's thigh. Then the master's elder sister-in-law stepped forward and said, "Brother, what are you doing, you'll kill the child." The beating stopped instantly. But the zamindar said in a fury, "You miserable woman, you want to see the dance, go and see it, but why did you show it to my daughter?"

In fact, the child was still sleeping fast leaning against the maid's shoulder and had seen nothing. The whole family was in a clamour—even the father was deeply saddened by the sight of the ugly black mark on Sabera's brilliantly white thigh from the blow of the stick. This is how, through physical abuse, we have been forced into a secluded life.

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[i] Cakes of dried dung or dungcakes are used as fuel in the rural areas in the subcontinent.
[j] A kind of wooden wind-instrument.

(22)

A gentleman was pacing about on the platform of the Shelaidah station in the late evening, waiting for a train. Another gentleman was standing a bit further away with a pile of luggage beside him. The first gentleman, feeling a bit tired, went to sit on that pile. But the moment he did so, the baggage moved under him and he instantly jumped off it in fear. At this time, the other gentleman came running and said in anger, "Mister, what are you doing? Why do you want to sit on these women?" Utterly embarrassed, the man replied, "Excuse me, Sir. I couldn't see clearly in the dark. I took it for a pile of baggage, but when it moved I was frightened and thought, goodness gracious!"

(23)

Let's leave aside others, and say a few words about my own experience of purdah. From the age of five, I had to observe purdah even from women. I had no clue whatsoever as to why I couldn't go in front of anyone, but I had to observe purdah nonetheless. Men were prohibited from entering the inner quarters, so I didn't have to endure their tyranny. But women had no restriction in their movement, yet I had to hide from them every time. Whenever women from the neighbourhood came to visit us without prior notice, someone would make a sign to warn me and I would instantly run for life and go hide behind the improvised wicker door of the kitchen, or inside the grass woven mat rolled up by a maid, or underneath a cot.

Like the baby chicks that hide under the wings of the mother hen the moment she sees a kite in the sky and signals to her brood, I had to seek cover like that. But the little fowls have a specific shelter in the form of the mother's bosom and they can find refuge there; for me, however, there was no such specific secure place. Besides, the little fowls naturally understand the signs from their mother; I had no such inherent instinct. Thus, if I ever failed to recognise the warning sign and walked in the presence of someone, the benevolent elders didn't hesitate to say things like, "how shameless and rash the modern girls are," to reproach me.

When I was five years old and living in Calcutta, two maids came to visit my second sister-in-law from her aunt's house in Bihar. They had a "free passport" and could walk about anywhere in the house, and like a fleeing fawn I had to run for life and hide anywhere—behind a door panel or under a table, for instance. There was a quiet room on the third floor. My maid

would take me there very early in the morning, and I had to spend almost the whole day in that room without any food. After rummaging through the whole house, the two maids from Bihar found out about that room as well. A nephew of my age, Halu, came rushing to inform me of this calamity. Luckily there was a bedstead there; I moved down under it and stopped breathing for some time, lest the two wicked women peeped under the bed after hearing the sound. There were some boxes, wicker-baskets and chairs in the room. Poor Halu dragged them using his (six-year-old) puny strength to put them on all sides of the bed to surround me. No one even took care of my meals regularly. If Halu ever came by into the room in the course of his playing, I would ask him for food or drinks. He would sometimes bring a glass of water or a bowl of parched rice. Sometimes he would go to get something but never come back—after all, he was only a minor, and he would forget. I had to spend almost four days in that situation.

(24)

Women of respectable families in Bihar usually do not get on to the train on their own when travelling by railway. They are put into a palanquin lined with baize and boarded on to the train's luggage-van. As a result, women cannot see any sights along the way; like the Brooke Bond tea, they travel the country packed in an insulated flask. But an aristocratic family in Calcutta went a step further. If their women had to travel by train, they were locked into a palanquin with bedclothes, a Palmyra-leaf fan, a pitcher of water and a glass. Then those palanquins were wrapped in five layers of fabric by the servants in the presence of the father or the son. First they would stitch a layer of cotton fabric, then a layer of waxclothes, followed by a layer of thick fabric, then with a layer of Bombay-made knitted material, and finally, with a coarse cloth made of jute. This stitching process went on for three to four hours, and the master of the house stood there for the whole time to watch over the proceedings. Then the bearers were called over to carry the palanquins to the train's freight compartment. Later, on arriving at the destination, the palanquins were unwrapped one at a time in the presence of a male guardian. After opening the stitches of all the layers of fabric, the servants would move away, keeping the palanquins still covered with the baize curtains. Then the master of the house himself, with his relatives and other women of the family would open the doors of the palanquins and take out the women in their dizzy state and pour rose water or ice on their heads, make them sip water little by little with the tea spoons, sprinkle water on to

their eyes and face and continuously fan them. In that way, after two or three hours of nursing, the women would come back to their senses.

(25)

In the eleventh account of this book, I mentioned that I went to Arrah in 1924 to attend the wedding of my two granddaughters. But except for my stepson-in-law's house[k] and the sky above, I had seen nothing of the Arrah town. When I mentioned this to my "daughter" (in fact, the girl my stepson-in-law married after the death of his first wife, my stepdaughter), she pleaded with me, "Mother, if you want to see the town, then we might also have the luck to see it a bit with you. We have been living here for seven years but have seen nothing of the place." My two newly wed granddaughters, Moju and Sobu, also chimed in solicitously, "Yes, grandma, please, if you'll only ask father."

I asked my son-in-law to hire a coach for us for several days, but every time he politely informed me that no suitable coach was available. On the last day of my stay there, his eleven-year-old son came and informed us that although a rented coach had arrived, one of the blinds of its window was broken. Moju said enthusiastically, "We'll put up a curtain on the broken blind, but for God's sake, don't you let them send the coach away." Sobu whispered, "Great! We'll be able to see things properly through the broken window." We were ready for the ride, but every time we wanted to get on to the coach, we were asked to wait. The carriage was not fitted with the curtain yet.

Later, when we went to board the coach, good God, we found it entirely wrapped in two or three layers of thick Bombay fabric. My son-in-law himself opened the door for us and locked it securely after we stepped in. When the coach started moving, Moju teased Sobu, "Go and see through the broken blind now!" There was a little hole in the curtain, and the two girls and their mother began to look through it, bending over. But I didn't feel the urge to scramble for it with them.

(26)

Like us, our names are also kept in the dark. A woman's name is known only at the time of writing the marriage deed. A rich zamindar's three daughters

[k] Reference to the daughter by Rokeya's husband's first marriage.

were getting married on the same day. The girls were known by their pet names—Child 1, Child 2, Child 3; no one knew their actual names. One of their distant uncles was acting as the marriage cleric [which was being solemnised in an Islamic way]. There was an age gap among the three grooms in accordance with the age difference among the brides. All the three grooms were absent from the wedding ceremony. For the convenience of the readers, we'll call them Groom 1, Groom 2, Groom 3, as per their age.

The marriage cleric was handed over the names of the three grooms and the three brides. While carrying out the wedding ritual, he got mixed up with the names of the brides and the grooms, and by mistake, he married Groom 1 with Child 3 and Groom 3 with the Child 2. Now it was the turn to marry Groom 2 with Child 1. Child 2 and Child 3 were very young—eleven and seven years old, respectively; so they didn't make any fuss. But Child 1 was nineteen years old; she had found out in different ways that she was to be married to Groom 1. She even knew his name. So when the cleric uttered Groom 2's name and asked for Child 1's consent, she remained mum. When she refused to say a word after all the castigations from her mother and aunts, the mother became angry and said to the cleric, "Yes, she has agreed, the rite is over, how long can you wait?" The cleric replied, "We have not heard 'Yes' from the girl's mouth; do you want me to solemnise your marriage with the 'yes' from you?" The girl's mother then landed a quick punch on the girl's back. In the end, it was impossible to know whether the girl had actually said "yes" or not.

Meanwhile, when the thirty-year-old Groom 1 came to know through a telegram that he had been married to the youngest daughter, seven year old Child 3 (instead of the nineteen-year-old Child 1), he became furious and fired a telegram back to his mother-in-law asking her to change the girl, or else he would sue her for swindling, and so on.

(27)

This incident took place ten or eleven years ago. I have said earlier that in Bihar girls are sent into a "myakhana" [a secluded place for women, or a female centre] three months before their marriage and there they are harrowed in all kinds of ways. Sometimes, that period of seclusion—if the marriage date is postponed for some unforeseen reason—may extend up to a year. One unfortunate girl was thus secluded for a period of six months. Nobody even looked after her basic necessities, such as bathing and food. In the first place, the Bihari people are reluctant to bathe, and who would

routinely bathe the girl at a confined place? During that period, a girl was not allowed to step on the ground; she had to be carried to the bathroom when needed. She was prohibited from doing anything on her own and was expected to sit idle on the cot the whole day, tucking her head between her knees. At night, too, she had to sleep on the same cot. She had to be fed by someone else. If her hair got matted, let it be—she was not allowed to comb the hair. In short, she had to depend on someone else for everything. Anyway, when the girl was married after six months, it was discovered that for keeping her eyes shut throughout the day, she had lost her eyesight permanently.

(28)

Many years ago an Arab woman came to Calcutta as a part of her religious mission. She could speak a smattering of Urdu. When the women came in flocks to visit her in palanquins, she would feel vexed as to why they were being "punished."

One day, a woman came to her from East Bengal. In the process of greeting her, when the Arab woman inquired after her husband's well-being, the Bengali woman pulled the veil over her face and said in a rustic slang, "He is fine. What can happen to him? He is fine." The confounded Arab woman had no inkling as to why the Bengali Begum had to cover her face while talking about her husband.

The Arab woman used to watch with amusement the practice of Bengali Begums riding the palanquin. One day a burka-clad Begum boarded a palanquin; she had a two year old child, a beetle-box, a sizable wooden chest, a bundle of clothes and a pitcher of water with her. The palanquin's cane base was broken and no one had noticed it earlier. The moment the bearers lifted the palanquin, its cane seat started breaking, making a cracking sound. The guards were following on two sides of the palanquin; addressing the child, they asked, "Little prince, what is that creaking sound?" But there was no reply from inside the palanquin. A little later, after they had crossed the gateway of the Arab woman's house, the bearers found the palanquin suddenly very light and they stopped midstride. Meanwhile, having slipped through the crack, the burka-wearing Begum was sitting with her son on the ground; her bundle of clothes, the beetle-box and other possessions were scattered all around. The water pitcher had broken and she was thoroughly drenched, yet she didn't say so much as, "Please put the palanquin down." This whole incident took place on a street in Calcutta. Seeing it, the Arab

woman quickly sent a maid to bring the woman back. She then jestingly said to the Bengali woman, "Begum, I was not prepared for such a palanquin show."

(29)

Once I went to Aligarh to attend a ladies' conference. There, I saw the various burkas worn by the delegates. One of them looked decidedly strange. After we met and introduced ourselves, I complimented her burka. In reply, she said, "Oh, no! This burka has caused me a lot of humiliation." The stories of humiliation she narrated later are as follows.

She visited a Bengali Hindu family to attend a wedding. The moment the children saw her entering the house in a burka, they started screaming and running helter-skelter for shelter. Her husband knew several other Bengali Hindu families, and she had had to visit all of them from time to time. But every time she had been to any of these families' homes, she had struck panic among the children. The boys would tremble violently at the sight of her burka.

She once visited Calcutta. If she went out in the evening with her burka-clad companions in an open carriage, boys on the street would murmur, "Oh God, what are those?" They would warn each other, "Be quiet! They must be ghosts wondering at night!" If the burka's *niqab* [which covers the face] moved in the wind, they would say, "Look, look! Those ghosts are moving their trunks like elephants. Dear o dear! Run immediately!"

Once she went to Darjeeling. When they reached the Ghum station, they saw a crowd of people watching a dwarf. His height was like that of a seven or eight-year-old boy, but his face was like that of an adult, covered with beard all over. Suddenly she noticed that the amused gaze of the crowd had turned towards her. Losing interest in the dwarf, they were now peering at a burka-clad woman.

Later, on arriving at Darjeeling, they went out on a tour by rickshaw after supper. When they went to the train station, they saw a large crowd of people. Soldiers were returning from Tibet that day and people were gathered to see them. Parking their vehicle on the side of the street, their rickshaw-puller also joined the crowd to partake in the fun. A little later, she noticed that all the spectators were taking a peek at her inside the rickshaw as they were passing by.

The dogs on the street would bark at her and come to attack her whenever she went out on foot. Some of the horses from the hilly areas would start

leaping, frightened by her sight. Once when she went to visit a tea garden, a three or four-year-old Gurkha girl picked up a huge pebble to throw at her.[3]

Once while walking around with four or five of her burka-wearing companions, they went close to a small stream and, getting tangled in their burkas, they all fell into a muddy gravel. A few coolies came running from a nearby tea garden and helped them to get on to their feet. In an affectionate tone, they chided, "Look at yourselves! You are wearing shoes and also burkas! What else can you do but to tumble in that situation?" Alas, the ladies' embroidered shawls and burkas were all soiled and soaked with water!

Not only that, but to hush crying children, parents on the street would point fingers at them and say, "Be quiet, see, there goes the witches, Mecca and Medina. See those hooded evil spirits, they are the Mecca and Medina."

(30)

A zamindar's nubile daughter was to be married to a rich, aristocratic and virtuous groom. For some reason, the two fathers got into a quarrel and so the wedding was called off. This distressed the bride beyond measure.

Unable to find a suitable groom in haste, the bride's father decided to marry the girl to his own debauched nephew. The girl knew all about her cousin's misdeeds; on many occasions, she herself had offered him tamarind drink and poured water on his head to help overcome his tipsiness. As a result, she was strongly opposed to the marriage.

But the bride had no say; she was voiceless in spite of her gift of speech. Her only recourse was to cry silently. So she cried the whole day and gave up eating and sleeping. But the callous parents didn't care; they were determined to marry the girl to that drunkard. This is how our orthodox parents have been protecting Islam and the Shari'ah[1] by stifling the fundamentals of the religion.

At the wedding ceremony, the girl refused to say "hu" [yes] to the marriage. She responded to all the entreaties, importunities and reproaches by

[3] See the difference between Bengalis and Gurkhas. While the Bengali boys screamed and ran away in fear, a Gurkha child took up a pebble in self-defence and prepared to strike at the fearful creature.

[1] A body of Islamic laws that is meant to guide the Muslims in their daily conduct and actions.

her mother and grandmother with endless tears. At last, someone pinched the girl hard and, unaware, she made a faint "uh-hu" sound in pain. Taking that "uh-hu" as "hu" the girl's marriage was solemnised. Glory to God! Long live our purdah convention!

(31)

Once, somewhere, a thief entered a ladies' compartment in a moving train. The thief took the jewellery from all the women one by one in a carefree way, while the weak, unfortunate, domesticated ladies, flinching in shyness, gave no resistance. They all kept pulling their veil and saying, "Have mercy on us, God! How could a man get in here?" Some also pulled down their burkas' *niqab*. Later, the noble thief stopped the train by pulling its alarm chain and got out of it safely.

(32)

The pet name[m] of the zamindar of Bhangni is, say, Baccha Mia. His wife's name is Hasina Khatun. Hasina's father is extravagantly rich and has loads of cash. One day Baccha Mia said to his wife, "I need money. Write to your father and get some money for me immediately." Instead of money, a letter came almost in the form of a long harangue on the virtues of being thrifty.

Baccha Mia's father-in-law had given money to his son-in-law on several occasions. Now he was unwilling to give any more. So, instead of sending money, he sent advice to his daughter. Angered by it, Baccha Mia barred his wife from visiting her parents.

This saddened the parents as well as Hasina. They could no longer see each other. A few days later, Hasina's brother came to see her.

However, instead of going straight to Bhangni, he arrived at his aunt's house in a village called Phulchowki, about four miles away. The next morning, he sent word to Bhangni that he would be arriving there in the afternoon.

Baccha Mia hatched a plot so that the brother and the sister couldn't meet. He told his wife that there was someone from Phulchowki to take

[m] It is customary in Bengali culture to have a pet name for every individual, generally used by an inner circle of close family and friends.

them there. Hasina was well aware of her husband's dishonesty, so she didn't believe his words. Somehow she was aware that her brother would come there that afternoon.

Baccha Mia repeated, "Your brother has a headache; he won't be able to make it today. That's why your aunt has sent Yir Mahmud Sardar to take us there. If you don't believe me, come to the corridor and hear it from Sardar himself."

Accordingly, Yir Mahmud Sardar was asked to wait outside the corridor and Baccha Mia queried him from inside the house, "Yir Mahmud, haven't you come from Phulchowki?" Yir Mahmud replied, "Yes, Sir. I have come with the news …" Baccha Mia hastily changed the topic and didn't let him finish the sentence.

Hasina cheerfully got ready to go to her aunt's house. A palanquin with a woven hood was arranged for her, and about eight doolies[n] covered with thick coarse cloth dyed in red were prepared for her maids. Baccha Mia's *miana*[o] was also ready. They set out on their way at around one o'clock, accompanied by their attendants, footmen, mace-bearers, staff-bearers and so forth.

On the way, when Hasina realised that her palanquin was being ferried across a river by putting it on two boats fastened together, she began to cry, because there was no need to cross a river to go to Phulchowki—God, oh God, where was her master taking her? What more could a zenana woman do in a situation like that except to cry and bang her head in misery against the palanquin's wall?

(33)

About eighteen years ago, a one and a half-year-old child in Calcutta had fever. Their purdah practice was extremely strict; therefore, no he-doctor was allowed to see the little girl and a she-doctor was called instead. The packed women in the house had no other virtue except for their "nobility." They stood encircling the lady doctor, Ms. Gupta.[p] After examining the patient, the doctor decided to give the girl a bath in warm water.

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[n] A dooly is a simple litter, often used to carry sick or wounded people.

[o] A kind of open palanquin for men.

[p] The lady doctor here is a Hindu woman. It is Rokeya's way of emphasising that the Muslims were so backward then that it was impossible to find a female Muslim doctor.

The lady doctor, Ms. Gupta, asked for warm water; the women stared at each other. She asked for cold water; they exclaimed, "Oh dear, a cold water bath will worsen her situation." In short, Ms. Gupta failed to convey her intentions to the ladies that day. While leaving, she explained the matter to the zamindar's manager and said that she wouldn't return to that house again. The manager pleaded with her repeatedly and, after giving her a fee of sixteen rupees, asked her to come back the following day.

The lady doctor, Ms. Gupta, faced the same frustration with the ladies the next day. Realising the awkward situation, the manager called up a woman he knew and sent her in to Ms. Gupta. Inside the house, Binapani[q] (the Bengali woman sent by the manager), found that the doctor was fuming in anger, while the women encircling her were trembling in fear. There were marks of horror on everyone's face. In the end, Ms. Gupta shouted out, "I am not here for a show!"

Binapani discreetly asked the ladies what the problem was. They replied, "We are not sure. She asked for a towel and a bathtub, but she throws away whatever we give."

Then she inquired with Ms. Gupta about the cause of her anger. Pointing at her wrist watch, she said, "See, it's more than half an hour, yet I have not received the items I need to bathe the girl." Binapani timidly asked, "Is it true that you don't like whatever they give you?"

Ms. Gupta replied, "Tell me how to like them. I ask for a bathtub to bathe the girl in it and they bring me a tiny one-seer[r] *degchi* [metallic cooking pail]—so I throw it away. Please tell me, is it possible to put the child in such a small *degchi*? I ask for soft, used piece of cloth to wipe the girl, they give me a new, rough towel—so I threw it away. They try to show off that they have new towels. They think they are all prima donnas and everybody should idolise them!"

At last, Binapani arranged all the items and helped Ms. Gupta to bathe the child. Then her anger subsided and she began to smile. The women also found their relief.

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[q] Binapani also happens to be a Hindu woman. It emphasises two points: (i) Hindus and Muslims were in close contact with each other during the period, in spite of the occasional violent communal riots fomented by the anti-colonial nationalist movement led by Mahatma Gandhi, (ii) Muslims were more backward in education than the Hindus, therefore although it was possible to find enlightened Hindu women, educated Muslim women, capable of thinking rationally and independently, were hard to come by.

[r] Seer is also a Bengali measure of weight related to the maund, as 40 seers make one maund.

(34)

I have heard that it is the practice in one particular respectable, aristocratic family in Bengal that the bride doesn't have to say "yes" at the time of the wedding, to give her consent to the marriage. Why should the men who are not related to her even hear that little sound of "yes" from the girl? That's why, in the wedding hall, the groom sits with his men as well as the bride's representatives, witnesses and relatives on one side of a thick curtain, and the women sit with the bride on the other side. A brass plate is placed under the curtain, half of which remains on one side of it and the other half on the other side.

After the marriage ritual is completed in accordance with the Islamic law, one of the companions or maids of the bride takes a nut-cleaver and flings it on to the plate with a clanging sound; if that cleaver slides to the side of the men, the marriage ceremony is completed.

I remember something else in this context. I knew a married woman from Lucknow. One day I went to her house for a visit. After a while, she called her seven year old son "bastard" and got up to hit him, for being naughty. When the boy ran away, I asked her bluntly, who was she cursing, the boy or the mother? In reply, she laughed and said that although she was grown up at the time of her marriage, nobody had asked her consent for it. She didn't say "yes" or any such thing at her wedding; she was given in marriage forcibly. Therefore, "all her children are bastards."

(35)

The following is an adaptation of an excerpt from the late Malvi Nazir Ahmad Khan Bhadur's famous book, describing the plights of the zenana women at the time of the Ghadar Mutiny [1915] in Delhi:

At 10 PM, the Captain's messenger came and informed Bhaijan [Elder Brother] that they would launch an attack on the mutineers at about 2 AM. A cannon was set next to our house; therefore, we ought to vacate the property before the assault began. We were utterly terrified by the news but were hardly left with a choice.

At last, we were compelled to set out on foot. Whenever I remember our tribulation that night, I feel sad but also amused. One of the Begums, leaving aside all her wealth, took up a beetle-box to carry with her. The poor women were not in the habit of walking—now forced to walk for their lives, some were losing their shoes on the way, while others were getting their

legs tangled in their pyjama ribbons; the longer the pyjamas were, the more difficult it was for the person to walk that night. Bhaijan got fed up at this and said, "You dumb women, go make some more pyjamas to please the eyes; make your Lahore silk ribbons longer by adding some more embroidered gold frills to it."

The miserable women were walking through the market area. Luckily it was night, which saved them—that is, a crowd hadn't gathered to witness their sorrow. Oh, alas, everyone's feet became heavy with swelling, weighing like boulders; everyone was stumbling over and over again. One of them sagged down on the road and said that she couldn't walk any more. Not only our feet, but also our whole bodies were aching. There was no end to the humiliation of the women that night.

A little later, we saw thousands of English and Sikh soldiers marching in file towards us. We lost hope at that sight and became paralysed.

At long last, Bhaijan managed to get four donkeys a bit further up the road, and the Begums, finally, found their relief by riding them.

(36)

It was winter and the dead cold month of *Magh*.[s] A trained bear dancer arrived in the village. It was customary to put in an appearance at the zamindar house whenever something new came to the village. Accordingly, the bear owner became a boarder at the zamindar house. The bear dance occurred every day in an open space on the northern side of the edifice, and the whole village came to watch it. But the women of the family were not allowed to see it.

The boys and the elderly maids came and told tales of their experience to the women; how the bear danced to the music or how it stood on its hind feet; how it wrestled with its manager, and how it tumbled etc. Hearing such accounts, two of the zamindar's juvenile daughters-in-law became eager to see the bear dance for a while. They wouldn't have to go terribly far; they could see it clearly if they lifted the blind of the bay window a bit, on the northern side of the youngest daughter-in-law's bedroom.

The moment the two brides lifted the blind, their four year old sister-in-law, Zohora, came running and said she would like to see it too. One of them took her up in her arms to show her. Zohora had never been to the

[s] The tenth month of the Bengali calendar (from the middle of January to the middle of February). *Poush* and *Magh* are the winter months in the Bengali calendar.

courtyard of their house, nor had she ever seen a dog or a cat before—now all of a sudden she saw a bear. The bear was wrestling with its manager; seeing this Zohora screamed in fear, and fainted. Ignoring the bear-dance, the onlookers now turned their attention to Zohora.

Zohora regained her consciousness no doubt, but she failed to overcome her fear. She would wake up suddenly at night screaming and trembling in fear. Seeing that the situation was critical, the family called in a doctor from the faraway district town. After hearing the whole story, the doctor asked if the child had been frightened by something. Words never remain a secret; it became known that the girl was traumatised while watching the bear dance.

Meanwhile, the master of the house began to inquire who had shown the bear-dance to Zohora. The maids and other female members of the family denied with one voice that they were involved in it. Gradually, it came to be known that two of his daughters-in-law were to blame. He was utterly enraged by this. He didn't care about Zohora's health anymore, what concerned him was how to hide his shame now that everyone knew that his daughters-in-law had gone to see the antics of a stranger. What a disgrace! Even the non-Muslim civil surgeon chuckled at the news that the girls had gone to see the bear-dance.

Agitated by shame, grief and anger, the master summoned his two daughters-in-law. Standing before their father-in-law with a long veil pulled over their faces, the two girls were trembling and (even in that *Magh* winter) sweating in disgrace and shame, and perhaps pleading to the ground under their feet:

> Mother earth, you open asunder,
> Let us disappear in you.

Indeed, what was the point for the zenana women to live on earth? Making a grating sound with his teeth, the *master* yelled, "Listen, you daughters-in-law …" and then fell silent from a dizzying anger. His hands were shaking in rage, his eyes became red, and he looked as though he couldn't decide whether to chomp the two girls raw or to swallow them whole without a bite.

(37)

Once, while a train was travelling from a northern state to Howrah [West Bengal], three burka-wearing men got into the ladies' compartment

at the Bali station. There were many Muslim women sitting in the compartment. They were amazed that the three newly arrived passengers didn't remove their *niqab* (face covering) even after the train had started. They became suspicious of their intentions. Those passengers were also very tall. When the train arrived at the Lilua station and a lady ticket collector entered the compartment, they all spoke to her about those three passengers. The moment the ticket collector approached them, one of the three passengers jumped through the window to the opposite side of the station and ran away. The lady ticket collector started yelling "Police … police" and caught one of them. Lifting the *niqab*, she found the face covered with a huge beard. Utterly baffled, she exclaimed, "How bewildering! Beard under the burka!"

(38)

Ms. Sharat Kumari Mitra, a Hindu lady doctor and an acquaintance, once said, "Gee, it's so embarrassing to visit patients in some of the Muslim families. You can't get any help in a timely fashion—even if it is for some hot water or a piece of fresh cloth."

Once a servant came to call her from a far-off place and said that the younger Begum of the house was having a toothache. Accordingly, the doctor took all the medicine with her, and even the instruments to extract the teeth if necessary. Arriving there, the doctor found that the Begum was not having a toothache but a labour pain. What could she do now? The Bhagalpur town, where she lived, was about eight miles away from Jamgaon, where she was visiting the patient. It was impossible to travel that distance in the same carriage, as the horses were already exhausted. Jamgaon was on the outskirts of town, and more like a village; horse-drawn carriages or palanquins were not readily available there.

By the time she returned to Jamgaon, after collecting the right medicine and the instruments required for delivering the baby from the Bhagalpur town, the patient was in a critical condition. When Ms. Mitra asked the elder Begum as to why she was misinformed about the problem, she replied, "I had to send a male servant to bring you, so what else could I say but toothache? How could I mention labour pain to a man? Wouldn't that have been shameful for both of us? What kind of a female doctor are you if you don't have the sense to understand this simple matter?"

(39)

The society has not relented at just imprisoning us in the zenana. We are told that Hazrat Ayesha Siddiqa[t] came of age at nine years; hence Muslim girls of aristocratic families are forbidden to laugh loudly, speak loudly or run around playfully, the moment they cross the age of eight. In brief, they are not allowed to move about freely. They are expected to sit in a corner of the house and turn all energy on needlework, without moving or stirring. They are not even allowed to walk at a fast pace.

One day, an eight-year-old girl from an aristocratic family came out into the courtyard in the afternoon and saw a small ladder dashed against the thatched roof of the kitchen. Tahera (that girl) was not sure why, but absent-mindedly she climbed two steps of the ladder. Exactly then her father arrived at the scene. Seeing his daughter standing on the ladder, he lost all his senses and pulled her down from it with a violent tug.

Tahera was a much-pampered only daughter of her father; she had never experienced anything except her father's warmth and indulgence, and had never seen her father in an unhappy mood. Today she was so terrified by the fierce look on her father's face and the rough tug on her hands that she couldn't control shaking and soiling her clothes in an unguarded state.

At night, she ran a temperature because she had to be bathed in the late afternoon and also because she was overwhelmed by an excessive fear. She was from a rich family and much loved by her father, so there was no lack in treatment. A Civil Surgeon was called over from a far off district town. It was not an easy thing to call a doctor in those days (that is forty or fifty years ago). The doctor had to be paid a quadruple fee and all expenses for hiring palanquins. On top of that, all the palanquin bearers had to be fully looked after during the visit; all in all, it was a grand affair.

In spite of such care, Tahera failed to recover from her fever even on the third day. Losing hope, the doctor left, and giving an apt reply to her father's harsh treatment, Tahera bid her final farewell soon after (*Ina Lillahi Wa Ina Ilayhi Raajioon*).[u]

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[t] Reference to Prophet Hazrat Muhamad's wife and the daughter of Hazrat Abu Bakar Siddique, Islam's first Caliph, whom the Prophet married three years after the death of his first wife, Hazrat Khadija. "Hazrat" is a honorific used for the Prophet as well as some of his revered followers. The approximate meaning of the word is "respected."

[u] This Arabic expression means, "To Allah we belong and unto Him is our return." It is said immediately upon hearing of the death of a Muslim.

(40)

There was a fanfare going on in a rich man's home on the occasion of his daughter's wedding. The place was in a row from all the guests and relatives who had gathered for the ceremony, and there was no shortage of anything. Several new huts had been built for the guests. One late evening, somehow, one of the newly built huts caught fire. Hearing the clamour, the servants and the villagers gathered at the portico and kept shouting repeatedly if the women had put on their veils and if the men could come in. But who would answer from inside? Everyone was dumbfounded by the fire. In the meantime, women inside the hut on fire were asking one another if there was purdah in the courtyard—how could they go out if there were male strangers around the place?

At long last, one of the elderly women being beside herself with fear, shouted out, "You scums, come to put out the fire. You worry about purdah even at this time?"

Then everyone came running to extinguish the fire. But as the women were coming out of the hut, they saw the courtyard full of men; so they quickly ran back into the hut and hid behind the wicker door. Thankfully, there were a few brave young men who dragged the women out. Otherwise, they would have been grilled into well-seasoned, delectable kebabs that night.

(41)

Shrijukta[v] Rai Bahadur[w] Jaladhar Sen [1860–1939] wrote the following in 1928 (Bengali calendar 1335).

Purdah in the bygone days: By bygone here, I don't mean the ancient or the medieval era, but the time of our youth, about fifty years ago. The incidents of stringent and even laughable purdah practice that I witnessed during that period still remain fresh in my mind. I'll try to recount a few of them here.

One day I went to the Howrah station for some reason. I was a college student at that time. Arriving at the platform of the station, I saw some male servants making a passage through a crowd of people. I didn't have the

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[v] Prefixed as an honorific title to the names of men, to mean fortunate, famous, illustrious or wealthy.

[w] The highest honorific title awarded to prominent Hindu gentlemen in British India; it is known as "Khan Bhadur" in the case of Muslims.

courage to go forward, thinking that perhaps some celebrity was about to board the train and so his attendants were pushing the innocent passengers off to make way for him. For that reason, I stood some distance away, expectantly awaiting the arrival of this nabob.

Some time passed, but the personage did not arrive. Finally, I saw a mosquito net approaching. Four servants were holding up the four corners of the mosquito net and moving forward slowly. I was stunned by this sight; I had never seen such a thing before. There was a man standing next to me, and I asked him, "Why is a mosquito net passing that way?" The man said with a chuckle, "Have you never seen a mosquito net travelling? See how many servants and attendants are on hand. The wife of some royalty or zamindar from the Bihar area is boarding the train by covering her modesty in that mosquito net. Why should a rich man's wife walk before us openly, just like the common people? Aren't they too sacrosanct even for the sunlight?" With that the man began to laugh. I also couldn't restrain my laughter at the sight of that ostentatious display of purdah. Oh, yes, this is the true purdah—nothing short of an expedition in a mosquito net.

On another occasion, people had gathered for ritual bathing in the Ganges to mark an auspicious time. I went to the Adya Shraddha Ghat Road in Barabazar to see the grand assemblage of people and also, let me say it frankly, to bathe in the water myself and cleanse my sin. It was winter, and the appointed time for bathing was five o'clock in the afternoon.

I was observing the people standing at the river landing, and thinking in my mind how I was going to bathe in the Ganges water on that extremely cold winter afternoon. Suddenly I saw a palanquin fully covered with side-screens arrive at the landing. There were four bearers on four sides of the palanquin and two maids standing next to its two doors. I immediately knew that a rich man's wife, daughter or daughter-in-law had come to bathe. Women of wealthy families usually arrived with such flourish, and there was no reason to be surprised by it.

But what I saw next was the epitome of both laughter and sorrow. I thought that the palanquins would be laid on the ground and the passengers would step out of it to bathe in the water. But that thought remained as an illusion of my mind. What I saw was that the four bearers and the two maids went down into the water with the palanquin. The place where the palanquin stopped, the water was chest-high. The bearers then immersed the palanquin into the water in a quick motion and took it out instantly. Soon after, they came out of the water and walked away in the same manner that they arrived. I laughed at the sight of the palanquin's Ganges bathing, but also felt compassion, thinking of the condition of those inside the

palanquin. The benign ladies inside the litter must have been shivering like anything in their wet clothes in that excruciating winter evening. Besides, the kind of cleansing they went through was also fairly obvious. That is the glorious purdah tradition!

Mr. Sen made fun of the event of the palanquin's "bathing" in the Ganges. In my childhood, we also laughed at hearing of an incident of a palanquin "bathing" in the river Brahmaputra at the Chilmari Ghat. Later, after going to Bhagalpur [Bihar], I came to know about the palanquin's travelling by railway.

Once I saw a thirteen-year old newlywed bride travelling to her in-laws' house, and it is still fresh in my mind. Everyone knows how hot it gets in the Bhagalpur area in the month of June.

At eight o'clock on a June morning, that girl-bride had to board a palanquin wearing a heavy Banaras-silk sari and covering her face with a long veil made from dragging a corner of the sari over her face. On top of the veil, there was a wreath tied to her forehead. Then, after securing the doors, the palanquin was covered with a curtain made of red woven cloth and later placed on a train's open brake van. Thus, the girl began her journey to her illustrious in-laws' house, burning and boiling inside the palanquin.

(42)

The other day (5 July 1931), a woman narrated the following two incidents to me [presented here in accounts 42 and 43].

Many years ago, one of her distant maternal grandmothers was returning home after travelling to the north. She had informed her family by telegram of her return itinerary to Calcutta, but because of a violent storm that day all the telegram lines were disconnected and the streets of Calcutta were inundated with water. Therefore, no one had received the grandma's telegram and consequently had not gone to the station with a palanquin to receive her.

Meanwhile, grandma's reserved carriage arrived at the Howrah station. Everyone got down, and even all their belongings were taken out, but because of the absence of a palanquin, grandma, in spite of having the burka on, was adamant that she would not step out of the train. After requesting her repeatedly and unsuccessfully, grandpa got fed up and said, "Okay then, you stay on the train, we are leaving." Finding herself in a helpless situation, the grandma said submissively, "Let me explain a way to you, and you follow that method in taking me out of the train." The plan involved her being

wrapped in several layers of clothes like a bundle and carried out of the train in that condition by three or four people. Thereafter, she was put on a horse-drawn carriage in that manner.

(43)

A burka-clad Begun had stepped out of the train with a bag in hand. Asking her to wait at a place with their belongings, her husband went to undertake some business. For some reason, he couldn't return in time. Meanwhile, his wife began to cry. Hearing her low and muffled sounds of crying and seeing the shivering of her body, a crowd began to build up gradually. They asked her graciously, "If you give us the name of your husband, we'll find him." The woman pointed to the sun and then showed her bag. Not able to infer anything from these gestures, the crowd began to laugh.

A little later, a man came there running and panting and asked, "What's the matter? Why is there a crowd of people?" The man laughed when the crowd explained to him what had happened, and added, "My name is 'Aftab Beg,' that's why she was pointing at the sun ['Aftab' in Urdu and Arabic means 'the sun'] and showing the bag in her hand [to mean Beg]."

(44)

Mr. Sharifuddin Ahmad B.A. (Aligarh) Azimabadi recounted the following three incidents in an Urdu newspaper, and I cannot resist the temptation of translating them [into Bengali] here for our readers. They are as follows [in accounts 44, 45 and 46].

I lived in Aligarh until last year. Because I used to consider the station there unique in grandeur among all the E.I.R. [East Indian Railway] stations, I would visit the place daily during my afternoon walk. Among the many odd things there, I came across a few thirteenth century burkas and, God forbid, they were all hilarious in one way or another. Of that, only three of my wacky experiences are narrated below.

The first incident is that one day I was taking a leisurely walk on the station's platform, when suddenly I felt a push from behind. Turning back, I saw a burka-clad woman standing there. She began to scold me, "Hello, can't you walk carefully?" I felt like bursting into laughter, because she was behind me, so it's just a matter of common sense as to who ought to be careful while walking. To her I said only, "Please, fix your burka so that the eye-mesh is in the right place," and walked away laughing.

(45)

The second incident is that again, one day I was busy enjoying the fun at the Aligarh Railway station with some friends. Suddenly we heard the sound of a child crying near us. We looked all around us but saw nothing. A little later, again we heard a child screaming very close to us but looking around we saw nothing. We were all flabbergasted by the whole thing, but since I knew well about the burka custom, I began to look more searchingly and finally noticed that a burka-clad woman was passing by and the sound of the child crying was coming from inside her burka.

As a matter of fact, the Begum was hiding the child inside her burka, and the child was screaming from the suffocating heat. That's why nobody could see the child but only hear the sound of crying. I explained this ludicrous thing to my friends and broke down laughing.

(46)

Again, as on previous occasions, one day I was loitering at the Aligarh railway station. Suddenly I saw a "white circle" moving forward. As it came closer, I saw an elderly man walking with a beetle box in one hand and a fan in another, and behind him a group of burka-clad women walking together, almost holding one another. Before the group could go very far, they came face to face with a cart. Hit by the cart, the moment one of the women fell down, the whole group tumbled to the ground.

It was evening, trains were arriving, there was a bustle of passengers, and in a situation like that if one sees something so weird lying on the floor of the platform, who wouldn't be curious? Soon a crowd gathered, and everyone in the mob was willing to help the tripped women. But who could touch a woman? I was feeling sorry for the elderly man too; he was alone, and there was this mishap. Finally, I said to him, "Sir, why do you not help the women to stand up and see if they have been hurt anywhere?"

When the man began to pull them up, I noticed that the women had tied up the ends of their burkas and were all blindly following the woman who was leading them. Now my puzzle was to understand why this woman who was walking ahead hadn't seen the approaching cart, which had resulted in this mishap. I turned my eyes to her burka and found that her eye-mesh, which ought to remain on her forehead, had moved to the back. This explained to me that the woman was walking on blind instinct only.

Now the situation was such that while the elderly man was trying to bring up one of the women, she was being pulled down by the others and therefore slipping out of the man's hand. After repeated efforts in that way, the women were eventually brought up on to their feet.

(47)

As the poet has said:

> This life is not poetry or fiction,
> Nor is it a theatre, but a habitat of reality.

This happened three years ago, when we received our first bus. The day before the delivery, one of our school teachers, an English woman, went to the factory to inspect the bus. She came back and reported that the bus was too dark inside; "Oh, no, I'll never ride that bus," she had said. When the bus arrived the next day, we noticed that there was a little metallic mesh on its back as well as the front door. Except for these two mesh ventilators, three inches wide and one and a half feet long, the bus could have been considered virtually airtight.

The girls were sent back home in the new bus on the first day. Returning back, the female assistant on the bus reported that it was unusually hot inside the bus, and the girls were restless during the ride. Some of them even vomited in the bus and the younger ones cried, frightened of the dark.

On the second day, as the bus was going out to bring the students to school, the same English woman took out the shutter from one of the doors of the bus and replaced it with a curtain made of coloured cloth. Yet even then, when the students arrived at the school it was found that some of them had fainted on the way, a few of them had vomited, and several of them were having headaches. In the afternoon, the English woman replaced the shutters on both the doors of the bus with curtains, and that is how the students were sent back home that day.

That evening, an old friend of mine, Mrs. Mukherjee came to visit me. Expressing happiness at the news of the school's manifold progress, she said jestingly, "Your school bus looks very impressive! At first sight, I thought it was a cupboard on four wheels; it's closed on all sides, so it looks more like a cupboard. My nephew came and said, 'Look, aunty, a moving black hole is passing by.' Really, how do the girls sit in there?"

In the afternoon, on the third day, four or five of the mothers came to the school and complained, "Your bus is like a vault. You are burying the girls alive." I replied apologetically, "What can I do? If the bus was not like that,

you would be the ones to criticise that it is 'too exposed.' " They became angry at this and said, "What, you want to practice purdah at the cost of human lives? From tomorrow, our daughters will not attend your school." Even on that day, two or three of the girls fainted. Almost every parent complained through the school maid that their daughters would not ride the bus again.

In the evening, I received four letters in the mail without any sent address. One of them was written in English, singed by the author as "Brother-in-Islam." The other three were in Urdu—two unsigned, and the fourth letter bearing the signature of five people. All the letters were on the same issue and written in a spirit of benevolence, pointing out that the curtains put on the two sides of the bus moved in the breeze and made the bus purdahless. If something was not done about it by the next day, they would be forced, for the good of the school, to write malicious comments about the institution in various Urdu dailies and ensure that girls didn't ride such an "exposed" bus.

What a catch-22 situation I was in, being caught between a rock and a hard place: "If I didn't catch the snake, the king would kill me; if I did, I risked its venomous fangs."

Perhaps no one else had caught a poisonous snake [the irate critics] alive to appease the king [the equally indignant guardians]. On behalf of all the cloistered women, I felt like saying:

> Oh, why was I born in this wretched world,
> In a family so purdah bound?

Uncollected Works

ESSAYS

Woman Worship[a]

"The place of woman in Hinduism is definitely praiseworthy," I muttered, turning the pages of an old issue of *Bharati*. "The adulation of woman among the Hindus is certainly exemplary. In no other country are women viewed with such respect. Hindus regard woman as a deity to be worshipped."

All the women present laughed at hearing my words, and I felt a little embarrassed. Taking exception to my words, Jamila Begum said, "Excuse me, Mrs. Chatterjee. The position of woman in this country is no better than a slave's."

Jamila was the wife of a renowned lawyer; she was a close friend of Kusum Kumari. The other woman, Amena Begum, was a widow. She lived in the north for ten years and spoke excellent Urdu. She too was a bosom friend of Kusum. They were so close to one another that they addressed each other by their first names. I had known the two Muslim women for about two, three months, but Kusum was of my age and a childhood friend.

I was flipping through the pages of *Bharati*, sitting in Kusum's drawing room. I wasn't ready for an argument, yet a verbal exchange ensued centring on my statement. With a smirk on her face, Amena Begum uttered, "Women are like men's property in this country."

I said, "That's your delusion. If Hindus didn't admire women, they wouldn't envision them as deities. Most of the deities are female."

Amena replied, "We want to judge by evidence. Leaving the imaginary deities aside, give us one example from real life."

I said, "Dear, oh, Kusum, come and help me. Can you bring me your copy of the *Mahabharata*, so that I can give them some historical examples."

Kusum answered, "I love and respect all three of you equally; I can't take any side. Why worry about the *Mahabharata* or history? Discuss the current events in society."

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[a] This essay was first published in the monthly magazine *Mahila* (Ed. Girishchandra Sen), in three segments in the consecutive issues of *Paush* 1312 (January 1906), *Magh* 1312 (February 1906) and *Falgun* 1312 (March 1906). This translation is based on the text of the essay in Abdul Quader, ed. *Rokeya Rachanabali* (196–203).

I said (to the two Muslim women), "Do you want to dismiss women such as Damayanti, Sita and Savitri[b] as slaves?"

Jamila: "No! Sita and Savitri are revered for their own deeds. Sita herself was a person, but in what way was she worshipped by society during her lifetime?"

Without answering to her question, I said, "There were many erudite women in the ancient time. Lilabati, Khana[c] are examples of rare learned women on earth."

Amena: "Their learning was their personal virtue, we are discussing society's attitude towards women. Khana was highly proficient in astronomy. Even now it is difficult to find a rural peasant who doesn't know one or two of Khana's maxims. But …"

Me: "No but …. The fact that Khana's maxims are recited in every village shows that she is worshipped by the masses."

Amena: "Excuse me, Mrs. Chatterjee, let me finish my words. Yes, Khana is being worshipped now, but don't you know how she died? The tongue with which she uttered those maxims was cut off to kill her."

Me: "Well, she was not killed, but yes, Khana's tongue was lopped off."

Jamila: "She didn't die just like that. After her husband had dismembered her tongue, she died gazing at him quietly, and crying."

Kusum: "Forget about those ancient stories, let's determine who wins and who loses on the basis of examples from the present century."

Me: "The Muslim ladies are two, I am alone. Might is right, therefore, I surrender without a fight."

Kusum: "Oh, no! Why should you give up so quickly? Try as far as you can."

Amena: "Even if we are two, we are still weaker compared to you. After all, you have higher education, (with a simper) although you failed in your HSC. You have seen and read a lot, whereas we live in strict purdah. We know only Kusum, and have met you."

Me: "Okay, okay, let's proceed. You don't give up! Now, Kusum, what do you mean by the present century, Bengali era, or the twentieth century of the Christian calendar?"

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[b] Three characters in Hindu mythology revered and worshipped as women of chastity. They also embody the concept of Pativrata (or uncompromising devotion to the husband) in Hinduism.

[c] Khana and Lilabati are the same person, a poetess and legendry astrologist, who composed in medieval Bengali between the 9th and 12th centuries AD. Her poetry, known as *khan'ar bachan* (meaning, khana's words), is among the earliest compositions in Bengali literature, and known for its agricultural themes.

Kusum: "Neither. Why not look into the events of the last one hundred years?"

Me: "Fine. With the creation of *Bharmo Samaj*[d] recently, women have gradually been raised from the status of imaginary deities to demigoddesses."

Jamila: "That's true to a point. But please remember one thing, when you take pride in the goddesses of the Hindu tradition, you must also be ready to own the flaws of the tradition."

Me: "That's a tough condition!"

Kusum: "Tough but a fair proposition. They are trying to obstruct your chances of sidestepping. Get it, Prabha!"

Me: "What kind of sidestepping?"

Kusum: "For example, if they spoke about the plights of women in a Hindu family, you could have said, 'that doesn't happen in the *Bharmo Samaj*.'"

Me: "But that's true! Who can say that women are oppressed in the *Bhramo Samaj*?"

Amena: "If you are interested only in the new order of the *Brahmo Samaj*, why do you bring in the Hindu deities? You'll take the credit of the good qualities but not share in the censure of its weaknesses, that's very unfair."

Jamila: "That's why you wanted to capitulate without a fight, now I understand. Okay, let's drop the topic of woman worship and talk on something else."

I was bewildered at first and then thought to myself, "Am I so timid that I should give up without a fight?" Aloud, I said, "No worries, ladies, I am not looking for a safe getaway. Come!"

Everyone began to laugh. It was my objective to make them laugh. They stopped discussing social issues out of politeness. I found it unbearable, so I said deliberately, "Hi ladies, you have not been able to give a single example of humiliation of women."

Jamila: "If I want to say—why one, there are many; 'that fire has so many flames, who can keep its count?'"

Me: "Why not show me one flame for the moment!"

Jamila: "Excellent! This is what an exalted Hindu woman has to say:

> Bravo, bravo to thou, progenies of Hindus,
> Ain't thy heart made of pure stone?

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[d] Literally, the worshippers of Brahman; it is reformist movement in Hinduism, founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833), which sought to do away with the ritualistic Hinduism and revive the spirit of monism found in the *Upanishads*.

You drag in faith to destroy your women,

You have no creed, no mercy,
No sense of good or bad,
You swallow your girls only to show godliness.

Now, what do you think? Should we call these lines of verse an outcry of sorrow or a joyous blessing for being exalted?"

Me: "Those are poet's word—imaginary sorrow."

Jamila: "You consider the agony of child widows an imaginary sorrow?"

Amena: "It's not entirely invented, but true to a large extent."

Kusum: "It's an absolute truth!"

Me: "It's a social custom, so we have no choice but to accept it."

Amena: "Leaving the poet's imagination aside, let me give you a more recent example to show what ingredients are used to worship the women in India. We won't have to go very far for it. Have you come across revered Mr. Pratap Chandra Majumdar's book *Heart Beats*?"[1]

I thought for a moment and realised that the book was about God and spirituality. Reflecting a little longer, I said with confidence, "Yes, I have. It has nothing about the oppression of women."

Amena: "Not in the actual book of course, but there is an example in Mr. Majumdar's biography written by S.J. Baros."

Me: "An example of woman's oppression? In the short biography of this spiritual guide?"

Amena said in a calm voice, "Yes, the incident of his mother's demise. When, stricken with cholera, Mr. Majumdar's mother was struggling with death; the chief of the household was fast asleep.[2] Perhaps the master of the house wouldn't be without a worry even when the family's cow was sick. How the society treats its widows is wonderfully depicted in Mr. Majumdar's words. You should read pages fourteen hundred to sixteen hundred of his biography once again. It will shatter your heart to pieces. Perhaps even a pet dog or cat doesn't die without treatment, and here was the best of God's creations, a wife in a family who was mortally ill, but no one turned to take a look at her. It didn't also occur to anyone that they should call in a doctor for her. Majumdar himself went to wake up his uncles from their blissful

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[1] I cannot resist the temptation of quoting some passages in full from this book. The heart-wrenching outcry of an anguished soul would sound most appropriate in the words of the motherless boy himself.

[2] "Everybody in the house was up except my uncle, who was the Karta (Head). Nobody seemed to care to call in a doctor. My perplexity may be imagined."

sleep, but he was not allowed to enter their rooms.[3] The servants also refused to go and call a doctor. But, alas, the son couldn't afford to be indifferent. One whose mother is on the verge of death, how can he be in peace! He ran furiously to go and call Keshab Chandra Sen[e] (now deceased) and a few of his other friends for help. But it was late at night, and their doors were locked. So he went to the house of a doctor, where he was chased away by the servant. That servant was an Indian man; he certainly knew how to worship a woman. Knowing that it would be inappropriate for him to trouble his master for the sake of a widow, he drove the grief-stricken son away.

"We can see clearly in our mind that nineteen year old boy running about frantically, overwhelmed with grief for his mother, and feel his intense restlessness and agony in our hearts. Of all the favours from God, mother's feet is the highest; she is more than all the prosperity and happiness put together in life.

"If you call such ruthless, inhumane treatment of widows woman worship, then I have nothing more to say."

Me: "Such incidents are rare. You cannot blame everyone just because one widow has not been looked after."

Kusum: "Not really, Prabha. Such incidents are not rare, but the thing is, very few people have documented such disgraceful incidents in the way Mr. Majumdar has. That's why we don't get to know them. I am also privy to similar incidents in one or two families."

Me: (to Jamila Begum) "And you? What chilling incidents are you familiar with?"

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[3] "I rushed to speak to my uncles, but I was not allowed into their rooms; and no one, not even a servant, would call a doctor. Maddened and despairing, I rushed into the streets, tried to call up Keshab and other friends; but every gate was shut for the night. I ran to a doctor's house in the neighbourhood, but the servant turned me out. I don't know to how many places I went and pleaded my poor, dying mother's case, but could not get medical help.

"… What need to bewail the world's hard heartedness? What need to curse the selfish cruelty of men and women to the wretched, forsaken Hindu widow ….

"But if men were more compassionate, and society recognised their (women's) rights to the commonest necessities of life, perhaps they would be less hard on themselves, and many a heart-stricken son would be spared the misery I felt when I found my mother's beloved life sinking under the load of world's neglect and indifference."

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[e] Keshab Chandra Sen (1838–1884) was a Bengali scholar, orator and religious leader. He was a leading member of the *Brahmo Samaj* movement. Pratap Chandra Majumder (1840–1905), on the other hand, was a writer, orator and theologian, who was related to Keshab Chandra Sen and was his friend and disciple.

Jamila: "I have witnessed one incident with my own eyes. That's a long story!"

Me: "Go ahead, let's hear."

Jamila recounted, "Once a rich man's baby daughter fell sick. The man had no lack of luxury items at home—maids, servants, horses, carriages, all that a man can have, he had plenty of everything. Only his daughter was not getting any treatment because women are considered a curse.

"There was no want—the other children in the family played with money, only that baby girl was dying from lack of treatment. The mother couldn't bear this negligence. She gently, tearfully asked her husband to get a doctor, but the master paid no need. Even one day as the husband was going to see a doctor for himself, the wife pleaded in a woebegone voice, 'tell the doctor about the girl as well.' 'When does a girl die,' he said and left the house.

"Therefore, having no other alternative, the helpless mother quietly kept crying with the child in her lap. When the langur seeks to kill its own male child, the mother saves it by running away into the forest. But where will the purdah-bound woman go to protect her female child from the atrocity of her father? There are many doctors in town, but how does it help the woman trapped behind the veil?"

Me: "God! Human beings can be so cruel? What happened in the end? Did the child survive or die of neglect?"

Jamila: "The child survived at last. When the mother was crying with the daughter in her arms, the lucky firstborn son of the family suddenly arrived there. He was an adolescent boy, so his heart was touched by his mother's tears; he personally went to the doctor and got some medicine for the girl. It was only to comfort his mother, but by God's grace, that little amount of medicine saved the girl's life. That rich family is still there; that baby girl, the father, the mother, the brother, they are all alive."

Me: "Is the family Hindu or Muslim?"

Jamila: "I won't say that. Why disgrace the family? All I can say is that they are Bengali people."

Me: "You see, the horrible purdah system we have in practice here is the root of all problems. The Muslims are ahead in it. They cannot come out even in the presence of their servants; that's why the Muslim women are so utterly helpless. The purdah system has made them inferior to animals, reduced them to a lower state than the mother langur, and caused them to become so forlorn."

Amena: "Even if the purdah system is disgusting, it has become a part of our blood and bones. Unless the men become more civilised, it won't be easy

to get rid of it. If the men knew how to be more respectful of women, then there would be no problem."

Kusum: "I have heard that they don't have such strict purdah practice in other Muslim countries. Then why did the Indian Muslims bring about such a custom to imprison all the women along with their own wives and daughters?"

Jamila: "No one exactly knows who founded the practice. When a Muslim brother writes in favour of purdah, he claims, 'we are the original architects of the system; those Hindus who claim that they initiated it, are wrong.' But again, when a Muslim brother writes something against the tradition, he argues that the Muslims picked up the convention from the nonbelievers. Anyway, whoever started it, we have to bear the brunt."

Me: "Why don't you gradually give up the purdah? We have renounced it."

Jamila: "You have not set a good example after renouncing the purdah. The way you did it, has also earned you much criticism."

Me: "Is there any need to be afraid of criticisms?"

Amena: "Even if you are not, some of you have, in fact, crossed all limits of privacy and even violated the sanctity …"

Me: "Why do you stop? Go ahead!"

Amena: "I was about to mention a harsh truth. Anyway, we have some responsibilities towards the society as well; we cannot ignore that for the sake of personal comfort and happiness."

Me: "Hindus denounce the *Brahmo Samaj* unnecessarily. I don't see any reason to care about it."

Kusum: "But the way some members of the *Brahmo Samaj* disparage abdication of the purdah practice, one ought to take heed of it. Perhaps Amena wanted to say something that she had heard from within the community."

Amena: "That's right!"

Me: "But on the whole, no other community oppresses its women more than the Muslims. You mentioned Khana's killing, but have you heard the history of the Anarkali Mausoleum in Lahore? Anarkali was buried alive at the behest of Emperor Akbar. Later, Emperor Jahangir built that beautiful sanctuary on her tomb. Besides, no one knows if there is a similar tragic history buried inside the Taj Mahal."

Jamila: "Muslims trample on their women no doubt, but at least on the surface they don't pretend that they worship them. Rather, the hidebound, bigoted Muslim clerics in the country think that it is their religious duty to oppress women."

Amena: "I think Hindus have learnt the purdah practice from us, and our fanatical clerics have learnt the art of oppressing women from them.

Otherwise, if one follows the teachings of the Qur'an, one can neither oppress the women, nor impose the unjust purdah convention on them."

Me: "Do you think the orthodox Islamic clerics are in favour of an unfair purdah practice?"

Jamila: "Amena, make sure that you don't incite the ultra-clerics."

Amena: "You are right. I am not yet ready to rile the Islamic clerics. Leave out the clergies, Mrs. Chatterjee."

Me: "If you are afraid of the bee, how will you extract honey from the beehive?"

Jamila: "One has to bring a big coil of smoke carefully while extracting the honey; one or two stings of the bee can be bearable at that time. But casting stones at the beehive without being ready to extract the honey would be a silly, adolescent act. We are talking about the oppression of woman, let's stick to that."

Me: "You are supposed to talk about that, and I am supposed to listen."

Amena: "There is so much to say. Can anyone ever finish talking about that tragic story? But it's time to go, bye now Kusum!"

After that we left for our respective homes.

Bengal Women's Educational Conference[f] (*President's Address*)

Dear Honourable Sisters,

I express my sincere gratitude to you for the honour you have shown me by electing someone as insignificant and ordinary as myself as the president of the Society. But I must say that your choice has not been an ideal one, since all my life, as a victim of the stringent purdah system in society, I have lived in an iron vault. I have never been able to interact in society freely, or even cultivate the emotions that are required of a president of an organisation.

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[f] This lecture was first delivered as President's address on the fourth day of the first Bengal Women's Educational Conference in February 1927. It was later published in *Ahmedi* under the title, "Narishikha o Muslim Samaj" (Women's Education and Muslim Society) and as "Sabhanetrir Bhasan" (President's Address) in the monthly magazine *Shahitik* (Eds. Mohammad Yakub Ali Chowdhury and Golam Mustafa) in *Falgun* 1333 (March 1927). Subsequently, it was published under various titles in the weekly magazine *Satyagrahi* (Ed. Maulana Mohammad Abdullah Hel Kafi), and the monthly magazines *Prabasi* (Ed. Ramananda Chattopadhyay) and *Sabuj Patra* (Ed. Pramatha Chowdhury). This translation is based on the text of the lecture in Abdul Quader, ed. *Rokeya Rachanabali* (225–231).

Therefore, there will be many lapses and shortcomings in my words and expressions, so please be prepared for it.

Honourable sister Mrs. Lindsey has asked me to speak on the problems and failures associated with the education of Muslim girls. I am not qualified to speak on such a topic in the presence of a highly learned audience. But the experience I have gathered as a writer and social worker for the last twenty or twenty-one years, and especially in running the Sakhawat Memorial School for Girls for the last sixteen years, I'll try to present that before you.

In any attempt to explain the state of women's education, it is unavoidable to discuss the condition of our society; and in explaining the circumstances of our society, it becomes inevitable to reflect on the negligence, indifference and contemptible attitude of Muslim men towards women. There is a saying, "Expressing one's own sorrow leads to another's slander."

Now the question is, how to improve on the state of education for Muslim girls? There are many ways for it by God's grace, but when do the girls ever benefit from any of them? You might be surprised to learn that I have been crying for the lowliest creature in India for the last twenty-two years. Do you know who that lowliest creature in India is? It is the Indian women. No one has ever experienced any anguish for them. Mahatma Gandhi was aggrieved by the sufferings of the Untouchables; by travelling in third-class, he tried to comprehend the plight of the impoverished railway-travellers. There are people also who feel for animals, so we see animals' rights groups everywhere. If a dog is hit by a car, we hear an outcry in the Anglo-Indian media. But there is not a single soul in the whole of the subcontinent to mourn for incarcerated women like us.

Men and women are like two sides of the colossal body of society. For a long time, men have been imposing themselves on women, and women have suffered it in silence. Men have succeeded so far mainly because of the many tireless "religious" troopers on their side. The good news is that, after so many eons, Lord Krishna himself has shown clemency towards our Hindu sisters and, therefore, there is a new awakening among the zenana women of different castes within the Hindu community. They, and in particular the women of Madras, have been able to advance themselves in every regard. A woman has been elected as Deputy President of the Madras Legislative Council this year. Of late, a woman in Rangoon became an accomplished barrister. Lady Barrister Ms. Sorabji is also well-renowned. But what is there to say about the Muslim women? They still live in the same darkness as before:

If a mother chooses to defile her own child,
And the father decides to traffic her for money …

Who can then save the child? The secretary of a prestigious girls' high school in Aligarh, Mr. Sheik Mohammad Abdullah, once said in one of his speeches, "The discrepancy in the education system for boys and girls in our country has made our situation so wretched that even dumb creatures cry at our sorrow. It is not a matter of pride for us to deprive our girls of education; it is, rather, one of perennial shame." That is, what someone of such little consequence as myself had said about twenty years ago in the first part of my book *Motichur*, is now being heard even from such wise and eminent people as Mr. Sheik Mohammad Abdullah. Those who are familiar with history will know that the Arabs used to bury their daughters alive during the barbaric jāhilīyah period. Although Islam has successfully prevented the physical killing of baby girls, yet Muslims have been glibly and frantically wrecking the mind, intellect and judgement of their daughters till the present day. Many consider it as a mark of honour to keep their daughters ignorant and deprive them of knowledge and understanding of the world by cooping them up within the four walls of the house. Until recently Egypt and Turkey were opposed to women's education, but having lost and learnt from their mistakes, they have now returned to the right path.

Like Europe and America, Turkey and Egypt have also of late instituted compulsory laws for giving equal education to boys and girls. But Turkey did not follow directly in America's footsteps; rather, it fulfilled one of the inviolable teachings of our religion, because the first person to ever mandate giving equal education to both men and women as a duty was our revered Prophet. He advised that attaining knowledge is an obligation for every human being, whether man or woman. Thus the law of compulsory education was decreed for Muslims thirteen hundred years ago. However, our community has never followed it, but has instead been violating it forever and even considering its breach a matter of family pride. I still have letters with me from parents of some of the students of our school who have asked that except for a little Urdu and recitation of the Qurʾan, their children should be given no other education, especially English. Such is our social norm.

We'll wait for the day when the law of compulsory education for women is introduced in India. But the question is—the same Muslims who are willing to lay down their lives in the Prophet's name (or even at the insult of a piece of brick at a dilapidated mosque), why are they reluctant to follow an authentic guidance from the Prophet? What has happened in the past

can be forgiven, but even in this twentieth century when they are being reminded of women's education again and again, and that our Prophet has made it obligatory to give education to our daughters, why are they still so indifferent to the education of girls?

The current state of education in the country is such that in an average of two hundred girls, not one can read the alphabets. Perhaps it will not be possible to find one properly educated woman in a population of ten thousand women. There are about thirty million Muslims living in Bengal alone. In a letter from the Ministry of Education last January I was asked to compile the names and addresses of all Muslim women having a bachelor's degree and forward it to them immediately. But except for the name of one woman, and those of Mr. Agha Maidul Islam's three daughters, I couldn't send any names from Bengal. Mr. Agha is not a resident of Bengal, so one has to say that there was only one woman with a bachelor's degree in a population of thirty million Muslims. Perhaps after conducting a painstaking search themselves, the inspector of schools for the Presidency and Burdwan districts asked me to search for the Muslim women with a bachelor's degree.

Let me quote a statement from Mr. Sheik Abdullah again: "Those who oppose women's education say that education makes women impertinent and intractable. Shame! They claim themselves to be Muslims, yet violate the fundamental laws of the religion so blatantly. If education doesn't mislead the men, why should it distract the women? How can a community that keeps half of its population ignorant as well as imprisoned in the form of purdah compete in the affairs of life with those who have introduced equal opportunities of education for their women?"

There are ten million beggars in India; of that, the majority are Muslims. So, how can they compete with other people? We too boast of nobility! Begging is the meanest of livelihoods, and Muslims outnumber other groups in this occupation. This is because they have rendered their female population totally useless by depriving them of opportunities to fulfil their physical and mental potentials. As a consequence, the children born of their womb become lazy and unwilling to work. So what else can they do to make their families proud but to beg!

Women have now been given the right to vote, but Muslim women relinquish that right voluntarily. In the last election, only four women had cast their votes in Calcutta. Is that a matter of pride for the Muslims? What other time or opportunity are they waiting for?

As long as the men are reluctant to recognise the rights of women as provided for in the sacred writings, they will not allow education for women. Those who cannot raise their own community, how can they emancipate

the nation? Only a crazy person seeks autonomy for himself by keeping his female-half in bondage. As the altruistic British government cannot suffer the aspirations of the Indians—here I remember Mr. Molly saying twenty-one years ago, "If they cry for the moon, we cannot bring it to them," etcetera—and our non-Muslim neighbours often cannot put up with the rights and claims of the Muslims, so the Muslim men cannot grant any wish of their women to prosper. But God's glory or the law of nature is amazing; He has kept this universe tied in an inseparable bond; we are so intimately connected with one another that we cannot leave anyone behind. As long as the Muslim men pay no heed to the aspirations of their women, the two hundred twenty million other Indians will pay no heed to them; and as long as those two hundred twenty million people ignore the eighty million Muslims in the country, the British government also will not yield to their demands. Some time ago I read in a Grub Street manual:

> Punish me knowing how much of it,
> You yourself can take.

Prophet Jesus (peace be upon him) has said, "Treat others as you would like to be treated." Here I cannot resist the temptation of quoting yet another statement from Mr. Sheik Abdullah. He said, "The purdah system in India is fatal for the women. It is the most painful bruise in our society. Hearing the mention of purdah, our Muslim brothers will perhaps cry out in unison, 'should we then allow our wives to loiter the streets in imitation of the Westerners?' In reply, I want to say, let's discuss it keeping within the bounds of Islamic tradition. It won't be an exaggeration to say that there is nothing similar between the Indian purdah system and the teachings on protecting women's dignity in the scripture."

I do not wish to express any of my own views on the purdah system except to say that I do not agree with Mr. Sheik Abdullah's description of purdah as "the most painful bruise." If it were painful, the women would cry out in agony using impassioned language. The purdah practice can be compared more accurately with the deadly Carbonic acid gas. Because it kills without any pain, people get no opportunity to take precaution against it. Likewise, women in purdah are dying bit by bit in silence from this seclusion "gas," without experiencing any pain.

It is of utmost importance to teach the Qurʾan side by side with the primary education of Muslim girls. By the teaching of the Qurʾan, of course I do not mean a senseless recitation of Arabic alphabets like a parrot. It has to be taught in the various regional languages in translation. Perhaps if the government does not introduce a compulsory law for it, our society will not

allow the girls even to study the Qurʾan. If someone calls a doctor and gets a prescription for illness, but instead of taking the recommended medicine, hangs the script around his neck like an amulet and reads it three times a day, how will that help him? We do not follow the teachings of the Qurʾan, but merely recite it like a parrot and put it away in a high place with ardour, wrapping it in a pouch. Recently, a visiting female scholar from Egypt, Ms. Zakia Suleiman, asked during a lecture at a large gathering of Muslims in Allahabad, "Those who understand the meaning of the Qurʾan please raise your hand." Only three men raised their hands in response. If so few men are versed in the Qurʾan, it's better not to speak of how dire our situation is. It shows that we know little about the values and teachings of the Holy Qurʾan. Whatever the local language in other places may be, what will be the language of Muslims in Calcutta? In running the Sakhawat Memorial School for the last sixteen years, I have come to realise that the Muslims in Bengal have no mother, that is, they have no mother tongue. They consider Urdu as their mother tongue no doubt, but the mangled Urdu that they speak tortures every tissue of the eardrum. Howbeit, we'll have to teach the Qurʾan both in Urdu and Bengali translations. My non-Muslim sisters in the hall, please do not think that I am expressing my bigotry by asking the Qurʾan to be taught as part of our elementary education. I am far from being a dogmatic. The fact of the matter is that whatever values are taught in elementary education can all be found in the Qurʾan. The teaching of the Qurʾan is critical in keeping our religion and community interrelated and intact.

The only reason for all the sorrows and sufferings of Muslims is their apathy towards women's education. The Muslim men think that they can enter heaven by relying on a few graduates from Aligarh University, Dhaka University and the Islamia College in Calcutta, and will be able to carry their wives and sisters stuffed in a handbag while traversing the causeway.[4] But God's plans are otherwise. In His scheme of things, everyone will have to bear the consequence of his or her own actions. Therefore, instead of hoping to enter heaven riding on another's shoulder, women should focus on the education of their daughters. The money they spend on the purchase of

[4] That's why they are reluctant to spend money for the proliferation of women's education. If I ask for a contribution for the girls' school, I am told that Muslims are poor—they have no money. But can one believe that? Those who have donated thousands of rupees voluntarily to the Islamia College, can they be poor? If they would follow the Shariʾah or the teachings of the sacred text, then they would definitely contribute half of whatever amount they gave for the education of boys to schools meant for the education of girls.

jewellery and on dowry during their daughters' weddings—a part of that can be spent on their education and on the care of their health.

Exercise is essential for the maintenance of health, and so is the fresh air. I don't understand why women are so reluctant to enjoying the fresh air, which is available free as one of God's gifts. In winter they secure their doors and windows, and especially their glass panels, in such a way that I wonder why the government doesn't prevent the use of sashes on doors and windows through an enactment of law. For about last five to six years, Dr. Ms. Cohen has been appointed as medical officer for all the girls' schools in Calcutta. When the health report of some of the girls of our school was sent to their parents with the advice, "please consult a doctor immediately," the mothers replied furiously, "I have sent my daughter to school for education, not to determine if she has bad eyesight, brittle teeth, or infection in the throat. If you make such remarks how will we marry our daughter? Stop saying such things, and never send my daughter for medical checkups." Heaven forbid! Here is the daughter struggling for life, and the mother is having sleepless nights worrying about how to get her married. In fact, what more can we expect from an unlettered mother?

The students at our school often fail in subjects such as Geography, History and Health Science because they do not get to see any other place in this world except for their school campus and the private quarters of their own homes, and remain unaware of the rest of the people of the world except for their own father and brothers. Confined in their enclosed rooms, they constantly witness their sickly and suffering mothers and elderly female relatives living their febrile lives. All they know is to call a doctor when someone is sick. The only remedy for such debilitating illnesses is good education.

In conclusion, perhaps it will not be improper to mention Sakhawat Memorial Girls School and Anjuman-i-Khawateen Islam (Muslim Women's Association). Both the institutions have been trying their utmost to improve the lot of Muslim women in Calcutta. Unfortunately, they have not quite succeeded as yet. It is essential to upgrade the school to a high school and find a suitable house for its location, and for Anjuman to become popular among all the Muslim women.

I have taken up much of your time today and would like to wind up here by seeking your kind indulgence for it.

The Hidden Jewel[g]

In the dark pit of the sea,
Many bright gems lie in secret;
Many flowers bloom in the wilderness,
Their beauty depleting and mingling with the wind.

How many of us keep track of the many flowers that blossom in silence in the groves of our solitary zenanas and fade from public view in this wretched Bengal? Many also do not know of the countless shining jewels that lie in well-guarded iron safes in our secluded inner quarters. Today, by alluding to one gem, I want to show that our Muslim community is not utterly indigent; rather, it has many invaluable gems in it.

Mrs. Karimunnesa Khanam

In April 1855, in the village of Pairaband, in Rangpur district [now one of the northern districts of Bangladesh], one such gem (Karimunnesa Khanam) was born in a high-walled residence of Late Maulvi Zahiruddin Mohammad Abu Ali Saber, the most famous zamindar in the area. As per the tradition of the family, she was not allowed to read anything except the Qurʾan, which she could recite like a parrot without the benefit of understanding its teachings. But she didn't get satisfaction from it. Her younger brothers learnt Persian from their tutor and recited in her presence, "Ke be-ilm na-tauwanad khodara shenakhat" [Without education you cannot recognise God].

Then the little Karimunnesa would also memorise those verses with them. Moreover, she would imitate the sounds whenever she heard her brothers reading Bengali—when you add the sign "akar" to the alphabet "kaw" it becomes "kaa;" if you add the sound "e" it becomes "ke;" and if you affix a long "e" it becomes "kee," and so forth. She also learnt to write the Bengali alphabets by drawing marks on the ground in their courtyard.

One day Karimunnesa was reading a Bengali novel secretly:

In the Qurʾan, God has proclaimed,
'Fad khuli fi 'ebadi wad khuli jannati.'[h]

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[g] First published as "Lukano Ratan: Sritikatha" (The Hidden Jewel: Reminiscence), in *Ashar* 1334 (5.1; July 1927) issue of *Sawgat*. This translation is based on the text of the essay in Abdul Quader, ed. *Rokeya Rachanabali* (231–233).

[h] This line is taken from the Surah Al-Fajr (The Dawn), which translates to, "Enter you then among my (righteous) servants/ And enter you my Garden (paradise)" (verses, 29–30).

Suddenly her father walked into the room. Frightened by it, she thought, "I am doomed; I'll have to walk into the jaws of death right now." But no—thanks to Allah! The father didn't get upset seeing a book in his daughter's hands. Rather, he took up the petrified girl in his arms and gave her a good cuddle; he also began teaching her Bengali from that day. Enough! All the orthodox elders in the community got annoyed by it and began grumbling, "O, teaching Bengali to the girl!" Maligned and vilified by their comments, eventually the father put an end to her learning.

Not only that, she was also sent into a "prison" (i.e., confined in her maternal grandmother's house in Baliadi), where they began planning for her marriage. She was married as soon as she turned fourteen years old. But it was a blessing in disguise; she managed to learn Bengali at her in-laws' house in Delduar with the help of a few distant brothers-in-law who were students. She was ever keen to acquire knowledge, and had to endure a lot of humiliation from society for it. But she didn't have to suffer abuse only for her own yearning for knowledge. She became a widow nine years after her marriage, so she had to meet with tribulation and mockery for the education of her two boys, every step of the way.

Knowing that it would be difficult to give her sons a good education in Delduar, Kariumnnesa Khanam moved to Calcutta. She sent her elder son, Haji A.K. Guznavi, to England and admitted her younger son, Mr. Abdul Halim Guznavi, at the St. Xavier's College [in Calcutta]. The cruel punishments that were meted out to her by society for committing such a grievous sin, the abusive language that was used and the many slanders and muckraking spread against her are simply beyond words; it should better be left to the reader's imagination.

Karimunnesa Khanam was a born poet. She wrote many poems on family matters and social issues, but they never saw the light of day. Nowadays we see people who are not familiar with the intricacies of the language hiring ghost writers to write essays and books for them and publish it in their own name. But Mrs. Karimunnesa never published her work in newspapers under her own name, although once in a while she did publish an article or a book under a pseudonym. Most of her work, especially the stacked exercise books containing her poetry, remained hidden in her trunk. About two or three years ago, I persuaded her to send a few poems to a Hindu newspaper, but her name was not included in the publication. After much inducement, I got her to add "By a daughter from the Saber family" as a byline. The editor of the paper wrote in a complimentary letter to me, "The poems by the daughter of the Saber family are excellent. I enjoyed reading them. Please feel free to send me more in future."

She also left no stone unturned to learn the English language, and it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the little she learnt was much more than those who have finished their school education. Here I remember an incident from sixteen years ago. One day she and I were getting the souls of several dead people to write clairvoyant messages by pressing our fingers on a planchette. When she saw my departed maid's soul write her name in English, she said with a laugh, "Now that I see your maid has learnt English after death, I wish to die as well—I'll then be able to learn English easily."[5]

She began to learn Arabic at the age of 67. She wrote to me in a letter, "I get no satisfaction from crooning the Qur'anic verses, I have, therefore, started to learn Arabic." She also knew the Persian language.

If society hadn't kept her throttled, Mrs. Karimunnesa could have become a luminous gem in our country. As an electric bulb grows dim when it is wrapped in layers of fabric, so the woman I am describing also couldn't realise her full potential for the many social obstacles surrounding her. She suffered silently, keeping the fervent desire for knowledge veiled in her soul. She had to endure a lot of social torment because of her quest for knowledge, suffer much humiliation for giving higher education to her two boys, and even experience profuse denigration and calumny for teaching me the Bengali alphabets. Halleluiah to our society! But she never stepped back. She is the one who inspired my interest in literature. As a matter of fact, without her support and the patronage of my beloved husband I would have never dared to write openly for the newspapers. Mrs. Karimunnesa had read an unlimited number of Bengali books and also had numerous Persian ghazals committed to memory.

On the 6th of September 1926, at the age of 71 years and five months, this precious individual died of a heart attack and disappeared from the face of the earth forever. One cannot call her death untimely, yet I feel that we would have benefitted much had she lived for another ten years and given us inspiration in our literary work. I do not enjoy anything anymore, and wonder, who else will read my work now?

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[5] We'll not reflect on the value and reliability of the planchette here.

The Dawn[i]

Wake up, mothers, sisters, daughters; rise, leave your bed and march forward. There, listen, the Muezzin is calling for prayer. Can't you hear that call, that command from God? Don't sleep any more; wake up, the night has ended, it is dawn now; the Muezzin is calling for prayer. Whilst women of the rest of the world have awoken and declared war against all kinds of social injustices—rising to the level of education minister, doctor, philosopher, scientist, defence minister, chief of army, writer, poet and so forth—we, the women of Bengal are still sleeping profoundly on the damp floors of our own homes, where we are being held captives, and dying in thousands as victims of consumption.

We have reserved all the curses for ourselves, and have vowed not to move forward in keeping with the time. We have taken a pledge not to get out of bed even after hearing the call for prayer. But that will not be any more, sisters. Just take a peek through the peephole of your Bastille and see the world outside.

We have been told at birth that we are born as slaves, slaves forever, and will remain slaves. Alas, the poet has moaned:

> Too weak to express my deepest sorrow,
> What sin did I commit to be born a dame?

All the blame is often ascribed on us, considering us dumb and stupid, but we have never protested against such bias because we are voiceless. We are mostly treated like animals and yet we seem to take pride in that.

Recently, our Masters have been treating us like expensive jewellery. That's why we see many types of "women's watch associations" being formed everywhere. Really, since we are like living luggage, it's important to have vigilant watchmen so that we don't get stolen. My dear luckless sisters, don't you feel humiliated by this? If you do, how do you endure such a terrible insult silently?

Take a look at yourself—we are equated with animals. That's why we see offices of "associations for the alleviation of animals' suffering" side by side with "women's watch associations." What could be a worse humiliation than this? Anyway, this abuse must stop now.

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[i] First published as "Subho Sadeq" (The Dawn) in *Ashar-Shraban* 1337 (July–August 1930) issue of the quarterly magazine, *Muazzein* (Ed. Syed Abdur Rab). This translation is based on the text of the essay in Abdul Quader, ed. *Rokeya Rachanabali* (241–242).

Sisters, wake up, open your eyes wide, and march forward. Say, mother, pounding your chest, we are not animals! Say, sister, we are not property! Say, daughter, we are not items of ornament to be enclosed in an iron safe. Say, all in unison, we are humans! And show with your actions that we are half of the best of God's creation, and in reality, we are the mothers of the created world. Form your own associations to protect your rights and privileges.

The spread of education is the only remedy for such tyranny. Girls should be given at least primary education. By education, I mean wholesome education; the skill to read a few books or write a few lines of verse is not true education. I want that education which will enable them to earn their rights as citizens; that which will make them into ideal daughters, sisters, wives and mothers. Education should cultivate both the body and mind. They should know that they have not come into the world merely to decorate themselves as beautiful dolls by wearing attractive saris, clips and expensive ornaments; instead, they have been born as women to fulfil a specific duty in life. Their lives are not meant to be thrown away just to gratify their husband-lords. They shouldn't depend on anyone for their basic necessities like food and clothing.

For physical training, the best idea is to teach everyone stick fighting, sword playing, husking rice with a husking pedal, grinding flour on a millstone and all other kinds of household work. Husking rice and grinding flour will help to meet the food shortage in the country. Nowadays, many people are dying for lack of rice and flour. These are much better ways of exercising than merely frisking around or dancing. Morning walk in an open space is also very good. The government is now giving attention to the protection of children, which is a good idea, but we need to protect the mothers first.

Anyhow, mothers, sisters, daughters, do not sleep any more; wake up, and march forward to accomplish your life's mission.

In a Land of Seven Hundred Schools[j]

In the Bengal Presidency, there is one such district, where there are not one, not two, but seven hundred schools. The zamindar of one of the villages in that area came up with the idea of setting up an English medium school for

[j] First published as "Satsho School-er Desh-e" (In a Land of Seven Hundred Schools) in the *Karttik* 1337 (November 1930) issue of the monthly magazine, *Sawgat*. This translation is based on the text of the essay in Abdul Quader, ed. *Rokeya Rachanabali* (243–246).

girls in the village. Setting up a school was easy but running it was not so, especially for girls who were accustomed to purdah.

The zamindar eventually decided that he would marry his eldest son to an educated woman. That daughter-in-law would look after the school. Accordingly, his son was married with a lot of fanfare. The bride's name is, let's say, Saleha Khatun. When Saleha came to her in-laws' house, she found that no one would speak with her—her mother-in-law, younger sister-in-law and everyone else was uncomfortable in her presence. Women from the neighbourhood came to visit her and whispered with one another. Everyone came to see the bride—as if she were an extraordinary item of display in a museum; so the women came and went the whole day with their children, to take a glimpse at the bride. But no one ever spoke with her, because Saleha had a threefold shortcoming: First, she was a Calcutta girl; second, her father was a magistrate; third, she had attended the Sakhawat Memorial School for Girls and finished her middle school education there. Moreover, while at school, she sat for the Calcutta Girls Scholarship Examination and won a stipend of 28, 000 rupees from the government. She also obtained a diploma in First Aid and Home Nursing, and won an award from the National Indian Association for her perfect needlework.

Everyone knew about these things. That's why she was dubbed "erudite wife" at her in-laws' house. Even the father-in-law had cautioned his wife in private not to say anything silly to the "erudite wife" and make herself a laughing-stock. He himself also spoke with his daughter-in-law in a measured way. As a result, though the unfortunate Saleha spent the whole day surrounded by a throng of people, she was always lonely.

Saleha's husband gradually came to realise this. One day he got hold of his younger sister and asked her why she didn't speak with her sister-in-law or spend some time with her. In a tearful reply, the girl said that her sister-in-law was always surrounded by a drove of people as if in a marketplace; how could she speak intimately to her in the presence of so many villagers (being herself a maiden)? Besides, her elders had advised her not to speak with her "erudite bhabi" as she herself was not literate.

One day, a munsiff's wife spoke a few words with Saleha and then suddenly fell silent. Embarrassed, she whispered to her timidly, "Please forgive me. I am an illiterate person. I don't know what I just said to you. My husband has instructed me not to speak with you, because you are educated and we lack manners."

After a few months, Saleha's father-in-law began pushing her to start a school in the neighbourhood with girls from all the respectable families in the village. But everyone was horrified to hear this—"O dear! What does the

'erudite wife' say! Books and scriptures are holy, and we are low-grade, vulgar women; what are we good for? Women are unclean; how can they touch the holy Qurʾan?" When Saleha brought this to the attention of her father-in-law, he said, "Okay, then, leave the middle class aside for the moment and teach everyone in the poorer section of the community how to pray. No one will complain about prayer."

The prayer lessons began. Saleha's mother-in-law also helped her in it. She explained to the elderly that they had one foot in the grave and must pray regularly, because:

> One who doesn't pray, has no faith, is a disbeliever,
> And will be punished mercilessly on the day of judgement.

They all agreed to learn how to pray. Saleha gathered everyone and explained the process of prayer to them, and asked them to memorise the different verses from the Qurʾan to be used for it.

One day, at the time for evening prayer, Saleha reminded everyone of the steps of the prayer and the Quranic verses to be recited, and then left to make her own prayer. As soon as she finished, her younger sister-in-law ran to her and said, "Bhabi, come and see—Kala's mother is lying on the bed and reciting, pointing her legs towards the ceiling, 'Praise be to Allah, my legs are about to touch the roof.' "[k] Saleha went with her and began listening to everyone's recitations standing outside the house. They were all reading out different gibberish aloud in various tones and rhythms. Saleha became furious and explained the matter to her mother-in-law in tears.

The mother-in-law came and, hearing their blubbering with her own ears, scolded them, "Oh, you, vile, shameless creatures! You are full of sins! Get out of here! You are not fit for prayer."

One of the elderly women (that same Kala's mother) ventured, "Madam, why do you shoo us away like animals? It matters little to us if we don't pray. Kala's father will go for hajj soon. We are followers of an acclaimed pir [saint]; we fast on the Ashura day (10th of Muharram) in Fatema's name, and offer beverages in remembrance of God's grandchildren.[l] Let's see who can do more virtuous deeds than us?" Saleha's mother-in-law exclaimed in horror, "God forbid! Pardon us, Allah," and locked her ears. The village women began to mutter in anger and scuttled out.

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[k] "Alhamdulliah" means "Praise be to Allah." However, in her prayer the woman disfigures it to "Alhamdu Aleh," which doesn't necessarily have any meaning.

[l] The reference in fact is to the Prophet's grandchildren, Hassan and Hussain, but the speaker ignorantly mentions God instead of the prophet.

A week later, the village women came to collect donations from Saleha. Asked why they were asking for a donation, they replied that there was pox in the village, so they would have to give offerings to the pox-goddess Shitala.[m] Sahela tried to explain to them politely that it was not good to get into such infidelity and heresy, and advised them to take the pox vaccine. They said, "Oh, since you are from Calcutta and have read a few books, you think you know everything. But, in fact, you know nothing. Even Allah Himself is afraid of goddess Shitala because she has given several pock marks on His body." Saleha sealed her ears with her fingers and said, "Save me, God, I don't want to hear this nonsense."

Another elderly woman said to Saleha calmly, "Erudite-wife, if you don't mind, let me ask you a question. People say, 'God and His messenger,' but aren't they one and the same?" Saleha explained the differences to her, got her to recite the basic article of faith in Islam [kalema shahadah] and spelled out its meaning to her. She then added, "Promise that from now on you'll not fast in the name of Fatema, or describe Hazrat Imam Hassan and Hussain as God's grandsons." In reply, one of the women said, "Our Prophet is a friend of God, aren't his grandsons God's grandsons too?"

Kala's mother said, "Look, erudite-wife, this is why we didn't speak with you earlier. Kala's father had warned me that you have studied English; therefore, talking to you would defile my faith. Bibi Fatema had asked her father's friend [God] to let her have the first ten days of Muharram. She said, 'Uncle, let the rest of the year be with you, but allow me to have the first ten days of Muharram.' Our Pir Saheb has said that reading or knowing the meaning of the Qurʾan is sinful; it tarnishes one's faith. And you, erudite-wife, you have marred our faith by telling us the meaning of the kalema now. You have read a bit of English but, disgracefully, you are a humbug when it comes to our religion. I advise you to ask for God's forgiveness and become a follower of our Pir Saheb from today—and never read English again, or the translation of the Qurʾan."

Saleha realised that her father-in-law's hope of opening an English medium school was a mere daydream.

She wanted to see if it was possible to attract the attention of the "virtuous" women of the village through sewing and other needlework. She would deliberately begin to knit or sew in the presence of young girls and women of the village, and make petticoats and blouses on her own. The women gazed

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[m] Shitala is the goddess of smallpox in Hindu tradition and worshipped widely in different parts of the subcontinent.

at her with awe and mumbled at each other. One day, one of them took heart and asked, "Well, erudite-wife, we notice that you cut bales of fabric into small pieces and then patch them together—how is that of any good? Why do you cut a whole piece into pieces and why do you patch them together again?"

Saleha explained to them, "It's a shame that you don't wear any undergarment; you should at least wear a chemise under the sari. If you bring your fabric, I'll show you how to make it into an article of clothing."

A few days later, women of some of the relatively well-off families brought along a few blouses, petticoats and frocks and, showing them to Saleha, said, "Our men say, these readymade garments are already available in the market, so what's the point of going through so much effort? Doesn't our erudite-wife know that these items can be bought in the marketplace?" Saleha became frustrated and gave up hope; there was no way to change these people. And the idea of opening an English medium school remained a pie in the sky for the moment.

One day Saleha's mother-in-law was seaming a diapered bedcover. When she took a break from work, Saleha began to stitch it. Her objective was to occupy herself and also to help her mother-in-law; she was an old woman and sewing no longer came easily to her, so Saleha began to sew the bedcover herself. A moment later, as she lifted her head, she saw that women from the village had gathered in flocks and were glibly lauding her work. They were saying to one another, "See, sister, erudite-wife has many virtues; she can also make a diapered bedcover."

One of them added, "Yes, we never knew about her many qualities. We say, a magistrate's daughter from Calcutta, what would she know! Come, come, everyone, have a look. Erudite-wife knows also how to make a bedcover." Saleha's mother-in-law came running, hearing the noise and thinking that there was some problem. When she saw the matter, swelling in joy and pride, she said, "Of course, she knows! She won a sewing competition. Everyone said my daughter-in-law is full of baloney. Now you see how fine her stitches are. She sews better than me!"

The Mysteries of Love[a]

The poet says that human beings love whatever is beautiful and attractive. That is why we love the moon so passionately in childhood. Children love flowers because they are beautiful. It is because of this that the leading female characters in all the novels are bound to be beautiful; otherwise they couldn't delight the eyes and, consequently, win the hearts of the readers.

But what if someone breaks that law and loves something unattractive and ugly? Would he or she be punishable to death by the tribunal of poetry? If so, let it be! A lover is never afraid to give up his or her life.

What is love? Even great philosophers have failed to divine its mystery, so who am I to talk about it? But having reached the last leg of life, I can say that what I have come to know about love, from the many experiences in my last sixty years, is that it is an impenetrable mystery. Whoever shows understanding of love, his or her opinion is no better informed than that of a blind man touching an elephant. At least, that is what I think.

Perhaps a few examples from my own life won't be out of place here. I have loved people of all religions—Hindu, Christian, Muslim, but why, I am not sure of it myself.

I once lived with my eldest sister in Orissa for a few months. It was many years ago, and I went there for a change of weather to help me recover from an illness. The people of Orissa are usually timid, and no one ever came to visit us (especially when my brother-in-law was home). With the exception of one person of course! There is no place a lover wouldn't tread; he or she will cross mountains, travel across a turbulent ocean without a skiff and all else. Visiting a deputy magistrate's house was not such a big deal after all.

Every morning as I walked on to the veranda, I saw a girl looking at our house with eager eyes. I used to keep busy with my work, but whenever I returned to the veranda I saw those two eyes fixed towards me.

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[a] First published in the *Shraban* 1311 (1.12; August 1904) issue of the monthly magazine, *Bharat Mahila* (Ed. Sarjubala Dutta). This translation is based on the text of the story in Abdul Quader, ed. *Rokeya Rachanabali* (429–434).

After my brother-in-law left for the office, my sister and I usually engaged in some weaving or stitching work in our spare time at noon, or my sister would fall asleep on the bed in the midst of chatting and I would take up a book and become absorbed in its imaginary poetic realms, forgetting the world outside. If I ever raised my head unmindfully, I would see Champa (that girl) standing by the window and gazing at me.

One day I asked her out of curiosity, "Why do you come here?"

Looking down, Champa said with a faint smile, "to see you." Then she flustered and kept looking at me timidly. I laughed and the girl ran away. Needless to say that I was thrilled at hearing Champa's words and even felt a tinge of pride knowing that she came every day only to see me. Perhaps the human heart is ever a beggar for love; therefore, receiving this unexpected attention (although I had no shortage of caring relatives) made me feel euphoric and excited like a destitute coming upon a treasure.

Sometimes I saw the maids and the servants scolding Champa, "Why do you come here every day?" She would reply apologetically, "to catch a glimpse of her." One day the maid asked Champa in an extremely harsh tone to move away from me. She left immediately, and I felt devastated. When I rebuked the maid for being so rude, she replied, "Oh, she is an untouchable, we are not allowed any contact with her." The maid had to bathe if she ever accidentally stepped on to Champa's shadow. But I couldn't get rid of Champa from my heart just because she was an untouchable, an outcast. She was not pretty looking—rather dark brown and unattractive in appearance, to be truthful, yet I felt happy every time I saw her.

Didi's [Elder Sister's] family often used to make fun of this innocent, immaculate love between us. One of Didi's elderly sisters-in-law lived with her; she also used to tease us a lot. She would say jestingly, referring to me, "Tahera is enjoying a second honeymoon." I was in the seventh year of my marriage at that time.

Happy days are fleeting. On a Sunday, Dulabhai (I used to call my brother-in-law Dulabhai from childhood) came and sat in our room. Seeing all three of us, i.e. Didi, her sister-in-law and myself, busy knitting, he said, "I should also do something."

Didi replied in a flash, "Excuse me, please, don't touch our sewing stuff."

Dulabhai said, "Why, am I any less capable than you? Just because I was called a 'Yahoo' the other day, does it mean I have really become a Yahoo?"

Didi's sister-in-law commented, "Jonathan Swift's imagination is so strange. In the land of Houyhnhnms, the horses rule and men drive their carriages. God! There is no limit to imagination."

Didi replied, "What is so surprising about horses ruling over men? Something more absurd has been happening in our real world since the beginning."

Dulabhai: "Indeed! What is that absurd thing?"

Didi: "That absurd thing is that men have been ruling the world for ever, while women, the best of creation, have been slaving for them."

Unable to find an answer readily, Dulabhai glared at Didi, and we all burst out in laughter.

"I won't touch your things, let me do my own work," said Dulabhai and took out a cigar from his pocket. Smoking was of course some hard work!

Puffing his cigar, Dulabhai looked out of the window and saw Champa. He asked curiously, "Hello girl, what's your name?" Immediately Champa ran away, and Didi chastened him, "Ah, why did you chase the girl away, she is Tahera's friend!"

This created a roar of laughter. Dulabhai even expressed regret for my husband, considering him as one deserving of sympathy.

Champa didn't come the next day. "Magistrate Babu" (Dulabhai always objected to the honorific "Babu," but the villagers were insistent on it. If they were asked to call him "Saheb," they would address him as "Saheb-Babu"[b]) himself had enquired after her name, and that was her main reason for fear. I kept suffering an inexplicable pain the whole day for being unable to see Champa. The girl didn't come on the second or third day either. I looked out of the window from time to time despondently, and every time I found the place where Champa would stand empty.

In the afternoon, Didi was making tea for Dulabhai. As she began to pour the tea, her seven-month-old boy started screaming. I noticed that the boy had absolute control over Didi, so she asked me to serve the tea and went to comfort the boy.

Taking a sip of the tea, Dulabhai said, "Tahera, where is your mind today?" I felt a bit embarrassed, but before I could say anything Dulabhai's sister asked, "Why?"

Dulabhai replied, "She forgot to put sugar in the tea."

Dulabhai's sister said, "Tahera has been distressed for the last few days over Champa's absence."

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[b] It is customary in both West Bengal and Bangladesh to affix the title "Babu" to the name of a Hindu gentleman, while the title of courtesy "Saheb" is used for a Muslim gentleman. The fact that the villagers insist addressing the narrator's brother-in-law, who is a Muslim, as "Babu," signifies that it was largely a Hindu locality.

Dulabhai answered, "You know, Apa [Elder Sister],[c] it's hard to know if Tahera is distressed because she has been missing Champa or because there was no letter from the Barrister Saheb [Tahera's husband] in today's mail."

I walked out of the room instantly.

Eventually, I failed to restrain myself and sent for Champa in the evening. She and her mother arrived in a moment and started howling at my feet. "Champa is a child," her mother cried. I was shocked to see the whole thing; why was her mother crying because Champa was a child? Then I realised that they were frightened by the fact that "Magistrate Babu" himself had asked for Champa's name. These people were as timid as they were simplistic.

I once even loved an English girl. She was white, I was dark—in a word, there was a huge gulf between us; their Christmas season is somewhat like our beautiful spring, but while we love to sit on a roof and enjoy the verdant smell of freshly blossomed Jasmine, they like to spend the December winter sitting near a fireplace and enjoy its radiant heat. Yet we developed a candid love for each other in our hearts. Ms. D also used to acknowledge it.

I felt miserable when Ms. D left. I went up to the station to bid her a final farewell, heard the train's whistle before its departure sitting at the waiting room, even heard the train moving—it felt as though the train went away running over my own heart. Since then, the breadth of a vast ocean has remained between me and Ms. D.

Let me ask again, what kind of a love is this? This is not the time and place to relate all my experiences of love, but let me conclude by narrating just one more incident.

I lived for a few years with my husband in a province in the north of India. I came to know all the neighbouring women within a short period, and developed a profound attachment for one of the elderly Muslim women. She too returned my love with double the enthusiasm. We had nothing in common except our religion. For example, she was born in the north, while I was born in Bengal. She was older than me by thirty years, yet like two childhood companions we became one and indivisible.

God doesn't tolerate excessive human love; hence my revered friend fell ill within a short period and I volunteered myself as her nurse. From now on, I'll call her "my patient."

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[c] Both "Didi" and "Apa" mean "Elder Sister." However, it is customary for the Bengali Hindus to use "Didi" more frequently, while the Bengali Muslims prefer "Apa." It should be noted that the narrator, although a Muslim, addresses her sister as "Didi," which is an indication of how the line between culture and religion has always been fluid among the Bengali people.

This was the first time I had minded a sick person (other than my own family members), and I never knew that there could be so much joy in taking care of another individual. Nothing in this world is permanent; my happiness also came to an end in the blink of an eye, before I could savour it to my heart's content.

I brought rose buds, perfumes, rose waters and many such fragrant items as well as pomegranates, oranges and other inanimate objects embodying my true love as gifts for my patient. I was obsessed with the thought of what might please her, what she might like. It was as if to make her happy was the sole duty and purpose of my life. My joy knew no bounds if I saw a little smile on her pallid lips.

And what about my patient? As soon as it got dark (I used to visit her at one o'clock in the afternoon and in the evening every day), she would get the seat by her bed ready and wait for me eagerly. She would find relief the moment she saw me. Even when she lay with eyes shut from excessive weakness and fatigue, she would open her eyes as soon as she heard me arrive. Those two lustreless eyes would glow with the fervour of happiness.

My patient would childishly insist that she wouldn't take the medicine. But if I brought the medicine to her myself, a smile would spread on her lips; with a false irritation she would say, "You have come to pester me," and take the medicine instantly. The medicine that was unpleasant when prepared by other hands became tasty with my touch. Such is the amazing power of love.

Even in that dying state, my patient would entreat me to sit down whenever she saw me. If I greeted her with Namaskar,[d] she would bless me to her heart's content. I would tell her stories to divert her mind from her pain and sufferings, and she would listen to them intently. She loved music very much, so I used to sing Urdu ghazals (poetic lyrics) for her, and most of them were according to her own choice.

One day I felt very disappointed at the sight of my patient. She seemed beyond any hopes of recovery. Sitting by her bed, I thought about the transitory nature of life, that it was the last day of spring and with the parting of spring my patient was also about to bid her final farewell. The sun, moon, stars—they all remain; only the beauty of spring comes to an end. I could hear an exchange between the poet and nature in my inner ear:

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[d] It is interesting that the narrator uses Hindu salutation here, although both she and the other character she describes as her patient are Muslims.

I asked (nature), "Where is that
Beauty and that prodigal youth of yours?"
Laughing, she replied, "That was not me, my friend,
It was an expression of God's majesty."

The spring will return, only my patient will never come back again.

Right at that time, my patient asked, "'Even the mark of your grave is about to wither'—can you sing this ghazal, Tahera?"

I was stunned. How did she know about my thoughts? Anyway, instead of the words of hope, now I had to sing a song of despondence to the patient, "(In a few days) even the mark of your grave will disappear." Singing a death-song by the bed of one who would die soon, if not right away, was also utterly rude. Hesitantly I said, "I don't have that song memorised." She then handed over a book of ghazal to me and said, "Okay, then you sing this one, 'There is no trace of the grave of Alexander or Dara[e]/ The memorabilia of vain kings have all disappeared.'"

I found myself in a difficult situation as it was a similar kind of song. In the end, I had to honour the patient's request, but my heart wavered as I sang:

Many have been trampled by the pain of death,
Many illustrious men lie consumed in the lap of earth.

I thought we would continue to carry on for a while longer. But no …

It was a Wednesday evening. My patient didn't open her eyes to greet me, didn't even ask me to sit down. I called out to her faintly but she didn't respond. This neglect broke my heart. I somehow restrained my tears for fear that her family would be alarmed if they saw me crying. Only those who have gone through a similar experience would know how difficult it is to hold back one's tears in a situation like that.

I began to stroke her hair gently, when suddenly (from the touch of my fingers) she opened her eyes and said in an indistinct voice, "Sister, I feel extremely exhausted today." The way the word "sister" was uttered, with intense affection, would remain unforgettable to anyone who heard it once.

Thursday night. My patient's body became cold. I tried in vain to warm up her two listless hands—her soul had disappeared before my very eyes before I could realise it.

The more we discuss of love, the more incomprehensible it seems. A lover's heart is soft like jelly, but also hard like rock. Sometimes we see love very

[e] Reference to Dara Shikoh, the eldest son and the heir apparent of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan.

firm but other times weak. It dwells in a child's heart, but in the heart of the elderly too—it transforms with the individual's age. Is love like a heavenly tree that continues to grow with leaves and branches in our heart? Or is it like the language of music that creates various ripples in our hearts with its varied notes? Whatever it is, it is not possible to know the true nature of love. All we know is that love is infinite; its mysteries are unfathomable.

Three Lazy Men[f]

In childhood, I heard a story that once there was a king who had three lazy men living in his palace. They spent the whole day lounging without lifting a finger. If anyone took heart and brought some food for them from the king's gruel-kitchen, they would eat it lying down. In this way they somehow continued to survive, living their listless existence. In a few days, the rest of the servants at the palace thought, "Er, this is interesting! These lazy men do nothing and yet they get their food twice a day, so why should we work so hard? Let's also be lazy, starting from today." With that, they all flopped on to the ground.

The king realised that this was a big headache. Now the palace was full of inactive men. How was he going to feed so many lazy men, and who was going to cook for them anyway? They were all lying indolent. He then called the minister and asked for advice. The Minister said, "Yes, I notice that no one is even dusting my seat (no one ever cleaned the king's throne, but the minister's servants were afraid of him now and then). Okay, Your Royal Highness, please do not worry about it, I am going to sort it out right away."

The minister then instructed one of his pet servants, "Set that hut on fire." Instantly the house was ablaze. All the lazy men sleeping there got up in a hurry and ran for their lives. Only the three original lazy men refused to get up. When the flame began to erupt furiously close to their heads, overwhelmed by the heat they began to mutter to one another:

> First Lazy Man: See, how fierce the sun is today!
> Second Lazy Man: You want me to open my eyes?
> Third Lazy Man: Don't talk rubbish to create fear.

At last, when the king realised that these were the real lazy men and would burn inside the hut if not rescued, he asked his men to take them out for

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[f] First published in the annual edition of *Sawgat* (Ed. Mohammad Nasiruddin) in 1333 (1927). This translation is based on the text of the story in Abdul Quader, ed. *Rokeya Rachanabali* (434–436).

safety. His sepoys and armed guards dragged the men out of the hut and put them by a safe roadside.

We are told that there are close to 27 million Muslims living in Bengal. They are like those three lazy men—they don't want to move or do any work, but only sleep like the mythical Kumvakarna, Ravana's famous younger brother in the *Ramayana*, who slept for six months at a time. Last April, when a vicious riot rocked the whole of Bengal, all the spurious lazy men shook off their lethargy and put their energy into advancing their fortune, but only we, the 27 million Muslims continued to sleep as before, turning on our sides. Some "sir" would get us a job or two, some tycoon would donate some money from his charity fund—and with that, somehow, our days would pass. Then, when this temporal life was over, of course heaven was there waiting for us. Who else would be there except us? Why should anyone care for this life that was so short? Once we somehow crossed this river of life, there would be the eternal paradise and any number of huris for us.

On the last 29th November, a woman from Bombay came to visit our school. After dilly-dallying for a moment, she said, "Please forgive me for saying this, but there is no more useless and dishonest people than you Bengali Muslims. The Mutwallis (supervisors) of waqaf (charitable grants for religious service) funds pilfer all the money. Only during the last election, a fat Mutwalli bought ten thousand rupees worth of wine for himself and his friends."

I said, "If you say that, allow me also to say a few words about the people of Bombay. The way Shet Chotani misappropriated 1.6 million rupees from the Khilafat fund ...."

The Bombay woman stopped me halfway, and the way she explained, taking Shet Saheb's side, I concluded from there that Shet Saheb had squandered the money on a whim and somewhat helplessly. After that she excused herself and began to insult me most flagrantly.

She said, "You see, I don't want to boast about my own community, but let me highlight a few facts. How many establishments—rest houses, hospitals, etcetera—are owned by the Bengali Muslims in this huge Calcutta city? Whatever is there in the city belongs to the merchants from Delhi and Bombay. Even the largest mosque where His Highness, the Governor of Bengal, goes for prayer, doesn't belong to the Bengalis. Perhaps even ten orphanages wouldn't ameliorate the plights of all the indigent in the city, but the only one that there is, is also managed by the people from Bombay. What a shame! In the whole of Calcutta, there is not a single school for the Muslim girls where they can get their education in the Bengali medium. Think of

your own school—it has been there for sixteen years, but so far you have been able neither to upgrade it to a high school nor to open a hostel for girls."[1]

I said, "Here all the girls are taken out of school by their parents when they begin to grow up, for the sake of purdah. Who will study in a high school?"

The woman from Bombay replied furiously, "Please, don't say that. Girls are going to all kinds of convent schools and destroying the true image of the religion. Only about two years ago, a girl from your village, unable to find lodging in a Muslim house or in a boarding house, eventually passed her B.A. examination from the Bethune College, with much hardship and in a miserable condition. And about purdah … we maintain a lot of purdah in Bombay. Rather, *you* don't have it. Sitting sequestered within four walls, deprived of all the rights, isn't the true purdah. Do you ever read the Qur'an? Or do you just make amulets with its smaller version and hang it round your neck?"

In short, I was seriously hurt by that Bombay woman's harsh words. But I am not sure if they will have any impact on the nearly 27 million endemically lazy Bengali Muslims.

Marriage-Crazy Old Men[g]

Some say that when the Sarda Act[h] was passed, the British Indian parliament was also supposed to consider another bill on the prohibition of marrying minor girls to old men. No one knows if there would have been resistance in the name of Shari'ah if such a measure were approved in the legislative assembly. Today I'll recount the stories of a few marriage-crazy old men for my female readers. I believe they will not be able to hold back their tears while reading them.[2]

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[1] As per the rules, it would be possible to open a Bengali section at the Sakhawat Memorial School if we had forty students showing interest in it.

[2] The story is based on real incidents.

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[g] The story was first published in the *Paush* 1337 (January 1931) issue of the monthly magazine *Mohammadi* (Ed. Mohammad Akram Khan). This translation is based on the text of the story in Abdul Quader, ed. *Rokeya Rachanabali* (447–451).

[h] Child Marriage Restraint Act passed in the British India Legislature on 28 September 1929, which fixed the age of marriage for girls to 14 years and boys to 18 years. It is popularly known as the Sarda Act after its sponsor Rai Saheb Harbilas Sarda.

I

A seventy-year-old man in a village in East Bengal wanted to marry for the eighth time after successfully sending his seven wives to the other world. The village mischiefs spread a gossip that the old man was a wife-gobbler, so no one wanted to offer their daughters to him as a bride. Although old, the influential septuagenarian's hair was glossy and black; he looked quite spruce and handsome with his beard turned black as a bumble bee with the use of hair dye. He had plenty of money too. His wardrobes were filled with all kinds of outfits, yet no scoundrel would marry his daughter to him.

At last, a few village youths took sympathy in the matter and after sifting through all avenues, identified a prospective bride and informed the old man that they couldn't find a virgin but that, there was a child-widow. She was a bit grown up, twenty-two or twenty-three years old, with a tall and robust body. The old man thought for an instant and said, "Okay, that sounds fine. Since there are no virgins around, what else can we do?"

The match-makers said, "She is a widow no doubt, but she was married at the age of five and became a widow after only six months. Since then she has been wasting her parents' provisions. Now her guardians want to give her in marriage. If you don't like the proposal, let's call it off."

The old man replied promptly and enthusiastically, "No, no, we can't cancel this proposal. It's good that she is a bit matured, she'll be able to look after the household better."

In time, the old man arrived at the wedding ceremony dressed as a groom. The occasion was being observed with a lot of festivities. The match-makers had taken loads of money from him to make the wedding into a grand pageantry.

A distant maternal grandmother of the bride and a gang of youths from the village were present at the wedding to ensure the various rites; this observance, that observance—their formalities never seemed to end. The youngsters were sniggering and whispering with the old woman and acting according to her advice. The groom was sitting facing a thick red curtain and suppressed laughter of women could be heard from the other side. The groom was intently waiting for the solemn moment of "auspicious sight"[i] and was heaping abuse in his mind on the village customs and conventions for the delay. He could hear the jangling sound of jewellery coming from the

[i] Also known as "darshan," it is a solemn rite of the bride and bridegroom to look at each other in a mirror in an Indian wedding, Hindu or Muslim.

bride sitting beside him and glanced at her with hankering eyes. The bride's body was fully draped in a heavy benarasi sari and only a fat, long braid of hair rolled with gold thread was visible through a finely crinkled modesty scarf. The plait of hair came down her back and touched the floor carpet. The old man felt happy that if nothing, his wife was the queen of mane. Who else had such long hair in the village?

After a long, excruciating wait, the mirror came; it was time for the "auspicious sight." While lifting the bride's veil, the subdued laugh from behind the curtain turned into a cackle. The old man was baffled; he saw the bride's face covered all over with bushy hair. The "bride" began to giggle, and took out the wig from his head and placed it before the groom. The confounded groom then saw that the bearded bride was one of his distant grandsons, Kalumia. With a radiant smile, the bride said, "Nanabhai [Grandpa], finally you chose to marry me." Not knowing what to say in his fury, the venerable old man uttered faintly, "I never knew you could be so silly." He then lifted the beautiful plait rolled with gold thread and threw it to the ground in violent rage and dashed out of the place.

II

A sixty-five or seventy-year-old Kazi Saheb in Patna [Bihar] wanted to marry again after the successive death of several of his wives. Because he too was dubbed a "wife-gobbler," he was finding it difficult to land a new bride. No pretty woman fell into the snare of his henna-dyed reddish-orange beard.

In the end, a few elderly men decided to act as a match-maker for Kazi Saheb. It was challenging to get a decent bride as all the nubile girls in town were already married. Therefore, at the cost of a huge sum of money, someone's ten year old girl was arranged. The bride's family had to be treated to feasts over six or seven months, and their servants had to be paid a lot of baksheesh.

After many such extravagant expenses and deeds, the date for the wedding was set on an auspicious day. The groom was brought to the site of the wedding in due time. At this wedding too there were many observances—this rite, that rite; all kinds of female customs—and by the time they ended and the moment for "auspicious sight" arrived, night had become dawn. The groom noticed with joy that various tinsel decorations were patched onto the child-bride's forehead, and her checks were glowing with the use of glittering golden powder on them. Oh, how alluring she was! The bride's appeal was overflowing! As per the tradition in Patna, a Miriasin[3] was carrying

[3] Miriasins are a type of female singers. They do not sing or play music in the congrega-

the bride in her arms to the bridal chamber, and a corner of her benarasi shawl was tied to one of the front hems of the groom's sherwani. The groom moved along with the bride, slowly holding that knot.

Suddenly the bride jumped out of the Miriasin's hands and began to run. The poor Kazi Saheb was holding the knot made with the bride's shawl, so he had no choice but to run as well. The route for the dash was determined earlier, and the bride ran through the course with her bangles and anklets making loud jingling sounds—round the pond, where the cowherds began to follow them, clapping their hands. The bride then ran into the garden, where they were greeted by the gardeners with a guffaw. Next, the bride went to the guard house, where the musicians were singing in accompaniment with the tabla and sarongo [a stringed instrument]. They applauded and sang loudly, "Greetings to you, the running bride! Hail to thee, oh running bride."

After running around in all directions for a while, the bride entered the lounge. Many distinguished visitors were sitting there. They were extremely amused, laughing their heads off. The bride took out her jewellery piece by piece, standing before them. When she removed her benarasi sari and the shawl, everyone saw that she was indeed a boy. Dear, oh Kazi Saheb!

III

A former station master of Bhagalpur [Bihar] expressed the desire to marry a fifth time in spite of having adult grandchildren at home. He was now retired and living in Muzaffarpur. Because he had lived in Bhagalpur for many years, people there knew him well and loved to call him "Station Master."

The station master, alias Khan Saheb, had lots of ancestral property in Muzaffarpur. His family lived there. When he lost his first wife the children were still very small, so he had to marry a second time for the purpose of bringing them up.

When Khan Saheb's second wife passed away, the girls were married off but the boys were still unmarried, so he had no choice but to take a third wife to greet and entertain kinsmen and relatives at the time of their wedding.

When Khan Saheb's house was full of sons-in-law, daughters-in-law and grandchildren from both his sons and daughters, his third wife breathed her last. This time his friends advised, "In a year or two you'll get your grandson married and bring his bride home, it is better for you not to marry

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tion of men. They sing and dance only in the female quarters and help in the observance of rituals at weddings and other ceremonial occasions.

again." But Khan Saheb replied, "Who'll take care of the household? The eldest daughter-in-law, the second daughter-in-law, the third daughter-in-law and the youngest daughter-in-law have all become mothers of three or four children no doubt, yet they are young and inexperienced. Who will manage the huge family?" Unable to get the sympathy of his friends, he secretly married a twelve-year-old girl and brought her home. His daughters-in-law were all visiting their parents at the time and there was no one in the house.

On returning back, the daughters-in-law saw that they had a new mother-in-law. The mother-in-law bolted the door as soon as she saw them. The daughters-in-law kept eavesdropping, and the moment she opened the door the third daughter-in-law lifted her, carried her to the veranda and placed her on a small rectangular bedstead. The kids in the family gathered around her to see the bride, some calling her "dulain dadi" [bride paternal grandmother], others "dulain nani" [bride maternal grandmother].

It turned out that the fourth wife didn't take care of the household at all and spent all her time playing and gossiping with the grandchildren. That's why Khan Saheb was left with no other choice but to marry a fifth time, and he received a lot of encouragement and support from the people when he was unable to make any headway in this regard in the lousy Muzaffarpur.

In due course, Khan Saheb got married. The rite of "auspicious sight" also took place. But the moment the bride was taken to the bride-chamber she fainted. Women came and encircled her to inquire after her wellbeing and so Khan Saheb felt obliged to step out of the room.

After living at his in-laws' house for a few days, Khan Saheb rented a place nearby. In the meantime, he couldn't see his newly-wed wife any more as the place was filled with a throng of women, hakims and doctors all the time.

At last, it was decided that the bride's family hakim would carry out the treatment, and he would have to be sent the bride's urine every morning. But the family servants were not obedient; the bride's health continued to deteriorate because her urine did not reach the hakim regularly as advised. As an unavoidable consequence, Khan Saheb himself began to carry the urine to the hakim every morning. He had to bear all the expenses for the treatment as well.

The hakim collected his fees with a grin and examined the urine every day. He would reassure Khan Saheb about the bride's recuperation every time and prescribe all the costly fruits, such as grapes, the best variety of pomegranates, quince—especially those that were out of season or unavailable in the area. Khan Saheb would rummage the world to bring all these fruits to his in-laws' house for the convalescent.

In this way two months passed, when one day one of the servants said rudely to Khan Saheb, "Why do you come to collect urine every day? There is no more urine here. Everyone's urine in the house has already been checked. There is no need for any more." Khan Saheb then asked that he be allowed to go inside the house once to take a look at his bride. The servant replied that there was nothing called his bride in that house.

Khan Saheb was flabbergasted by this. Controlling himself, he asked, "The alluring, elegant face that I saw the other night, who was that then?" "Some professional dancer hired for the night. She has left," the servant replied.

Khan Saheb became furious and went to a lawyer to seek advice on whether it was possible to lodge a criminal suit against these traitorous imposters. After hearing everything, the lawyer advised, comforting him, "You have been insulted enough. Do you want to lodge a suit and waste money to buy some more humiliation for yourself? You better go back home now."

The old Khan Saheb said, "Listen to what I am saying, I have lost four thousand rupees without a return, and those evil, wretched, cursed people got me to carry the urine of their servants too." He then began to sob.

WORKS IN ENGLISH

SULTANA'S DREAM[a]

One evening I was lounging in an easy chair in my bedroom and thinking lazily of the condition of Indian womanhood. I am not sure whether I dozed off or not. But, as far as I remember, I was wide awake. I saw the moonlit sky sparkling with thousands of diamond-like stars, very distinctly.

All on a sudden a lady stood before me; how she came in, I don't know. I took her for my friend, Sister Sara.

"Good morning," said Sister Sara. I smiled inwardly as I knew it was not morning, but starry night. However, I replied to her, saying, "How do you do?"

"I am all right, thank you. Will you please come out and have a look at our garden?"

I looked again at the moon through the open window, and thought there was no harm in going out at that time. The men-servants outside were asleep just then, and I could have a pleasant walk with Sister Sara.

I used to take my walks with Sister Sara when we were at Darjeeling. Many a time did we walk hand in hand and talk light-heartedly in the Botanical gardens there. I fancied Sister Sara had probably come to take me to some such garden, and I readily accepted her offer and went out with her.

When walking I found to my surprise that it was a fine morning. The town was fully awake and the streets alive with bustling crowds. I felt very shy, since I was walking in the street in broad daylight, but there was not a single man visible.

Some of the passers-by made jokes at me. Though I couldn't 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 they mean by that?"

"They mean that you are shy and timid like men."

"Shy and timid like men?" It was really a joke. I became very nervous, when I found that my companion was not Sister Sara, but a stranger. Oh,

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[a] This story was first published in the *Indian Ladies Magazine* (Eds. Kamala Satthia and Sarojini Naidu) in 1905. It was later published in the form of a book in 1908 by S.K. Lahiri & Co, 54 College Street, Calcutta. The author translated the story into Bengali and included it in *Motichur* (A String of Sweet Pearls), Vol. II, published in 1922.

what a fool had I been to mistake this lady for my dear old friend, Sister Sara!

She felt my fingers tremble in her hand, as we were walking hand in hand.

"What is the matter, dear, dear?" She said affectionately.

"I feel somewhat awkward," I said in a rather apologising tone, "as being a purdahnashin[b] woman, I am not accustomed to walking about unveiled."

"You need not be afraid of coming across a man here. This is Ladyland, free from sin and harm. Virtue herself reigns here."

By and by I was enjoying the scenery. Really it was very grand. I mistook a patch of green grass for a velvet cushion. Feeling as if I were walking on a soft carpet, I looked down and found the path covered with moss and flowers.

"How nice it is," said I.

"Do you like it?" asked Sister Sara. (I continued calling her "Sister Sara," and she continued calling me by my name.)

"Yes, very much; but I do not like to tread on the tender and sweet flowers."

"Never mind, dear Sultana. Your treading will not harm them; they are street flowers."

"The whole place looks like a garden," said I admiringly. "You have arranged every plant so skilfully."

"Your Calcutta could become a nicer garden than this, if only your countrymen wanted to make it so."

"They would think it useless to give so much attention to horticulture, while they have so many other things to do."

"They could not find a better excuse," said she with [a] smile.

I became very curious to know where the men were. I met more than a hundred women while walking there, but not a single man.

"Where are the men?" I asked her.

"In their proper places, where they ought to be."

"Pray let me know what you mean by 'their proper places.'"

"O, I see my mistake, you cannot know our customs, as you were never here before. We shut our men indoors."

"Just as we are kept in the zenana?"

"Exactly so."

"How funny," I burst into a laugh. Sister Sara laughed too.

"But dear Sultana, how unfair it is to shut in the harmless women and let loose the men."

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[b] One who practises purdah.

"Why? It is not safe for us to come out of the zenana, as we are naturally weak."

"Yes, it is not safe so long as there are men about the streets, nor is it so when a wild animal enters a marketplace."

"Of course not."

"Suppose, some lunatics escape from the asylum and begin to do all sorts of mischief to men, horses and other creatures, in that case what will your countrymen do?"

"They will try to capture them and put them back into their asylum."

"Thank you! And you do not think it wise to keep sane people inside an asylum and let loose the insane?"

"Of course not!" said I laughing lightly.

"As a matter of fact, 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 can you trust those untrained men out of doors?"

"We have no hand or voice in the management of our social affairs. In India man is lord and master. He has taken to himself all powers and privileges and shut up the women in the zenana."

"Why do you allow yourselves to be shut up?"

"Because it cannot be helped as they are stronger than women."

"A lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race. You have neglected the duty you owe to yourselves and you have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interests."

"But my dear Sister Sara, if we do everything by ourselves, what will the men do then?"

"They should not do anything, excuse me; they are fit for nothing. Only catch them and put them into the zenana."

"But would it be very easy to catch and put them inside the four walls?" said I. "And even if this were done, would all their business—political and commercial—also go with them into the zenana!"

Sister Sara made no reply. She only smiled sweetly. Perhaps she thought it useless to argue with one who was no better than a frog in a well.

By this time we reached Sister Sara's house. It was situated in a beautiful heart-shaped garden. It was a bungalow with a corrugated iron roof. It was cooler and nicer than any of our rich buildings. I cannot describe how neat and how nicely furnished and how tastefully decorated it was.

We sat side by side. She brought out of the parlour a piece of embroidery work and began putting on a fresh design.

"Do you know how to knit and do needlework?"

"Yes; we have nothing else to do in our zenana."

"But we do not trust our zenana members with embroidery!" she said laughing, "as a man has not patience enough to pass thread through a needlehole even!"

"Have you done all this work yourself?" I asked her pointing to the various pieces of embroidered teapoy cloths.

"Yes."

"How can you find time to do all these? You have to do the office work as well? Have you not?"

"Yes. I do not stick to the laboratory all day long. I finish my work in two hours."

"In two hours! How do you manage? In our land the officers, magistrates, for instance, work seven hours daily."

"I have seen some of them doing their work. Do you think they work all the seven hours?"

"Certainly they do!"

"No, dear Sultana, they do not. They dawdle away their time in smoking. Some smoke two or three cheroots during the office time. They talk much about their work, but do little. Suppose one cheroot takes half an hour to burn off, and a man smokes twelve cheroots daily; then you see, he wastes six hours every day in sheer smoking."

We talked on various subjects; and I learned that they were not subject to any kind of epidemic disease—nor did they suffer from mosquito bites as we do. I was very much astonished to hear that in Ladyland no one died in youth except by rare accident.

"Will you care to see our kitchen?" she asked me.

"With pleasure," said I, and we went to see it. Of course the men had been asked to clear off when I was going there. The kitchen was situated in a beautiful vegetable garden. Every creeper, every tomato plant was itself an ornament. I found no smoke, nor any chimney either in the kitchen—it was clean and bright; the windows were decorated with flower garlands. There was no sign of coal or fire.

"How do you cook?" I asked.

"With solar heat," she said, at the same time showing me the pipe, through which passed the concentrated sunlight and heat. And she cooked something then and there to show me the process.

"How did you manage to gather and store up the sun heat?" I asked her in amazement.

"Let me tell you a little of our past history then. Thirty years ago, when

our present Queen was thirteen years old, she inherited the throne. She was Queen in name only, the Prime Minister really ruling the country."

"Our good Queen liked science very much. She circulated an order that all the women in her country should be educated. Accordingly a number of girls' schools were founded and supported by the Government. Education was spread far and wide among women. And early marriage also was stopped. No woman was to be allowed to marry before she was twenty-one. I must tell you that before this change we had been kept in strict purdah."

"How the tables are turned," I interposed with a laugh.

"But the seclusion is the same," she said. "In a few years we had separate universities, where no men were admitted.

"In the capital, where our Queen lives, there are two universities. One of these invented a wonderful balloon, to which they attached a number of pipes. By means of this captive balloon which they managed to keep afloat above the cloud land, they could draw as much of water from the atmosphere as they pleased. As the water was incessantly being drawn by the University people, no cloud gathered and the ingenious Lady Principal stopped rain and storms thereby."

"Really! Now I understand why there is no mud here!" said I. But I could not understand how it was possible to accumulate water in the pipes. She explained to me how it was done; but I was unable to understand her as my scientific knowledge was very limited. However, she went on:

"When the other university came to know of this, they became exceedingly jealous and tried to do something more extraordinary still. They invented an instrument by which they could collect as much of sun-heat as they wanted. And they kept the heat stored up to be distributed among others as required.

"While the women were engaged in scientific researches, the men of this country were busy increasing their military power. When they came to know that the female universities were able to draw water from the atmosphere and collect heat from the sun, they only laughed at the members of the universities and called the whole thing 'a sentimental nightmare.' "

"Your achievements are very wonderful indeed! But tell me, how you managed to put the men of your country into the zenana. Did you entrap them first?"

"No."

"It is not likely that they would surrender their free and open air life of their own accord and confine themselves within the four walls of the zenana! They must have been overpowered."

"Yes, they have been!"

"By whom?—by some lady-warriors, I suppose?"

"No, not by arms."

"Yes, it cannot be so. Men's arms are stronger than women's."

"Then?"

"By brain."

"Even their brains are bigger and heavier than women's. Are they not?"

"Yes, but what of that? An elephant also has a bigger and heavier brain than a man has. Yet men can enchain elephants and employ them, according to their own wishes."

"Well said, but tell me please, how it all actually happened. I am dying to know it!"

"Women's brains are somewhat quicker than men's. Ten years ago, when the military officers called our scientific discoveries 'a sentimental nightmare,' some of the young ladies wanted to say something in reply to those remarks. But both the Lady Principals restrained them and said, they should reply, not by word, but by deed, if ever they got the opportunity. And they had not long to wait for that opportunity."

"How marvellous!" I heartily clapped my hands.

"And now the proud gentlemen are dreaming sentimental dreams themselves.

"Soon afterwards, certain persons came from a neighbouring country and took shelter in ours. They were in trouble having committed some political offence. The king who cared more for power than for good government asked our kind-hearted Queen to hand them over to his officers. She refused, as it was against her principles to turn out refugees. For this refusal the king declared war against our country.

"Our military officers sprang to their feet at once and marched out to meet the enemy.

"The enemy however, was too strong for them. Our soldiers fought bravely, no doubt. But in spite of all their bravery the foreign army advanced step by step to invade our country.

"Nearly all the men had gone out to fight; even a boy of sixteen was not left home. Most of our warriors were killed, the rest driven back and the enemy came within twenty-five miles of the capital.

"A meeting of a number of wise ladies was held at the Queen's palace to advise [as] to what should be done to save the land.

"Some proposed to fight the soldiers; others objected and said that women were not trained to fight with swords and guns; nor were they accustomed to fighting with any weapons. A third party regretfully remarked that they were hopelessly weak of body.

"There was a dead silence for a few minutes. Her Royal Highness said again, 'I must commit suicide if the land and my honour are lost.'

"Then the Lady Principal of the second University (who had collected sun-heat), who had been silently thinking during the consultation, remarked that they were all but lost; and there was little hope left for them. There was, however, one plan which she would like to try, and this would be her first and last effort; if she failed in this, there would be nothing left but to commit suicide. All present solemnly vowed that they would never allow themselves to be enslaved, no matter what happened.

"The Queen thanked them heartily, and asked the Lady Principal to try her plan.

"The Lady Principal rose again and said, 'before we go out the men must enter the zenanas. I make this prayer for the sake of purdah.' 'Yes, of course,' replied Her Royal Highness.

"On the following day the Queen called upon all men to retire into zenanas for the sake of honour and liberty.

"Wounded and tired as they were, they took that order rather for a boon! They bowed low and entered the zenanas without uttering a single word of protest. They were sure that there was no hope for this country at all.

"Then the Lady Principal with her two thousand students marched to the battlefield, and arriving there directed all the rays of the concentrated sunlight and heat towards the enemy.

"The heat and light were too much for them to bear. They all ran away panic-stricken, not knowing in their bewilderment how to counteract that scorching heat. When they fled away leaving their guns and other ammunitions of war, they were burnt down by means of the same sun-heat.

"Since then no one has tried to invade our country any more."

"And since then your countrymen never tried to come out of the zenana?"

"Yes, they wanted to be free. Some of the Police Commissioners and District Magistrates sent word to the Queen to the effect that the Military Officers certainly deserved to be imprisoned for their failure; but they never neglected their duty and therefore they should not be punished and they prayed to be restored to their respective offices.

"Her Royal Highness sent them a circular letter intimating to them that if their services should ever be needed they would be sent for, and that in the meanwhile they should remain where they were.

"Now that they are accustomed to the purdah system and have ceased to grumble at their seclusion, we call the system 'mardana' instead of 'zenana.'"

"But how do you manage," I asked Sister Sara, "to do without the Police or Magistrates in case of theft or murder?"

"Since the 'Mardana' system has been established, there has been no more crime or sin; therefore we do not require a policeman to find out a culprit, nor do we want a magistrate to try a criminal case."

"That is very good, indeed! I suppose if there was any dishonest person, you could very easily chastise her. As you gained a decisive victory without shedding a single drop of blood, you could drive off crime and criminals too without much difficulty!"

"Now, dear Sultana, will you sit here or come to my parlour?" she asked me.

"Your kitchen is not inferior to a queen's boudoir!" I replied with a pleasant smile, "but we must leave it now, for the gentlemen may be cursing me for keeping them away from their duties in the kitchen so long." We both laughed heartily.

"How my friends at home will be amused and amazed, when I go back and tell them that in the far-off Ladyland, ladies rule over the country and control all social matters, while gentlemen are kept in the mardanas to mind babies, to cook and to do all sorts of domestic work; and that cooking is so easy a thing that it is simply a pleasure to cook!"

"Yes, tell them about all that you see here."

"Please let me know, how you carry on land cultivation and how you plough the land and do other hard manual work."

"Our fields are tilled by means of electricity, which supplies motive power for other hard work as well and we employ it for our aerial conveyances too. We have no rail road nor any paved streets here."

"Therefore neither street nor railway accidents occur here," said I. "Do not you ever suffer from want of rainwater?" I asked.

"Never since the 'water balloon' has been set up. You see the big balloon and pipes attached thereto. By their aid we can draw as much rain water as we require. Nor do we ever suffer from flood or thunderstorms. We are all very busy making nature yield as much as she can. We do not find time to quarrel with one another as we never sit idle. Our noble Queen is exceedingly fond of botany; it is her ambition to convert the whole country into one grand garden."

"The idea is excellent. What is your chief food?"

"Fruits."

"How do you keep your country cool in hot weather? We regard the rainfall in summer as a blessing from heaven."

"When the heat becomes unbearable, we sprinkle the ground with plentiful showers drawn from the artificial fountains. And in cold weather we keep our room warm with sun-heat."

She showed me her bathroom, the roof of which was removable. She could enjoy a shower bath whenever she liked, by simply removing the roof (which was like the lid of a box) and turning on the tap of the shower pipe.

"You are a lucky people!" ejaculated I. "You know no want. What is your religion, may I ask?"

"Our religion is based on Love and Truth. It is our religious duty to love one another and to be absolutely truthful. If any person lies, she or he is ..."

"Punished with death?"

"No; not with death. We do not take pleasure in killing a creature of God—specially a human being. The liar is asked to leave this land for good and never to come to it again."

"Is an offender never forgiven?"

"Yes, if that person repents sincerely."

"Are you not allowed to see any man, except your own relations?"

"Our circle of sacred relations is very limited, so even cousins are not sacred."

"But ours is very large; a distant cousin is as sacred as a brother."

"That is very good. I see purity itself reigns over your land. I should like to see the good Queen, who is so sagacious and farsighted and who has made all these rules."

"All right," said Sister Sara.

Then she screwed a couple of seats on to a square piece of plank. To this plank she attached two smooth and well-polished balls. When I asked her what the balls were for, she said, they were hydrogen balls and they were used to overcome the force of gravity. The balls were of different capacities to be used according to the different weights desired to be overcome. She then fastened to the air-car two wing-like blades, which, she said, were worked by electricity. After we were comfortably seated she touched a knob and the blades began to whirl, moving faster and faster every moment. At first we were raised to the height of about six or seven feet, then off we flew. And before I could realise that we had commenced moving, we reached the Garden of the Queen.

My friend lowered the air-car by reversing the action of the machine, and when the car touched the ground the machine was stopped and we got out.

I had seen from the air-car the Queen walking on a garden path with her little daughter (who was four years old) and her maids of honour.

"Halloo! You here!" cried the Queen addressing Sister Sara. I was introduced to Her Royal Highness and was received by her cordially without any ceremony.

I was very much delighted to make her acquaintance. In [the] course of the conversation I had with her, the Queen told me that she had no objection to permitting her subjects to trade with other countries. "But," she continued, "no trade was possible with countries where the women were kept in the zenanas and so unable to come and trade with us. Men, we find, are rather of lower morals and so we do not like dealing with them. We do not covet other people's land, we do not fight for [a] piece of diamond though it may be a thousand-fold brighter than the Koh-i-Noor,[c] nor do we grudge a ruler his Peacock Throne.[d] We dive deep into the ocean of knowledge and try to find out the precious gems, which Nature has kept in store for us. We enjoy Nature's gifts as much as we can."

After taking leave of the Queen, I visited the famous universities, and was shown over some of their factories, laboratories and observatories.

After visiting the above place of interest, we got again into the air-car, but as soon as it began moving I somehow slipped down and the fall startled me out of my dream. And on opening my eyes, I found myself in my own bedroom still lounging in the easy-chair.

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[c] Meaning "Mountain of Light" in Persian language, it refers to a large piece of diamond that is believed to have originated in the state of Andra Pradesh, India and that enriched the coffers of several India rulers before it was confiscated by the British in 1850 and has since remained a part of the British Crown Jewels.

[d] Built by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan, it is one of the most splendorous thrones ever made. It was later taken out of India by the Iranian conqueror Nadir Shah, who seized Delhi in 1739. The throne, made with expensive stones in the shape of two open peacocks' tails, has since been lost.

ESSAYS

God Gives, Man Robs[a]

There is a saying, "Man proposes, God disposes," but my bitter experience shows that God gives, Man Robs. That is, Allah has made no distinction in the general life of male and female—both are equally bound to seek food, drink, sleep etc. necessary for animal life. Islam also teaches that male and female are equally bound to say their daily prayers five times, and so on.

Our great Prophet has said, "Talibul Ilm farizatu ala kulli Muslimeen-o-Muslimat" (i.e. it is the bounden duty of all Muslim males and females to acquire knowledge). But our brothers will not give us our proper share in education. About sixty years ago, they were opposed to the study of English even for males; now they are reaping the harvest to their bitter experience. In India almost all the doors to wealth, health and wisdom are shut against Muslims on the plea of inefficiency. Some papers conducted by Muslims may or may not admit this—but fact is fact—the *Inefficiency* exists and stares us in the face! Let me also venture to say that it is so; for children born of educated mothers must necessarily be superior to Muslim children, who are born of illiterate and foolish mothers. The late Lady Shamsul Huda by way of conversation often used to say that the Muslim public abused her husband because he had given certain high posts to Hindus ignoring Muslim claims, but they failed to see their own fault that such and such Muslim gentlemen were really unfit for the posts.

It is an irony of fate that the Hindus, who are bound by their cartload of *Shastras* to treat the women like slaves and cattle and to get their daughters married before they were hardly above their girlhood, i.e., within ten years of age, are, as a matter of fact, allowing the greatest liberty to their womenfolk and giving them high education. They are trying to get laws passed against child-marriage, raising the age to sixteen years though their Pandits are loud in proclaiming the attempt as "unworthy of a Hindu"; and they are devising means to popularise widow marriage, heedless of their Pandits, who quote *Shastras* saying "not only should a woman refrain from marrying a second

[a] First published in *The Mussalman* (Ed. Mujibur Rahman), on 6 December 1927.

time but she should reduce her body by living only on fruits, roots, flowers, etc. after her husband's death."

On the other hand, while Islam allows every freedom to women (so much so that women cannot be given in marriage without her consent in free will, which indirectly prohibits child-marriage), we see people giving away their daughters in marriage at tender ages or giving them in marriage without their consent. Many a time a bride bitterly bewails her fate on being compelled to marry a bridegroom whom she knows to be a drunkard or an old man of sixty, but the marriage celebration proceeds despite her silent protest. And so-called respectable families in our society take pride in preventing widow-marriage, no matter whether the widow be a girl of thirteen or a child of seven years of age!

The worst crime which our brothers commit against us is to deprive us of education. There is always some grandfather or elderly uncle who stands in the way of any poor girl who might wish to be educated. From experience we find that mothers are generally willing to educate their girls, but they are quite helpless when their husbands and other male relations will not hear of girls attending school. May we challenge such grandfathers, fathers or uncles to show the authority on which they prevent their girls from acquiring education? Can they quote from the Qurʾan or Hadis any injunction prohibiting women from obtaining knowledge?

We know there are Mussalmans of advanced ideas who are anxious to give their daughters a good education, but for want of a suitable High School for Muslim girls they cannot have their wishes fulfilled, and so they groan under the wretched social system. Why cannot the public of Calcutta support one ideal school for Muslim girls? Such a High English School with boarding accommodation and hostel, which can supply the demands of all the different classes of people, high and low, is very badly needed in Calcutta. On our part we are willing to convert this school (we mean the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School) to that ideal one, provided we get public support and money enough to meet the cost of up keep.

Educational Ideals for the Modern Indian Girls[b]

From the most ancient times there has existed in India a system of education which, though distinct in its characteristics and ideals from the modern western system, has produced great men and earnest seekers after truth.

[b] First published in *The Mussalman* (Ed. Mujibur Rahman), on 5 March 1931.

This ancient Indian education developed in the early period of history from the science of grammar and mathematics. It has enabled India to make a mark in the sphere of high philosophy and metaphysics. Conditions of life have changed considerably from those prevalent in those early days and to work out without many essential modifications ancient theories and practices in education is by no means a practical proposition. Yet we must seek the elements of value in our ancient heritage. We must assimilate the old while holding to the now. Thus will we render our present educational system, the great defect of which is it is an exoteric in an alien soil. It is unsuited to our needs and requirements and incapable of developing the distinctive thread of our national thought and culture.

If education is described as the preparation for life or for complete living, the Indian educator had formed of it a true and valuable conception. The ancient curriculum was not confined to mere book-learning. It included many more things. Physical development received its due share of attention. In those early days, little was known of our vast expenditure on costly buildings. The place of instruction was outdoor under the shade of a tree, in a natural environment, which impressed what was learnt all the more deeply on the mind. The student's life was, moreover, one of healthy activity, for he had to work for the teacher in his house and on the field, looking after his cattle and even collecting alms for him. Moral education was similarly not neglected. The period of studentship was a time for vigorous discipline. Rigid rules were laid down for the conduct of the pupils including hygienic, moral and religious precepts and the regulation of good manners. Implicit obedience was expected and obtained from the student by the teacher and there were elaborate rules for the respect due to the latter.

The modern demand is for an education which develops all the faculties, physical, moral and mental. From what we know of the ancient system of education in this country, methods were followed which conduced to the achievement of this aim. Those were days before science was known or had changed the possibilities of existence. Yet in this civilised and advanced generation we must acknowledge the value of Indian methods. The necessity for open air schooling as far as practicable is emphasised by us today. Healthy outdoor sports are recommended to keep up the physique of the student and the value of moral training is endorsed. We are thus advancing in a right direction. What we should recognise, however, is that our educational goal is age-old. We are not experimenting with new fancied ideas but are adopting traditions or our ancient system in introducing what we consider are twentieth century educational reforms. Thus progress be accelerated, for the

Indian mind is slow to accept innovation but that which is traditional and of proved utility finds ready favour.

Religion is a tremendous force and the chief concerns of all Asiatic people. From start to finish, all Eastern philosophy and literature are religious. In India religion has pervaded education as all things else. The very purpose of education in the early ages was religious, namely, to train young Brahmans for their duties in life as priests and teachers of others. Thus the spiritual side of education was greatly stressed. The idea of educational discipline was extended to the whole of life and the theory of Asrams or stages of those of student, house holder, hermit and wandering ascetic was developed. The student was first to acquire learning. He was next to enter upon the 2nd stage of that of grihasta or house holder. Then after having brought up a family and done his duty in the world he would enter upon the life of Vanprastha or forest hermit and later become a "Sannyasi" or wandering ascetic. The ancient Brahmanic education was therefore not only a preparation for the life but for a future existence as well.

In this utilitarian age when religion is treated as obsolete, and the all engrossing objective ordinarily are personal ambition and the advancement of material prosperity, it becomes all the more necessary for us to retain our ancient ideals. We should try as in the past to teach true values and give the students a guidance for all duties and relations of life [as well as in] the practical duties of life. At a later stage of history in India (as in the Middle age in Europe) a tendency arose to life. The current philosophy taught the unreality of the world and that the highest wisdom was to [find] release from worldly fetters. But Islam has disapproved strongly of extreme other worldliness. The Holy Qurʾan has declared against the monastic life, for if all were to forsake the world the bonds of society would soon be broken. In our daily prayers we Muslims beseech Allah saying, "Our Lord, grant us good in this world and good in the hereafter." Our aim should be to harmonise in due proportion the two purposes, spiritual and secular, in the education we impart. Much can be done in accomplishing this aim by impressing on the girls the excellence of our ancient ideals and of the life of great national heroes.

One of the most notable characteristics of Indian educational ideals is the relation between pupil and teacher. The Indian system knew nothing of a large institution or a large class of pupils taught together. There was usually one teacher for a few pupils from the beginning to the end of his period of studies. Thus individual attention was given. A family relationship sprang up between teacher and pupils which had a high moral effect. "In the West," writes an educationist, "it is the Institution rather than the teacher

which is emphasised and it is the school or college which a student regards as his 'Alma Mater.' In India it is the teacher rather than the Institution that is prominent and the same affection and reverence which a western student has for his 'Alma Mater' is in India bestowed with a lifelong devotion upon the teacher." It is not desirable or practicable in this democratic age when a general spread of education should be our aim to abolish large Institution. But we may with benefit require of the teacher the high responsibility of moulding the character of the pupil by personal influence and example. We must require of our teachers a high intellectual, moral and spiritual standard and our aim should be to work for a condition which shall make such a class of teachers available. The teaching profession is one of the noblest in the world. Its responsibilities and opportunities both require to be increased.

The state of the education of women in India has for long centuries been deplorable. In the early Aryan period women held a position of authority and honour. We are told in the *Upanishads* of women who took part in deep discussion on philosophical truths and the authorship of some Vedic hymn is ascribed to them. Yet even in the *Rig Veda* there are indications that women were coming to be looked down upon as inferior beings who should remain in subjection to men. Education for women has therefore become synonymous with us for breaking the barrier of ancient custom which shut them from learning. When we advocate the education of girls we generally imply the adoption of western methods and ideals in their training to the exclusion of all that is Indian. This mistake on our part cannot be too strongly guarded against. We should not fail to set before the Indian girl the great and noble ideals of womanhood which our tradition has developed. This ideal was narrow and circumscribed in the past. We may enlarge and widen it thus increasing its excellence but what we should avoid is its total neglect and a tendency to slavish imitations of western custom and tradition. In the past, with a few exceptions, our women were not noted for scholastic attainments. Their sphere was the domestic. Yet in the obscurity of their lives they conducted their duties with capacity and considerable amount of [love] and care. Their fingers were toilworn. The cares of family, the effort to advance the happiness of others, these engrossed them. They were loyal and steadfast in times of endurance and hardship and proved to be in the words of the *Mahabharata*, "A companion in solitude, a father in advice. A rest in passing through life's wilderness."

We should by all means broaden the outlook of our girls and teach them to modernise themselves. Yet they should be made to realise that the domestic duties entrusted to them cover a task on which the welfare of the country depends. They should not fall behind their illiterate sisters

in splendid endurance, heroism and discipline. We should teach our girls [that] if they are to fulfil their heavy duties commendably, [they should], above all … concentrate on desires and efforts which are not superficial. We should teach them that the art of happiness lies … in discipline, that service should be their watchword, even though that service may not [bring more than a] transient sigh to the sum total of the world's unhappiness.

In ancient India the arts and crafts were not neglected. The caste system with its many disadvantages, helped to foster them and keep up the standard of work. The dexterity and skill of each particular trade was handed down from father to son. The teaching was by handling and observing real thing and unconsciously the boy picked up from his father many secrets of the trade. The encouragement of kings and great nobles was also responsible for the production of really fine work. But in these days the tradition of vocational training has disappeared in India. Parents give no thought to the career which their boy or girl adopted by temperament to adopt, all that they desire being that their child should obtain a hallmark of the university, a degree. I feel tempted to quote from a poem by Justice Akbar, which runs thus:

> How can the infant get any scent of it parents' character,
> When it is fed on tinned milk and gets educated by the Government?

The ancient tradition of vocational training (although this training must be given today under changed circumstances) must be revived by active propaganda.

The future of India lies in its girls. The development of its educational system on proper lines is therefore a question of permanent importance. Although India must learn many lessons from the West, to impose on it the western system without modifications to make it suitable to us is a huge mistake. India must retain the elements of good in her age-old traditions of thought and methods. It must retain her social inheritance of ideas and emotions, while at the same time by incorporating that which is useful from the West a new educational practice and tradition may be evolved which will transcend both that of East and the West.

In short, our girls would not only obtain university degrees, but must be ideal daughters, wives, and mothers—or I may say obedient daughters, loving sisters, dutiful wives and instructive mothers.

Letter 23: To Mujibur Rahman

February 10, 1911

A PROPOSED GIRLS' SCHOOL

To
The Editor,
The Mussalman

Sir, Permit me the liberty of asking the courtesy of your paper to inform the Mohamedan public that I intend to start a Girls' school in Calcutta in strict observance of Purdah at an earliest opportunity possible, which is not only the crying need of the time but the want of which, I believe, is keenly felt by all right thinking men and women.

My beloved husband, the Late Moulvie Sakhawat Hossain, B.A. of the Provincial Executive Service, has bequeathed Rs. 10,000 for female education, the income (Rs. 6,000 annually) of which is at my disposal. I am therefore not only ready to spend that amount but I shall rather be glad to personally conduct the school and am prepared to devote my time, energy, and whatever knowledge I possess, towards its furtherance.

But as the fund in hand is not sufficient to meet the requirements, I appeal to the generous Moslem public to extend their helping hand and thus contribute to the success of the project which deserves the hearty sympathy and practical patronage of well-wishers of the community.

Mohamedan gentlemen desirous of helping me in my scheme are requested to kindly communicate with me direct, while my Moslem sisters who wish to associate themselves by their cooperation to the movement are invited in my house to discuss the subject, or I shall be glad to call on them should they inform me of their addresses.

KHATOON

Letter 25: To Mujibur Rahman

January 10, 1913

To
The Editor,
The Mussalman

Sir, I desire to inform the readers of your widely circulated paper that we are going to establish a boarding house attached to the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School, for the convenience of the mufassil pupils. At present our school imparts instruction in Urdu, but we are arranging to open a separate class for teaching regularly Bengali and English to such girls who wish to receive instruction through the medium of these languages.

Up to this time we have got applications from 7 girls only and the guardians of these girls are rather pressing hard for their Girl's reception. To start a boarding house with seven girls will be very much inconvenient to us; but we have, however, made up our minds to make a beginning in spite of all inconvenience. We pray to the Almighty God that he may be pleased to further the work we are about to undertake.

[…] we expected to find some difficulty in getting a suitable grant from Government towards this object, but fortunately for us this was obtained with comparative ease. The Government contribution was, however, made conditional on our raising a substantial amount for this purpose, from private sources, and accordingly we set about in collecting subscriptions from the Mohamedan public. I regret to say that the response in our appeal has not yet been adequate and after about one year's effort we are still short of the amount required for the purchase of the necessary equipage by a sum of Rs. 280. Is this not enough to fill one's soul with a deep sense of shame and bitterness?

In this connection, I may be excused for mentioning that in order to add something to the Omnibus Fund I advertised in your paper to sell some of my books at a reduced price for [a] month or so. But such is the public spirit and sense of appreciation of our cause by the members of our community that only Rs. 6 worth of books have been sold during the month of Ramazan! The cost price for the whole lot of Indian Law Reports is Rs. 102 and I am offering the books at Rs. 51 only, which amount will also go to the same Fund, but even then I have not been able to find a purchaser.

These are the people, who cannot support a single female school but aspire to have a University. It is no wonder that Government denied us the

same because we do not deserve it yet. One may well ask what would be the good of having a University when such an important duty as the education of the females is neglected by the community in this sad manner? Granted that we get a University, what will we do with it while your females remain in the dark? You cannot banish all the females from your society nor can you bury your daughters alive like the Arabs of the past.

However, hoping still to get more application for admission to our boarding school, I conclude this.

R.S. HOSSEIN

Letter 32: To Mujibur Rahman

November 30, 1917

SAKHAWAT MEMORIAL GIRLS' SCHOOL

To
The Editor,
The Mussalman

Sir, A certain correspondent by the name of Mr. R. Rahman wrote in a letter in your issue of the 25th May last:

"What I regret is that in the capital of a Presidency inhabited by an overwhelming majority of Bengali-speaking people, there is not a single institution for Mussalman girls where education is imparted through the medium of Bengali. If any separate school for Bengali speaking Mussalman girls be needed it ought to be started without delay."

Although it is an axiomatic truth that Bengali is the mother tongue of the people of Bengal, the condition and circumstances of Calcutta are quite different. At least, that is my idea. I have been living in this town for the last seven years at a stretch and during this long period I had occasion to come in contact with good many respectable Mohamedan ladies and I did not remember to have heard Bengali spoken by any of them, even in case where I found broken and miserable Urdu spoken. I started talking with them in Bengali but they preferred to give their replies in Urdu. Many of these ladies, although natives of Bengal, say that they have forgotten Bengali. They can talk only bad Urdu but still they must talk Urdu!

When this school was started in Waliullah Lane in the beginning of 1911 with only 15 or 16 girls, I used to teach English as an additional subject

with a view to popularise the institution with the local people, and I made it a practice to explain the meaning of English words in Bengali. Shortly afterwards requests poured on me from the guardian of pupils to use Urdu as the medium for explaining English.

In the wake of the Sakhawat Memorial School, two or three other girls' schools have been established, and in these schools also education is imparted through the medium of Urdu because the guardians prefer Urdu.

For some years past, Government is employing a number (I think there are 6 such teachers on Rs. 30 per month) of peripatetic female Urdu mistresses to teach reading, writing and needlework to the grown up girls and married women of purdanashin Mohamedan families residing in Calcutta. These tutoresses go to the houses of their pupils in "burqa." They also teach Urdu and not Bengali and yet so far I am not aware of any complaint having been made that no provision has been made by Government teaching Bengali-speaking girls in a similar manner. How very difficult it is to secure such Urdu knowing female teachers (and how very incompetent they are, when found) may be ascertained if enquiries be made at the office of the Inspectress of Schools, in whose hands the appointment of these teachers lies. And yet teachers competent to teach Bengali—well educated teachers in every way though not belonging to the Islamic faith—are to be found everywhere in Calcutta. Why does then Government teach Urdu instead of Bengali if there is really a demand for the latter? It is because the purdanashin Mohamedan girls in Calcutta are not willing to learn Bengali even without payment of fee.

Mr. R. Rahman has expressed his mortification at the want of a Bengali school for Bengali-speaking Mohamedan girls in this wide city of Calcutta. But why is there such a want and who is responsible for it? Is it not a matter worthy of consideration? It is a law of nature that in course of time a community or country gets what it is in need of. If the Calcutta Moslem public wanted a Bengali school how is it that one such institution has not come into existence during all these years? It is certainly not for the sake of our personal convenience that we have been teaching Urdu instead of Bengali.

The Omniscient alone knows what difficulty and hardship one has to undergo to conduct an Urdu school, and those who practically do the work also know it. The primary difficulty is want of female teachers and one has to hunt out this wide world with a torch in hand to discover a qualified mistress. Secondly, suitable books are not available at any rate in this side of India. How often have I entreated the Inspectresses of schools to include such books in the list of text books prescribed by Government as could

be found on this mortal earth. As the result of my seven years' insistence, such books are now easily available. Thirdly, Urdu maps, globes and other accessories are not easily available. Besides this, there are a hundred and one other difficulties to contend with. Still we are imparting education in Urdu and can it be said that we are doing so merely in pursuance of a personal whim or sentiment?

Last year, after the annual examinations, when we were making arrangements for holding the Prize Distribution, a happy idea struck us, that among other things, a Bengali recitation should be given, and for this I entrusted one of our mistresses, Mrs. S …, a Bengali lady, to get some four girls recite a Bengali poem. She accordingly took up this work, but after a week she came up to me and reported that none of the girls could talk Bengali. I said, "How is that? Cannot the Calcutta girls talk Bengali?" She said, "Yes, they can in a manner. Just listen to them and judge for yourself." Shortly after, only some of those girls who could talk and understand Bengali were selected. After a week, Mrs. S again reported that although the girls had got the poem by heart, their pronunciation was very bad and quite "foreign." I have heard our European sisters talking Bengali with a peculiar accent, but in the case of our girls I found that although their accent was not the same, there was however a tinge of foreign tongue in their Bengali. I then made another selection, and took great pains till the day of the distribution of prizes to coach them say "Koto pakhi" instead of "Kowto pakhi" and "boniker bala" instead of "Bonoker bala."

At the beginning of the current year I started a Bengali class. Only a couple of girls began to read Bengali only, as their guardians had stipulated this condition. They were aged 5 and 6 years respectively. Eight other girls joined from the Urdu section, their object being to learn Bengali as a language, their other subjects of study (Geography, History etc.) being continued through the medium of Urdu as before. As the number of Bengali reading girls was small, I allotted three days in the week for teaching Bengali. When towards the end of May last the school was closed for the summer and Ramazan Vacation there were only 12 students in the Bengali class. And yet when I read the following in the letter of Mr. R. Rahman "Due provision should be made in the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School for imparting education through the medium of Bengali," I said to myself, "Let it be so."

Immediately on the re-opening of the School after the vacation, a whole time Bengali teacher was searched for and a junior vernacular training passed mistress was at once engaged. She was quite ready to teach all the subjects from the first year infant class up to the sixth standard (Middle Vernacular) in the Bengali branch of the school.

Now please mark. In the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School we have got a Bengali section, a list of Bengali text-books as prescribed by Government and Mrs. J …, a junior training passed female teacher. But what about pupils? "These are your pupils," she said. "These three girls will read only Bengali throughout the week and those that have got Bengali as [an] optional [subject] will read only three days in a week." When I went to look at the girls who had taken Bengali as optional I found there were only six instead of ten. I thought to myself, however, that three little girls who were reading Bengali whole time would, like the three legs of a teapoy support the Bengali branch on their study shoulders. A few days after this I leant that out of these three girls one left Calcutta for the mufassil with her parents.

At present there are only 5 girls left in the batch who took to learning all subjects in Bengali. I have given special instructions to Mrs. J … to teach this trio everything, even needlework, in Bengali. She said, "I don't know English expressions as used incorrectly such as 'Ron, Fel' (instead of Run, Fell) and incorrect Hindustan terms." The different kinds of sewing are known as "bakhaya, tepchi, turpai, arma," and these are all Urdu expressions. For want of suitable Bengali equivalents of these terms the trio have been put in the general sewing class with the Urdu speaking girls.

But this does not exhaust the list of our worries in connection with our Bengali branch and in its teacher in charge, Mrs. J …. As soon as the bell strikes for the school to begin all teachers attend their respective classes. But Mrs. J … comes to me and says, "What am I to do?" "Why, please go and teach Bengali." "One girl has gone to read the Koran and the other is sewing."

Now it has become a part of my daily routine to invent work for Mrs. J …, especially when the Bengali reading trio happens to be absent by chance, there is … difficulty for me. Sometimes the teacher would come and [say] in the middle of the day, "Please, what am I to do?"

"Go and teach Bengali, please."

"I have done that."

"Then go and teach writing."

"They have done so."

"Please teach arithmetic in Bengali."

"That has already been done during the last hour."

Mr. R. Rahman further writes in his article, "It is an undeniable fact that more than 99 percent of the Mussalmans of Bengal are Bengali speaking, so they have greater claim on the school than the Urdu-speaking Mussalmans …." I quite agree to this. But now I am constrained to ask, where are the writer's "more than 99 percent Bengali-speaking" girl students? From the above, I think, I have been able to make it clear that even those Bengali-

speaking Mohamedan families that are residing in Calcutta do not quite appreciate the advantage of school education for their girls. From the experience I have gained during these 7 years I have noticed that Urdu-speaking people are more keen on sending their girls to school and that Bengali-speaking families are less enterprising in this respect.

I have related what success has been attained by our Bengali branch during the past one year. We have at present only three little girls reading Bengali whole time. Now it is my earnest request that Mr. R. Rahman, Mr. Azizur Rahman (belonging to your staff) and other well-wishing gentlemen holding similar views would be good enough to come forward and get students for our Bengali section, for which we are entertaining the services of the whole time qualified teacher. Mr. Azizur Rahman himself assured me that he would give us a good many pupils if I were to start a Bengali branch in my school. Now that I have done so, I fail to see why he is unable to act up to his promise. We shall probably be compelled to abolish the Bengali section from next year if we fail to get at least 20 students by the end of this year. It is quite beyond our means to go on paying the salary of the Bengali teacher month after month when there is not sufficient work. We shall be highly obliged to Mr. M. Rahman if he will be good enough to pay us out of his own pocket the amount spent or rather misspent for the Bengali-speaking students. He is quite at liberty to deduct subsequently Rs. 44, 352 per month (i.e. to say Rs. 448 × 99 times) when he realises the same from Government and also to realise monthly from Government Rs. 17, 820 being 99 times Rs. 180, the amount which the Government now spends on the salary of the peripatetic Urdu teachers. Then there will be no want of funds for the spread of Bengali education in Calcutta.

(Mrs.) R.S. Hossein
Calcutta
The 20th November, 1917

Letter 33: To Mujibur Rahman

December 20, 1918

SAKHAWAT MEMORIAL GIRLS' SCHOOL AND BENGALI TEACHING

To
The Editor,
The Mussalman

Sir, In your issue of 30th November 1917, you were good enough to publish a letter from me with regards to the teaching of Bengali in this school and a similar letter was published in your contemporary *Mohammadi*. I can therefore take it that at any rate the readers of these two journals were able to know the results of our efforts to impart instruction in Bengali to Mohamedan girls in the city. Now after a lapse of more than a year I am placing before you my further report in connection with the teaching of Bengali in our school.

Before submitting this report it is necessary to mention one or two things. I was anxiously waiting to see that my Bengali speaking brethren, especially that patriotic gentleman Mr. R. Rahman whose incisive pen first ventilated this matter in the columns of your paper, would place mother Bengal—or at any rate the Bengali Mohamedan community—under a heavy debt of gratitude by establishing a Bengali Girls' school during this long one year. But where is that school? To our misfortune, it has not come into existence yet.

Although I stated last year we would be obliged to abolish the Bengali section of our school if sufficient girls were not forthcoming, nevertheless we kept the section continuing for a year more. But at the end of the year I find that its condition is still [same]. It is mostly people from the mufassil who came to Calcutta and after 6 or 9 months are transferred elsewhere, send their girls to our school to be taught in Bengali. Like meteors these girls blaze forth in the firmament of the school for a few months and then disappear altogether. Now with regard to those girls of the Urdu section who take up Bengali as an optional subject. At first they thought it a good fun to while away some time in the Bengali class trying to pick a smattering of the language; but at the end of the year they found that they were called upon to give an examination of their knowledge, [so] one by one [they] dropped off.

At present there are only 3.5 pupils in our Bengali section; 3 are whole time Bengali girls and one is a girl from Urdu section learning Bengali as an optional subject. The eldest amongst them being "grown up," will leave school at the end of this session. It is beyond our means to have the responsibility of the Bengali section on our shoulders and to go on paying a mistress month after month for the sake of 2.5 girls only. We have therefore decided to abolish the Bengali branch from the beginning of January next.

R.S. Hossein
Calcutta
The 11th December, 1918

Letter 34: Notice

February 7, 1919

ALL INDIA MUSLIM LADIES' CONFERENCE

Notice: The Sixth Session of the All-India Muslim Ladies' Conference will be held at Calcutta in Mellyville House, 8 Ripon Street, on the 10th, 11th and 12th February 1919 under the presidency of Begum Saheba of Major Khediva Jung Bahadur (Hyderabad). There will be 2 daily sittings, i.e. 10 AM to 2 PM and again from 3 PM to 5 PM. Mohamedan ladies coming from the mufassil with the object of attending the conference will be provided with board and residence, free of charge, at 86A, Lower Circular Road, viz. the premises of Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School. They will be met at the railway stations on receiving timely intimation, i.e. at least 24 hours before their arrival. They are requested to place themselves in communication with the undersigned.

Local ladies are requested to attend the conference in large numbers. Invitation card can be [...] on application form.

(Mrs.) R.S. Hossein
86, Lower Circular Road
Calcutta
The 27th January, 1919

Letter 35: To Mujibur Rahman

February 21, 1919

MUSLIM LADIES' CONFERENCE ENDS IN A FIASCO,
REGRETABBLE INTERFERENCE

We have received the following for publication:

The following is a statement of fact connected with the sixth annual session of the All India Muslim Ladies' Conference lately held at Calcutta. As it was at my insistence that the conference was invited to Calcutta I think it proper to let the public know what actually took place and why I and my fellow-workers had to stay away from the meetings.

The Anjuman-i-Khawateen Islam, Calcutta, decided at one of its meetings to invite the All India Muslim Ladies' Conference to hold its sixth annual meeting at Calcutta. Accordingly, I wrote to the Secretary, Nafis Dulhan Saheba and in reply I was informed that our invitation was accepted. The time at first fixed for holding the conference during the X'mas week had to be changed on account of the prevalence of influenza. After some correspondence it was decided to hold the meeting on the 10th, 11th and 12th of this month. A Reception Committee was then formed and Mrs. Abdul Latif Ahmad was elected its President and I its Secretary. As certain things, such as the selection of the site and the construction of the pandal could not be done without the help of the male members of the community, a committee of representative Mohamedan gentlemen, interested in the matter, was formed in the middle of January last. At its second meeting held on the 23rd January the Committee carefully considered the question of a site. It was decided that the conference should be held at a central place, where strict purdah could be ensured and conveyances for the return journey of the ladies attending the meeting could be easily procured. It was also necessary that the site should not be far from the office of the Reception Committee at 86A, Lower Circular Road, so that the work of the erection of the pandal and other arrangements for the meeting could be conveniently supervised. Having regard to these requirements, the lawn attached to Mrs. Ariff Bham's house, No. 8, Ripon Street, was selected and Mrs. Bham's consent was obtained with some difficulty the following day. I should not omit to mention that the meeting at which the site was selected was attended by some gentlemen of the Surit community and by Shaikh Mahbub Ali Saheb, whose wife is one of the Vice Presidents of the Anjuman-i-Khawateen Islam.

None of these gentlemen raised any objection to the site selected. Besides, at the meeting of the Anjuman-i-Khawateen held shortly after the selection of the above mentioned site was duly announced and not even a single member present whispered anything against the proposal or suggested the idea of any objection being raised from any quarter.

2. Six hundred invitation cards were printed and distributed on the 4th and 5th of this month, premises No. 8, Ripon Street being mentioned in it as the place of the meeting. On the 7th instant, two days after the distribution of the cards and three days before the date of the meeting, I received a letter dated the 6th February from Naziri Begum Saheba (Mrs. Sulaiman Arif) in which she expressed her surprise and regret that the conference was to have been held at Mrs. Bham's place where some of the members of the Anjuman would not attend. In reply I informed her that no other member had expressed unwillingness to attend even if she had any objection on any personal ground as it was a communal affair for which Mrs. Bham had made over her lawn to the Reception Committee for the days on which the meetings would be held there.

3. At 2 PM, on the 7th February (the day on which Naziri Begum Saheba's letter was received), I received a telegram from Nafis Dulhan Saheba that she would arrive at the Howrah Station at 4 PM that day, accompanied by the President elect, Mrs. Khedive Jung Saheba, and few other ladies. Immediately I went to the station with some other ladies and received Nafis Dulhan Saheba and her party at the 1st class Ladies' Waiting Room. When we were conversing with the ladies and their luggage was being put into hackney carriages Mr. G.M. Arif came to the station and took away the ladies to his residence at Amratala Lane. Some time before they came here it was arranged by correspondence that Nafis Dulhan Saheba and her companions would stay for a day or two with Mr. Ariff who is a great friend of her husband, Moulvi Habibur Rahman Khan Shirwani Saheb and then she would come over to stay with me at the school which was converted into a guest house for the time being and Mrs. Khedive Jung Saheba would be the guest of Lady Shamsul Huda. This being the arrangement previously made I raised no objection to the ladies' going to Mr. Ariff's place. I mention this because several ladies have found fault with me permitting Mr. Ariff to take the ladies to his place.

On the 8th instant at about 10 AM Nafis Dulhan Saheba with a companion of Mrs. Khedive Jung and Naziri Begum called upon me at the school and informed me to my utter surprise, that the conference could not be held at 8 Ripon Street as some people had objection to go there. As I was not in a position to say anything without consulting the members of the Reception

Committee it was arranged that Nafis Dulhan Saheba and others would again call in the afternoon to discuss the matter. They accordingly called when many members of the Reception Committee previously proposed to hold the conference elsewhere. As invitation cards had already been issued and there was no time to make other arrangements we could not agree to any change of site. Nafis Dulhan Saheba, however, insisted upon holding the conference elsewhere and undertook to make the necessary arrangements herself. The meeting broke up late in the evening without coming to any decision. At the time of leaving, the companion of Mrs. Khedive Jung Saheba and Nafis Dulhan told me that they and their party would come the next day to stay with us at our place. On the 9th instant Mrs. Abdul Latif Ahmad, the Chairman of the Reception Committee, accompanied by me and three other ladies, called at the residence of Mr. G.H. Ariff to fetch Mrs. Khedive Jung Saheba, Nafis Dulhan Saheba and others. We were however coldly received and repeatedly told that they were coming over to our place themselves. When pressed to come with us they gave us to understand that they were going out somewhere and would call in the afternoon. Before they came, there assembled at the school a large number of members of our Anjuman and subsequently the Committee of the gentlemen also met there. On her arrival with her party Nafis Dulhan Saheba informed us that she had already arranged to hold the conference at the Galstaun Park and had issued notice to this effect. It was pointed out that her action was wholly unconstitutional, that it was the function of the Reception Committee to select a suitable site and to make the necessary arrangements for holding the conference, that she had no right to hold the conference wherever she liked, upsetting all our arrangements for holding the conference, and outraging our feelings. But all our arguments and entreaties were of no avail. Nafis Dulhan Saheba persisted in doing everything in her own way. The meeting broke up after 11 PM when Nafis Dulhan Saheba left with her party. It was arranged that our final decision would be communicated to them the next morning. After they left, the matter was again discussed [by] both the ladies and the gentlemen present, at their respective meetings and it was concluded that it would be most undesirable as well as improper to acquiesce in such arbitrary and unconstitutional proceedings. Accordingly, on the following morning, a telephone message was sent to Nafis Dulhan Saheba to the effect that the members of the Reception Committee would not cooperate with her in holding the conference at the Galstaun Park, nor would they attend the meeting.

5. From about 11 AM on the 10th instant over 200 Mussalman ladies, who unaware of what had happened, had gone to 8 Ripon Street, called upon

me and on knowing all the circumstances preferred to return home rather than attend the conference at the Galstaun Park. In order to give some consolation to the disappointed ladies and to explain the deplorable circumstances which prevented us from joining the conference, to those that were unaware of them, it was decided to hold on the 12th instant, under the auspices of the local Anjuman-i-Khawateen Islam a general meeting of the Muslim ladies of Calcutta in the pandal at 8 Ripon Street. It was an agreeable surprise to us to find that this meeting was attended by more than six hundred ladies, an attendance perhaps not exceeded at any meeting of Muslim ladies held anywhere in India. Among others the following ladies were present.

Nawab Begum Baduruddin Haidar, Mrs. Abdul Karim, Umme Salma Begum (mother of Lady Shamsul Huda), Mrs. A.K. Fazlul Haq, Mrs. Abdur Rahman Buksh Ellahi, Mrs. Khan Bahadur Daudur Rahman, Mrs. Khan Bahadur Md. Korshed, Afsar Jahan Begum (sister of prince Mirza Akram Hossein Bahadur), Mrs. Abdul Latif Ahmed, Mrs. Ahmed Zakaria, Mrs. Shamsul Ulama Velayet Hossain, Mrs. Shamsul Ulama Zulfiqar Ali, Mrs. Shamsul Ulama Kamaluddin Ahmed, Mrs. Kabiruddin Ahmed, Mrs. Matloob Ahmed Khan Chaudhury, Mrs. Syed Muhtashem Hossein, Mrs. Abbad, Mrs. Abul Kalam Azad, Mrs. Syed Abdus Salek, Mrs. Anisuzzaman Khan, Mrs. Syed Fida Ali, Mrs. Musaji Salehji, Mrs. Solaiman Salehyi, Mrs. Ahmed Duply Mir Qasem Ebrahim Salhji, Mrs. Ahmed Ibrahim Salehji, Mrs. Ebrahim Salehji, Mrs. Md. Elias and Miss Rabia Elias, Mrs. Saleh Md. Daud, Mrs. Mulla Mahmud, Mrs. Ahman Md. Mamsa, Mrs. Osman Jamal, Mrs. Abul Muzaffar Ahmed, Mrs. Hedayet Ali, Mrs. Azizul Kader, Mrs. Nashiruddin Ahmed, Mrs. Baker Shirazi, Mrs. Murtaza Shustari, Mrs. Bashir Mirza, Mrs. Aladin Chandoo, Mrs. Abdul Ghaffar, Mrs. Derajuddin Ahmed, Mrs. Abu Imam, Mrs. Mokarem, Mrs. Habib Mohamed, Mrs. Shaikh Abdullah (Aligarh), Fatema Arzoo Begum (Bhopal), Momena Begum (Bulandshahar), Sister of Mr. Zahid Suharawardy, Mrs. Aga Md Karim, Mrs. Qutbuddin Ahmed, Mrs. Ihtisham Rasul, Mrs. Abdul Aziz Khan (Gaya), Mrs. Mirza Md. Khorasani and Mrs. Mirza Mehdi Khorasani.

Does not this unsurprisingly large attendance of Muslim ladies belonging to the various sections of the community conclusively prove that our arrangements had the hearty approval of the Muslim ladies of Calcutta and there could be no objection to attending any meeting held at Mrs. Bham's place? In fact the only objection communicated to us either verbally or in writing came from Mrs. Soliaman Ariff (Naziri Begum Saheba). This, we have reason to believe was entirely due to family differences between the Ariffs and the Bhams, who were related to one another by marriage. It is very

much to be regretted that designing people created so much unpleasantness in order to satisfy some personal grudge. I should not omit to mention that notice of all the meetings of the Anjuman-i-Khawateen at which the arrangements for holding the conference were discussed and settled were sent to Naziri Begum Saheba, who is one of the Vice Presidents of the Anjuman-i-Khawateen but she did not care to attend any of the meetings. Thus she is to blame and not we, for not knowing in time where the conference was to have been held.

At the aforesaid meeting Mrs. Abdul Latif Ahmed occupied the President's chair. First of all, I read out a statement of what led to our holding aloof from the All India Muslim Ladies' Conference. The business of the meeting was then gone through.

Two resolutions were adopted at the meeting, the first expressing regret at the death of Suhrawardiya Begum and sympathising with the bereaved family and the second approving the action of the Reception Committee in not participating at the Galstaun Park meeting. Papers were read by some ladies on female education and cognate subjects.

My attention has been drawn to the reports of the proceedings of the meetings of the conference held at the Galstaun Park published in some of the newspapers. I regret to have to say that the reports are not correct. From information received from most reliable sources, it has been ascertained that the first day's meeting was attended by only 15 ladies, of whom several were non-Mussalman. Such being the case, is it not most misleading to state that the "spacious pandal erected for the purpose was packed to the full with ladies resident in Calcutta and those who had come from distant parts of India?" The attendance at the second day's meeting according to information received from some of those who were present was 25 and at the third day's meeting only 10, though it has been published in the papers that the latter was attended by about 400 ladies. Mrs. Shaikh Abdullah Saheba of Aligarh and Fatema Arzoo Begum Saheba, sister of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Private Secretary of Her Highness the Begum of Bhopal, corroborated statements made by other eye-witnesses as regard the attendance at the meetings of the conference. It has been stated that when the President elect arrived at the pandal, Mrs. G.H. Ariff in a speech in English welcomed her on behalf of the ladies of Calcutta. May we enquire whether any new reception committee was formed and when and by whom Mrs. Ariff was authorised to play the part of hostess and welcome the visitors on behalf of the ladies of Calcutta? It has been said that purdah arrangements were perfect. If our information is correct, such arrangements are not possible in a place like the Galstaun Park which is overlooked by

highly built houses on all sides and inside which there is a three-storied building occupied by different people.

In conclusion, I wish to make it clear that there was absolutely no objection on public grounds to hold the conference at 8 Ripon Street and it is our firm conviction that the unfortunate attitude which Mrs. Khedive Jung and Nafis Dulhan were led to take up was due to the influence and out of deference to the feelings of their hosts, viz. the Ariff family, and as outsiders they were not in a position to gauge the public feelings. We were the best judges of the local circumstances and when we assured them that there could be no objection to holding the conference at the place which we had selected and as events have proved the Muslim ladies of Calcutta did not hesitate to attend a meeting in large numbers at that place, they should have been satisfied with our assurance.

(Mrs.) R.S. Hossein
Hon. Secretary
Anjuman-i-Khawateen Islam
Calcutta
The 18th February, 1919

Letter 36: To Mujibur Rahman

April 4, 1919

THE MUSLIM LADIES' CONFERENCE: A REJOINDER

To
The Editor,
The Mussalman

Sir, Anent the letter of Nafis Dulhan Saheba published in your last issue I beg to observe that she has taken unnecessary pains to prove that the President Mrs. Khedive Jung Bahadur had nothing whatever to do with the change of the site. In my lengthy letter which was published in *The Mussalman* of the 21st February and a gist of which appeared in some of the local dailies, nowhere did I say that the aforesaid lady was responsible for the change of site.

It is entirely incorrect on the part of Nafis Dulhan Saheba to assert that she changed the site after due consultation with me and after I had explicitly

informed her that I would have no objection whatever to the changes or that the ladies of the Reception Committee approved of the new site. As a matter of fact, I or the members of the Reception Committee never agreed to the change of site and it is utterly ridiculous for her to say that the ladies of the Reception Committee approved of the new site, because on the evening of the 8th February, i.e. only 2 days previous to the conference, when she broached the subject she could not mention where her "new site" was to be, it was only on the evening of the 9th she sprung a surprise on us by announcing that she had fixed Galstaun Park for the purpose, having already issued earlier in the afternoon, without our knowledge, printed placards to that effect. How absurd her contention is will be evident from the fact that if it were true that I and the Reception Committee had agreed to the change of site, the necessary announcement would have been made over my signature, and [it] is passed our comprehension why it should have been at all necessary for the notice to be issued over her signature.

Nafis Dulhan Saheba mentions that "the same thing happened at a previous conference at Delhi, where a man of light and leading like Hazikul Mulk Hakim Md. Ajmal Khan immediately and readily changed the proposed site of the meeting as it did not meet with our approval." Possibly the objections over the site originally chosen at Delhi were valid and hence it had to be changed, but in our case no valid objections were put forward and we were therefore not bound to comply with unreasonable requests merely to please Mr. Golam Hossain Ariff and his family who were the hosts of Nafis Dulhan Saheba and her party. It is also possible that Hakim Ajmal Khan Saheb, who had organised the session at Delhi in February 1917, was too far accommodating and deferential but she cannot expect the same treatment everywhere and others may not care to let her have too much of her own way in all things. I understand similar troubles arose last year also at Lahore but Abroo Begum Saheba, the President of the session, managed to smooth over the difficulties by her tact and firmness. Incidentally, it may be noted that the above instances furnish a good example of Nafis Dulhan Saheba's meddlesome habit at the eleventh hours or taking the most charitable view of the matter, they show a singular want of care on her part in not instructing local organisers beforehand what requirements ought to be kept in view selecting a site.

In making the assertion that most of the ladies of our Reception Committee took part in the Galstaun Park conference Nafis Dulhan Saheba is so wide of the mark that she was able to trot out only 3 names, viz. Mrs. Hakam, Mrs. Wahab and Mrs. Rasul, although the committee consisted of 26 members. It is immaterial to our purpose if a few members deserted our camp and joined

the other side. It is natural for some people to be actuated by motives and influenced by considerations other than those of loyalty to one's party or country or nationality. What those motives and considerations were in the case of the aforesaid ladies it is not my business to say, but this much I can say that they had their ample reward in having their names prominently mentioned in the proceedings which Nafis Dulhan Saheba published in *Tahzibun Niswan* and probably in other Urdu periodicals, and they will assuredly have the further pleasure of finding their names prominently mentioned in the Annual Report of the conference when it is issued in due course. I should mention that although Mrs. Hakam was a member of the Reception Committee, the other two ladies were not. Mrs. Wahab was only a volunteer and followed her sister Mrs. Hakam. Mrs. Rasul (who by the way is not to be mistaken for the wife of the distinguished and public spirited barrister of that name whose recent death we all deplore) was also a volunteer and was not even a member of the local Anjuman-i-Khawateen at that time. These two probably were the only secedes out of a band of about 40 lady volunteers we had.

I cannot understand why Nafis Dulhan Saheba has chosen to fasten on me the charge of holding a "counter conference." In the notice issued by me convening a general meeting of the Muslim ladies of Calcutta under the auspices of the local Anjuman-i-Khawateen on the 12th February I did not call it a conference and in the proceedings published by me in your paper I did not call it conference. In this meeting which, I repeat, was attended by over 600 Muslim ladies, a resolution was adopted approving the action of the Reception Committee in not joining the Galstaun Park meetings, and if indeed it was a fact, as stated by Nafis Dulhan, that the ladies of the Reception Committee had approved of the new site, it was the right and proper occasion for any member of the Reception Committee and practically all of whom were present there or indeed any one from the audience to have approved the motion. The unanimous adoption of the resolution effectually proves the hollowness of the claim set up by Nafis Dulhan.

Nafis Dulhan Saheba has a fling at me when she says that by holding the "counter-conference" I had evidently to find some way for accounting satisfactorily for the contribution of Rs. 1, 500 from Mrs. Abdul Latif Ahmed and other "generous donations" from "many other ladies of Calcutta." As I have said in my previous letter, our arrangements were complete in all respects for which we had already incurred heavy expenditure but everything was spoiled by the unnecessary interference of Nafis Dulhan at the last moment. I had myself very little handling of the money; practically the

whole of the expenses were incurred through the hands of the male Managing Committee, of which Nawab Nasirul Mamalk Mirza Shujat Ali Baig Khan Bahadur, was the President and Mr. Mowdud Rahman, B.A., Bar-at-Law was the Secretary. A regular account has been kept of the receipts and disbursements together with vouchers in support of the same at my office. No one regrets more than myself—it was I who by unremitting labour raised the necessary funds—that all this money should have gone for nothing, and I have no hesitation in laying the responsibility for this fearful wastage of public money on the shoulders of Nafis Dulhan.

In conclusion I would reiterate my conviction that all this trouble was due to the fact that Nafis Dulhan Saheba allowed herself to be unduly influenced by her old friends and hosts, Mr. Golam Hossain Ariff and his family, who are not in friendly terms with the Bham family at whose place we had arranged to hold the conference. It is highly to be regretted that the claims of friendship and hospitality should have outweighed her sense of public duty. She has more than requited the hospitality she and her [team] received, by the lavish praise she has bestowed on her hosts in the columns of the Urdu papers in which she has published the detailed proceedings of the Galstaun Park meeting.

(Mrs.) R.S. Hossein
Honorary Secretary
Anjuman-i-Khawateen Islam
Calcutta
The 1st April, 1919

Letter 40: To Mujibur Rahman

Monday,
The Mussalman, 20th Anniversary Number, December 6, 1926
Mrs. R.S. Hossein's Letter

It is a well-known fact that no nation can rise without the help of its literature and without newspaper no literature can thrive. Maulvi Mujibur Rahman Saheb realised this truth in his heart of hearts long ago and started *The Mussalman* at a time when there was hardly any paper for Muslim interests in Bengal and when Bengal itself was in chaos and confusion about the "Partition of Bengal," just like our revered prophet (on whom be peace), who was born in the dark ages of Arabia to save the human beings at large.

I am a constant reader of *The Mussalman* since the very day of its birth and I am glad to notice that it is going on harmoniously on the same path serving our community, without caring for favour or fearing frowns. The path chosen by *The Mussalman* is not smooth and strewn with flowers, but full of thorns and rough stumbling blocks. Anybody who has some experience about public work knows very well how difficult it is to serve one's country especially when the interests of the people clash with those of their Government's. For a newspaper, the task is still harder as it has to face various unfavourable circumstances including uncharitable criticism. Thank God, in spite of all sorts of trouble, *The Mussalman* has victoriously completed the 20th year of its life. I remember to have said the very thing (that *The Mussalman* neither cares for favour nor fears frowns etc.) 20 years ago; and I believe the old file of the paper may still contain the issue in which my letter was published.

Being an old reader I have every right to congratulate *The Mussalman* most heartily and I hope its worthy editor will be pleased to accept the same. May God grant Maulvi Mujibur Rahman Saheb long life and prosperity to perform Diamond Jubilee of this paper! Amen!

While appreciating most sincerely its service of 20 long years, I must also complain that *The Mussalman* in doing its duty by half, i.e. while serving our ship-wrecked community most earnestly it is neglecting the female portion of the society. Specially, by God's grace the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School and the Anjuman-i-Khawateen Islam Calcutta (started by my humble self, ten years ago) have been able to change the mentality of Calcutta a great deal, though indirectly (and why not also directly?) and silently. The Muslim population of Calcutta may or may not admit it but "Fact is Fact." Sixteen years ago when the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School was started, there was not a single Muslim girls' school in this City of Palaces. In 1914 when we were having the 3rd function of annual Prize distribution of this School, Miss L. Brock, the then Inspectress of Schools for Presidency and Burdwan Divisions, said in her speech that four years ago (i.e. in 1909) she had tried to start a school for Muslim girls with the help of (the late) Mr. Justice Sharifuddin but failed. But now the same Calcutta can boast of half a dozen Muslim girls' schools aided by Government, one Muslim Female Training School, entirely financed by Government, and about one dozen Muslim girls' schools started by the Corporation of Calcutta. I may be pardoned when I feel proud to say that at least four of these school's Head Mistresses are the ex-pupils of the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School, who are managing those schools satisfactorily. So, you see, field is now quite ready for taking up the cause of female re-generation.

I now conclude, congratulating the editor of *The Mussalman* again.

(Mrs.) R.S. Hossain
Calcutta

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