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# Evaluation of Feminist Philosophy of Begum Rokeya Shakawat Hussain with Other Scholars in the Pre- and Post-Colonial Era

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## ABSTRACT

*Mrs. S.R. Hussain, unanimously well-known as Begum Rokeya Shakawat Hussain or simply Begum Rokeya, was a Bengali feminist writer, and social activist who advocated throughout her lifetime for women's education and socio-economic emancipation. Her roles in the awakening of the Bengali women of Bangladesh and India will always be remembered with reverence and inspired thousands to break the shackles of the vicious circle of backwardness and superstitions. The main objective of this research paper is to evaluate the feminist philosophy of Rokeya with that of other change makers in the pre- and post-colonial era. Furthermore, it has focused on Rokeya's feminist philosophy and the contributions of other celebrated feminist activists around the world. This research has followed the qualitative approach by reviewing secondary data and information. The findings of this research have shown that some women who initiated various reformation movements in Bengal were vocal in bringing about socio-economic changes and fought against injustice and discrimination alongside their male counterparts. The global feminist and Islamic divine books have also played a vital role for women's rights and empowerment. The philosophy and contributions of Begum Rokeya's work are the major catalysts for eliminating gender disparity and balanced development in society.*

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## Evaluation of Feminist Philosophy of Begum Rokeya Shakawat Hussain with Other Scholars in the Pre- and Post-Colonial Era

### 1. Introduction

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was one of the eminent and glorified personalities in the history of the Indian Sub-Continent who fought and wrote extensively for women's self-esteem and emancipation. As a writer and social reformist, she had always been vocal for women's rights and penned down some epoch-making books to inspire the deprived and maltreated Bengali womenfolk to make them aware of social injustice and dogmas postulated by the then male-dominated society (Jahan, 2018). She was born on December 9, 1880, in Payrabond village, Mithapukur Upazila, in Rangpur, during the undivided Bengal province of British India. The serene and panoramic Mithapukur village of Rangpur grasps the relics of the house of Begum Rokeya with much care and affection, where she passed her struggling period as a housewife of a highly educated Zamindar. However, the Begum Rokeya Memorial Center, adjacent to her house in Payrabond village, has been set up to stir up the rural womenfolk with the light of education and vocational training that bears the testimony of Rokeya's relentless sacrifice and unwavering struggle (Rahman, 2021, a; Badal, 2023). It is universally acknowledged that men and women should be treated equally for the burgeoning of human civilization. To this end, human resource management is an important issue for the sound development of a country. The active participation of men and women is essential to accomplish every development initiative. Every educated woman can assist in the making of an advanced and progressive nation (Konrad, 2007; Islam and Rahman, 2023; Malhotra et al, 2002). Napoleon Bonaparte also emphasized the need of an educated women (Yu, 2023; Mishra & Khatun, 2017).

Gender inequality hinders societal and economic growth of a nation. Therefore, a country can't move forward by ignoring half of its population. Women worldwide had historically pushed for their rights against society's dominant groups. Many philosophers, scholars, activists, writers, poets, feminists, and litterateurs advocated for women's rights and equal opportunity for the development of human society. Not only were they women, but some male philosophers were also well-known for promoting women's freedom throughout history (Sandua, 2023; Ingraham, 2018; UN, 2020). The national poet of Bangladesh, Kazi Nazrul Islam acknowledged in his poetry that women play instrumental roles in every success of their male counterparts (Nazrul, 1996; Huda, 2000, as cited in Khan, 2010). Since the beginning of human civilization, many feminists and writers have raised their voices to ensure gender equality. Simone de Beauvoir (France), Kamla Bhasin (India), Nowab Faizunnesa Chowdhurani (Cumilla), Begum Rokeya (Rangpur), Fatima Jinnah (Pakistan), and Sufia Kamal (Barisal) are highly esteemed as torchbearers for women's emancipation in who enlightened the miseries and maltreatments women had to undergo during their times (Quayum, 2023; Tidd, 2004; De Beauvoir, 2016; Butler, 1986; Menon, & Bhasin, 1993; Amin, 1996; Bhattacharya, N.D.; Karim, 2008; Imran and Rasheed, 2025). They wrote extensively on equality, justice, education, freedom, and other issues regarding women's empowerment. For instance, in 2016, Kamla Bhasin described violence against women as the world's biggest battle, motivating every woman to challenge the existing gender inequality without fear (Bhagat, 2021; The Daily Star, 2021; Khondker, 2022).

Begum Rokeya is widely recognized as a pioneer of Bengali Muslim women's awakening and emancipation. She raised societal awareness of women's rights by

publishing books such as Padmaraag, Abrodhvasini, Matichur, and Sultana's Dream. Moreover, people still draw motivation and inspiration from the published works of Begum Rokeya. (Roy & Hossain, 2015). However, this research article is a qualitative approach, articulating Begum Rokeya's feminist philosophy with other South Asian and global feminist activists. The study also highlights the contribution of some iconic feminist activists who played significant roles in women's empowerment.

## **2. Literature Reviews**

Akter and Rahman (2021) revealed that women were confronted with different types of domestic violence, followed by psychological, physical, economic, and sexual abuse by their family members. Nonetheless, Rahman et al (2018) observed that the pervasive form of discrimination being done across the world is creating a long-term effect on society. They also stated that discrimination against women is a common phenomenon across the globe. However, they found that Islam has bestowed women with immense rights and opportunities compared to their male counterparts. Sangeetha (2018) found that the women in the post-colonial era in India are now more educated, self-reliant, and hardworking and they are making an epoch-making contribution in every sphere of life. She addressed that the rate of delinquency against Indian women and children provides a painful picture of the status of women due to the corrupt systems that cause delays in judgment. Ghosh and Maity (2024) found that Muslim women in the colonial period faced numerous obstacles to pursuing education and self-determination and Begum Rokeya emerged as a torch-bearer who raised her voice against discrimination done on women and penned down her writings against male-dominated social norms and prejudices. Sanjida (2016) explored Rokeya's literary works to portray her vision to bring sound development of women by ensuring proper education and economic solvency. Zaman, Mahbub-ul-Alam, and Hyder (2011) found the significance of studying Begum Rokeya's writings and deeds to understand the current status of women in the Indian subcontinent. The researchers realized that Rokeya's vision to illuminate women with the light of education had not been fully implemented and practiced in society, yet in the true sense, due to the vicious circle of male-dominated customs. Whereas Ilahi (2024) made a comparative analysis of the contribution of Begum Rokeya and Arundhati Roy in the light of Rokeya's Sultana's Dream and Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things" to understand the broader aspects of their feminist approach. He regretted that domestic violence, homicide of women for dowry, and other forms of violence are still prevalent in male-dominated societies. Salam (2015) observed that after 83 (Eighty-three) years of Rokeya's departure, many parents still feel unsafe sending their daughters to schools and colleges due to the social barriers stemming from Bangladesh's conventional socio-economic structure. However, Mitra and Mallick (2024) emphasized Rokeya's relentless endeavor in educating the women of British India by establishing "Sakhawat Memorial Girls' High School" and inspiring the Muslim girls to break the shackles of gender disparity within the boundaries of the strict Purdah system. They cited Rokeya's literary works, public engagement, and speeches to denote her struggle for women's empowerment and emancipation. Shahu (2022), in her study, tried to focus on the two prominent feminist writers of the 20th century, Virginia Woolf and Begum Rokeya, to redefine their struggles to secure women's rights of being as independent entity within the peripheries of a male-dominated orthodox society. She addressed the contributions

## Evaluation of Feminist Philosophy of Begum Rokeya Shakawat Hussain with Other Scholars in the Pre- and Post-Colonial Era

of the two legendary feminist writers in changing women's minds to work as worthy candidates like their male counterparts by demolishing social prejudices and political barriers to attain peace and prosperity in society. Akter (2023) supported Begum Rokeya's idea of a society with equal participation and collaboration of women in the light of analyzing 'Sultana's Dream'. In her study, the researcher advocated for women's empowerment as a major tool to break the shackles of a patriarchal society. Miah (2014) discovered the rebellious spirit of Rokeya in light of her protest against the social taboo and misconception that prevailed among Muslim communities in the British colonial era due to the misinterpretation of religious scriptures postulated by the conservative Muslim clerics. He addressed Rokeya's endeavor to motivate the womenfolk who were falling behind in every sphere of life with their male counterparts because of being deprived of modern education. Nevertheless, Asha (2021) made a comparative study on the utopian world Rokeya had created for women in her book 'Sultana's Dream' and the real world to demonstrate the existing status of the women of that time. She observed Rokeya's philosophy in empowering women to make themselves self-reliant by engaging in socio-economic and political sectors to alter their submissive position.

However, none of the studies evaluated the feminist philosophy of Begum Rokeya Shakawat Hossain with that of her contemporary change makers in the pre- and post-colonial period. Besides, there is an absence of discussion on the overall contributions of the feminist scholars from ancient period to the present time in the above literatures. Furthermore, none of the studies have highlighted the reflections of Rokeya's feminist philosophy in the post-colonial era (Farid & Ashraf, 2025).

### **3. Objectives of the Study**

The principal objective of this study is to evaluate the feminist philosophy of Begum Rokeya Shakawat Hossain with that of her contemporary change makers in the pre- and post-colonial period. Other objectives of the study are:

- a)** to highlight the contributions of some iconic figures in women's empowerment
- b)** to evaluate the effectiveness of Rokeya's feminist philosophy in the post-colonial era

### **4. Research Methodology**

This research is a qualitative approach. The researchers collected diverse data and information from secondary sources. Hence, they reviewed books, journals, national and international organizational records, government and non-government publications, websites, documents, statistical data, newspapers, magazines, and other necessary documents to accomplish this study. On the other hand, they have also evaluated the content analysis as per the objectives of the study.

### **5. Contribution of Some Iconic Figures in Women's Empowerment**

The development of women and their empowerment did not come overnight. It took a long time, with the contributions of many visionary social activists and reformists since the inception of human civilization. Since men and women play indispensable roles in every sphere of their lives, they strive in war and struggle together, win many battles, and contribute to the burgeoning of a civilization (Fatima, 2022; Lewis

et al, 2024). Mrs. Khadijah (555 AD–620 AD), the wife of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), helped her husband with all of her properties to develop Islam as a religion.

The message of Hazrat Mohammad (PBUH) instructed how to deal with women as partners and mommies, especially mental, relational, verbal, material, and other processes. The material process entertained the male partners for choosing good gestures for women during feeding, clothing, and other factors for good behavior with women (Almutairi and Alyousef, 2024). On the other hand, Mrs. Nusaybah Bint Kaab (Umm Umarah) was a great warrior who dared to fight against her enemies. Alternatively, Mrs. Aisha, the daughter of Abu Bakar (R.) and the youngest wife of Muhammad (SM), was a famous scholar of that time. She narrated about 2210 (two thousand two hundred and ten) hadiths (messages and directions of Prophet Muhammad) that were her extraordinary contributions to the clarification of many problems regarding Islamic ways of life (Hamidi, 2014; Nuseibeh, n.d; Da Costa, 2002; Shaikh, 2023). However, Mrs. Sayyida al-Hurra (1485 AD—after 1542 AD) was the last Muslim woman who ruled Spain and Morocco as a queen (Karim & Khalil, 2021; Kadioglu, 2021; Lebbady, 2009). Therefore, it has been observed that women and men have made different types of contributions since the inception of human civilization.

Among some of the female Muslim icons from South Asia are Ismat Chughtai (Urdu litterateur), Qurrantulain Hyder (versatile figures and journalist), Rashid Jahan (writer and social activist), Nowab Faizunessa Chowdhurani (social activist and philanthropist), Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain (writer, social activist, and philanthropist), Shah Bano (notable Bano case for getting judiciary rights), Wajida Tabassum (writer), and others (Jaffer, 2015; Kiran, 2016; Dhand & Wadhwa, 2023; Ali, 2023; The Library of Congress, 2016; Gupta, 2009; Hakeem, 2015; Mody, 1987; Weldon, 1992; Raj, 2020; Carroll, 1997; Naqvi, et al, 2024; Subhani, 2022; Chawla & Yasmeen, 2019). However, women took timely initiatives to establish their rights and dignity over time. Nowab Faizunessa Chowdhurani was born on the bank of the Dakatia River, Pachimgaon, in the Laksham Upazila of Cumilla in 1834 AD. She was famous for her philanthropic and educational activities. She was the first woman to obtain the Nowab title from the then-British government. She established many educational institutes to disseminate knowledge among her fellow populaces and set up some hospitals for the well-being of the poor (Karim, 2008; Hasanat, 2021). People get motivation from her contributions and social movements.

Some women who initiated various reformation movements in Bengal were vocal and active in bringing about socio-economic changes and fought against injustice and discrimination alongside their male counterparts. Begum Rokeya and other feminist writers spearheaded reformation initiatives as inspirational icons in the Indian Sub-continent. They raised their voices against injustice, discrimination, torture, terrorism, civil and political rights, and other fundamental human rights issues. Pritilata Waddedar was a close associate of Master-Da-Surja Sen. On the contrary, Kanaklata Barua, Bina Das, Sarojini Naidu, Aruna Asaf Ali, and Matangini Hazra were among the prominent participants in the revolutionary movement against the British Raj. Ila Mitra led Rajshahi's Tebhaga movement that gave birth to peasant uprisings. Kalpana Datta and Neela Roy Nag (the first female graduate of the University of Dhaka) were all involved in various movements, including the non-cooperation movement against British rule (Quadir, 1973;

## Evaluation of Feminist Philosophy of Begum Rokeya Shakawat Hussain with Other Scholars in the Pre- and Post-Colonial Era

Sanyal, 2012; Emon, 2022; PANJABI, 2010; Shaikh, 2016; Schendel, 2020; Chakravarthy, 2020; Amiruzzaman, 2024; Sabreen, 2019). Women played different integral roles against social injustice and foreign dominance over the years.

Women had an active participation in the state linguistic movements of 1952. Around 80 (eighty) to 85 (eighty-five) female students of Dhaka University of the 1947–1951 sessions protested with their fellow language fighters against Urdu's domination as the state language of Pakistan that was imposed by the Pakistani authority upon excluding Bengali as a state language. Dr. Sufia Khatun, Shamsun Nahar, Rawshan Ara Bachchu, Sara Taifoor, Kazi Amina, Mahfil Ara, Khurshidi Khanam, and Halima Khatun were some of the notable personalities who led the state language movement up front (The Daily Star, 2020; Karim & Akter, 2022). These women made contributions to the state language movement. However, women also took part in the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971. Dr. Captain (Ret.) Sitara Begum and Taramon Bibi (Kurigram) received the Bir Pratik Award in recognition of their outstanding contributions in the liberation war of Bangladesh. Geeta Kar, Hena Das, Kakon Bibi, and Shirin Banu Mital received training to fight against Pakistani armies. Mehrunnesa, Rizia Chowdhuri, and Momtaj Begum, on the other hand, fought in the 1971 war to liberate the country from Pakistani Military dictatorship (Amin et al, 2016; Bhuiyan & Dipu, 2020; Shoeb & Ushoshee, 2021). To liberate Bangladesh, some women contributed in different sectors during the war of independence. Last but not least, women participated in the democratic movements propelled on a large scale during the autocratic Ershad Regime to achieve equal rights for all. However, their dreams remain partially unrealized, and there must be collaboration among males and females to protect women's rights by ensuring sustainable progress and advancement (Khan & Husain, 1996; Nazneen, 2017; Panday & Li, 2014; Parvin, 2016). A huge number of women participated in the July-August mass uprising (which is also known as Monsoon Revolution) of 2024 that made the long-serving Sheikh Hasina-led corrupt and fascist regime flee the country (Begum, 2025).

## 6. Frameworks of Begum Rokeya's Feminist Philosophy

### 6.1. Feminism and Feminist Philosophy

The word “Feminism” has been used in different debatable contexts with variations of its meanings. For instance, some authors use feminism to denote a historically certain political movement in Europe and the USA. Other authors chose the terms to explain the belief that there are discriminations against women, although there is hardly any consensus on the specific list of these disparities (McAfee, 2018). As an ideology, feminism puts emphasis on equal rights for men and women to take part in politics, decision-making, career choice, and parenting. It has elements of several communal, cultural, and political movements that aspire for the rights of both men and women equally (Mohajan, 2022). However, attaining equality between males and females is a product of an attitude and philosophy in violation of individual, collective, and administrative norms and in debate with genetic, psychological, sociological, and collective rules and regulations, opposed to nature and disposition (Yilmazçoban, 2020). Feminist philosophy is a perspective that examines and challenges the oppression of women. Additionally, it examines issues that are usually found in real-world principles and political viewpoints, epistemology, metaphysics, and linguistics (Mason, 2018). However, feminist philosophy has been

a pivotal source of debate in the context of gender equality for a long time (De Zoysa, 2018). Feminist thinkers have established new approaches to analysis and evaluation, demarcated new outlines of inquiry, and bolstered some of the central areas of philosophy to redefine feminist philosophy on a broader scale (Alcoff and Kittay, 2007). The rudimentary aspect of this philosophy is to lessen and ultimately overcome various disparities against women (Kurra, 2023).

## **6.2. Feminist Philosophy of Begum Rokeya**

Begum Rokeya (1880–1932) established herself as a feminist icon, Bengali writer, and social activist in the Indian subcontinent. She is simultaneously famous in Bangladesh, Kolkata, and other parts of greater India for her literary works and philanthropic activities. Begum Rokeya believed that quality education and economic creditworthiness would assist the Indian womenfolk to become equivalent to the men. She penned well-known feminist works, including Matichur (1st and 2nd volumes), Padmarag, Aborodh Basini, and Sultana's Dream. Many scholars compared Rokeya's literary endeavors with the revolutionary writings and ideas of Simone de Beauvoir (Mahmud, 2016; Miah, 2014; Quadir, 1973). Rokeya's visionary insights and liberal attitudes still have a profound impact on many Bengali girls who have been fighting for women's emancipation to get rid of all sorts of social injustice and religious bigotry (Redwan, 2022). As of today in Bangladesh, ensuring women's security inside and outside the domestic sphere is one of the crucial challenges. Rokeya had always spoken for educating women to increase their involvement in public life by breaking the walls of domestic confinement. Nonetheless, the fight for terminating structural and systematic violence in society is still relevant due to the poor economic background of Bengali women (Hasan, 2014). Moreover, Rokeya, as an iconic figure in the South Asian feminist movement, stands as a forerunner who championed the cause of women's freedom in the British colonial era. Her progressive principles and indomitable activism align meticulously with the philosophies of liberal feminism, which advocate for parity, justice, individual rights, freedom, and access to education as solutions to women's empowerment (Uddin, 2024). Some writers and critics claimed that Begum Rokeya was rather different on her way of life. As she maintained Islamic rituals in her personal life, there were many contradictory elements to her feminist philosophies, largely reflected in her celebrated books "Sultana's Dream" and "The Downfall of Women" (Hasan, 2021; Hasan, 2008).

## **6.3. Reflection of Rokeya's Feminist Philosophy in the Post-Colonial Period**

Begum Rokeya's philosophy holds significant importance in the Palestinian society, particularly in relation to the colonial connection. Rokeya had experienced British colonial domination, and the Palestinians are now undergoing the same ordeal under the Israeli occupation. During British India, the anticolonial movement in Bengal was gaining momentum, and for many years, Palestinian women have rejected Israeli land appropriation strategies through mass confrontation and struggle. Consequently, Begum Rokeya's and Palestinian feminisms have unique standpoints and cannot be related to the conventional feminist discourses postulated in Western societies (Hasan, 2023). Rokeya's feminist ideas, philosophies, and activism still affect a broader global setting of the feminist movement. Her endeavors, followed by her cultural sensitivity and practical initiatives, established her as one of the prominent figures in the Bengali feminist landscape who left an indelible mark on

## Evaluation of Feminist Philosophy of Begum Rokeya Shakawat Hussain with Other Scholars in the Pre- and Post-Colonial Era

the region's history in bringing social reformations and women's socio-economic empowerment (Mitra and Mallick, 2023). Begum Rokeya's ultimate effort was to make people aware of the importance of women in creating a peaceful world by ensuring equal rights for men and women. Women are now more confident in giving a strong foundation to their lives, families, communities, and countries (Akter, 2023). They experienced better access to services, credit markets, and higher education at the beginning of the 21st century. At present, women in South Asian countries, especially Bangladesh, enjoy more rights and independence. Nevertheless, despite the recent economic boom and changing social structures, women cannot leverage equal opportunities like their male counterparts as they have been compliant with a male-dominated society (Akter, 2023). Unlike many advanced countries, gender equality has not progressed significantly in Indian society, despite women's capabilities being demonstrated in almost every domain of life (Chakravorty, 2021). Nonetheless, women are now more educated, empowered, solvent, and diligent than those of the colonial era (Sangeetha, 2018). Rokeya's desire to create a just society for women has become almost a reality in Bangladesh. According to the World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Gender Gap Index 2025, Bangladesh has emerged as a leader in gender equality among South Asian countries, securing the 24th position globally (Bay of Bengal Post, 2025). The report reveals that Bangladesh, alongside Saudi Arabia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Ethiopia, is one of the most effective economic powers in overcoming gender discrimination across all income levels in 2025. Moreover, Bangladesh, among the seven economies in South Asia, has become the only country to grab a position in the global top 50, indicating its continuous advancement in alleviating gender differences, particularly in socio-political empowerment and education (Dhaka Tribune, 2025).

### 7. Evaluation of Rokeya's Social Movements with Other Activists

#### 7.1. South Asian Feminists

Begum Rokeya had always been outspoken for women's empowerment. She motivated her fellow and future generations through her literary creations to work for women to make them worthy candidates to rebuild a progressive and prosperous society. However, as of today, women have been playing a significant role in the burgeoning of nations and every sphere of human society. Like Begum Rokeya, Raja Rammohan, and Charatchandra Vidyasagar worked for women in the conservative Hindu society of the Indian Sub-continent. Nevertheless, Rokeya was active in the inner-outer development of women in conservative and backward Muslim society. The horizon of Rokeya's thought influences Hindu, Muslim, and Christian societies both in the East and the West. Moreover, Rokeya did not look at women sympathetically like Rammohan or Vidyasagar, as she emphasized women stand upright with their wisdom and strength (Huda, 2019). Mahatma Gandhi believed in the growth and development of the Indian people by empowering women in the fight for national freedom. Gandhi's philosophies influenced the foundation of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India. Gandhi's autobiography reflects his conviction and respect for gender equality in Indian society (Razvi, 2007). Men should collaborate with their female companions, as Nazrul's poetry, which cites "Nari," is also a pioneering work that is still relevant today. "In my eyes, there is no difference between men and women!" Nazrul wrote

in his poetry on women, "Sing the song of equality." Whatever impressive or beneficial accomplishments there are in this world. Half of that was done by women and the other half by men. Whatever sin, grief, pain, tears- Half of that was brought by man, the other half by woman, (Sonali, 2020; Islam & Arefin, 2017; Haque, 2022; Sonali, 2021; Khan, 2010). The national poet of Bangladesh, Kazi Nazrul Islam, advocated for the equality between men and women. Since a society flourish by the relentless efforts of both entities, the discriminatory treatment against women will downgrade the development and evolution of a nation to a great extent. An Indian feminist and political activist, Sarojini Chattopadhyay Naidu had fought for the rights of the widow. She raised her voice against the injustice committed against the Indian widow that forced a woman to choose death to survival in the name of the infamous 'Suttee-Pratha'. As a feminist icon, she stood against the softness of the jealousy-spirit in the fair sex (Easar, 2020). Kamini Roy, a legendary poet and Begum Rokeya's contemporary feminist icon, was one of the main voices in the women's suffrage movement in the British colonial era (Paul, 2024). Like Begum Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain, one of the renowned female poets of Bengali literature, Sufia Kamal had to undergo a harsh reality in the 20th century, and she fought bravely against the conservative society for being unable to receive an institutional education due to the conservative outlook of orthodox people of that time. She believed that the development of a society depends on the equal inclusion of men and women in education. Like her mentor Begum Rokeya, Sufia Kamal devoted her life to attaining social change and intensifying female education through demonstrations and movements (Mahmud, 2020). Arundhati Roy, a prominent Indian feminist writer, has been a vocal advocate against patriarchal oppression. Her feminist philosophy and rebellious attitude against the patriarchal society have been reflected in her epic creation, "The God of Small Things" (Ilahi, 2024). Malala Yousafzai, Nobel laureate and feminist icon of Pakistan, started her activism for women's empowerment at the age of eleven, championing the rights to education for the Pakistani girls in Swat Valley in the face of Taliban aggression (Pathan, 2022). Apart from Malala Yousafzai, some revolutionary Pakistani activists who were regarded as progressive, and vocal for women's rights include Fatima Jinnah (1893-1967), Benazir Bhutto (1953-2007), Asma Jahangir (1952-2018), Raana Liaquat Ali Khan (1905-1990), and Hina Jilani contributed much throughout their lifetime for women's education, and empowerment (Imran and Rasheed, 2025).

## **7.2. Global Feminists**

Mary Astell was one of the leading defenders of women in late 17th-century England. She adopted Descartes' idea to support logical arguments for the equivalent rational aptitudes of gender issues, and she successfully applied those arguments to compete with the low-grade education afforded to females (Broad, 2003). Astell did not dishearten women from having the motivation to achieve external goods like glory, prestige, and self-esteem (Brown and Broad, 2023). Virginia Woolf was Rokeya's contemporary feminist activist and an English writer who categorized her experience regarding women in a male-dominated society, highlighting the negative attitudes of society that restricted women from breaking the shackles of age-old social prejudices. Since she pushed the limits of activism and literature, her influence on feminism cannot be oversimplified by any means. Her feminist philosophy is an investigation of the feminine realization and the inner domain of women, which is not the termination in itself, but a motivation towards

## Evaluation of Feminist Philosophy of Begum Rokeya Shakawat Hussain with Other Scholars in the Pre- and Post-Colonial Era

an all-inclusive sense of human distinctiveness that can be attained through psychic equilibrium (Hebert, 2023; Kurra, 2023). Among the American feminist icons, the grounds for Keller's feminist philosophies were the belief in the inevitability of struggling for justice and social harmony. She emphasized that, in her humanitarian activities, women's rights are a vital aspect of the wider concern of social justice. She strongly believed that bestowing women with voting rights would play a crucial role in the triumph of socialism, and for this particular reason, she keenly kept supporting the women's suffrage movement in America and in Great Britain (Pawlik, 2019). In Indonesia, the feminist movement emerged in tandem with the development of nationalism in the early 20th century. Raden Adjeng Kartini, Maria Ulfah Santoso, and Martha Christina Tiahahu fight for women's rights, which include the right to education and medical care, as well as struggles for the eradication of gender discrimination from Indonesian society. In the post-colonial era in Indonesia, the feminist movement has established itself in various flows, for instance, critical feminism and liberal feminism (Yunita, 2024). Syed Syeikh Al-Hadi and Zainal Abidin Ahmad, widely known as Za'ba, motivated immensely by Muslim philosophers and reformers during their studies in Egypt, were Malaysian male intelligentsias whose works on women's freedom is considered the beginnings of the liberation of the Malay societies, not limited to the gendered terms, but also against the colonial power (Izharuddin, 2023). Egyptian famous writer, activist, and physician Nawal El Saadawi vigorously uncovered the intersections of patriarchy, religious fanaticism, and Western neocolonialism (Jilani, 2021). Nawal El-Saadawi stood against infibulation/circumcision. She also stood against the veil, religious rituals, patriarchy of religious associations, and more specifically against the influence of the capitalist system in Egypt (Abdo, 2021). Similarly, a Nobel laureate Iranian human rights activist and feminist Shirin Ebadi, unlike other Islamic feminists, argued that women's rights cannot be entirely gained through reinterpretation of religious texts in Iran. She believed in the separation of religion from state affairs, highlighting that patriarchal supremacy, not Islam itself, is the main cause of women's repression (Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2008). Ebadi has been fighting for upholding human rights, more specifically women's rights, within the Islamic framework of Iranian society (Musselman Library, 2015). Among the African feminist icons, Nobel laureate Wangari Maathai is the founder of the Green Belt Movement, who has created a link to environmental conservation with women's empowerment. Leymah Gbowee, another activist and Nobel laureate from Africa, has founded Women of Liberia Mass Action to unite women, regardless of ethnic and religious identity, to put an end to brutal civil war and advocate for peace and women's empowerment across Liberia. Besides, Amina J. Mohammed (Nigeria), Graca Machel (Mozambique), Mamphela Ramphele (South Africa), and Nanjala Nyabola (Kenya) are the most famous feminist activists who are working for women's awakening and empowerment all across the African continent (Ukoha, 2024; Brooks, 2024).

### 8. Discussion

The philosophy and contributions of Begum Rokeya's work are the major catalysts for eliminating gender disparity and balanced development in society. Like many other celebrated feminist activists of the pre- and post-colonial era, she clearly highlighted the rudimentary factors to ensure women's rights and empowerment. Additionally, her feminist philosophy has a huge impact on gender and development

studies to ensure equality and equity in society (Hossain and Rahman, 2021; Wiest et al., 1994; Izquierdo, 2015; Alam & Rahman, 2014). Her philosophy predicted the post-colonial feminist movement worldwide by criticizing the long-standing patriarchal structures that oppressed women within a colonial framework. Besides, her advocacy for women's education, economic emancipation, and social construction of gender, which have become the primary concerns of the post-colonial feminist movement, highlights the connection of patriarchy and colonialism to a great extent. She exposed the injustice of the veil system and gender inequality persisted during her time in Bengali Muslim society. Besides, she envisioned an imaginary society where women led the society toward peace and prosperity with their intellect and wisdom. It was a direct criticism of the colonial gender ideology which laid the basis for asserting agency for regressive women around the world (Ray, 2013; Uddin, 2024). However, Rokeya's dream stands out due to its novelty in creating a concrete feminist utopia in her masterpiece 'Sultana's Dream' and its revolutionary strength in supporting women's complete freedom through education and social reformation by challenging patriarchal ideologies in a contemporary South Asian setting. The strength of Rokeya's vision lies in its pragmatism and lasting influence on the advocacy for women's freedom and empowerment, not just same as men but as a crucial driving force for the progress of society. Her vision resonates intensely with liberal and Marxist feminist philosophies that transcend through its definite cultural framework and up-to-date concepts on technology and gender issues. (Sanjida, 2016; Asha, 2021). Begum Rokeya Shakawat Hussain holds an important and foundational place in the international feminist canon as a revolutionary scholar and feminist who championed women's education and equal rights in South Asia during the British colonial era. Her endeavors in establishing schools for girls, advocating for women's empowerment, and writing prominent feminist books like Sultana's Dream made her a visionary icon who raised a unique voice in the wider discourse on women's self-identity. She provided a solid philosophical and pragmatic framework for challenging patriarchal norms of society. (WhatsOn, 2021). Rokeya's life and struggle are remembered as a beacon of women's emancipation, social change, and liberal thought in the colonial period in Bengal and South Asia. She advocated for women's education at a time when it was mainly denied by the huge majority of the conservative people of society. Additionally, she wrote celebrated books like Sultana's Dream, envisioning a just and equal society not just for the backward womenfolk of her time, but for the women of all time.

## **9. Conclusion**

Many social activists and reformists have worked for women's development and empowerment since the dawn of human civilization. They have played a significant role in strengthening the feminist movement and given it a solid foundation to alleviate the pervasive form of discrimination and injustice in society. Both male and female feminist activists of Asia, Europe, America, and other parts of the world have undertaken an arduous journey for the betterment of women folk. At present, the inclusion of women in every development activity has become possible due to the unwavering struggle and support of the renowned feminist activists like Kazi Nazrul Islam, Virginia Woolf, Sorojini Naidu, Helen Keller, Sufia Kamal, Shirin Ebadi, Fatima Jinnah, Malala Yousafzai, and other change makers around the globe. In South Asia, the colonial reality had left a negative impact upon the women folk

## Evaluation of Feminist Philosophy of Begum Rokeya Shakawat Hussain with Other Scholars in the Pre- and Post-Colonial Era

of the backward Bengal Muslim society when it was forbidden for a woman to go out of the four walls. Begum Rokeya Shakawat Hussain took her pen as sword to fight for the women's rights and empowerment during the British colonial era. Her dream portrayed in 'Sultana's Dream' has envisioned a just and equal society for women of all time.

However, this research is an attempt to highlight the feminist ideologies of Begum Rokeya and other feminist activists in South Asia and other parts of the world who have left an imperishable inspiration for future feminist activists to attain equal rights and independence for women. This research will help the policy makers, theoreticians, researchers, and feminist scholars to have a comprehensive understanding of the feminist movements accomplished by different social activists and reformists from the ancient past to the present time. Additionally, this research work will help the academics and learners of Gender and Development Studies to evaluate Begum Rokeya's feminist ideologies along with other feminists in the framework of feminist discourse.

This research focuses on the feminist philosophy of Begum Rokeya and other scholars, exclusively for evaluation in the context of the pre- and post-colonial aspects. However, there is a broader scope to compare the nature of the feminist movement from the Western background to the colonial context. A comparative analysis between Begum Rokeya's activism and Western feminist icons during the colonial period will pull out the rudimentary differences between the oriental and Western feminist philosophies. Last but not least, a comparative analysis between the feminist activism of Begum Rokeya and other Bangladeshi feminist writers and thinkers of the present time will be a matter of study to understand the nature of discrimination and injustices in colonial and post-colonial society.

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