



Sultana's Dream - A Feminist Utopia:

A Critical Exploration

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Abstract

Begum Rokeya Shekhawat, the most prolific Indian Muslim woman scholar, wrote *Sultana's Dream*, which appeared in the *Ladies Magazine* of Madras, India, in 1905. She took a stand against patriarchy within Islam. The dream sequence in *Sultana's Dream* is more than just a fun diversion. Instead, it calls for a culture shift that allows women to participate fully in public life without the oversight of men at home. She confronts the stereotypes of Muslim women through this dream.

Many gender norms, such as women's captivity in a *jenana* system, find embodiment in women's life. This research paper, "Sultana's Dream - A Feminist Utopia: A Critical Exploration", aims to provide a critical analysis of the work, focusing on how radically persuasive it is in prompting readers to consider the degraded status of women and how women, in particular, never challenge the same. Through her writing, Begum Rokeya evokes vivid details of the unbelievable events of the period. Education for women was considered radical in those days. There was, however, a growing understanding among reformers in Hindu and Muslim communities that women needed an education to be both excellent wives and mothers. Few people thought women should get an education for their development. It is thought-provoking that Begum Rokeya Shekhawat could be so radical in her thinking to oppose the patriarchal system despite having grown up in such a milieu. She broke the glass ceiling for women in male-dominated fields like politics and science. Some of the scientific miracles she proclaimed are still considered necessary today. Her advocacy for women's political engagement was decades before her time, yet it remains a vital issue in modern India.

Keywords:

Sultana's Dream, Begum Rokeya, Muslim, Feminism, Radical, Patriarchy.

Introduction

Feminism is not just an idea or an ideology but a way of life. Feminism symbolises giving a platform to those marginalised or silenced sections of society who had been oppressed, suppressed and victimised due to their birth as women. While many feminist movements have originated in the West, there have also been significant feminist developments in the East, about which far less is known. However, most feminist movements (Liberal, Marxist, and Socialist) advocated gender parity. They thought that if women and men had the same access to resources, they might achieve parity.

The radical feminists held the view that men and women are fundamentally different. Therefore, similarity cannot reveal their requirements or potential for growth. They disagree with liberal feminists that women should aspire to be like men. Femininity is viewed as a blessing in the radical culture where women's reproductive and other feminine roles are honoured. However, extreme libertarians reject the idea of biological destiny for women and instead blame biological compulsions for women's subjection. Most think radical feminism first appeared in the West in the 1960s (Bhattacharyya, 2009). At the time, people in the United States debated the ethics of abortion and other forms of birth control (Rampton, 2008).

If we probe the works of early Indian feminists, the radical element against patriarchy was transparent. Even though most feminist texts are written from a Western perspective, women writers from India strongly desired to speak out against gendered injustices in their works. *Sultana's Dream*, written by Begum Rokeya Shekhawat Hossain and published in *The Ladies Magazine* of Madras in 1905, is one such work. She wrote when it was frowned upon for women to pursue higher education. Unlike the Hindu community, the Muslim community was slow to embrace a spirit of reform (Sur, 2014; Sanghi and Srija, 2014).

Sultana's Dream

Begum Rokeya Shekhawat's critique of patriarchy is among Bengal's earliest and most radical writing (Hossain, 1988; 2005). She was raised in complete isolation, as is customary for Muslim girls, and was never allowed to attend school. She attacked the anti-women habits of modern Muslims in Bengal, even though the situation for Hindu women at the time was not much better (Hossain, 1988; 2005). However, her points about women's subservience were universally valid. Reform movements were gaining traction in Bengal when she wrote this. Women's education was a topic of conversation. The plight of women was an issue considered by both Muslim and Hindu reformers. There were discussions about whether or not women should be educated and, if so, to what level. Women from wealthy Muslim families typically received their education at home. The Muslim reformers shared the belief that educated women would make better wives and mothers held by their Hindu counterparts.

Many members of the Muslim elite, however, frowned upon the idea of seeking further education elsewhere. For their female children, they favoured the *jenana* system of education.

Begum Rokeya came from a wealthy background. Her older brother and sister encouraged her to continue her study. Her brother was responsible for her education in both English and scientific investigation. Her husband shared her enthusiasm for education once they were married. She wrote *Sultana's Dream*, a direct challenge to the prevalent view at the time that discouraged women from pursuing higher education and careers. The story begins in a dream, as the title suggests. A young lady named Sultana invited the girl out of her apartment after she met her, and the two became fast friends. At first, Sultana was startled and frightened by the complete absence of light. Walking out into the bright, fresh moonlight, she was taken aback to see that it was, in fact, dawn. This series is based on the idea that women are confined and restricted in the shadows of their ignorance. The world will be much better if they pull themselves out of that hole.

Sultana's experience with a stereotypical alternative world to her own demonstrates the extent to which she has internalised the limits placed on women. Because of the similarity between Sultana and Begum Rokeya, the reader may view her as a fictitious representation of Rokeya. The character of Sister Sara represents the woman's awareness of and resistance to the patriarchal standards that determine women's destinies. Many pictures in this dream sequence would have been entirely taboo for women when Begum Rokeya was writing. She had said that Sultana had gone to a country where women did not practice *purdah* or engage in *jenana* and that this place was known as "Ladyland." The women were doing scientific work and could go wherever they wanted. Begum Rokeya's highly radical element is evident in this book, as she repeatedly states that men are worthless. Since all men were in *mardana*, she said there were no police or jails in Ladyland (opposite Jenana). Therefore, as Sister Sara mentioned, there is no need for such procedures as criminals are non-existent.

Sultana's Dream is a radical feminist text since it promotes women's scientific temperament. She had lauded women's participation in science as the safer alternative and insisted that men when given a chance, had consistently squandered it. Women, given the same opportunities as males, can make better use of scientific knowledge for the benefit of future generations with less waste. She talks of conflicts in which women fought and triumphed just as males had. A few people who had committed political offences sought sanctuary in the Ladyland, setting off the war. The king of the adjacent kingdom sought their return. But the Queen of Ladyland refused. Refusing asylum seekers went against her principles. The King had therefore declared war. The men of the land immediately took up arms in defence of their homeland.

However, it appeared that all of their efforts had room for development. The wise ladies of the land collectively decided to solve the problem independently. They were realistic enough to

realise that they could not win a fight against a man by using brute force. So they made the rational decision to put their knowledge to use. It is admirable that the conflict was resolved without resorting to violence. This is an admirable development. For example, rainwater harvesting, an eco-restoration drive, and a greenery movement that bears great water management potential in the water crisis were implemented and are now a part of current scientific practice (Hossain 1988; 2005). Next, she discusses the importance of a Queen in the text devoted to Ladyland's growth. This is analogous to the role of women in politics, which was unheard of in those days but is now widely recognised as crucial.

Even though it is presented in a dream sequence, *Sultana's Dream* reveals the author's deep yearning to shatter every glass ceiling that pertains to women. It is just letting out the pent-up anger that has been kept in check by patriarchal traditions. In Indian culture, women hold a place of honour within the home (Bhattacharyya). There are many rules she has to follow to keep this status. Her freedom of movement, education, freedom of choice, and 'dreams' are all constrained. A perfect Ladyland is described in *Sultana's Dream*. This vision can become a reality if women break free of their psychological servitude to men. Any woman will absorb this servitude to the point where she fails to see her potential. Women are discouraged from pursuing their identities because doing so conflicts with their expected roles and responsibilities within the family.

Despite this, the story of Begum Rokeya compels readers to learn more about the lives of Muslim women in modern India. It is worth noting that the status of women in Islam has been a topic of discussion, particularly among scholarly Muslims. Since the influence of Western liberalisation, this pattern has been more noticeable. "The contentious issue of women's rights is a hot topic in the Islamic world" (Kaushik and Munjial, 2013). The Indian Constitution's guarantee of religious tolerance and cultural pluralism is a powerful and moving provision. Articles 25–30 of our Constitution protect the rights of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural minorities, making India a genuinely democratic and pluralist society (Kaushik and Munjial, 2013). This is a genuinely progressive right essential to the well-being of all societies. However, Muslim women in India have some of the lowest literacy rates (Shinde and John, 2012; Sur, 2014).

Even yet, towards the turn of the twentieth century, Begum Rokeya's literature garnered international attention to the plight of Indian women. However, only feminist students in the Indian setting find such works engaging. Therefore, such works ought to be published in everyday popular texts accessible to people from all walks of life and academia. A societal shift is required, but this spirit needs to be decentralised. Women of all socioeconomic, cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds must speak up and claim their rights. *Sultana's Dream* is, in every sense of the word, a feminist text that speaks to our current moment.

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