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Research Paper

Revisiting Begum Rokeya's World: A Comprehensive Study on *Sultana's Dream*

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Abstract

Dreaming implies the presence of stern reality and yearning for the desired world. *Sultana's Dream* (1905) by Begum Rokeya is investigative of society. She, as a seer, dreamt about a society filled with meritocracy, harmony and sense of humanity. Sultana's Dream is the upshot of her hunger for awakening women from their dormant state for women's development which certainly confers strength on today's women. This study examines Begum Rokeya as a visionary who craves women's equality along with men through her utopian world portrayed in Sultana's Dream. By exemplifying the lady-land in this utopian world through universal female education, she makes it obvious that women can be the productive cultivator of their mind and can implement or invent the ways of life; safe and sound, and free from all maladies of the society.

Keywords

Dream, lady-land, feminism, education, humanity

1. Introduction

Begum Rokeya (1880-1932) was a leading Bengali feminist writer and social activist. Dealing with any of her works is a delicate and demanding task because all of her works spotlight the characteristic of the mentality she conceives for the development of women through touchstone of education. She envisages a long-cherished dream for the mental and spiritual development of the women and her *Sultana's Dream* (1905) is the exemplification of that dream. In spite of being a short imaginary work, it actually has a complete guideline of pragmatic instructions. Her reformist views for women are grounded on- education, self-development, creativity, ambition and mental strength. These concepts have been explained on the basis of scientific education, economic emancipation and open exercise of intellects; breaking all conventionalized ideas of a religion and accepting a liberal religion based on love and truth. Moreover, she projects a society where biological difference does not affect social position, rather all male and female are to be considered equally and importantly as humans.

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It is true that though women today have achieved many of Rokeya's dreams, still complete emancipation of women, which was the dreams behind all dreams of Rokeya, has yet to come. Looking deep into the term "complete emancipation" which can largely be divided into two parts called 'physical' and 'psychological', it appears that today's women are emancipated of the former yet they are on the very beginning stage of the latter. In present day, ingenious women dream about perfect life style but it is far more different than Rokeya. Coming out along with men, they are facing new kind of challenge. They are not getting the liberty of mental strength; everywhere they have to face the reality of being a woman, so, Rokeya's dream is acquiring its enlarged form to the twenty first century women. The study

The women question interweaves numerous things which are always darkened by the male dictators of the society ages after ages. Human reproduction, women's position at work, labor division at home and at work, the institution named matrimony-family all are coupled with male members of the society. Beginning from the rules of socio-political evaluation, religious decrees are interconnected for legalizing the inferior state of the women. In history when the inferior situation of women started, is extremely controversial. Religions like Christian, Islam always try to prove that this world is started with the evil doing of the woman who ate fruit of knowledge (Eve) so the religious decree is that woman must be guided and controlled by the man. According to the origin of ancient religious state coherent rules are made concerning that women are weak, inferior and dangerous. The recent sentiment on the subject of women is the unbroken thread of that ancient patriarchy society. The story of Adam and Eve is not the new area to think, many define it in many ways. "Many years ago, about one hundred years ago in our extremely fettered society a woman in veil 'Aborodhbasini' but spiritually free, in her determined writing raised her voice against it. *The Fruit of Knowledge* of Begum Rokeya is indeed the rewriting of the story of Adam and Eve; it is the marvelous upshot to observe the world through the eye of a socially disillusioned woman." (Trans. by author, (qtd in Muhammad, 2005, 17-18). Though from French Revolution the question of women takes its firm ground, before this revolution some asserted the right of education and the human right for women (Exploring the French Revolution, 2013). Therefore, as far as history of women question is concerned 17th century can be the season when illuminated thinkers tried to implant the seed of women's privileges. In 1645 Mary Cappe wrote "the time is coming when not only man but woman will lead" (Trans by author, qtd in Muhammad, 2005, 21).

Among many writers of the Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) published the most influential works on the subject of women's role in society. In his book *Emile* (1762), he described his vision of an ideal education for women but they should not endeavor to take active positions outside the home. Rousseau's writings on this subject electrified his audience, both male and female. Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97) presented the first major theoretical exploration of gender discrimination in her *A Vindication of the Right of Women* (1792). In it she opposes to accept that women are weak and inferior to man. Here she assaults male thinker like Jean-Jacques Rousseau. By reinstating her judgment from biological view of gender to social, Wollstonecraft, as a first thinker, proposes that gender roles are not natural but social. Margaret Fuller activist and writer of USA in her *Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) presented a parallel view with Wollstonecraft. John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor stood for women. *The Subjection of Women* (1869) by Mill and *Enfranchisement of Women* (1851) by Taylor are two great publications on the topic of women's liberation. In 19th century voice for women was augmented by various writers from different corner of the world who raised their voice for women. Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen's (1828-1906) *A Doll's House* (1879), Isabel Archer's *Portrait of a Lady* (1881), Henry Arthur Jones's (1851-1929) *The Case of Rebellious Susan* (1894) and George Bernard Shaw's (1856-1950) controversial *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893) and *Candida* (1898) are the works

where the writers stipulate the women's rights and emancipation. Nayar (2011) defines feminism as

> *"both a political stance and a theory that focuses on gender as a subject of analysis when reading cultural practices and as a platform to demand equality, rights and justice. Feminism's key assumption is that gender roles are pre-determined and the woman is trained to fit into those roles" (83).*

Begum Rokeya is one of the greatest writers and activists who in this undivided Bengal first thought about Muslim women, in point of fact women as whole. No writer sooner than Rokeya had been so informative in his or her art to resolve the gender prejudiced social, cultural and political set-backs in Bengal. As an active member of the society she takes up arms through her art. She lashes out against societal ills in blatant terms, employing language, satire and utopia. Rokeya is greatly irked and disillusioned by social circumstances regarding women of her time and thus, utilizes her art as an apparatus of social criticism and social engineering.

2. An Account of *Sultana's Dream*

Begum Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* stands for her vision about women's improvement as it is a universally accepted topic, a comparative study of the present situation of women and the condition of the time of the author can be a good technique to justify how much successful she is as a futurist. Rokeya being a first Muslim feminist of Bengal Renaissance and education crusader earned many critics' attention and she is studied with a great enthusiasm by the feminists specially. Critics are most interested to study about her life through the illumination of her writing as in Abdul Mannan Syed's book *Begum Rokeya*, we get a clear portrayal of her life. Although *Sultana's Dream*'s revelation as the machinery of women's liberation is not researched as vast extent comparing with present world's women, this topic is touched and explored briefly by many in their writing. Bagchi (2005) scrutinizes it as a dream creation because of the story which does not match the time when the writer lived. She says: "*Sultana's Dream* is concise and generically structured as a dream vision. Here, the utopian imagination is light, fresh and delightfully witty." (Hossain, xix). He actually clarifies the theme Rokeya deals with in *Sultana's Dream*. In *Sultana's Dream*, a feminist utopia, Rokeya takes a leap forward to show what might happen in future when the playing field is more even for women". (qtd. in Quayum, 2012). He (Quayam, 2012) further observes her "As a devout and practicing Muslim woman, Rokeya was determined to improve the social, cultural, economic and educational condition of Muslim woman in early twentieth century Bengal". Quayum (2012) states about her success as a dreamer saying that-

> *"This multi-pronged approach to assist and uplifts the condition of Bengali/Indian women, and bring them a better and brighter future through giving them education and an organizational structure, was what has made Rokeya an extraordinary figure in the annals of Bengali/Indian literature and culture."*

Great contemporary of Rokeya "Mohitlal Majumdar (1888-1952), once described her as the embodiment of the soul and conscience of her age." (Quayum, 2012). Her biographer and close associate, Shamsun Nahar Mahmud (1908-64) dubbed her a "spider mother," who sacrificed her life to nurture future generations of Bengali women, and added,

> *"The fate of the Bengali Muslim women has changed radically within the space of half a century, and there is no way to deny that this benevolent woman played the most significant role behind it" (Quayum, 2012).*

The faculty of her intelligence always tortured to think about her own race, it was also because of the condition she survived in. Indisputably, her utmost craving was to fortify women of her time, but her universality here in the point that she aspirates that one-day women will wake up and will demand their equal rights along with men and in every sector, they will stroll with a grasp of fresh

air. *Sultana's Dream* is the triumphant of that yearning. Passing hundred years and breathing the air of twenty first century, question comes naturally that how much we have achieved of that dream.

Sultana's Dream noticeably states two faced ideas: one is the condition the woman undergoing that time and the second one is the alternative of that one woman can accomplish. By the two characters Sultana and Sister Sara, the author demonstrates these schemes. Writer's lustrous portrayal of the male subjugated society of 19th century through the character Sultana is perceptibly a real picture of her time which she had to go through. In 21st century many of these things have changed. Men's mentality toward women and women's corresponding thinking of that mindset is clarified through the interrogation between two characters: Sultana and Sister Sara.

Throwing couple of questions to Sultana, Sara unmasks her as a typical woman of 19th century. Sara sadly states that: "But dear Sultana, how unfair it is to shut in the harmless women and let loose the men" (Hossain, 2005, p.5) Very easily Sultana interrogates: "Why?" Even she explains the reason of staying into 'zanana': "It is not safe for us to come out of the zenana, as we are naturally weak" (5). It is the family teaching for women of that time. Woman has to maintain "purdah" from childhood. Author herself is the burning example of her time.

> *"I had to maintain purdah even at the age of five" (Translated by the author and quoted in Syed 19 author's translation).*

Though the 'purdah' system is not so much strict like current days, the mentality is approximately on the stage that women are naturally weak. About 'purdah', Muhammad (2005) says that-

> *"Though these concepts are not abolished from our society today, the acceptability is not the same" (Qtd. in Muhammad, 2005: 131 author's translation)*

Twenty first century women are observably enjoying the freedom of many things but the tension of the family member like the same that girls are feeble.

In response to Sara's rhetoric question "How can you trust those untrained men out of doors?" (Hossain 2005, p.5), Sultana reveals the patriarchal society by some sturdy words "We have no hand or voice in the management of our social affairs. In India man is lord and master. He has taken to himself all powers and privileges and shut up the women in the zenana" (5) Here in these words Rokeya's disappointed breath is understandable because she wants that women should not be treated like that. Truly enough that women are not treated similar in different times. Men's mastery over women is still apparent. Man, always tries to prove their supremacy over woman. Unlike Rokeya, today's women are getting the voice and hand to manage the social affairs but men's thinking is the same: master and lord.

Many feminists think about women in different ways, but their main point is invariable: the liberty of the women. Rokeya's claim of the emancipation for women is different here, she covets that first of all women must awake from themselves; they must respect their duty towards themselves. It is important to make it clear that great Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen emphasizes the same thing in his play *A Doll's House* that women should be self-respective because of the duty they have to themselves. The protagonist Nora says to her husband-

> *"I have other duties equally sacred… My duties towards myself" (Ibsen, 2009, p.167)*

Rokeya here in the story states likewise through the character Sara that "You have neglected the duty you owe to yourselves and you have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interests" (5) Because of the proclaimed concept by men about woman, Sultana says that they let themselves shut up because men are stronger than women. Rokeya is speaking to those women who do not protest against the society where they have no right, where they cannot even think about themselves. It is factual that women in a small proportion gave ear to her crying; today's women are developing themselves all the way Rokeya wishes for. Feminists, activists and reformers place her as a ground-breaker of their desire. Nevertheless, women are facing

innumerable difficulties to get that. Anu Muhammad argues that "Developing being a person, a woman has to face two sided obstacles, firstly: obstacle from the side of the man, many women's irresistible love to be inferior is the second one" (Muhammad, 2005, p.132). The women of current days are going through these problems; their foremost aim is to surmount these predicaments.

3. Representation of 19th Century Women

All the way through Sultana's surroundings Rokeya delineates an emblematic woman of 19th century. She depicts both the oppressor and oppressed. Her skillful argument against the tormentor gives evidence that she is nurturing a dream to get out of it. In all the cases of men's superiority over women like "men are stronger than women", "women are naturally weak", "men's brains are bigger" she does not deny these rather realistically she disputes about these matter and proves that such worthless preeminence is created by men only to authorize over women and Sultana is convinced by Sara's talent of it. At the same way the women of 21st century is fully swayed by the blow of Rokeya but so many limitations are yet to be fulfilled.

The background story of Sara's country is nothing but the forward ambition for the country of Sultana (Rokeya's country). When children were fantasized by the story about a princess who was captured by the evil person and rescued by a prince, and after that they are married happily; Rokeya, living at that time told a story which is a science fiction of a "lady-land". She does not like to overpower the evil person by a prince and his warriors but by the intellectual ladies. Both the evil person of Sara's country and the neighboring country are overcome by one stone: education.

In October 1909, Rokeya set the first school for girls in great Bengal, at that time to this woman's mind what dreams can come than these that all the women in her country will be educated, girls' schools will be founded and supported by the government. Education will spread far and wide among women. And early marriage also will be stopped. No woman will be allowed to marry before she is twenty-one.

"The educational institution grew so rapidly over the years that by the time of her death in 1932 it had become a full-fledged high school where seventy-five per cent of the students passed the matriculation examination. In 1935, the school began to receive government grants. Today, it is a thriving government-funded institution and the most enduring testimony to Rokeya's vision and competence as an educationist" (Hossain, ix)

Available educational institutes are established by the government and non-government organization and education for girls is free up to the Intermediate Level. In Rokeya's time girls were within the age of 16 and it started from 5 years old. That early marriage will be eliminated from the society is claimed by her. But it is regretfully true that passing hundred years of her vision Bangladesh has one of the world's highest rates of early marriage. According to UNICEF (2011) figures, 66% of Bangladeshi girls are married before the age of 18 and approximately a third of women aged 20 to 24 are married by the age of 15, whereas she wants that no girl will be allowed to get married before 21, still girls are married before 18 although the official age of girls' marriage in Bangladesh is 18. Today's women's thinking about marriage is similar to that of Rokeya.

4. Comprehension of 'Dream'

In her dream land she carries out the cherished vision. Sister Sara's country women within the same seclusion of 'purdah' system established two separate universities where men were not permissible to admit because of their 'purdah'. No doubt that Rokeya shows enthusiasm for science and inventions because the whole world is enjoying the consequences of industrial

revolution. Her dreaming about women's scientific education is although a very advanced idea; 21st century women are still at the inaugurating stages of it especially the women of subcontinent.
The general consideration about the brainpower of a woman is that she has less intelligence than a man. They can only quarrel with each other. Rokeya's clear statement is that it is not true and she yearns that one-day women will prove it and in *Sultana's Dream* she accomplishes the dream. Actually, today's women prove that it is not the matter of man's brain or woman's, if proper nurture is given anyone's brain can be an asset of the world. Even it is proved in our country that along with man, woman can reach at the top of the Mount Everest. The idea washes out those women are "naturally weak".
Is it dreamt by Rokeya that for the development of the women reversal rule is needed? No, it is the system which makes her to think like that. Here in the story when Sister Sara's countrymen are defeated by the enemy the women wished to defeat the enemies but their condition was that "before we go out the men must enter the zenana" (Hosaain 10) Rokeya makes it clear that for the sake of 'purdah' men will go to zenana. The queen of her ideal country does not wait to hit the iron while it is burning. She never allows men to come out of the 'zenana' because they think that women's brain is good for nothing and to them any kind of invention by the women is the "sentimental nightmare" (Hossain 8). It is also because that if she permits them to go out, the women have to go to their secluded stage as women must maintain their 'purdah'. So, through the rule reversal process Rokeya states that for any cost women need the freedom to study, to invent, and to participate in social management and in a whole the acknowledgement that like men they can do anything.
Religious idea is the secular one to Rokeya. When Sister Sara is asked about the religion, she does not mention any religion. Rokeya's bitter experience about religion whether it is Islam, Hinduism or Christianity gives the mind to think that religion must be based on love and truth. Therefore, there will be difference among the people of a country. The principles of a country are given in the story. As her dream land is free from all evil's women are not confined into four walls. The queen says, "no trade was possible with countries where the women were kept in the zenanas and so unable to come and trade with us" (14) "We do not fight for piece of diamond though it may be a thousand-fold brighter than the Koh-i-Noor, nor do we grudge a ruler his peacock throne. We dive deep into the ocean of knowledge and try to find out the precious gems, which Nature has kept in store for us. We enjoy Nature's gifts as much as we can." (14). So, Rokeya's dreams express many folded dreams about the betterment of the women and of the country and today's women are going through these dreams though they are going through with many difficulties.

5. Conclusion

The scrutinizing overview of Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* offers us a wide variety of sensitivity on the area of female's condition of her time and today's achievement in comparison with that visualization. Her journey to the "Lady land" is nothing but the picture the state she wishes. It is not merely journey to a land through satire and fun; rather it is the image of a soul who represents millions of souls. Everyone in this human society is equally important no progress is possible by keeping one side ignorant and captive. The deep insight of the fiction suggests that Rokeya gives importance to human's brainpower and to her human resource is the best power of a country. As a human woman must have the right to entry to all facilities of civilization so that they can prove their value and participate with others to verify their mental power. Today we have the field, now enough support and cooperation is needed to uplift as asset of the country. Finally, Rokeya does not dream in such a way that it is not reasonable rather perfect for the undeveloped women of our country.

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