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## Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's Sultana's Dream: An Echo of Enlightened Women's Leadership in the Feminist Utopia

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### Abstract

Sultana's Dream (wrote in 1905, published in 1908) is a feminist utopia was written by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932). She is a Muslim feminist writer and social reformer who lived in British India, which is now Bangladesh. At the very beginning of her life, Begum Rokeya could realize very well that education is the only key for emancipation as well as the progression in the then vulnerable women society. Her life motto was to expand female education in the Bengali Muslim Society as she believed that if education is inculcated properly in women, it would enlighten them and liberate them from the barriers of rigid patriarchy and existing norms. Therefore, Rokey's piece of writing (Sultana's Dream) retains a signature of her creative ingenuity to build the infrastructure of not only women education but also women empowerment. The objective of this essay is to signify how education is the main driving force behind establishing women leadership with innovative thinking power who invented sufficient (scientific) instruments for them and who possessed protective power to save the Lady land from invaders and consequently run the state very well than ever.

**Keywords:** Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Utopia, Feminism, Women Education, Women Leadership.

### Introduction

In her short life, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain wrote essays, novels, utopias, poems, humor and satirical articles on women rights and other social issues both in Bengali and English. Her referential English pieces are: *Sultana's Dream*, *Padmarag*, *God Gives*, *Man Robs*, *Educational Ideals for the Modern Indian Girls* and approximately her twelve English letters. Begum Rokeya was the true trailblazer of women education and in pursuance of the necessity of women's education; she established a girl's school for Muslim women. The main purpose of this study is to substantiate Begum Rokeya's creativity of perfect women leaderships who were enlightened by education.

### Rokey's farsightedness

"We do not covet other people's land. We do not fight for a piece of diamond.... We

dive deep into the ocean of knowledge and try to find out the precious gems, which nature has kept in store for us." (Hossain, 2005).

With a scientific, modern and liberal outlook, Begum Rokeya correctly envisaged that through education, Muslim women could reach their fullest potentials and pursue their own interest without depending on men. Thus, the first line of "*Sultana's Dream*" substantiates her deliberate thinking for the wellbeing of vulnerable women in that contemporary society:

"One evening I was lounging in an easy chair in my bedroom and thinking lazily of the condition of Indian womanhood". (Ibid, p-3)

Here, by sitting in an easy chair Sultana, equivalent of a sultan is thinking about the condition of womanhood when she falls asleep and wakes up in the Lady land

where Sister Sara is her host. This land is like a futuristic utopia founded on feminist science, which seeks knowledge and peace rather than wealth and power. This text verifies that about one and half-century ago Rokeya had her foresight to distinguish education as a magical power for women empowerment that has been visualized today throughout the whole world.

It is remarkably important to note that Begum Rokeya brought the issue of female education at a crucial point in the history of Muslim Bengal when after a long period of colonial oppression; Muslims realized its economic, political and cultural detriments. At that time, women were quite vulnerable in the position of the society as they were treated inferior to men. Even the forward-looking Brahmins and Brahmos of colonial Bengal did not teach women much beyond socially accepted subjects (Hasan, 2013).

As we can see from Ghosh's statement about this:

Even long after women's education was accepted by the society, women were considered inferior to men in intelligence. They were not given the opportunity to study science. Perhaps it was thought what was not needed for household chores such as cooking, raising of children, knitting, writing letters or keeping daily accounts were unnecessary for them. Sarala [Devi Chawdhurani] and Shanta [Nag] were students of Bethune College which was founded in 1849 exclusively for girls. No science subject was taught there (Ghosh, 1986).

While Muslim Women in colonial Bengal and before that had to go through portrayal as 'invisible'; 'backward other' and 'silent victims'; Begum Rokeya made her extra ordinary contribution to the amelioration of women's position in the society.

In her educational movement, Begum Rokeya couldn't support any disparity between the learning of male and female, which was highly revolutionary at her time. She (Rokeya) says:

*"Let me also venture to say that it is so; for children born of well-educated mothers must necessarily be superior to Muslim children, who are born of illiterate and foolish mothers"* (Rokeya, "God Gives, Man Robs" 491) (Quadi, 2006).

According to Hasan, She (rokeya) also talks about men's interest in women's educational advancement. Men want to have their sons brave, valiant and bright; but, she argues, this will not happen if the mothers remain ignorant (Ibid, p-49).

### Sense of Justice

Begum Rokeya had her audacity to substantiate in "Sultana's Dream" that justice can never indulge brutality as well as to forgive is always divine. While Sultana asked Sister Sara, about punishment:

*"If any person lies, she or he is...."*

*Punished with death?"*

*No, not with death"* (Hossain, 2005).

Hence, Sister Sara clarified that:

*"We do not take pleasure in killing a creature of God, especially a human being. The liar is asked to leave this land for good and never to come to it again"* (Ibid, p-13).

Basically, humans are the best creature of Almighty. So, as human, we have no right to kill another human by adopting brutality. Instead, it is quite reasonable to give a chance to an offender to purify him or herself. She also extends, if any offender repents sincerely, that person is forgiven straightforwardly. Moreover, in Sultana's Dreamland, religion is based on Love and Truth. It is people's religious duty to love one another and to be absolutely truthful. Thus, religion, love and humanity went at par in Sultana's Dreamland where the inhabitants have a chance of self-realization. According to Plato, the citizens of a state can materialize their moral ideal through their self-realization (Islam, 2011).

### Family Background and education

The first Muslim legendary feminist thinker and educationist Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was born on 9 December, 1880, in the village of Pairaband in Rangpur in the then undivided Bengal. Her mother, the first of her father's four wives, strictly followed the practice of purdah, whereby women were secluded inside a separate part of the household – called the zenana. Her father Zahiruddin Saber permitted his daughters only reading the Quran in Arabic, although her brothers visited St. Xavier's College in Kolkata for their education. Rokeya's father could not go against the traditional attitude of that time of educating daughters at home and to practice some skills like cooking; housekeeping; sewing and knitting etc. Despite all of these, her elder brother Ibrahim Sabir taught her Bengali and English secretly. Thus never having the chances for formal education, Rokeya's auto didacticism lends her character from her childhood day's spark of independence.

In 1896, at the age of 16 she got married to a government service holder, Khan Bahadur Syed Shakhawat Hussain whose encouragement and official connection spread her exposure to western knowledge and his official rank provided her with wider access to Europeans with whom she could interact and share ideas and finally they recognized and appreciated her piece *Sultana's Dream*

with enthusiastic manner. Thus, Rokeya got an opportunity to communicate with educated women and in this way she became perfect in English (Shirin, 2020).

### Two Major Creations

Basically, Begum Rokeya wrote two utopian fictions: one is *Sultana's Dream* (1905) and the other one is *Padmarag* (1924). Whereas the former is a sheer dream vision, set in an imaginary country and however *Padmarag* is not like that, rather it belongs to Rokeya's own time and place, and the problems it lays bare are clearly contemporary. Begum Rokeya's "*Sultana's Dream*" is one of an imaginative and ambitious narrative which was published in 1905; in Indian Ladies Magazine, the first magazine in India, established and edited by a woman for women. It is one of the first examples of feminist science fiction. This short story is set in a place called Lady land where men are behind the purdah and women run the country much better than men ever did. In this feminist utopia, women rule the world as society lives peacefully and prospers through their inventions of solar ovens, flying cars, and cloud condenser, which offers abundant clean water to the population of "Lady land". And the men, who are deemed "fit for nothing", are shut inside their homes.

A Greek word 'utopia' has been used cross-culturally and with telling effect over the ages by feminists, which is a European concept. It is in fact about embodying a dream about an ideal place which is basically no place at all, for it does not exist until imagined into existence by those who strongly inspired by the dream of an ideal life. Thus, in *Sultana's Dream*, the utopian imagination is light, fresh and delightfully witty. Most striking feature in it is to celebrate the importance of education as holding the key to women's empowerment and progress. In this feminist utopian narrative, Rokeya illustrates her brand of feminism, creativity, the focus of her intellectual musings, the challenges she dared to take up and the down-to-earth attitude she adopted while carrying out her welfare and development oriented work "*Sultana's Dream*" also offers us insights into an individual whose sincerity, humanity, humor, creativity and pragmatism illuminate every word she wrote. In "*Sultana's Dream*", author Rokeya successfully depicted the world of utopia in which male individuals are confined to the 'mardana' and perform the daily mundane chores while women use their superior intellectual ability to govern the country wisely and well. Needless to say, here the driving force behind the success of the utopian feminist country of lady land is women's education.

### Scientific Inventions

Begum Rokeya puts particular emphasis on the importance of women familiarizing themselves with the

world of science and technology. In this nameless country, male figures engage in futile and incessant warfare, thereby exhausting their countries valuable resources. The female figures, on the contrary, are developed to the more productive goal of cultivating their minds. Begum Rokeya drew outstandingly the scenario of two universities, an exclusive world for women where novel schemes are drawn up and subsequently implemented: one allows water to be drawn directly from the clouds and the other enables solar heat to be collected, stored and concentrated.

Perhaps, Sister Sara who is well-educated in science, history and politics was everything that Hossain hoped women in her indigenous world become. In *Sultana's Dream Land*, a feminist revolution, led by political cunning of the Lady Principal of an all-women university and the scientific achievements, has already overthrown the men who ruled the state. Prior to the revolution, the scientific research of Lady Principal had been dismissed by males as a "sentimental nightmare" for its solving social problems instead of enhancing the state's military power. But, later the males could realize their hollowness while entering into "Mardana" without uttering any words.

Therefore, using the concentrated solar heat stored by the women's universities as a missile, the enemy is routed. The men are seen still safely secluded in the mardana and the women continue to govern the country creating a utopia where science, technology and virtue work together in a perfect harmony. Once nameless country is now called Lady Land, here air travel is the only mode of transport, land is cultivated by electrically driven motors and the weather is controlled. Overall, women educators are being the heroines, the lady land witnessed the triumph of the virtuous, inquiring, and scientific enlightened and welfare-oriented spirit in women (Hossain, 2005).

### Rokeya's punctuality

Through her life, Begum Rokeya had her exactness and in '*Sultana's Dream*' we get the illustration of punctuality which is a vital criterion for the development of a nation. When she asked Sister Sara:

'How can you find time to do all these?

You have to do the office work as well?

Have you not?'

And Sister Sara replied:

'Yes, I do not stick to the laboratory all day long. I finish my work in two hours.'

Then, Rokeya asked again:

'In two hours! How do you manage?'

(Ibid, p-6). Afterwards, Sister Sara clarified, under the name of seven hours, the officers or magistrates in our country, basically do not work for this whole period. They dawdle

away their time in smoking and they talk much about their work:

‘Suppose one cheroot takes half an hour to burn off, and a man smokes twelve cheroots daily; then you see, he wastes six hours every day in sheer smoking’ (Ibid, p-7).

In her personal life, Begum Rokeya utilized her time in a better way. Even, when she became widowed only at the age of 27, though it was a critical time in her life, as there was a family dispute with Sakhawat’s daughter from his previous marriage; Begum Rokeya did not engage herself in it. She just left Bhagalpur and shifted to Kolkata in 1911. Now, she dedicated herself full time to the purpose of enhancing women’s education. For that purpose, she shifted her school (Shakhawat Memorial School, first set up in Bhagalpur) in Kolkata too. In Bengal, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s school was the first permanent educational institution for Muslim girls. Not only that but also Rokeya had to go from door to door for persuading girl’s indifferent parents to send their daughters at school. Undoubtedly, this task was hard nut to crack, because, at that time, formal education for Muslim girls was unheard. Thus, Rokeya took venture and utilized her time for the wellbeing of whole Muslim society, firstly, by inspiring them and secondly, by enlightening them with education. She also invested all of her money very generously for this purpose which she got inherently after her husband’s death.

### Hardship and interval

Though Rokeya employed all of her knowledge, wealth and energy for the progression of women education, there was a gap in her literary career from 1909 to 1914 because of some trials and tribulations such as family disputes and demise of her parents, husband and children. Basically she lost her two baby daughters; one at the age of 5 months and the other at four months old (Quayum, 2013). May be for having such hardships Rokeya could not produce works of literature between 1909 and 1914.

### Conclusion

After the above discussion and analysis, it can be said that, from Begum Rokeya’s ‘Sultana’s Dream’ it is quite evident that she could envisage appropriately the fact that educating women leads to sustainable development, which is something that has been adopted by the United Nations recently. It is also found that Rokeya played an important role in spreading women education as well as their empowerment. Basically, a dream that Rokeya dreamt for Bengali women to acquire some 150 years ago remains one of the basic criteria for establishing women’s leadership until presently. Overall, she had her boldness and ingenuity to imagine the best thing for

women emancipation and empowerment that was even unheard at her contemporary time. Therefore, she could figure out astonishingly the hidden potentiality among women for which today’s enlightened female representative’s contribution has reached at peak worldwide. Thus, Begum Rokeya’s Utopia has become the perfect resemblance of this contemporary modern world where our enlightened women run the state with full autonomy.

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