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## The Reality of Sultana's Dream: A step towards success Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein

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### ABSTRACT

*Rokeya's Sakhawat Hossein is a "marginal" female writer at the turn of the century, an avant-garde feminist under the British Raj. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, gender issues in Colonial India, had become an imperative place of contestation between a range of Indian and British groups committed to reform in the name of both "modernity". Indeed, woman's question was the central issue in nineteenth century India along with the struggle for freedom. For many feminists, the dismal condition of India's women affirmed the need for female emancipation as in the traditional society, flexibility of roles and functions was a rarity. Meanwhile, Indian activists insisted that the anti colonial struggle required the modernization of Indian society in which the women's question and social reform were critical. In this time Rokeya stood as a beacon for women through her work Sultana's Dream, a science fiction depicting a nation of women – an anti-colonial utopian space in colonial Bengal in which gender relationships were deconstructed without ignoring history. Undeniably, Sultana's Dream opened up new vistas for women where dreams, visions and thoughts can boom. This article is an effort to realize the dream of every Indian woman through the campaign of gender equality.*

**Keywords : Science fiction, Gender equality, Feminist utopia, Gender subversion**

Muslims as characters, and to an even greater extent as writers, did not appear much in literature. They were often restricted to a class, such as Edward Said's cultural 'other' or Gayatri Spivak's 'subaltern'. They were either dominated or absent from the fictional patrimony. In 1909, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain published the very first novel of its kind, Sultana's Dream which overturned the situation of power in the State of Bengal by reversing gender roles and making it a better place to live in. The position of Indian women in Rokeya's time centers on the veiled Muslim woman, a symbol that still reverberates as a commanding locus of disagreement more than a century after the publication of the book. Rokeya lays bare the ignoble position of women that is full of love and good wish for her sex. She exposes the harsh reality of women's slavish status in society as men engage themselves in outside activities to earn money and explore new areas of progress and prosperity. Absence of women from these pursuits gives men a sense of superiority as it give them an unpromising impression about women and a position of lordship over women. The root cause of this was the absence of women from mainstream activities. Under the British colonial rule in India, purdah (the isolation of women from public observation) had become an especially charged practice that both mediated and disillusioned the stare between the colonizer and the colonized. Women in Sultana's Dream are presented as the rulers and policy makers in a utopian land thereby exploring the tension between the conventional and the modern, matriarchy and patriarchy, the bond between British women and Hindu or Muslim women.

The story is an example of ingenious subversion. It is not an escape from reality but an implement towards achieving social reality. It is women's idea of reality to awaken within them potential for a more democratic outlook specifically carried out through Ladyland's imaginary space in which Sultana is introduced to, through her friend Sara. Rokeya and her ideas of womanhood are redefined by making use of 'realism disguised as fantasy' and a utopia which is an ideally perfect place, especially in its social, political, and moral aspects

where women dominate men, and it is seen as natural. Indeed, Sultana's Dream, like other fantasies is transcending reality, "escaping" the human condition and constructing superior alternate worlds. It seeks to present the familiar world of colonial Bengal as actually weird to her female readers because women had to curb their real desires and accept a reality which was at odds with them. Challenging and changing the patriarchal definition of reality, men in Ladyland are confined to purdah and objectified just as women in colonial Bengal were; enabling us to understand how forms of dominance are themselves not relented and reproduced. Possessing feminine qualities and carrying out "women's work such as cooking and raising babies", it is believed in the land that 'a lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race'. So there is a destabilization of gender leading to female subversion. According to Butler, "gender performance is subversive because it is the kind of effect that resists calculation and occurs only when the subject is unable to control it, thus making it always occurring and always unpredictable". For Rokeya, the domination filters down women's status to less honored women. She relies on the literary tool of fantasy to subvert prevailing discourses and reach women's true "home," a utopia in which women control their own lives igniting a pursuit for home and Ernst Bloch supports such an interpretation suggesting that fantasies are important to nurture and defend since they represent the revolutionary urge of women to restructure society to achieve their true home. Bloch further believes that dreaming which stands still is of no good "but if it becomes a dreaming ahead, then its cause appears quite differently and excitingly alive.... wishful thinking is capable of revolutionary awareness."

Sultana's dream is just a dream and not reality, a mere wish fulfillment and a hidden longing to prove the self. Sultana in her fantasy tries to rise above reality and escapes in a superior world where the situation for women will not only transform but will also make her persona dominating. The author wants to revise the notion of the world in which man considers himself the lord and master and poses a question to the whole so-

ciety "Why do you allow yourselves to be shut up?...because it cannot be helped as they are stronger than women." In her dream she wants to revolutionize what women have been going through since times immemorial. This perhaps, is one of the reasons for not considering the Ladyland a perfect utopia.

The idea of gendered space in the world of dreams, harmonizes successfully with Bengali Muslim modes of masculine and feminine propriety in the story. Femininity and masculinity are rooted in the social (one's gender) rather than the biological (one's sex). Members of a social group decide what being male or female means and because of these social definitions, however, it is possible for one to be female and see herself as masculine or male and see himself as feminine or female. In the Ladyland, women are free to work and hold positions of power, while the men are kept sequestered in prisons called mardanas creating a world full of harmony, beauty and scientific endeavour lending it the quality of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Contrary to these utopian visions, the setting of the story is the realistic setting of early twentieth century male dominated society and the author focuses on the reversal of gender roles, rather than equality. Ladyland is a utopia of a perfect social order for women where men can be conquered only through 'brain power'. In terms of innovation of society and independent life, it is all made-up because subjugation still exists in India. The queen of Ladyland has brought changes and made women highly educated, techni-

cally advanced and self confident. Ladyland has religion and laws based on love and candour thus creating a secure and peaceful place for themselves but not for men to live in. It is only a dream and far away from reality

There have been profound changes in the roles and status of women, but there are still many obstacles preventing them gaining equality with men. If early reform was largely conducted by men, by the late nineteenth century, women affected by campaigns such as that for women's education, had joined in. Rokeya offers a valuable depiction of the predominant struggles of Indian womanhood during the time. She exemplifies by her focus on religion, purdah and education, the clash between class and caste affecting women all over India where being a woman itself is a caste. By teleporting to an unsaid and unseen land Rokeya provokes the reader to reflect critically upon the conditions and limits of socialization. Her work ultimately reveals that alternative modernity is a combination of reality and fantasy that are endlessly surprising, simultaneously real and fantastic, new and familiar. Just as Rokeya's utopia is an unfinished dream, it demonstrates that "modernity" is incomplete but always a work in progress. Though Indian women have left no stone unturned in unveiling the barriers of ignorance and manacles of male dominance, the story of Rokeya still seems to be only a step towards achievement of these goals aptly justifying the words of Lord Byron "There is a tide in the affairs of women God knows nowhere!"

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