

## **Metamorphosis of Women from Oppression to Empowerment in Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Padmarag*: A Literary Role Model of Women Emancipation**

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/ejells.2013/vol11n42132>

Published June 14, 2023

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**Citation:** Akter M.R. and Hayet M.A. (2023) Metamorphosis of Women from Oppression to Empowerment in Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Padmarag*: A Literary Role Model of Women Emancipation, *European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, Vol.11, No.4, pp.21-33

**ABSTRACT:** *Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's Padmarag celebrates the empowerment of women as the driving force for women's emancipation from the shackles of patriarchy. The metamorphosis of women from sufferers of captivation and deprivation to empowerment and emancipation is presented through the lives of Tarini Bhavan inmates. The feminist movement in Padmarag is a social reformation movement. It is based upon the revelation that patriarchal oppression is present everywhere and that women should be emancipated from this oppression along with being facilitated with equal opportunity in every sphere of life like men. In Tarini Bhavan, the sufferer women from different castes and creeds endeavor to achieve education, human rights, freedom of movement, and political recognition. They prove themselves as role models for their own gender and show the world that empowered women can advance themselves and play a crucial role in society.*

**KEYWORDS:** Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, women empowerment, women emancipation, patriarchy, feminism, metamorphosis

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain stands out as one of the revolutionary feminist writers for the superior merits of her work as well as for her incredible courage and resilience to struggle for women's emancipation against the hostile, unfavorable conditions of her society. She was born in 1880 in a village called Pairaband in the district Rangpur that lies in present day Bangladesh, what was then the British Indian Empire. Widely regarded as Bengal's pioneering and creative educationist, Rokeya bore a keen interest and deep dedication to

education from the very early stage of her life. But unfortunately being born in an orthodox era when women's education was almost like a taboo and her own family not being an exception with this string, she was never allowed to go to school for formal education. Her father was rich, intelligent, progressive in certain ways but extremely traditional in case of women education. Her father himself learnt seven languages, sent two sons for education in Calcutta but did not allow formal education to his girls. Further, Bengali language and literature were not prescribed for Muslims in that period. Middle class Muslims could learn Urdu as lingua franca. But Rokeya had much interest for Bengali language. Defying custom, she persisted in learning Bengali and English from her elder brother Ibrahim Saber. Later on, her husband Khan Bahadur Syed Sakhawat Hossain worked as the inspiring fountain for her inclination to education and the articulation of her unorthodox ideas through literary writing and practical work which she continued with full gamut until her last breath on 9 December, 1932.

Rokeya's *Padmarag* is an epitome of social reformation through the elimination of social barriers for women. It is a powerful reflection of male oppression where Rokeya shows that women are always the victims of this oppression irrespective of their races, religions and geographic backgrounds. Therefore, among the inhabitants of Tarini Bhavan, there are Hindus, Brahmas, Muslims, Christians, black and white women. They all had gone through terrible experiences of patriarchal oppression. Tarini Bhavan is presented as the inhabitation of all these anguished women. But Rokeya does not present it only as a simple refuge centre, she rather portrays it as an institution where women get the opportunity to taste the essence of fellow- feeling, they can realize their economic, social and emotional selves and get engaged in productive activities. This institution thus reflects the dream of Rokeya as it turns helpless and hapless women into self-reliant human beings and beneficial resources of society. The significance of *Padmarag* lies in its polemical message for women's emancipation and celebration of Rokeya's strong faith in women empowerment as the way to achieve their self- reliance and freedom from the torture of patriarchy.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The article "Emancipation of Women through Education and Economic Freedom: A Feminist Study of Begum Rokeya's Utopias" (2012) by Mohammad Shafiqul Islam and Rama Islam studies *Padmarag* to seek the emancipation of women from the shackles of patriarchy and thereafter their empowerment through education and economic freedom.

In his article "Commemorating Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Contextualising her Work in South Asian Muslim Feminism" Md. Mahmudul Hasan from International Islamic University Malaysia, has analyzed the life, incredible commitment, sacrifice and feminist

accomplishments of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. He then contextualizes her ideas in the broader South Asian Muslim feminist tradition.

In her article “Begum Rokeya the Rationalist and Rights of Women” Hasna Begum appreciates Rokeya as a social reformer and disseminator of women’s education. Here, she marks the invocation of Rokeya in *Padmarag* that education and economic freedom forms the base of women emancipation.

The literary criticism “Women in Virginia Woolf and Begum Rokeya: A View from Western and Islamic Perspective” by Farzana Zaman, Mahbuba Sultana and Marzia Shurovi defines *Padmarag* as an intriguing example of feminist utopia. In their discussion of *Padmarag*, autobiographical hints, powerful reflection of male oppression and celebration of Rokeya’s strong faith in a universalist society have been pointed out.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research study on “Metamorphosis of Women from Oppression to Empowerment in Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s *Padmarag*: A Literary Role Model of Women Emancipation” is a qualitative research by category. While conducting this study, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s *Padmarag* has been used as the primary resource. As secondary resources, literary works *Motichur*, and *Abarodhbashini* by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, critical essays and articles of prominent critics on Rokeya, and relevant feminist theories have been critically analyzed.

## **DISCUSSION ON METAMORPHOSIS OF WOMEN FROM OPPRESSION TO EMPOWERMENT IN ROKEYA SAKHAWAT HOSSAIN’S *PADMARAG*: A LITERARY ROLE MODEL OF WOMEN EMANCIPATION**

Rokeya had written the novel *Padmarag* at a time, when all women across the Asian sub-continent were crushed under the forces of the traditional patriarchal society. Gender roles were strictly defined. Women were deprived of the very basic urgencies of life like:

- Living a life with a sense of self-worth, respect and dignity,
- making choices and decisions about their personal, familial issues,
- having equal rights to participate in social, religious and public activities,
- having equal social status in the society,
- determining financial choices,
- getting equal opportunity for education,
- getting equal employment opportunity without any gender bias etc.

In the Muslim community, education was limited to reciting the Quran even without understanding its meaning. Such social strains compelled women to live a life of oppression. Rokeya discusses the oppression of women in *Abarodhbashini*, in which she

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details the captivation of women by the name of religious and social customs. She focuses mainly on the veil custom by the name of purdah. For Muslim womanhood in Bengal; restrictive, repressive purdah was the only way-of-life. Rokeya herself grew up in a household where women were told to conform to purdah (veil) observance. From the age of five, women had to keep themselves sequestered from men and stranger women.

Rokeya pioneered women's advancement from such a context. She wrote courageously against gender discrimination to promote women emancipation. She believed that discrimination would cease only when women were able to achieve proper empowerment as women empowerment refers to the creation of an environment for women where they can make decisions of their own for their personal benefits as well as for the society. It helps to improve the social, economic, political and legal strength of the women.

Women empowerment is an essential one for both the development of the personal lives of women and the overall social development. *Padmarag* accounts the personal stories of suffering of its characters and their transformations to betterment through empowerment. We get several such cases in this text. Few of these literary role models of all the struggling women are- Saudamini, Koresha, Rafia, Helen, Sakina, Usha and the heroine of the novel- Zainab. Tarini Bhavan works here as the centre of empowerment of these down-trodden, distressed women.

Saudamini is a character who had to face the rivalry of her sister-in-law and the maternal aunt of her step children for no fault of her own. At the very first step into her husband's home she was showered with poisonous barbs. Though she loved her husband dearly and also tried to adore her step children yet the adverse circumstance of her husband's house defeated her in the family life. Besides the ill treatment of the relative women, her husband too misunderstood her. The marital life did not allow her a bit of happiness except false blames and sufferings but it demanded her highest dedication. To save her step daughter from drowning she too jumped into the water and embraced the uncertainty of her destiny. Luckily, both were rescued by the fishermen, Saudamini as an unconscious one but alive and her step daughter as dead. This terrible wave of life snatched her sanity and it took her one year of living in a lunatic asylum to get recovery. Finally, it is Tarini Bhavan where Saudamini's anguished heart finds its peace. Tarini Bhavan shelters her, empowers her and turns her into a strengthened person who does not feel upset by minor setbacks of life anymore. What she feels now that her heart is "big enough to embrace the whole world". (Rokeya, *Padmarag*, 84). If Tarini Bhavan were not there to solace the flames of Saudamini's anguish, the society would not get such a world lover. Undoubtedly, it's her empowerment, which is her inner working spirit. It has made her realized of her self- worth and utility in this human life.

Koresha is a woman from Patna. As a consequence of her husband's polygamy, she was also fated to have a step son from the early stage of her marriage. Like the ones of Soudamini, her step son too proves to be an ill fate for her. Cholera took him to death. But innocent Koresha had to bear the consequence. She was falsely blamed of not managing proper treatment for him. Further, following the death, her husband showed his utmost indifference to her. The pain of husband's indifference reached to her so intolerably that it compelled her to leave home. When the familial happiness frustrated her, Koresha took a turn to a life of empowerment. She enrolled herself in a teacher's training institute and started her professional life of teaching. Thus, instead of her love to her husband and proper care of her step son, Koresha fails to get a loving family circumstance. Later on, she succeeds to create her own place in the society through achieving empowerment. It's the potentiality of empowerment which enables her to establish her own identity in the society.

Rafia is a wife of a renowned barrister. After three years of their marriage, he left her with two daughters and went to England for higher study. She waited for him so eagerly for long ten years but he did not come back. After thirteen years of their marriage he divorced her for no reason and came back at home with his mem- shahib wife. This unexpected turning of life made Rafia psychologically unsettled. She recovered after three long years. Then, she came at Tarini Bhavan by chance. Since then she is working here as the private secretary of Mrs. Sen. Rafia's involvement with empowerment rescues her from the distressed context and provides her a life of honor.

Helen is an English lady. Her husband was a drunkard who used to get angry with her in his extreme state of drunkenness. He rebuked her without anything wrong with her and sometimes even tortured her physically. To the worst, this devilish man got engaged in an illegal relationship and murdered a person. Based on all these issues, when Helen appealed for separation the court of England did not grant it. Rather, the court declared her as "tied for life to a lunatic" (Rokeya, *Padmarag*, 96). But it did nothing for her remedy. Helen is the representative character of all the suffering women of the first world countries. A civilized country like England does not spare a little space of security and solace for women. Further, Helen's victimization proves the miserable context of women at the hand of men made law which works only in favor of men. Helen gets her little world of security and solace at Tarini Bhavan. She does not mourn for her past anymore. Instead she has turned the pain into strength and become a world lover. She earns her own livelihood here and works for the sake of social welfare.

Story of Sakina gives us another glimpse into the sufferings of women at the iron hand of patriarchy and their achievement of transformed, better human lives through their involvement in empowerment projects. Sakina's husband was a rising lawyer. Instead of being an educated man, he laid his sole emphasis on the bride's physical beauty as the condition of their marriage. Firstly, his education failed to free him from the traditional

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psyche of justifying a girl by her physical beauty. Then, it also failed to save him from so many other bad habits like drinking, maintaining illegal relationship etc. At the very day just after their marriage, he eloped with all the ornaments of his newly married bride. He married a widow later on. Even then Sakina's brothers agreed to send her back to her husband's house. They forced her to go with her husband against her will. Sakina attempted suicide to get rid of the context. Sakina finally manages to reach at Tarini Bhavan where she starts living a life of her own and thus avoids going with her rogue husband. Sakina's letter of rejection to her husband reveals her self-respect, dignity and inner strength which were absent among the women of her time.

Usha is the name of another woman who was turned out of her family because of her husband's cowardice. When robbers attacked their house Usha's husband left her all alone and ran away. Even her four brothers –in –law did not come at her rescue. She was taken by the robbers. Then, after being rescued by some stranger passers-by when she arrived home, she was not accepted anymore. Her in-laws suspected her purity and threw her out of home. To worsen her fate their maid servant-Kesta's mother pretended to help her and sold her to a prostitute. Luckily Usha was saved by Kestas wife and brought to Calcutta. Finally, Usha comes at Tarini Bhavan to get a work here with Kestas mother-in-law. Here, Mrs. Sen embraces her affectionately, provides her shelter and manages higher education and training for her. Now, Usha works as the head mistress of Tarini School.

The heroine of *Padmarag*- Zainab, who is known as Siddika at Tarini Bhavan, also takes shelter at Tarini Bhavan when the life proves to be an intolerably thorny one for her. Based on the issue of dowry she was rejected by her husband's family even before the reception ceremony of her marriage was arranged. She never got the chance to see her husband even for once. Further, because of her education and intelligence she fell into victim of colonial oppression. The oppressor colonizer Robinson murdered Zainab's brother out of greed of his property and targeted to entrap her by the false accusation of murder for he feared revenge of the murder from her side. Once again, like the story of Helen, the men made law and men-presided administration worked in favor of men, though it was an illegal one. Zainab had to seek her own rescue which she got at Tarini Bhavan. Instead of being educated and knowing several crafts Zainab fails to earn her livelihood. It is here, at Tarini institute, Zainab gets vocational trainings which turn her into an empowered woman, capable of serving herself and the society as well.

It is the society, a male dominated one, which dashes all the aforementioned women characters into ground, robs them of sanity or leads them to the brink of death. Tarini Bhavan embraces them, provides them secure shelter, empowers them and turns them into women of self worth. Later on, these very characters dedicate their lives for the social welfare activities. They serve the society to reform it, establish the love of humanity in it and erase its unequal treatment of men and women.



Women of Tarini organization are the literary manifestations of Rokeya's dream of empowered women. Despite the context of the then rigid social structure for women, in their way of empowerment they have achieved an inspirational mark of success. Dina Tarini works as the source of this enlightened journey of women towards emancipation. She is the shadow character of Rokeya herself. Through the character delineation of Dina Tarini, Rokeya has portrayed a glimpse of her life long struggle for women. Probably this is the very reason of her naming this self portrait as Dina Tarini. As in her article "Inside Tarini Bhavan: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Padmarag* and the Richness of South Asian Feminism in Furthering Unsectarian, Gender- Just Human Development", Barnita Bagchi mentions:

The name, Dina- Tarini, means 'savior of those in distressed'. Literally, 'tarini' means a boatman. In the metaphorical sense, it refers to someone who steers those in danger out of troubled waters to safety. Tarini, the chief protagonist of *Padmarag*, is the salvation of women for whom life has become so unbearable that death seems to be the only alternative. (4).

In *Padmarag*, Dina Tarini works for the development of the downtrodden women. She becomes a widow at the early years of life. After the death of her husband, at the age of twenty- one, she establishes Tarini Bhavan. Tarini Bhavan has a school, a workshop or a training institute for adult women, a shelter for widows and a home for the ailing and the needy. The school is attended by both day scholars and boarders. The organization 'Society for the Upliftment of Downtrodden Women', run by the women of Tarini Bhavan, is the institutional core of this whole project. Tarini has to establish this organization 'Tarini Bhavan' in defiance of the wishes of her relatives.

Rokeya too faced such frowning from her relatives when she established her school for girls, using the funds bequeathed by her husband for that very purpose. She was also still in her twenties and without anybody beside her as her well wisher or assistant. Though she worked for the welfare of the society and maintained strict purdah while communicating with male acquaintances, the society did not spare her from its bitter humiliations. Male dominated society which was always a rival of women's development called the companions of Rokeya as prostitutes. Some of them even branded her as a woman of loose morals. The celebrated Bangladeshi freedom fighter, writer and social activist, Sufiya Kamal was involved in the social welfare activities of Rokeya's organization Anjuman- i- Khawatin- i- Islam. She and other social workers of their group were sent by Rokeya into the slums of Calcutta to work among the women who lived there. Sometimes, hostile men prevented them from entering the area. In her article "Inside Tarini Bhavan: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Padmarag* and the Richness of South Asian Feminism in Furthering Unsectarian, Gender- Just Human Development", Barnita Bagchi points out the reflection of this hostility of male society to Tarini Sen:

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Tarini Sen's activities are frowned upon by her family who ostracize her and vilify her for supposedly consorting with riffraff- prostitutes, lepers and orphans with no known antecedents. The mother- in -law of one of her former students alludes to her as a whore. Although her work involves addressing the injustices of society and attempting to eradicate them, its members, including the families of those who benefit directly from her project, do not spare her from abuse. As Rokeya puts it, Dina- Tarini is, to all intents and purposes, a social outcast (samaj- chyuta). (5).

Going beyond every adversary, Tarini's establishment of her organization 'Tarini Bhavan' and her advancement in her goal of emancipating women through making them empowered asserts the strength of a woman's will. This inner spirit and the energy of its expression are found among all the empowered women of Tarini institution.

Tarini Bhavan shelters women from every walk of life. Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Brahmins, Eastern and Western women- women of all religions, races and communities are living here with solidarity. Together they endeavor to achieve self- respect through self-reliance and work for the sake of shared humanity.

Women of Tarini Bhavan prove their worth in management activities. All the branch organizations of Tarini Bhavan- Tarini school, the workshop or the training institute for adult women, the shelter for widows and the home for the ailing and the needy, are well managed by the inhabitants of Tarini Bhavan who are often referred to as "sisters of the poor" (Rokeya, *Padmarag*,59). Amidst of so many adversaries, their skillful management of the activities of these organizations prove the masculine world wrong in its definition of women as worthless ones, incapable of managing any project or institution, born only to cook and cry.

In the workshop of Tarini Bhavan, needy women receive training in areas that enable them to earn their own living. They learn book binding, spinning, sewing etc. and undertake orders for related jobs that will generate an income. They also learn how to prepare sweetmeates for sale. Further, they receive training in teaching, typing and nursing- variety of marketable crafts women could acquire in Rokeya's time. To that end, Rokeya encouraged the revival of craft industries, which women could successfully carry out at home. An early feminist, in many ways, Rokeya pioneered the development of NGOs.

Women of Tarini Bhavan are also skilled in medical section. Some of them help in running "the Home for the Ailing and the Needy" (Rokeya, *Padmarag*, 30), where the poor, homeless and disabled receive medical care. Besides nursing the patients to health they also prepare mixtures of medicine and bandages by themselves. That is they are well skilled in first aid medical treatment.



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Tarini sisters perform the activities of education ministry too with praiseworthy success. The school accepts neither government sponsorship nor financial aid from those Indian states which have alliance with the colonial government. The school does not teach its students the colonial version of Indian history that might encourage them to disdain their own past and culture. Instead of blind acceptance of the government prescribed books, Tarini herself selects textbooks for her school. While selecting the textbooks she discusses with the well educated women of the country. The pupils are given an education in all standard subjects like Mathematics, Geography, Life Sciences etc. Thus, Tarini and the teachers of her school- the sisters of Tarini Bhavan, are performing the roles of the Education board officers. They are even constructing a new education formula- a constructive, vocational one; denying the general, archetype, result- oriented education of the country.

Empowered women of *Padmarag* have gained their economic freedom too. They earn their own livelihoods and therefore, are not dependent on men for financial support. Instead, they can now donate money in social welfare activities. As we see, Siddika “receives two hundred rupees every month as salary. From this, she spends a very small amount, between thirty and forty rupees, on food and clothing and donates the rest to the Tarini Bhavan treasury.” (Rokeya, *Padmarag*, 130). The Tarini inmates help Latif to get money to go home. They all contribute in raising this fund. While taking money from Siddika, Latif thinks how free these hands are. The economic freedom enables Bibha to buy medicine for her ill mother. All these economic capabilities were unthinkable for women before.

Empowerment imbues women with decision making capabilities too. It sharpens their ready wit. Once, Usharani, Koresha and Siddika see a wounded man in a bush beside the road. Usha checks the man’s pulse and finds him alive. As the patient needs medical treatment urgently and the hospital is far away from that place, they instantly decide to take him at their residence. They arrange ‘dandi’, a type of vehicle, to take him home.

During summer vacation, few teachers of Tarini school and Tarini herself go to Kurseong to enjoy the vacation. They enjoy the natural beauty which refreshes them both physically and psychologically. Enlightenment and empowerment have enabled these women to roam by themselves without any hindrance or hesitation. Whereas, when we met Siddika for the first time at station in her disguised appearance, she was looking at the station and its crowd with such wonder as if she had never seen these before. Truly it was the very case. Siddika had never seen these before. Not only Siddika, women of all creeds and castes of patriarchy were always deprived of the scent and beauty of nature. They were kept captivated within the four walls of their so called homes, which were actually prison houses for them. Free movements of empowered Tarini inmates depict Rokeya’s belief that it’s only empowerment and enlightenment which can emancipate women from the shackles of patriarchy.

Empowerment brings women the right to voice their choices, opinions and decisions. Patriarchy has always imposed its own decisions upon women and kept them voiceless. This imposture of decisions did not spare the very personal issues too like marriage, child birth, divorce etc. The heroine of the novel- Siddika, instead of being a legacy of a renowned family and an educated one, was left by her husband's family for the sake of dowry, without any choice or decision of her own. Except Helen, all the other characters too were the victims of unjust patriarchal decisions. They were married off without their consents and then left or divorced, again without their consents. But now, in case of empowered women of Tarini Bhavan, patriarchy fails to exercise its inauthentic force. The context of Siddika too gets changed with her achievement of empowerment. As, she is now a self-reliant one, she has the ability to assert her own choices. Nobody dares to force her to marry Latif. When Latif's mother and sister request the other sisters of Tarini Bhavan to convince Siddika to get married with Latif, they do not agree to do so. Rafia speaks in clear sound "Unless Siddika gives her consent, no one can marry her off". (Rokeya, *Padmarag*, 129). Tarini sisters understand the value of one's choice or decision. Through witty comments in their conversation with Latif's mother and sister, they also focus on the factors of what patriarchy would have done in this context: "Perhaps, if she had a guardian, he might have trussed her up and delivered her to you" (Rokeya, *Padmarag*, 130). But, here in Tarini institution everyone has the authority of her own choices and decisions. Even Mrs. Tarini Sen herself, though she is the guardian of all the women of this centre, cannot ask anyone to get married or restrict anyone's marriage.

Empowerment always teaches women the most valuable lesson of life. It makes them realized that women are not born only to maintain the household chores of their husbands. Human life is an invaluable gift of the creator. It should not be wasted only through cooking and child rearing. All the neglected, distressed, deprived women should come out of the oppressive patriarchal veil custom to live their lives. They should no more live with agony silently.

Rafia, who is left by her husband quite unjustly, is now a woman of self-reliance and dignity. She is an expert typist too. As Latif praises Rafia's typing as an excellent one, Rafia makes a bitter reply-"Thanks to the abuse heaped on me by members of your sex" (Rokeya, *Padmarag*, 111). Her words reveal the very reality of Rafia and all other women of Tarini Bhavan. The society once neglected them, denied to recognize their human-selves, considered them as women with no voice and choice. Now, they have gained skills, secured a place of worth by themselves and taken their due recognition from the society.

## CONCLUSION

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's feminism is not a proclamation of women's superiority or a mandatory hatred for men, it is the belief in equality of the sexes in every sphere of life.

She refuses to accept that inequalities between women and men are natural and inevitable. She believes it as a social construction and tries to make her readers understand that a society, a state and above all the whole world should be an ideal place so that everyone can live in peace and harmony breaking all forms of barriers, especially the barrier of gender discrimination. Rokeya establishes that marriage is not the ultimate goal, family is not the ultimate end. The process of Siddika's evolution, from a solitary, secretive and melancholy young girl to a competent, self-assured woman ready to face the future, is set as an example and inspiration for women. Yet it was tough for Rokeya to bring cocooned women out of seclusion, to motivate and persuade them to appreciate the importance of becoming involved in empowerment activities. Moreover, the cobweb of patriarchal evils rendered Rokeya's toil even tougher.

Though Rokeya's dream is unflinching and time-winning, the miserable context of women still vibrates in the society. It is regrettable that even educated men cannot change their mind which had been set by the patriarchal society. Men women relationship is still an unequal one. This deplorable condition of women in the society reminds us of Rokeya. When it is found that a girl is degraded in different ways even in the form of acid throwing, a woman falls victim of her husband's cruelty, a woman lives an accursed, secluded life, we seek cry of Rokeya. Distressed women may seek the course of emancipation and empowerment by following the directions suggested by Rokeya in her precious writing *Padmarag*.

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