

A Brief Textual Analysis of *Sultana's Dream*

Sudeshna Majumdar
Assistant Professor of English
Rampurhat College

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* (1905) is a fictional narrative that combines a feminist utopia with science fiction to harbour Rokeya's vision of liberated womanhood.

- **How *Sultana's Dream* was written?**

Rokeya spent many years in the Banka Subdivision of Bhagalpur that was her husband's place of service. Once her husband was away from home for a couple of days on duty and it was at the time, to spend her vacant hours, she started writing this fiction in English. When her husband came back and asked her, how she had spent her time, she showed him the story. Rokeya's Husband, Khan Bahadur Sakhawat Hossain was broad-minded enough to realize the immense potential of this work and he positively took Rokeya's critical vision of patriarchy. He described the work saying, "it is a great revenge". He sent the manuscript of this work to the commissioner of Bhagalpur, Macpherson for correction. However, the text needed no correction and Macpherson praised Rokeya's diction and her ingenious ideas on womanhood and science.

- ***Sultana's Dream*: A Feminist Utopia**

In *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya wrote reversing the roles of men and women in which women were the dominant sex and the men were subordinate and confined to the Mardana (the male equivalent of the zenana). The entire experience takes place through the narrator's dream-visit to the fictitious Ladyland, a land ruled by liberated women.

The narrative begins in a **dream vision**. Rokeya follows the Middle English tradition of conveying the satirical message through the foil of a dream vision. *Sultana's Dream* contains satirical observation on gender stereotyping of men and women. In this dream vision the narrator is guided by a friend called Sister Sara. 'Pearl' and 'Patience' are two didactic poems of Middle English literature that followed this dream vision. In this dream the narrator, a woman hesitates to go into the garden at the behest of Sister Sara out in presence of man-servants, which highlights the purdah system of Muslim society and sets a contrast to the

Ramkumar Bose
Teacher-in-Charge
Rampurhat College
(Govt. Spons.) 15/12/21

conducts of the woman in Ladyland. The setting of the story in warm green garden and in a spring morning is the traditional convention of Middle English romances, which is applied here by Rokeya.

As the narrator goes into the Ladyland, its women inhabitants throw joke at her calling her 'mannish'. The word 'mannish' is applied here in a paradoxical sense because 'mannish' does not mean bold and powerful as the traditional connotation of the term suggests, but it means 'shy and timid'. In this story men are strategically motivated by women and they are put within the Mardana, where they do all sorts of domestic works. Men were exhausted fighting the enemy and they willingly went into **Mardana**, the male-enclosure. They were never brought out of that enclosure because the Queen said their service was no longer needed. Within Mardana men became accustomed to the purdah system. Mardana, the word that is connotative of masculinity, is applied here in a completely contrasting sense, to imply a space of docile submission. Rokeya's rhetorical play becomes remarkable in the contexts of terms like 'mannish' and 'mardana'. The weak point of patriarchy becomes its self-satisfaction and the feeling of superiority, which is silently tackled by women to overpower men. In this way the women of Ladyland emerge as self-sufficient and full of agency.

The Ladyland was ruled in a traditionally male-dominated way and the women were under purdah but things changed as the present Queen inherited the throne thirty years ago. The Queen is a female ruler and she can also be called a 'sultana'. **In Ladyland the Queen circulates the order that all women should be educated for education is the sole means of liberation. She also stops early marriage for girls and establishes women's universities, where women are engaged in scientific research.** These two stances of the Queen reflect Rokeya's own idea of social welfare. Ladyland, with its progressive policies exists within the mind of its creator, Begum Rokeya.

- **Sultana's Dream: An Ecofeminist Vision of Life**

Throughout the narrative an emphasis on greenery, on gardening and the predominance of verdant landscape introduces an **ecofeminist** consciousness within the story. Ecofeminism tries to establish a link **between woman and nature as both are sources of reproduction,** growth and nurture. The Ladyland, predominated by women nurtures an ecological awareness. The inhabitants of that land take fruits as their chief food. Within the narrative Sister Sara shows the narrator different nature friendly inventions by women of their universities and she suggests: "We are all very busy making nature yield as much as she can."

When the narrator meets the Queen of Ladyland, she tells her: "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 gift as much as we can." Thus the Queen voices the basic morale of ecocritical thinking. Living with the resources of nature is an important aspect of eco-centric vision of life and the inhabitants of Ladyland, with their manifold eco-friendly scientific discoveries like solar-oven, cloud condenser, water-balloon and pollution-free aeroplanes offer the pioneering effort about using sustainable energy. Since all these concepts are actually conceived within the mind of Rokeya, we can aptly describe her as the pioneer figure of not only women's liberation in Bengal, but also the advocate of **sustainable development**.

- ***Sultana's Dream: A Satire on Patriarchy***

Sultana's Dream is generally regarded as a notable and influential satire on patriarchy and conservative Indian society. The narrator of the story is addressed by Sister Sara as 'a Sultana', who is a lady ruler, a female counterpart of a male ruler. A Sultana is an empowered woman. She is thus portrayed as a liberated woman, who dreams about a land ruled by women, the Ladyland. Within the narrative men are generally associated with crime, mischief and sin. As long as men are kept within the fold of Mardana, the women are safe in the streets. Within the narrative the narrator now and then expresses her conservative beliefs about womanhood, which is countered by Sister Sara. Thus the narrator represents the voice of tradition and conservatism, while Sister Sara represents the voice of the liberated womanhood. Thus Rokeya mentions the traditional myths about women's sentimentalism, inability and weakness and argues to demystify these false-beliefs by portraying women as capable of rational thinking, managing abilities and cerebral strength. She also suggests that women can manage their time more deftly than men, and they work both in the office and at home with equal skill and swiftness, whereas men waste their working hours through idle gossip, lounging and smoking charoots.

In this story men are often compared to untrained wild animals entering a marketplace and they should be tamed. Men are traditionally associated with physical strength and are often compared to a lion. A lion is also the symbol of political power, but in this context a lion is described as an irrational and instinctive animal, and thus Rokeya obliquely satirizes the traditional notions about male power. In another context as the narrator voices the traditional myth about male sex that, men's brains are bigger and heavier than women's, Sister Sara argues that "An elephant also has got a bigger and heavier brain than a man has. Yet man can

enchain elephants and employ them, according to their own wishes." Thus she satirizes the superiority of the male ego as void and instinctive, which can be easily dominated by women, who are more strategic and nimbler in their cerebral exercises.

However, the narrative also contains Rokeya's regret about the state of her contemporary British-Indian society. She comments through the voice of the narrator: "We have no hand or voice in the management of our 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." Thus Rokeya, through the voice of the fictional narrator represents the diminutive status of women in her contemporary India society and their lack of political power. It was only after 1950, in post-Independence India that women got a place in the formation of Indian Constitution.

However, the women liberation movement started in India since Indian Freedom Movement as many women came out to fight for the country and received education. Moreover, in post-Partition India, women had to come out of their domestic sphere and began to work in civic departments to provide for their destitute families. All these achievement became possible only because of women like Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, who prepared their way by promoting girl's education. She advocated reform, particularly for women, and believed that parochialism and excessive conservatism were principally responsible for the relatively slow development of Muslims in British-India. In 1916, she founded the Muslim Women's Association, an organization that fought for women's education and employment. Rokeya held education to be the central precondition of women's liberation, establishing the first school aimed primarily at Muslim girls in Kolkata. She is said to have gone from house to house persuading the parents to send their girls to her school in Nisha. Until her death, she ran the school despite facing hostile criticism and social obstacles.

At the end of the story the Queen posits one condition to begin trade with the narrator's country (i.e. India) that, women of that country have to come out of their purdah and conduct trade with them because men are too mischievous to conduct trade with. In Rokeya's contemporary India this was an impossible dream, and that is why the Queen's speech becomes ironical in the context of conservative Indian society, where only men are considered capable of conducting trade and commerce. In Ladyland men are thus satirically portrayed as incapable and untrained, which is a role-reversal for them. The second part of the queen's speech expresses an anti-war view. She says that her country people do not fight for power and property (symbolized by Koh-i-Noor and Peacock Throne) and they cultivate

knowledge and are happy with gifts of nature. Thus she expressed an eco-critical vision of life through her speech.

- ***Sultana's Dream: A Science Fiction***

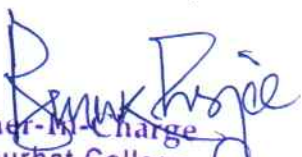
Sultana's Dream (1905) can also be interpreted as a feminist science fiction, where Rokeya depicts an alternative vision of science, in which inventions such as solar ovens, flying cars, and cloud condensers are used to benefit the whole of society. This science fiction has a feminist angle because Rokeya imagines technological innovation in domestic sphere, which is a marker of her progressive stance.

- The kitchen, which is situated in a vegetable garden, has no smoke of coal, for they cook in solar oven, which is a prototype of microwave cooking.
- Not only solar-oven, but destruction of enemies in war by concentrated solar heat is another innovative stance of the women of Ladyland.
- Apart from that they collect moisture from clouds by mean of a water balloon and they store water in that balloon for later use. Thus they anticipate cloud condenser of modern science.
- By means of the water balloon they also control rain and storm and the general weather of Ladyland.
- In Ladyland fields are tilled by means of electricity, which anticipated the modern day pollution-free electrical tractors.
- The women also have the prototypes of air cooler and room heater.
- Their houses are equipped by removable roofs, which is a great technological innovation.
- The narrator goes to the garden of the queen riding an aeroplane driven by Sister Sara, a lady pilot. The aeroplane is equipped with hydrogen balls and it is pollution free.

In this story women are engaged in scientific research, meanwhile men are engaged in increasing their military power. Thus a contrast is made between physical power and cerebral power and also a contrast is made between the traditional myth about women and the reality about them. Traditionally women are stereotyped as sentimental and lacking strength, whereas men are portrayed as physically stronger, but in reality women are capable of rational thinking. When women concentrated sunlight, their discoveries are ridiculed by men as 'a sentimental nightmare', but they waited and answered back through fighting enemies

with solar heat, where men failed. In Ladyland the women follow the religion of love and truth. They consider their male cousin as parts of 'sacred relations', which is a marker of Rokeya's humanistic and philanthropic stance.

In *Sultana's Dream* by associating women with education, rational thinking and scientific research Rokeya asserts her own dream of female emancipation. *Sultana's Dream* was complemented by the following work of Rokeya, *Padmarag* (1924), a novel that also describes a female-led utopia with similar educational and philanthropic emphases.


Teacher-in-Charge
Rampurhat College
(Govt. Spons.) 15/12/24