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"Sultana's Dream": The Eco-Feminist Vision of Freedom

Md. Mominur Rahman[α] & Md. Abdul Momen Sarker[σ]

Abstract- This paper aims at connecting the relationship between feminist fantasy and Eco-feminism. One of the major traits that *Sultana's Dream* incorporates is overwhelmingly simple and precise solution to phallocentric oppression. Gendered reversal and scientific progress, in this story, have provided us with the aura of freedom envisioned by Begum Rokeya Sakhawat 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 view of harnessing the energy of nature. The gendered structure "reshaped", "recreated", "reversed" and "relocated" by the author have left us with the interpretation of the role of power in the first place.

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I. Introduction

"Sultana's Dream", written in 1905, is one of the earliest examples of feminist science fiction. It sketches the vision of a semi-secluded 'lady land' freed from any rules of men. The idea of women in charge of outside and in Geo-political affairs is one of the major agenda that Begum Rokeya boldly addressed (Zakaria). She was one of the pioneers who advocated women's freedom movement in colonial India. Born in 1880, at sixteen she married the Deputy Magistrate of Baghalpur. Her husband was quite older than of her age. Growing up in an elite family, under strict purdah system, she did not receive any institutionalized education. With the help from her brothers, who had British style education, she cultivated her own taste of education and started growing passion for the manifestation of women's freedom in India (Nagpal). *Sultana's Dream*, the utopian vision of freedom was the outcome of her self-indulged ideal of womanhood. The story is written in a very straightforward way where Rokeya tries to express her direct disgust for men in India and how they conduct their business. Rokeya published "Sultana's Dream" as a short English language story in the *Indian Ladies Magazine*. This particular publication is meant for women with 'modern' thinking in India—who are readers and writers. The story not only deals with the motive to under-rule male narrative, but in a broader sketch, deals with ecology. One of the major concerns, apart from the idea of flash-forward time traveling, the notion of juxtaposing science and nature as a means of freedom makes this story as a major "game changing idea" (Nagpal). Nature as depicted in the story manifests as the virtue, which is maneuvered by the female scientists of the story to gain control of the 'lady land'. Sultana, the elite protagonist and the narrator of the story—the stereotypical representation of rich Indian Muslim woman, well versed in the purdah system, experiences the unique journey to the lady land which also reminds us about how Alice falls in the wonderland—through the rabbit hole. The gendered structure "reshaped", "recreated", "reversed" and "relocated" by the author have left us with the interpretation of the role of power in the first place with an overwhelming question—is power a natural deal or just a constructed "real"? In the world of relational artifact, Sultana experiences the "land of garden" which is vividly a technological and political paradise created by women—for women (Nagpal). The "Lady Land" constructed for women, the 'upside down land' is the cruel criticism to "zenena" which Rokeya thinks as the unnatural state for women to be free and creative. The "Lady Land" is a confined space, which has a minimum value to the reader, but in a broader sense, the idea of exploring its essence through the flight of a dream works as a statement—a wish fulfillment. "Sultana's Dream" is an embodiment of "Ecocritical" and "Eco-feminist" celebration. The aim of this essay is to show the connection between "Ecocritical" study of nature and the 'Eco-feminist' dream of freedom in this celebrated feminist story.

The story revolves with Sultana, the protagonist/narrator of the story. She is sitting idle in her chair, thinking about the condition of Indian women. The setting of the story is quite laid back. There is a subtle tone of resemblance in the mode of storytelling. The speed of narration later gains speed when Sultana falls into a deep meditative sleep. Then she sees sister Sara. The author creates confusion with the identity of sister Sara due to Sultana's delirious state of mind. She is quite confused at the point of meeting what appears to be the different person later. The setting of the story dramatically shifts from a starry night to a well lit morning. The location of the story as well gets a new makeover because as soon the reader gets to realize what the place would be the then sister Sara pronounces it as "Lady Land". From darkness to light

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the author's idea of turning of events gets a new metaphorical meaning. The emancipation of womanhood gets a new place from mental space to the realm of a supposed "utopian" location. It is made quite obvious that Sultana trusts the unknown women as sister Sara as her trusted companions, we get to see the overwhelming innocence that Rokeya makes us read in this cynical world of distrust. One of the major things that she challenges is the 'inassociative' act of men who tend to distrust the relational value in a male and female relationship. Sultana is amazed to see the whole country as a garden. It is a sublimity that Rokeya tries to create out of Sultana's habit. It is to be mentioned that, she is used to stroll in the 'garden' with sister Sara. Though the uncanny and the supposed 'unreal' is later clarified by sister Sara—Sultana comes to know that, they are in "Lady Land", the land of women, for women and ruled by women. Sultana encounters women everywhere and becomes surprised by the fact that the outside, the gendered space which is devised by men is now occupied by women in almost every aspect. She is even teased by some of the passersby as "too timid" as men (Hossain). Then the story escalates quickly as sister Sara upon Sultana's request describes the story of the freedom of women and the origin of "Lady Land". According to sister Sara, once there were men who were in charge of the executive positions in this land. The queen, though she is the head of the state, is quite powerless in that male dominated context. As Nasrin Malik says, "it was much more than simplistic utopian thinking but a philosophically mature vision of a world where, following defeat in a crushing war, men succumb to isolation in exhaustion and disillusionment with a world dominated by brute male force"; the men as mentioned in the story are busy doing what men do best—laughing and criticizing the queen's efforts to open female only educational institute. There are establishments of new universities only for women enlightenment and mostly innovation to enhance nature's gifts. Sultana also comes to know that, so as the readers, while this sort of travel narrative unfolds its secrets of emancipation that there are a refugee problem that creates a diplomatic nightmare for the "Lady Land" and one of its neighboring countries. The refusal of handing over one asylum seeker leads these two counties to war. The war is a militaristic disaster, the enemy are a few miles closer to the capital. Everyone is thinking of losing everything that they have—mostly the pride of the queen. She is ready to commit suicide, if she is defeated. But prior to the war and the diplomatic failure, there is another significant thing happened that completely changes the course of the philosophy of the story. There are two universities in that country—mostly innovating machines that matter. One of the universities creates a way that can extract rain water and use it for harvesting. The other university gets jealous over it and makes something that can store sun- heat—to be used for later purposes. At the brink of their defeat, the principal of the later university who succeeds in harnessing sun's energy proposes to help. The queen agrees. Before she lets her professor to proceed, there is a meeting with the male members in the country. After hearing the queen's proposition, they agree to let them shut under inside the houses. According to sister Sara, they have no choices left. The principal of the university ask her students to position sun's rays with their contraption in direction towards the enemy. The sun's rays and the scoring heat blinds the vision of the enemy movement and they eventually fly away. After that nobody dares to attack them. The lady land becomes a "reality" in the dream. The next question that Sultana asks is quite surely echoing reader's "collective unconscious", "And since then your countrymen never tried to come out of the zenana?" (Hossain). The query is not left unanswered. Sister Sara explains that, though the men, who are going to be imprisoned for the rest of their lives, want to be free. Some of the police commissioners and district magistrates send word to the Queen to the effect that the military officers certainly deserve to be imprisoned for their failure; but they never neglect their duty and therefore, they should not be punished and they pray to be restored to their respective offices (Hossain)." The "punishment" that is given to the men by putting them in a complete isolation is called "Mardana" which is the mirroring of the image of "Zenenah", that exists in colonial British period and the later part of the history till present in some parts of the continent (Walsh). The physical abolition of purda has impacted the growth of its mental image—subjugation. The "Mardana" therefore stands as the representation of the embodied male seclusion from power—from center. The purdah system that, the men in the "Lady Land" get as a form of punishment, is an ever-existed form of "trouble" that has been haunted in South-East Asia, as Haque describes, the purdah practices which determine gender spaces even women basic needs like health facilities, education, and employment opportunities are underestimated. Such socio- cultural disparities are further compounded by an absence of political recognition and public policy. Thus, the combination of the visible and invisible forms of purdah, creates an interconnected web of deprivation, marginalization and denial-not only of women's rights for self improvement, but also of their roles as agents of change (304).

Sultana later comes to know about how the women conduct their business in the "Lady Land". Sister Sara says that they are an efficient work force because the country supports innovation over laid back working environment which mocks the Indian civil workers who mostly waste time in their work space. The ecocritical part of the story is quite intriguing because from Sultana's description we get to know that the whole country is a garden—an escape from the battered cities

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and ranting countryside that Hossain feels in the colonial India. The slow and powerful initiation of industrialization that is introduced by the British Raj—as Sharma explains:

Being a colonial country, she had to pay a large sum for England's industrialization scheme. India was forced to supply raw materials for triggering industrial revolution with greater rapidity in England. India was then forcibly transformed from being a country of com-bined agriculture and manufactures into an agricultural colony of British manufacturing capitalism.

Sister Sara explains that the whole country is quite concerned with the idea of ecological balance because the chief food that they eat is fruit from the gardens which raises the concern about the author's overwhelming support for the relationship between animals and the ecological balance. As mentioned in the *Beginning Theory,* Peter Barry's most celebrated work, "The ecocentered reading, by contrast focuses outside, on the house and its environs, rather than inside, on the owner and his (her) psychology"–the 'outside' has been given preference in the story as we also come to know that the country is using water extracted from the cloud to water the plants, uses flying vehicles for the mode of transport and it keeps the outside as well as the inside clean. Sultana gets to see the queen later. She travels through the state of the art transportation system—called "the air-car" (Hossain). Upon meeting the queen, as the queen sounds delighted and welcomes Sultana to her royal place. The queen talks about her views of trade with any other countries; she also points out her overwhelming disgust about trading with countries where women are kept in captivity—inside the zenanas. The queen also describes men as "lower moral'" entities. She also expresses her thoughts of greed among nations over trivial things like the Koh-i-Noor. There is an explicit tone of anti-colonial sentiment that can be found in queen's short speech. Sultana visits the famous universities and their laboratories. Finally the story ends with Sultana, who goes on another undisclosed voyage, but slips from the air-car and falls straight to her easy chair. The story ends with a sudden awakening which marks the "dream" from a Jungian perspective as– dreams reveal more than they conceal (299). They are a natural expression of our imagination and use the most straightforward language or images at our disposal; the contemplation of mythic narratives is one of the ways they connect to us (304). Sultana's dream can be seen as a manifestation of the myth of nature which as the author believes will free gender biased locale and space.

The vision Eco-feminism is a pluralism—the decentralization of power that has been blocked by men to establish patriarchal dominance (Gaard vii). The liberation of nature is one of the basic tenants of Eco-feminist movement. This particular field of theory evolved from various fields that feminist movement has always been drawn into. As Gaard elucidates, the inquiry and activism of Eco-feminism has evolved from mostly "peace movements, labor movements, women's health care, the anti-nuclear and animal liberation movements" (1). One of the major reasons that Eco-feminism evolves as an eclectic vision is not a straight forward answer. It takes a lot of time before this nature study plus women's freedom movement joins hands in 1970s, but before that Simon de Beauvoir points it out from as a conceptual movement that began in 1951 (Hope and Shiva 12). Ghhoklkp [l[plop[

"Sultana's Dream" can be considered as an elitist fiction, written for the 'modern' readers— mostly rich women with the knowledge of letters. The scope it creates along with the representation of the protagonist—Sultana experiences a dream within a dream for the author. Rokeya perhaps believes that the elite women need to be elevated first so that they can understand science and the role of nature better that the 'other' women in Indian subcontinent. The gendered space, the science and nature, has given this story a well deserved philosophical roots—the philosophy of Geo-politics and freedom. The "Lady Land" as represented to us as the polar opposite of the "male land" of colonial India which restricts women to 'purdah' and 'zenana'. Devoid of education, the women of India 'lazily' sit in their respective houses to do chores, or perhaps 'think' about the condition of womanhood as Sultana does in the story. In the story the author believes that women can truly be free when they harness the use of nature in their daily life. The "Lady Land" remains as a sharp contrast to the idea of the male-centrist "utopia" envisioned before by Thomas Moor and Francis Bacon. The story is constitutionally a pluralistic work of fiction; the author's ideal image is a concurrent moving spatial boundary of nature and women's freedom. As Virginia Woolf points out:

What is meant by "reality"? It would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable— now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now a daffodil in the sun. It lights up a group in a room and stamps some casual saying. It overwhelms one walking home beneath the stars and makes the silent world more real than the world of speech—and then there it is again in an omnibus in the uproar of Piccadilly. Sometimes, too, it seems to dwell in shapes too far away for us to discern what their nature is. But whatever it touches, it fixes and makes permanent. That is what remains over when the skin of the day has been cast into the hedge; that is what is left of past time and of our loves and hates (118).

Eco-Feminism asserts that patriarchy is quite potentially harmful to women, children and other living beings and things. It gives rise to capitalistic mode of greed driven production system—or more precisely from author's colonial perspective a medieval

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monarchical tyranny. It seeks for eradication of all forms of social injustice against women and environment. The readers can easily see the overwhelming factor that the author tries to portray while advocating the necessity of women's freedom linked with uninterrupted education (Nagpal). The role of women is of nurturer and caregiver. Material feminism tends to free women from their daily household work like cooking, washing and other traditional female domestic chores. The "Lady Land" in "Sultana's Dream" is a utopia that works in unison with science and technology in order to empower women and making self-restraint. The idea of patriarchal ideology becomes meaningless in this story. The story is the embodiment of self-aware society who leans mostly towards nature and uses it for the common good of every individual in that society, also it creates a vivid exploration of gendered pivotal society.

II. Conclusion

In "Sultana's Dream", there is a direct reversal of the gendered position of women. The lady land is a feminine space which is a harmonious place where everybody lives in perfect sync with nature. The women in the lady land roam freely in the outside, study at the university, work, innovate and most importantly broke the shackle of men in general. They treat men like lesser breeds. The isolation of men has been treated in this story as a natural thing to do. But, it took quite a while for Sultana to sync with the fact that the women in India are treated like the same way as men in "Lady Land". The vision of freedom that has been sketched by Begum Rokeya Sakhawat is a straight forward solution to freedom which Luce Irigaray thinks as an anti "Signifying economy" due to its nature towards the phallocentric gender-power nexus and through language (107). This claim has also been supported by Judith Butler in her most celebrated works, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity;* she considers, in reaction to the societal ambivalent roles that has been posed by phallocentric language, as subverting and considers women as "identical beings". The reversal of both men and women roles are mostly, in this story, reactionary actions towards organized authority and oppression of rights. The "sentimental nightmare" the name of women innovation in the story has yet to be established. But on the hind side, the author has laden a road for women's emancipation. The harnessing of science as an identity is the most game changing idea. This story is not only a feminist science fiction, but also an eco-critical answer to the men and their destructive nature.

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