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*Comment on the convergence of an ecological and a feminist consciousness in Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's 'Sultana's Dream' (1905).*

*Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's 'Sultana's Dream' is a vision of an equal and sustainable society, which converges science, nature and culture. Comment.*

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880 - 1932) was a Muslim Bengali feminist thinker, writer and political activist. She hailed from British Indian Bengal (present day Bangladesh). Begum Rokeya was a strong advocate on women's liberation, women empowerment (primarily their education and employment) and gender equality. She belonged to an orthodox Muslim community (at the time) which was against her beliefs of the liberation of women. Some of the anti-empowerment ideas prevalent at the time in parts of British India were:

- the use of 'Parda', the custom of veiling women behind a drape at home (in the Zenanas) and their seclusion from the outside world.
- the practice of 'Sati' where the newly widowed women sacrifice themselves by sitting atop the funeral pyre of their deceased husbands.
- the concept of child marriage.
- The prohibition on marriage of upper caste Hindu widows.

- The absence of legal rights for women to own property, to vote in elections, etc.
- The social stigma on education and employment of women.

Fortunately, Begum Rokeya's husband was well educated and more liberal in his views than the rest of the society. He encouraged Rokeya to learn English and Bengali (apart from Urdu) which widened her mediums to communicate her ideas through writing and words. She expressed antipathy about a few of the above concerns (most notably about the 'Pardanashin' women, women's education, and employment) which have been vividly expressed in her writings. Her literary career encompassed several acclaimed Bengali, Urdu as well as English publications such as 'Pipasa', 'Matichur', 'Padmarag', 'Abarodhbasini' and her most notable work being 'Sultana's Dream'; which is also the subject of discussion of this commentary.

Sultana's Dream is a short story written by Begum Rokeya in 1905. While the story is set in a modern realist setting, a major part of it is fictional, with a feminist utopian background. The story begins with Sultana falling asleep in her current world (reference to the British Indian Bengal) and starts dreaming, wandering into a different world; 'Ladyland' where she meets an image of her friend, Sister Sara. The two of them engage in a dialogue that runs for almost the entirety of the rest of the story where Sister Sara tells her about Ladyland, where the women are liberated from the restrictions set by men and the men are in turn secluded from the outside world in their 'Mardanas' (Zenanas for Men). Ladyland is portrayed as a place of natural beauty where special attention is given to horticulture and the preservation of nature by means of eco-friendly scientific development. Several comparative judgements have been shown between men and women in terms of their efficiency, scientific skills, patience and violent natures. Their highlighted conversations were regarding the scientific advancements of Ladyland (like advanced architecture, diminished health problems, controlling rains

and storms, storing solar heat, flying cars and significant advances in horticulture), their policies of non-violence, their education and employment systems for women and an overall sentiment of self-contentedness. The history of how the men came to be in Mardanas was also discussed at length. Finally, Sultana meets the queen of the land and then wakes up to realize it was all a dream.

I partially agree to the given statement that Sultana's Dream can be construed as a vision of an equal and sustainable society with respect to its science, nature and culture. This is true in light of the circumstances that the author of the story was brought up in and the limited amount of exposure she had on the complex and avant-garde subjects of feminism and sustainability at the time. However, when viewed from a more contemporary lens, some of these ideas could be seen as half-cooked and less convincing.

*"Our good Queen liked science very much. 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 far and wide among women. And early marriage also was 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."*

*"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."*

Although Sultana's Dream may appear as a feminist, utopic, science fiction, depicting a completely projected world with no shortcomings of the real world, its underlying principles are very contemporary. While the broad concept of feminism may seem slightly disfigured in the story, its fundamental pillars still remain headstrong i.e., the story still envelopes a motive for equality & equal opportunities for both genders, and to fight the issues of education and employment for women. The above quotes express the Queen's views on the ideology behind structuring Ladyland the way it is. The sentences justly summarize the moral of the story. They emphasize Ladyland's principles on importance of education of women, discouragement of child marriage, the futility of colonialism & capitalism, and a balance in coexistence with nature (the word 'gift' in the 2<sup>nd</sup> quote stresses on a symbiotic relationship with nature rather than its exploitation). The author builds up on the plights of the 'Pardanashin', uneducated and ill-treated women of her society to voice out their concerns in a rather positive manner. These are not just erstwhile vexations, but instead reflect the similar albeit slightly modified problems that women face even today in several strata of society. Girl child taboos & related abortions, educational barriers, girl child marriages, legal work rights and sexual violence & abuse are but a few prominent straws from the haystack. A passing yet laudable mention must also be made of the minimalization of economic and social disparities between the citizens of Ladyland. An ideal example of this is seen when Sister Sara greets the Queen (in the latter part of the story) without any elaborate ceremonies and social etiquettes. The interaction with the Queen displayed no sense of superiority and formalities; it was rather like a chat between 2 best friends. So, the author has indeed tried to subtly show the merits of a female dominant society and the implications it has on its people and the surroundings. This has been discussed at length in a later section.

*“The kitchen was situated in a beautiful vegetable garden. Every creeper, every tomato plant was itself an ornament. I found no smoke, nor any chimney either in the kitchen -- it was clean and bright; the windows were decorated with flower gardens. There was no sign of coal or fire.*

*'How do you cook?' I asked.*

*'With solar heat,' she said, at the same time showing me the pipe, through which passed the concentrated sunlight and heat. And she cooked something then and there to show me the process.”*

As discussed in the previous paragraph, the contending 2<sup>nd</sup> contemporary nodus is that of the environmental quandaries that we face today. The above quote from the story obliquely recognizes some of the climate problems such as fossil fuel pollution, the energy crisis, and the alternative renewable energy options. During the inception of the short story under analysis, there was no wind of the current environmental concerns to the general masses. Yet – keeping in mind that Begum Rokeya was scientifically illiterate – she not only acknowledged these disguised menaces (and some of their causes) in the early 1900s, but has also made an amateurish attempt at supplying a solution for them. She very shrewdly discerned the impact that a capitalist society would bring about on the environment; by means of industrialization and colonization (and its consequential warfare) entering a vicious cycle of mass production which would lead to multitudinous environmental degradation. Furthermore, her text references also provide us with a vague yet believable image of an alternative modern society that has incorporated a sustainable future for the citizens of Ladyland, while boldly proclaiming the path of making this transition in the story too. This deep foresight is a commendable quality of the writer.

*“‘While the women were engaged in scientific research, the men of this country were busy increasing their military power. When they came to know that the female universities were able to draw*

*water from the atmosphere and collect heat from the sun, they only laughed at the members of the universities and called the whole thing "a sentimental nightmare"!"*

While the facets of women and nature have been separately addressed earlier, the relationship between the woman **and** the environment in the short story needs a special mention. There are several parallels drawn throughout the story which essentialize the coexistence of women and nature. One of such instances is depicted by the above quote. The dominance of capitalist-patriarchy is tenuously accentuated in the text. Back in the day (and even now), due to the surrounding social structures, men were presented as the dominant of the two genders. Additionally, the jobs that they did (military power in reference to the story) invariably marked their position as the bread winners/influencers in the house. Since the household chores did not take precedence (or were even considered equal) over the more monetary jobs, the capitalist dominance produced a twofold oppression of some women. These women are most likely the ones that came from poorer families and stayed at home to do household chores (for e.g., those doing agriculture, collecting water, etc.). While there are men that come from similar backgrounds too (and are also victims), the women were and still are affected first in the series of events and at a more need basic level. Hence, the writer has attempted to limn these women as the moguls of Ladyland. Furthermore, these women are also the ones that face the brunt of deforestation, droughts, and other climatic changes first. Thus, the movement of eco-feminism has been developed to aid the situation at this front. Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies have coauthored a book of the same name which discusses this concept at length. They critique the 'European Project of the Enlightenment' which drove the patriarchal ideology of freedom of humans from the shackles of nature and to reduce the reliance on nature by conquering it. This gave rise to the ideas of manual labor which indirectly also encouraged other forms of social dominance based on gender, geography, color, race, economic position, etc. The authors also discuss the deep relations between the woman and the nature. The

below quote from this book elucidates these connections/analogies further. They use the term 'rape' as a metaphor to emphasize the similarity in the situation of nature's capitalist-patriarchal exploitation with that of the female gender. Hence, ecofeminism is described as a fight for women and the environment together against the capitalist-patriarchy which is based on control and hierarchy. The effects that the capitalist-patriarchy has, is synergetic with respect to the damage that each of these abstractions do individually. The book also offers several examples to maintain this line of thought. Some of these are the destruction of local biodiversity as well as the traditional farming methods (which affect the economically poorer female farmers) due to the introduction of genetically modified crops and the intellectual vandalism of the traditional farming woman that is caused by the patenting of genetically modified crops by corporate scientists.

*“ Ecofeminism is about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice. It asserts the special strength and integrity of every living thing. For us the snail darter is to be considered side by side with a community's need for water, the porpoise side by side with appetite for tuna, and the creatures it may fall on with Skylab. ” - Ecofeminism, Vandana Shiva & Maria Mies*

Besides the socialist approach to finding the relationship between women and the environment, there is also a moral rationalization to this connect. The work that women usually do often requires an added amount of sensitivity and empathy. This can be justified by looking at the trends ever since industrialization has started. While a large share of the men's chores have been dedicated towards exponentiating capitalism and colonialism, the women have (mainly) trudged the forefronts in education, medicine and sociology. This point has also been highlighted in the story by Begum Rokeya but has been referenced later in the essay. A natural conclusion drawn from the above argument is that

the world would have been structured quite differently under a feminist dominance. Other such contemporary examples of this relationship are widely seen across the globe. The Chipko movement in Uttarakhand (1973) and the Bishnoi Movement cum religion (1485) set precedence for all future environmental activism in India. Both these movements were on the same lines, where the women were hugging trees in order to protect them from the deforestation activities. Other such movements are the Narmada Bachao Andolan (against dam constructions along the Narmada River), Green Belt Movement in Kenya (against desertification of land) and the Gardening Angels Movement across the United States (make community gardens from vacant lots) to name a few.

A more spiritual connection between women and nature is also an ancient belief. The personification of Earth & Nature as 'Gaia' or 'Avani' (Females) and 'Mother Nature' illustrate the feminine qualities of nature (e.g., reproductive properties, life-giving force, etc.). The 'Ecofeminism' sees diversity as central to "women's work and knowledge", as the reproductive/domestic work of life is dependent on diverse skills that belie specialization. Our main text also vividly illustrates this women-nature affinity plentiful times using imagery. The author gives noteworthy importance to horticulture and botany in her short story. Further, this attention is not from an economic perspective but instead upstands as a lesson in sharing one's wealth (economic, intellectual and emotional) with others and back to the nature. While this connection may seem superficial at the surface, its implications can be noticed in the afore-mentioned movements. Further contemporary discussions could include the potential solutions of overpopulation and sanitation. The education of women will make them more sensitive to important concepts such as family planning, personal safety and hygiene. This will in turn bring about positive developments in population control. A 2<sup>nd</sup>, real world result is observed regarding better sanitation facilities. In the recent years, a political party showed sincere efforts in improving their sanitation infrastructures. The following election results showed a surprising bias; a substantial



percentage of votes for the party were cast by females. This was unlike earlier trends, where the votes were mostly grouped familywise.

*“ We talked on various subjects, and I learned that they were not subject to any kind of epidemic disease, nor did they suffer from mosquito bites as we do. I was very much astonished to hear that in Ladyland no one died in youth except by rare accident. ”*

*“ 'In the capital, where our Queen lives, there are two universities. One of these invented a wonderful balloon, to which they attached a number of pipes. By means of this captive balloon which they managed to keep afloat above the cloud-land, they could draw as much water from the atmosphere as they pleased. As the water was incessantly being drawn by the university people no cloud gathered and the ingenious Lady Principal stopped rain and storms thereby. [...] They invented an instrument by which they could collect as much sun-heat as they wanted. And they kept the heat stored up to be distributed among others as required. ”*

*“ 'Our religion is based on Love and Truth. It is our religious duty to love one another and to be absolutely truthful. If any person lies, she or he is....' ”*

*'Punished with death?'*

*'No, not with death. We do not take pleasure in killing a creature of God, especially a human being. The liar is asked to leave this land for good and never to come to it again.'*

*'Is an offender never forgiven?'*

*'Yes, if that person repents sincerely.' ”*

Following up on our earlier discussion on developments by women in science and sociology, the text mightily talks about the convergence of these factors and the science of sustainability through a feminist lens. The above quotes are just exemplars of the discussion in the entire storyline. The 1<sup>st</sup> quote visualizes exceptional medical and ecological enhancements in Ladyland while the 2<sup>nd</sup> talks about its technological developments. Both of these have been portrayed on the framework of women's education. Moreover, these ideas were very forward of Begum Rokeya's time. The solar panels were still in their prototype stages at the time and were not common discussion topics in non-scientific spheres, whereas anthropogenic cloud formations were not even a legitimized invention. Knowing her inept scientific knowledge, Rokeya may have coincidentally played the right cards or might be a voracious as well as a versatile reader of current affairs. Also, these have not just been motiveless scientific advances but rather focusing on the common goal of conserving the environment. Such radical thinking (and its mass communication) amidst a despotic, patriarchal society (who held contrasting views) is truly an awe-aspiring feat. The 3<sup>rd</sup> quote discusses the virtues of the women of Ladyland where concepts such as love, truth and forgiveness are held in high regard. Overall, the community's inclination towards a more altruistic, moral society and its sustainable environment is observed. A passing mention must also be made to the strict decree of non – violence adhered to by the citizens of Ladyland. The fact that this opinion was envisaged much before the independence of India and the progression of Gandhian ideologies also needs a special mention.

While Sultana's Dream does pride itself on a majority of intellectual accomplishments, it has its pitfalls as well.

*“ 'You need not be afraid of coming across a man here. This is Ladyland, free from sin and harm. Virtue herself reigns here.' ”*

*“ 'But the seclusion is the same,' she said. 'In a few years we had separate universities, where no men were admitted.' ”*

While a crude concept of equality can be perceived from the story, one cannot miss that the text often addresses statements that – at the absolute best – can only be termed as a role reversal between the two genders. The portrayal of men as insensitive, unyielding, dangerous and evil might have been Rokeya's firsthand experiences peeking through the literary framework, but its oversimplification as a stereotype could be a controversy. The above quotes emphasize this argument further, where the men are typecast as sinful and hurtful. The statements might be accurate with respect to some men at the time of narration (and even at present), however it could have created a derogatory impact on the male readers who did not fit the description. Consequentially, the story could have brought about an adverse change of heart in the said male individuals. Furthermore, as stated in the 2<sup>nd</sup> quote, the proposed concept of equality by Begum Rokeya is inconsistent with the present notions of feminism; which are the 'advocacy of women's rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes'. Though the author's exaggeration could be justified as time appropriate, but could render the story as a non-classic in the present.

*“ I mistook a patch of green grass for a velvet cushion. Feeling as if I were walking on a soft carpet, I looked down and found the path covered with moss and flowers.*

*'How nice it is,' said I.*

*'Do you like it?' asked Sister Sara.*

*'Yes, very much; but I do not like to tread on the tender and sweet flowers.'*

*'Never mind, dear Sultana; your treading will not harm them; they are street flowers.'* ”

*“ Nor do we ever suffer from flood or thunderstorms. We are all very busy making nature yield as much as she can. ”*

*“ 'Our fields are tilled by means of electricity, which supplies motive power for other hard work as well, and we employ it for our aerial conveyances too. We have no rail road nor any paved streets here.' Therefore neither street nor railway accidents occur here,' said I. ”*

Another scope for limitation of the short story is its self-contradicting stand on the human-nature interaction. Although we noticed several earlier references to nature personified as a human entity and thus applicable to all anthropogenic social etiquettes (such as equality, violence, mutualistic sharing, etc.), the above set of quotes negate this point of view. While the 1<sup>st</sup> quote mentions the philosophy for stepping on the street flowers, the act of doing so can be construed as an element of unwarranted aggression towards nature. Although the action itself may not have colossal effects, but it decisively reveals an indifferent attitude of the author towards nature as a human entity.

Furthermore, the 2<sup>nd</sup> quote showcases the human trying to ‘yield’ the forces of nature. Here, ‘yield’ symbolizes a control over nature. This argument tends to display the author’s possible thought process of exploiting (‘molesting’ from a more human perspective) nature. Thus, while the males in the story are shown to directly exploit nature under the umbrella of capitalism, the women could be viewed as doing the same with the pretext of scientific advancements. Another example of the same can be seen in quote 3 where an indirect mode of pollution is still being produced by the harvesting of electricity and the use of arial conveyances. While one might argue that the women have been using nature only for

their basic self-sustenance without surplus consumption, the concepts of 'use' of nature and 'surplus' are itself highly debatable as they are extremely subjective notions and also are anthropocentric on deeper analysis. This has also been critiqued in the 'Ecofeminism' book where the authors contest the definitions of basic needs and higher needs. Thus, the overall text cannot reliably conclude a stand of cooperation rather than the conquest of nature. This also falters any hypothesis on notions of human freedom from manual labor and the demands of nature, as this so called 'freedom' is a double-edged sword which, on one hand could develop science for its benefits but could also end up raising the pollution levels and global warming thus endangering the environment.

Lastly, even though the author was deficient in scientific knowledge (which is justified with her background), with time when the fields of humanities and science will confluence, the entire story will prove to be regressively effective (due to its lack of scientific backing) at convincing the masses towards the merits of female dominance in society on the environment.

In summary, Sultana's dream is a ground breaking piece of literature that acknowledges, reasons and tries to solve the erstwhile and present society's problems with respect to the manifold discrimination against women as well as the oppression of the environment by the forces of capitalism. The story further highlights the synergetic effects that a capitalist-patriarchal regime can cause on the said victims. Later, a comprehensive analysis was done on the portrayal of the sacred (moral and spiritual) connection that the women share with the nature. A fresh perspective on the concept of ecofeminism was weaved in by the discussion of the book 'Ecofeminism' by Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies. This was followed by the succinct note of the references to the environmentally sustainable elements in the story. Lastly, some shortcomings of Begum Rokeya's writings with respect to the

portrayal of men in the backdrop of feminism, the controversies with the 'use of nature' and the scientific inaptitude of the writing were put forth. An overall conclusion from the above discussion could be, that despite its limitations, Sultana's Dream supplies a bird's eye view at the existing problems of inequality/oppression of women & the environment as well as proves to be a zestful source of motivation for combating these urgent issues in the present and future. This does, however, leave us to ponder about whether a real, feminist dominant community would garner the same virtues of Ladyland as described in the story or not?

## References:-

1.) 'Sultana's Dream' (1905) by Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain:

<http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/sultana/dream/dream.html>

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