

RECLAIMING THE ZENANA: ROKEYA SAKHAWAT HOSSAIN'S LIFE-WRITINGS AS FEMINIST AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the writings of Hossain's as profound and political acts of feminist protest. Constructed in the familiar elements of Indian Muslim women under colonial rule, Hossain's Sultana's Dream and Padmarag challenge both patriarchal diagnosis of religion and the colonial smothering of native female voices. Her works carry the roar of her personal history and experience of purdah, pain, and courage, and hence her attempts to envision Muslim womanhood not as compliance but as subversion. In Sultana's Dream, the dream space becomes a canvas of inversion – men relegated to seclusion while women walk free, govern, and innovate. But it is Padmarag that reveals Hossain's deeper, more grounded voice. The women in Tarini Bhavan reflect fragments of herself: educators, caretakers, and survivors building a world within a world. Their acts of everyday resistance – opening schools, offering shelter, reading letters in secret – become a powerful archive of Muslim women. In contemporary times, the zenana persists in new forms – whether in digital silencing, domestic expectations, or cultural gatekeeping – making Hossain's reclamation of that space ever more relevant as women continue to carve out rooms of their own within and beyond inherited boundaries. Through her texts, Hossain blurred the line between fiction and lived truth. Her work speaks not from the margins, but from the heart of struggle – where faith becomes ethical, solidarity becomes sacred, and writing becomes survival. In reading her, we meet a woman who dreamed, fought, and mothered a movement – not only through activism but through storytelling. This chapter offers her voice the space it always deserved: not as exception, but as example.

Keywords: Hossain, Feminism, Purdah, Zenana, Resistance

INTRODUCTION

The enclosed domestic space of the *zenana* – the women's quarters in traditional South Asian households – has long been emblematic of patriarchal control, domesticity, and seclusion. Throughout colonial Bengal, the *zenana* was both a material reality for many Muslim women and a powerful symbol of their marginalization, often invoked in reformist, literary, and political discourses of the time. Within this historical and cultural context, the work of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932) emerges as a bold intervention. An educator, social reformer, and prolific writer, Rokeya reclaimed the *zenana* in her essays, letters, autobiographical pieces, and fictional works, transforming it into a critical site of feminist thought and imaginative liberation.

This chapter, "Reclaiming the Zenana: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's Life-Writings as Feminist Autoethnography," explores how Rokeya's personal and literary narratives engage

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