

HINDU–MUSLIM RELATIONS IN THE WORK OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE AND ROKEYA SAKHAWAT HOSSAIN

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ABSTRACT Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932) are two stalwarts of twentieth century Bengali literature. Born and raised in very different socio-cultural and religious environments, both lacked formal education, yet both went on to become ardent champions of education. Despite their different religious identities, both writers stepped out of their cultural and gendered borders to embrace the ‘other’ in a spirit of fellowship and unity, against a backdrop of turbulent Hindu–Muslim relationships and recurrent communal riots, throughout most of their adult lives. The present article investigates this cross-cultural, dialogic-inclusive vision of Hindu–Muslim unity as reflected in the literary works of these two writers. It seeks to explain why and how they espoused such a bold vision, going against the grain of religious feuds that characterised the history of the period. The current relevance of such cross-cultural navigation is evident.

KEYWORDS: *Bengali literature, British India, education, Hindu–Muslim relationship, humanism, India, literature, Rabindranath Tagore, Rokeya*

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), Asia’s first Nobel Laureate, and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932), one of British India’s earliest Muslim feminist writers, were contemporaries in Bengali literature and are two of the most acclaimed writers of the Bengal Renaissance during the early twentieth century. They were born and raised in very different socio-cultural and religious environments. Tagore hailed from a financially and culturally rich Hindu-Brahmo-Brahmin zamindar family in Calcutta, while Rokeya was born into a similarly well-to-do but relatively conservative Muslim zamindar family, in a small village in the north of East Bengal, now in Bangladesh.

Somehow, critics have not discussed these two writers often enough in a comparative light, emphasising their similarities in circumstances as well as in outlook. This could be so because of the many obvious differences in the style, scope and nature of their respective writing. For example, Tagore was primarily a poet, though he wrote in other genres as well. Rokeya excelled in polemical prose, but wrote poetry and fiction too. Tagore was more of a romantic writer who saw reality through the eyes of a visionary and an idealist. Although social reform was an important aspect of his writing as well, he never compromised his art for the sake of being a teacher or for giving 'moral lessons' (Das, 1996: 737, 741). Rokeya, on the other hand, more of a practical thinker, saw the edification of readers as the primary function of writing. To her, literature was essentially a tool for reforming and improving society (Hossain, 1992: 17). Tagore considered imagination and emotion to be his guiding stars, while Rokeya celebrated reason and logic. A natural poet, Tagore wrote in florid and figurative language even in his prose, for which he was once forced to defend himself against charges of grandiloquence by his critics (Tagore, 2008: 850–1). Rokeya always wrote in an ostensibly simple and transparent style, using familiar diction, simple sentences and deliberately unadorned prose. Tagore's objective was to arouse the reader's imagination and passion. Rokeya's was to appeal to her readers' intellect and influence their judgement through a compelling train of thought.

While both of them lacked formal education, both became ardent champions of education. Tagore considered education as a major step towards India's freedom and assertion of its moral authority on the global stage. Rokeya saw the redemption of Indian women, more specifically of Muslim women in South Asia as central. To express their convictions in the redemptive power of education, Tagore built a university, Visva-Bharati in Santiniketan in 1921, while Rokeya established a school for girls in Calcutta in 1910, Sakhawat Memorial School for Girls, named after her husband. Most significantly, despite their different religious identities, both writers stepped out of their cultural borders to embrace the 'other' in a spirit of fellowship and unity, against a backdrop of turbulent Hindu–Muslim relationships and recurrent communal riots,¹ throughout most of their adult lives.

This article investigates this cross-cultural, dialogic-inclusive vision of Hindu–Muslim unity as reflected in the literary works of these two important writers. It seeks to explain why and how they espoused such a bold vision, going against the grain of religious conflict that characterised their period. The main objective is to argue that despite many obvious and conspicuous differences, Tagore and Rokeya shared several similarities, most importantly that they both were inclusive, holistic and non-sectarian in their outlook. Both crossed their cultural and communal borders to embrace the 'other' in their society. Both believed that creating Hindu–Muslim amity and unity was fundamental to the creation and survival of the internally plural Indian nation. Both were thus respectful in their interactions with and representation of members from the 'other' religious–cultural community. It could be said that they took a humanist and secular approach, though the meaning of the latter term remains deeply contested even today, whether we look at this from the perspective of India or of Bangladesh.

The Importance of Biographies

To understand how and against what grave odds these two writers came to espouse such a cross-cultural outlook and to champion the value of religious unity in a country whose annals have been battered recurrently by communal strife, riots and hatred, one should begin by first looking into their biographies. Tagore was born into a culturally advanced and rich zamindar Hindu–Brahmin family in Calcutta in 1861, only four years after the outbreak of a revolt by Indian soldiers against the ruling East India Company. While this revolt led to the rise of nationalist sentiment in the subcontinent, it precipitated the assertion of British colonial hegemony through taking over India as a formal colony of the Crown. Tagore's grandfather, 'Prince' Dwarkanath Tagore (1794–1846), a leading industrialist of his time, was held in 'very high esteem and affection... by Queen Victoria and the nobility of England' (Kripalani, 1962: 22). However, Dwarkanath's son, and Tagore's father, Debendranath Tagore (1817–1905), was a spiritually inclined individual who contributed to a reformist religious movement, Brahmo Samaj,² which sought to revive the monistic basis of Hinduism as laid down in the Upanishads. Tagore's sister Swarnakumari Devi (1856–1932) was one of the first women novelists in Bengal. The rest of the family were equally gifted in literature, music, art, philosophy and mathematics, such that the family ran a literary journal of its own.

Despite such an outstanding background, Tagore never had any formal education in childhood. Instead of being sent to school he was educated at home. Although he went to England at the age of 17 to study Law at the University of London, he returned home a year later without completing his studies. This alternative mode of education was perhaps a boon, as it would have helped Tagore to elude the dominant religious stereotypes of his society, often passed down to children through the mainstream education system. Moreover, Tagore was influenced by his father's reformist outlook. Like his father he was interested in revising and reinventing Hinduism by ridding it of its fatuous traditions and meaningless rituals. Imbibing the spiritual teachings of the Upanishads, he saw all human beings sharing the same spark of God.³ Besides, although Tagore's father lost much of the family wealth accumulated by Tagore's grandfather owing to his impractical and idealistic nature, the family still had large landholdings in three different places in what is now Bangladesh. In November 1889, Tagore was appointed by his father to oversee this family property. This at once brought him into close contact with poor tenant farmers, most of whom were Muslims, who lived by cultivating the family's land. Since Tagore spent more than ten years (1890–1901) living with these tenants in East Bengal, it is logical to suggest that this particular experience was instrumental in helping him to rise above the prevailing 'dusty politics' (Tagore's own phrase) of communal hatred. It enabled him to understand and appreciate the culture of those Muslim tenants, and by extension, the culture of Islam. In a letter to a Bengali woman friend in 1931, the daughter of an orthodox zamindar family from Natore in East Bengal, Tagore declared in simple but pointed language: 'I love [my tenants] from my heart, because they deserve it' (Dutta & Robinson, 1997: 405).

The political dimensions of this mindset for Tagore are discussed by Novak (2008 [1994]: 118–9):

Interested in politics only insofar as it concerned the deeper life of India, he espoused mildly communistic ideas, though not necessarily Marxist ones, wanting the nationalist movement to consider social reforms before political freedom, actively opposing the Bengal partition, and endorsing the peaceful aspects of the countermovement to keep Bengal in one piece.

Compared to Tagore, Rokeya's life, for a woman and a Muslim, was no doubt far more challenging, laced with additional difficulties. Born in 1880 into a conservative Muslim family, she grew up not in metropolitan Calcutta like Tagore, but in a small village called Pairaband, in Rangpur district, now in northern Bangladesh. Rokeya's father, Zahiruddin Muhammad Abu Ali Hyder Saber, like Tagore's, was a zamindar. Being a wasteful and extravagant man, he lost his entire inheritance long before his death and lived the remaining years of his life in hardship and poverty, incurring huge debts. Moreover, Rokeya's father was an orthodox man who did not believe in his daughters' academic education, except for learning the Qur'an by rote without knowing its meaning. Thus Rokeya, too, was deprived of formal education in childhood. While Tagore's family valued knowledge and culture, creating a positive influence on the young boy, Rokeya's father barred his daughter even from learning Bengali and English. Abu Ali Saber himself read and spoke several languages, including English; he even married a European woman as his fourth wife (Ray, 2002: 17). Yet he did not want Rokeya to learn English, because in those days Muslims saw this as detrimental to Islamic teachings and the Islamic way of life. Moreover, he did not want his daughters to learn Bengali because the aristocratic *ashraf* Muslims at the time saw Arab and Persian traditions as authentic Islamic culture and treated local traditions, including the languages, as un-Islamic (Ahmed, 2001: 9). Bengali was looked down upon as a 'non-Islamic inheritance' (Ahmed, 2001: 6), spoken mainly by Hindus and those lower-class *atraf* Bengali Muslims who had converted from Hinduism.⁴

If this was not enough of a hurdle, Rokeya was also brought up in the strictest form of purdah practised by elite Muslims at that time. She was not allowed to interact with men or even women outside her family circle from the age of five. In several episodes of her book *The Zenana Women (Aborodhbashini)*, especially in episode 23, Rokeya sarcastically portrayed how she had to go into hiding in her own home whenever an unknown woman walked into their courtyard or came to visit. A victim of this purdah system, she became its severest critic in later years. For example, in her essay, 'Bengal Women's Educational Conference' (Quadir, 2006: 227; my translation), Rokeya wrote:

Although Islam has successfully prevented the physical killing of baby girls, yet Muslims have been glibly and frantically wrecking the mind, intellect and judgement of their daughters till the present day. Many consider it a mark of honour to keep their daughters

ignorant and deprive them of knowledge and understanding of the world by cooping them up within the four walls of the house.

In another passage of the same essay, purdah practices of the time are compared to carbonic acid gas which kills its victims silently and without causing any physical pain. Rokeya (Quadir, 2006: 229, my translation) wrote scathingly:

The purdah practice can be compared more accurately with the deadly Carbonic acid gas. Because it kills without any pain, people get no opportunity to take precaution against it. Likewise, women in purdah are dying bit by bit in silence from this seclusion 'gas', without experiencing pain.

Despite such challenges and obstacles that left her with virtually no other options in life except to become a traditional Muslim housewife, Rokeya grew up to become a writer in both Bengali and English. She came to embrace a view of life that was utterly contrary to the insular and parochial lifestyle in which she was brought up during her childhood. In later life, she not only became a fierce critic of social segregation of sexes and excessive purdah, but also a champion of unity between various racial and religious groups in the subcontinent. This was probably made possible through the benevolent and salutary influences of three people in her life: Karimunnesa Khatun, her elder sister; Ibrahim Saber, her elder brother; and Khan Bahadur Syed Sakhawat Hossain, her husband. Reading through the works of Rokeya, one finds that she did not have much to say by way of expressing gratitude to her parents. Rather she gives full credit to these three people for whatever success she attained in life.

Rokeya learnt the Bengali language from her elder sister Karimunnesa Khatun, to whom she later dedicated the second volume of her book *Motichur* (1922). In her dedicatory note to this book, Rokeya explains that without the constant support and motivation from her sister, she could never have learnt Bengali or become a writer in the language:

I learnt to read the Bengali alphabets in childhood only because of your affectionate care.... I have not forgotten Bengali in spite of so many challenges... because of your care and concern and encouragement which have continued to motivate me to write in the language. (Quadir, 2006: 57, my translation)

Likewise, Rokeya learnt English from her elder brother, Ibrahim Saber, who used to tutor her secretly at night after their father had gone to sleep. Ibrahim Saber, brought up in an elite institution in Calcutta and later educated in England, also perhaps taught her to come out of the shadows of her father's orthodox outlook and to perceive the world in a more modern and inclusivist spirit. In childhood, Ibrahim Saber came into contact with Dr K.D. Ghosh, father of the renowned philosopher, writer and nationalist leader, Sri Aurobindo Ghosh (1872–1950), when Ghosh was working as a civil surgeon in Rangpur. This probably had some effect in shaping his attitude towards

Hindus generally, and indirectly influenced Rokeya as well in later years. As a mark of the overall influence her brother had on his younger sister, Rokeya dedicated her only novel *Padmarag* (1924) to Ibrahim Saber, in which she acknowledged:

I have been immersed in your love from childhood. You have groomed me in your own hand. I have never experienced the love of a father, mother, an elder or a teacher. I have known you only.... Your love is sweeter than honey. Even honey has a bitter aftertaste, but yours is ambrosial; pure and divine like Kausar. (Quadir, 2006: 261, my translation)

Another person who helped Rokeya in overcoming the closed, exclusivist world views of her father was her husband, Sakhawat Hossain. Like Ibrahim Saber, he was educated in England; like Ibrahim he was modern and progressive in his outlook. That Sakhawat was free of religious prejudice is evident from the fact that when he came to West Bengal to study at the Hooghly College, he became a close friend of Mukunda Dev Mukappadhay. Son of a renowned nineteenth century Bengali writer and philosopher, Bhudev Mukhapaddhyay (1827–1894), he helped Sakhawat, a man from Bihar, to learn Bengali. In this regard, Rokeya's biographer, Shamsun Nahar Mahmud (2009 [1937]: 26, my translation) writes:

Rokeya was married at the age of eighteen. Her husband was a senior government official. He had to travel to many places as part of his job. This gave the opportunity for Rokeya to also see many places and gather various experiences. Having lived in several places and mixed with diverse communities, she became very open minded.

Thus, having travelled different paths in life and incurring different influences, both Tagore and Rokeya came to adopt and advocate a worldview that was cross-cultural and inclusivist in nature, and which believed in the unity and harmony of the two main religious groups in India, Hindus and Muslims, as one of its core principles.

Tagore's Legacy

Tagore has left behind much evidence of his intention to unify the various racial and religious groups in India, part and parcel of his global imagination.⁵ He was interested in creating not only a holistic national identity for India, but also one identity for the whole of humankind. He believed that territorialism and provincialism were essentially animal instincts in the human being; only by rising above it could humanity attain its true identity as human beings.⁶ Throughout his life, Tagore campaigned for the establishment of a global society through the cultivation of fraternity and human fellowship. His attempts to bring together Hindus and Muslims in India and to create an inclusive race (*mahajati*) were an important aspect of this philosophy. Tagore believed that one of the reasons for Hindus and Muslims being constantly at each other's throats was their ignorance of each other's culture, which induced bigotry in

both groups. In a foreword to a book by a Muslim author (see Karim 1935 [1935]: 7), Tagore himself explained:

One of the most potent sources of Hindu-Muslim conflict is our scant knowledge of each other. We live side by side and yet very often our worlds are entirely different. Such mental aloofness has done immense mischief in the past and forebodes an evil future. It is only through a sympathetic understanding of each other's culture and social customs and conventions that we can create an atmosphere of peace and goodwill.

Attempting to bridge this widening gap and to create a better and more sympathetic understanding between the two religious groups, Tagore introduced a Chair of Islamic Studies at Visva-Bharati in 1927 and a Chair of Persian Studies in 1932. Already in 1921, the year in which Visva-Bharati was upgraded from a school to a university, he started admitting Muslim students. Moreover, Tagore (1915) translated many poems by the fourteenth-century Muslim mystic poet Kabir into English. He also paid tribute to the Prophet of Islam on several occasions as a mark of respect and admiration for the religion and its followers. One such tribute describes the Prophet as 'one of the greatest personalities born in this world', while in another, after describing Islam as one of the few great religions of the world, Tagore went on to invoke the blessings of the grand Prophet of Islam for India, which, he wrote, 'is in dire need of succour and solace' (Das, 1996: 802).

Riots between Hindus and Muslims remained a common occurrence during this period, as the British would often use religion to divide people.⁷ Additionally, Gandhi's nationalist movement was sometimes misappropriated by religious and cultural fanatics for their vested interests and selfish political gain. Whenever riots broke out, Tagore used to write letters in newspapers, appealing for calm and understanding on both sides. In one such letter to the *Calcutta Statesman*, written in 1931, in the wake of riots in Chittagong, Tagore urged Hindus and Muslims not to 'indulge in mutual recrimination' at the behest of the British, but 'join hands...for the sake of bleeding humanity', and for the fact that being 'the children of the same soil, [they] will ever remain side by side to build up a commonwealth' (Dutta & Robinson, 1997: 404). He also wrote a letter to Gandhi, urging him to use his political charisma to resolve tensions between Hindus and Muslims and establish amity between the two groups. Tagore explained in this letter that there is a deep-rooted antipathy against Muslims in most Hindus, adding in a tone of love and admiration for Gandhi: 'But you know how to move hearts of those that are obdurate, and only you, I am sure, have the patient love that can conquer the hatred that has accumulated for ages' (Dutta & Robinson, 1997: 417).

It is true that Tagore did not depict many Muslim characters in his fictional work. This is not because he did not like Muslims or did not care to represent them in his writing. It is mainly because he knew that any criticism of Muslim culture, no matter how mild or well-intentioned it might be, would only feed Muslim extremism. Fiercely opposed to traditionalism and religious extremism, Tagore however attacked

the outworn, degenerate and superstitious practices in Hindu culture over and again in his works.⁸ In many other writings he critiqued the Hindu caste system, child marriage, dowry practices, gender disparity and other evils associated with patriarchy and/or religious chauvinism and formalism. Such criticisms sound quite 'modern' and are often still necessary today. At the same time, Tagore consciously avoided such criticism in the case of Muslims, because he knew that such an approach would blur his mission of creating a religious mosaic in his homeland. Therefore, whenever he introduced Muslim characters in his work, albeit rarely, he portrayed them in a positive light, often pitting them against corrupt and retrogressive practices in the Hindu culture and/or community.

This is particularly evident in stories such as 'Kabuliwala', 'False Hope' ('Durasā') and 'A Woman's Conversion to Islam' ('Musalmanir Galpā').⁹ 'Kabuliwala' is the story of a burly Afghan Muslim who has come to Calcutta to make a living by lending money and selling clothes and dry fruits to local people. The fact that Rahmat, the Afghan, has come to Calcutta in search of a livelihood shows that he is not inhibited by place or culture. He is willing to brave all circumstances to support himself and his family through honest living. Scrupulous and industrious, he is also a loving father. His love for his daughter, left behind at home, makes him shower affection on a Bengali girl of a similar age, Mini, whom he gets to meet one day while doing his rounds for selling goods through the rickety lanes of Calcutta. Mini is a Bengali–Brahmin girl and he is an Afghan–Muslim. But this does not deter Rahmat from loving the girl, nor prevent Mini's father from letting the man visit his daughter for chit-chat almost every day, sometimes also in the evening. This obviously goes to show that religious or cultural difference does not have to be a barrier in human relationships, so long as individuals are not too dogmatic or fanatical in their beliefs, practices and customs.

However, the story takes a rueful turn as Rahmat stabs one of his clients for betrayed trust and is sent to jail for eight years. The murdered man had taken money from Rahmat on loan but denies it when Rahmat comes to collect the sum before going home for his annual visit to his family. Obviously, being honest himself, Rahmat does not know how to handle deceit. He therefore responds to the situation with raw emotion and violence. Besides, he needs the money for his family, money he has earned with a great deal of physical and emotional hardship for their support and sustenance. After coming out of jail, Rahmat tries to re-establish his relationship with Mini, but this now fails because time has changed Mini and she no longer possesses her childhood innocence. Previously the two used to joke about marriage and in-laws with ease, but now Mini knows what marriage actually means, as the day Rahmat comes to see her is also coincidentally her wedding day. This brings to him a rude awakening, realising that his daughter back home has also grown up, so he must go back and reinstate their relationship in light of the changes that time has brought into their lives. This, in fact, introduces the theme of transience in life but also shows that despite our religious and cultural differences, we as *homo sapiens* are all equally subject to the laws of death and impermanence. Therefore, while we bicker and even kill one another for

our differences, time—the grim reaper—waits at the end of the road with the same ferocity, obstinacy and indifference for everyone.

'False Hope' is the story of an aristocratic Muslim woman, daughter of a Nawab in British India, who falls in love with a Brahmin youth, Kishore Lal, the commander of her father's army. The setting of the story is the 1857 uprising of Indian soldiers against the British. Tagore suggests this uprising was triggered by the use of animal fat in cartridges, which had to be bitten off before use, and which Muslims suspected as pig-fat and Hindus as cow-fat, both being taboos in their respective cultures. By inserting this information in the story, Tagore cleverly insinuates that, be it Hindus or Muslims, followers of institutionalised religions in India are by and large superstitious, superficial and supercilious. They have little understanding of the real teachings of their religions.¹⁰ Therefore, while they are willing to shed blood for the most trivial of issues, they are still capable of compromising their faith for some selfish or material gain or profit.¹¹

This message becomes clearer as the story progresses and we are informed that Kishore Lal, who was a strict Brahmin and had rebuffed the pure love of a young Muslim girl only because he saw her as a heretic, later exchanges his faith for the comfort of family life by marrying a pagan Bhutanese woman. The young girl, in the meantime, sacrifices her own faith, studies the Hindu shastras and becomes a yogini only so that she can get Kishore Lal. But he proves elusive, until after 38 years of relentless search she makes the painful discovery that Kishore had renounced his faith a long time ago and had married the Bhutanese woman, through whom he now has grandchildren. At this point, the Nawab's daughter, who has become a pauper, having deserted her father's home because of her love for Kishore Lal, mutters in agony to the story's narrator, to whom she is telling her life-story, thus making her story a story within a story, that is, metafiction (Radice, 2005: 227):

But why was I so deluded for so long? Why didn't I know that the Brahminism that stole away my young heart was nothing but custom and superstition? I thought it was *dharma*, unending and eternal.... Alas, Brahmin, you exchanged one set of habits for another, but I gave away my life and youth, and how can I get them back again?

By pitting the Muslim woman against the dogmatic but opportunistic Brahmin, Tagore shows the superiority of the Muslim woman who is more human for having placed her personal love above an abstract cause, and for her willingness to abdicate the world for the sake of her love. The Muslim woman is sincere in her pursuit, while the Hindu-Brahmin is false and deceitful. Moreover, this Muslim woman has a syncretic imagination and is willing to know and discover the secrets of the Brahminic faith as a way of fulfilling her love. She is not insouciant, aloof and dogmatic like Kishore Lal. Therefore, she is the better role model and example for a multiracial and multi-religious society. Her attempts to know about the other religion embody the hope of unity for a society deeply divided on religious lines.

If the hybrid and dialogic imagination of the Nawab's daughter makes her more human and humane in Tagore's eye in 'False Hope', in 'A Woman's Conversion to Islam', it is another Muslim character, Habir Khan, who is similarly portrayed in a positive light, in contrast to the Brahmin family of Kamala's uncle and aunt, who are condemned for being overly orthodox. The story concerns Kamala, a Hindu Brahmin girl, who is saved from being abducted by brigands on the night of her wedding, by an elderly Muslim man, Habir Khan. After rescuing Kamala from the hands of the bandits, Habir Khan takes her back to her uncle's family, who brought her up following the death of her parents. But this Hindu family refuses to take her back for fear of losing their caste. Habir Khan then gives shelter to the girl, but in his magnanimity never forces Kamala to convert to Islam. Instead, he allows her to continue practising her own religion, in one section of the house, uninterrupted. He even gets her a Brahmin priest to help her in worship. Later, Kamala falls in love with Habir Khan's second son, Karim, marries him, and converts to Islam of her own will. She then adopts the Muslim name Meherjan. Habir Khan's religious tolerance and generosity of spirit is, again, what makes him an exemplary character for Tagore in a multi-religious and multi-cultural society. As Tagore shows us through the characters of Rahmat in 'Kabuliwala', the Nawab's daughter in 'False Hope' and Habir Khan in 'A Woman's Conversion to Islam', it is only by keeping oneself afloat, sympathetic, benevolent, broad-minded and inclusive in spirit, rather than creating a wall of separation between groups through rigidity and exclusivism, that India can attain a united national identity and fulfil its destiny as a nation among a commonwealth of nations in the world. On the other hand, such unity is not possible if one were to follow the examples set by Hindu Brahmin characters such as Kishore Lal and Kamala's uncle, who stand for bigotry and social divisiveness in order to perpetuate their inhumane practices for the sake of authority and power. However, the Brahmin narrator in 'Kabuliwala' is an exception to this rule. Instead of cultivating prejudice towards Rahmat, a Muslim, he welcomes him to his home as a 'friend' of his daughter, Mini, which metaphorically signals a gesture of friendship towards and cooperation with Muslims. Hindus, too, clearly have the potential to be inclusive, though in Tagore's work they are often subject to a severely critical gaze.

Comparison with Rokeya's Work

The spirit of potential fellowship, unity and togetherness that we observe in Tagore's writings is also evident in the works of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. There is no doubt that Rokeya wrote mostly for Muslim women, as her primary focus was to redeem Muslim women from an abusive patriarchy that oppressed and exploited them by keeping them utterly ignorant as well as socially segregated and financially dependent on men. However, in fulfilling this mission, she never lost sight of the larger objective of emancipation of all women, or the necessity of uniting all Indians for creating a holistic national identity, or, indeed, for uniting all mankind for the sake of harmony, justice and peace. Although a practising Muslim, who recited the Qur'an regularly

and prayed five times a day,¹² she had no prejudice against Hindus and often spoke in favour of Hindu women. When she opened a school for girls in Calcutta in 1910, Rokeya had no clue about how to run a school, as she had never been to school herself in childhood. To gain experience in school administration, she used to visit several *Brahmo* and Hindu schools in Calcutta, where she came in close contact with leading Hindu Bengali educationists of the time, such as Mrs P.K. Roy and Mrs Rajkumari Das, who became life-long friends. After Rokeya's sudden and premature death on 9 December 1932, a memorial was held at Calcutta's Albert Hall, where Indians of all faiths, Hindus, Muslims and Christians, gathered to pay tribute to this remarkable woman. This commemorative meeting was chaired by none other than Rokeya's long-time friend Mrs P.K. Roy, who in her presidential address made the following remarks about Rokeya and her cross-border cultural outlook (Sufi, 2001: 33, my translation):

The more I saw her, the more I was impressed by her broad outlook. She knew that mere customs and rituals couldn't make a true faith; that which can elevate the human condition to a higher level, was the only true and lasting religion.

I loved her, because I shared her dreams and aspirations. She knew no difference between Hindus and Muslims; neither do I.

I always revered her, because she embodied the image of a true Indian woman in every sense—whatever that is truly India, is what she cultivated all her life.

Rokeya, indeed, was a patriotic Indian who cultivated Indic values throughout her life. She considered herself first and foremost an Indian national. Thus, in her essay 'Sugrihini' ('The Good Housewife'), she stated unequivocally that it was important for all Indians to place their national identity over and above their religious and regional identities, in order to heal all differences between those of different ethnic and religious backgrounds and bring the country together. She wrote (Quadir, 2006: 56; my translation):

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

As aforementioned by Mrs P.K. Roy, Rokeya also believed that all religions were in essence one, as the objectives of all religions were to elevate the human condition and to establish harmony in society. Explaining this non-sectarian, inclusivist and sublime outlook, Rokeya wrote in the dedicatory note to her novel *Padmarag* ('Ruby'), by drawing an anecdotal example from her elder brother, Ibrahim Saber (taken from Quadir, 2006: 263, my translation).:

A religious person once went to a dervish to learn about meditation. The dervish said: 'Come, I'll take you to my guru'. This guru who was a Hindu, said: 'What will I teach?

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

Perhaps it is in keeping with this outlook that Rokeya read also Hindu scriptures. There is evidence in her work of familiarity with the Ramayana, the Upanishads, the Vedas and the Bhagavad Gita. In her essay, 'The Female-half' ('Ardhangi'), for example, she mentions the story of Rama and Sita, though she rejects the story's premise of being a positive example of familial relationship between husband and wife, considering Sita as too slavish and submissive, and Rama as overly insensitive and domineering. In 'Educational Ideals for the Modern Indian Girl', however, Rokeya cites the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita approvingly, arguing that it is important for all Indians, despite their respective religions, to be aware of the Indian heritage of education and to assimilate the old while holding to the new.¹³ Rokeya also explains that Indian education was religious at the beginning, as its primary objective was to train young Brahmins for their duties in life as priests and teachers of others (Hasan, 2008: 504). Because of this there has always been a moral dimension to the Indian education system. As India progresses and modernises itself, and as it appropriates the Western utilitarian mode of education, it should not rid itself of these Indian values, which give a distinctive quality to its education system. It should rather adjust and amplify those values to suit the modern context, to avoid what Rokeya refers to as 'a tendency to slavish imitations of Western custom and tradition' (Hasan, 2008: 505). The need is to be modern and yet Indian at the same time, as Rokeya (Hasan, 2008: 506) proffers:

India must retain the elements of good in her age old traditions of thought and methods. It must retain her social inheritance of ideas and emotions, while at the same time by incorporating that which is useful from the West a new educational practice and tradition may be evolved which will transcend both that of the East and the West.

This clear-cut statement is an expression of Rokeya's syncretic imagination on two levels. First, she is asking all Indians to acknowledge their Indian identity and accept whatever is good in its indigenous education system. Second, she is advising them to look to the West for elements that would be of help to modernise the education system. Through this two-way process, India will retain its identity and yet become a modern society. In stating this, Rokeya is not making a distinction between Hindus

and Muslims but rather considers them as one people, sharing a common national identity and a homeland.

As noted, Rokeya also shows familiarity with Hindu myths and Puranic tales. She mentions Durga, Kali, Shitala and other Hindu goddesses in her work. Two of her essays, 'The Creation of Woman' ('Nari-srishti') and 'The Theory of Creation' ('Srishti-tawtho') are built on the Hindu Puranic tale of Tvastri's creation of the universe, in particular the creation of man and woman. The second essay has Hindu and Muslim characters, such as Jaheda Begum, Shirin Begum, Nonibala Dutta and Binapani Ghosh living under one roof, or at least spending the night together as friends. In 'Nurse Nelly', again, we are told that the narrator, Jobeda, has a good friend, Bimala Devi, a Hindu woman, whom she goes to visit at the hospital every day when she goes to Lucknow with Khuki, her younger sister-in-law, for the latter's treatment. All these are reflections of how much Rokeya valued the unity of Hindus and Muslims for the creation of a harmonious Indian society.

In her essay 'Home' ('Griha'), Rokeya gives examples from both Hindu and Muslim societies to show that all women in India are essentially homeless, owing to the fact that no matter what caste, class or religion they belong to, they all have to live at the whim and mercy of men. Again, this shows that Rokeya was not concerned solely about Muslim women and their condition in society, but about all Indian women, no matter what community or religion they belonged to. She argued that Hindu women like Saudamini, Prativa and Rama are as much exploited and oppressed by males as are Muslim women like Hasina, Jamila, Mohsena, Hamida and Jobeda. They are forced to live in subhuman conditions, sometimes even worse than animals. Although their different class, caste and religion should make a difference in their lives, this does not happen because, as Indians, they are all subjected to a patriarchal system that tyrannises and marginalises almost every woman equally.

In 'Woman Worship' ('Nari Puja'), Rokeya has four women conversing on the purdah system, two Muslims and two Hindus: Mrs Chatterjee, Kusum Kumari, Amena and Jamila. The women discuss how the purdah practice has plagued women for centuries in both religious communities, giving examples from both to show that men have treated women like animals, sometimes even worse than animals. When Mrs Chatterjee naïvely suggests that women enjoy the status of deity in Hindu society, Amena retorts, summing up the author's view in the piece: 'Excuse me.... the position of woman in this country is no better than a slave's' (Quadir, 2006: 196, my translation). Here, Rokeya's emphasis is not on women of any particular group, rather on all Indian women, which reaffirms her non-sectarian, non-communal, inclusivist outlook. It demonstrates that Rokeya was keen to reform not only Muslim society by ridding it of debased and despicable gender practices, but that she was interested in reforming the whole of Bengali and Indian culture, irrespective of tradition, region or religion.

In her book *The Zenana Women (Aborodhbashini)*, again Rokeya draws examples from both Hindu and Muslim communities to indicate that women in India have been dehumanised and commodified by a patriarchal system that has spread its roots through

all Indian religious traditions. Thus, if Muslim women have to live a mute, abased, obedient and invisible life, with no control over their minds and bodies, remaining utterly dependent on their male counterparts for every business of life, this is also the condition of Hindu women, who are equally deprived of their selfhood and dignity. Forced to live an often abject and ignoble life, they exist totally at the caprice and clemency of their men. The book has 47 episodes. In most of these Rokeya ridicules the excesses of the purdah practice in the Bengali and Bihari Muslim communities which deprived women of all opportunities of life, including education, personal and social freedom, as well as rights to work, wealth and inheritance, reducing them to subhuman creatures. However, in two episodes (episodes 12 and 41) Rokeya specifically extends her empathy towards Hindu women by satirising similar repressive practices in their community. The first of these episodes takes a swipe at practices of child marriage and female segregation simultaneously, depicting a child bride who goes for a holy bath at the Ganges with her family, gets lost in the crowd and starts following another man only because the man is wearing clothes of the same colour as her husband. Asked why she was following the other man, the girl innocuously reveals that because 'she always covered her head with a veil, therefore, she had never seen the face of her husband fully before' (Quadir, 2006: 389, my translation). In other words, the girl is married, but she never got to see her husband, still virtually a stranger to her, similar to many of the Muslim couples depicted in the book.

In the second episode, Rokeya recounts two absurd incidents from Shrijukta Rai Bahadur Jaladhar Sen's recollection of 'stringent and even laughable purdah practice' from his youth. The first one is about 'a mosquito net travelling', the second about 'a palanquin bathing'. In the first incident Jaladhar Sen recollects how he saw a woman coming to Howrah station to board a train one day, covered in a mosquito net. He found the incident so ridiculous that he could not contain himself, commenting: 'I... could not restrain my laughter at the sight of that ostentatious display of purdah. Oh, yes, this is the true purdah—nothing short of an expedition in a mosquito net' (Quadir, 2006: 407, my translation). The second incident narrates the sight of a Hindu woman brought to the Ganges for a holy bath, an important ritual and fairly common experience for Hindus, men or women. What is amusing in this incident is that the woman inside the palanquin is not allowed to step out for bathing, but is instead dipped into the water by the bearers, keeping her inside the palanquin. She is later carried back home in that wet condition. Apparently, the woman is not let out because her family honour would be compromised if her face were made visible to people unknown to her. This is no different from Muslim women's experiences narrated in the book, where Muslim women are likewise treated like precious commodities to be jealously guarded by men, invisible to the rest of the world, as public exposure would somehow make them less honourable and virtuous. This is a case of stripping women, irrespective of religious identity, of their agency and individuality altogether.

In 'The Mysteries of Love' ('Prem-rahasho'), an autobiographical story, Rokeya declares: 'I have loved people of all religions—Hindu, Christian, Muslim, but why, I am not sure of it myself' (Quadir, 2006: 429, my translation). Love, she argues, is mysterious; it defies all logic and social norms. Although human nature is to instinctively love something attractive and beautiful, sometimes things not so beautiful can also fascinate us. Love cannot be circumscribed or compartmentalised on the basis of race, language or creed. It crosses all borders. We are capable of loving another human being no matter what his or her cultural or religious identity is, whatever class or caste he/she belongs to, or how old or young he/she might be. To bear out this argument, Rokeya narrates three experiences of 'sisterhood' from her own life: Her 'love' relationship with Champa, an untouchable girl in Orissa; with Ms D, an English woman; and with an elderly woman from northern India, whom she describes as 'my patient'. The story documents how each of them came close to the narrator and meant so much to her, though Champa and Ms D were from different cultural-religious groups, and the elderly woman came from a different language and age group. These examples show that Rokeya not only advocated cross-cultural unity and inclusivity in her writings, but also experienced and practised them in her personal life.

Conclusions

One could give many more illustrations to demonstrate how Tagore and Rokeya, starting from totally different perspectives, came to share a dialogic spirit and sought to bring together Hindus and Muslims in their work. This article clearly establishes that though they were largely focused on depicting the follies and foibles of their own respective cultures, so that the community could ride above such weaknesses and move forward, they were never exclusive, parochial, chauvinistic or sectarian in their outlook. They never considered their own community above others. Instead, they constantly advocated fellowship and togetherness between various cultural and religious groups, especially the two largest religious communities in the country, Hindus and Muslims. At the time of their respective writings, this meant to express that the various people of British India could attain a holistic national identity, and its people could and should live together in a spirit of mutuality, trust and reciprocity, as well as in peace, amity and unity.

The same message today, in Hindu-dominated India and Muslim-dominated Bangladesh, in particular, has lost none of its relevance and poignancy. The need to co-exist peacefully, in a spirit of live-and-let-live, while continuing to tackle the ongoing problems of gendered injustice in all local cultures, continues to call for subtle balancing of competing expectations. While socio-cultural development-oriented policies and legal reform efforts appear to have assumed prominent positions in public discourse, artistic endeavours, especially in a country such as Bangladesh, remain highly

relevant. As Novak (2008 [1994]: 163) observes, referring to the work of Rafiuddin Ahmed (2001), ‘Bangladesh never believes anything until there is a poet to articulate it’. Yet listening to good poetry or reading enlightened writing is one thing, active transformation in creating a new mindset is quite another matter and still remains a constant challenge.

Notes

1. On the background of colonial Bengal during the time Rokeya was writing, see Datta (2012).
2. The association that Debendranath Tagore, a disciple of Ram Mohan Roy, founded was first named Tatvaranjani Sabha. Later renamed as Tarvabodhini Sabha, it merged with the Brahma Sabha, founded by Ram Mohan Roy to become part of the Brahmo Samaj movement.
3. Russian Marxist critic Lukacs, quoted in Desai (1985 [1915]), condemned Tagore for the excessively religious tone in his writing and his tendency to emulate the ideas of the Upanishads. He wrote that Tagore is ‘a wholly insignificant figure [who] survives by sticking scraps of the Upanishads and the Bhagavadgita into his works amid the sluggish flow of his tediousness’.
4. In her essay ‘Lukano Ratan’ (‘The Hidden Jewel’), Rokeya explains how her sister Karimunnesa had to withstand social torment and calumny for teaching her the Bengali alphabet, because learning Bengali and English was seen as forbidden for Muslims, especially women.
5. Tagore articulates this global vision in many of his writings, most specifically in his essays on nationalism, in which he rejects the idea of the nation in favour of unity of all mankind. He once wrote (quoted in Kripalani, 1962: 294): ‘The infinite personality of man (as the Upanishads say) can only come from the magnificent harmony of all human races. My prayer is that India may represent the co-operation of all the peoples of the world. For India, unity is truth, division evil’. See also Quayum (2004 and 2006), which interrogate Tagore’s vision of global unity vis-à-vis ideas on nationalism as well as eternal separation of the East and the West, as propounded by English writers such as Kipling and D.H. Lawrence.
6. Tagore discusses these issues in some detail in essays such as ‘Race Conflict’ and ‘The Way to Unity’. For details, see Das (1996).
7. At the time of the 1905 Bengal partition, Tagore wrote ‘Amar Sonar Bangla’, which much later became the national anthem of Bangladesh.
8. This is particularly obvious in short stories, such as ‘Assets and Debts’ (‘Denapaona’), ‘Sacrifice’ (‘Tayag’), ‘Subha’, ‘Mahamaya’, ‘Punishment’ (‘Shasti’), ‘The Exercise-Book’ (‘Khata’), ‘Imprudence’ (‘Durbuddhi’) and ‘Purification’ (‘Shagskar’).
9. The stories of ‘Kabuliwala’ and ‘A Woman’s Conversion to Islam’ are found in Quayum (2011), while ‘False Hope’ is made available in Radice (2005).
10. One of the peer reviewers suggested that some useful parallels may be drawn with how the recent film ‘PK’ by Aamir Khan critiques organised religions.
11. Rokeya expresses a similar view, when she asks: ‘But the question is—the same Muslims who are willing to lay down their lives in the Prophet’s name (or even at the insult of a piece of brick at a dilapidated mosque), why are they reluctant to follow an authentic guidance from the Prophet?’ (Quadir, 2006: 227, my translation).

12. For biographical information on Rokeya, see Quayum (2012).
13. This particular essay was written by Rokeya in English. The cited comment is found in the collection of her work by Hassan (2008: 504).

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