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Sultana's Dream: A Utopian Ecocritical Exploration of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's Vision

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Abstract

This analysis explores Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's groundbreaking work in utopian fiction, science fiction, and ecofeminism, focusing on her captivating narrative, "Sultana's Dream." Hossain invites women to transcend societal confines, addressing the woman question in Bengali Muslim society through satire and weaving together themes of gender, science, education, and religion. The narrative challenges patriarchal norms by provocatively reversing the concept of restriction, using the voice of a "veiled" Muslim woman.

The exploration doesn't neatly resolve, instead, it generates a cascade of intriguing questions. The complexity deepens as Hossain's contemporaries have yet to contemplate these queries. This literary endeavor, navigating uncharted territory, prompts readers to grapple with the profound ambiguity of a narrative that urges them to confront unasked questions of their time.

Keywords: Rokeya Sakhwat Hossain, South Asian ecofeminism, Islam and gender in South Asia, Women

Scientific knowledge, according to Francis Bacon, doesn't just guide nature but has the power to control and even overpower it (The New Organon 78). However, trade wasn't possible with countries that kept women secluded, considering men to have lower morals. The focus wasn't on desiring land or valuable items but on exploring knowledge and enjoying the gifts of nature (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Sultana's Dream 17).

Religious restrictions contribute significantly to our subjugation, as men use laws justified by religion to assert dominance over women (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, translated by Ray, Early

Feminists of Colonial India 64). The construction of political subjects involves deliberate legitimizing and exclusionary goals, concealed when analyzed only through juridical structures. Juridical power not only claims to represent but actively 'produces,' necessitating politics to grapple with its dual function: the juridical and the productive (Judith Butler, Gender Trouble 3).

In "The New Atlantis" (1624), Francis Bacon envisioned a superhuman pursuit of scientific knowledge to dominate nature. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's "Sultana's Dream" challenges this by showcasing women surpassing the traditional male domain. In Ladyland, women acquire Baconian scientific knowledge, using it to gently guide and conquer nature, contrary to Bacon's call for male domination (The New Organon 78).

The authority of this shift is evident as the Queen of Ladyland outlines economic and political strategies to Sultana, a Bengali Muslim woman visiting in a dream. The discourse emphasizes economic and political empowerment, critiques men's shortcomings, rejects colonial ideologies, and expresses deep devotion to nature. Positioned within the utopian framework of "Sultana's Dream," reminiscent of Swift's "Gulliver Syndrome," Hossain's creation emerges as utopic science fiction, laying the groundwork for a feminist ecocritical narrative before these genres connected with gender politics in the Indian subcontinent.

"Sultana's Dream" explores the life of a Bengali Muslim woman constrained by patriarchal gender and religious norms. Influenced by Judith Butler's perspective on juridical power, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain subverts gender roles and scrutinizes socially constructed identities. In Ladyland, men are secluded, while women govern, challenging gender norms in Bengali Muslim society with a Swiftian critique.

In 1905, Hossain wrote "Sultana's Dream," published in the Indian Ladies Magazine, expressing her opposition to Muslim patriarchy. Influenced by her belief that both Indian men and women were complicit in their oppression, she criticized men's selfishness and women's mental slavery. In Motichur, Vol. 1 (1904), Hossain persisted in attributing the erosion of women's self-respect to the constraints imposed by the Muslim patriarchal system.

Rokeya strongly criticized the practice of isolating women and denying them education and health rights within the Muslim system. She viewed strict seclusion as a form of imprisonment and condemned a social order exploiting power under religious pretenses. In an essay addressing women's degradation, Rokeya exposed the patriarchal use of religion as a manipulative tool, urging women to recognize religious scriptures as regulatory systems imposed by men.

Her bold assertions against women's subjugation are consistently expressed in her essays, letters, and fiction. However, her most powerful expression is in "Sultana's Dream," where she cleverly makes men subject to their own rules, granting women juridical and political power. This effort aims to unveil and redefine the legitimating and exclusionary aims of the Muslim patriarch, blending utopian satire, science fiction, and ecofeminism to articulate the dual function of juridical and productive power.

In Rokeya's story, the optimistic narrator envisions Nature and its resources as a new power source, creating a world where Woman and Nature hold unique roles of power. As the narrative progresses, Sultana's dream of a land where women rule transforms into an ecofeminist vision for a harmonious world under Nature's care. Despite its brevity and an abrupt ending, the novella portrays a dream where a secluded Muslim woman visits a land where women freely roam, pursue education, control science and technology, and seclude their men in domestic activities.

The "Gulliver syndrome" is evident as Sultana, surprised by the absence of men, adjusts her behavior after being corrected, similar to Gulliver. In this land, men are small like the Lilliputians, and Sultana, once scolded for acting like one, quickly learns to navigate like a gigantic Gulliver. Just as Gulliver faced criticism, Sultana recognizes the presumptuous treatment of women by her own countrymen. The narrative gradually raises questions about religion, gender, and social politics as a curious Muslim woman explores paths where men are no longer allowed access.

The idea of creating a women's community and the utopian goal of improving women's lives date back to Margaret Cavendish's writings in the early seventeenth century, particularly her work "The Blazing World" (1666). The discourse gained momentum in the eighteenth century through writers like Delarivier Manley, Sarah Scott, Mary Hamilton, and others, reaching its peak in the early twentieth century with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "Herland" (1915). However, the

politically ambitious but ideologically limited utopian writings of the seventeenth century fell short in presenting a new agenda for women's rights and empowerment.

For example, Margaret Cavendish's "The Blazing World," despite being led by a powerful Empress and guided by the laws of Natural Science and philosophy, aligned with a British colonial mindset. The narrative tended to devalue the female body and position the Queen as a protector of [masculine] ideology. In 1709, Delarivier Manley followed the New Atlantean framework of the utopian novel established by Plato and Bacon in her work titled "Secret Memoirs and Manners of Several Persons of Quality of Both Sexes, from the New Atlantis." This piece served as a serious political commentary on women and power, with women rebelling against social norms by cross-dressing, aspiring to enjoy freedom like men, and dominating and excluding their husbands.

In the eighteenth century, utopian texts explored the domestic side of life, forming a genre termed "domestic utopia" by Christine Rees in "Utopian Imagination and Eighteenth Century Fiction." The Victorian Era marked the zenith of utopian fiction, with works like Olive Schreiner's "Three Dreams in a Desert" (1890) serving as a notable inspiration for suffragists. Apart from Schreiner's contributions, Elizabeth Corbett's "The New Amazonia: A Foretaste of the Future" (1889) and Amelia Mears' "Mercia, the Astronomer Royal: A Romance" (1895) presented visions of socialist reforms while reflecting the contemporary influence of Darwinian theories of social evolution.

British Utopian Fiction retained a focus on women's political and legal rights, aiming to reform domestic relationships. Nan Albinski, in her examination of British feminist utopian fiction in "Women’s Utopias in British and American Fiction," notes that "British women Utopians were reformists rather than revolutionaries" (51).

Utopian ideals took shape across the Atlantic, notably in Mary Bradley Lane's "Mizora," a pioneering feminist utopian novel in 1881. This movement peaked with Charlotte Perkins Gilman, whose "Herland" portrayed a thriving society governed by "tall, strong, healthy, and beautiful women." Gilman explores various themes, such as sexual dynamics, marriage, parthenogenesis, and childbirth, challenging traditional norms. In "Herland," Bartkowski notes that Gilman replaces religion with sacred motherhood, eliminating sexuality (32).

On the contrary, Rokeya's "Sultana's Dream" diverges from the typical narrative of Him pursuing Her, lacking a conventional happy ending. It concludes with an awakening from a "happy dream." Ladyland, as envisioned by Rokeya, doesn't discard religion entirely; instead, it replaces specific religious beliefs with a universal religion, seemingly excluding motherhood and sexuality from its storyline.

In Rokeya's time, "Herland" hadn't been published, but Lester Frank Ward's idea of a gynocentric evolution theory was already around. In "Pure Sociology" (1903), Ward proposed parthenogenesis, envisioning the female body as a resource and potential sole source of reproduction. He argued that life begins with the female organism and, in asexual reproduction, the female could be seen as existing alone and performing all life functions, including reproduction (313).

Rokeya's Ladyland, embracing an asexual domestic setup, hints at a potential existence for such a parthenogenetic society. Rokeya's narrative reflects the nineteenth-century suffragist fantasy of diminishing man's power and cutting him off after a brief functional role. In this vision, men aren't vital for society's development or upbringing, aligning with the law of nature that eliminates the unfit. The narrative suggests that women, considered unfit, are secluded, veiled, and involved in domestic tasks.

Ecofeminist philosophy argues for an unbiased analysis to understand how women, nature, and animals are interconnected. In "Sultana's Dream," an ecocritical perspective is seen as Sister Sara describes a country where women focus on fruit consumption, the Queen loves botany, and the goal is to turn the entire nation into a vast garden. Women govern, using electricity for farming, controlling rain with floating water balloons, and avoiding natural disasters. Men handle domestic tasks while women actively work to maximize nature's yield.

Susan Griffin's "Women and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her" explores the patriarchal association of women with nature and fertility, contrasting men linked to culture and rationality. This gendered view supports the ideology of male supremacy. Ecofeminists aim to challenge this, connecting the domination of nature with that of women, advocating for women's equal

rights, and emphasizing respect for nature. Although the formal ecofeminist movement emerged in the late twentieth century, "Sultana's Dream" reflects contemporary ecofeminist ideology by highlighting the relationship between women and nature.

In Ladyland, women successfully rebel against male dominance, creating harmony with nature. Yet, the text reveals a paradox as Rokeya's utopian women seem to exploit nature despite their revolutionary strides. Sister Sara's concluding victory speech describes dominant women in control of man, nature, and science, akin to George Orwell's Animal Farm.

The utopian irony in "Sultana's Dream" unfolds as the dream, meant as a satirical solution to women's oppression, shatters the hopes of the disillusioned dreamer. Christine Reese notes utopian satire's vulnerability, and utopian fiction involves a double vision—ideal life nostalgia and a corrective imaginative view. Ladyland reflects Sultana's desired perfection, while her world serves as the negative mirror. However, subversion falters when adopting the master's tools instead of dismantling the narrative.

Bacon's principle, basing scientific knowledge on violence and power, surfaces in Ladyland, especially in women's violent disruption of nature and its confinement to laboratories. Sultana's dream ends with visits to laboratories and academic institutions, prompting questions about Sister Sara's intentions and drawing parallels between free worlds, Sultana's bedroom, and men's secluded quarters.

The Queen's speech in Ladyland explains the avoidance of trade with countries sequestering women. Ladyland and Sultana's household share a communal life of perfected seclusion in a utopic but stagnant world. Sister Sara's confined space warns that women's empowerment was a dream in colonial Bengal, tainted by patriarchy. The abrupt ending signals recurring dream episodes until awakened female consciousness reinvents its discourse, echoing Audre Lorde's belief that the master's tools won't bring genuine change. Sister Sara's utopian tool falls short in awakening third-world Sultanas.

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