

## Reconsidering the Utopian Discourse in Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream*: A Study in Feminist Perspective

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### Abstract

The present paper seeks to unearth the thematic underpinnings of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* through the lens of feminism, utopian literature, and discourse analysis. The narrative presents a speculative vision of a gender-inverted society where women hold dominion over public and domestic spheres. Through a close examination of Hossain's text, this study explores the implications of such a societal structure on gender dynamics and power relations. It scrutinizes how the author employs literary elements to envision a utopian world where traditional gender roles are inverted, offering a critique of patriarchal norms. By analyzing the discourse within the narrative, this research aims to uncover the socio-political commentary embedded in *Sultana's Dream* and its relevance to contemporary feminist discourse.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Utopia, Patriarchy, Emancipation, Educational reform, Patriarchal Critique, Gender Roles, Feminist Literature

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain is widely celebrated as a trailblazing figure in Muslim feminism and education across South Asia today. She embraced and extended the legacy of the nineteenth-century Bengali Renaissance through her activism and literary works. In the early twentieth century, amidst colonial Bengal's deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, Rokeya emerged as a visionary advocating for the advancement of women's rights. In 1910, she established the Sakhawat Memorial Girl's High School, demonstrating her commitment to female education. Additionally, she played a pivotal role in founding the Bengal chapter of the renowned women's welfare society, Anjuman-i-Khawatin-e-Islam, in 1916, furthering her

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efforts to uplift women within society. The collections of her essays, *Motichur*, Part I (1904) and II (1921) as well as her fictional works like *Sultana's Dream* (1905), *Padmarag* (1924) and *Abarodhbasini* (1931) are actually the vehicles of her voice against patriarchy. All these writings focus on such issues as women's education, women's empowerment and their rights as well as on her struggle against patriarchal practices like child marriage, *zenana* system, violence on women, and their subordination in the fields of education, politics, culture, etc. This paper seeks to read Sakhawat's *Sultana's Dream* from the feminist point of view and offer insights into the dynamics and politics of the author in locating the utopian narrative within the feminist discourse.

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* challenges established social norms by constructing a narrative set in the utopian realm of Ladyland, where traditional gender roles are reversed. Positioned as a feminist utopia, the text offers a unique perspective by reimagining the conventional utopian genre through a feminist lens. Hossain disrupts traditional utopian conventions by depicting a world where women hold authority and men are relegated to domestic duties within the confines of Mardana. Through the character of Sultana, who ventures into Ladyland alongside Sister Sara, Hossain illustrates a society where women govern based on their education, intellect, and mastery of science, effectively subverting patriarchal structures. The term 'utopia' (Greek *ou*, not + *topos*, place), originally coined by Sir Thomas More in his book of the same title (1516), means no-place or an imaginary place considered to be ideal or perfect. Apart from More's, Plato's ideal commonwealth in *The Republic* (400 B.C.), Ovid's portrayal of the Golden Age in the first book of *Metamorphoses*, Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1624), William Morris's *News From Nowhere* (1890) are some well-known examples of utopian fiction. While the Western utopian writings mainly deal with legal, social and administrative issues, Rokeya's work solely devotes itself to the feminist cause and imagines a country upside down by reversing the prevalent patriarchal social order.

Syed Sakhawat Hossain, Rokeya's husband, described *Sultana's Dream* as a potent retaliation against patriarchal structures upon reading the manuscript in 1905. He advocated for its publication in the Indian Ladies' Magazine that same year. The impetus driving this groundbreaking work stems from Rokeya's progressive and iconoclastic views regarding women's education and their substantive engagement in the contemporary realms of intellectual pursuits, scientific inquiry, and technological advancements. Sultana, the titular character, serves as a symbolic embodiment of traditional Indian femininity within the narrative. Her name is essentially ironic. "Sultana" means a female sovereign, a princess. But in reality, she is devoid of the autonomy of self and confined within the four walls of her household. The narrative begins with Sultana lounging in her easy chair in one evening

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contemplating on the present wretched condition of womanhood in the colonial India. The evening darkness is symbolic here; it suggests the prevailing darkness over the women status in the orthodox male-dominated social order as contrasted with the morning of the utopian Ladyland where Sister Sara takes Sultana in the latter's dream. Sister Sara is, in fact, the alter ego of Sultana. She is an emblem of the emancipated woman of Rokeya's dreamland, the repressed self of Sultana. She is the possibility of what Sultana would have been if she is given complete freedom of self and identity.

In the paradigmatically inverted realm of Ladyland, women have assumed dominance in the public sphere, supplanting the traditional role of men. Within this society, women adeptly manage all aspects of social, political, educational, and administrative governance with remarkable proficiency and accomplishment, relegating men to domestic responsibilities. In Ladyland, the male populace is characterized as the inferior sex, wherein exhibiting traits traditionally associated with masculinity is indicative of physical, mental, and intellectual frailty. Consequently, Ladyland serves as a space where the entrenched social and cultural gender stereotypes prevalent in colonial India are subverted and inverted. Sultana, a woman from the Indian tradition of patriarchal hegemony, is thus the butt of a joke in Ladyland:

...yet I felt sure they were joking. I asked my friend, 'What do they say?'

'The women say that you look very mannish.'

'Mannish?' said I, 'what do they mean by that?'

'Shy and timid like men?' It was really a joke. (Hossain 3)

Sultana, a *pardanashin* who is unaccustomed to walking unveiled in the streets of her own country, is assured by Sister Sara to be herself in Ladyland as virtue reigns here solely and this country is free from men's "sins and harm" (4). *Zenana* has been abolished here and women have been freed from the confinement of their households. Now they can wherever they want and think and act according to their own will. *Zenana* has rather been replaced by *Mardana*, the final recluse for men ("*mards*") where remain indoors, look after their children and perform household chores:

'Where are the men?' I asked her.

'In their proper places, where they ought to be.'

'Pray let me know what you mean by "their proper places".'

'O, I see my mistake, you cannot know our customs, as you were never here before. We shut our men indoors.' (Hossain 3-4)

In Rokeya's Ladyland women form the ruling class while men are the marginalized Other. The writer here breaks away from the hegemony of the cultural definitions of gender designed by the patriarchal society of her time. This reversal of gender roles proves the validity

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of what Simone de Beauvoir points out precisely in her *The Second Sex*: “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.” (295) and shows what the reverse in cultural prospects may cause to the status of woman’s identity in society. In Ladyland all the women like Sara enjoy absolute freedom, all the political and social rights unlike the women in Sultana’s world where their rights are curbed in the management of social affairs: “In India man is lord and master. He has taken to himself all powers and privileges and shut up the women in the zenana.” (5). In fact, like Beauvoir, Begum Rokeya believed the fact that the biological difference between man and woman does not decide the male domination over the other sex, it’s the cultural codes that matter. Sister Sara justifies it clearly; just as human race does not allow the physically stronger lion to dominate over them, similarly women should not allow the biologically stronger men to dominate over the women. She suggests that women’s brains are quicker than men’s in her country because they do not waste time like the male workers in the Calcutta offices. Rather by applying their brain or intellectual power women have proved their superiority to the men there.

Rokeya’s utopian land is a proper manifestation of the Enlightenment philosophy as it is enlightened by equality, education, intellect and the sustainable and eco-friendly use of science and technology in daily life. The whole country is as if a replica of the Eden with its clean roads, abundance of greenery, pollution free atmosphere, a stress free life for everyone there. The women there find enough time for engaging in horticulture, decorating their houses with artworks and embroidery. Ladyland is governed by the kind, benevolent Queen who is herself the best example of Rokeya’s concept of an emancipated and enlightened woman. After inheriting the administrative power over the land, the Queen takes measures to establish girls’ schools throughout the country and to reform the earlier patriarchal social order, as evident in Sister Sara’s account:

She circulated an order that all the women in her country should be educated. Accordingly a number of girls’ schools were founded and supported by the government. Education was spread so far and wide among women. And early marriage was also stopped. No woman was to be allowed to marry before she was twenty-one. I must tell you that, before this change we had been kept in strict *purdah*. (Hossain 7)

Rokeya’s vision for the liberation of women through advanced education is mirrored in the actions of the Queen of Ladyland, who founded universities for women dedicated to the study and advancement of science and research-based education. The women, now well educated in science and technology, have flourished their intellectual capabilities in scientific inventions. They have proved that they are better than men in the sustainable use of science for the development of society. The Lady Principal of one university invented the captive water

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balloons that can draw water from clouds as much as the people require. Thus weather has come under control. As there is no rain-fall there, the roads are free from mud and there is neither flood nor any thunder-storm. The researchers can provide water drawn from the artificial fountains to sprinkle the ground keeping the country cool during the hot weather. The citizens can even enjoy bath shower by turning on the tab of the shower pipe connected to the water balloon. The researchers of another university successfully have created a device through which they can collect concentrated heat from the sun. This heat is transmitted into the kitchen through pipes and used for cooking making the kitchen smoke free and eco-friendly.

The Queen is philanthropic and humanitarian; she gave shelter to the refugees from a neighbouring country and defended them against the aggression of the ruthless King of the country. However, when he insulted the Queen and invaded Ladyland, the military power of the country stood up with arms to defend their country, but all their attempts failed to defeat him. But then women from the universities came forward and took the matter in their own hands. With their scientific wisdom and strategies, which the male military officers had earlier called as “a sentimental nightmare” (8), the two thousand women students and researchers from the universities drove away the foreign aggressors with the help of the concentrated sunlight and scorching heat without causing any death or bloodshed.

Thus, in the utopian Ladyland muscle power of the men is found to overpower by the power of intellect and education of women. This grand success for country with the help of women’s intellect could have possible only when the men had been sent into the *Mardana* and women had the opportunity to explore their intellectual powers of science and technology to protect their country from the invaders. After the battle is over, the women continue to rule the country with men safely sheltered still in their recluse. Thus, in her utopian country the Queen sets men powerless who have misused their military power meaninglessly causing no good for the country’s security. Rokeya here actually envisions a country that is secured not with military weapons like guns and bombs, but with the weapons of intellect and science.

The Queen’s radical measures for social reformation have achieved huge success in restoring law and order too. In Ladyland, as men have been confined within the *mardana*, there is complete absence of crime: “Since the *mardana* system has been established, there has been no more crime or sin; therefore we do not require a policeman to find out a culprit, nor do we want a magistrate to try a criminal case” (11). The Queen has abolished the capital punishment as all women there believe that they have no right to destroy the living creatures created by God. The religion of the country is based on tolerance, mercy, love and truth: “It is our religious duty to love one another and to be absolutely truthful” (12-13). If anyone is found guilty of telling a lie, the offender is either banished from the country or forgiven, if he or she repents

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and asks for mercy. There is universal brotherhood and fraternity in Ladyland where even a distant cousin is regarded as sacred as a brother just unlike Sultana's own world where women's relationships are limited to a very low scale.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman in her feminist utopia *Herland* (1915) also shows a secluded country ruled by women like Rokeya's Ladyland. Both countries are a matriarchal in administration, free of hierarchies, gender ideologies, and rooted entirely in pragmatism. Both celebrate the women's capabilities to administer a civilization based on the values of equality, freedom, humanity and commonwealth. As in Ladyland, the women of Herland organized their society rationally, realizing that they would never survive without cooperation. Throughout the ages the women of Herland have developed a peaceful, orderly, highly efficient society in which crime and anti-social behavior are unknown just as found in the country of the Queen in Rokeya's narrative.

In Ladyland, the women have embraced advanced agricultural and transportation methods, integrating eco-friendly applications of science and technology into their society. Agricultural tasks are facilitated through the utilization of electric power for ploughing fields. Traditional modes of transportation such as railroads and paved streets are absent, replaced instead by innovative air-cars powered by "hydrogen balls," enabling swift movement between locations. Furthermore, Ladyland embodies an idealized utopian vision of trade and commerce, characterized by the adoption of modern principles of free trading. Towards the end of *Sultana's Dream* when Sister Sara takes Sultana to the palace of the Queen, Sultana finds the Queen's ideas of trade based on freedom and equality: 'The Queen told me that she had no objection to permitting her subjects to trade with other countries.'(13) But she permits trade with those countries only where women are not kept into *zenanas* and women would participate freely in the commerce and trade as the Queen thinks, 'Men, we find, are rather of lower morals and so we do not like dealing with men.'(14) She hates the colonizers and their political strategies to exert power over the subject. Sultana is overwhelmed by the Queen's humanitarianism, altruism and her sagacious nature as well as her passions for knowledge and education:

We do not covet other people's land, 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. We dive deep into the ocean of knowledge and try to find out the precious gems, which nature has kept in store for us. We enjoy nature's gifts as much as we can. (Hossain 14)

Sultana's metaphorical journey from the restrictive grip of male dominance and the suppression of women to a freeing utopian space of female liberation depicts a profound

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transformation of the female mind, transitioning from a phase of unawareness to a state of enlightenment and self-realization. In her waking life, the real-world Sultana resides in a state of slumber within the confines of domesticity, oblivious to the suppressed voice of her own identity. Conversely, her experiences within the dreamworld of Ladyland serve as a manifestation of her yearning for knowledge and liberation. Rokeya emerges as a visionary, advocating for the creation of a utopian society where women are afforded genuine opportunities to harness their capabilities for the betterment of society as a whole. Ladyland is, in fact, the best example for an ideal commonwealth where one would not exploit another's freedom, where all are equal, free, and co-operative in their ways of living. This can well be compared with Raphael Hythloday's description of the ideal commonwealth in Thomas More's *Utopia*:

But in Utopia, where everything belongs to everybody, no man need fear that so long as the public warehouses are filled.... Distribution is simply not one of their problems; in Utopia no men are poor, no men are beggars. Though no man owns anything, everyone is rich (18).

The depiction of Ladyland in *Sultana's Dream* serves as a narrative exploration of the latent capabilities and potentials suppressed within the women of Sultana's society. Rokeya's portrayal suggests that in the real world, women are often deprived of the freedom to express themselves intellectually and assert their individuality. Drawing from her own lived experiences, Rokeya witnessed firsthand the systemic discrimination and segregation endured by Indian women from her early years. In her *Abarodhbasini* she shows how *purdah* system have exploited the women's life and thrown them into the confinement of the four wall of the household. Women were not allowed to walk alone on the streets freely. If anyone transgressed the patriarchal social codes they would have been leveled as "fallen" women. In her novel *Padmarag*, the author depicts the theme of women's subjugation within a patriarchal system, alongside a path to liberation. The story follows women from diverse social and religious backgrounds who have suffered under the rigid, male-dominated societal structure. These women come together to create an ideal society at the utopian Tarini Bhavan, where they gain formal education and learn various crafts. This empowers them to find purpose in their lives and construct an independent existence for themselves.

Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* serves as her ideological crusade against the patriarchal hegemony entrenched within orthodox Indian social structures. Drawing upon Betty Friedan's observations in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Rokeya highlights the societal conditioning imposed upon women by patriarchal and hegemonic ideologies, compelling them to believe that fulfillment is attainable solely through marriage, motherhood, and domestic duties.

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Rokeya's narrative confronts these patriarchal constructs head-on, advocating for the emancipation of women and the establishment of a society devoid of gender bias and exploitation. Through the radical portrayal of Ladyland, Rokeya articulates her vision of an idealized womanhood, grounded in principles of equality, freedom, and human dignity. The text serves as a testament to Rokeya's lifelong advocacy for feminist causes, providing women with a utopian realm where they can freely exercise their intellectual faculties and reclaim their inherent rights and powers. In essence, *Sultana's Dream* offers a glimpse into Rokeya's progressive ideals, celebrating the potential of women when granted the opportunity to explore their suppressed capabilities with unabated freedom and self-expression.

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