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Research Article




Religion in Begum Rokeya's Literature: Resemblance with the Marxist Narrative

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Abstract

Against the dark background of the social exclusion of women, especially Muslim women, Begum Rokeya, the pioneer of women's emancipation in Bengal, British India in the early 20th century, stood with her enlightenment like a beacon and pushed her way for women's emancipation from the depths of misery. She lived in a society shrouded by blind religious beliefs and practices where women were deprived of rights and freedom, and were repressed and oppressed in the name of religion. Despite her prevailing leanings toward religious beliefs and practices, she found that a powerful obstacle to women's freedom stemmed from the misinterpretation of culturally biased religious norms, notions and intentions. She was a strong advocate for the emancipation of the society and especially women of her time. She eloquently expressed her opinion with regard to

religious rituals, prevailing sentiments and general public psyche in practice that hindered the progress and emancipation of women as well as the society. Her opinions, propositions, criticisms, and activism in this regard surprisingly resembled to a great extent that of the predominant Marxist views. In this article, her views and opinions on the dissemination and practice of religious teachings and rituals in the context of the marginalization of women as well as society have been examined and compared with that of the Marxist thoughts, especially those on religion through textual analysis and Marxist allusions.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Progress, Patriarchy, Marxism, Religion, Society, British Bengal, Education, Human Rights, Colonial Impact

Begum Rokeya, the vanguard of women's emancipation in early twentieth-century Bengal, lived at a time when society was blanketed in superstition and blind religious belief. It was a dark period in history in terms of the condition of women, particularly for the Muslim women of what was then British Bengal. Muslim women were generally denied education, social freedom, and independent identity, and were confined within the four walls of the home under the auspices of purdah rituals. Religion played a big part for this plight of women. In the name of religion, deprivation and exploitation of women were justified by the patriarchs and fundamentalists. In a society where education was only for a select few upper-class people, religion was accepted by the masses as dogma rather than influenced by its enlightened and humanistic aspects. As a result, the powerful sects of society often used religion for vested interest. Muslim women of this age, undermined by the dogmatic and extremely mechanical interpretation of religious rituals and shackled by the fundamental and patriarchal social status quo, were almost entirely ostracized by the larger society and encapsulated within the walls of the home. Against this background of the oppression of women in society, Begum Rokeya strongly advocated the emancipation of women and society as a whole. She became known as a rational, scientific, progressive thinker who took up her pen against the abuse of religion by opposing the patriarchs and fundamentalists in a colonized, capitalist-feudal society where women were universally considered subservient.

Begum Rokeya was born on December 9, 1880 in the village of Pairabond in Rangpur District (now Bangladesh), a very remote, backward region where the light of the modern world had not yet arrived. She was born into a conservative Zamindar family, where there was a strict prohibition on education for girls, "except for learning the Qur'an by rote without knowing its meaning" (Quayum 180). She married Syed Shakhawat Hossain in 1896, aged just 16, but lost him soon after in 1909, aged just 29. After that, she lived alone in Kolkata to fight for education and freedom for women, especially Muslim women. She fought for the cause of women at a time when all of society was shrouded in the darkness of superstition and religious gossip. Overlooking the denunciations of patriarchal fundamentalist society, a woman, particularly as a Muslim woman, Begum Rokeya displayed an act of unimaginable courage and determination to champion women's education at a time when Muslim women were largely within the four walls and "any attempt to educate them was seen as blasphemous" (Quayum 139). Against this background, Rokeya found her way of activism against the patriarchal social system through her writing. As Jahan (qtd in Miah) mentioned:

She did not write primarily to entertain. Rather, she marshaled her thoughts and arguments to question the existing order of things, to raise doubts about seemingly accepted facts, and to motivate people to take the necessary actions to change customs she considered evil and unjust (158-159).

In a capitalist society, patriarchy and fundamentalism get united to oppress, suppress, and exploit women.

Both social leaders and those who deemed themselves custodians of Islam in Muslim Bengal were opposed to female education and women's involvement in public life and used pseudo-religious arguments to deprive them of many of their legitimate rights. So Rokeya had to fight social mythologies and counter quasi-Islamic, misogynistic arguments against female education (Hasan 175).

Rokeya has stood her entire life as a steadfast soldier in the fight against patriarchal thinking and religious imposition. She dedicated her life to the emancipation of women, even if it meant being at loggerheads with society. She vowed, "We must declare war on society... We do not want peace, lifeless as death" (Rokeya 318). She has endured chronic social criticism throughout her life for opposing powerful patriarchs and fundamentalists. But instead of flinching, she implored in a determined voice, "If you want to work for the society, make your skin so thick that blame, shame, neglect, insult cannot hit that anyway. Make your skull so strong that storm, thunder, lightning all can be resisted back" (qtd in Sufi 54).

Her lifelong striving for women's emancipation was met with the violent outrage of religious zealots. She grieved: "For 25 years I took curses from die-hard fundamentalists for serving society" (Rokeya 381). She has even been defamed as "anti-society and anti-religion" (Sufi 54) and criticized as "a shameless woman, a misanthrope, a radical misguided by the proselytizing propaganda of Christian missionaries, and a sexist" (Jahan 53).

Although almost a century has passed since her death, what she envisioned and proposed more than a century ago cannot be fully addressed and accomplished even today. In *Sultana's Dream* (1908), Begum Rokeya said, "No woman was to be allowed to marry before she was twenty-one" (Rokeya 480). This is yet to be achieved in many countries including Bangladesh where in the name of "special situations", under aged children are allowed in marriage.

In a capitalist country like Bangladesh, patriarchy is ingrained in the social psyche, where fundamentalism has a strong grip on social and political decisions. And the fanatical fundamentalists are trying relentlessly to resist women's progress and stop the progressive movement and thought. After Rokeya's death, almost a century has passed. Still, Rokeya's teachings for women's education and emancipation are being targeted and attacked by the fundamentalists as happened in her lifetime. Not long ago, under the pretext of public appeasement, her signature writings with progressive elements have been substituted from the secondary and higher secondary level Bengali textbooks with writings that does not represent her properly, a similar denial she used to receive during her life time.

Marxism is a philosophy that generally supports atheistic views. Lenin said, "Atheism is an integral part of Marxism" (5), nevertheless "Marxism was not anti-religious" (4), Marxism declared religion a "private matter" (3) and said about "granting liberty of worship" (6) and "to avoid offending the religious sentiments of believers" (6). Begum Rokeya was a very devout Muslim, "a

practicing Muslim who prayed five times a day” (Quayum 143). Though religious, however, she was a freethinker and far removed from dogmatism. She had a very progressive mentality that dealt rationally with the religious issues and explained the religious points with logic and opposed the abuse of religion against the emancipation of women. Although Marxism advocates atheism and Rokeya was a practicing believer, her progressive and rational view and ideologies on religion are to some extent consistent with Marxist thinking on religion.

This paper analyzes Begum Rokeya’s account of the misinterpretation and abuse of religion in her contemporary era of feudal-capitalist-colonialized-patriarchal-fundamental society where women have been oppressed, suppressed, exploited, deprived, and imprisoned in the name of religion. This paper offers textual analysis of the literature of Begum Rokeya and some examples of her life in the light of Marxist theory (mainly Lenin’s “Religion”) (1933) to support the point.

Lenin said, “We know perfectly well that the clergy, the landlords, and the bourgeoisie all claimed to speak in the name of God, in order to protect their own interests as exploiters” (47).

The literature of Begum Rokeya offers many practical examples of this statement about the use of religion to deceive and exploit people. Begum Rokeya persistently sought through her writings to draw people’s attention to how religion was used to deceive people, particularly to dominate and rob women. Rokeya said:

We could never raise our heads against slavery, the main reason being that whenever a sister tried to raise her head, it was immediately put down under the pretense of religion or by the weapon of the sayings of Scripture (610).

Rokeya was able to diagnose that the misinterpretation of religion by the patriarchs and the fundamentalists for their interest was one of the main obstacles on the way to women’s emancipation. Rokeya challenged the abuse of religion against women by opposing the prevailing patriarchal fundamentalism: “Men are dominating women under the pretext of religion. So I have become bound to argue over religion” (612).

The above assertions depict the capitalist-fundamentalist society of the then British Bengal where religion was used as an instrument in the hands of the patriarchs and the fundamentalists to enslave and confine women.

Lenin said,

The orthodox faith... teaches to bear misfortune “uncomplainingly”! What a profitable faith it is, indeed, for the governing classes! ... it is, quite natural for the exploiters to sympathize with a religion that teaches us to bear “uncomplainingly” the woes of hell on earth, in the hope of an alleged paradise in the skies (36).

Begum Rokeya lived in a time when it was quite normal in the patriarchal capitalist system to take everything that was said in the name of religion without complaint. The women of her day used to be deceived, humiliated and degraded by whatever was imposed or taught on them in the name of religion. It was a very daring task for anyone in this society to speak out publicly against the patriarchal religious teachings. However, Rokeya’s thoughts and courage were groundbreaking and radical in the context of her time and beyond. Rokeya did not accept the established patriarchal religious teachings without complaint. Rather, she vividly expressed her progressive attitude by questioning and protesting the logic of patriarchal religious ideas. Rokeya said:

Sisters, you see these scriptures are but a few rules written by men. What you hear from the male saints might be different if what you heard from the female saints...If God were to send a representative to oppress women, it would not be limited to Asia alone...Anyway, we're going to tolerate the supremacy of the men no longer bowing our heads in the name of religion. And note that where religious ties are stricter, women are more oppressed (611). She did not even hesitate to argue with logic against the core theory of religion about the creation of men and women. She said:

We have been hearing from the grandmothers that it is God's wish that women should be dominated by men – God created men first, afterward, women were created to serve men. But I am not ready to believe that. Because grandmothers got this knowledge from the men. The men surely say this for their own interest that women are born only to give service to men (605).

Begum Rokeya voiced her rational criticism not only against the patriarchal interpretations of Islam but also against the patriarchal interpretations of Hinduism, the two dominant religions in South Asia of the time. In Hinduism, *Ramayana* is one of the greatest religious books and Hindu women are taught the story of Sita as she is considered one of the holiest and most dedicated wives in Hindu religious mythology. Begum Rokeya has criticized the depiction of Sita's submission to her husband as the pinnacle of chastity despite her husband's humiliating treatment. Begum Rokeya criticized the portrayal of Sita as a devoted wife and as an ideal for Hindu women. She noted that the patriarchal hegemony over women was very clear and indicative, even as it portrayed women as worshiping idols. Rokeya said:

To teach women the ethics of an ideal wife, the older generation shows "Sita" as a role model... But the way Ram behaved towards Sita made it clear that the relationship between Sita and Ram was like a relationship between a doll and a boy is. .. Ramachandra showed his husbandhood completely!! ... Sita also had feelings, he did not want to understand that, because if he tried to understand, he could not fully use his husbandhood (26).

She also criticized the widespread repulsive social custom of early marriage among Hindu girls. She said, "If Hindu girls are not married, the family loses its honor, it was also said by the men" (613). She satirically pointed out that even behind the traditional concept of beautifying Hindu women, there is an evil patriarchal purpose. With sarcasm, Rokeya commented:

Why is it forbidden in Hinduism to cut the hair of married women? Have you ever thought about it? When married women's husbands get angry, they can easily hit their wives by tangling their long hair in their hands. ... shame on us! How much we take care of this hair since childhood! (606).

Thus, Begum Rokeya was vigilant in criticizing religiously imposed hegemonic pretenses of social norms regarding women, regardless of the religions of her day.

In the most fearless voice, Rokeya pointed a finger at men of the society for deceiving women through the use of religion. She went so far as to question the origin of religious scriptures to search for the discriminatory religious ethos towards women. She dared to proclaim, "Men proclaimed these religious books to be God's commandments to deceive us" (Rokeya 610). It is crucial to understand this argument in the context of the time and society in which she lived and from the perspective of an almost non-existent educated Muslim female intelligentsia. Living in

such a backward era of religious blindness, she showed great courage in identifying the divine commandments as obstacles to woman's emancipation. Similar ideas were repeated in the Marxist view, "The emancipation of women from age-old slavery is in direct contradiction to religion" (Woods para. 38).

Marx (qtd in Lenin) said, "Religion is the opium of the people" (12). Lenin said, "Religion is a kind of spiritual Intoxicant" (7) because it directs our understanding away from the world and towards an otherness, about which we can know nothing and about which it is useless even to ask questions (Woods para. 114).

Marxism thus refers to religion as a means of diverting the attention of ordinary people from their worldly problems, blinding and diverting them from their real problems to an imaginary paradise where the workers, the poor and the common people go through drudgery, deprivation and exploitation and endure them patiently with the hope of reward in the hereafter.

Religion teaches those who toil in poverty all their lives to be resigned and patient in this world and consoles them with the hope of reward in heaven (Lenin 7).

Rokeya illustrated how the temptation for reward and fear of punishment in the afterlife weaken people's efforts to improve their life in the world and make them more likely to spend their short life on earth anyway to enjoy eternal life in heaven. And she showed how differently the concept of the afterlife works for men and women. For men, it was the lure of reward,

After the end of our limited life on earth, heaven in the afterlife is reserved for us. Who else goes there beside us? Life in the world is very short, who wants that? After somehow surviving life on earth, eternal heaven and numerous fairies await us in the other world (Rokeya 435).

Whereas for women, it was the fear of hell, Whenever we look at the past and the present uplifting our head, instantly the society scares us "Remain asleep as you are, otherwise see, hell is waiting for you" (Rokeya 610).

Thus in the prevailing patriarchal-fundamental psyche, women were threatened with the consequences of raising their heads not only in the world they lived in, but also in the hereafter. Patriarchal society used the concept of "life after death" to exploit and terrify women just as they used other aspects of religion. Although bound by broader religious beliefs and customs as a practicing Muslim, she could not help but criticize society's de facto religious status quo, alienating and marginalizing women, depriving them of their spontaneous and natural position, and marginalizing them as a social being. As a secular thinker, Rokeya criticized people's tendency to delve into thoughts of life after death. She urged to rid people of religious opium and awaken them to take action and find meaning in their lives on this earth. Lenin spoke of waking people from "religious slumber" (31) and according to him "to set up a heaven on earth is more important to us than ... the imaginary paradise in the sky" (10). As mentioned, "Where religion teaches us to lift our eyes to the heavens, Marxism tells us to fight for a better life on earth" (Woods para. 27).

Lenin spoke of "ignorance or insanity in the shape of religion" (9). Abundant instances of ignorant and insane application of religion prevalent in her time could be found in Begum Rokeya's literature. To her, being religious means knowing the true nature of religion. The observance of religious rituals by the common people, who, without knowing the meaning, uttered only a few memorized Arabic words, was criticized by her: "(I think) prayer cannot be done by only having a

few memorized words like parrots” (Rokeya 190). She pointed out that this lack of knowledge of the true religious principles produced ignorant fanatics who distorted religion in their foolish ways. She said, “The bigoted Muslim clerics are protecting Islam and Sharia (Islamic law) by gagging Sharia itself” (Rokeya 402). The supposedly Muslim society ignored the true teachings of Islam, which recommended education for girls, even though they considered themselves diehard Muslims. Rokeya said:

The Muslims who get ready to sacrifice their lives in the name of their Prophet (or for the insult of a brick of a broken mosque)... our dear Prophet has said that educating girls is a “foroz” (must duty) but why are they indifferent to girls’ education? (227).

In her criticism of the delusional interpretation of religious rituals and duties, Begum Rokeya also drew attention to the fact that Muslims disregard the religious instruction to fast in the month of Ramadan. Ramadan is a month of self-restraint. During this month, Muslims are instructed to control their worldly desires and give their full attention to prayer to God. However, Begum Rokeya observed the opposite. She said:

Fasting teaches us restraint. If done properly, this fast has a beneficial effect on the social, physical, mental, or spiritual side. Everyone has to exercise restraint. It is a matter of regret that our food craving increases the most in the month of Ramadan. We are supposed to spend the whole day praying to God with a pure soul by abstaining from worldly chores, but instead of doing this, we end the whole day preparing Iftar (evening snacks). Instead of suppressing food cravings, we increase our food cravings, even more, this month (Rokeya 193).

Begum Rokeya also showed how many Muslims sometimes resorted to hypocrisy to make women’s life more miserable. She pointed out:

Mr. Khotkhote ... hates all the Hindu customs very much. But he did not give his consent to the proposal of his 13 years old widowed sister’s marriage by saying, “As we are living in a Hindu majority country, we are bound to show our respect to their customs and rituals. No widow of an aristocratic family can remarry” (Rokeya 443).

Begum Rokeya further pointed out that due to the lack of true religious knowledge, women tend to be the victims of religious abuse. She recalled how her older sister Karimunnessa’s intellectual potential was crushed under this ignorant, misogynistic application of religion: “If society had not suppressed her, Karimunnessa could have been a bright star of the country” (Rokeya 233). Thus, both Rokeya and her sister testify to how women’s potential has been destroyed by blind religious imposition. Countless women of that time suffered the same fate. Marxist analysis has observed a similar phenomenon in which women become victims of religion: “Generations of religion have set the seal on the unhappy lot of women” (Woods para. 38).

Rokeya showed that the excess of purdah practice was a result of misconception and misapplication of religion to isolate and imprison women. In this context, she accused the Muslim population of religious illiteracy. She said, “Being locked within the four walls, deprived of all rights, cannot be called purdah. Do you read the Quran Sharif? Or do you hang it around your neck as a talisman?” (Rokeya 436).

In her childhood, she had to be burdened by the strict custom of purdah, when she was not even allowed to meet strange women visiting her house and had to hide from them to keep

up the purdah ritual, let alone from any man except her father and her brothers. She grieved: “For all my life I was imprisoned in the iron chest by the oppression of strict purdah” (Rokeya 225). So, she boldly worked throughout her life to eliminate the strict version of Purdah, which she terms as the —purdah of ignorance (Tharu and Lalita 159).

Her secular and humanistic perspective on religion has been made clear by this statement about purdah, “In my consideration, she maintains the real purdah, who considers all human beings as brothers and sisters” (Rokeya 189).

This rather unique interpretation of the purdah ritual is a reflection of her intellectual inclination towards the equal status of human beings, irrespective of religion, caste, and, all other divisive denominations and calling for equality for humanity. Marxist thought reflects on that similarly. Lenin said, “There must be no discrimination whatever in the rights of citizens on religious grounds. Even particulars concerning the religion of citizens on official documents must be completely done away with” (8).

That is, Marxism rejects any discrimination based on religious identity. Although Begum Rokeya lived during a turbulent period in Indian history when communalism and communal clashes were rampant, she upheld non-communalism throughout her life. Although she was a religious Muslim woman, in her eyes there was no discrimination between Hindus and Muslims and other religious people. She was a true patriot whose philosophy was the unity of all Native Indians regardless of religion. She said, “We should remember that we are not just Hindu or Muslim, Parsi or Christian, Bangalee, Mandraji, Marwari or Punjabi - we are Indian. First, we are Indians, then we are Muslims, Sikhs or anything else” (Rokeya 39). As stated, “She embodied the image of a true Indian woman in every sense—whatever that is truly India, is what she cultivated all her life” (Quayum 187).

In her novella, *Padmarag* Rokeya created a commune “Tarini Bhaban”, a real paradise, where instead of religious intolerance typical of her time, women of all religions lived together like sisters. She said, “What ideal equality! – Muslim, Hindu, Brahma, Christian, all are working together by cooperating as if they are blood siblings of one mother” (Rokeya 269).

As it was observed, “The writer was truly far from any dogmatism. Otherwise, it would not have been possible for her to make two Muslim women Rafia and Koresha say their prayers so easily on the carpet of a Hindu woman Tarini” (Hasan 30).

Not only did she want the unification of people of mainstream religions, she even welcomed the untouchables in Hinduism, who at the time were considered the extremely marginalized and outcasts of society. She recounted her love for a Chandal girl (lower caste, untouchable sect): “I could only love Champa because she was an untouchable Chandal girl” (Rokeya 430). Poet Mohitlal Majumder said about her, “Begum Rokeya is not only a Muslim woman, after reading her life history, I have got a strong belief that she is a perfect Bengali woman” (qtd in Syed 17). Lenin said, “Everyone must be absolutely free to profess whatever religion he likes, or to profess no religion, i.e., to be an atheist, as every Socialist usually is” (8).

Marxism advocates the right of everyone to believe in any religion or not to believe in any religion. Religion cannot be imposed upon people by force; It is the democratic right of people to believe or not to believe in a religion. However, atheists were never normally accepted on this subcontinent. In Islam in particular, “atheist” has become synonymous with a sinner. Even at this

late stage of the 21st century, talking about atheism has remained one of the taboos in this part of the world, especially in Muslim society. Begum Rokeya, surprisingly, was brave enough to accept the atheists as acceptable social beings without hesitation. She said, “Whatever you want to be, a lover, a religious person or an atheist, you must develop your spiritual culture” (Rokeya 41).

Begum Rokeya’s scientific knowledge and awareness were few of the reasons she was able to think so progressively and rationally. Begum Rokeya had no opportunity to receive formal schooling but was able to acquire knowledge of the history of science on his own. Living in an era when religious blindness was the norm, she was able to side with science in the conflict between science and religion. In her literature, she often cites the example of the great scientist Galileo, who was brutally punished by the Christian religious fanatics for having given a scientific explanation of the solar system. She said, “What good work could be done in this wretched world without suffering? ‘The earth has motion’ For saying this, the great Galileo was sent to the madhouse” (Rokeya 14). She continued, “Even after his release from prison, Galileo continued to say, ‘The earth is moving’” (Rokeya 20).

As Woods pointed out, “In the struggle of science against religion - that is to say, the struggle of rational thought against irrationality - Marxism sides wholeheartedly with science” (para. 115). Woods gave similar kinds of examples from the history of religion’s crushing of science:

In the history of ideas, the Church has always played a most reactionary role. Galileo Galilei was forced to recant his ideas under threat of torture by the Holy Inquisition. Giordano Bruno was burnt at the stake. Charles Darwin was mercilessly hounded by the religious Establishment in England for daring to challenge the accepted idea that God had created the world in six days (para 84).

As Rokeya has depicted religion’s use by the dominants and fundamentalists in the then Indian society, Rabindranath Tagore has also described a similar kind of scenario in pre-revolution Russia in his essay *Russia r Chithi* (Letter from Russia). Tagore described vividly how religion was used as an instrument of repression by the ruling class before the revolution and how after the revolution socialism changed the scenario. About pre-revolution Russia, Tagore said, “Religious blindness gripped the common people’s conscience from all sides like a python” (291). In Maxim Gorky’s novel *Mother*, we get a clear description of religion’s association with the rich people only in pre-revolution Russia, where the mother (the protagonist) realized that:

there was plenty of everything upon earth, but that the people were in want, and lived half starved, surrounded by inexhaustible wealth. In the cities stood churches filled with gold and silver, not needed by God, and at the entrance to the churches shivered the beggars vainly awaiting a little copper coin to be thrust into their hands. Formerly she had seen this, too—rich churches, priestly vestments sewed with gold threads, and the hovels of the poor, their ignominious rags. But at that time the thing had seemed natural; now the contrast was irreconcilable and insulting to the poor, to whom, she knew, the churches were both nearer and more necessary than to the rich (Gorky 611-612).

Tagore narrated how the same Russia transformed into a country worshipping humanity instead of religious babbity after the revolution. Tagore termed the new Russia after the revolution as “The Pilgrimage”. He said, “I have come to Russia – otherwise, I would not complete my

pilgrimage in this life” (Tagore 246). And he threw the universal question to the worshippers and users of religion without humanity, “Is religion contained only in the mantras, does God reside only in the temples” (Tagore 273). In socialist Cuba, prior to the revolution, religion was used to exploit the common people by the dominant class. Anu Muhammad in his book, *Biplober Swapnobhumi Cuba* (Cuba, The Dreamland of Revolution) said, “I have understood, how religion is used as a weapon by the imperialists and the enemy of the mass people for their propaganda, dominance, and repression of the common people” (96).

Thus, from these texts describing socialist states, we get to know about the religion’s use for the powerful’s interest as a weapon of deception in different countries as delineated by Rokeya in the British Bengal. Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* showed that religion was used as an instrument of exploitation by the bourgeoisie. Marx and Engels said, “for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation” (16).

Even the priests, who are supposed to devote themselves to God and the good of mankind, are sold in capitalism. Marx and Engels said, “It has converted ... the priest ... into its paid wage laborers” (16). Thus, in the bourgeoisie capitalist societies, religion has not been able to serve humanity, rather it has been used by the dominant classes to serve their interest. Marx and Engels said, “It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor” (15-16).

Begum Rokeya dedicated her life to the emancipation of women. Whatever obstacles stood in the way, she spoke out strongly against them. Even against religion! Religion has always been such a sensitive subject in this subcontinent and it still is today despite many advances in areas of science, technology, education etc. We can well imagine how daring a task it was for Begum Rokeya to speak out against religious abuse, when even today one of the most daring tasks is to speak about any aspect of religion, however illogical may be. Rokeya also strived to spread this rebellious spirit to all women in society so that they could fight against all barriers, including religion, because she believed that women’s progress means society’s progress. So she issued an urgent call for all women to rise up by overcoming fears of religious oppression. She said:

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

The spark Rokeya lit that day still enlightens countless women in society to stand up against all the wrongs done to them. In all women’s movements in Bangladesh, Begum Rokeya was the inspiration. As Sufia Kamal (qtd in Akhtar), a pre-eminent poet, and social and political activist in Bangladesh, said, “one day in the future society will recognize the value of [Rokeya’s] efforts, and scores of people will follow her in her footsteps” (298).

Begum Rokeya herself, a devout Muslim, was aware of the precise difference between true religion and religious abuse. Her attitude was not against religion, but against the abuse of religion through which the capitalists, the fundamentalists and the patriarchs persistently tried to block women’s progress and social progress in general. Rokeya’s thoughts on the true nature of religion are best understood through a single statement, “Our religion is based on Love and Truth. It is our religious duty to love one another and to be absolutely truthful” (Rokeya 484).

Despite being a practicing Muslim woman, the way she views and explains religious issues concerning women and social issues undoubtedly makes her a progressive thinker. She thought not only progressively but also rebelliously as she tirelessly and fearlessly sought to liberate women and society from religious abuse and religion's misuse. She demonstrated the spirit of a Marxist thinker in the way she treated religious issues, in a manner largely similar to how religious issues were treated in Marxism. This essay has analyzed Begum Rokeya's position on the misinterpretation and misapplication of religion and the progressive interpretation of religion in the light of Marxism. The way Begum Rokeya portrayed and protested the patriarchal and misogynist use of religion and fought to liberate women and society from it portrayed her as a rational and progressive thinker in keeping with the Marxist narratives, and her writings reflected spontaneously the call for the emancipation of women and society from the grip of religious abuse. Consequently, it can be assumed that in interpreting Begum Rokeya's perspective on religion, Marxist ideas are congruent and Marxist analyses are of high relevance.

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