

## Teaching Sultana's Dream as a Feminist Utopia to Undergraduates

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### Abstract

The paper would attempt to negotiate the interstices between theory and pedagogical practice in dissemination of feminist thought and the everyday performance of gender roles through the short story Sultana's Dream. The contents of this story open up discussions on Utopian visions and their plausibility along with discourses on dystopias. The search for or dream of Utopia reflect about a dystopian reality. The imagined Utopia for women possibly creates an alternate reality in the realm of fantasy which then is open to critique in the classroom. The text is discussed within the context of a Generic Elective course Contemporary India Women and Empowerment taught to non English Honours students who are from diverse disciplines. The challenge is to take them through the textual play with ideas and discourses on gender equality, normative behaviour and the feasibility of the Utopian vision.

**Keywords:** Gender, pedagogy,Utopia, Feminism, Patriarchy

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the short story Sultana's Dream. The contents of this story open up discussions on Utopian visions and their plausibility along with discourses on dystopias. The search for or dream of Utopia reflect about a dystopian reality. The imagined Utopia for women possibly creates an alternate reality in the realm of fantasy which then is open to critique in the classroom. The text is discussed within the context of a Generic Elective course Contemporary India Women and Empowerment taught to non English Honours students who are from diverse disciplines. The challenge is to take them through the textual play with ideas and discourses on gender equality, normative behaviour and the feasibility of the Utopian vision.

The GE course objective is to engage with representations of women, femininities, gender -parity and power. The aim is to make non-English literature students develop a sense of how discourses of gender shape our everyday lives, experiences and choices. A large variety of theoretical as well as literary material is used to teach them about the socially constructed nature of gender. The objective is to help them read, perceive, understand, interpret, and intervene ethically on the subject. The course introduces the students to the difference between Sex and Gender, concept of patriarchy, gender stereotypes, femininity and masculinity. The attempt is to make them realize that gender is all pervasive and to sensitize them to observe that it is operational in every sphere of their lives. The given accepted normative and contestations by feminists and theorists are also discussed.

The course charts the manner in which gender is socially constructed within patriarchy and the creation of stereotypes of the masculine and feminine . It introduces the students to terms such as patriarchy, masculinity and femininity and their impact on the position of women. Patriarchy is one of the basic concepts in the study of gender and helps the students to understand other concepts which impact women's lives. Patriarchy literally means the rule of the father or patriarch and generally refers to male domination and the hierarchical power structures by which men dominate women. It manifests itself through customary practices , social norms and traditions which control a woman's life, behaviour, social choices and aspirations. Patriarchy attempts to control a woman's sphere of activity through regulation and even violence thus suppressing her access to justice and equality.

Many social theorists believe that in the evolution of human society the sexes were initially equal and Patriarchy emerged gradually with the growth of concepts like family,

property, private ownership and division of labour among the sexes. Women were gradually confined to the domestic sphere while men had exclusive access to the public domain. Men gradually began to control not only women's productive output inside the home but also the labour they undertook outside the home. This control was exercised by limiting their mobility, access to family property and economic independence. The family often became the means of perpetuating and disseminating discrimination and the power structure existing within the family was a reflection of the socio-political order prevailing outside.

Biology also plays a significant part in determining the role and position of women in society. Patriarchy strictly divided the roles of men and women and as child bearers women were assigned the task of nurturing children and were relegated to the background as the weaker sex. Under patriarchy men also controlled the sexual and reproductive capacities of women. For instance in many traditional societies women were not permitted to determine the number of children they bear. Within patriarchy control over women's reproductive power is often institutionalized through religious practices and state policies.

Feminists assert that gender was in fact a social construction and can be re-worked. Inequality of the sexes, which is considered to be a given, can also be challenged and debated. Feminist critical theory questions prevalent constructions of gender and insists that it should be used as one of the necessary parameters for analyzing and understanding social reality. The text 'Sultana's Dream' enables us to speak about issues of social construction of gender and domains of influence of men and women. It uses the device of dream and fantasy to speak about gender discrimination, inequality, violence and imagines an alternative world- a feminist utopia where men willingly retire from the public sphere into the domestic domain of the 'Mardana'. It discusses the division of work between men and women, the feminine and masculine domains, the private and the public, the domestic and the outside sphere of action. Sister Sarah mentions that in Sultana's world women are associated with home, hearth, chastity, purity, marriage, motherhood etc. The different role models for both genders are generalized, universalized through socialization at home and community and the ideological, religious, educational, cultural and social conditioning of boys and girls creates habits of the mind and consciousness development is in tune with these constructions and frameworks one is brought up within.

The text also highlights the interface between class, gender, religion and ethnicity. The dream of a Utopia indicates present problems. Sultana's Dream contests paradigms of gender created by a patriarchal discourse in general and specifically within upper class Muslim society but is not restricted to it alone. Sultana and the Christian governess in the dream/ fantasy help to break this too easy identification and create the link between the specific and the general, the Muslim women and the women in general.

Rokeya Sakhawat Hosain, the author of 'Sultana's dream' was a social activist and a pioneer in the field of feminist activism in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal. She was born into a Bengali Muslim family of Zamindars from Pairaband which is in present day Bangladesh. At the age of sixteen Rokeya was married to Khan Bahadur Shekhawat Hosain who was a deputy magistrate in Bhagalpur, Bihar. Her husband encouraged her interest in writing and it was during his lifetime that she established herself as a bold and pioneering writer.

Rokeya was concerned about women's education. In 1909 she established a school for girls in Bhagalpur. Later, when she was forced to leave Bhagalpur she set up the school again in Calcutta in 1910. Rokeya was an iconoclast who challenged accepted norms of patriarchy in her essays, which appeared in periodicals read by educated Hindus and Muslims. She fearlessly exposed the injustice and oppressive strategies of patriarchy. She also drew attention to their impact upon women who internalized these beliefs and value systems thus helping to perpetuate them. She was ahead of her times in promoting skill based vocational training to help women achieve financial security. Many of her practical experiences in these fields are reflected in her fictional writings.

The imagined Utopia of Sultana's Dream suggests that the real world for women is dystopic. Rokeya plays with these notions of the real, fantasy, probable and believable through Lady Land. The narrator dreams of a world where there is a reversal of gender roles. It is significant that just before dozing off she has been thinking of "the condition of Indian womanhood"(p.4), a concern which apparently impacts the content of her dream. She finds herself in a beautiful land filled with gardens and imbued with the beauty of nature. However, nature here is not in its wild state, it has been nurtured and harnessed to create a harmoniously balanced world.

Sultana is escorted into this dream world by her friend Sister Sara who bridges the worlds of reality and dream. The upper class Muslim narrator discovers a land where commonly held gender roles are inverted. Initially she continues to be constrained by the

value systems of her own world and feels hesitant to walk around without the purdah. Her sense of discomfort is reinforced by the fact that her timidity and shyness is seen as a male characteristic by the female inhabitants of this land.

In this world women are responsible for governance, politics and scientific enquiry which are generally considered to be the domain of men. Her escort informs Sultana that Ladyland is free from 'sin and harm and virtue herself reigns here' thus aligning femininity with ethics and morality. Women have been forced to take over the running of their realm due to the excessive militarism and general mismanagement of affairs by men who are schooled in the code of machismo. Men, who are normally associated with rationality and logic are now indicted for their lack of reason and inability to control their animal instincts. Therefore, in Lady land it is the men who have been placed in seclusion in the *mardana*, by the women administrators. Significantly the men are confined only after they have demonstrated their incompetence whereas women in the real world are kept in seclusion for no fault of theirs but merely in order to perpetuate male dominance.

Rokeya uses the fantasy, futuristic, Sci-fi framework to overturn all patriarchal tropes and critique them. For instance Sultana's Dream critiques militarism, war-mongering, violence, misuse of science and technology and power. The 'Zanana' has become the 'Mardana', the confined space for men but not completely. Women continue to pride themselves on their creative nurturing roles, gardening, embroidery, cooking, things requiring finesse, care and patience. Men on the other hand are depicted as failures, inadequate, inept and time wasters. They are like predatory animals unable to control their urges or their sexual drive which makes them run amok. They therefore need to be incarcerated as zoo animals and are restrained inside the domestic sphere. The story debunks the given notions of gender divide and male superiority. The existing world for upper class women as depicted in the story is about fear of imminent violence, the need to be chaperoned and completely dependent on male support. When Sultana begins the journey, she is diffident and has no agency. She seems to be leading a life of leisure. The dream world and the fantasy creates an imaginary alternative and this suggests that the agent of change or/transition is actually the mind or consciousness.

The female guide sister Sarah deconstructs patriarchal myths and makes the complacent Sultana realize that the perfect life for women as imagined or constructed and codified by men is not perfect and ideal in reality and actuality. Sister Sarah makes her realize that the restrictions imposed on women are unnecessary and metaphorically and literally cage them inside the Jenana and create the dystopic reality which is projected as an ideal world for

women by men and patriarchy. The ideal woman is a creation of patriarchal discourse for male comfort. The real world of men and women has different rules for each gender and functions at the cost of the freedom and agency of the other. The real world 'imagines and images' women in a particular manner as per male fantasy and implicates women by socializing and training them to believe this as their destiny or ideal self. This ideal leads to compromised, self-effacing, deluded restrictive lives that can be seen as dystopic. On the other hand, the world sister Sarah leads Sultana into through her dream can be seen as a symbol of an unconscious, subconscious desire for sisterhood among women of different faith, bridging gaps created by religion through gender solidarity.

Sarah's world is imagined as a feminist utopia, a safe place for women clearly implicating the real world of Sultana as a dystopia for women. Lady Land is a beautiful land filled with gardens and imbued with the beauty of nature. Nature here is not in its wild state, it has been tamed and harnessed to create a harmoniously balanced world. In Ladyland nature is harnessed in a viable manner, a very interesting example of which is the use of solar energy and aerial transportation. Even the kitchens are spotless and use sustainable sources of energy. Thus, women intelligently harness the power of nature both in the public and the private domains.

In this world it is the women who are the enabling agents in both spheres reducing the men almost to redundancy. There is an interesting conversation between Sister Sara and Sultana in which the former informs her that "We shut our men indoors ..."p5. Sultana finds this amusing and observes, 'Just as we are kept in the zenana?'p5. Sara responds, 'But dear Sultana how unfair it is to shut in the harmless women and let loose the men.' In a telling indictment of the male gender and its inability to control its desires and emotions Sara adds that women are not safe, 'so long as there are men about the streets, nor is it so when a wild animal enters a market place.' Further, she indirectly accuses men, belonging to Sultana's world, of shutting up women indoors without any reason and points out sarcastically, 'Men, who do or at least are capable of doing no end of mischief are let loose and the innocent women shut up in the zenana. How can you trust those untrained men out of doors!' In Ladyland the patriarchal system of segregation is cleverly used by women to make the men retreat quite docilely into the zenana leaving the women free to occupy public space. Thus the women use rules and regulations devised by men to confine them against the men themselves.

Men are socialized into accepting a subservient role and incarcerating the 'violent' men also frees Ladyland from crime and the need for a police machinery.

Sara also accuses women of Sultana's world of neglecting the duty they owe themselves. Sara suggests that while women are physically weak they are naturally superior to men intellectually and therefore should be in control. Their feminine skills which are generally denigrated as being unimportant by patriarchy are celebrated in this world. In Ladyland men are cloistered but not entrusted with any feminine work such as embroidery which requires skill and patience. While patriarchy traditionally assigns the sphere of science and technology to men, in Ladyland it is women who are at the forefront of these domains. They use science creatively and constructively unlike men who are ultimately equated with destructive energy.

It is interesting that this feminist utopia has a patriarchal past which it has been able to overthrow. Militarism is, in a sense, the final frontier of male machismo but it proves to be a catalyst for role reversal in Ladyland. It is only when the country is facing invasion and defeat that the women step in and find a scientific and workable solution to save their country. Not only do they make innovative use of solar power in battle but they also use the sun's energy to make their environment pollution free and healthy thus reinforcing their image as eco sensitive nurturers.

The qualities valorized by patriarchy are deglamorized in *Sultana's Dream*. This world gives primacy to love and truth and to preserving its integrity rather than glamorizing aggression. It is the perfect feminist utopia where the women are the agents of their own destinies and the destiny of their world. Their roles are not limited to the domestic sphere but encompass such traditionally male domains such as science, politics, militarism and the maintenance of civil society.

Ladyland is the ultimate feminist fantasy and a biting critique of the patriarchal construction of gender. It raises important issues regarding the position of women, not only in Rokeya's society but also in the contemporary world. She forces the reader to take an objective look at gender disparities by inverting traditional gender roles in her tale.

Through this Utopian vision Rokeya satirizes the politics of male hegemony and dominance. The dichotomies of the narrator's real world are the original point of departure in this dream in which men are the dominant gender and their credo of violence, control and ownership leads to warmongering and destruction. In the narrator's dream world woman is

not denied agency ,she continues to play a nurturing role but from a position of authority and competence.

Patriarchy has generally limited women within the domestic sphere by laying emphasis upon her role as a mother. In *Sultana's Dream* this very power becomes the impetus for regenerating a world originally destroyed by men. The image of the well groomed beautiful garden in the narrative is suggestive of the success with which women can perform this role in a much wider context.

So the imagined utopia for women has numerous role reversals but underlines a basic difference from the patriarchal system. Here men willingly go into the mardana, there is no force applied. It emphasises the importance of mind over brute force, harmony, balance, diversity and an enabling environment for the women is the focus of this utopia. Men no longer dominate the discourse, there is a symbolic and literal erasure and caging which happens through subversive satire and laughter. The men seem to live in a dystopic world as disempowered beings who are imagined to be content as are women in Sultana's world. The real utopia and dystopia collapse into one another and interconnect. The story emphasises that it all depends on the point of view one sees the kaleidoscope from. Female utopia is a male dystopia. The real partakes at each and every point between the imaginary, thus the class hopefully begins to understand that all given realities need to be interrogated and the imagined contestations in fantastical lady Land have a real body of feminist critique of patriarchy supporting it

### **Conclusions**

The story 'Sultana's Dream' emphasises that the issue of gender roles and how society views it depends on the perspective one sees the kaleidoscope from. Female utopia is a male dystopia. The real partakes of the imaginary, thus the class begins to understand that all given realities need to be questioned and the imagined contestations in fantastical lady Land have a real body of feminist literature supporting it.

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**BIO-NOTE**

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Dr Brati Biswas is an Associate Professor of English at Dyal Singh Evening College University of Delhi .She has a PhD on Dalit literature of Bengal from Jawaharlal Nehru Universty Delhi. She has published and presented articles on a wide range of topics from feminism to Dalit literature. She translates from Bangla to English and Hindi. She is also a practicing poet.