

Early Feminists of Europe and Bengal– Mary Wollstonecraft and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain- A Comparative Study

Rashed Mahmud¹, Himadri Sekhar Roy^{2*} 

¹rashed.sust07@gmail.com

²roy-eng@sust.edu  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1704-5606>

*Corresponding Author: Himadri Sekhar Roy 

APA Citation:

Mahmud, R., & Roy, H .S) .2020 .(Early feminists of Europe and Bengal-Mary Wollstonecraft and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain :A comparative study .
Journal of English Language and Linguistics, 1(2), 93-114.

Received Date: November 28, 2020

Accepted Date: December 27, 2020

Abstract

In the context of East and West, Mary Wollstonecraft and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain are two pioneering and revolutionary writers in the history of women's rights movement. Though feminism as a movement started later than their era respectively, their intellectual contributions and the everlasting influence on the thinking of feminist concern placed them in a distinguished position of proto-feminists or mothers of modern feminism. Both of them fought for women's rights at such a time and social setting when women had no rights and opinions of their own, when they were not given many basic human and civil rights in comparison with men, when women had degraded social status and therefore the patriarchy was not ready to give them right honor. For this reason, despite a clear gap in the periods to which they lived, the similarity of their thinking and writings provides adequate ground to bring them under a study of comparison and contrast. The paper attempts to

make a critical study on Wollstonecraft and Rokeya with special focus on their thoughts on society and education, contributions on the emancipation and empowerment of women, role on the elimination of religious bigotry, and above all, their influence on the women's rights movement of Bangladesh.

Keywords: Awakening, Co-education, Emancipation, Economic independence, Empowerment, Women's rights movement

Introduction

Throughout human civilization, women have been victims to the patriarchal society. Either in relation to men or to the society at large, they were not considered as equal to men. Authors, from time to time, have given different views regarding the sufferings of women (Roy & Mahmud, 2015, p. 82). Some have tried to sympathize with them while others showed the way out. Most of them were male writers. Women did not appear at the scene till the late 18th century or who appeared, their writings were still conventional. They conformed to the societal norms and customs. The first one who dared to shock the patriarchal authority through her writings, in the west, was Wollstonecraft (1759-1797). A very similar role was played in the east by Hossain (1880-1932). They are the pioneering figures in the history of feminist movement even though they did not begin writing as part of the movement. Feminism as a movement started later on and from their writings, the feminists got the food for their movement.

Wollstonecraft and Rokeya lived and wrote in different localities and times respectively. Despite a clear gap in the periods to which they lived, their motto was one and the same to awaken and emancipate women by means of education and economic independence. In their writings, they criticized the patriarchy for not allowing women to exercise their rational minds. Side by side, they also chastised women for having some share in the subjugation process and accepting the degraded status. They urged women to become aware of their rights, receive education that was denied to them for ages,

enter into the workforce, get financially independent, take full responsibilities as human beings and to abolish their dependence on men, and thereby to bring about a revolution in the patriarchal perception of women.

Thoughts on Education and Society

Mary Wollstonecraft was mostly self-educated and her thoughts were ahead of her time. She thought that people were victims of a society that assigned them their roles, comforts, and satisfactions according to the false divisions of class, age and gender. She boldly asserted that every person has a right to independence of mind irrespective of men and women. She envisioned a society where women would receive education and work together with men as equal in every sphere of life. She also called for uniform citizenship for both genders, offering everyone a “direct share . . . in the deliberations of government” (Wollstonecraft, 1792, p.182). She opined that boys and girls should be taught together in the same institute– today it is familiar as co-education. She said, “Day schools, for particular ages, should be established by government, in which boys and girls might be educated together” (p.209). She believed in informal conversational methods of teaching with several physical exercises. She opined, “The elements of religion, history, the history of man, and politics, might also be taught by conversations, in the socratic form” (p.210).

Wollstonecraft’s view of education was influenced by a long Enlightenment tradition– manifested in the work of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Mary Astell and most importantly in Catherine Macaulay’s *Letters on Education*, published only two years before– which argued against the system of trivial female upbringing and asked for a sound and serious education for girls (Curthoys, 2010, p.37). She believed that the existing society based on privilege and inherited property worked to the advantage of men. Women did not have any right and were not allowed to vote. They had no opportunity to utilize their brain power in professional or academic roles. She said that in keeping women in the role of ‘convenient slaves’, and denying them financial independence, the society was wasting its assets. She proposed that

for careers and professions women should be trained in medicine (not merely nursing), midwifery, business, farming, shop-keeping, etc. Wollstonecraft (1972) said:

Women might certainly study the art of healing, and be physicians as well as nurses. And midwifery . . . They might, also, study politics, and settle their benevolence on the broadest basis . . . Business of various kinds, they might likewise pursue, if they were educated in a more orderly manner, which might save many from common and legal prostitution. (pp. 183-84)

She said that these would enable a woman “to struggle for herself instead of eating the bitter bread of dependence” (p.85) and would facilitate mothers and widows to live and manage their own affairs more reasonably. “I do not wish them to have power over men, but over themselves” (p.81), she wrote, and she upheld that “It is justice, not charity, that is wanting in this world” (p.92).

Wollstonecraft’s thoughts on education were well expressed in her *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Her *Thoughts* offered advice on female education to the emerging British middle class. The book supported some educational objectives for women– free thinking, rationality, self-control, truthfulness, reception of one’s social position, marketable skills, and faith in the Creator (Richardson, 2002, p. 26). Wollstonecraft said that today’s daughters would one day become mothers and teachers. She believed that as teacher women can most efficiently improve the society. She was of the view that as women were the elementary caregivers and educators of children, they should be given proper education. Five years later, she elaborated these ideas in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* too. In the book, she emphasized on reason. It is through the exercise of reason that individuals become moral and political agents. Education becomes perfect when it results from exercising understanding and reason:

The most perfect education, in my opinion, is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart. Or, in other words, to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render it independent. (Wollstonecraft, 1972, p.31)

To Wollstonecraft, the most perfect type of education is one which persuades the individual to achieve habits of virtue that will make him or her independent. The virtuous beings must obtain their virtue from the practice of reason. Therefore, she prefers wholesome education which, through the practice of reason, will strengthen and enliven both the body and mind.

On the other hand, when Rokeya was born, the society did not understand the importance of educating their girls. Learning was limited to a narrow circle of the society. Before or during her lifetime, though some persons took initiatives for the education of Muslim women, in the Bengali Muslim society, Rokeya is the first to link up the expansion of education with the emancipation and progress of women. She thought about the liberation of women and considered education as the means of achieving that liberation. Rokeya (2010) wrote:

The spread of education is the only panacea of this oppression! At least, the girls must be provided with primary education! By education I refer to the real education; being able to read some books or write few verses of poem is not education. I wish for that education– which will permit them to gain citizen rights. (Subeh Sadek, p. 221)**

By female education Rokeya meant such education which will raise in them the awareness, self-confidence and self-esteem about their rights; will

** My translation. All double star marks (**) that follow refers to the same.

cultivate inspiration of independence. “The purpose of education,” said Rokeya, “is not to blindly imitate a community or a race” (Istrijatir Abanati, 2001, p.12). According to Rokeya, it is “to develop the innate faculties of the individual through cultivation” (p.12). She also opined that academic degree is not real education. Real education is to develop the inherent qualities of human beings. In “Padmarag”, the education system which she described of Tarini Bhavan’s school, clearly reflects her above thoughts on education:

Teaching students to read several pages and moulding them in university form, they are not made puppets for luxury. Science, literature, geography, astronomy, history, mathematics– they are taught every subject, but the methods of education are different. By teaching to memorize fake history they are not taught to hate the country and its people. Special care is taken to teach ethics, religion, virtues, etc. The girls are trained to become ideal woman, good housewives, and good mother; they are instructed to love their country and religion more than their lives. They are specially supervised so that they become self-reliant, and like wooden puppets, they do not become dependent on their fathers, brothers, husbands or sons in future. (Padmarag, 2010, p. 270)**

In the same novel, Rokeya writes, as an advice to Siddika from her late brother (Soleman): “Get ready for the awaiting life-struggle! With proper education I will prepare you so that you need not depend on any mischievous man for mere foodstuffs” (“Padmarag, 2010, pp. 335-336).** In the novel, every statement of Siddika indicates that she has become aware of her rights. Obviously, though expressed in a different form, these are Rokeya’s own arguments too.

In social perspective, in some matters Rokeya’s attitude was enough progressive than modern times. The first condition of liberation is economic independence or self-reliance. The society where financially women are completely dependent on men, it is useless to speak of women’s liberation in that society. Rokeya tells about this economic independence in “Delicia

Hatta” (The Murder of Delicia). The main theme of the novel *Padmarag* is also the economic independence.

Rokeya did not confine her social struggles solely to women’s rights; she was well-known as a social reformer. She felt distressed to see the suffering of peasants and social practices that were harmful to society. One particular case was her thoughts on the condition of the peasants. She wrote an essay entitled “Chashar Dukkhu” (Misery of the Farmer). In “Endi Shilpa” (Silk Craft), she commented about the fact that villagers were willing to pay more money to buy cloth that the British were producing mechanically. This cloth became known as Assam Silk, which was exported to India by the British. Mockingly, Rokeya says: “We began to consider it fashionable to buy suits made of Assam silk from the fashionable stores in Calcutta as our great masters— the masters for one hundred and fifty years—prepared their coats and skirts with it” (Rokeya Endi Shilpa, 2010, p. 200).^{**} Rokeya was pointing out the misplaced priorities of the Indian elite. The Indian elite placed their priorities by running after phony pursuits instead of helping vulnerable Indian peasants.

In the undivided Bengal, Rokeya brought the message of renaissance and regeneration among the Muslim women. She wanted women to shake up their laziness and servile mentality. For this reason, she spent a great part of her life for the expansion of education among the Muslim women, and set up a girls’ school for that; alongside, to make women fit for playing role in the society and the state, she set up an association named “Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam” or Muslim Ladies’ Association.

Role on the Emancipation and the Empowerment of Women

Both in the Eastern and Western feminist perspectives, the basic point of women’s emancipation is to increase the economic solvency and political power of women. And to establish the rights of women, both of Wollstonecraft and Rokeya emphasized on the economic solvency of women and reasoned that the attained economic solvency would lead to the empowerment of women. They maintained that if women receive education,

enter into the work field and become financially solvent, they will be aware of their rights in the society. This awareness will help women have influence to take decisions in the affairs of the family, society, and even of the state.

Wollstonecraft believed that the monarchy, aristocracy and hereditary power stood in the way of securing women's rights. In aristocracy, the king thinks that he has inherited the power of ruling by the 'divine rights of kings'. The men, similarly, believe that they have inherited the power to rule over women by the divine rights of husbands. For this reason, Wollstonecraft strongly criticizes the monarchy, aristocracy, army, and priestly power and says that these systems are living on the willful power secured by inheritance. She opines that so long as these systems exist, no change is possible. Hence, these systems need to be abolished.

Wollstonecraft did not believe in the partial improvement of women's condition. Therefore, she asks for the overall reformation. She maintains that hereditary power and riches are obstacles to reason and change. She repeatedly attacks the willful power obtained by inheritance and shows how its misuses have obstructed the liberation of humankind. She explains how, to sustain its supremacy, the patriarchy has differentiated the role of women, how it has assigned different ideal of women's success, and how it has kept women "in ignorance under the specious name of innocence" (*Rights of Woman*, p.28). She explains that women are socialized to seek male protection rather than support themselves. They are socialized to desire to be beautiful so that they can attract men. Wollstonecraft finds fault not only with the above weakening and degrading socialization of women, but also with their subjection to "a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers" (p.11). Men have wanted "softness" and "sweet attractive grace" (p.28) from women, and wanted to keep them "in a state of perpetual childhood" (13). Wollstonecraft says that what women have been taught is not only useless but also destructive.

In *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft discusses about the discriminatory education system of men and women. For the subordination of women, she blames women's lack of education and the education system proscribed by men. She regards the prevalent education system as a conspiracy by men to suppress women and to make them appear less reasonable and weaker than they really are. She maintains that such faulty education of women needs to be changed. Therefore, she proposes the establishment of a national system of education, that is, co-education which would instruct boys and girls together. Irrespective of rich and poor every student will wear similar uniform and abide by the same rules. The education will be wholesome, that is, the instruction and achievement of knowledge will develop and strengthen both the body and mind.

For the emancipation of women, Wollstonecraft emphasizes on the economic independence and solvency. Independence, says Wollstonecraft, is derived from the ability to earn one's living (Brody, "Introduction" lviii). She believes that if women remain financially insolvent, they will always be dependent on, and controlled by men. She opines that economic independence allows women to develop virtue and self-respect. "It is vain," says Wollstonecraft, "to expect virtue from women till they are, in some degree, independent of men" (*Rights of Woman*, p.176). Therefore, to secure the rights of women in truest sense of the term, she strongly demands for the economic independence of women.

On the other side, Rokeya dreamt of upgrading the socio-political and economic status of women and emphasized on female education to ensure women's economic independence and their empowerment. She understood that education is the power which can show women the way, help to be self-reliant, conquer the groundless fear of false prejudicial belief and establish them in the society as proper human beings. She believed that to save women from this misery, three things should be ensured– firstly, women should be aware through female education, secondly, women must be financially independent, and thirdly, women must be empowered through establishing equal rights between men and women. In her writings, Rokeya

shows how the patriarchal society is depriving women from their due rights and talks about the education through which women can get rid of their misery and indignity as well as retain their rightful position in the society. She depicts the picture of an imaginative land where women have been equal to men in knowledge, intelligence, vision, thinking, etc. and in achievements sometimes excel men and these women are established on respective positions for their merits (See *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag*).

If we evaluate the first part of *Motichur*, we find that all the essays are about awakening of the secluded Bengali Muslim women. She pinpoints the illiteracy, ignorance, prejudices and wretched conditions of women. She portrays how the inhuman seclusion has maimed the womenfolk and gives her opinions about what should be the roles of women for the overall development of the society. In *Motichur II*, Rokeya tells that in every culture and society women are oppressed by the patriarchy. She urges women to receive education and create an environment of sympathy and solidarity to fight the injustices against women.

In *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya shows what happens when women receive education. In the text, she depicts the dream which she envisioned about women's emancipation and their awakening all through her life. Here she shows a "Ladyland" where women enjoy all fundamental human rights and they have developed their mental faculties to such an extent that in their country virtue and peace reign. The "driving force behind the success of the utopian feminist country of Ladyland is women's education. Rokeya lays particular emphasis on the importance of women familiarizing themselves with the world of science and is unconventional in her condemnation of male militarism" (Bagchi xii). The women of the Ladyland which Rokeya envisioned, are independent in every sense, they are free from seclusion.

In *Padmarag*, Rokeya just enlarges the canvas of "Sultana's Dream". She describes a women-founded and women-administered community where women of diverse religions, regions and ethnicities with unhappy histories of patriarchal oppression improve their lot by concrete social action. In the novel the authoress describes the ideal of her personal life, modus operandi

of running schools, and education which are in fact flawless and these methods should be the ideals of human life. Both *Padmarag* and *Sultana's Dream* discuss in light hearted, charming, and intelligent ways the question of female education.

In the Western feminist thoughts, Wollstonecraft was the pioneer to establish the socio-economic and political rights of women in the 18th century Europe. Afterwards, from her thoughts, feminism evolved and developed all over the world including Europe. She reasoned that if women become economically solvent, they can be powerful in the political arena and this can help them decrease the differences between men and women in the society and establish equal rights. On the other hand, in the Indian society, for the emancipation of women, Rokeya urged women to receive education, become financially solvent, attain citizen rights, contribute to the society equally with men and thereby create an environment that facilitates the empowerment of women. From this perspective, Wollstonecraft and Rokeya have much resemblance.

Role on the Elimination of Religious Bigotry

In the society, religious orthodoxy and prejudices play a vital role in the subjugation of women. Both of Wollstonecraft and Rokeya hold religious bigotry and prejudices responsible for the subjugation of women. In their writings, they show the influence of religious orthodoxy in the subjugation of women and say that if religious orthodoxy is eliminated from the society, women will enjoy their due rights.

For hundreds of years people had believed that God created woman as inferior to man. In the male-dominated society, women are suppressed in the name of religion. Wollstonecraft argues that religion does not differentiate between men and women; it is men who have created and perpetuated the discrimination for their own interest. She says, "God, has made all things right; but man has sought him out many inventions to mar the work" (*Rights of Woman*, p. 41). God has created and ordered everything in perfect harmony. He has created both men and women and bestowed them

with immortal souls. So, both of the sexes have capability to exercise reason. Therefore, asserts Wollstonecraft, women need to exercise reason to be effective and fair parents and to attain virtue. This will curb their impulses, help achieve their potentialities, and free them from their shackles.

Wollstonecraft opined that the patriarchy has subjugated women in the name of religion and morality. As women did not have education, they were influenced by religious prejudices. They could not understand that civil and religious liberties were part of one's birth rights. As they were not aware of their rights, they took it for granted that the discrimination between men and women was natural and ordained by God. But Wollstonecraft showed that in religion there is no such discrimination. She reasoned that if women receive education, they will be financially solvent and the solvent women will not be influenced by religious orthodoxy and prejudices. So, for the progress of women, Wollstonecraft urged women to get rid of religious orthodoxy and prejudices.

However, even though Wollstonecraft spoke against the patriarchy and the religious hypocrites who misinterpreted religion for their own benefits, she was not against religion. She accepted a religion which mingled faith with reason, morality with knowledge, and which placed no limits on human inquisition. "I submit to the moral laws which my reason deduces . . . it is not to an arbitrary will, but to unerring *reason*" (*Rights of Men*, p. 25), said Wollstonecraft. She denied the view that the faculty of reason is entirely male attribute. She questioned, "Who made man the exclusive judge?" (*Rights of Woman*, p. 5) She challenged the dogma and despotism of the English Church, criticizing "slavery to forms, which make religion worse than a farce" (p.198). She did not borrow any religious belief from others. She sensed the presence of the Almighty in nature and traced a mystical experience in which her "soul rested on itself, and seemed to fill the universe" (Wollstonecraft, *Maria* "Chapter 10"). She believed that "true grace arises from some kind of independence of mind" (*Rights of Woman*, p.117). Her religious beliefs were natural, as opposed to the revealed religion of more orthodox strains of Christianity.

On the other hand, during Rokeya's time the Muslim society did not feel the necessity of education for women. Society was entangled in superstition and religious prejudices. Rokeya criticized these prejudices and oppressive social customs forced upon women that were based upon a misled version of religion, asserting that women fulfilling their potential as human beings could best display the glory of the Almighty. In her writings she made women dream of a better world and tirelessly motivated them to materialize those dream.

In her writings, Rokeya repeatedly focused on the religious prejudices, evils of purdah, child marriages, polygamy and divorce, all of which left hundreds of powerless women in poverty and pain. She said that men have subjugated women manipulating the messages of religion. To keep control over women they have wrongly interpreted and corrupted the teaching of Islam. Rokeya observed the plight of the secluded women and tried to motivate them to seek knowledge, education, morals and freedom. In her essay "Subeh Sadek" (The Dawn), she urges women to wake up and prepare themselves. It is proper time to claim their rightful position in the society. "Dare say, mother! We are not animals; speak up sister. We are not furniture; speak out daughter. We are not any object like bejeweled ornaments to be confined into the iron chest; everyone speaks out altogether, we are human beings! And show that actually we are the half of the best part of the whole creation. Indeed, we are the mother of the whole creation" (p.221).**

The patriarchy has always interpreted religion for their own interests. To spoil the independent spirit of women, they claimed that if women receive education, they will be unruly and it will create chaos in the society. But Rokeya protested against this propaganda. She said:

The opponents of female education say that women will be unruly . . . fie! They call themselves Muslims and yet go against the basic tenet of Islam which gives equal right to education. If men are not led astray once educated, why should women? (Hossein, n.d., pp. 694-695)

Rokeya argued that in Islam, there is no difference between men and women in terms of learning. In Islam, receiving education is compulsory for both men and women. The men who are depriving women education, they are acting against the principle of Islam. She further reasoned that as men do not go astray after they become educated, similarly, women will not go astray or become unruly whenever they are educated. In *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag*, Rokeya showed what the educated women can do when they are allowed to receive education.

Influence on the Women's Rights Movement of Bangladesh

It is evident that in the women's rights movement of Bangladesh, Mary Wollstonecraft does not have any direct influence. Being born in a very conservative society and for the lack of education, underdeveloped communication system, geographical distance, Rokeya was not able to access the thoughts and ideas of Wollstonecraft. The researchers of Rokeya do not have sufficient information as to what extent Rokeya knew about Wollstonecraft. Yet Wollstonecraft's feminist thoughts, writings and thinking about women's rights seem to have influence on Rokeya's writings. It can be said that though it is natural that there was no communication between them, as the British colonial rule was prevalent, as Rokeya knew English well, and as her husband had transferable job, Rokeya seems to have some knowledge about Wollstonecraft (Sultana, p. 385). Whatever might be the case, there exists a strange resemblance in the thoughts of Wollstonecraft and Rokeya. If their resemblance is analyzed, it is said that Wollstonecraft has influence on Rokeya (pp.385-386). And as most of the Bangladeshi people are familiar with the thoughts and ideas of Rokeya, it is said that Wollstonecraft and Rokeya's thoughts and ideas have a significant influence in the women's rights movement of Bangladesh.

Though in Europe, the feminist writings started to have influence in the 18th century, in India the feminist writings began to have its influence in the later part of the 19th century and the early 20th century. After the partition of India and the regime of Pakistan, in the independent Bangladesh, the feminist writings of the previous era started to have its influence. Though the aims

and objectives (emancipation and independence of women) of the feminist movement are same in most countries of the world, there exist some disparities owing to the differences of social norms, customs and cultures. For this reason, in various phases of the feminist movement, some dimensional differences are noticeable in claiming the rights of women. For the difference of norms, customs and cultures, Wollstonecraft had the opportunities to mix with various men. But for the socio-cultural difference, Rokeya did not have the opportunity to mix with other men except her husband. However, in the present feminist movement of Bangladesh both of these trends are noticeable. Some feminist activists marry and have children, some are unwilling to marry, and some marry out of the tradition but do not want to take responsibilities of the family.

Wollstonecraft wrote a book claiming the rights of women. In her *Rights of Woman*, she discussed about various aspects of women's rights and it created awareness among the activists of the feminist movement. From her writings, the latter feminist activists got food for their movement. It brought about a revolutionary change in the European society. For this reason, she is considered as a social reformer in Europe. On the other hand, through her writings Rokeya has created awareness among the women of Bengali society. She urged women to receive education and become aware of their rights. For this reason, she is also regarded as a social reformer.

In the present Bangladesh, Rokeya's influence is noticeable not only in the family level but also in the state level. In the family, most of the parents want that their daughters have the opportunity to receive education and become influential figure in the society. Most of the parents advise their daughters to follow the ideals of Rokeya. Nowadays, the importance of female education has increased as a result of the progress of feminist movement. For the expansion of female education, the government has taken steps to make female education fees-less and is providing stipends to the girls. But Rokeya not only talked about primary education but also emphasized on higher education for women. In the present Bangladesh, women are receiving higher education, occupying important positions and

contributing to the society. Besides, Rokeya is being officially evaluated by the government in Bangladesh. The government is awarding ‘Begum Rokeya Padak’ (Begum Rokeya Medal) every year for the pioneering contribution of an individual in empowering women and raising women’s issues. In 1984-85, the road from Bijoy Sarani to Mirpur 10 Roundabout has been named Begum Rokeya Sarani (Begum Rokeya Road). In 2008, the 30th public university was established in Rangpur and it was named after Begum Rokeya. As a tribute to her works and legacy, the government observes ‘Begum Rokeya Day’ every year on 9th December.

Through their writings Wollstonecraft and Rokeya showed that the women need to change their attitudes and they themselves have to claim their own rights. “Unless we think for ourselves, no one else will think for us. Even if they do, it will not be altogether propitious for us” said Rokeya (Istrijati Abanati, p.13). To organize women for claiming their own rights Rokeya established women’s organization, “Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam”, and wanted to regenerate women. The aim of the association was to offer financial assistance to poor widows, rescue and shelter battered wives, help poor families to marry their daughters, and above all help poor women to achieve literacy. In the present society, the feminist activists are seen to be active in various ways to assert their rights, and to claim their rights they are seen to be organized and to influence the government. For waging various protests, they are seen to arrange meeting, seminar, and conference and to make placards using the key quotes from Wollstonecraft and Rokeya. These incidents are nothing but the reflections of Wollstonecraft and Rokeya’s thoughts.

Wollstonecraft and Rokeya emphasized on the economic solvency of women. By independence Wollstonecraft meant the ability to earn one’s own living. She opined that economic independence allows women to develop virtue and self-respect. So, to secure the rights of women, she strongly demanded for the economic independence of women. Similarly, Rokeya said that the first condition of liberty is economic independence. Therefore, in her various writings, she heralded the message of economic

independence. Rokeya said, “Groom them to enter professional life and let them earn their own livelihood” (Istrijatir Abanati, p. 12). At present, as half of the total population is women in most countries of the world including Bangladesh, every country is giving special eye to the progress of women. In Bangladesh, it is noticeable that in many families both of the husband and wife are doing job. Nowadays, women’s tendency to do job is not a fashion, but a responsibility to bring in solvency in the family. Through these examples, it is evident that Rokeya has been able to abolish the seclusion system and bring women outside home to be established in various fields. Today’s enlightened women clearly manifest Rokeya’s vision of a better society where women enjoy equal benefits like men.

Wollstonecraft and Rokeya talked about the political empowerment of women. In *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft addressed the topic of female education, the flaws within the institution of marriage, and the injustice of excluding women from politics. She pointed out that instead of being sheer social ornaments, if women acquired valuable skills through exercising reason, the socio-political life of the nation would greatly improve (Taylor 32). So, she urged women to study politics, “They might, also, study politics, and settle their benevolence on the broadest basis” (*Rights of Woman*, p. 184). Similarly, Rokeya also emphasized on the empowerment of women. She wanted that education which makes woman good citizens and helps them contribute to the society; and which also helps them become financially solvent and self-reliant without being parasites on others for food, clothing and shelter. Both of Wollstonecraft and Rokeya showed that if women attain political empowerment, they can contribute to the society and even to the state.

Similarity and Dissimilarity between Wollstonecraft and Rokeya

Though Wollstonecraft was born more than a century before Rokeya’s birth, both of them were proto feminist and liberal feminist. They told men to help women get emancipated. There are much more similarities in them; and some noticeable disparities as well. The similarities are in their thoughts, position and emotion. In spite of being born in different countries and times,

both of them were the first person in their respective societies to overcome the concept of conventional ideas and think of the problems of women with profound rational viewpoints. Thinking of the problems, they got surprised, offended, and became upset. During that time, there was no one to think like them. In Wollstonecraft's writings, Rokeya's unrevealed feelings are found:

After considering the historic page, and viewing the living world with anxious solicitude, the most melancholy emotions of sorrowful indignation have depressed my spirits, and I have sighed when obliged to confess, that either nature has made a great difference between man and man, or that the civilization which has hitherto taken place in the world has been very partial. (*Rights of Woman*, p. 11)

Like Wollstonecraft, Rokeya also understood that the degraded status of women is not natural, it is due to the social system which is created by men. She realized that women's lagging behind is not due to natural inferiority but lack of equal opportunities like men. There are many similarities between Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and Rokeya's "Istrijatir Abanati". In her *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft writes, "The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state" (*Rights of Woman*, p. 11). In "Istrijatir Abanati", Rokeya also opines that women of this country are not in a healthy state. She writes, "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 . . . At whose feet have we sacrificed all our physical strength and mental courage?" (Istrijatir Abanati, p. 10)

Wollstonecraft maintained that in the patriarchal social system women are groomed in such ways that without devoting their lives to great work or for the sake of society, they devote their lives to attract men with their external beauties. She writes, "The civilized women of the present century, with a few exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect" (*Rights of Woman*, p.11). Likewise, in "Istrijatir Abanati", Rokeya regards women's

fascination for ornaments ignoring great works as a sign of their enslaved mind. She writes, “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 . . . The widow who has lost the right to wear bangles is wretched like none other on earth” (p.8). She explains these ornaments of beautification as “badges of slavery” (p.7). Like Wollstonecraft, Rokeya also realized that for renouncing their abilities and potentialities, women have lost their rightful position in the society. Too much unnecessary dependence on men has led women to a vulnerable condition. She writes, “Being constantly protected from the dangers and difficulties of society, we have lost our courage, confidence and will altogether . . . When we are faced with the slightest of difficulties, we rush into the house and start wailing at the highest pitch” (9).

Despite these similarities some discrepancies are also noticeable. Wollstonecraft came from a poor family, received education on her own efforts, opened girls’ schools and wrote books on female education. She lived together with her lover out of the wedlock and gave birth to a baby unconventionally. She had been deceived by her lover; again fell in love with another man, became pregnant and died after complications in childbirth only at the age of thirty-eight. She had the opportunity to socialize with the cultured men of the time. On the other hand, Rokeya came from a rich family; she passed her childhood in seclusion and could not receive institutional education. She was married to a man who was of her father’s age and gave birth to two daughters who died in their infancy. Her married life lasted for eleven or thirteen years. She opened schools, formed organizations for women, wrote books supporting and demanding female education. While Wollstonecraft took writing as a profession and to support herself, Rokeya did not write for her living. Wollstonecraft was polygynous, did not believe in marriage, but Rokeya was monogamous and believed in marriage. In her *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft talked for the middle-class women, she hated the aristocratic women. But Rokeya wrote for awakening all classes of women.

Humayun Azad, a Bangladeshi writer and critic, evaluates Rokeya saying that as a feminist Rokeya was much more radical than Mary Wollstonecraft (Azad 284). He regards Rokeya's "Istrijatir Abanati" as Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Azad opines, in "Istrijatir Abanati" Rokeya did not present an overall proposal for the emancipation of women, but in it she briefly described almost all aspects of the emancipation of women (p.285). There is another disparity between the thoughts of Wollstonecraft and Rokeya. The principles of Wollstonecraft's feminism were male rivalry, man-hatred. "Mary Wollstonecraft hated men. She had every personal reason possible known to psychiatry for hating them" (Lundberg, p.145). But Rokeya was of the view that for the overall development of the society the women should try to attain the ability to play proper roles and work alongside men (Begum, p. 76). "The interests of men and women," says Rokeya, "are not different, but the same. Whatever their aim or purpose in life is, so is ours" (Istrijatir Abanati, p. 9). Rokeya tells women to come forward and urges men to educate both male and female. She compares men and women with two wheels of the same car. To run a car smoothly both of the wheels should be equal. "The vehicle which has one big wheel (husband) and another small wheel (wife) cannot proceed far. It will only move in one place (around the corner of home)." (Ordhangi, p.34)** So, the original development of the society means the development of both the male and female. In short, the motto of Wollstonecraft's feminism was to move forward avoiding men, and the motto of Rokeya's feminism was to move forward alongside men (Begum, p.76).

Conclusion

For the liberation of women, Wollstonecraft and Rokeya's contributions can be compared with two sides of the same coin. The role that Wollstonecraft played in a European context; the similar role was played by Rokeya in the Indian context. They considered women's lack of education as a great barrier to the way of their emancipation. As women were deprived of education, they were deprived of their rights; instead of being self-dependent they were dependent on others. They could not do anything independently, and for this reason they were victims of exploitation,

oppression and deprivation. Wollstonecraft and Rokeya said that unless women become aware of their situations and come out of these situations, the socio-economic development is not possible. For the development of the society and the state, women must be awakened. They must receive proper education. They need independent livelihood; they need equal opportunities like men. Almost half of the total population is women. Keeping this large number of populations within the four walls in the name of customs and religion, the overall development of the society and the state is not possible. So, Wollstonecraft and Rokeya urged people to stop such misuse of religion and change the attitudes of the patriarchy. They said that once women get equal opportunities like men, receive proper education and become financially solvent, they can contribute to the overall development of the society and the state.

References

- Azad, Humayun. (2012). *Nari (Woman)*. Third Edition. Dhaka: Agamee Prakashani.
- Bagchi, Barnita. (2005). "Introduction". *Sultana's dream and Padmarag*. By Begum Rokeya. Trans. Barnita Bagchi. India: Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd.
- Barbara, T. (2003). *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Begum, Sufia. (2017). *Rokeya Theke Sufia: Bangali Narir Egiye Chola (Rokeya to Sufia: The progress of Bengali women)*. Dhaka: Parijat Prakashani.
- Brody, Miriam. (2004). "Introduction". *A vindication of the rights of woman*. By Mary Wollstonecraft. Ed. Miriam Brody. London: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Curthoys, A. (2010). "Mary Wollstonecraft revisited", Key Thinkers and Their Contemporary Legacy. Ed. Ned Curthoys. *Humanities Research*, Vol. xvi, No. 2. Australia: The Australian National University Press.
- Farzana, S. (2003). "Praccha O Proticcher Naaribadi Darshan: Mary Wollstonecraft and Begum Rokeya (The Feminist Philosophy of the East and West: Mary Wollstonecraft and Begum Rokeya)".

Rokeya Chintar Uttaradhikar (Legacy of Rokeya's Thoughts). Ed. Anwarullah Bhuiyan. Dhaka: Rodela Prokashani.

- Ferdinand, L. & Marynia F. Farnham. (1974). *Modern woman: The lost sex*. New York: Harper & Bros.
- Hossein, Mrs R.S. (n.d.). “*Bangiya Nari Shiksha Samiti Sabhapatir Adhibhashan*” (Presidential Address Bengal Educational Conference). Saogat, 5:10, Asharh, 1333 BS.
- Richardson, A. (2002). “Mary Wollstonecraft on education”. *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft*. Ed. Claudia L. Johnson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rokeya, Begum. (2010). “Endi Shilpa”. *Begum Rokeya Rachanabali (Complete Works of Begum Rokeya)*. Ed. Mostofa Mir. Dhaka: Bornayan.
- . (2001). “Istrijatir Abanati” (Woman’s Downfall). Trans. Mohammad A Quayum. *Translation Literature*, 4.2.
- . (2010). “Ordhangi (The Female Half)”. *Begum Rokeya Rachanabali (Complete Works of Begum Rokeya)*. Ed. Mostofa Mir. Dhaka: Bornayan.
- . (2010). “Padmarag”. *Begum Rokeya Rachanabali (Complete Works of Begum Rokeya)*. Ed. Mostofa Mir. Dhaka: Bornayan.
- . (2010). “Subeh Sadek (The Dawn)”. *Begum Rokeya Rachanabali (Complete Works of Begum Rokeya)*. Ed. Mostofa Mir. Dhaka: Bornayan.
- Roy, H. S. and Mahmud, R. (2015). “J. M. Coetzee’s Lucy: An Archetype of Scapegoats on the Altar of Patriarchy”. *Chaos - IUB Studies in Language, Literature and Creative Writing*, Vol. 3, No. 2.
- Wollstonecraft, M. (1792). *A Vindication of the rights of woman*. London: Penguin Books Ltd.
- . *A vindication of the rights of men*. *The online library of liberty*. Indiana (1790, Online 2011). Web. 5 Apr. 2018.
- . *Maria, or, The wrongs of woman*. (1798, Online 2014). Web. 5 Apr. 2018.