

Visions of Women's emancipation and empowerment: An exploration of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's "Sultana's Dream"

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Abstract

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's brilliant feminist utopia entitled "Sultana's Dream" throws a flood of light on women's emancipation and empowerment through education. It is a dream vision, set in an imaginary country called Ladyland where women live, move and breathe freely. As a Contrast to the real world of Rokeya's time in the first decade of twentieth century, Ladyland represents a world where women have an access to education, can cultivate their minds and develop their potentialities to the fullest extent possible. This paper is a thoroughgoing analysis of Rokeya Hossain's scathing Criticism of a deeply conservative patriarchal society which tries to suppress and oppress women by confining them within narrow domestic walls and denying them the rights to fulfil their potentials. "Sultana's Dream" is a pioneering work in so far as it highlights the supreme importance of women's education in paving the way for the emancipation of women and their empowerment in a male-dominated society.

Keywords: Dream vision, women's emancipation, Empowerment, patriarchy, women's education.

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Introduction

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was a remarkable Bengali Muslim feminist and educationist. Written in English and published in the Indian Ladies' Magazine in 1905, Rokeya's 'Sultana's Dream' is a short work of considerable significance. The plight of women in India particularly in respect of education and social development prompted Rokeya Hossain to write this feminist utopia to focus on the issues of seclusion, purdah and women's rights. Rokeya was a life-long crusader for women's emancipation. She was dead against the machinations of a patriarchal society that always attempted to justify and defend the subjugation of women. She came to realize that no nation can advance or prosper without the advancement of women along with men.

In her novella 'Sultana's Dream', Rokeya Hossain comes out with an emphatic declaration that the age-old system of confining women in the system of purdah or zenana is not only eating into the vitals of society but also a veritable stumbling-block to the progress of the nation. Women are kept Confined, cabined in the four walls of a room, completely detached from the outside world. They are simply deprived of education and victims of oppression. According to Begum Rokeya, the patriarchal society is solely responsible for perpetuating this heinous system of zenana which empowers men to subjugate women in the name of protecting women. Rokeya raised her protesting voice against patriarchy and all forms of injustices done to women. In 'Sultana's Dream', the tables are turned and the situation is completely reversed. We find men in purdah and women are shown to be in full control of home and government. Rokeya seems to suggest that had women been given an access to education and an exclusive power to run the home and the state, putting men in mardana, the society might have been an ideal society to live in.

Begum Rokeya's feminist utopia 'Sultana's Dream' reminds us of the feminist utopian work, 'Herland' (1915) by the American Feminist reformer, Charlotte Perkins Gilman. The world of 'Herland' is an exclusive world for women, in which men have hardly any place while the world of 'Sultana's Dream' is such a world where women are empowered to run the affairs of the society and men are kept in seclusion. In the female utopia 'Sultana's Dream' Begum Rokeya seems to be taking revenge on the men by relegating them to the minor role of performing the daily mundane chores as well as by confining them to the 'mardana'. We happen to find a complete reversal of roles where women, instead of doing the conventional domestic duties of cleaning, washing and cooking, are presented as far more advanced than men in every field of activity. Being gifted with superior intellectual ability, women display their wisdom and pragmatism in governing the country well.

Discussion

There is no denying the fact that the novella 'Sultana's Dream' breaks fresh grounds in its projection of women possessing faculties and talents equivalent to or greater than men as well as attaining complete mastery over nature without any help from men and thus creating a new world of perfect beauty, great wealth and goodness. Women are represented as full of self-confidence. In 'Sultana's Dream' Rokeya Hossain's chief concern is the emancipation of women, particularly Bengali Muslim women who have been the pathetic victims of oppression and vulnerability over the ages by the patriarchal society. As a bold feminist writer Rokeya Hossain always sought to wage a relentless war against the male-dominated society that prevented women from being able to control their fate by putting them in the zenana i.e., seclusion.

'Sultana's Dream' is a feminist utopia par excellence. Barnita Bagchi has very succinctly pointed out:

"But utopia, a Greek word that has been used cross-culturally and with telling effect over the ages by feminists, is a European concept. It is, most of all, about embodying a dream, a dream of an ideal place ('eu-topia') which is, at the same time, no place ('ou - topia'), for it does not exist until imagined into existence by those strongly inspired by the dream of an ideal life." (Sultana's Dream and padmarag, Introduction, P.xviii)

The utopian feminist country that sultana happens to visit in her dream is called 'Ladyland' – a land governed and ruled by women. This imaginary 'Lady land' appears to sultana to be an ideal land where there is no male supremacy, no patriarchal control and oppression. It is a place absolutely free from all sorts of violence, corruption and crime. There is no male hegemony in this land. Women are free to move about. They are not put in zenana. Virtue reigns supreme in this land. Sultana was completely taken aback when she stepped into this ideal 'Lady land'. While walking hand in hand with her dear old friend, Sister Sara in this land, she said:

'I feel somewhat awkward.... as being a purdahnashin woman I am not accustomed to walking about unveiled.'
'You need not be afraid of coming across a man here. This is Lady land, free from sin and harm. Virtue herself reigns here.'

(Sakhawat Hossain, R. 2005, p.4)

In the book 'The Essential Rokeya' the editor Mohammad A. Quayum very aptly points out that "Rokeya herself was a victim of this senseless, demented pseudo – religious practice". By 'pseudo – religious' practice, Quayum refers to the purdah practice and how in those days the strictest form of purdah was enforced on the Muslim women. (The Essential Rokeya, Introduction, P. xvi). Satirising this practice, in "Bengal women's Educational conference", Rokeya herself writes:

Although Islam has successfully prevented the physical killing of baby girls, yet Muslims have been glibly and frantically wrecking the mind, intellect and judgement of their daughters till the present day. Many consider it a

mark of honour to keep their daughters ignorant and deprive them of knowledge and understanding of the world by cooping them up within the four walls of the house.

(Rokeya Rachanabali 227)

Throughout her life Begum Rokeya expressed in her writings her tremendous anger against this utterly deadly practice of purdah which silently kills women. As a result of this poisonous practice, women can hardly develop their potentialities. They remain retarded mentally, intellectually and artistically.

Rokeya Hossain's avowed mission in life was to do away with the zenana system and to ensure freedom for the Muslim women. In her novella 'Sultana's Dream' she shows how sultana was completely puzzled when she reached 'Ladyland' in her dream – vision and started 'walking in the street in broad daylight, but there was not a single man visible'. (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, P.3) .Sultana came to know from her companion that in the 'Ladyland' men are shut indoors, in accordance with the prevailing customs of the land. Through sultana's companion , Sister Sara, Begum Rokeya goes to the extent of calling men as 'some lunatics' or 'wild animals' . As Sister Sara explains:

As a matter of fact , in your country this very thing is done ! Men, who do or at least are capable of doing no end of mischief, are let loose and the innocent women shut up in the zenana! How can you trust those untrained men out of doors?

(Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, P.5)

Sultana regrets the fact that women have no role in the management of social affairs. Men play the role of lord and master and confine the women in the zenana, enjoying all powers and privileges.

Rokeya holds women responsible for the predicament in which women find themselves. She is of the view that women should put up a brave resistance against the patriarchal society that continues to torture women by creating the false notion that men are stronger than women. In 'Sultana's Dream' Rokeya debunks this false idea of male superiority as Sister Sara very intelligently raises the point:

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, 2005, P.5)

Thus Rokeya seems to be not only sympathetic to the deplorable condition of women but also a harsh critic of women insofar as they shut their eyes to their own interests. But the fact remains that the practice of seclusion perpetrated by the orthodox men in society was no doubt one way of subjugating women and thereby making them burdens to their families.

It goes without saying that the prime goal of Rokeya Hossain has always been an emphasis on female education. She happened to realize, profoundly enough , that the key to women's emancipation lies in educating the women. In 'Sultana's Dream' we happen to find that the creation of "Ladyland" and the governing of this ideal land was fully controlled by a galaxy of educated women.

Rokeya was convinced of the fact that for the emancipation of women, two things were of paramount importance--educating girls and women and stopping the practice of early marriage. While giving Sultana an account of the uniqueness of "Ladyland" , Sister Sara was all praise for the queen who was ruling the "Ladyland". She ecstatically Says:

Our good Queen liked science very much. She circulated an order that all the women in her country should be educated. Accordingly a number of girls' schools were founded and supported by the government. Education was

spread far and wide among women. And early marriage also was stopped. No woman was to be allowed to marry before she was twenty-one. I must tell you that, before this change we had been kept in strict purdah.

(Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 2005, P.7)

Thus, in “Ladyland” Sultana finds that women are absolutely free to pursue scholarly activities as well as higher education through familiarizing themselves with the world of science. It is through education that women achieve superior intellectual ability which eventually empowers them to govern the country in a perfect manner. The women of Ladyland as a result of their continuing pursuit in scientific researches, worked wonders in drawing water from the atmosphere and collecting heat from the sun. The men of this country mocked at their achievements and called the whole thing ‘a sentimental nightmare!’

It would not be wrong to say that Rokeya Hossain in her feminist utopia ‘Sultana’s Dream’ purposefully depicted “Ladyland” as ‘an antithesis to her homeland of India’ (Hakeem, P.40). Roushan Jahan, a famous biographer of Rokeya Hossain, has aptly pointed out:

“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 as Charlotte Perkins Gilman did a few years later in Herland, in which pathogenesis was the means for continuing a unisex society. In Lady land, men are part of the society but are shorn of power, as women were in Rokeya’s India. They live in seclusion and look after the house and the children, again, just like the women in Rokeya’s India. Women, the dominant group in Ladyland, do not consider men fit for any skilled work, much as Indian men thought of women at the time.”

(Jahan R, P.11)

It is true that Begum Rokeya has represented women at their best in the imaginary country of Lady land. She seems to be taking a revenge on the men who always are in favour of shutting women indoors. Rokeya also seeks to suggest that women once empowered can use the power more effectively than men as Lady land is the place where law and order prevails and there is no violence. In the Introduction to ‘Sultana’s Dream and padmarag’, Barnita Bagchi has correctly remarked that “In the unconventional, inverted world of Sultana’s Dream, the men, whose advantage is brawn rather than brain, remain confined to the mardana and perform the daily mundane chores, while the women, headed by a queen who is ably supported by her deputies -- the female principals of the two women’s universities-- use their superior intellectual ability to govern the country wisely and well.”

(Bagchi B., P.XII).

Conclusion

To round off, ‘Sultana’s Dream’ by Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain is a remarkable work of great significance. When ‘Sultana’s Dream’ was published in 1905, the then society was taken by storm. Through this feminist utopia, Rokeya Hossain debunks the age-old myth with regard to male superiority, women in seclusion, child marriage and women education. Rokeya seeks to drive home the message that the emancipation of women and their empowerment can only be possible if women have an easy access to education. As a bold feminist she expresses her opinion that if women are provided with the same opportunities as are given to men, they would prove themselves as good as men or perhaps better than men in respect of administration, education or governing a country. Precisely speaking, Rokeya wanted to impress upon the society that the gender discrimination should be and must be obliterated for the creation of a better society.

Each and Every percipient reader of ‘Sultana’s Dream’ can come out with the findings that the zenana system, i.e putting women in seclusion and the patriarchal society relentlessly oppressing women are mainly responsible for the pathetic and hapless condition of women. Rokeya Hossain hammers home the point that universal female education can only safeguard the women from male oppression and make them raise their protesting voice against the tyrannical male-dominated society which acts as an impediment to the over-all improvement of the condition

of women. In ‘Sultana’s Dream’ Rokeya envisions a beatific imaginary country called Ladyland which gives women the much-needed freedom to pursue their dreams and aspirations. Defying the yoke of male oppression and putting men in purdah, women take complete charge of home and government and devote themselves fully to cultivating their minds, nurturing the scientific, enlightened and welfare-oriented spirit in them. Thus Rokeya Hossain’s vision of the emancipation of women lies crystallized in her excellent feminist utopia entitled ‘Sultana’s Dream’.

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