

Begum Rokeya's *Abarodhbashini*: A Rebellion against Purdah

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Abstract

Purdah system has been an integral part of Indian society devised to segregate the sphere of males and females. Connected with women's modesty and virtue, women observing purdah or segregation are held as superior in class and order, but mainly it is a tool of patriarchy to keep women's mobility in check. It became a matter of debate in the women's reform that was undertaken in colonial period. Many reformers spoke against the ill effects of purdah on women and voiced for its removal. Sarojini Naidu took up the aspect of life within purdah in her famous poem, "Purdahnasheen" pointing out that though life in purdah is claimed to keep women protected, but it could not "shield a woman's eyes from tears", i.e., women continue to suffer under purdah. The present paper takes up a little known colonial text on purdah system, *Abarodhbashini*, which discusses the ordeals of women observing a strict form of purdah called "abarodh" (seclusion), mainly in the Bengali Muslim community. Rokeya, the author herself had experienced the life of an "abarodhbashini" so could offer a unique perspective of a person subjected to this system. The book is a collection of satirical anecdotes which point out the adverse effect of such extreme seclusion on women's physical and mental health and thus must be abandoned. The subjective viewpoint of Rokeya is important, for it offers a rare glimpse of a life that a class of Indian women lived in colonial times and which has not been much recorded.

Key Words: purdah, seclusion, patriarchy, gender

[Purdah] causes such social and national waste that it is not even necessary to elaborate on it here. Now the time has come to focus one's thoughts with a great deal of sharpness on this issue. Discussions must now take place on what is the real extent of loss in giving... appropriate freedom to women and on how much advantage has actually been gained from such imprisonment. (Nazar Sajjad Hyder qtd in Antoinette Burton 65)

Purdah has been an integral part of Indian society across the different communities directing the behavioral norm of women as

purdah "not only mean secluding women behind veils or walls, but" as Dagmer Engels points out it "entailed an all-encompassing ideology and code of conduct based on female modesty which determined women's lives wherever they went." (2)

The issue of purdah system formed an essential part of the feminist discourse in colonial India. Indian women were caught in the cross-fire between the reformist and conservative ideologies trying to direct and dictate the feminist discourse. On one side purdah was hailed as a stumbling block to the development of women and thus regarded as fit to be abolished. But at the

same time there was widespread serious concern for maintaining purdah as a part of saving the indigenous tradition and culture and citing the scriptures in its favor. For example Maula Abul A'la Maududi in *Purdah and the Status of Women in Islam* quoted by Patricia Jefferey vindicates the purdah system saying:

In several ways, then, society should be organized so that men and women are kept apart, for human sexuality is dangerous and the purdah system must at all cost be preserved, for it is the 'bulwark against the sex anarchy.'
(21)

In fact the sexual vulnerability of women is the foundation of purdah and in turn of the sex-segregated society in India. "Integral to seclusion system are the concepts of 'separate worlds' of work and play for men and women and the 'symbolic shelter' provided by men" writes Geraldine Forbes, "for women are seen as vulnerable, subservient and indicators of status." (Papanek 220-221) Whatever might have been the reasons presented as the justification for upholding the purdah system, it all lead to the male concern of containing and controlling female sexuality. However, this patriarchal intention has kept women bonded and secluded in female quarters restricting their movement and forbidding interaction with outside world had made women dependent and ignorant. In this confusing paradoxical scenario, this paper attempts to analyze a colonial text, *Abarodhbashini* (The Secluded One) by Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1882-1930), a pioneering feminist figure from Bengali Muslim community. Against the

ambiguous nature of feminist discourse towards purdah system this text provides an unequivocal denunciation of the system by a women who herself had experienced the rigors of the seclusion of women in the name of purdah. It holds special significance if we see it in comparison with the ideas being expressed by the women with so called reformist attitude and yet who were in support of the purdah system. Sultan Jahan Begum, the queen of Bhopal is one of the representative figures among such reform minded ladies who though advocating for women's rights and reforms took the conservative side in the matter of purdah and supported it. Even Sarojini Naidu showed reluctance to denounce purdah in clear terms and rather chose to side with a "deft and wise and almost imperceptible relaxing of its [purdah's] rigorous laws day by day as education increase." (205) Similarly many conservative voices talked in a resonating tone, if nothing, at least stressing the need of keeping binaries of public/private equivalent to men/women intact which forms the basis of purdah. Compared to these attitudes which were obviously somewhere affected by the intense hold of the purdah system in Indian society, Rokeya's *Abarodhbashini* is quite a class apart for it spoke loud and clear that the purdah system has brought serious harm to the mental and physical life of the Indian women and thus need to be abolished by all means.

Abarodhbashini is a collection of forty one anecdotes which were published originally in *Masik Mohammadi* between 1927 and 1929 where "she [Rokeya] presents a sequence of predicaments, sometimes

moving, occasionally pathetic, but mostly ridiculous, that the practice of purdah resulted in.” (342 Tharu and Lalita vol I) In the preface, Abdul Karim notes that “By writing ‘Living in Seclusion’ [*Abarodhbashini*], the writer has opened up a new way of looking at women in society.” and that “no one else has, so far, written the history of the miseries of the secluded women of India and Pakistan.” The utter wretchedness of Indian women has been depicted in these anecdotes who have “surrendered everything to thieves and are silently shedding tears in silence.” (32 Akhtar and Bhowmik)

The incidents recorded in *Abarodhbashini* presents the life of women in purdah, both Hindus and Muslims, mainly in Bengal and Bihar; though certain incidents are from other north Indian states too including Punjab, United Province and Orissa. The work makes an interesting read as it comes from someone who herself had experienced purdah and thus was well aware of its implications as Roushan Jahan who translated the work into English points out these tales offer a chronicle and an interpretation of purdah in South Asia in the early part of this century from the rarely recorded perspectives of a Bengali women who lived in it herself.

Commenting on her style, Jahan writes that she had a remarkable sense of the comic which enhanced her resources as a challenger. Roushan Jahan points out that Rokeya was raising the issues of women empowerment and need for a reappraisal of gender roles that have now become internationally prominent issues in the field of feminism.(5)

In some Rokeya records instances where women kept quiet in the name of purdah and allowed themselves to be looted by the thieves, as in seventh and ninth incidents. When being burgled, the women themselves handed over their jewellery and kept quiet in the fear of violation of purdah, Rokeya sarcastically comments. *Abarodhbashini* is filled with such incidents where women chose to die in place of violating purdah. One such incredible incident is anthologized in *Purdah*:

Once, a house caught fire. The mistress of the house had the presence of mind to collect her jewellery in a handbag and hurry out of the bedroom. But at the door, she found the courtyard full of strangers fighting the fire. She could not come out in front of them. So she went back to her bedroom with the bag and hid under her bed. She burned to death but did not come out. Long live purdah! (240)

The physical discomfort and health hazard of the extremity of purdah has been emphasized in many of the tales, such as in thirty-eighth where the *Purdahnasheen* (purdah observing) women risked their life instead of risking purdah before doctor. A lady in labour pain sent for the doctor reporting tooth ache in fear of violation of purdah and consequently when the doctor arrived with medicine for tooth ache and discovered the real state. The doctor went back to get instruments for delivering the child and when returned back the patient’s state worsened and all these trials for the sake of purdah! In a similar incident Rokeya went on to relate the absurdity of purdah where the male doctor was made to diagnose

female patients from one side of the blanket hung in between and guessing the condition of the patients.

Besides, Rokeya satirises the extreme passivity of women in the name of purdah which makes them inefficient in raising a voice even when their houses are burgled. Examples of such incidents are described in tales numbered seventh and ninth where women keep mum and let the thieves sweep away all their belongings. This extremity of purdah, according to Rokeya could do no good to women and better be forsaken. Then Rokeya also questions the gender dynamics between spouses who are barred from free interaction and which could lead to serious confusions such as the one described in incident twelfth. A Hindu lady on a bath to river Ganga with her husband is found missing. Later it is found out that she mistakenly followed another man with similar dress like her husband as she did not fully recognise her husband, so strict has been the purdah: "When questioned, the wife said that she always had her head covered and therefore never had a good look at her husband." (33 quoted in Akhtar and Bhowmik)

Rokeya seems particularly critical of the purdah enforced upon young girls which seriously restricts their growth and development as "once they are over eight, little girls in well-respected Muslim families are forbidden to laugh or speak loudly, run or jump and so on". Sketch thirty-nine is the tragic story of a young girl, Tahera who under the harsh treatment meted out to her on account of not complying with purdah falls ill and dies: "Giving a fittingly cruel reply to her father's rude behaviour, Tahera

left, now free forever." Similarly in few incidents, Rokeya relates the problem of purdah for the young girls who came to study in her school. In a comic style, characteristic of Rokeya which as Roushan Jahan comments enhanced her resources as a challenger, she describes the misadventure of a nine year old girl in sketch thirteen. (5) While the girl returned from school, the girl's father complained that someone threw tea on her. It was explained to her father, however that it was the poor girl's mistake who as clad in *burqa* with no opening for eyes, bumped into some man and some time hit some cat.

The severity of purdah system was presented when girls about to be married were confined in solitude for up to six or seven months. In one such incident related in sketch eleven, Rokeya narrates the occasion of marriage of her granddaughters who were confined in close rooms devoid of fresh air and light. Consequently, one of them was struck with acute hysteria. "This is how we are trained to endure seclusion.", Rokeya concludes sharply. (241 quoted in de Souza)

Likewise the severity of purdah has been criticized by Rokeya in rest of the incidents related in *Abarodhbashini* in a conversational style pointing out the excess of the seclusion practiced in Indian society, sometime her tone is satirical of horatian strain while at other times she scathingly censures the ills brought upon by purdah system. *Abarodhbashini* is a significant piece of writing for many reasons, firstly being a rare first hand record of life in purdah of early twentieth century from an almost invisible group, i.e., Bengali Muslim women. Moreover, contrary to the general

idea of male reformer's defining the parameters for women's social activities, this work coming out from the pen of non-conformist Rokeya, defies any such dictate. It is clear from the way this writing unreservedly denounce the purdah system by presenting the wretchedness of life in purdah when the general attitude towards the purdah system was rather accommodative. The ambivalence towards the system of purdah that had its source in the patriarchal desire of keeping women indoors maintaining the public/private indoors in spite of social reforms directed at women caused the most progressive of reformers to soften towards purdah even while criticizing it. However, no such qualms seem to have affected the author of this work which is quite loud and clear in its censure of purdah that had brought harms to women folk as presented in the forty one instances of ordeal of purdah. In this way this work also seems to vindicate the women writing in colonial India of passivity and lack of agency. The feminist consciousness emanates exuberantly through the incidents related, though the feminist subjectivity here has to be defined in its own terms and context. It makes the work all the more original in its approach and provides a scope for indigenous source of feminist consciousness.

As the incidents sketch the suffering of *purdahnasheen* women albeit in a rather light, humorous and chit-chat way, it raises serious concerns and throws light on social milieu of contemporary India. From talking of gender dynamics between the married couples where women do not even recognize their husbands to women letting themselves

kicked and looted, all for the sake of upholding purdah to confining women to the limit of making them hysterical to killing girls for the modesty entailed in purdah system, Rokeya has woven a rich saga of life of women leaving under the rein of purdah, questioning the utility of this system that has robbed women of self integrity. Thus *Abarodhbashini* invokes these purdah tales as a call to women to work for their salvation. Interestingly, she hardly ever seems to be blaming man or patriarchy for tribulations of purdah system. Rather she seems to mock and chastise women's servility to this age long practice and thus exhorting women to shun purdah for good; a testimony of a unique female agency of the work. Besides, it might also be noted that the work lacks any theoretical basis and purely a reminiscence of purdah life experienced and observed by the author and presented before the reader. Of course, Rokeya As pointed out by Rokeya in the introduction about the association of class consciousness with purdah is but a useless logic to maintain this practice and intended the reader, to see through the predicaments of purdah system which she wrote was bad for both men and women and thus should be done away with, as Nazar Sajjad Hyder in "Purdah" in *Tehzibun-Niswan* (1937) wrote:

A noble inheritance, blue blood, the restrictions of tradition are but mere excuses for this [keeping women in purdah]... Because they take undue advantage of their liberty, nay, it would be more fitting to say ill advantage, men fear that if the women are given freedom, they will also become like them. Therefore, [men

conclude] it is wise to keep women confined. (qtd in Tharu and Lalita vol I 391)

Having said that, this simple collection of women's experiences in purdah with a valuable insight into social life of the then India and with feminist consciousness

imbued in its core is a significant feminist text of colonial era. Thus *Abarodhbashini*, remains an important text in understanding the gender dynamics that existed in the then society and the resistance that a woman like Rokeya, coming out from that same milieu offered to such hierarchy.

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