

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Woman's Downfall

['*Istrijatir Abanati*']

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain

Translated and introduced by Mohammad A. Quayum

Author Introduction

Dubbed 'Bengal's earliest and boldest feminist writer',¹ and one who worked throughout her life to remove what she called the 'purdah of ignorance',² Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was born in 1880 as Rokeya, or Roku, in Pairaband, a small village in British India which now lies in the district of Rangpur, in the north of present-day Bangladesh.³ Her father, Zahiruddin Mohammad Abu Ali Saber, was a rich landlord, believed to have been intelligent and progressive in certain ways but extremely tradition-bound when it came to the education of women. Therefore, although he himself had learnt seven languages, including Bengali, Hindi and English, and sent his two sons by first marriage to the prestigious St. Xavier's College in Calcutta for education, he never sent his three daughters by his same wife – Karimunnessa, Rokeya and Humaira – to school.⁴ Hence, Rokeya never had the opportunity for any formal education in her life. More importantly, although she and her elder sister Karimunnessa showed an extraordinary fascination for Bengali language and literature from childhood, the family was inimical to it, since it was customary for middle-class Bengali Muslims in those days to consider Urdu as their lingua franca, and to frown upon Bengali as the language of non-Muslims. However, defying custom, Rokeya persisted in learning both Bengali and English, mainly from her eldest brother Ibrahim Saber, who used to tutor her secretly at night after the family, and especially their father, had gone to sleep.

At the age of sixteen, Rokeya was married to Khan Bahadur Syed Sakhwat Hossain, a civil servant who was born in Bhagalpur, Bihar, and educated in Patna, Calcutta and London. Sakhwat Hossain was thirty-eight years old and a widower, yet her brother, Ibrahim Saber, who had met Sakhawat and was favourably impressed by his liberal outlook, persuaded the family to marry Rokeya to him. Their marriage was relatively happy, as Sakhawat became an ardent supporter of Rokeya's interests in writing and women's education. He always encouraged the ever-too-willing Rokeya to write instead of being merely a dutiful and obedient housewife, and was indeed

¹ Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag*, trans. Barnita Bagchi (India: Penguin Books, 2005) i.

² Quoted in *Women Writing in India: 6000 B.C. to the Present*, ed. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, Vol. 1 (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1995) 340.

³ Ray suggests that Rokeya's ancestors originally came from Iran and they first settled in Bihar before moving to Bengal and making Rangpur their home district (Bharati Ray, *Early Feminists of Colonial India: Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain* [New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2002] 17).

⁴ Zahiruddin Mohammad Abu Ali Saber had four wives, one of them a European. Rokeya's mother was his first wife, and as Ray explains, 'One of the wives was childless, the other three had between them nine sons and six daughters' (17).

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also proud of her writing. It is believed that after Sakhawat had read Rokeya's most famous piece of work, 'Sultana's Dream,' a witty utopian fantasy in which men are confined to the *murdana* (men's quarters) and women have taken over the running of the country, he proudly remarked that the story was 'a terrible revenge' on men.⁵ Rokeya acknowledges her husband's positive contributions to her writing career, for having encouraged her to articulate her unorthodox ideas and to even publish them, by saying, 'If my dear husband had not been so supportive, I might never have written or published anything.'⁶

Sakhawat was equally supportive of his young wife's interest in women's education. Therefore, in addition to her lawful share of inheritance, he set aside ten thousand rupees for her to set up a school for girls after his death. Sakhawat suffered from acute diabetes and succumbed to the disease in 1909, making Rokeya a widow within thirteen years of her marriage. They had two children but unfortunately both of them died in childhood; 'Twice, I became a mother, but the joy of holding my babies to my breast was short-lived. One left me at the age of five months; the other died when it was four months old,' Rokeya writes in tragic sorrow.⁷

Rokeya started the school in her husband's hometown, Bhagalpur, five months after his death. However, a quarrel with her stepdaughter over property forced her to close down the school and move to Calcutta permanently, where she set up a school, again in her husband's name, in 1911. The school, which is still in existence, is considered one of the earliest schools for Muslim girls in the Bengal Presidency. Rokeya had to work very hard, and against many odds, to make the school successful. Firstly, she was brought up in seclusion and had never been to school herself; obviously, therefore, she had no experience in teaching or in school administration. For the first few days, she couldn't even imagine how one teacher could teach several students at the same time. But Rokeya had no lack of determination and a strength of will that could move mountains. To acquire the techniques of teaching and running of school administration, she frequented the Brahmo and Hindu schools in the vicinity and acquainted herself with their principles. Her main difficulty was, of course, convincing parents to send their daughters to her school. Although Hindus were relatively more advanced in women's education and had as many as 2,238 schools for girls in the Bengal Presidency by 1891,⁸ Muslims were more tradition-bound, fearful that women's education would violate the purdah convention and therefore challenge the fabric of Islam. Rokeya went from door to door to explain to her people that education and self-assertion of women was important for the community to move forward; and she succeeded in her mission, albeit slowly, so that the school continued to grow. She began with only eight students, but by the time of her death in 1932, it

⁵ Quoted in *Women Writing* 340.

⁶ Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *Sultana's Dream, A Feminist Utopia and Selections from The Secluded Ones* edited and translated by Roushan Jahan (New York: The Feminist Press, 1988) 40.

⁷ Hossain, *Sultana's Dream* ed. Jahan 40.

⁸ Hossain, *Sultana's Dream* ed. Jahan 45.

had developed into a full-fledged high school, offering courses in all the regular subjects as well as providing vocational training to girls so that they could be financially self-reliant, instead of becoming dependent on their husbands after their marriage.

However, Rokeya was not only a writer and educationist but also a feminist activist. She realised that it was important to organise the women to counter tradition and opposition from influential men. Only a collective effort could alter the fate of women, and create enough opinion in favour of women's education and their social and economic independence. With this view, she started the Bengal chapter of Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam (Muslim Women's Association) in 1916. Its activities were, Roushan Jahan explains, 'related directly to disadvantaged poor women. It offered financial assistance to poor widows, rescued and sheltered battered wives, helped poor families to marry their daughters, and above all helped poor women to achieve literacy.'⁹ Its members were sent to the various slums in Calcutta to give basic education to the poor and destitute women, Muslim and Hindu. Rokeya visited women from house to house to motivate them to join her association and increase the membership, at the risk of inviting verbal abuse from the people with conventional and parochial outlooks. But, given her abiding dedication and courage of conviction, she again came out successful.

Although Rokeya was brought up in a strict purdah convention and in an Islamic cultural milieu, and although her primary calling in life was to educate and emancipate the Bengali Muslim women from a vicious circle of ignorance and oppression, she was never sectarian in outlook. In her essay, 'Sugrihini' [The Good Housewife], she categorically wrote:

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.¹⁰ (Rokeya *Rachanabali* 56; my translation)

In a dedicatory note to her novel *Padmarag* [Ruby], she also gave an anecdotal example from her brother, to whom the novel is dedicated, to reaffirm her non-sectarian, inclusive outlook:

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

⁹ Hossain, *Sultana's Dream* ed. Jahan 42.

¹⁰ *Rokeya Rachanabali* [The Collected Works Rokeya. Revised edition] ed. Abdul Quadir (Dhaka: The Bangla Academy, 2006) 39-40; my translation.

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 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.'¹¹

This vision of religious harmony and reciprocity is particularly important as Rokeya lived through the turbulent years of Hindu-Muslim riots, in the wake of the partition of Bengal in 1905 and Gandhi's *swaraj* movement which was aimed at dismantling the British Raj, but which in a strange way often fomented mutual hatred among Hindus and Muslims, leading to violent bloodbaths.

Rokeya's writings about the emancipation of women, her relentless wish to educate and restore Muslim women to their rightful place in society, and her defiant activism all drew tremendous hostility from the orthodox segment of the society. Many of her contemporaries were merciless in their criticism of her, and some did not even spare her the humiliation of slander. She was described 'a shameless woman, a misanthrope, a radical misguided by the proselytizing propaganda of Christian missionaries, and a sexist.'¹² One critic complained that to Rokeya, 'everything Indian is bad and everything Euro-American good.'¹³ Many even alleged 'that her companions were prostitutes and the scum of society. Some branded her a woman of loose morals.'¹⁴

However, Rokeya had her fair share of admirers as well. Congratulating her for her courage, long sacrifice and devotion, Sarojini Naidu (a leading writer and nationalist leader of the time) wrote to her in a personal letter from her sickbed in 1916, 'I am writing this letter only to let you know how much this sister of yours admires your vision and contribution to the society. ... When I see a sister, Hindu or Muslim, stepping forward to serve the nation, in the way you have done, I feel tremendously proud'.¹⁵ Likewise, in a tribute to Rokeya five years after her death,

¹¹ Rokeya *Rachanabali* 263.

¹² Hossain, *Sultana's Dream* ed. Jahan 53.

¹³ *Women Writing* 342.

¹⁴ Hossain, *Sultana's Dream* ed. Bagchi x.

¹⁵ Morshid Shafiul Hassan, 'Rokeya o Tar Jagriti-sadhana' [Rokeya and Her Struggle for Emancipation], *Rokeya Rachanabali* [The Collected Works of Rokeya] (Dhaka: Uttaran, 2008) 12; my translation.

Mohitlal Majumder, a prominent Bengali writer and critic, wrote, ‘The spirit, intellect and conscience of the Bengali Muslim society has found its expression in a female icon.... It is rare to find her equal even in the Hindu community.’¹⁶

Rokeya has left behind four volumes of work – *Motichur* (Sweet Globules), Part I (1908); *Motichur*, Part II (1921); *Padmarag* (Ruby; 1924); and *Aborodhbashini* (The Secluded Ones; 1928) – as well as many other letters, essays, stories and poems which were not collected in her lifetime. The essay, ‘Strijatir Abanati,’ which has been translated below, was first published in 1903, as ‘Alankar na Badge of Slavery’ [Jewellery, or Badge of Slavery], in *Mahila*, a monthly magazine edited by Girish Chandra Sen, the first translator of the Qur’an into Bengali. It was later included in the first volume of *Motichur*. The essay is written in a serious yet playful tone, in which Rokeya takes a swipe at the men for their oppression of women and for perpetuating women’s cycle of subjugation and ignorance; but she is equally critical of the women for colluding in their victimisation, through blind submission to tradition and excessive love for ignorance and indolence.

¹⁶ Hassan 12; my translation.

Woman's Downfall

Dear female readers, have you ever thought about the condition of your misfortune? What are we in this civilised world of the twentieth century? Slaves! I hear slavery as a trade has disappeared from this world, but has our servitude ended? No. There are reasons why we are still in bondage.¹

It's true that nobody knows the history of the primitive times, and yet it seems that in the ancient age when civilisation didn't exist, when social ties didn't prevail, our situation was not like it is now. For some unknown reason, as one half of mankind (male) continued to flourish in different aspects of life, the other half (female) failed to keep up with the pace and so, instead of becoming the companions or partners of men, they ended up as their bondmaids.

Can any of you explain the cause of such world-wide degradation of women? Perhaps lack of opportunities is the main reason for it. Unable to get on, the female sex had pulled back from all affairs of life and, considering them to be weak and inefficient, men began extending a helping hand to them. Gradually, the more the womenfolk received support from men, the more incompetent they became. We can very well be likened to the beggars of this land. The more that the wealthy give alms with a religious mission, the greater the number of low-life beggars that are on the rise. Eventually, begging has become a profession for the indolent. They are now no longer ashamed of taking alms.

Likewise, with the loss of our dignity, we feel no trepidation in taking favours from men. Therefore, we have become slaves of indolence and, by extension, of men. Slowly, even our minds have become enslaved. Being serfs for centuries, we have now become used to our serfdom. In this way, our higher mental faculties of self-reliance and courage, having been nipped in the bud over and over again for lack of cultivation, have probably stopped sprouting altogether. Consequently, men have found it appropriate to suggest: 'The five worst maladies that afflict the female mind are: indocility, discontent, slander, jealousy and silliness ... such is the stupidity of her character, that it is incumbent on her, in every particular, to distrust herself and to obey her husband' (*Japan, the Land of the Rising Sun*).

Then there are those who say, 'Exaggerations and lies are accessories of the female tongue.' Some consider us foolish and others, unreasonable. Because of such flaws in us, they have begun to consider us as inferior. But that is quite natural. Let me give you an example. Sons-in-law are much loved in our country; even a witch loves her son-in-law, and yet a son-in-law who moves in with his parents-in-law is not viewed with affection. Thus, when we lost our ability to differentiate between freedom and captivity, progress and stagnation, slowly, from being landlords and

¹ Some of us might think that it's God's wish that women should live in the subjugation of men. He first created man, and later, to serve him, He created woman. Here, however, we will not discuss views of any of the scriptures but only express what we understand from common sense. That is to say, I am only voicing my own opinion.

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masters of the house, man, in stages, ended up being our lord and proprietor.² And, gradually, we have become like one of their domesticated animals, or some kind of a prized property.

With the inception of civilisation and various societal relationships, all regulations in the community were formulated according to the wishes of their leaders. That is customary. 'Might is right.' Now I ask, who is to blame for our downfall?

And our most cherished jewelleries are the markers of our slavery. Now it is no doubt used to enhance our beauty but, in the view of many respectable and important people, ornaments were originally badges of slavery.³ Therefore, we see prisoners wearing iron shackles while we, being objects of affection, wear fetters made of gold or silver, i.e. anklets. Their handcuffs are made of steel; our handcuffs are gold and silver bangles. Needless to say, iron bangles are also not excluded. Our bejewelled chokers are perhaps modelled after the dog collar. Horses, elephants and other animals are bound in iron chains; likewise, embellishing our necks with gold-chains,

² 'Although the Japanese wife is considered only the *first servant of her husband*, she is usually addressed in the house as the honourable mistress. ... acquaintance with European customs has awakened among the more educated classes in Japan a desire to raise the position of women' (*Japan, the Land of the Rising Sun*).

Some women may object to the use of the word 'slave.' But let me ask, 'What does the word 'husband' mean?' If one who gives charity is called a 'giver,' the person who receives it must be described as a 'receiver'; likewise, if we describe one as 'husband, lord, master,' what else can we call the other but 'slave?' If you claim that wives have dedicated themselves to the service of their husbands from love, then of course nobody can complain against such selfless devotion. But haven't men also taken a similar vow of support and service to their family from a bondage of love? Even when the poorest of workers receives his meagre wage after a day's work in starvation and goes to the market, he doesn't waste money on titbits to feed himself. Instead, he buys a little grocery with it and hands it over to his wife. When the wife serves the husband with a handful of rice after cooking it, the poor fellow is happy with it. What a remarkable self-sacrifice! And yet why does society describe married men as 'husbands' rather than 'love-devotees?' I remember one more important point here. Those privileged wives who feel offended by the word 'slave' and often cite the examples of Sita and Savitri, don't they know that there are one or more aristocratic classes within the Hindu community who buy young girls at a price for marrying? One who is purchased with money, what else you could call her but a 'slave?' In this context, some may of course point to the practice of grooms bargaining on their academic qualifications but, generally, there is no instance of male spouses being sold. Importantly, it is the groom's degrees that are sold but not the groom himself. But this argument doesn't apply in the case of brides because eight to twelve year old girls hardly have any distinctive attributes or academic qualifications that could fetch a price. In other words, it is the girls themselves who are being sold. Once I raised this issue in a conversation with an upper-class Brahmin woman and asked her, 'Why do they have to buy girls, can't they find brides in their own community?' In reply the woman said, 'Of course they can. But that is their custom. Someone will pay dowry to marry another's sister, and another will give dowry to marry his sister.'

Our objective here was not to point out a particular class of people or a specific vice, but to counter the false arguments of the adversaries I had to give this example from one of the Slaves, alias the Lady. I regret doing it, but one's duty comes first.

³ A well-known religious scholar from the north, Mr Zakaullah, has said, 'A nose-ring is an embodiment of the harness.'

we think we are wearing ornaments. A cow-owner perforates the nose of a bullock to put the harness; our masters in this country have made us wear a nose-ring set with a pendant. That nose-ring is the symbol of the master's being and presence. Thus, you see, sisters, your most precious ornaments are nothing but testimony to your slavery. And notice the irony of it; the more a woman wears the badges of slavery, the more she is revered in society.

There is so much eagerness in the female race for this jewellery as if the happiness and prosperity of their whole life depends on it. Thus poorer housewives, unable to afford gold or silver bracelets, fulfil their enslaved lives by wearing glass bangles. The widow who has lost the right to wear bangles is wretched like none other on earth. What boundless grace of habit! Because we are accustomed to slavery, we even love and admire the jewellery that marks our servitude. In spite of the fact that opium is unpleasant in taste, it is a fond object for the opium-addict. No matter how harmful intoxicating drugs are for the body, the addictive person doesn't want to get rid of it. Similarly, bearing marks of slavery on our body, we feel proud of ourselves and swell with self-esteem and delight.

For what I have said about jewellery, some of our sisters might think that I am acting as an emissary of men. That is, I am adroitly creating disgust for ornaments in sisters to save their husbands' money from jewellers. But that is not the case. I only want to act as your voice. If the objective of jewellery is to squander men's money, then there are many ways of doing it. Let me mention one or two for you here.

Put that stone-studded choker around the neck of your pet dog. When you go out for a ride on a horse-drawn carriage, you could deck your horse with your invaluable necklace. Your bangles and bracelets could be used as rings for your drawing room curtains. That would be a proper way of being extravagant with your male partner's money, who now passes as your master. The primary aim of jewellery is nothing but to demonstrate wealth. Demonstrate it in this way. Why should you bear the marks of slavery on your own body? If you make the right use of jewellery in this way, people might at first dismiss you as a crazy person, but you might as well ignore that.⁴ In this cursed society, what good has been achieved without pain? Even the noble Galileo was condemned to a mental institution for claiming 'the earth moves around the sun.' Which honest person has been able to express his/her views without trouble? That's why I say, don't pay heed to social gossip. No good word or action in this world is appreciated at the time of its occurrence.

In reality, jewellery is nothing but an insignia of slavery. But if, instead of taking it as a symbol of servitude, one considers it as a method of adornment, would that be less humiliating? Isn't the attempt to augment one's physical charm an expression of mental weakness? Men see it as a sign of defeat. While disputing on a subject they often assert, 'If I can't prove my words I'll wear a bangle.' To inspire the men, the celebrated poet Saadi once said, 'Oh, valiant men! Try to attain victory; do

⁴ Wearing jewellery and squandering money in the ways I have mentioned are no different. But I hope, instead of wasting it, spending it in the right way will be considered logical.

not put yourself in the attire of women.’ They feel belittled wearing our dress. Let’s see what that dress is. The material we use is almost similar to that used by men. Is there much difference in the size of a loincloth and a sari? Countries where men wear trousers, women also wear the same. We hear of ladies’ jackets but also of men’s jackets. But perhaps the expression ‘woman’s blouse’ implies feminine weaknesses rather than a garment.

Men often claim that they are shielding us from all harm with the armour of their utmost love, and threaten that we’ll never get similar affection from the rest of society. We are also swinging along, heaving, bobbing and dissolving in that affection. In fact, their compassion is the source of our ruin. By cooping us up in their emotional cage, men have deprived us from the light of knowledge and unadulterated air, which is causing our slow death. They also claim, ‘We’ll bring everything for them with joy to make them happy – why should they have to endure sorrow while we are still around?’ We thank these people for such generous thoughts, but brother, this wretched world is not merely a delightful fancy of poets – it is intricate, wicked and evil. Reality is not poetry:

This life is not poetry or fiction,
Nor is it a theatre, but a habitat of reality.

There lies the trouble. Otherwise, with your grace, we would have no want. Taking after your imagination, maidens of Bengal could have increasingly become slender, delicate, overwhelmingly timid, etc., until in an aerial body they would dissolve into the sky like steam. But the real situation is not so pleasant. Thus, I wish to humbly plead: ‘Do us this favour, do not do any favour to us.’

As a matter of fact, many objects get destroyed from excessive care. When a dress is painstakingly put away in a confined place for too long, it becomes a provision for termites. The poet has aptly said:

Why did the lamp extinguish?
I covered it with zealous care
Waiting up all night,
So has the lamp snuffed out.

Thus, it is apparent that careful and earnest attention is the source of our utter ruin.

Being constantly protected from the dangers and difficulties of society, we have lost our courage, confidence and will altogether. Renouncing self-reliance, we have become totally dependent on our husbands. When we are faced with the slightest of difficulties, we rush into the house and start wailing at the highest pitch. Honourable brothers, again, who doesn’t know about the way you taunt us about our whimpering.

And we suffer that humiliation in silence. When I think of the way we have become so miserably timid, I feel that I am almost suffocating in revulsion and shame.⁵

Let alone a tiger or a bear, we are terrified at the sight of a cockroach or a leech. Some of us would even swoon at its sight. A nine or ten year old boy can intimidate all the women in the family with a leech trapped in a bottle and amuse himself. The women continue to scream and run and the boy chases them with the bottle in hand laughing. Haven't you seen such a ridiculous sight? I have, and I feel mortified in disgust and shame at the thought of it. Frankly, I felt amused too at the time, but now as I think about it I feel enraged. Alas! At whose feet have we sacrificed all our physical strength and mental courage? And we don't even have the power to reflect on this dreadfully deplorable situation.

I have given an example of cowardice; now let me give you an example of physical weakness. We have become such insensate, inanimate objects that we are no better than mere drawing-room ornaments for men. Dear female reader, have you ever seen an inert thing in the form of a daughter-in-law in a rich Muslim family from Bihar? Allow me to depict the replica of this newlywed woman. The female race would have been duly honoured if she had been placed on display at a famous museum. In a dark room, there are only two doors, one of which is closed and the other open. Therefore, sunlight or fresh air (for the sake of purdah?) is barred from

⁵ The other day (dated 19th April) I saw in an Urdu newspaper that the Turkish women have appealed the following in a petition to the Sultan: 'We have nothing to do except to remain confined within four walls. Let us be given at least so much education that we could protect our houses and the city with the right weapons during a war.' They have listed the following advantages in support of their petition:

1. The main advantage is that many soldiers employed in protecting the city during a war will reduce the number of soldiers in the battlefield. The harm arising from it will not happen in future (because women will protect the city).
2. Children will be familiar with the science of war from childhood, and both parents being soldiers will ensure that the offspring will not be timid or cowardly.
3. They will design a special type of uniform which will cover the whole face and body, except the nose and eyes.
4. It has been decided in honour of the purdah system that, for the first three years at least, male soldiers in every family will train their female relatives. After that, the trained female soldiers will go around from house to house to train the other women in art of war.

Those women have also mentioned in their petition: 'We'll not trouble the government with the cost of making the uniforms. We only expect them to give us rifles and other weapons.' Let's see how the honourable Sultan responds to the petition.

Whether this report is true or not, the newspaper is responsible for it. However, we believe that such aspiration is not impossible in Turkish women. It is recorded in history that they have participated in war in the past. If we look up any book on the Muslim society we'll find (that while in war), 'Joygun the daughter of the emperor became a war prisoner and so did many Arab mounted soldiers' etc.

I ask how those societal leaders in our country who are shocked at the suggestion of having female clerks, and cannot imagine women doing anything involving physical work except to dress up dolls and make wreaths with flowers, will respond if they hear about this proposal of introducing female warriors. Won't they collapse?

entering the room. In that little room, there is a plain rectangular bedstead decorated with red paper cuttings, and the girl that you see sitting on it, inanimate but bedecked with all types of gold jewellery, her lips ruddy from chewing betel leaf and a beatific smile spreading over her face; she is the bride (that is, the señora's daughter-in-law). Her body is covered with ornaments worth Rupees 10, 240. I find it necessary to spell out here how many grams of gold is present in each part of her body.

1. On the head (tiara), half seer (440 grams).
2. Ears (earrings), a little more than quarter of a seer (275 grams).
3. Neck (necklace), one and half seers (1320 grams).
4. Soft upper arm (armlet), almost two seers (1760 grams).
5. Waist (waist ornament like a scorpion), almost three-quarters of a seer (715 grams).
6. Ankles (anklets), exactly 3 seers (2640 grams) of heavy gold.

The nose-ring suspended from the bride's nose is four inches in radius.⁶ Her wretched linen salwar, pleated and thickly layered with various gold and silver threads as well as spangles is drooping from its own weight. And the miserable newlywed is tired under the sheer mass of her salwar and the double-folded wrapper covering the upper part of her body.

It is impossible to move about with a load of eight seers of gold on her body. Therefore, what else can the hapless newlywed be except a listless object? She has a constant headache, and there are three-fold reasons for it: (1) Her hair has been combed too tightly and smoothly into plaits and onto her scalp, (2) there is a load of jewellery on the hairdo, (3) half of her head as well as the eyebrows are covered with silver sequins fastened with glue. Her forehead is speckled with variegated astral designs. Her body is an insensate mass; her mind is even more obtuse.

Living life in such a drab, objectified state is a mere mockery. For, the woman's health is wasted from lack of any physical activity. Her feet get wearied, exhausted and sore walking from one room to another. Her hands are utterly useless. Dyspepsia and lack of appetite are her constant companions. If there is no spirit in the body, there is also no spirit in the mind. Her head and heart are both perpetually weak. Everyone will understand how difficult it is to live in that condition of a forever sick person.

What do you gather when you come across an image like that? What we learn from our own experiences and those of others is the real religious teaching. Sometimes, lessons from the simple experiences of life are superior to bookish knowledge. What the brilliant Newton learnt from the sight of a falling apple was not available in any book in those days. By thinking about this newlywed woman I too have been able to depict this picture of the social condition of our land. Anyway, I felt

⁶ The radius of some nose-rings is six inches and their circumference more or less nineteen inches. They weigh about fifty-eight grams.

very sorry for that bride and thought, 'unlucky woman, her present and afterlife, both are ruined.' If God asks whether she has made proper use of her head, heart and eyes, what will she answer? I then asked one of the girls in the house, 'I see you doing nothing involving physical effort, how will you explain this to God?' She replied, 'You are right,' and added that she doesn't waste her time but goes out for strolls frequently. I said, 'Loitering is not exercise. Run for about half an hour every day.' The use of the word 'run' made her laugh boisterously. I felt hurt and thought, 'Goodness gracious, she has misunderstood me.' They have even lost their capacity to appreciate new knowledge. There is little hope for our advancement; the only remaining hope now is the Saviour.

Just as the sunlight cannot permeate our bedrooms, similarly the light of knowledge cannot penetrate the chamber of our mind. This is because there are no suitable schools or colleges for girls. Men can study as much as they want, but will the gates of our ambrosia treasury of knowledge ever fully open? If a noble-minded, liberal person approaches to raise us by the hand, then thousands will create resistance.

It is not possible for a single individual to advance against a barrier mounted by thousands of people. That is why, no sooner than a little ray of hope begins to radiate, it vanishes again into the darkness of eternal despair. Most of the people have some kind of superstition against women's education; that's why the moment they hear of 'female edification' they think of all the evils of education and shudder from an imaginary horror. Society doesn't hesitate to forgive all the errors of an uneducated woman, but even if a woman with a little education makes no mistake, the society will multiply an assumed mistake by her and, blaming it on her schooling, cry in a collective voice, 'Halleluiah to the female enlightenment.'

Just about everyone nowadays thinks of education as a gateway to professional life. Yet since for women to pursue a professional career is inconceivable, the majority of the people believe therefore that female education is inconsequential.

For the sake of futile argument, some local Christians might suggest that woman's appetite for knowledge is the root cause of man's downfall as in Genesis it is mentioned that both Adam and Eve were ousted from the Garden of Eden because the primal mother Eve ate the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge.⁷

Anyway, the purpose of education is not to blindly imitate a community or a race. It is to develop the innate faculties of the individual, attributed by God, through cultivation. Proper use of these qualities is incumbent upon us, and their dissipation is a vice. God has given us hands, legs, eyes, ears, imagination and the power to think. If we strengthen our hands and legs through exercise, do good deeds with our hands, observe attentively with our eyes, listen carefully with our ears, and learn to make our

⁷ On the other hand, European Christians believe that Eve was cursed indubitably, but Jesus Christ came and redeemed woman from that scourge. They say, 'Through woman came curse and sin; and through women came blessing and salvation.' Man is not the father of Jesus, but woman have been honoured with the status of his motherhood.

thinking ability more sophisticated through reflection, then that is true education. We do not consider the pursuit of academic degrees as real education. Let me give you an example of the flowering and enhancement of visual powers.

A scientifically trained eye sees charming and beautiful objects where an untrained eye sees only clay and dust. The earth that we trample on with contempt, taking it as mere soil, mud, sand and coal dust – scientists will, on analysis, find there four kinds of valuable items. For example, cultured sand results in opal; modified clay can be used in making porcelain or sapphire, and processed coal can make diamond. From water we get vapour and mist. So you see, sisters. Where an illiterate eye sees clay, an enlightened eye sees ruby and diamond. We keep such priceless eyes forever blind; how will we answer for it to God?

Imagine that you have given a scouring-brush to your maid and said, 'Go and keep my house clean with it.' Taking it as a charitable gift, the maid wraps it in an embroidered pillowcase and puts it away in a high place, and never uses it. In the meantime, your house becomes uninhabitable from accumulated rubbish. Then when you take an account of your maid's work, how will you respond to the atrocious state of your house? Would you be happy if the maid had kept the house clean by using the scouring-brush, or would you be content with her admiration for it?

Our conscience is making us aware of our degradation; now it is our duty to make an effort to move forward. We ourselves should initiate opening the door to our progress. Elsewhere I have said, 'the only remaining hope is the Saviour.' But we should remember that unless we raise our hand for help, even the Saviour will not come to our aid. God helps those that help themselves. Therefore, unless we think for ourselves, no one else will think for us. Even if they do, it will not be altogether propitious for us.

Many people think that since women live on the income of men, they must therefore accept their authority. This is generally true. Perhaps woman, first being incapacitated of physical work, was obliged to subsist on the wealth of another. That's why they also had to capitulate. But now, since woman's soul has also been enslaved, we see families where poor women earn their livelihood by menial labour and support the husband as well as the children, yet there, too, the effete man acts as the patriarch. Again, a man who has no income of his own but marries an heiress of considerable wealth; he too lords it over his wife. And the wife does not object to his lordship.⁸ The reason for it is that woman's higher faculties being stymied for a long time, her body, soul, head and heart have all become accustomed to slavery. Now there is nothing called autonomy and strength in her soul, or even the desire to accomplish them. So I want to say, 'Rise, oh sisters, rise.'

I know that it is not easy to rise at the beginning. I know too that society will create a huge fuss about it. I know that Indian Muslims will be inclined to 'slaughter' us (i.e. condemn us to capital punishment) and Hindus will drag us to the funeral pyre

⁸ The cry for freedom that we hear occasionally from women of some sections of the Bengali community is not true freedom; they are hollow words only.

or to a fire of eternal affliction.⁹ (I also know that our sisters have no intention to rise.) But rise we must for the sake of society. Haven't I said that nothing meaningful can be achieved without effort? Stepping out of the prison Galileo said, 'But nevertheless the earth does move.' Likewise, we'll have to endure many afflictions and strife. Let me give you an example of the Parsi women in this context. The following two passages have been translated from an Urdu newspaper.

The Parsi women have undergone a significant change in the last fifty years. The Western civilisation that they have acquired now, they were not even familiar with it in the past. Like the Muslim women, they too lived in purdah (i.e., zenana). They couldn't carry an umbrella to protect against sun or rain. If they suffered excessive heat of the sun, they had to use their own shoes as a sunshade. They had to sit behind a curtain even inside a carriage. They were not allowed to speak with their husbands in the presence of other men. But now the Parsi women have renounced purdah. They can ride around in a carriage without having to cover their face. They can speak freely with other men. They can run their own businesses (mostly shopkeeping). At first, when a few men allowed their wives to step out of purdah, there was an outcry everywhere. Hoary wise men declared, 'Doomsday is looming.'

Well, the world has not ended yet! That's why I say, let's all move forward collectively to attain our freedom; the dust of anger will settle with time. By freedom we mean nothing but a successful life, like the men.

The question may arise, how to reclaim the lost jewel? What will make us the deserving daughters of the land? Firstly, we must have the will and an unwavering resolve to work alongside the men in all affairs of life. We should also have a firm conviction that we were not born as slaves.

We'll do all we have to in order to attain equality¹⁰ with the men. If earning a livelihood freely brings our freedom, then we'll do that. If need be, we'll begin by becoming clerks and then magistrates, barristers-at-law, judges; we'll work in every profession. Fifty years from now, we'll have a lady viceroy in the country who will turn all the women into 'empresses.' Why shouldn't we be gainfully employed? What do we lack – hands, legs, intellect? The labour that we expend in household work at our 'master's' house, can't we run an independent business with that?¹¹

⁹ The reasonable men in society may not impose a death-sentence on us, but the unreasonable ones (who do not care for logic) will surely arrange for brooms and ice-bags.

¹⁰ I am talking of equality with men only to explain the kind of success we want. What else could I compare it with? Man's achievement is the ideal for our progress. The kind of balance there should be between a son and a daughter in a family is what we want. Because man is society's son and we are the daughter. We are not saying that you should deck your daughter with a turban like the one on your son's head. Rather, we suggest that the care and expenditure incurred in making the son's turban should also be undertaken in preparing the head-scarf of the daughter.

¹¹ But why should we have to get into agriculture? Why should a landlord carry the plough while the peasant subjects are still there? Can't we do any other kind of lofty work except for being royalty? Clerks and so forth have been mentioned only as examples. As in the description of Eden, we have to say, there is no winter, no summer, but only an eternal spring prevailing there. In the paradise garden,

If we can't get employed in professional work, we'll take up farming. Why do we have to agonise over the lack of eligible men in India for having nubile daughters? Groom them to enter professional life and let them earn their own livelihood. No doubt, in the professional world man's labour is worth more, and woman's work is considered cheap. If a woman does the same work done by an unlettered man, she will get only half his salary. A manservant's monthly pay is three rupees, and a maidservant's is two rupees. However, there are instances where women receive higher wages than men.

If we say that we are weak, ignorant, dull-witted women, who is to blame for it? Ourselves! We do not nurture our intellect, so it has lost its vigour. Now we will reinvigorate it through cultivation. The hands that have become delicate from lack of exertion, can't we make them strong again through utilisation? Let's try to foster knowledge once more and see whether this dull head becomes sharp again.

In conclusion, let me emphasise that we make up half of society. How will society move forward if we remain inert? If we tie up one leg of a person, how far can he go hobbling? The interests of men and women are not different, but the same. Whatever their aim or purpose in life is, so is ours. A child needs both the parents equally. We ought to have such qualities in us so that we can walk side by side with men in both the material and spiritual spheres of life. Firstly, they moved ahead on the path to progress at an accelerated pace, and we stayed behind. Now reaching that advanced state, they realise that their soul-mate is not there alongside and so they have become lonely. Therefore, they are feeling obliged to take a step backward. In societies where men have advanced, taking with them their significant other, people there are reaching towards the pinnacle of civilisation. Our obligation is to abjure being a terrible burden on society and become the companions, co-workers and lovers of men and support them in whatever way we can. Surely, we were not born to live the life of a feckless mannequin.

I trust that our worthy sisters will examine this issue, and even if not rebel, at least ruminate on it deeply.

diamond flowers blossom on the small winding tendrils of emerald. Likewise, to convey our ambition, if we do not give the example of lady-viceroy, what other metaphor could I use? Let me add that the idea of having female clerks doesn't seem as shocking in other countries as it does in Bengal. In America, there is no lack of female clerks, female lawyers and so forth. And there was a time when in the Muslim communities in other countries there was no scarcity of female poets, female philosophers, female historians, female scientists, female orators, female doctors, female politicians, etc. Only in the Bengali Muslim community we do not have such jewels of women.