

## Vision of women's Empowerment: A Critical Feminist Study of "Sultana's Dream" by Begum Rokya Shakhawat Hossain

Md Najimuddin<sup>1</sup> and Bilal Waziri<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Lecturer, Department of English, Scholars' School and College, Dhaka, BANGLADESH.

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Paktia University, Paktia, AFGHANISTAN.

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author: najimmms@gmail.com



[www.ijrah.com](http://www.ijrah.com) || Vol. 3 No. 2 (2023): March Issue

Date of Submission: 15-02-2023

Date of Acceptance: 08-03-2023

Date of Publication: 18-03-2023

### ABSTRACT

The 19th century was a very dark period for the women of Bengal. For the most part of their lives, there was only one word - "no". Muslim women in particular lived under an imposed discipline. They were cruelly overpowered by the typical patriarchal norms of the society. During that period the women were not allowed to move outside the four walls of their homes and were even denied the basic rights such as education. Not only did they refuse to come before men, they also hid themselves in front of strangers such that even their voice could not be heard by the strangers. Not only in Bengal, but in the entire Indian subcontinent, the condition of women was extremely deplorable. Many people voiced their concerns against such harsh treatment of the women and among them Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a great pioneer for the emancipation women, believed in the freedom of woman from the shackles of male dominant society. She was a great pioneer of the rights of the women and believed in education for the emancipation of women in the sub-continent especially in Bengal. Her essay titled "The Sultana's Dream" is the manifestation of Rokeya's of the unfaltering approach towards empowering the women. Her essay, narrated in a dream sequence details her concept of the emancipation of women where they are subject to no restriction levied upon them by the male counterparts. She wants to see women in a variety of ways. Rokeya's opinions are similar to the ones voiced in the 21st century feminists where women's empowerment is considered as one of the mainstream developments and progress around the world. In the light of this, this paper presents a feminist study and deal with how Begum Rokeya has proved to be a champion of the rights of women by asserting that women are no less than their male counterparts.

**Keywords-** Begum Rokya Shakhawat Hossain, Emancipation, Feminism, Veil, Women Education, Empowerment.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the ages, the history of Bengali has come to the mind of intellectuals who have unselfishly encouraged the people for the welfare of the society through their words and deeds. Among them Begum Rokya Shakhawat Hossain (1880-1832) who was a poet and a writer, thinker, educator, social reformer, as well as thunderous voice of equal rights of men and women. She carried the renaissance and revival of the Muslim women during the English colonial period. It was her sincere desire that Muslim women's society should be self-sufficient, like the men in the field of education, able to contribute as well as men in social activities. She is a great precursor who was one hundred or two

hundred years ahead of her time. She had a modern, liberal and scientific outlook. The researchers have expressed the opinion that the writing of Rokeya's epilepsy contributes significantly to the awakening of helpless women in Bengal. She worked hard till death in that difficult orthodox society to educate girls and endured thousands of abuses for the liberation of unfortunate women who were in a degenerate condition. The words she had spoken about women's rights and freedoms a hundred years ago are not only being deeply appreciated at present, but also women have been able to prove their role for the welfare of society through their talent, skill and sacrifice. Today, we are hearing about the empowerment of women everywhere in the world. The UN Charter has been drafted to eliminate

discrimination against women, and there are policies for women's development in the country. We find these words in Rokeya's works. Rokeya, in her lifetime pursuit, raised the question of women's rights to society. She shows how they deprived, neglected, exploited and held them captive in the male dominated society where freedom was nothing. Men occupy a position of dominance over women. They considered women as slaves under them. The lives of women were even worse than animals. She has also raised a new awakening in men so that their daughters could get an education.

## II. THEORETICAL ASPECTS

Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain's writings mainly focus on women's issues. As we know, feminism speaks of women's rights and equality for building a developed society. Rokeya has addressed all the discrimination against women in her writings. That's why I have applied a feminist approach to my research paper.

The basic idea of feminist theory is that men and women should be equal in every way of life. It includes various movements, theories and philosophical ideas that are involved with gender differences and its effects. Feminism also explores the conditions which build women's lives. The famous British writer Mary Wallstonecraft (1759-1797) is often considered the first feminist writer and pioneer of women's rights. At the beginning of the 20th century, there were some famous feminist thinkers such as Virginia Wolf (1882-1941), Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860- 1935), Simon de Beauvoir (1908-1986) and Betty Friedan (1921-2006). Rokeya Shakawat Hossein (1880-1932) was a powerful voice of feminism in Bengal's literary history. She strongly advocated for the equal status of women and their rights and entitlements in society. There are some branches of feminism which explore several issues connected to women. Here I would involve the relevant feminist theories to analyze Rokeya's "Sultana's Dream".

Cultural Feminism supports that there are biological differences between men and women. According to them it would be better place to live in as women are gentler and humbler than men, if women rule the world. In Sultana's Dream we see, like the cultural feminist thoughts, a woman leads the country and when they take over the power their land is a much better place to live in. They do not quarrel with each other, they do not shed blood while fighting with the enemy, and they banish the person from the country forever. Instead of death penalty. They do not encourage any kind of misdemeanor. Virtue itself reigns there. Their religion is based on truth and love. As it is ruled by women it is free from anarchy. The theory of material feminism can be applied to Sultana's Dream. The contribution of women in Lady land is reversed, and women involve in political, social and economic affairs while men are engaged in the domestic chores, rearing babies, cooking,

washing etc. Marxist feminism also can be applied here, the women of Sultana's Dream before emancipation resemble the embodiment of the reproductive labour of the society. In Ladyland, ladies before taking over power were kept in the zenana to play the traditional role of women. The liberal feminist's quest for women's equality and ability to prove their worth by action is vividly illustrated in the literary piece of Sultana's Dream.

## III. LITERARY SURVEY

Feminism actually has been opened a broad spectrum for the researchers. Massive researches have been done about Begum Rokeya's "Sultana's Dream" and analyzed each and every perspective by different researchers. Regarding this research there are some researches have been done already.

First, the very recent research which is done by Atanu Bhattacharya & Preet Hiradhar, on 08 May 2019, in their thesis —The sentimental nightmare: The discourse of the scientific and the aesthetic in Rokeya S. Hossain's "Sultana's Dream". In this article they inspect Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain's exploratory science fiction story "Sultana's Dream" in the background of science fiction writing in 19th- and 20th-century Bengal. It is range of narratives and analyzes the intersection of the story in the way it creates a distinctive text. The story deals with the main contradictory formations that Hossain claims with: that of the "women's question" (with an emphasis on the Muslim woman's question); the nature of the violence that produces a male dominated state and the possibility of a scientific-aesthetic intervention capable of countering such male violence. The article argues that Hussein's speculative science fiction, creating a model of a feminist utopia by depicting the emancipation of a transformed scientific state apparatus, not only identifies gender, but also the potential of the state based on rational aesthetics.

The second research is done by Md. Mominur Rahman & Md. Abdul Momen Sarker, World University of Bangladesh, Bangladesh (2018), in their thesis "Sultana's Dream": The Eco Feminist Vision of Freedom. In this paper their aims at connecting the relationship between feminist fantasy and Ecofeminism. One of the important traits that Sultana's Dream embodies is overwhelmingly simple and precise solution to phallogocentric maltreatment and oppression. Gendered reversal and scientific advances, in this story, have provided us with the glimpse of freedom conceived by Begum Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain. Representing Sultana in this story which incubates the atmosphere where womanhood is fully observed in full rhythm in the lady land where the story is set is the embodiment of science and gendered exploration has given us a better perspective of harnessing the energy of nature.

The third research has done by F. Hasanat (December 2013) Sultana's Utopian awakening: An

ecocritical reading of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's "Sultana's Dream". This paper examines Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain's seminal work in context of Utopian fiction, science fiction and ecofeminism. With Sultana's Dream, Begum Rokeya invites women of her society to have an illusory experience of freedom that exists outside purdah and beyond the four walls of the zenana.

The fourth research is done by Zuhaib Ahmad Malik, (19 Mar. 2013) "Sultana's Dream" as a Feminist Utopian text. In this paper he has tried to locate the text within the structure of a sub-genre, Feminist Utopia. The paper has presented Sultana's Dream a source of creating new consciousness both political and spiritual. It has framed "Sultana's Dream" in the context of Lyman Tower Sargent's concept of Social Dreaming" and Donna Fancourt's focus of feminist utopia as "Altered State of Consciousness".

#### IV. OBJECTIVES

- To identify the feministic ideas which are reflected in "Sultana's Dream". To identify the visions of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain for the empowerment of women.
- To observe the innovative ideas and liberal thoughts in this particular creative writing regarding the freedom of education for women's empowerment.
- To analysis education as a means of women empowerment.
- To observe the relevance of Rokeya's ideas in relation to women empowerment through education.

#### V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

I have used both primary and secondary materials to complete my term paper. As my motive is to disclose the vision of women's empowerment in "Sultana's Dream", I have closely pursued and examined both the sources. I have minutely focused on the English translation of "Sultana's Dream" has been used as primary sources. There are some critical theories books which played an important role to make theoretical framework and also to support my ideas, views of my research paper.

Besides these elementary sources I have also use the secondary materials like essays, authentic articles from various academic journals, dissertations which have done by some eminent critics and authors on Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain to enrich my research paper.

Since my focus is on the vision of women's empowerment in Rokeya's "Sultana's Dream" I have exclusively depended upon library sources to analyze the topic. As it is a qualitative research it has been confined only with textual analysis.

#### VI. DISCUSSION

##### *Dream Sequence*

Dream is an activity that everyone experiences. It is a kind of situation in which we want to see or enjoy what we cannot do in our real life. Wandering in our unconscious experience, dreams also have the power to pull at our consciousness as it penetrates our thoughts when we are awake. According to Sigmund Freud, an Austrian Neurologist and the founder of Psychoanalysis, dreams are the forms of attempts for fulfilling desires in order to resolve a conflict by the unconscious part of our mind, may be something recent or something from the recesses of the past. According to Freud the real imagination connects the unconscious with the conscious, thus if recognized as utopian activity, Sultana's Dream like other feminist utopia's seems to argue that dreaming becomes a state that could be utilized more effectively in the struggle for utopian transformation. This may be a utopian change that connects ideas with actions.

The dream mode is used as a potent tool to extend the boundaries of human thought. Sultana, the protagonist, dreams of an ideal world, Ladyland where the women emerge as victorious in all sphere of their life. Sultana's Dream is more about action than words, even if they take place within the dream itself. The empowerment of women, their emancipation and the development of the society were not idle dreams for Rokeya, rather the frame of dreams it carries has been her vision of life and she didn't build the fortress of her vision in air. She has used the dream sequence for the development of women and to make the society move forward. Sultana's Dream delineates the superb inventions of the women of Ladyland. The talented women of Ladyland created solar heat catcher, air car, captive balloon and much more. She provides appropriate education and faculties to her imaginary girls and then presents them as fully empowered women with the ability to acquire skills in all areas of their lives. So, in the dream, she provides a better path for a better nation through the use of science fiction. Through the dream, the author has fulfilled her heart's desire for a society that can be enriched through scientific innovation and discovery and also conveys the message to women that empowerment can lead to their success and that they too can dominate society. So, we can say that there is an effective application of dreams in the text. Sultana again departed from Ladyland using the dream mode. She carries the realization that the women of Ladyland build an indomitable resistance to life.

##### *Contribution to the Field of Knowledge*

This study also seeks to highlight the innovative ideas developed by Rokeya in her writing "Sultana's Dream" where she talks about a place known as 'Ladyland' which is free from sin and harm and virtue reigns there. She has used certain terms like horticulture, solar heat, scientific research, universities for women,

electricity plough field, aerial conveyances, hydrogen balls, air car, laboratories and observatories in an era when Muslim women were not even allowed to meet their family members without *pardah*, leave apart education. Rokeya talks about all these innovative ideas which shows the way in the field of women empowerment. The most interesting thing is that she talks about male *zenana* like a *mardana* where the male members were kept in *pardah*. They serve all sorts of domestic chores like rearing babies, cooking foods, washing clothes while women rule over the country and control all the social, political, economic matters. Rokeya states in the text that:

*"when I go back and tell them that in the far-off Ladyland, ladies rule over the country and control all social matters, while gentlemen are kept in the Mardanas to mind babies, to cook and to do all sorts of domestic work; and that cooking is so easy a thing that it is simply a pleasure to cook!"*

Rokeya was always thought for the weaker part of the society, cared for the women who were suffering from the wrath of the society, and she thought for them. So, to empower them she thought to educate them. It shows that education here serves as a weapon to destroy the age-old practice of *pardah* and male domination. Rokeya spoke of women empowerment and women emancipation in such a time where women were ill-treated. She could not receive education on her own, but she achieved what she wanted through her sheer determination and hard-work. In this way she acts as a perfect example of women emolument that ignites power in our mind to achieve what others think are impossible for women. If she could do that a hundred years back, why can we do it now?

#### **Education as a Means of Women empowerment**

It is clear evident from Rokeya's writing of "Sultana's Dream" that the driving force behind Ladyland's success is women's education. She focuses on getting women acquainted with the world of science. To show women that they also can be the head of the institution, she has created the characters of Lady Principals who have reached the pinnacle of success with their knowledge and intelligence and are able to overcome the obstacles that stand in their way. That education is the key to women's empowerment and progress is one of the main features of this story. She shows how women use their skills to achieve the same goals that men have fallen despite the display of their physical strength and military strength. Rokeya states in the text that:

*"Then the Lady Principal with her two thousand students marched to the battle field, and arriving there directed all the rays of the concentrated sunlight and heat towards the enemy. The heat and light were too much for them to bear. They all ran away panic stricken, not knowing in their bewilderment how to counteract that scorching heat."*

So, she thinks that the desired advancement of women is an urgent need for the progress of a society, because no society could ever onward in the true sense of the term by leaving half of its members at home. That is why she has always spoken of women's equal participation in workplace with men. She delineates women in universities working in Ladyland and doing their best to use their intellect for the betterment of the society and queen who is dedicated to her Ladyland and working extremely hard for its development.

Her intension of criticism is not the patriarchal society but also equally scornful and critical of women for their tendency to stay under confinement. Thinking that women are equally responsible for their submission as they voluntarily accept their subjugation and subordination without determining the consequence. She blames them for their blind submission and holds them liable for their situation. She condemns women in fact when Sister Sara asks Sultana:

*"Why do you allow yourselves to be shut up? Because it cannot be helped as they are stronger than women."*

*A lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race. You have neglected the duty you owe to yourselves and you have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interests."*

Here we find Rokeya to be a harsh critic of women who purposefully prefer to be subservient to men. She blames women responsible for their own misery. She goes on to say that "Shutting your eyes to your own interests" is one of the reasons women have been unable to rise from their miserable condition. She uses the parallelism between the human and lion to show that physical strength does not equal to power and believing one is weak is walking away from the responsibility of pursuing one's own-interest. Women should know that this strength does not always equal to power. They should not let men overshadow their genius by means of physical strength. Rather they need to use their skills in such way that men fail to subjugate them. A man does not show physical strength to tame a lion. He uses various techniques to make the lion yield to him. And women in Ladyland does not use weapons to segregate men, they make it happen by their prudent thinking. Thus, Rokeya manages to destroy the notions of power associated with men.

Rokeya did not speak against women's household work. She believed that women cannot be good housewives without special knowledge about housework. Education is also required to accomplish the household chores. In Sultana's Dream the land is free from all kinds of diseases. They do not suffer from infectious diseases and also do not have mosquitos. In the text Sultana says that: *"I learned that they were not subject to any kind of epidemic disease, nor did they suffer from mosquito bites as we do. I was very much*

*astonished to hear that in Ladyland no one died in youth except by rare accident."*

And this happened because the land is neat and clean. They have decorated the country skillfully and the kitchens of Ladyland are free from smoking. So, education is mandatory to keep the house well-arranged. Rokeya writes in her essay —Shugrihini (The Good Housewife) that:

*"One needs intelligence in order to keep the house clean and well-arranged. The housewife will have to show her taste in the very beginning when the house is being built. After the house is built, one needs furniture. Intelligence is needed in arranging them. One should know where each piece of furniture would look the best and where it will not."*

Education develops intellectual skills of a person. We can differentiate between rights and wrongs, what we should do and what should be avoided through education. And education is equally necessary for men and women in every sector of life. Rokeya describes the kitchen in "Sultana's Dream" and shows what happens when the kitchen is not in good condition, she portrays why education is necessary for girls in the housekeeping sector. She provides a solution to this problem that only education which shows the way to empower women.

#### ***The relevance of Rokeya's ideas in relation to women empowerment***

As a pioneer she became a champion of education for girls and worked to provide humanitarian services to the people in her community. As a Muslim woman, she overcame inequalities and ran a school for girls in a culture where solitude and veil were a norm. Rokeya Hossain's writings can help to dispel existing stereotypes about Muslim women. She worked with women of different religions and socio-economic backgrounds to create a blueprint for women's emancipation.

Instead of looking down upon other women she advocated that women from different backgrounds to unite in solidarity fight against patriarchal oppression. The most significant aspect of Rokeya Hossain is that she was part of a grassroots movement that met the needs of Indian women. Despite significant inequalities, Rokeya Hossain was able to form a girl's school and succeeded in the movement for women's rights and girl's education. In her writings, Rokeya Hossain repeatedly called for action amongst men and women to improve their lives. Rokeya Hossain was also aware of the condition of the Muslim community in colonial India.

In Sultana's Dream, she represents sister Sara with potential areas of modern knowledge like history, politics, military strategy, education and science. For this reason, in the Ladyland a number of universities have been founded where women are conducted in various types of research including the storm-stopping machines, creation of flying cars, artificial fountains and solar-heat machines etc. Susmita Roye describes:

*"Sultana's dream-world is one where women run universities and are great scientists. They are one and all highly educated and are also in control of the educational system of their community. Sister Sara mentions that she works in the laboratory and describes to Sultana the various scientific wonders achieved by their women. That is indeed only possible in a dream for both Sultana and Rokeya."* (Susmita Roye, *Op. cit.*, p. 141 *Begum Rokeya's English Works*)

Begum Rokeya wanted all women to be independent. She exposed the flaming inequalities present between genders not only among the Muslims but also among other communities. She compared ornaments with the chains of dogs. She thought that ornaments are only marks of slavery. Begum Rokeya wanted women to come out of their captivity and take part in all aspects of life. In her words, *"We constitute one half of the society and if we are left behind, how can the society progress? If a person's one leg is tied, how far can he go? The interests of men and women are the same. The goal of life is the same for both."* She strongly believed three things to achieve women's empowerment: education, economic freedom and mobility, including moderate purdah and she worked towards this goal with a teacher's intellect, zeal of a social reformer and her humanitarian conscience. Begum Rokeya led the way in empowering and enlightening women by establishing Sakhawat Memorial Girls School and Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam. She could feel that it was important to unite women as well as education to establish their rights in the society.

## **VII. CONCLUSION**

The utopian imagination in Sultana's Dream is fresh, funny, amazing, and witty. In the previous work too, as in the later, education plays an important role to women's empowerment and advancement. The role of knowledge, science, technology, and the fact that the lady principal of the college conducts the strategy that leads men voluntarily going to the selection in the mardana all highlight.

Rokeya believed in women's education which could offer them a happy life. In the broaden sense, knowledge is a powerful tool for empowering women in civil and political arenas as much as the domestic and the individual one. Those who are working in adult education and those working in formal education can benefit richly by analyzing Rokeya's Sultana's Dream in particular.

However, from the above discussion and analysis it can be said that Rokeya's "Sultana's Dream" is one of the notable English pieces which is found as important resources that provides us influential and effective wisdom to encourage and establish women education. It is also found that Rokeya played an important role in spreading women's education and their empowerment. She tried to redress unnatural practices

of seclusion and men's perception towards educating women. Finally, Rokeya urges all women to continue their efforts to increase their intelligence through education.

### REFERENCES

[1] Hossain, Rokeya Sakhawat. *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag*. Trans. Barnita Bagchi. New Delhi: Penguin, 2005.  
[2] Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002.

[3] Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretations of Dreams*. Read Books Ltd, 2013.

[4] Begum, Hasna. *Begum Rokeya: The Feminist Views and Visions*. Dhaka: Sucheeptara, 2011. Hossain, RokeyaSakhawat. RokeyaRachanabali. Dhaka: Uttoron, 2006.

[5] Susmita Roye, —Sultana's Dream vs. Rokeya's Reality: A study of one of the Pioneering' Feminist Science Fictions, *Kunapipi*, Vol. 31, 2009, p. 141.

[6] <http://www.theindependentbd.com/arcprint/details/127272>