

## REVISITING *SULTANA'S DREAM*: AN UTOPIAN PERSPECTIVE

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### **Abstract:**

The novella *Sultana's Dream* (1905) by Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain is the pioneering text of India's science fiction. In the novella, the driving force behind the success of the utopian feminist country of Ladyland is women's education. In the unconventional, inverted world of *Sultana's Dream*, the men are "kept in the zenana" ("*Sultana's Dream*" 5) and are left busy with household chores. The women, on the other hand, use their superior intellectual ability to govern the country dexterously and gingerly. Rokeya's unflinching attempt towards female education is described in some of the words. *Sultana's Dream* retains its status being the most successful pieces of Indian writing in English.

**Keywords:** Elysium, ladyland, zenana, purdah and female education.

### **Utopian images in *Sultana's Dream***

According to *Oxford Learner's Dictionary* a Utopia is "an imaginary place or state in which everything is perfect." Though lots of Utopians have been written, in literature, this genre achieved its name from Thomas More's *Utopia*. (Abrams, 337) In the novella *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya introduces three significant characters who portray the utopian image of the "Ladyland" with various kaleidoscopic images. The novella *Sultana's Dream* opens with the lines:

"One evening I was lounging in an easy chair in my bedroom and thinking lazily of the condition of Indian womanhood. I am not sure whether I dozed off or not. But, as far as I remember, I was wide awake. I saw the moonlit sky sparkling with thousands of diamond like stars, very distinctly" (*Sultana's Dream*, Page 4).

Here, we can bring to mind, the text describes the condition of Indian women. The idea or the novella is presented only in a dream. The writer was uncertain whether she "dozed off or not" on writing the particular text. Thus, Rokeya in her dream is contemplating about Indian womanhood.

The space of the "Ladyland" is demarcated only for women. One has to bear in mind Rokeya wanted to talk about the ideal space of the women in the year 1905 and the concept of feminism has to be understood in that context and also apply to understand how we in the 21<sup>st</sup> century really look about the concerns that Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain voices in *Sultana's Dream*. The characters of the *Sultana's Dream* are thus named as Sultana, Sister Sara and the Queen. In the novella, the driving force behind the success of the utopian feminist country of "Ladyland" is women's education. People worship the religion based on Love and Truth. Their religious duty is to love one another and to be absolutely truthful.

The "Ladyland" is devoid of violence and corruption. It is symbolic as it is a refuge where women have successfully freed themselves from the control of mankind. "Virtue herself reigns here" ("*Sultana's Dream*" 4). In the unconventional, inverted world of *Sultana's Dream*, the men are "kept in the zenana" ("*Sultana's Dream*" 5) and they are busy with household duties. It is the women who take the upper hand to govern the nation courageously. Women can do extraordinary things in the "Ladyland".

One of the most beautiful aspects of the Ladyland is no one dies in youth except by rare accident. In

the Ladyland, science, technology and virtue work hand in hand in perfect harmony. The only means of transport is air travel. The land is cultivated by electrically driven motors contemporaneously weather is controlled too. Using the concentrated solar heat stored by the women's universities a missile, the enemy is routed. The men are safely secluded in the mardana, the women continue to govern the country which is called as the Ladyland. In the conversation between Sultana and Sister Sara, Sister Sara said about Sultana "The women say that you look very mannish" ("*Sultana's Dream*" 1). Here the word "mannish" is "shy and timid like men." This complete inversion of context draws attention in the usual patriarchal scheme of things. They are looking at things in one particular way.

The "Ladyland" of Sultana is free from sin and harm. Virtue itself reigns here. The fact that virtue is possible, freedom is possible, freedom from sin, freedom from harm is possible but only when the men are kept at the distance. This is Rokeya's idea of utopia. Whatever is taking place in *Sultana's World*, is exactly the opposite. The natural logic that entails is that women should roam around freely. So "Ladyland" is not an impossible task as far as Sister Sara looks at it. Sister Sara feels that "Ladyland" is the space that follows rationality that follows scientific attitude and follows the logic. Then another question puts forth around us is "Why do we define this logic?" Here the understanding should be based on structure and power.

In Sultana's country, man is Lord and master. In respect to this, Sister Sara said something significant. She said, "You have neglected your duty that you owe to yourself and you have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interests." (*Sultana's Dream* 7). It means humanity would entail that women like men should focus on their own interests, should focus on what they want whereas that is not really allowed to happen. It rings a very important bell here when we actually compare it in the context of the situation of women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There is nothing artificial about it.

This utopian world of Ladyland is free of disease. People "neither" die of "street nor railway accidents". (*Sultana's Dream*, 12) People do not "find time to quarrel with one another as we(they) never sit idle." (*Sultana's Dream*, 12). This is moreover a place where women have complete regard for each other's idea. This utopia is an alternative space going by the standards today where we think about all sorts of alternative methodology whether it comes to agriculture or whether storage of water and whether it comes to solar power. Rokeya describes how each plant is looked at as an ornament because there is some much effort and there is so much tending that goes into it. There is no coal here, no smoke, no fire to cook because people in the "Ladyland" depends on solar power. The chief food that people in the "Ladyland" have is none other than fruits. There is also a reference to a "water balloon" (*Sultana's Dream*, 12) to trap water. Sister Sara also describes Sultana that there was also a good Queen who "circulated an order that all the women in her country should be educated" (*Sultana's Dream*" 7). Some of the thoughtful ideas supplemented by her were:-

"No woman was to be allowed to marry before she was twenty-one." (*Sultana's Dream* 7)  
Before this particular rule was implemented, they "had kept in strict purdah" (*Sultana's Dream* 7).

When those individuals in the Ladyland who are found guilty of lying, they were not gifted with the punishment of death. The people are so generous here that they are not entitled to execute a creature of God, especially a human being. The liar is asked to leave this land for good and never come to it again. Those golden souls who repent sincerely are being welcomed with open arms back in the Ladyland. Rokeya's hatred of the other sex can be relevant when she finds that they belong to the society of lower morals and the women do not find ease in dealing with them. In the Ladyland, however brighter and expensive the "Koh-i-Noor" diamond may be, they would not grudge a ruler his Peacock Throne.

"They would enjoy the natural gifts as much as they can. In order to achieve this gift, they would dive deep into the ocean of knowledge and try to find out the precious gems, which nature has kept in store for them." (*Sultana's Dream* 14)

In the “Ladyland”, the significance of time is very important. There is time to work also there is time to relax. Men waste their time “in smoking” (*Sultana's Dream*, 7). Women used to work for two hours a day whereas men waste “six hours every day in sheer smoking.” (*Sultana's Dream*, 7). Thus, there lies the strong digging on the society of men here. This is the constructed work for women. Moreover, they are not distracted and disturbed.

When Rokeya's husband, Mr Khan Bahadur Sakhawat Hussain read *Sultana's Dream*, he had commented, “A terrible revenge!” and had persuaded his wife to send it to the *Indian Ladies' Magazine* which published the work. In Rokeya's own words, *Sultana's Dream* originally was an act of ideal exploration: “To pass the time, I wrote the story.” (R.S. Hossain and Bagchi, 2005). *Sultana's Dream* was written basically in English. Most of her other works were written in Bengali. Roushan Jahan said that her writing was partly to demonstrate her proficiency in English to a non-Bengali husband.

“Begum Rokeya strongly believed that to gain the freedom of women, three things are obvious: education, economic independence and mobility with moderate purdah and she worked towards that end with the intellect of a teacher, zeal of a social reformer and conscience of a humanitarian throughout her life. She could feel that uniting the womenfolk along with education was important to establish their rights in the society.” (Jayanta Mete *Gender, School and Society*)

At the end of the novel *Padmarag*, despite the fact, Padmarag or Siddika and Latif Almas share sentiments betwixt each other, marriage do not take place. Through the spokesperson of Tarini Bhavan, Dina Tarini, Rokeya mentions that it is important for women to make this as a sacrifice so that the education of women, the welfare of women, needs to be looked after.

Radical feminism is a perspective within feminism that brings forward radical reordering of society in which male supremacy is eliminated in all social and economic contexts. Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* brings to our mind the exact nature according to this perspective. First of all, we need to remember that the setting is in the utopian feminist country of Ladyland. Rokeya lays particular emphasis on the importance of women in the world of science and is unequivocal in her condemnation of male militarism.

Through reading *Sultana's Dream*, one can achieve its utmost goal that is the emancipation of women and education that leads a gateway to achieve independence in the male-dominated society. It is widely read and re-read and retains its status as one of the most triumphant pieces of Indian writing in English. *Sultana's Dream* is thus an extraordinary achievement and one that is particularly enjoyable today.

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