



Influence of Regional Literature on Indian English Literature: A Study with Reference to Begum Rokeya

Tapan Kumar Sinha

Assistant Teacher

Goalpokher Lodhan High School (H.S), Uttar Dinajpur, West Bengal.

Email: tksinha047@gmail.com.

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.12.4.88](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.12.4.88)



Article info

Article Received: 03/10/2024
Article Accepted: 01/11/2024
Published online: 08/11/2024

Abstract

Indian English Literature, a rich and evolving field, owes much of its unique identity to regional literary traditions. As an intersection of diverse cultural, linguistic, and intellectual traditions, Indian literature in English has absorbed myriad influences from regional literature. Among the pioneers in modern Indian thought and women's emancipation, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's works exemplify the significant role that regional literature has played in shaping Indian English Literature. This paper delves into the influence of regional literature on Indian English literature, focusing on the contributions of Begum Rokeya. Through her writings, we observe how regional themes, issues, and perspectives have been integrated into Indian English literature, enriching its scope and deepening its societal relevance.

Introduction

Indian English Literature has long been shaped by the country's diverse linguistic and cultural landscape. Unlike the monolingual traditions found in some Western literature, Indian literature is a product of multiple regional languages, each with its unique heritage. Regional literature has enriched India's linguistic identity and offered English writers a reservoir of stories, motifs, and philosophies to draw from. Among the notable figures contributing to the cross-pollination of regional and English literature in India, Begum Rokeya's work provides an exemplary case.

Rokeya's writings—rooted in Bengali, yet universally relevant—bridge the gap between regional consciousness and modern Indian English literature.

Begum Rokeya, a Bengali writer, social reformer, and advocate for women's rights in colonial India, emerged as a significant figure in the early 20th century. Her works, written primarily in Bengali, explore themes of gender, education, social reform, and Muslim women's rights. While her primary audience was the Bengali-speaking population, her influence has permeated the broader Indian literary landscape, especially in English translations and

adaptations. This paper examines how Begum Rokeya's regional influence has contributed to Indian English literature, highlighting the significance of regional literature in shaping the voice and vision of Indian writers in English.

Begum Rokeya's Life and Legacy

Born in 1880 in what is now Bangladesh, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was a pioneering figure in the field of women's education and empowerment. She grew up in a conservative Muslim family, where her access to education was limited. Despite these constraints, Rokeya's brother secretly tutored her in Bengali, English, and Urdu. Her exposure to these languages broadened her perspective, ultimately leading her to become one of the foremost writers and reformers of her time.

Rokeya's seminal works, including the satirical piece *Sultana's Dream* (1905) and her Bengali essay collections *Motichur* (1904, 1922), reflect a profound regional consciousness. *Sultana's Dream*, written in English, portrays a utopian society where women lead and men are confined to the domestic sphere. This story is not merely a critique of gender roles but is also a product of Rokeya's observations of societal norms in Bengal. By reimagining a Bengali society with gender roles reversed, Rokeya brings a distinct regional flavor to a universal feminist message, thus demonstrating the interweaving of regional and English literary traditions.

Regional Themes in Begum Rokeya's Work

1. Gender and Patriarchy:

Begum Rokeya's critique of patriarchy is deeply rooted in the Bengali Muslim context, but her perspectives resonate across Indian English literature. Her portrayal of women's subjugation and her vision for their empowerment reflect the struggles and aspirations of women across regional and linguistic divides in India. *Sultana's Dream* and her essays challenge the rigid patriarchy of her time, drawing from her experiences in Bengal

and questioning the broader social structures present in colonial India. The influence of Rokeya's regional perspective can be seen in later Indian English writers like Kamala Das and Ismat Chughtai, who also addressed issues of female agency and resistance.

2. Education and Social Reform:

A recurring theme in Rokeya's works is the importance of education for women. Her establishment of the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School in Kolkata was a landmark in promoting female education among Bengali Muslims. Her writing often reflects this dedication to social reform through education, a theme that has continued to inspire Indian English writers. Rokeya's advocacy for women's education resonated in English-speaking intellectual circles and influenced later writers in articulating the need for education as a means of empowerment.

3. Language and Identity:

As a Bengali writer addressing universal themes, Rokeya's work underscores the tension between regional and cosmopolitan identities. Although *Sultana's Dream* was written in English, her essays and letters in Bengali reveal her belief that language is integral to cultural identity. Rokeya's bilingual approach, writing in Bengali for a regional audience and in English for a broader one, reflects the fluid linguistic boundaries in Indian literature. Her work serves as a precursor to Indian English literature's later efforts to balance regional authenticity with a national or even global readership.

Influence of Begum Rokeya on Indian English Literature

1. Feminist Utopianism in Indian English Literature:

Sultana's Dream is often considered one of the earliest examples of feminist science fiction. Rokeya's vision of a society governed by women has inspired many Indian English writers, especially in feminist literature. Writers

such as Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy continue the legacy of exploring gender and societal issues by bringing regional stories to an English-speaking readership, much as Rokeya did with her pioneering work. The feminist utopian vision she proposed remains influential in developing feminist discourse within Indian English literature.

2. Representation of Marginalized Voices:

Rokeya's work paved the way for other marginalised voices, particularly Muslim women, to find expression in Indian English literature. Writers like Shashi Deshpande, Taslima Nasrin, and others have built on Rokeya's foundation, addressing religious, cultural, and gender-based oppression issues. Through translating or adapting themes from regional literature, these writers have created a space in Indian English literature for stories that might otherwise remain confined to regional language traditions.

3. Inspiration for Social Reform Narratives:

Begum Rokeya's commitment to social reform resonates with the themes of many Indian English literary works. Authors like Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao were similarly inspired by regional issues of social injustice and the struggles of marginalised communities. Rokeya's life and work as a reformer—her advocacy for Muslim women's rights, particularly—have added depth to the social reform narrative in Indian English literature, inspiring generations of writers to address social inequalities through fiction.

The Broader Impact of Regional Literature on Indian English Literature

Regional literature's influence on Indian English literature extends beyond individual authors like Rokeya. It has enriched Indian English literature by introducing regional idioms, dialects, and cultural nuances, contributing to a unique literary style. Indian English literature's distinctiveness lies in its hybridity, where English language and regional

sensibilities converge to create culturally specific and universally relatable stories. This convergence is evident in the works of Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, and Jhumpa Lahiri, whose writings reflect regional and international perspectives.

Conclusion

Begum Rokeya's contributions to literature exemplify the enduring influence of regional voices on Indian English literature. Her work reflects how regional experiences, written in regional languages or English, have enriched Indian English literature with diverse themes, perspectives, and styles. Rokeya's legacy persists as a testament to the power of regional literature in shaping Indian English writing, providing it with a distinct voice that speaks to local and global audiences. Through her pioneering work, Rokeya has helped lay the groundwork for a more inclusive and multifaceted Indian English literature, making her a central figure in understanding the interplay between regional and English literary traditions in India.

References

- Hossain, Rokeya Sakhawat. *Sultana's Dream and Selections from The Secluded Ones*. Penguin Books, 2005.
- Amin, Sonia Nishat. *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939*. BRILL, 1996.
- Tharu, Susie, and K. Lalita. *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*. Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Jain, Jasbir. *Women's Writing: Text and Context*. Rawat Publications, 1996.
- Mehrotra, Arvind Krishna. *A History of Indian Literature in English*. Columbia University Press, 2003.