

## Glimpses of Feminism in Sultana's Dream: A Utopian Science Fiction

**Dr. Nutan Yadav**

Associate Professor  
Govt. College for Women  
Hisar

### Abstract

With *Sultana's Dream*, Begum Rokeya invites women of her society to have an illusory experience of freedom that exists outside *purdah* and beyond the four walls of the *zenana*. Centering its focus on the Woman question in context of the Bengali Muslim society of her time, the satiric narrative of *Sulatana's Dream* (1905) takes into consideration the issues of gender, Science, education and religion, and as the story proceeds, the concept of restriction as a master tool is set in reverse in such a provocative manner that the apparently simple writing of a "veiled" Muslim woman unveils a path of discourse that challenges the very foundation of Muslim patriarchal systemization. She calls out the patriarchal system for making women unable to have a voice in their life choices and also holds women accountable for not organizing and working together to improve the social condition of women mark as one of the feminist utopia work. This work also attracted reasonable attention on the issue of seclusion, *purdah* and women rights. My paper is an attempt to bring out the boldness, vigor, courage, or strength, pride or a loud voice of women in *Sultana's Dream*.

**Keywords:** *purdah* system, *zenana*, religion, satiric narrative

### Review of Utopian literature

Utopian literature has existed for decade spanning a range of cultures and philosophies. The term 'Utopia' designates the class of fictional writings that represents an ideal, nonexistent political and social way of life. Utopia has a quality of universality, as revealed by the fact that it has fascinated readers of five centuries, has influenced countless writers, and has invited imitation by scores of "Utopianisms." Utopias are protests against conventional wisdom, and

grow up in the pores of the established society. They are often answers to crisis and show a special explosive force in times of shifting epochs. The concept of utopia is elusive by nature.

### **Introduction to the novel:**

**Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's** "*Sultana's Dream*" published in The Indian Ladies magazine in 1905, is a prominent short story where the author presents a utopian world- a form of ideal world that has no existence. Rokeya treats Satire as an important ingredient of Utopian fiction. *Sultana's Dream*. It was considered a work "ahead of its time" and was published before Charlotte Gilman's Western, Feminist utopian work *Herland* (1915). *Sultana's Dream* is strikingly advanced in its critique of patriarchy, conflict, conventional kinship structures, industrialization and the exploitation of the natural world.

The core inspiration of her literary work rests in her realization of the needs of taking measures against the suppression, oppression and domination of men over the women race for centuries in Bengal. Her mission of sowing the seeds of self strength in the mind of Bengal's women has always been underlying in her literary works. Rokeya's experience in her own house as being deprived of education and secluded inside her house (*purdah system*), (*zenana*) And the plight of women in her society encouraged her to work for the cause of women and to dream for a society where women would enjoy equal rights of men. Consequently, she expressed the dream of female emancipation and the rise of woman conspicuously in *Sultana's Dream* at the beginning of her literary career.

### **Plot of the novel *Sultana's Dream***

This story takes place in the female utopia Ladyland, where men are excluded from the community. In this fictional universe, women have furthered the progress of humankind in a considerable amount, especially technologically. Without men, the women have already invented flying cars and have completely automated agriculture and other industries. They have also learned to manipulate the weather. The men live under the thumb of women in their sci-fi world. The women of the city continue in their paradise, observing that men were so foolish to think

that strength came from dominance. They observe that in nature, there are animals that have bigger brains and stronger bodies than men, and yet, the animals don't attempt to seize control. Without the competition that men unnecessarily introduced, society is much better. The novel explains some of the other differences between Ladyland and the real world. For instance, in Ladyland, all religions have been simplified to truth and love. Since the women don't smoke nearly as many cigarettes, they managed to do in two hours what men took eight hours to accomplish.

### **Tracing feminist Utopian ideas in the novel:**

**“The protagonist, a Muslim woman living in contemporary India wakes up in a transformed future world: a utopia in which women are free to explore at will and pursue an education.”**

The novel can be described as a feminist utopia. Broadly a feminist utopia can be defined as a “narrative about a society that is free from the patriarchal subordination of the women.” It envisions a world in stark contrast to patriarchal society. Feminist utopia imagines a society without gender oppression, envisioning a future or an alternate reality where men and women are not stuck in traditional roles. These novels are often set in worlds where men are entirely absent. The genre of feminist utopias has its origin in the first wave of feminism which rose up in the late nineteenth century. This dissertation follows the evolution the genre, focusing on the changes it reflects in the strategies of Utopian writing and, more specifically, on the developments that have occurred within feminism itself.

Utopianism is a genre well suited to feminist deconstruction and the (re)envisaging of social relations. It allows the opportunity to envision a world of equality and autonomy where the patterns of domination in the patriarchy of our current social reality are deconstructed.

Feminist utopias create a space for experiencing an alternative social and political order, free from traditional patterns of domination, where individuals can collectively experience new paths towards self-realization.

*Sultana's Dream* is a novella with a writing style reminiscent of Gulliver's Travels (1796).

In the novel, a woman that is dreaming and happens to visit a land where men are confined in a system called *Mardana* and women bear the responsibility of advancement in society. The land is called "Ladyland," where there is law and order. The land is devoid of violence, corruption and crime. The people of "Ladyland" have learned to appreciate Nature and treat each other with respect and Love. In "Ladyland," child marriage is banned and education is encouraged amongst women.

"In other words, the People of this land do not care about any extra-terrestrial power or adhering to a set of senseless Rituals, but only the values that are directly beneficial to the human community and to the human Soul" (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 1988, pp. 1-2)

*Sultana's Dream* captures many issues regarding women's rights, and reflects a relentless and lifelong battle against people in her society that limited women from being able to control their fate. "Ladyland" is Rokeya Hossain's ideal of a place where women are free to be a part of society and innovate to their hearts' content. It is a place where men are put in the zenana [seclusion] and where Rokeya Hossain addresses the contrast of personality between men and women.

Rokeya Hossain narrates the story through three main characters: Sultana, Sister Sara and the Queen. The first important part in *Sultana's Dream* is the description of "Ladyland." The Setting in *Sultana's Dream* is equally important as Rokeya Hossain describes the main character slumbering in a zenana [seclusion]. Sultana wakes up to find Sister Sara and follows her outside. This is where "Ladyland" is introduced to readers:

**"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”**

Rokeya Hossain sets the tone of *Sultana’s Dream* and the setting of “Ladyland” as a refuge where women have successfully freed themselves from the control of mankind. This is where the readers come across Rokeya Hossain envision of a society for women where women are free to practice scholarly pursuits.

Rokeya brings the attention of the readers towards tradition of seclusion. The dialogue between Sister Sara And Sultana seems intentional where Hossain is arguing about the shallow beliefs about women as being weak and the zenana [seclusion] as a form of protection for women and acceptance of such illogical beliefs by women herself.

The use of the terms “lord” and “master” is a chilling reminder of Rokeya Hossain’s crusade against the subjugation of women and the status of women during her time. Thus Rokeya Hossain brings to attention the issue of power and privileges enjoyed by man only. ***Rokeya Hossain is a harsh critic of women purposefully choosing to be subservient to men.***

She discusses how men unfairly use their power to keep women secluded physically, but also mentally. She argues that this creates a situation for women where they cannot contribute to society and become burdens to their families. Rokeya Hossain uses an accusing tone that questions the practice of seclusion as being too steeped in superstition. The indignation present in Sister Sara and Sultana’s dialogue is present as if Rokeya Hossain is arguing the unjust system of seclusion. Rokeya Hossain is sympathetic to the plight of the women, but also a critic in the following excerpt below:

**‘Why do you allow yourselves to be shut up?**

**Because it cannot be helped as they are stronger than women.**

**A lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race. You**

**‘Have neglected the duty you owe to yourselves, and you have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interests.’ (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 1988, pp. 8-9)’**

Hossain continues to blame women for losing self-respect and holds the Muslim patriarchal system responsible for denying equal opportunities to its women.

Rokeya Hossain emphasizes her interest in educating girls and Women, but also terminating the practice of early marriage. Rokeya Hossain continues this style of banter between Sister Sara and Sultana. When Sultana asks about the creation of “Ladyland,” Sister Sara Provides a brief history here:

**Let me tell you a little of our past history, then. Thirty years ago, when our present Queen was thirteen years old, she inherited the throne. She was Queen in name only, the Prime Minister really ruling the country. (p. 9)**

In the passages above “Ladyland,” Rokeya Hossain sets the marriageable age at 21. The curricular emphasis on science explains Rokeya Hossain’s fascination with a place where only women could run a government or make scientific discoveries. The idealism of “Ladyland” as a place where women can innovate comes into question by the men. The men belittle the achievements of the women and Rokeya Hossain describes the Men of “Ladyland” as those interested in “increasing their military power” and being dismissive towards the achievements of the women in Ladyland.

Intentionally, Rokeya Hossain created “Ladyland” to be an antithesis to her Homeland of India. As Roushan Jahan, a biographer of Rokeya Hossain notes:

‘Women in Ladyland are powerful, but to portray a society where women are in position of Power, Rokeya did not find it necessary to eliminate men or to propose anything so drastic.’

Indeed, Rokeya Hossain wanted “Ladyland” to portray women at their best and at the same time exact revenge on a male population that had taken delight in shutting women in doors. Rokeya Hossain purposefully removes men from power to show that the power in women’s

hands can be used more efficiently than by men. This role reversal is intriguing, and it is not shocking that Rokeya Hossain chose to write *Sultana's Dream*.

Rokeya wanted the novel to be a feminist Utopian novel that contains elements of fury, cynicism and revenge. Despite her scathing portrayal of men in *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya Hossain's revenge on men was not to get rid of them. Instead, Rokeya Hossain subjected the men of "Ladyland" to the same conditions they placed on the women of "Ladyland." Hence, it came as no surprise that Rokeya Hossain chose to include the clash between the men and women in "Ladyland":

Women's brains are somewhat quicker than men's.

**'Ten years ago when the military officers called our scientific discoveries 'a sentimental nightmare', some of the young ladies wanted to say something in reply to those remarks. But both Lady Principals restrained them and said they should reply not by word but by deed, if ever they got the opportunity. And they had not long to wait for the opportunity.'** (pp. 12-13)

In the passage above, it is interesting to note that Rokeya Hossain chooses the words 'sentimental nightmare' to describe the innovations being made by the women. She has also described the men as war-like as and more interested in military affairs than making innovations that will help society. Sister Sara narrates:

This difference of approach towards the advancement of society is clearly made in this passage. Rokeya Hossain continues to describe the innovations in science by the ladies in universities in Ladyland:

Rokeya Hossain portrays the women in "Ladyland" as individuals who would use their skill and wit to create something for the good of society instead of engaging in warfare. Rokeya Hossain presents an interesting narrative where women are depicted as using their power to innovate. Ladies at another University find a way to collect heat that can be used for cooking and other purposes. When "Ladyland" comes under attack from The King, Rokeya Hossain takes this opportunity to present the dilemma of physical strength of men and women here-

‘This is a sobering section where the women of Ladyland have incurred defeat from the male forces in their land. The collection of sun heat as an invention has become the only lifeline that can guarantee victory. The failure of the men became an opportunity for the women in “Ladyland” to use their scientific pursuits to work together and unleash sun heat upon enemy Forces’.

This is one of the sections where Rokeya Hossain alludes to the change in power between Men and women in “Ladyland.” In the passage below, the inability of the male army in fighting off enemies becomes an opportunity for the women to propose the following arrangement here:

‘The Lady Principal rose again and said, ‘Before we go out the men must enter the zenanas[seclusion]. I make this prayer for the sake of purdah. Yes of course,’ replied Her Royal Highness. On the following day the Queen called upon all men to retire into zenanas [seclusion]’

One could call this an excellent political move on part of the ladies in “Ladyland.” However, it is only the beginning of the reversal in status of men in “Ladyland.” Rokeya Hossain’s choice in placing men under seclusion can be characterized as ‘purdah reversed’ and a ‘fitting revenge.’ In this section, Rokeya Hossain manages to destroy notions of strength associated with Men. The lady warriors have bested the men by using their weak state to place them in a system that they were subjected to for the longest time. It is a fitting revenge because neither arms nor brawn is used to seclude the men; it is through shrewd thinking that men are led to believe that seclusion is the best option for them.

Sultana’s Dream reaches its climax when Sister Sara explains why “Ladyland” no longer deals with men:

‘Men, we find, are rather of lower morals and so we do not like dealing with them. 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 Kohinoor, 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 [that] Nature has kept in store for us. We enjoy Nature’s gifts as much as we can. (pp. 14-15)



The passage above is an indication of Rokeya Hossain's thoughts towards men that have systemically oppressed women. Rokeya Hossain argues that men and women are fundamentally different. Hossain characterizes the men as warlike and thieves as they 'covert other people's lands and 'fight for a piece of diamond.' On the other hand, Rokeya Hossain characterizes women as being curious individuals that 'dive deep into the ocean of knowledge and enjoy Nature's gifts as much as possible.' Rokeya Hossain purposefully explores the personalities of men and women to show the differences and depict women as individuals striving for the common good of society. There is plenty of criticism in *Sultana's Dream*, but Rokeya Hossain also declares a call to action amongst the women in her society. She calls out the Indian patriarchal system for making women unable to have a voice in their life choices and also holds women accountable for not organizing and working together to improve the social condition of women.

Towards the end of the passage, she argues that women are as good as men and can be better if given the same opportunities that are given to men. Rokeya Hossain manages to challenge prevailing notions concerning male superiority, seclusion, child marriage and a woman's right to education. Rokeya Hossain's goal in *Sultana's Dream* is clearly to outline a continuing struggle towards the improvement of the condition of women and call out proponents of male superiority by cleverly turning the tables of seclusion on them.

In *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya Hossain calls out the practice of seclusion as a form of protection as being ludicrous. *Sultana's Dream*, she is holding men accountable for creating a system in which men subjugate women on the basis of religion. Rokeya Hossain argues against a system that oppresses women and gives power and hierarchy to men.

Ladyland is propelled by progressive scientific innovation, which is only possible with the removal of the oppressive male power structures that the women eliminate by restricting the men to the mardanas. They engineer flying cars, install plumbing in homes, and even control the weather with a large water balloon that can dispense water when necessary. Because of the scientific and technological advancements of Ladyland, there are no deaths from car accidents or natural disasters. The women are able to create a total utopia using science. The women's use of

science is also a criticism of the male-dominated scientific field of the time, which primarily used science in ways that harmed the natural world or strengthened modes of enacting violence upon others.

To sum up

Begum Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* (1905) advocates Women's secret desire to be on equal footage with man. Accordingly, the narrator, Sultana envisages a dream land that materializes a utopian scheme in which the male folk are positioned at a completely opposite pole to a society that is ruled by women. Putting men in such a position, Rokeya constructs a feminist social structure. In Rokeya Hossain's own words, *Sultana's Dream* was originally an act of idle exploration:

"To pass the time, I wrote the story but it left an indelible mark as one of the feminist utopia work. This work also attracted reasonable attention on the issue of seclusion, purdah and women rights. Creating a society reined by women, touching all the aspects of Utopian literature, the symbols as well as motifs such as Ladyland, garden also contributes to make it immaculately utopian work representing feminism

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