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Sultana's Dream as a Utopian Imagination of Feminist Resistance in Twentieth-Century India

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Abstract

This article revisits Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's Sultana's Dream *(1905) as a pioneering feminist utopian text that articulates resistance to both colonial modernity and indigenous patriarchy in early twentieth-century India. Situating the novella within the socio-historical context of colonial educational reform, gendered domesticity, and emerging feminist thought, the study examines how Rokeya deploys the utopian genre and dream narrative as deliberate literary strategies. Drawing on feminist theories of utopia, the article argues that* Sultana's Dream *moves beyond simple gender role reversal to construct a political metaphor grounded in intellect, education, ethical governance, and non-violent transformation. Through the imaginative space of 'Ladyland,' Rokeya exposes the social construction of gender hierarchies, challenges patriarchal claims of masculine superiority, and redefines power as collective rationality rather than domination. The dream framework functions as both a narrative safeguard and a symbolic act of awakening, enabling Rokeya to envision women's emancipation without reproducing violence or coercion. By reading* Sultana's Dream *as a conscious act of feminist resistance rather than an escapist fantasy, this article extends existing scholarship on utopian literature and foregrounds Rokeya's contribution to South Asian feminist thought as a writer who transformed imagination into a political tool for social critique and change.*

Key Words: *Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Sultana's Dream, Colonial India, Feminist Utopia, Gender and Resistance, Women's Writing in South Asia*

1. Introduction:

Sultana's Dream was published in 1905 and is considered to be one of the first pieces of feminist utopian fiction written by an Indian woman, (Sarkar, 2013, p. 7) and a milestone in early South Asian feminist writing that transforms utopian imagination into a conscious mode of political and feminist resistance. It also plays an important role in the development of modern speculative fiction, which is closely linked with writers like H. G. Wells, Jules Verne and Arthur Conan Doyle, and which predates Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915). (Bagchi, 2005, p. 1) Written at the intersection of colonial modernity and indigenous patriarchy, the text deploys the dream form as a strategic narrative space through which gender hierarchies, epistemic authority, and social power are interrogated and reimagined. Rather than offering a static blueprint of a "perfect" society, (Margaret Whitford, 1991, p. 52) *Sultana's Dream* – 'utopian fantasy' (Lalita, 1993, p. 340) envisions utopia as a critical method—one that exposes the

ideological foundations of women's subordination and proposes imagination itself as the beginning of social change. The deliberate inversion of gender roles, a world of women – 'peaceful and ordered' – where men are 'shut indoors' in the '*mardana*[i] is termed by Rokeya's husband as 'terrible revenge' on men. (Sarkar, 2013, p. 7)

Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain is regarded as one of the most influential Muslim feminist thinker of colonial India. She was born on December 9, 1880 in Pairaband, in the Rangpur district of Bengal Presidency. (Dil, 2014, p. 28) Rokeya open her eyes in a world, structured by religious orthodoxy and entrenched patriarchy under the colonial rule with its forms of knowledge and debates surrounding women question. This socio-cultural and political milieu helped shape her intellectual trajectory and influenced her to present a sustained critique of the prevailing structural inequalities within the Bengali society – particularly the Muslims that prevented women access to knowledge and public life.

Raised in a conservative Muslim household, Rokeya formative years unfold witnessing firsthand how enforcement of purdah practices and the denial of educational opportunities to women have made women's life miserable. Her father and the patriarch of the family, Zahiruudin Mohammad Abu Ali Saber's worldview was shaped by rigid gender hierarchies of nineteenth-century Bengali Muslim society. As the head of the family, Saber made sure that his sons would have a good education. They get comprehensive education in English, Arabic, Persian and Urdu, to secure their future, whereas his daughters were denied such opportunities (Momin, 2021, p. 33) and were locked down in domestic seclusion.[ii]

These early life experiences left deep impact on her and awakened her to the close connection between gender, power, and forms of knowledge. However in this strict environment, Rokeya found an unlikely ally in her brother, Abul Asad Ibrahim Saber. Having Ibrahim studied at St. Xavier's College, Calcutta and had progressive views on education also thought his sisters should be intellectually liberated. Disagreeing with their fathers' thinking, he secretly starting teaching Rokeya in Bengali and English late at night when the family was sleeping so that no one could interfere. (Joarde, 1980, p. 6) These undisclosed lessons were Rokeya's first glimpses into the outside world apart from her domestic worldview and a quiet act of rebellion that transform her into a visionary thinker from an obedient daughter. With her brother's encouragement and her own determination, she discovered knowledge in itself, might be an act of resistance against the limits which were being set on women's life.

The reformists' debates on education, modernity and status of women in Indian society[iii] further expanded her intellectual horizon. Rokeya's ideas grew in this broader intellectual context, but she took reformist agendas further by focusing on the particular constraints faced by Muslim women and by pushing the cause of female education as a mean to achieve intellectual autonomy rather than merely social improvement.

Rokeya's marriage in 1896 to Khan Bahadur Syed Sakhawat Hossain, a Deputy Magistrate in the Bengal Civil Service, (Hakeem, 2015, p. 8) further enabled her intellectual and public engagement. His encouragement allowed her to write openly and later establish the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School in 1911.[iv] Besides, Rokeya was familiar with many European's wives whose husbands worked with Syed Sakhawat Hossain. Her husband's acquaintances with Annie

Besant, Lady Chelmsford, and Mr. McPherson further gave her a chance to talk with them. (Mahzabeen, 2023, p. 136) Her close contacts with European women show her interest in knowing the condition of women in western societies. (Mahzabeen, 2023, p. 136) Her access to European literature especially the reading of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* sparked her literary imagination provided her with literary strategies for social critique. (Hasan, 2016, p. 7)

A closer look at the Rokeya's life shows that her conviction of female education, rational inquiry, and intellectual freedom were all shaped by this milieu of constraint, negotiation, and reform. And out of this *Sultana's Dream* emerges—a utopian narrative that radically inverts colonial and patriarchal hierarchies by envisioning a society governed by women through reason, science, and ethical governance. Her other significant works include two anthologies of essays titled *Motichur I [1904]* and *Motichur II [1922]*, a utopian novel *'Padmarag'* [1924], '*Avarodhbasini'* (The Secluded Women, 1931) and a number of short stories. Written in Bengali and serialized in '*The Monthly Mohammadi'* before being published, *Avarodhbasini* is Rokeya's important work other than *Sultana's Dream* that reveals the bizarre practices and brutality of purdah such as "*purdah bus*" (her friend Mrs. Mukherjee termed it "moving black hole"). (Hakeem, 2015, p. 19) Rokeya describes *purdah* as a mechanism of social and psychological confinement of women.

This article revisits the gendered literary space of nineteenth-century colonial India through Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's work, arguing that the utopian imagination in *Sultana's Dream* exemplifies women's intellectual resistance within restrictive social frameworks. It asks:

1. *How does Rokeya's lived experience inform her utopian imagination?*
2. *In what ways does Sultana's Dream rework prevailing aesthetics of reform and modernity?*
3. *How does the text articulate a distinctly feminist vision within early Indian literature?*

Methodologically, the study adopts an empirical textual and historical discourse analysis, combining close reading of *Sultana's Dream* to show how Rokeya's narrative constructs utopia as a mode of resistance. By situating her speculative vision within the intertwined discourses of colonial modernity, gender reform, and intellectual emancipation, the article examines how *Sultana's Dream* transforms the very tools of patriarchal and colonial discourse into instruments of feminist critique and alternative world-making.

2. Review of Literature:

One of the most important developments in recovering the voices of women writers and social reformers in conventional historical narratives in South Asia has been the rise of feminist historiography. In this expanding field of scholarship, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain is regarded as a trailblazer for Muslim women and an activist for women's education, who questioned the patriarchal system in colonial India through her literary works.

Critical scholarship on Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and *Sultana's Dream* spans colonial modernity, women's reform, and utopian imagination, reflecting the multiple intellectual contexts in which her work has been situated.

Several keywords are relevant to the study; these include: [i] Modernity; [ii] Education of women and social reform; [iii] Utopian fiction; and [iv] Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain.

The streams of scholarship on colonial modernity can be divided into two broad streams: (i) the scholarship that looks at the checkered phenomenon from different vantages and labels or names it differently, and (ii) the scholars who highlight its differential impact.

In the first category we may place the works of Tahir Kamran [2021], Sanjay Joshi [2001] and Aamir Mufti [2007]. Tahir Kamran defines this as 'arrested modernity,' (Kamran, 2021) and Sanjay Joshi as 'fractured modernity' (Joshi, 2001); both emphasize the differential nature of the phenomenon in terms of experience and negotiation. Likewise, Aamir Mufti depicts it as being characterized and conditioned by paradoxes of 'Enlightenment Modernity' which make it ambivalent. (Mufti, 2007) It has been generally accepted that colonial modernity in South Asia has been more of a negotiated and contested process of adaptation, resistance, rejection, and selective appropriation of Western concepts rather than a uniform acceptance or rejection of the colonizer.

Another sub-stream of scholarship on colonial modernity in India is represented by the works of Bernard S. Cohn [1992] and Dipesh Chakrabarty [2000] which explore the changes in systems of knowledge, identity, and modernity. Sanjay Seth's work [2007] can also be placed in the same category as it investigates ways in which colonial education affected conceptions of the self.[v] The studies come together to reveal that colonial modernity was not limited to political and administrative changes, but also involved the creation of knowledge, subjectivity and social relations. The scholarship is significant because it helps us understand the intellectual context in which Rokeya put forward her criticism of patriarchy and her vision of alternative modes of women's education and social change.[vi]

The second keyword, 'Education of women and social reform', has been viewed from different perspectives in Indian colonial studies. The works of Gail Minault (Minault, 1998) and Hanna Papanek (Papanek & Minault, 1982) represent its first major sub stream; they discuss the conflict between purdah and education and reveal that female education emerged as a key site of investigation and conflict in the Muslim reforming movements. Women also entered this debate by bringing their own voices and experiences into it, a shift that has also been emphasized by feminist historians. (Burton, 2003)

Another line of inquiry is the work by Anwar and Afia Dil published in 2014 that highlights Rokeya's role not just as a writer but also as an educationist and institution builder. (Dil A. S., 2014) It highlights that her reformist vision went beyond the literary expression, touching upon the sphere of education and social transformation. It gives insights into Rokeya's vision of an alternative social order based on education, in which the power of women's ideas and intelligence is central to their social ascendance.

Utopian fiction is another keyword for understanding the vantages through which scholars and litterateurs have employed the technique. It brings to the fore the political and transformative nature of utopia as a genre, which was previously merely idealized as a fantasy. The works of Karl Mannheim (Mannheim, 1936) and Darko Suvin (Suvin, 1979) are regarded as pioneering works in the field. They underscore the function of utopian fiction as subverting prevailing ideologies and creating space for social change. Another category of literature in the field

examines it in a dreamlike sense. One can place the works of Ernst Bloch [1986], Ruth Levitas [1990], and Lyman Tower Sargent [1994] into this stream. Ernst Bloch speaks of a "utopian impulse" (Bloch, 1986) that dreams of better futures. Ruth Levitas construes utopia to equate with a need to dream of "Different (and better) Ways of Being," (Levitas, 1990) and Lyman Tower Sargent considers it a mode of "Social Dreaming" (Sargent, 1994) in which societies imagine themselves as something other than what they are.

Utopian fiction holds an important place in feminist literary theory. It is seen as a critique of patriarchal power and a thinking space for achieving gender equality. The work of Margaret Whitford [1991] can be described as pioneering work in this branch of scholarship. She questions the rationale of the patriarchy, implying that order and progress don't depend on the domination of the other. (Whitford, 1991) Rachel Duplessis's work [1985] represents further advancement of the field, as she employs feminist utopia as an "apologue" whose didactic role is to reveal the double-edged nature of the patriarchy's ideology and to envision social change. (DuPlessis, 1985) Sally Gearhart's work brought to the fore a number of political functions of feminist utopian writings, such as juxtaposing an idealized society with the present world, a critique of prevailing conditions, seeing patriarchy as one of the major reasons for social issues, and giving women equality with men, especially in terms of bodily autonomy. (Gearhart, 1984) Lucy Sargisson's work [1996] further advances this line of argumentation as she stresses that feminist utopia is not an escapist fantasy but a critical intervention, one that criticize patriarchal society. (Sargisson, 1996) As a whole, this collection of scholarship demonstrates how the practice of feminist utopian imagination is a compelling literary means of critiquing the prevailing regime of power and of expressing other possible social futures.

Another stream of this genre of scholarship examines Rokeya's utopian fiction, and hence it is directly related to the main theme of this article. Hasina Joarder and Safiuddin Joarder's *'Begum Rokeya: The Emancipator'* (Joarder, 1980) was one of the early attempts to reclaim the legacy of Rokeya, who was presented as a leading advocate of women's education and emancipation. Three decades later, works of Bharati Ray [2012] and Mahmudul Hasan (Hasan M. , 2013) and Mohammad Quayum (Quayum, 2013) further advanced the field. Bharati Ray situates Rokeya alongside another early feminist author—Sarala Devi Chudhurani to show that both created narratives of alternative moral and political futures in their engagement with colonial modernity. (Ray, 2012) Bharati Ray's work lays the groundwork for understanding the intellectual and literary importance of '*Sultana's Dream.'* A year later, Mahmudul Hasan and Mohammad Quayum published another important work on Rokeya, which places her work in the context of South Asian Muslim feminist thought and writing as well as social activism.

More recently, Marshall Momin's work [2021] provides one of the more comprehensive political interpretations of *'Sultana's Dream.'* He reads '*Ladyland'* as a political utopia, as a metaphorical opposition to the domination of patriarchy, as a reconfiguration of gender relations, power and education. (Momin, 2021) His analysis proves Rokeya's use of utopia to challenge the traditional hierarchy and reveals the irrationality of patriarchy. Put more simply, Momin symbolically interprets Rokeya's vision, highlighting its political aspects, while also emphasizing the reversal of patriarchal norms.

Collectively, the current scholarship has made *Sultana's Dream* an essential feminist work, a criticism of patriarchy, and a significant work of South Asian reformist thought.

It would be relevant to add how the present work fits into the main streams captured through keywords. Most studies have tended to focus on feminist history, colonial modernity, women's reform, and the imagination of utopia. Less attention has been paid to how these overlapping intellectual traditions together forge Rokeya's concept of feminist resistance. The aim of the present study is to examine *'Sultana's Dream'* as a socio-political space of literary imagining of feminist resistance, beyond the feminist utopia and the symbolic inversion of gender relations in colonial India.

3. Historical Background and Contextualizing the Gender Debate in Colonial India:

Having situated *'Sultana's Dream'* within existing feminist, postcolonial, and utopian scholarship, it is equally important to locate Rokeya's intervention within the historical debates that shaped colonial India.

The story belongs to a time when issues of women's education, domesticity, and social reform were important to competing colonial and nationalist notions of modernity. Reading *'Sultana's Dream'* in this historical context shows that it is not an abstract dream but a critique of the ideological construction of gender, knowledge, and authority in the late-19th and early-20th centuries.

Throughout the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century, discussions on social reform[vii] and national identity[viii] became an integral part of the intellectual and political discourse of the growing middle classes in India. With the evolving British colonial control—from a commercial enterprise into a territorial power—it increasingly sought to legitimize its authority through claims of 'rule of law' and 'civilizational superiority.' (Barbara D. Metcalf & Thomas R. Metcalf, 2012, 58) In this respect, gender became one of the most powerful tools to identify and categorize 'differences' in society. (Seth, 2013, p. 274) The position of Indian women became the main indicator of India's civilizational backwardness.[ix]

The "woman question"[x] was one of the many arguments through which the British legitimized their "civilizing mission" (Seth, 2013, p. 275) and rested their claim to moral authority.[xi] Indian cultural practices such as sati, child marriage, restrictions on widow remarriage, and purdah were portrayed as evidence of India's social backwardness, thus using the language of reform to justify imperial rule (Seth, 2013, p. 275) and the selective reshaping of indigenous society. Colonial power, therefore, presented and projected itself as a moral and civilizing force capable of eradicating what it regarded as native 'barbarism.' (Metcalf, 1995, p. 35)

The colonial critique of Indian society and its claims of moral and civilizational superiority prompted Indian intellectuals and social reformers to engage more actively with questions of social reform. (Seth, 2013, p. 275) Responding to colonial representations of Indian society as socially backward, they sought to reform practices that had become the focus of colonial criticism, while simultaneously demonstrating that Indian society was capable of moral and intellectual progress. In Bengal, these debates developed within the intellectual milieu commonly described as the Bengal Renaissance,[xii] a broad movement associated with educational reform, vernacular print culture, religious reinterpretation, and social criticism. What began in Bengal soon became a more generalized phenomenon – a debate between traditions versus modernity, as elites in other parts of India engaged in similar speculations and discussion. (Chandra, 1992)

Raja Rammohan Roy's campaign against *sati*, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's advocacy of widow remarriage and female education, and Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule's promotion of women's education were among the most prominent indigenous reform initiatives that expanded the discourse of social reform in nineteenth-century India. Among Muslim social reformers, Syed Ahmad Khan and his followers championed the cause of Muslim education. Syed promoted rational inquiry and modern education to enable Indian Muslims to respond to the intellectual and social challenges of colonial modernity. However, he remained cautious regarding women's education. He maintained that the existing level of female education was sufficient for the time being and argued that the education of Muslim men should be the immediate priority. In his view, once Muslim men attained modern education, its benefits would gradually extend to women and contribute to their educational advancement. (souza, 2004, p. 170)

The emerging discourse of nationalism sought to respond to the growing material dominance of the West and its hegemonic representation of Indian society as backward and uncivilized. As Partha Chatterjee argues, nationalist discourse distinguished between the material and the spiritual domains of national life: the material sphere could benefit from Western knowledge and institutions, whereas the spiritual sphere remained the repository of the nation's distinctive cultural identity and moral values. (Chatterjee, 1993, pp. 119-120) Within this framework, Indian women came to symbolize and safeguard the spiritual essence of the nation. (Seth, 2007, p. 12) At the same time, however, they became the subject of reform, as nationalists sought to transform and modernize the middle-class woman and the Indian home while preserving their role as custodians of indigenous culture. Consequently, debates surrounding women's status emerged as one of the principal arenas through which questions of modernity, tradition, and national identity were negotiated.

Colonial modernity in South Asia, as mentioned in the literature review, was negotiated rather than passively received. Reformers appropriated modern education and institutional reform selectively, while rejecting the superiority of colonial culture. This article reads these negotiations in terms of ‘controlled modernity’—a careful selection of colonial reforms that involved adopting certain aspects of colonial modernity, such as modern education and institutional reform, while simultaneously maintaining a careful hold on patriarchal authority.

The "woman question" was perhaps the most overt expression of this selective accommodation. This 'ideological battleground' (Sinha, 2000, p. 626) on women's issues, between British imperialism and Indian nationalism—across both Hindu and Muslim reformist circles—largely positioned women as the objects rather than the participants of reform. Although these debates unfolded throughout colonial India, they acquired particular intensity in Bengal, where the intellectual climate of the Bengal Renaissance placed women's status at the center of wider projects of social and cultural reorganization.

Influenced by debates on sati, widow remarriage, female education, and child marriage, literary works increasingly portrayed women as the moral center of the household and the custodians of indigenous culture. Novels by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, such as *Bishabriksha* (1873) and *Krishnakanter Will* (1878), explored the tensions between tradition and reform through the figures of widows and educated women. The emerging nationalist discourse simultaneously encouraged women's education and domestic reform while locating women within the spiritual

and cultural domain of the nation. Consequently, the ideal of the educated yet domesticated '*bhadramahila'*[xiii] became a defining feature of nineteenth-century Bengali literature.

These reformist debates were not confined to Bengal; they profoundly influenced other Indian literary traditions, particularly Urdu under Aligarh Movement. Syed Ahmed Khan's associates particularly, Chirag Ali, Mumtaz Ali, Altaf Hussain Hali, and Sheikh Muhmmad Abdullah were the supporters of the female cause. Chirag Ali's work '*The Position of Woman* (Ahmad, 1970, pp. 111-119) tried to highlight the emancipatory role of Islam for women. Similarly, Mumtaz Ali's was ahead of his time regarding the emancipation of women. His famous work '*Haquq-e-Niswan'* even enraged Syed Ahmad Khan who tore it into pieces. Similarly, Deputy Nazir Ahmad's work, '*Mirat-ul-Uroos'* (1869) and '*Banat-un-Nash'* (1873), advocated female education as a means of cultivating the ideal wife, mother, and household manager. While Abdul Haleem Sharar adopted a more critical stance towards rigid forms of female seclusion. In novels such as '*Badr-un-Nisa ki Musibat'* and '*Agha Sadiq ki Shadi,'* he highlighted the social consequences of excessive purdah.

The diversity of responses to the "woman question" was evident even among Muslim religious scholars. While reformist thinkers such as Mumtaz Ali and Chiragh Ali employed Islamic scripture to advocate women's education and a reconsideration of prevailing gender norms, Ashraf Ali Thanvi's *Bahishti Zewar* (1905) promoted female education primarily for religious instruction and moral discipline. Rejecting formal schooling, Thanvi advocated home-based education under the supervision of Muslim women and limited literacy to the practical requirements of domestic life, such as household management and record-keeping. (Khan, 2019)

Any assessment of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's writings must be situated within the social and intellectual history of colonial Bengal, where nineteenth-century reform movements and the expansion of women's literary and print culture reshaped contemporary debates on gender and education. The reform movements had women in the middle of debates over social regeneration, but women's presence in those debates was limited. In the mid-nineteenth century, however, with the increase of female literacy, expansion of print culture, a few women such as Rasasundari Devi, Kailasbasini Devi and Swarnakumari Devi began to intervene in these debates through essays, periodicals, and literary writings, transforming the literary public sphere into a key site for contesting prevailing ideals of womanhood, education, and social reform.

The early writers of this period were for the most part -'at the receiving end of male patronage, internalized male concepts' (Ray, 2012, p. 41) - conservative in their ideology and were re-creating, rather than challenging, the vision of the educated wife, the devoted mother, and the moral keeper of the home, as established by the male reformers. Journals such as *'Bamabodhini Patrika'* repeatedly emphasized women's domestic responsibilities, (Ray, 2012, pp. 41-42) reflecting how education itself was conceived not as a means of individual emancipation but as an instrument for creating the ideal Bengali *'bhadramahila'* analogous to Urdu '*Ashraf* woman.' The importance of the change, however, was not just in what women wrote, but in the fact that they were beginning to write. The practice of writing gradually opened up opportunities for women to voice their own reflections and dissent; (Karlekar, 1991, p. 195) it was a step toward allowing women to become part of the process of constructing the narratives rather than objects of reform. Kailasbasini was the first woman in nineteenth century Bengal who wrote on the degraded condition of a Hindu woman in a Hindu household. (Devi, 1863)

Among the literary forms through which women asserted this new authorial presence, autobiography occupied a particularly significant place. *Amar jiban* by Rasasundari Devi (1876), is considered the first autobiography written by a Bengali woman and marked a shift in the focus of history to a woman's lived experience. Rather than merely reiterating reformist ideals, it documented the struggle for literacy and intellectual self-fashioning within the confines of domestic life, marking an important transition from women as subjects of reform to women as narrators of their own histories.

While autobiographical writing allowed women to assert their own lived experiences, the reformist essays and treatises offered a more overt framework for questioning the social practices that regulated women's lives. The anonymous text *Seemantini Updesh* [1886], written by a Hindu woman, is one such example, which criticized the ignorance in the Hindu practices and gender norms that had contributed to the subjection of women over the years. It prompted women to stop, think, and learn about the systems that constrain women.[xiv] The ambivalent attitude towards colonial modernity can be inferred from a careful reading of *Seemantini Updesh.* Although the work remains critical of indigenous patriarchal norms, it also implies that colonial control created chances for women's education and self-reflection however limited that were not available within the existing social systems. This is not an endorsement of colonialism; rather, it illustrates the contradictory ways in which women have utilized colonial modernity to articulate critiques of gender inequity.

Among Bengali Muslims this shift took place in a particular social and intellectual framework. The education of women was still largely restricted to the religious sphere, with religious texts and other didactic literature reinforcing a vision of domesticity, seclusion, and the hierarchy of gender relations. (Ray, 2012, p. 44) Such reform initiatives were closely tied to the making of a respectable middle-class identity and the reconfiguration of the boundary between the public and domestic spheres. (Vaid, 1989, p. 9) Muslim social reform was thus to create a new image of women: educated, pious, and morally disciplined - with a view to the Islamization of women. (Amin, 1995, p. 416)

Muslim women were not merely passive recipients of these reformist agendas. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw Bengali Muslim women's growing participation in education and literary activities. The *Swadeshi* movement further awakened their socio-political consciousness and gave new momentum to the women's movement. (Ray, 1985, pp. 145-147) (Begum, 1989) The pioneering work in Muslim women education began with the setting up of a school in Comilla district by Nawab Faizunnessa Chaudhurani. (Ray, 2012, p. 54) These educational initiatives for Muslim women to learn and read led them slowly to enter into the intellectual public sphere.

Besides, literary journals like '*Nabanoor'* helped to open a literary public that allowed Bengali Muslim women to discuss women's education, child marriage, purdah and polygyny, and women's social responsibilities within a religious and cultural framework. The authors, such as Masuda Rahman, Khaerunnessa Khatun, Ayesha Ahmed and others, expanded the agenda of reform by foregrounding the experiences and aspirations of women themselves. (Sarkar, 2013, pp. 39-42) Collectively, these initiatives increased women's involvement in public discourse and demonstrated that the "woman question" and colonial reform were influenced by a variety of opposing viewpoints rather than a straightforward conflict between tradition and modernity.

It was in this growing intellectual tradition that Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain appeared. While sharing a reformist dedication to female education, she went beyond the didactic approach of contemporary women's literature by using utopian fiction to uncover the systemic basis of patriarchy. In essays collected in '*Motichoor* '(1905), Rokeya located women's subordination not only in patriarchal structures sustained by male privilege but also in the internalization of that oppression by women themselves through what she described as slavery. (Ray, 2013, p. 60) For Rokeya, the degradation of women resulted not from inherent incapacity but from the systematic denial of education, opportunity, and autonomy. (Ray, 2013, p. 60) '*Sultana's Dream'* is therefore a reflection of a larger historical shift where women grew from being objects of reform to the agents of knowledge production, and eventually became agents of envisioning new social and political futures.

4. Textual Analysis: *Sultana's Dream* as a Gendered Imagination of Resistance:

Women's representation has undergone many changes in literary, cultural, and religious texts, from the mythic figures of faithful devotion to *Dastan's* beloved to reformist images of moral domesticity, showing a long tradition of domination and struggle to rediscover the lost self. Colonial rule transformed the "woman question" into a central issue of public debate, as British officials, Indian reformers, and later nationalists advanced competing visions of women's status, education, and social roles. Rather than reinforcing popular reformist ideas, Rokeya's utopian fantasies focus on the ideologies that fostered women's subjugation and investigate the potential of an alternative social structure based on education, logic, and scientific growth.

The *Sultana's Dream* brings to the fore the ideological constraints of patriarchy and colonialism in a very impressive manner. *Sultana's Dream* is about two female characters, one from colonial India (Sultana) and one from a fantasy utopia known as '*Ladyland'* (Sister Sara). The story begins in the mundane world of colonial patriarchy but swiftly shifts. *Sultana's Dream* is a revolutionary early South Asian feminist work of fiction that also uses imagination as a weapon of political struggle. The story was Rokeya's first attempt to write in English just to pass time. (Hakeem, 2015, p. 33) She chose a dream sequence to narrate the story, allowing her to imagine a different world outside the material world: Sultana's dream, in which she sees a culture run solely by women.

As the story progresses, men appear to be confined to mardana – a place of seclusion with purdah practice and a reversal of the traditional *Zanana* (or *Zenana*)that historically isolated women in South Asian households. When Sultana asks Sister Sara, "where are the men?" The answer was a paradoxical commonsense, "We shut our men indoors." (Dawson, 2021, p. 118) This very excuse that used to confine women becomes a means to expose its fundamental absurdity. This role reversal demonstrates that 'weakness' is socially created and sustained by tradition and complacency.

Here Rokeya's critique is two-fold. She speaks about the social institution, the laws, customs, and policy, and the inner work that women must do for themselves. Rokeya shows this through Sister Sara's remarks, "You have neglected the duty you owe to yourselves, and you have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interests." (Dawson, 2021, p. 118) This remark is not an emotional or moralistic plea; it is a call to action. Rokeya feels that liberation requires eliminating external obstacles in addition to developing collective self-responsibility.

In the *Ladyland's mardana*, men were assigned the traditional roles of cooking, cleaning and taking care of the home which were typically done by women. This innovative reversal of Rokeya is both intentional and strategic exposing the absurdities and injustice of the gendered space of Indian households. Men in *Ladyland* are seen as impatient for the type of work that women perform such as embroidery or sewing – skills traditionally associated with women. (Momin M. , 2021, p. 64) This shift challenges the gender stereotype logic and highlights its social construction. Rokeya's depiction of men is metaphorically isolated, reliant or dependent and even unprivileged or deprived due to their gender, which mirrors conditions for actual women during the colonial period in India. Her playful banter was an act of subversion and a deliberate form of feminist critique, allowing readers to see the absurdity of patriarchal rules through humor and role reversal.

While men are assigned traditionally feminine roles, and women take over the economic, political and intellectual sphere, *Sultana's Dream* challenges the gendered construction of knowledge and challenges the binary logic of dividing labor, arguing that women are "just as capable as men of being involved in the political and social affairs needed in society." (Momin M. , 2021, p. 63) The choice to have men go into *mardana* is not just a technical solution; it is also a symbol of justice. This Utopian arrangement in its nature was a double-edged sword: a tactical "fitting revenge," and corrective education, forcing males into the seclusion they had come to expect for females.

'Ladyland' is more than a gender swap; it is a redefinition of the logic of power. In Rokeya's imagined world, political power is not gained by force, or by threats or intimidation, or by imperial conquest, but by education, scientific investigation, and rational thought applied to the public good. Science no longer serves as a tool to dominate and is now used to build peace and develop a better life. Rokeya places this transformation in an educational institution, embodies it in the character of the Lady Principal, and proposes that this change must begin with intellectual leadership, not with violence.

The *Ladyland* which is ruled by a queen has a policy of compulsory girls' education, postponing marriage, and women's universities, illustrates her conception of education and public policy as tools for social change. (Dawson, 2021, p. 120) Furthermore, the story shows women's inventions such as collecting water from clouds and storing solar heat are not just gadgets, but symbolic of reclaiming knowledge and applying it for daily life. In her feminist utopia, this relationship between knowledge and power therefore gets reconstructed, and education itself becomes the main practice of feminist resistance. Thus, through the queen of the Rokeya envisioned resistance.

Besides the details of harvesting water from clouds, solar power, etc., it further situates *Sultana's Dream* within the early science fiction genre and modern-day debate of eco-feminism,[xv] revealing Rokeya's employment of scientific imagination as a feminist device and reconnecting with nature. Scientific advancement is a symbol of emancipation for *Ladyland's* women, whose rationality the patriarchal dogma has long denied them. The men of '*Ladyland'* don't believe in the women's achievements, calling them "a sentimental nightmare," (Dawson, 2021, p. 121) which demonstrates that it is bias and not reason that perpetuates the existence of the represented others, a lack of faith in women's ability. Rokeya purposefully changes the definition of scientific advancement. Science is no longer used for conquest, but rather for the welfare of the people, environmental harmony, and peaceful co-existence.

Rokeya's *Ladyland'* vision envisages politics in the context of existing structures. There is still a queen and prime minister, but their authority is enforced not by force or fear, but by reason, mutual aid, and righteousness. Ladyland is a world of peace, non-violence, environment and justice—where people are educated and social order is in place instead of conflict and people's dominance. The people of the Utopian *Ladyland'* believe that it is their 'religious duty to love one another and to be absolutely truthful.' (Dawson, 2021, p. 125) Even the death sentence is not used in the criminal justice system, as they say 'don't take pleasure in killing a creature of God, especially a human being'. (Dawson, 2021, p. 125) The change of political character in *Ladyland'* is not brought about by conquest, but by intellectual leadership, personified in the Lady Principal. Rokeya, therefore, finds the revolutionary change in the educational institution and not in the political violence.

In its approach, Rokeya's utopia is a vision of transformation, not chaos. She does not topple down political systems; she rather feminizes them, giving a moral alternative to patriarchal and imperial politics. The people of this land, writer and academic Mohammad Quayum explains, "The people of this land do not care about any extraterrestrial 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." (Quayum M. A., 2013, p. 9)

Throughout, Rokeya strikes a mix between criticism and constructive programs. Sister Sara's final statement, "dive deep into the ocean of knowledge," (Dawson, 2021, p. 126) rather than "seek thrones or diamonds," is a summary of Rokeya's proposal: a new ethic of leadership and inquiry, not essentialist superiority, ought to be the basis for the restructuring of society. Her idea of Utopian '*Ladyland'* is neither a modern Utopia that tries to eliminate men physically like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, '*Herland*,' (Hakeem, 2015, p. 40) but rather a moral utopia where social order is established through education and intelligence instead of hierarchy and violence. The world of '*Ladyland'* is remarkably harmonious and peaceful, quite different from the gender-divided, hierarchical, and chaotic world in which Sultana finds herself. This difference is used by Rokeya to condemn both native patriarchy and colonial modernity, which denied women intellect and citizenship.

In addition to its thematic content, '*Sultana's Dream'* portrays writing as a means of resistance. Mashall Momin writes, "For many women during Rokeya's lifetime, writing proved to be a means for negotiation and reimagining the psychological and physical pain of being trapped by patriarchy." (Momin M. , 2021, p. 78) Rokeya restores women to authorship as liberation through building a dream world where women rule with knowledge and compassion.

Through fantasy, *Sultana's Dream* explores the relationship between power and gender. It functions as a narrative experiment that enables Rokeya to expose the contradictions of patriarchal society while envisioning the possibility of social change. (Silbergleid, 1997, p. 158) Sultana's awakening from the dream is therefore not merely the conclusion of the narrative; it is a moment of realization for both the protagonist and the reader, inviting them to rethink the social order that the dream has so powerfully unsettled.

5. Conclusion:

Sultana's Dream (1905) proves that feminist utopia is not only a literary imagination of an ideal society, but a particular form of resistance. The dream form is not an escapist fantasy; it

reveals the paradoxes of patriarchy and colonial consciousness and outlines an alternative social order that is based on education, scientific inquiry, reason, and peace. She puts women at the heart of knowledge, citizenship, and public life, questioning the logic of purdah and the gendered assumption that restricted women to the domestic sphere.

As author and educator Carol Pearson states, feminist utopias both explicitly or implicitly denounce patriarchy by revealing the conditions and institutions that limit and isolate women. (Pearson, 1981, p. 63) Rokeya's vision also challenges the social norms that confine women to the domestic sphere and men to control, what Carole Pateman calls the 'sexual contract'.[xvi] However, *'Sultana's Dream'* is more than just a gender flips. It reimagines education as an empowering process of intellectual freedom and conceives of knowledge as an act of contestation to patriarchal oppression. Science, reason, and education are used as political tools in '*Ladyland'*, affording women the ability to assert authority over public life and redefine power and gender.

Rokeya's feminist utopia as described earlier is not to create a 'blueprint of a perfect society' but to 'extend the limits of the imaginable.' (Margaret Whitford, Luce Irigaray , 1991, p. 52) The dream narrative is thus a political thought experiment; it shows the nature of patriarchy not as an immutable order of nature, but as a historically contingent system that can be questioned and reshaped. On this point, '*Sultana's Dream'* can be interpreted as a precursor of later feminist visions like '*Herland'* [1915] and '*Les Guérillères'* [1969] but it is also firmly grounded in the historical circumstances of colonial India.

This article has contended that Rokeya turns utopia into a tactic of feminist resistance. Her criticism is not just about exposing the oppression of women, but also about envisioning the circumstances in which oppression is made impossible. Rokeya moves women from the margin of knowledge to its producers, from the domestic sphere to public authority and from an object of reform to an agent of social transformation. In this definition, the concept of a feminist utopia is not one that suggests an alternative to reality, but rather a critical engagement with it.

Viewed through this framework, *Sultana's Dream* is a feminist utopian resistance not because women rule '*Ladyland'*, but because '*Ladyland'* redefines what power itself means. It is a political project that employs utopian imagination as a mode of feminist resistance. By relocating power from military force to education, scientific knowledge, and rational inquiry, Rokeya challenges the epistemological foundations of both patriarchy and colonial modernity. Her vision demonstrates that resistance lies not merely in replacing male authority with female authority, but in reimagining the principles upon which authority itself is constructed. In this sense, *Sultana's Dream* remains a powerful reminder that the struggle for women's emancipation begins with the courage to imagine a different social order.

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End Notes

[i] A reversal of the zenana and purdah practices that historically isolated women in South Asian homes.

[ii] Rokeya later recalled that she was forced to live "within the rolled-up maidservant… under the bedstead" each time strangers came to visit - a vivid image of the confined and segregation of women. Anwar S. Dil and Afia Dil ,Women's Changing Position in Bangladesh: Tribute to Begum Rokeya, 1st ed. (Dhaka: Adorn Publication; San Diego: Intercultural Forum, 2014), 28.

[iii] For scholarly analyses of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century social reform in India, see Tanika Sarkar, Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001); Partha Chatterjee, The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Lata Mani, Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Geraldine Forbes, Women in Modern India, vol. 4, The New Cambridge History of India (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and Uma Chakravarti, Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998).

[iv] She started this school with only five students. She faced extreme hostility from her in-laws and from her stepdaughter and her husband in opening the school and was forced to close it. She later moved to Calcutta, where she reopened the school with just eight students. See for detail, Mohammad A. Quayum, ed., The Essential Rokeya: Selected Works of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932) (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), xxiii

[v] See Bernard S. Cohn, Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992). Dipesh Chakrabarty's Provincializing Europe, and Sanjay Seth, Subject Lessons: The Western Education of Colonial India (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

[vi] There exists considerable scholarship on education in colonial India, encompassing missionary interventions, colonial educational policy, indigenous learning systems, and women's education. As the main focus of this article is the construction of womanhood, the educational debate has not been explored in detail here. For broader discussions, see Gauri Viswanathan, Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); Sanjay Seth, Subject Lessons: The Western Education of Colonial India (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007)

[vii] For scholarly analyses of nineteenth and early twentieth-century social reform in India, see Tanika Sarkar, Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001); Partha Chatterjee, The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Lata Mani, Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Geraldine Forbes, Women in Modern India, vol. 4, The New Cambridge History of India (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and Uma Chakravarti, Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998).

[viii] For key scholarship on the formation of national identity in South Asia, see Partha Chatterjee, The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Sudipta Kaviraj, The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Ranajit Guha, Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Gyanendra Pandey, The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006); Ashis Nandy, The Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Rabindranath Tagore, Nationalism (London: Macmillan, 1917).

[ix] The idea that the position of women reflected a society's place on the civilizational scale drew from Scottish Enlightenment thought, especially John Millar's The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks (1806). James Mill extended this logic in The History of British India (1817), where he claimed Hindu customs showed India's "low state of civilization." Similar views were echoed by John Barrow, who regarded "the

condition of the female part of society" as a measure of national progress (Fitzgerald, The Savage and the Civilized, 1996, 133).

[x] The "woman question" is the debate that took place in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries over women's social status, education, legal rights, marriage, and home responsibilities. It emerged as a focal point of contention in colonial India between the British colonial administration, Indian nationalists and social reformers who saw the condition of women as an indicator of national progress, modernity and civilization. These discussions were not necessarily about women's voices, but focused on women as symbols of social change and cultural identity.

[xi] Lata Mani (1989) has demonstrated how the debate on sati systematically silenced women's voices, turning them into symbols of civilizational backwardness rather than historical people with agency. Similarly, Gayatri Spivak's crucial inquiry, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" reveals how colonial and nationalist discourses hijacked women's suffering to build their own moral legitimacy. See also, Bharti Ray's work, "Early Feminists of Colonial India

[xii] In British Orientalism & the Bengal Renaissance (1969), David Kopf considers the idea of Renaissance as synonymous with modernization or revitalization. He underlines that the notion of Renaissance is used to signify a set of cultural patterns associated with Italy during the 15th & 16th centuries by European scholars.

[xiii] Bhadramahila (literally, "respectable woman") was the nineteenth-century Bengali middle-class ideal of womanhood, emphasizing education, domesticity, moral virtue, and devotion to family. Education was valued primarily to produce enlightened wives and mothers rather than independent public actors. See Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849–1905* (1984).

[xiv] The author of this book is unknown. Seemantini Updesh: Tanisi Adab ki Ek Zarrin Dastavez, ed. Dr. Dharamveer, Translated. Noor-ul-Islam, Ask Publications, Lahore, 2019, P. 22.

[xv] The term ecofeminism was first coined by the French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in *Le Féminisme ou la mort* (Paris: Pierre Horay, 1974), where she argued that the domination of women and the exploitation of nature stem from the same patriarchal structures.

[xvi] Pateman framed her argument on social contract theory, and opined that, 'the original contract constitutes both freedom and domination…. The original pact is a sexual as well as a social contract: it is sexual in the sense of patriarchal-that is; the contract establishes men's political right over women – and also sexual in the sense of establishing orderly access by men to women's bodies'. Carole Pateman, The Sexual Contract, 1988, P. 2