

**FEMINIST UTOPIA: FICTION OR REALITY IN BEGUM ROKEYA SAKHAWAT
HOSSAIN'S SULTANA'S DREAM**

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Abstract

A feminist utopia entails new values-allocating principles and a new ethic based on the reproduction principle. It is innate in every human being to dream big. Thomas More's Utopia is one of the pioneering works in this regard. Before this, Plato in his seminal work The Republic, describes a communistic, egalitarian city-state ruled by philosopher-kings known as guardians, who are made up of both men and women. Sultana's Dream was written and published in the year 1905 much before Charlotte Perkins's Herland (1915) but Sultana's Dream remains unacknowledged. The plot of Sultana's Dream revolves around the creation of Ladyland, a fictitious feminist utopia that stands for empowerment and hope. Gender equality, women's empowerment, and technological advancement are the key themes of Sultana's Dream. The ideal land as envisaged by Begum Rokeya is controlled by women and men are given a secondary position. The absence of men is a blessing in disguise. The world of Ladyland may not be an accurate representation of what might be accomplished shortly, but it is a stark reminder of the need for gender equality and the possibility of a better future for women.

Keywords: defamiliarization, paradox, imagination, post-colonial, ecological, dichotomy, feminist utopia, patriarchy, circumscribed, and predisposition.

Feminist Utopia: Fiction or Reality in Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's Sultana's Dream

Introduction

It is innate in every human being to dream big. Thomas More's Utopia is one of the pioneering works in this regard. Before this, Plato in his seminal work The Republic, describes a communistic, egalitarian city-state ruled by philosopher-kings known as guardians, who are made up of both men and women. These leaders go outside the city once a year for an intense sex orgy rather than creating a family and having children. As a result, state-raised children who are blissfully unaware of their true paternity make up the next generation of guardians. Several medieval texts also

envisioned what a perfect society might seem like. As early as the late 15th century Christian de Pizan came out with her work titled *The Book of the City of Ladies*. To combat patriarchy, the book defends the accomplishments of women throughout history and creates a symbolic city that is occupied by a pantheon of all female figures who have loved morality and justice and who still do. A feminist utopia entails new values-allocating principles and a new ethic based on the reproduction principle. Feminism is viewed as a political philosophy that criticizes oppressive, patriarchal social structures as well as larger systems of dominance, rivalry, and violence. Many utopias depicted a strange land beyond imagination. To name just a few of the more well-known instances, Charlotte Perkins Gilman serialized *Herland* in 1915. She highlighted the importance of asexual production in the ideal land. William Marston depicts the significance of peace, voluntary acceptance, and so forth in *Paradise Island*, which comes under the collection – *Wonder Woman Comics*.

Begum Rokeya Hossain Sakhawat (1880-1932) was born in Rangpur in West Bengal which is now a part of Bangladesh. The date mentioned indicates the period of British colonialism. She grew up in 19th-century India wherein Bengal witnessed a lot of upsurges of social reform movements and discussions about questions of gender. Sati, widow remarriage, women's education, protesting child marriage, and raising the age of consent, were certain debates of discussion during that era in Bengal. She was a person who was born and brought up in *Purdah*. She was never given formal education but was educated at home with the help of her brother. So, she grew up in that context and perhaps felt restricted. There is a paradox about her education because on the one hand, she was not allowed to move out of her home but on the other hand, the books she read at home gave her exposure to her imagination. She wasn't circumscribed. Her work is the first feminist utopia published in 1905. The author had also written a series of accounts of life in *Purdah* titled *The Secluded Ones* and described seclusion as a "silent killer like carbon monoxide" (R. S. Hossain, *Sultana's Dream A Feminist Utopia and Selections from The Secluded Ones N.P.*). Begum Rokeya uses English to bring forth her thoughts effectively though English came to India after the setup of the English East India Company in 1600. The introduction of the English Language was mainly done to promote 'commerce and trade' (Bano Mastoi et al. 26). However, this English education was not the medium of communication among Muslim women. Rokeya participated in projects that 'promoted English-language' (Hasan 183) instruction for women. Her studying English at this time and the publication of a novella in English about a utopian country familiarize people with educated women and highlights the importance of educating women. Further, it proves that an English-speaking native lady uses the language for literary production rather than for official tasks. Begum Rokeya Hossain Sakhawat was married at the age of eighteen to a north Indian Muslim who was twenty years older than her. He was an Urdu-speaking deputy magistrate of Bhagalpur (at present in the state of Bihar). He encouraged her to study English. The author wrote it in English language and gifted it to her husband. Her husband read it and said it was completely ruthless for men and encouraged her to send it for publication. The compilation and republication of *Sultana's Dream* were done much later in the 1970s by the New York Printing Press. It is an

unacknowledged fact that it is the first feminist utopia in the world. She had learned Bangla, Persian, Urdu, and Arabic earlier. 'English was the fifth language' (R. S. Hossain, *Sultana's Dream A Feminist Utopia and Selections from The Secluded Ones N.P.*) she learned.

Textual analysis

The plot of *Sultana's Dream* revolves around the creation of Ladyland, a fictitious feminist utopia that stands for empowerment and hope. Gender equality, women's empowerment, and technological advancement are the key themes of *Sultana's Dream*. The work is all about the discussion between Sister Sara and the protagonist Sultana, who had fallen asleep while "thinking lazily of the condition of the Indian womanhood" (B. R. S. Hossain 3). This shows her concern about Indian womanhood and there were lots of discussions, writings, and debates in the newspaper both in the English language as well as the Indian languages about Sister Sara who is an obvious reference to a Christian Missionary. Initially, Sultana presumes the stranger walking with her is Sister Sara (an old friend) but later she realizes that she is a stranger. In *Sultana's Dream*, the author envisages a Dreamworld - Ladyland where women innovate, create, and play a leading role in different institutions like the judiciary, military, etc. They also ensure that Nature's Bounty is used effectively. As the author contemplates, she comes out of her reverie. The narrative comes to a conclusion when Sultana awakens from her dream and discovers that she is still in her bedroom contemplating the state of women in colonial India.

The narrative depicts a feminist paradise in which men are relegated to the home domain and women rule society. Sultana enquires about the absence of men on the road. Sister Sara explained that they are at their proper places where they ought to be' (B. R. S. Hossain 4). The central theme of *Sultana's Dream* is a fascinating land called the Ladyland where virtue reigns. It is controlled by women and men are confined to the periphery. Here indirectly she wishes to communicate about the unsafety felt by her due to the presence of men on the street. She further explains that as women are kept in zenana similarly men are kept in mardana. So, the author is turning things down in a certain sense, critiquing purdah as an artificial institution which is not something natural, but the gender ideology teaches. She is critiquing without getting formal education at school but by reading classics at home only. In *Sultana's Dream*, we see the role reversal and dichotomy of the mardana and zenana. Men in Ladyland are lesser human beings and so they are restricted to the private sphere which is called Mardana. She is critiquing and giving a solution of role reversal that is defamiliarization and making things look upside down. Further in the novella *Sultana's Dream* Sister Sara shows Sultana a piece of embroidered work, she is inquisitive and enquires how could Sister Sara find out time amidst office work and laboratory work. Then she explains that she can do it well because they work for only two hours a day. So here she further critiques the amount of time wasted by men in smoking, playing carrom, working overtime, and still pretending to be busy. She wishes to convey that even men and women start believing patriarchal ideas of what is work and what is not termed as work.

In the story, the dream scene serves as an allegory for environmental protection and refers to the imperial power's ongoing ecological neglect. Sister Sara informs Sultana that in Ladyland a bloody military triumph had been necessary to bring about the transformation in gender norms and the glorification of women in science. A huge number of lives were lost as a result of the male-dominated military's failure to fend off an invasion by another nation. The exhausted men completely withdrew from the war front and handed over the reins to the women folk in a last-ditch attempt to fend off the invasion. Then, female scientists released their sun's fire on the opposition, destroying them and gaining control of their nation. In the text, we hear Sister Sara explaining to Sultana the latest technologies being used. She informs that they keep the room warm with the sun's heat. Sun's heat is in vogue today which in today's world is termed solar heat. Our public institutions today do not have the facility of rain harvesting or solar heating. The importance of technology is to be used for the betterment of human beings. Then she shows Sultana her bathroom, wherein the roof is reversible like a lid to have a sun bath. This indicates the rapid strides made by women. If women are given the opportunity, they can run a country, and invent many new things. The inventions made by female scientists remain invisible in science textbooks today. Students can hardly answer any five female scientists at their fingertips. We naturalize the predisposition that women are weak in mathematics and science which seems to take over the mindset of society.

Our farmers depend on monsoon though we have made advancements from spaceships to submarines. Sister Sara explains about water balloon which is attached to the pipes and therefore they can withdraw as much water as they can. Hence, they are to make use of the best yield from nature. A vivid picture is portrayed here about human beings and nature by Rokeya. The same issues of human beings dealing with nature without destroying it and channelizing the natural resources have been already thought and said about by many great philosophers. During those times which was then East Bengal and now a part of Bangladesh was devastated by floods every year. People lost their houses, family members, and vocation. So ecological concerns are shown relevant in contemporary times. "We are so busy that we don't find time to quarrel with one another. Our noble queen is fond of botany...to convert the whole country into one grand garden." (B. R. S. Hossain 12) Further, she enquires about the chief food of Ladyland to which Sister Sara answers fruits. So, the readers can easily comprehend the ecological questions being asked in the text. Today we see a lot of organic food and healthy fruits to maintain a vegan diet. Most religions break their fasts with fruits. Therefore, a mixture of traditional and modern knowledge practices can be very well seen and felt while reading the text. Begum Rokeya is trying to imagine a world that is ecologically viable, sustainable, and healthy. There are no highways or railroads in Ladyland; instead, people walk on a green carpet. Horticulture is extremely important here, unlike the attitude of Bengali men who look at horticulture as just mere trash. The use of solar cooking finds mention in the text as pollution is controlled to a great extent. The solution to the vexing problem of pollution is elucidated by the author to put an end to 'environmental conflicts' (Koenlsler and Papa 286). The entire structure of Ladyland could be interpreted as a territorial

metaphor. Ramachandra Guha talks about ecological imbalance and its relation with social justice in his writings about the 1970s Chipko Movement. He also spoke against the wrong approach adopted by the state in misusing nature for materialistic gains which is equivalent to cultural imperialism' (Environmentalism et al. N.P.) which has disastrous effects on both culture and the environment. When Rokeya wrote this, the colonial power was changing how agriculture. In this light, it is possible to analyse the portrayal of the value of nature in Ladyland, from the green carpet to the use of solar energy and the preservation of water bodies.

In Ladyland, one comes across various techniques such as the use of solar power, rainwater harvesting, etc. to maintain ecological balance. In the discourse, the author emphasizes the role of science is to play a friendly role rather than a domineering one. In the text, the author eagerly waits for the creation of a beautiful world without the corrupting influence of power.

Through the narrative, Rokeya presents an alternate vision of a post-colonial society. The protagonist gets a feast for her eyes when she is taken around by Sister Sara to have a glimpse of the beautiful gardens and fields which were completely managed by women. Sultana enquires about land cultivation and how the plowing is done. So, Sister Sara replies, "Our fields are tilled using electricity, which supplies motive power for another hard work as well, and we employ it for our aerial conveyances too. We have no rail or road nor any paved streets here"(Hakeem 39). She further states that there are neither street nor railway accidents because of aerial conveyances. Sister Sara says, "We are so busy that we don't find time to quarrel with one another. Our noble queen is fond of botany...to convert the whole country into one grand garden" (B. R. S. Hossain 12). Begum Rokeya is trying to imagine a world that is ecologically viable, sustainable, and healthy. She looks for virtue and a good life in the text which is very central to the philosophical discussion. The basic question to be pondered over by the readers is what should be the philosophy of the good life? Many important themes are covered in this one single text by Rokeya like ecology, virtue, and good life, issues of technology, and equality.

In Ladyland, if any person lies, he or she is asked to leave the land. In today's times, we see cases of rape, and we hear the voice hang them but here is a woman who hasn't received a formal education, and has never gone to school brought up in purdah is talking about the punishment of leaving the country instead of capital punishment. The inmates are unable to get any sort of happiness by harming any creature. Instead, the culprit is made to leave and never return to the Ladyland. Today we see in jails that yoga, sports, and art and craft skills are being taught. The idea is not to have conditions of punishment that make a criminal more of a criminal, but we have to have redemption. Further when Sultana enquires whether there is a provision of forgiveness to the culprit to which Sister Sara replies that if he repents seriously then he is forgiven which indicates the emphasis on truth and honest living. There shows conformity in what is believed and what is practiced.

The theme of a sacred relationship is dealt with utmost care in the text. Sister Sara informs Sultana that in Ladyland even “a distant cousin is as sacred as a brother”(B. R. S. Hossain 12). Everything related to sacred relationships is restricted. As we are familiar that there is a provision for getting married to the first cousin in Islam, but Rokeya feels that even the first cousins are not considered to be sacred. In Ladyland a distant cousin is sacred. Rokeya is converting everything in reverse. She is questioning society as to why there exists a suspicion in society related to relationships. She emphasizes the sanctity of relationships. The death of someone who belongs to another community doesn't affect whereas if the person belongs to one's community, then one feels upset. Even emotions have got circumscribed in today's times. Therefore, she wants to bring the entire country under one umbrella of sacredness. So Rokeya is talking about a world where everybody is related to each other, and everyone is a family.

Conclusion

When we read the text there are layers of meaning, it is opening of mind and enhancing imaginative skills which one could never have imagined in those times. Begum Rokeya played such a huge role in Bengali Muslim women's lives that Shamsun Nahar Mahmud (1908–1964), Rokeya's biographer and close friend, famously referred to her as a spider mother and said: "There is no way to deny that this benevolent woman played the most significant role behind it" (Los 1). The novella also emphasizes the significance of education and intellectual vigor Sultana is depicted as a wise and inquisitive woman who yearns for knowledge and is dissatisfied with the constraints imposed on her by society. One of the themes that is remarkable about *Sultana's Dream* is ecology. Begum Rokeya is sensitive toward the ecological system. In contemporary times we are much aware of global warming, pollution, earthquakes, floods, and the Aravalli ranges being devastated. A great sensitivity to ecology is seen by Rokeya in *Sultana's Dream*. The distinction between fact and fiction is hazier than ever. As corny as it may sound, a book or movie with fictional characters in it has the power to drastically alter our life. It provides access to a new universe and a means of escaping reality. In the words of a sociologist, Hillary Rose, “Feminist Science fiction creates a privileged space- a sort of dream laboratory”(Clare 134). The space for women as depicted in fiction remains only in fantasy but not in reality. It is quite surprising that she has mentioned air cars driven by electricity, water balloon, channelizing solar heat, and irrigation facilities through water balloons. She was very sensitive toward the preservation of ecology. She has delineated many techniques through which not only one can preserve ecology but also utilize ecology for human comfort. As mentioned by Sister Sara in the text about, artificial fountains and even the upper ceiling of the bathroom was retractable. She talked about modern means of rain harvesting and electricity being employed for the tilling of the land as well as aerial conveyances. The things which Begum Rokeya delineated in her text *Sultana's Dream* seem to be fiction for contemporary readers interestingly have become a reality for us. She has stretched upon establishing trade relationships with those countries that give due respect and honor to their females. In the words of Sister Sara, “No trade was possible with countries where the women were kept in the zenanas and so unable to come and trade with us. Men, we find, are rather of lower morals and so we do not

like dealing with them”(Quayum 146). The readers can feel the author emphasizing gender equality. It seems to us that she is much more concerned about issues like gender sensitization and human rights which are very important in the contemporary era. Further, she also attaches utmost importance to human rights concerns to establish trade relationships with other countries. She voices these concerns through Sister Sara’s character when she says, “We do not fight for a piece of diamond though it may be a thousand-fold brighter than the Koh-I-Noor, nor do we grudge a ruler his Peacock Throne” (Hasanat 114). Therefore, we can say that *Sultana’s Dream* was in no way a fictional text but a document having realism. It has addressed many important issues like ecological concerns, conservation of energy, human rights, technological advancement, female emancipation, etc. which are significant in the contemporary world.

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