



From Purdah to Power: A Study of Feminist Utopia in Sultana's Dream

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Abstract:

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* introduces one of the early feminist utopian texts in Indian English literature, in which Rokeya completely reverses gender roles to challenge patriarchy (Hossain). Ladyland is a society controlled by women and recognised for peace, intellectual clarity, and scientific progress. Rokeya highlights the absurdity of masculine dominance and the suppression of women under purdah. The narrative employs irony and a strategic exchange of power to critique masculine hegemony while envisioning an unbiased societal structure. This study investigates how Rokeya reconstructs the traditional gender roles by positioning females as intellectual, political, and moral leaders, while males are marginalised in the domestic domain. Utilising a feminist lens, this study examines how *Sultana's Dream* not only envisions a world free from patriarchal constraints but also interprets gender roles within the dominant institutional power dynamics of colonial India. Ultimately, this paper argues that Rokeya's dream of the society "Ladyland" is not merely an imagination but a significant attempt to reframe women's empowerment and potential in a male-dominated society.

Keywords: Feminist Utopia; Ladyland; Gendered Space; Purdah and Power; South Asian Feminism.

Introduction

Gender studies refers to an interdisciplinary academic field that challenges traditional gender roles. It examines gender identity and gender stereotypes. It examines how gender interacts with other identities to produce unique experiences of privilege and inequality. Beyond the realm of English literature, gender studies draws from psychology, sociology, history, and more to explore gender. It focuses on men's roles, women's experiences, and underscores society's significant influence in shaping gender as a social construct. This research critically examines gender roles, the cultural and social formation of femininity and masculinity, power dynamics, and the intersectionality of gender. It is a discursive domain that investigates how societal, traditional, and ancestral dynamics construct ideas of masculinity and femininity, shaping patterns of dominance and submission, narrative identity, and opportunities inherent in social structures. Gender studies interrogate how literature represents, questions, and deconstructs the codes of conduct that shape it, serving as a crucial framework for examining texts that reject patriarchal narratives of power.

Begum Rokeya and the Historical Context

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was a Bengali activist in the early twentieth century. She struggled for women's empowerment and initiated efforts to promote women's education and rights. Her writing is an open critique that condemns the exploitation, suppression, and discrimination of women within a patriarchal society, which demands justice and independence for women.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, when women in colonial India were largely confined to domestic roles and denied intellectual freedom, Begum Rokeya emerged as a revolutionary feminist voice. She utilised literature as a pathway to self-discovery of female consciousness and challenged patriarchal customs. Rokeya Hossain wrote *Sultana's Dream* in 1905 when the social position of women was highly restrictive in the Indian subcontinent. The complete

exclusion of women from public life, limited education, and the purdah system made women's lives impossible. In this period, the literacy rate of women was extremely low, and their identity was confined only to domestic spheres.¹ Rokeya's text was a reaction to this oppressive atmosphere. Nationalism was rising at that time, but women's role was only symbolic; there was only limited actual empowerment.

Feminist Utopia and the Politics of Gender Reversal

Rokeya imagined a reverse world turned upside down, where women are powerful, scientific, rational, and politically dominant. It is essential to understand this context because, through this world, anyone can access the deep reality of Ladyland, which is not merely a fantasy but a direct critique of contemporary patriarchal society. Her groundbreaking short story *Sultana's Dream* stands as an early example of feminist utopian fiction. The purpose of using utopia is not only to present an ideal world but also to expose the limitations of patriarchy. This text illustrates her evocative philosophy, which holds that women's education and critical thinking are the foundations of personal emancipation and cultural progress. Through this contrast, Rokeya highlights the absurdity of patriarchal conventions and presents a vision of a society based on reason, instruction, and harmony—attributes traditionally denied to women. She breaks the silence through her work, presenting her innovative ideas, power, intelligence, and authority. Rokeya envisioned a world where there is minimal crime, no pollution at all, and technology is used primarily for welfare, not war.

The gender structure of this utopia is also revolutionary. Rokeya rejected masculine aggression, militarism, and domination. Instead, a woman-led governance forms the foundation of this world. Thus, Rokeya presents a feminist political model, where power means rationality and collective well-being. Rokeya envisioned scientific inventions that support women's liberation, like solar power, cloud condensation, flying cars, and peaceful weapons, not violence. In

Ladyland, science is a tool of women's agency. Rokeya envisioned scientific inventions that supported women's liberation, like solar power, cloud condensation, flying cars, and peaceful weapons. At the beginning of the twentieth century, science was often seen as a field of male dominance, but *Sultana's Dream* challenged that idea. The scientific capabilities of Ladyland demonstrate that women possess equal intellectual potential, but differences in opportunities remain a significant barrier in their lives.

In *Sultana's Dream*, Begum Rokeya reflects on questions of individuality, the roles of women, and self-discovery through education. Her writings convey a strong call for equality and enlightenment. Rokeya reimagines social structures through a reversal of gender roles, using this inversion

to question the assumed naturalness of patriarchal authority. She represents her revolutionary ideas through her dream. In this story, men are bound to domestic settings—reflecting the purdah system that traditionally constrained women—whereas women participate in intellectual, institutional, and rational projects. This comprehensive inversion highlights the constructed core identity of gender roles and affirms the subjectivity of social hegemony. Rokeya's representation thus performs as both a feminist subversive commentary and a utopian treatise for gender inclusivity.

This study is noteworthy because it reconsiders *Sultana's Dream* from the perspective of gender-reversed positions as a political and speculative act that challenges patriarchal power structures and gender roles. Although previous research has acknowledged Rokeya's perspective on early feminism, some studies have emphasised how her narrative examines gender itself, interpreting it not merely as a concept but as a dynamic and reversible framework. By examining how Rokeya uses paradox, reversal, and fantasy, this paper highlights her

significant role in rethinking the limits of female rationality and cultural contribution well before the development of contemporary feminist ideology.

Although there is a dominant appreciation of Begum Rokeya's feminist beliefs, existing research has largely treated *Sultana's Dream* as a utopian illusion or as a form of social modernisation. What remains neglected is its contemplative participation with the vision of gender itself. This study engages a critical gap by examining how Rokeya's narrative resonates with later feminist approaches, particularly those associated with Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler, well before their enunciation in the West. Whereas Beauvoir argued that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir)². Butler later proposed gender as a performative and socially constructed act. Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* reflects these core beliefs through the visionary reversal of roles in Ladyland. By understanding this reversal as an early feminist articulation of gender performativity, this study offers an original perspective, presenting Rokeya as a forerunner of modern feminist philosophy, whose ideology of gender flexibility appeared autonomously within the hegemonic Indian framework, critiquing both Western patriarchy and the suppression of native traditions.

While most studies of *Sultana's Dream* are based on feminist vision and social-political aspects, this study focuses on psychological dimensions that remain unexplored. By applying psychoanalytic theory, this paper examines hidden desire, suppressed thoughts, and emotional resistance. Ladyland may be read as a symbolic expression of desires for freedom, equality, and identity. Thus, it is not merely a feminist utopia but also a psychological escape from patriarchal restriction.

Literature Review

A study of existing literature is crucial to understanding how *Sultana's Dream* has been witnessed, interpreted, and conceptualised across diverse feminist frameworks. Sultana's

Dream, published in 1905, has attracted significant attention as one of the earliest feminist utopias in Indian literature. However, critical discussions have often been focused more on Rokeya's reformist concerns and less on the theoretical aspects of her gender imagination. This chapter traces the critical evolution of feminist portrayals of *Sultana's Dream*, analyses theoretical findings from leading voices in feminist thought, and identifies the critical lens this research aims to fill.

Throughout the decades, critics have interpreted *Sultana's Dream* as both a sharp political satire and a feminist representation. Early critics interpreted the text through the framework of social reform, highlighting Begum Rokeya's defence of women's education and self-determination in colonial Bengal. *Sultana's Dream* works like a "bridge" between Eastern and Western theories. It is not just a feminist imagination but an intellectual prophecy that is fulfilled much later in modern Western philosophy. Early researchers consider this text a reformist, feminist, and utopian text. However, Rokeya's work engages with ideas that later gained prominence in feminist theory. She is not just a storyteller but an important early voice in feminist thinking because she has already imagined many of the theories that later shaped feminism. Thus, the text stands as an early and influential contribution to feminist utopian writing, especially within the context of South Asian literature, which provides not only the ideas of feminism that discuss the equal rights of a male and a female but also portrays the suppressed emotions, frustration, and expectations of a woman in a male-dominated society.

Rokeya used satire as a powerful weapon. It represents a sharp ironic reversal when women lead an advanced and peaceful society, while men are confined to the "mardana purdah." This reversal questions the patriarchal assumption: if men claim that women are weak, then *Ladyland* suggests that weakness is not natural; it is the result of societal construction. The domestic confinement of men exposes that rules were never natural but only tools of gendered power. Through this irony, Rokeya subtly but powerfully undermines the patriarchy.

Sultana's Dream is a short story written in 1905. The story imagines a dream world in which women rule, and men are confined. This story depicts a society rooted in peace, education, and technology. Rokeya challenges patriarchal norms through this story, and women are represented as leaders, innovators, and socially responsible and capable enough, more than men. In the opening line of text, "I had a curious dream last night, that I was in a country where men were kept in confinement." This passage reflects her suppressed anger and frustration toward men. She is critiquing the patriarchy through gender reversal. Here, she presents the idea that traditional gender can change because it is not fixed.

When she stated, "No crime, no war, and no fear existed in this land governed by women," she was praising the women-led societies that consist of peace and social harmony. She also examines how war and conflict often drive male-dominated societies. At the same time, women can easily establish rational and peaceful governance. Through her depiction of technological progress, the writer demonstrates that women possess scientific knowledge and innovative capacity, with solar energy serving as a powerful symbol of sustainability and rationality.

There is a direct attack on the patriarchal system when she reveals, "A lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race" (Hossain). Sister Sara mentions this while introducing Sultana through Ladyland to show that even physical strength cannot justify domination. Here, Sultana is portrayed as an ordinary, traditional woman living in a patriarchal society, closing the doors upon herself. She represents all women here who are not prepared enough to go beyond the limits set by males in a patriarchal world. After observing the condition of men in the imaginary world of Ladyland, Sultana asked Sister Sara why women accept confinement within the Zenana (Purdah).

Rokeya selected the name of her text, *Sultana's Dream*. "Sultana" means a female Sultan, a Muslim ruler, and the visionary place, the Ladyland, also refers to the land where the lady is

superior and dominates, in contrast to patriarchy. Ladyland is itself a symbol of a land that is ruled by a woman and for women. Rokeya utilised the theory of gender reversal as a powerful tool of satire and irony. She makes society understand that power and domination are not natural but socially constructed (Hossain). This text is revolutionary, defying the norms of its time, yet Rokeya dared to write it and envisioned her haven in Ladyland—a realm where Islamic ethics and modern science coexist freely, unbound by restrictions such as the purdah system (Hossain). She reimagines the culture where Eastern spirituality and Western progress can meet.

Rokeya portrays that intelligence and morality are stronger than physical strength. She took the example of a lion and an elephant to present their physical strength. It is a symbolic representation, as a lion may be physically stronger, but it does not rule over men. Men, therefore, cannot claim any natural right to rule over women. Through her indirect reference to the elephant, she indicated that an elephant possesses greater strength than a lion, but still, it is trained and guided by the human mind. It simply means reason is always superior to force. In Rokeya's Ladyland, power does not mean violence, but it means education and rationality. Rokeya's Ladyland is not just an escape from reality, but it is a recreation of reality, showing the possibilities of the transformation of gender roles, and also depicts the would-be society after giving rights, freedom, and education to women. Thus, Rokeya envisioned a world that affirms women's ability to transform society through reasoning, intellect, equality, and education.

Rokeya frames the struggle of women within a broader national context, showing that it is not merely a female resistance against patriarchy but also a Muslim woman's struggle against her own country. The following distinctive lines highlight how Rokeya challenged both patriarchy and colonial authority through her speculative vision.

As Mahua Sarkar researched, “As the debates around issues such as higher education for women in the last two decades of the nineteenth century show, the only context in which women would be allowed visibility and agency was under the guardianship of men and to further the nationalist cause in some way. Any agency shown by women that fell outside these acceptable limits was liable to be ridiculed, denounced, and ultimately given short shrift within nationalist historiography (Sarkar 229-30).

Mahua Sarkar argued that Muslim women were pushed into the politics of invisibility in late colonial Bengal, whether they wanted to speak or not. Nationalists and colonial discourses envisioned them as silent, oppressed, dependent, and lacking agency. Begum Rokeya imagined a world that was completely opposed to the real patriarchal-dominated world. Instead of presenting a Muslim woman in purdah, Rokeya introduced us to an active, visible, intellectual, and scientifically advanced woman. In Ladyland, women emerged as inventors, leaders, and authoritative figures, directing the state, exercising control over power and knowledge, and reshaping the world.

Theoretical Framework

To understand *Sultana's Dream (1905)* deeply and in a structured way, this paper employs two crucial viewpoints: feminism and psychoanalytical criticism. Within feminist discourse, particularly Mary Wollstonecraft's pioneering ideas, and in psychoanalytic theory through Freud's reflections on dreams, this text finds a comprehensive interpretive framework. By relying on Wollstonecraft's foundational arguments on women's coherent potential and Freud's interpretation of dreams as domains of discourse³, this study offers a dual perspective to evaluate the visionary depth of Rokeya's utopian dream, and also focuses on the intellectual understanding of dreams in an alternative world from a feminist viewpoint. This fresh, dual-

layered theoretical framework gives this paper an original and holistic reading of *Sultana's Dream (1905)*.

Feminism, as a critical and political movement, seeks to challenge traditional notions that place women in subordinate positions. It questions the belief that man is the supreme and independent power in society and argues that man is naturally superior to women. It also exposed how patriarchy operates through law, religion, education, and literature to control women's bodies, voices, and minds. In literary studies, feminist criticism focuses on how texts present women, their condition as women, and the construction of gender roles. The central purpose of feminist theory is to challenge the patriarchy and question the gender roles to place women's agency in the centre. In *Sultana's Dream (1905)*, feminist criticism becomes a powerful tool to understand how Rokeya rejects the idea of the traditional image of the passive, silent, and submissive woman and instead presents a vision of active, powerful, and educated women who invent, govern, and lead their society. The entire structure of *Ladyland* is based on the critique of patriarchy.

Mary Wollstonecraft argued in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792)* that women are not naturally inferior to men; rather, their weakness is the result of a social system that denies them access to intellectual freedom, education, and rational development⁴. She advocated education and freedom for women so they could teach their families and fulfil the roles of mother, daughter, and sister effectively. In *Sultana's Dream (1905)*, the woman plays the role of a leader and innovator because she is educated. The central idea of Wollstonecraft's text is that strength does not entitle one to dominate. Similarly, through the metaphor of a lion, Rokeya's text shows that physical strength can never justify domination—whether in the case of men, animals, or colonisers. Female inventors, scientists and leaders embody the possibilities that patriarchy has suppressed in the real world. Therefore, Rokeya's text serves as a blueprint, demonstrating that when women get the opportunity, education, and leadership

space, society can evolve into one that is more peaceful, rational, and ethical. Mary Wollstonecraft articulated the foundations of theoretical feminism, while Rokeya transformed those ideas into a fictional demonstration. Both concluded ultimately that the empowerment of women is not only desirable but crucial for social progress, and patriarchy remains an irrational system that demands a challenge.

Psychoanalytic Dimensions of the Utopian Imagination

Psychoanalytic theory, as developed by Sigmund Freud, provides a framework for understanding how unconscious desires and repressed experiences shape human behaviour. Freud argues that dreams often function as forms of wish fulfilment, allowing suppressed thoughts to find symbolic expression. In the context of *Sultana's Dream*, this perspective becomes particularly relevant, as the narrative itself unfolds through a dream. Ladyland may thus be interpreted as a symbolic reconstruction of reality, in which the restrictions imposed on women by patriarchal society are overturned. The emphasis on knowledge, freedom, and rational control in this imagined space reflects not only a social critique but also a deeper psychological response to repression. In this sense, the dream does not merely present an alternative world; it reveals the underlying desires for agency and autonomy that remain unfulfilled in lived experience. (Freud)

In *Sultana's Dream*, Sultana inhabits a world that stands in stark contrast to reality, fulfilling her unconscious wishes and desires through the medium of a dream. This dream may also be read as an escape from patriarchal oppression. The narrative transforms repressed frustrations and anxieties into a utopian state. Consequently, the story of a dream world is only a literary manifestation of unconscious desires. Ladyland revolves around frustrations and repressed thoughts of a woman about gender oppression in this society, through wish fulfilment, which is the central component of Freudian dream theory. According to Freud, dreams often form as

“wish fulfilment”—the things that are not achievable in real life often provide an alternate space within dreams. Rokeya’s *Ladyland* is the same “wish-fulfilment” utopia. In this fictional world, women live free from restriction, purdah, and fear. The dream space satisfies the repressed psychological needs that remain unfulfilled in reality. Imagination forms a “safe outlet” for repression according to psychoanalysis. Likewise, *Ladyland* becomes a symbolic expression of women’s collective unconsciousness.

Symbolic reading plays a vital role in psychoanalytic theory. Many symbols in *Sultana’s Dream* represent unconscious desires, fears, and resistance. *Ladyland*’s “solar power” is a powerful feminist-psychoanalytical symbol. Freud connected light to awareness, clarity, and truth. *Ladyland*’s pure and peaceful environment represents that if society excludes repression from women’s lives, then the human psyche will be more balanced and creative. In *Ladyland*, women replace violence with harmony, which is a symbolic healing of repressed consciousness.

The confinement of men indoors follows the principle of Freud’s “inversion.” Imagination inverts the gender roles when repression is unbearable. This inversion of Rokeya is a psychological mechanism in which oppressed minds feel relief at the prospect of reversal. According to a psychoanalytic study, this is a “compensatory fantasy” that shows a woman who is less powerful in the real world but ultra-powerful in a fictional world. As a result, *Ladyland* is an idealised, perfect, and peaceful place because unconscious imagination creates the opposite of the real world.

Sister Sara’s reference to the trained, nonviolent lions can be read through a psychoanalytic lens. In *Ladyland*, the taming of the lion symbolically represents the transformation of violence into controlled and productive energy. Unlike the Freudian model, where repression often produces neurosis or destructive return, this utopian space redirects aggressive instincts toward creativity and social harmony. Feminist thought has long identified patriarchy with structures

of violence; by placing women in positions of authority, Rokeya imagines a social order in which power is detached from coercion and aligned with rationality and peace.

The intersection between psychoanalysis and Rokeya's vision lies in the idea of inner transformation. Ladyland is not merely an external political model but also a projection of women's latent intellectual and emotional potential. The dream framework enables the articulation of a self that remains suppressed within patriarchal reality. Through this imaginative reconstruction, Rokeya converts the experience of confinement into a therapeutic narrative of liberation, where the emergence of women's agency becomes both a psychological and a social possibility.

Conclusion

Sultana's Dream (1905) goes far beyond a simple reversal of gender roles and offers a deep consideration of the relationship between power, knowledge, and identity. In the imagined space of Ladyland, Rokeya shifts authority from physical force to education, reason, and ethical responsibility, thereby questioning the patriarchal belief that power is a natural male inheritance. Read alongside later feminist thought, the text reveals an early recognition of gender as a social arrangement rather than a biological destiny. At the same time, the dream structure allows the narrative to transform the lived experiences of restriction into a form of imaginative and psychological release. What emerges, therefore, is not an escape from reality but a critical reworking of it, shaped by the historical conditions of colonial India and by the desire for intellectual equality and collective progress. This reading highlights how Rokeya's narrative engages with both social reality and imaginative possibility.

Thus, Ladyland emerges not only as a feminist reordering of the external world but also as a symbolic recovery of women's suppressed subjectivity and creative power.

¹ Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*.

² Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.

³ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

⁴ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

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