

A Retrospection of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream*

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ABSTRACT

Until the recent past, there had been a dearth of academic study of literature in English produced by the Muslim women writers. The gender bias and the minority status to which the writers belong has been a barrier to voice their views and establish their identity. Despite this hurdle, some Muslim women writers could create an identity for themselves through their writings and that too was feasible due to the socially advantageous position or rather the economically strong background from which they hail. Comparatively, Muslim women were kept away from the purview of the education scenario and those who attempt to break this barrier were stigmatised or looked down upon by the patriarchal society. This paper aims at probing the answer for the marginalisation of Muslim women writers and considers the contributions made by the first Muslim women writer of India, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain to the field of literature.

KEYWORDS

Feminist Utopia; Marginalisation; Muslim women writing.

In general, Muslim women voicing their opinion was considered to be a rarity. This is an uncommon feature in India with its tradition and culture-bound society. When women embarked on writing they were simply ignored and undervalued as there prevailed a misconception that women cannot think beyond the domestic spheres and hence, if at all they write, their ideas would revolve around their hearth and home. The major reason for such a view is due to the fact that writing per se was regarded to be a man's domain and women were conveniently curtailed from the purview of this space. Women had undergone untold suffering both physically and psychologically and they were kept in silence for centuries. To break this

silence and to disprove the predominantly prevailing notion of her times, emerged a writer, reformist and a visionary Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. Her work *Sultana's Dream* which was published in 1905 remains the first ever work written by a Muslim writer. Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* was published only in 1940.

Though *Sultana's Dream* was published at the dawn of the twentieth century, it had remained unpopular until the recent decades among the academic circle. Only in the recent past, her works have been prescribed in the universities across India. It is too surprising to note that a work of renowned nature had been disregarded and sidelined due to unknown reasons. The first instance that propelled me

to focus on Hossain is why an author of this kind has been marginalized from the mainstream writers? Is it because she belonged to a minority religion in India? What aspect does she lack to be avoided from being incorporated into the established anthologies of women's writing? This paper would enable the reconsideration of the contributions made by Rokeya Hossain not only to literature but to the society too, through her farsighted vision and efforts that she carried out in her writings and deeds as well.

Rokeya Hossain is an inspiring figure who contributed much to the struggle to liberate women from the bondage of social malaises. She fought to give women a better space in life and she dedicated her life to educate and empower the womenfolk. Born in 1880, Hossain was denied formal education by her father. However, with the support of her brothers, she learned to read and write Bengali and English. It is with the help of her supportive husband, she published *Sultana's Dream*. The literary genre provided women with a way in which they could simultaneously conform to and dissent against such conventions of remaining only in the domestic sphere, by means of textuality to enter the masculinised public sphere.

Lakhi explores *Sultana's Dream* using a historicist and materialistic approach. Malik analyses it from a feminist perspective. *Sultana's Dream* is Hossain's attempt to craft an alternative reality for women. She presents a new vision through her writings. In *Sultana's Dream*, a proposal to have a 'Ladyland' is framed whereby they can put an end to the problems of the present day world with a restructured frame of thought. In the Ladyland, women rule and men are kept indoors. It is considered to be a feminist utopia as it is free from crimes. The term utopia is always associated with an idea or dream of an idealized and perfect society that does not exist in reality. But, a dream of such a

society can transcend and elevate the existing society, at least to a certain extent.

In the Ladyland, of which the speaker of this novella narrates, displacement and complete role reversal take place. Displacement in psychology is "regarded as a defense mechanism whereby the mind substitutes either a new aim or a new object for goals felt in their original form to be dangerous or unacceptable" (Wikipedia). An individual shifts his /her impulse from an unacceptable target to a more acceptable or less threatening target. Rokeya with all dexterity offers a contrast to the existing world of chaos in the political and social set up with an idealized 'Ladyland'.

Dreaming is an activity that is experienced by everybody. It is a series of thoughts, images, and sensation occurring in a person's mind during sleep. Cherished aspirations, ambition or ideal too can be regarded as dreams. While Sultana was lounging and lazily thinking about the condition of womanhood, she has a dream in which sister Sara appears and takes her to a Ladyland. Her dream is not just a rambling of events. It is rather a conscious thought process that had been in the mind of Rokeya. "I am not sure whether I dozed off or not. But, as far as I remember, I was wide awake" (3). The initial sentence of the novella implies the concern she had for the Indian women. At this point, it is essential to highlight that she is not a torch bearer of the minority folks alone, for she was so nonsecular in her attitude. She involved and accommodated women of other religion too in her works and in the social activities she undertook. The novella also implicates that women, when offered space for themselves can think beyond the confines and express themselves and what they aspire for.

Rokeya boldly criticized the oppressive social beliefs that forced women to be submissive. She asserted that such a belief only presents the false and corrupted view of

Islam. She wrote daringly against the restriction on women in order to promote their emancipation. *Sultana's Dream* is written with a view to promoting that Islam has a holistic view of human development, which views education and knowledge as central. She emphasized that Islam encourages the acquisition of knowledge and its use for the benefit of humanity. In 1926, Begum strongly condemned men for withholding education from women in the name of religion as she addressed the Bengal women's education conference: "The opponents of the female education say that women will be unruly...fie! they call themselves Muslims and yet go against the basic tenet of Islam which gives equal right to education. If men are not led astray once educated, why should women?" (Gupta).

Sultana's Dream is more about action than words. Sultana is awestruck to notice the revolution and progress that are found in the Ladyland as compared to India in general and Calcutta in particular. The womanish qualities of being "shy and timid" (Hossain 3) is associated with men, and so when Sultana walks with shyness when she enters the Ladyland she is mocked and laughed at for being "mannish" (3). When she explicates to sister Sara "as being a purdahnishin woman I am not accustomed to walking about unveiled" for which Sara assures her stating "You need not be afraid of coming across a man here. This is Ladyland, free from sin and harm. Virtue herself reigns here" (Hossain 4). It is only to protect herself from the gaze and harm of men and to remain modest and chaste Islam advocates that women ought to be veiled. A popular fallacy that exists about Islam and purdah is that only women are entitled to wear it and it is maintained only to control female behaviour and to limit their freedom and movement. But, in reality, Islam talks about the hijab of the eye and physical hijab. Hijab of the eye should be followed by both

men and women. For the Holy Quran insists that men and women should lower their gaze in front of *non maharam* people. But, the necessity of purdah for women does not arise in the Ladyland as it is the duty of the men to maintain their honour by not appearing before the women. As Sultana, could not resist her curiosity of asking Sara "Where are the men?" (4). A powerful and unanticipated response comes from her "We shut our men indoors" (5). It is no wonder that after reading *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya's husband commented "A terrible revenge!" (xii).

The Ladyland is free of sin and crime. The main reason for this is men are denied the opportunity to wander freely as they wish, instead they are kept in *mardana* as opposed to the *Zenana* of women. If a statistic is taken regarding the crime rates committed by male and female certainly men would far out space females in the commission of serious offences. Crime is a man's world. Hence, Rokeya is offering an alternative to ward off the evil that exists in the society due to men. She asks, "how unfair it is to shut in the harmless women and let loose the men" (5). Moreover, it is not safe for us to come out of the zenana as long as there are men about the streets. This appears as a sort of female resistance on the part of the writer.

The advocacy of inversion is found in the text through the presence of strong binaries in order to draw a parallel between the extremities that exist. Ladyland is contrasted with Calcutta, Zenana with Mardana, Science and military power, Solar heat and captive balloon, sane and insane. Rokeya portrays sister Sara as a woman proficient in a number of modern branches of knowledge such as history, politics, military strategy, education and science. While men with lower morals are involved in coveting other people's land and fight for a piece of diamond and peacock throne women indulge in constructive activities and they enjoy

nature's gifts. While men failed to protect their country using their military power, lady principal of the second women's university finds a solution to tackle the enemies using solar heat. But, before they went the Queen instructed "all men to retire into zenanas for the sake of the honour and liberty" (10). This statement may sound ridiculous but it actually endorses the entrapment of men for the freedom (i.e.) men have to be entrapped so that women remain free. This attitude actually points the entrapment of women in colonial Bengal to symbolize the nation's honour and spiritual essence. In the Ladyland, men are confined to the zenana initially and that too not by arms, but by the brains of women. Later, when the women achieve success in warfare the men got accustomed to the purdah system and ceased to grumble at their seclusion. From then onwards the system was called as *mardana*.

There are two universities exclusively for women. Education was made feasible for women as the Queen of the Ladyland was interested in Science. Jealousy persists in Ladyland, but, that turns out to be healthy, positive and productive. When the first university invented a captive balloon to store water from the clouds, the other university worked with determination to do something more extraordinary still and invented an instrument to collect the sun's heat. Men who were busy increasing their military power only criticized it as "a sentimental nightmare (Hossain 8)."

Rokeya depicts men of the Ladyland as akin to lunatics, wild animals and an individual who does not have the patience to thread a needle, who waste time when it comes to working and who engage in warfare. Here, her intention, I contend, is not to demean men and their conduct. But, rather she pinpoints how women are treated unfairly in

the social and domestic realm. The value and potential a woman possess are never valued or recognized. By making the unfamiliar familiar to us Rokeya demonstrates, "gender roles are constructed by reversing oppressive patriarchal ideologies and highlighting female potential. What may seem contradictory in *Sultana's Dream*, may, therefore, be a clever literary strategy of doublespeak" (Lakhi 18). Thus, she presents the political, religious and gendered suppression from which the women of the Ladyland have overcome successfully.

In *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya has reinforced the need to achieve a paradigm shift in the consciousness that is essential for a radical transformative thought and action. Her dream is not a personal wish but, a social dream that she has envisioned. She provokes the reader to reflect critically upon the conditions and limits of the society. "The personal desire of writer has shared and public expression of them. They are well thought by the writer and then represented in a more artistic manner through which a classless, well educated, advanced society with no patriarchy is developed. Love, Truth, Honesty, Scientific endeavour and Purity are the tools of this feminist nation. Peace and harmony prevail everywhere, which of course every nation desires to have" (Malik 6). The utopia she presents is endlessly surprising but, it turns out to be a dream. This incompleteness further implies that it is in progress. *Sultana's Dream* reflects the rationality, scientific attitude and logic that women possess. If given chances women could explore and achieve greater heights and further, create a constructive and productive community. Similar society can be developed only when women are involved in regulating norms and framing policy structures. Success lies, not in the negation but in the realization of the worth of women.

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