

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

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6 **Abstract**

7 This paper aims at connecting the relationship between feminist fantasy and Eco - feminism.
8 One of the major traits that Sultana's Dream incorporates is overwhelmingly simple and
9 precise solution to phallocentric oppression. Gendered reversal and scientific progress, in this
10 story, have provided us with the aura of freedom envisioned by Begum Rokeya Sakhawat
11 Hossain. Representing Sultana in this story which incubates the atmosphere where
12 womanhood is fully observed in full rhythm ???" in the lady land where the story is set is the
13 embodiment of science and gendered exploration has given us a better view of harnessing the
14 energy of nature. The gendered structure ?reshaped?, ?recreated?, ?reversed? and ?relocated?
15 by the author have left us with the interpretation of the role of power in the first place.

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17 **Index terms**— eco-feminism, ecocriticism, gender politics, feminist science fiction.

18 **1 Introduction**

19 "Sultana's Dream", written in 1905, is one of the earliest examples of feminist science fiction. It sketches the vision
20 of a semi-secluded 'lady land' freed from any rules of men. The idea of women in charge of outside and in
21 Geo-political affairs is one of the major agenda that Begum Rokeya boldly addressed ??Zakaria). She was one of
22 the pioneers who advocated women's freedom movement in colonial India. Born in 1880, at sixteen she married
23 the Deputy Magistrate of Baghalpur. Her husband was quite older than of her age. Growing up in an elite
24 family, under strict purdah system, she did not receive any institutionalized education. With the help from her
25 brothers, who had British style education, she cultivated her own taste of education and started growing passion
26 for the manifestation of women's freedom in India ??Nagpal). Sultana's Dream, the utopian vision of freedom
27 was the outcome of her self-indulged ideal of womanhood. The story is written in a very straightforward way
28 where Rokeya tries to express her direct disgust for men in India and how they conduct their business. Rokeya
29 published "Sultana's Dream" as a short English language story in the Indian Ladies Magazine. This particular
30 publication is meant for women with 'modern' thinking in India-who are readers and writers. The story not only
31 deals with the motive to under-rule male narrative, but in a broader sketch, deals with ecology.

32 One of the major concerns, apart from the idea of flashforward time traveling, the notion of juxtaposing
33 science and nature as a means of freedom makes this story as a major "game changing idea" ??Nagpal). Nature
34 as depicted in the story manifests as the virtue, which is maneuvered by the female scientists of the story to
35 gain control of the 'lady land'. Sultana, the elite protagonist and the narrator of the story-the stereotypical
36 representation of rich Indian Muslim woman, well versed in the purdah system, experiences the unique journey
37 to the lady land which also reminds us about how Alice falls in the wonderland-through the rabbit hole. The
38 gendered structure "reshaped", "recreated", "reversed" and "relocated" by the author have left us with the
39 interpretation of the role of power in the first place with an overwhelming question-is power a natural deal or just
40 a constructed "real"? In the world of relational artifact, Sultana experiences the "land of garden" which is vividly
41 a technological and political paradise created by women-for women ??Nagpal). The "Lady Land" constructed for
42 women, the 'upside down land' is the cruel criticism to "zenena" which Rokeya thinks as the unnatural state for
43 women to be free and creative. The "Lady Land" is a confined space, which has a minimum value to the reader,
44 but in a broader sense, the idea of exploring its essence through the flight of a dream works as a statement-a

1 INTRODUCTION

45 wish fulfillment. "Sultana's Dream" is an embodiment of "Ecocritical" and "Ecofeminist" celebration. The aim
46 of this essay is to show the connection between "Ecocritical" study of nature and the 'Eco-feminist' dream of
47 freedom in this celebrated feminist story.

48 The story revolves with Sultana, the protagonist/narrator of the story. She is sitting idle in her chair, thinking
49 about the condition of Indian women. The setting of the story is quite laid back. There is a subtle tone of
50 resemblance in the mode of storytelling. The speed of narration later gains speed when Sultana falls into a deep
51 meditative sleep. Then she sees sister Sara. The author creates confusion with the identity of sister Sara due to
52 Sultana's delirious state of mind. She is quite confused at the point of meeting what appears to be the different
53 person later. The setting of the story dramatically shifts from a starry night to a well lit morning. The location
54 of the story as well gets a new makeover because as soon the reader gets to realize what the place would be the
55 then sister Sara pronounces it as "Lady Land". From darkness to light The emancipation of womanhood gets a
56 new place from mental space to the realm of a supposed "utopian" location. It is made quite obvious that Sultana
57 trusts the unknown women as sister Sara as her trusted companions, we get to see the overwhelming innocence
58 that Rokeya makes us read in this cynical world of distrust. One of the major things that she challenges is the
59 'inassociative' act of men who tend to distrust the relational value in a male and female relationship. Sultana is
60 amazed to see the whole country as a garden. It is a sublimity that Rokeya tries to create out of Sultana's habit.
61 It is to be mentioned that, she is used to stroll in the 'garden' with sister Sara. Though the uncanny and the
62 supposed 'unreal' is later clarified by sister Sara-Sultana comes to know that, they are in "Lady Land", the land
63 of women, for women and ruled by women. Sultana encounters women everywhere and becomes surprised by the
64 fact that the outside, the gendered space which is devised by men is now occupied by women in almost every
65 aspect. She is even teased by some of the passersby as "too timid" as men ??Hossain). Then the story escalates
66 quickly as sister Sara upon Sultana's request describes the story of the freedom of women and the origin of "Lady
67 Land". According to sister Sara, once there were men who were in charge of the executive positions in this land.
68 The queen, though she is the head of the state, is quite powerless in that male dominated context. As Nasrin Malik
69 says, "it was much more than simplistic utopian thinking but a philosophically mature vision of a world where,
70 following defeat in a crushing war, men succumb to isolation in exhaustion and disillusionment with a world
71 dominated by brute male force"; the men as mentioned in the story are busy doing what men do best-laughing
72 and criticizing the queen's efforts to open female only educational institute. There are establishments of new
73 universities only for women enlightenment and mostly innovation to enhance nature's gifts. Sultana also comes to
74 know that, so as the readers, while this sort of travel narrative unfolds its secrets of emancipation that there are
75 a refugee problem that creates a diplomatic nightmare for the "Lady Land" and one of its neighboring countries.
76 The refusal of handing over one asylum seeker leads these two counties to war. The war is a militaristic disaster,
77 the enemy are a few miles closer to the capital. Everyone is thinking of losing everything that they have-mostly
78 the pride of the queen. She is ready to commit suicide, if she is defeated. But prior to the war and the diplomatic
79 failure, there is another significant thing happened that completely changes the course of the philosophy of the
80 story. There are two universities in that country-mostly innovating machines that matter. One of the universities
81 creates a way that can extract rain water and use it for harvesting. The other university gets jealous over it
82 and makes something that can store sun-heat-to be used for later purposes. At the brink of their defeat, the
83 principal of the later university who succeeds in harnessing sun's energy proposes to help. The queen agrees.
84 Before she lets her professor to proceed, there is a meeting with the male members in the country. After hearing
85 the queen's proposition, they agree to let them shut under inside the houses. According to sister Sara, they have
86 no choices left. The principal of the university ask her students to position sun's rays with their contraption in
87 direction towards the enemy. The sun's rays and the scoring heat blinds the vision of the enemy movement and
88 they eventually fly away. After that nobody dares to attack them. The lady land becomes a "reality" in the
89 dream. The next question that Sultana asks is quite surely echoing reader's "collective unconscious", "And since
90 then your countrymen never tried to come out of the zenana?" ??Hossain). The query is not left unanswered.
91 Sister Sara explains that, though the men, who are going to be imprisoned for the rest of their lives, want to
92 be free. Some of the police commissioners and district magistrates send word to the Queen to the effect that
93 the military officers certainly deserve to be imprisoned for their failure; but they never neglect their duty and
94 therefore, they should not be punished and they pray to be restored to their respective offices ??Hossain)." The
95 "punishment" that is given to the men by putting them in a complete isolation is called "Mardana" which is
96 the mirroring of the image of "Zenenah", that exists in colonial British period and the later part of the history
97 till present in some parts of the continent ??Walsh). The physical abolition of purda has impacted the growth
98 of its mental imagesubjugation. The "Mardana" therefore stands as the representation of the embodied male
99 seclusion from power-center. The purdah system that, the men in the "Lady Land" get as a form of
100 punishment, is an everexisted form of "trouble" that has been haunted in South-East Asia, as Haque describes,
101 the purdah practices which determine gender spaces even women basic needs like health facilities, education,
102 and employment opportunities are underestimated. Such socio-cultural disparities are further compounded by
103 an absence of political recognition and public policy. Thus, the combination of the visible and invisible forms of
104 purdah, creates an interconnected web of deprivation, marginalization and denial-not only of women's rights for
105 self improvement, but also of their roles as agents of change (304).

106 Sultana later comes to know about how the women conduct their business in the "Lady Land". Sister Sara says
107 that they are an efficient work force because the country supports innovation over laid back working environment

108 which mocks the Indian civil workers who mostly waste time in their work space. The ecocritical part of the
109 story is quite intriguing because from Sultana's description we get to know that the whole country is a garden-an
110 escape from the battered cities and ranting countryside that Hossain feels in the colonial India. The slow and
111 powerful initiation of industrialization that is introduced by the British Raj-as Sharma explains:

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

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

136 The vision Eco-feminism is a pluralism-the decentralization of power that has been blocked by men to establish
137 patriarchal dominance ??Gaard vi). The liberation of nature is one of the basic tenants of Ecofeminist movement.
138 This particular field of theory evolved from various fields that feminist movement has always been drawn into.
139 As Gaard elucidates, the inquiry and activism of Eco-feminism has evolved from mostly "peace movements,
140 labor movements, women's health care, the anti-nuclear and animal liberation movements" (1). One of the major
141 reasons that Ecofeminism evolves as an eclectic vision is not a straight forward answer. It takes a lot of time before
142 this nature study plus women's freedom movement joins hands in 1970s, but before that Simon de Beauvoir points
143 it out from as a conceptual movement that began in 1951 ??Hope and Shiva 12). Ghhoklkp [l[plop["Sultana's
144 Dream" can be considered as an elitist fiction, written for the 'modern' readers-mostly rich women with the
145 knowledge of letters. The scope it creates along with the representation of the protagonist-Sultana experiences a
146 dream within a dream for the author. Rokeya perhaps believes that the elite women need to be elevated first so
147 that they can understand science and the role of nature better than the 'other' women in Indian subcontinent. The
148 gendered space, the science and nature, has given this story a well deserved philosophical roots-the philosophy
149 of Geo-politics and freedom. The "Lady Land" as represented to us as the polar opposite of the "male land" of
150 colonial India which restricts women to 'purdah' and 'zenana'. Devoid of education, the women of India 'lazily'
151 sit in their respective houses to do chores, or perhaps 'think' about the condition of womanhood as Sultana
152 does in the story. In the story the author believes that women can truly be free when they harness the use of
153 nature in their daily life. The "Lady Land" remains as a sharp contrast to the idea of the male-centrist "utopia"
154 envisioned before by Thomas Moor and Francis Bacon. The story is constitutionally a pluralistic work of fiction;
155 the author's ideal image is a concurrent moving spatial boundary of nature and women's freedom. As Virginia
156 Woolf points out:

157 What is meant by "reality"? It would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable-now to be found
158 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
159 room and stamps some casual saying. It overwhelms one walking home beneath the stars and makes the silent
160 world more real than the world of speech-and then there it is again in an omnibus in the uproar of Piccadilly.
161 Sometimes, too, it seems to dwell in shapes too far away for us to discern what their nature is. But whatever it
162 touches, it fixes and makes permanent. That is what remains over when the skin of the day has been cast into
163 the hedge; that is what is left of past time and of our loves and hates (118).

164 Eco-Feminism asserts that patriarchy is quite potentially harmful to women, children and other living beings
165 and things. It gives rise to capitalistic mode of greed driven production system-or more precisely from author's
166 colonial perspective a medieval monarchical tyranny. It seeks for eradication of all forms of social injustice against
167 women and environment. The readers can easily see the overwhelming factor that the author tries to portray
168 while advocating the necessity of women's freedom linked with uninterrupted education ??Nagpal). The role of
169 women is of nurturer and caregiver. Material feminism tends to free women from their daily household work
170 like cooking, washing and other traditional female domestic chores. The "Lady Land" in "Sultana's Dream" is a

171 utopia that works in unison with science and technology in order to empower women and making self-restraint.
172 The idea of patriarchal ideology becomes meaningless in this story. The story is the embodiment of self-aware
173 society who leans mostly towards nature and uses it for the common good of every individual in that society,
174 also it creates a vivid exploration of gendered pivotal society.

175 2 II.

176 3 Conclusion

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

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