Exploring Women's Agency in Bengali Feminist Utopian Fiction: An Analysis of Begum Rokeya Hossain's *Sultana's Dream*

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Abstract
Since the evolution of the genre, Science Fiction has served as a fertile ground for the exploration of socio-cultural understandings of gender. The paper aims to provide an overview of the treatment of gender in feminist science fiction in general and explore, through the textual analysis of Begum Rokeya's Sultana's Dream (1905) in particular, the concept of women's agency. To serve this purpose, the feminine authorial tendency of using the genre as a parameter for discerning gender discrepancies by providing a utopian setup, will be scrutinised. The analysis will, therefore, interrogate the patriarchal utopian genre of science fiction and underline how feminist interventions have given voice to women's agency. The paper will also try to examine how exploration of the thematic concerns of the chosen text highlights the basic feminist literary tendencies of the female-authored science fiction of the 1970s in the West. Exposing the patriarchal tendency of subjugating the position of women in society by portraying them as the 'other' or the 'inferior' functions at the core of this analysis. The need to evolve a theory of women's agency lied in the urgent need to give a proper voice to women's own needs and concerns in a patriarchal society. Building on the consciousness raising model of the feminist movement of the 1960s-70s, utopian Science Fiction as a literary genre can be visualised as a tool for women empowerment.
Keywords: Science Fiction, Agency, Gender, Utopia, Feminist.

Introduction

Science Fiction (referred to as SF hereafter) is a genre of literature that defamiliarizes the familiar by fantasizing a world wherein,

> the social and sexual hierarchies of the contemporary world can be examined through the process of 'estrangement', thus challenging normative ideas of gender roles; and visions of different worlds can be created, made familiar to the reader through the process of narrative. SF narrative can be used to break down, or to build up. (Lefanu 21)

Joanna Russ, an eminent British SF writer of the 1970s, asserts that SF presents a tension–between the possible and the impossible,

between 'what is' and 'what is not'. The various features that qualify a piece of literature as SF have been enlisted in her article "The Image of Women in Science Fiction" as:

> the fourth dimension, hyperspace (whatever that is), the colonization of other worlds, nuclear catastrophe, time travel (now out of fashion), interstellar exploration, mutated supermen, alien races, and so on. The sciences treated range from the "hard" or exact sciences (astronomy, physics) through the life sciences (biology, biochemistry, neurology) through the "soft" or inexact sciences (ethology, ecology) to disciplines that are still in the descriptive or philosophical stage and may never become exact (history, for example). (205)

It is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818) which is generally considered to be one of the first experimentations with the genre. "Although influenced by the Gothic Literature of the time in setting and mood, Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818) also reflects an awareness of new scientific discoveries at this time, the dawn of the Industrial Age"(Sargent xvi), and as well, was characterised by dissolution of the societal order.

Science and technology are generally assumed to be masculine domains, and women are often discouraged to pursue scientific studies on various insubstantial grounds such as presumed lack of aptitude for science, or for their supposedly intuitive rather than rational temperament, or that they are generally imagined to conform to the traditional roles of a housewife or mother. The fascination with SF usually begins in the boyhood days when children, usually the males, come across pulp SFs and comics (Sargent xix). Hence, "'technology' in SF can be read as both a signifier of masculinity, and also as a site of cultural anxieties about gender" (Merrick 244). Therefore, predominantly masculine in content, SF is generally considered to be a male-centric genre of fiction that aims to serve the male readership with its presentation of super-human action-hero characters and scientifically charged themes. As a result, certain presuppositions regarding the representation of gender roles became recurrent in SF themes.

> One very powerful image of masculinity in SF from the 1930s to 1950s was that of the 'super-man'. The superhuman qualities of such characters often lay in their intellectual and scientific superiority, rather than a more traditional masculine physicality. Such stories were indebted to Darwinian notions of evolution, and the highly gendered narrative of sexual selection. (Merrick 242)

Furthermore, SF took under its purview the perspective of the middle-class 'white' males in general, thereby relegating to the background considerations of gender, class or race. The gender and racial discrepancies often find marginal representations in these fictional works.

Although the basic claims of the genre border on exploring alternatives to the current world we reside in, the role of women in such works has not been subject to abundant exploration. With its focus on the prolific advancements in science and technology in a male-centric universe, the genre typically excludes from its purview the idea of a female readership as well. An exploration of the image of women portrayed across these literary practices has shown that, it is the male perspective of women and not of their own, which gets represented in SF works. An observation has been made in the article "The Image of Women in Science Fiction" (1971) by Russ in this context: "there are plenty of images of women in science fiction. There are hardly any women" (Lefanu 13). Women had limited roles: the image of the woman, typically as that of a sex object or a damsel in distress rescued by a scientist of super-heroic stature, served the author's practical function. Furthermore,

> …in his story he (the author) could have a character explain the workings of a gadget or a scientific principle to an ignorant girl or woman, and by extension to the reader. Women could also serve as rewards for some heroic deed, could be rescued from danger, could sometimes be dangerous (or devious) enemies that the hero had to defeat, or could adorn the covers of magazines, which often showed them dressed in revealing and impractical outfits. (Sargent xxxvii)

Even eminent writers like H. G. Wells in the 19th C, who had given much impetus to the genre of SF as a whole, gave little attention to the representation of women.

Apart from Mary Shelley, Catherine L. Moore has experimented with the genre in the 1930s. However, her works exemplified a male perspective: "a necessity for anyone who wished to publish in the pulp magazines which had dominated American sf since the 1920s. A number of her stories dealt with the adventures of Northwest Smith, a rugged soldier of fortune who travelled throughout the solar system" (Sargent xix). The occasional appearance of a woman SF writer was unable to improve the scenario. The 1950s and early 1960s saw a significant emergence of female SF writers, among whom Hilary Bailey, Josephine Saxton, Joanna Russ, and Pamela Zoline are some of the eminent names. However, it was only in the late 1960s and the early 1970s that women writers started to get extensively involved with the genre. Their works aimed to dispel the generic notion that SF is primarily a male-centric genre of fiction, and it is this association with gender that procured it its name of 'feminist utopia' by Russ. What had catalysed such an involvement was that the same period was marked by widespread women's rights movements. The movement stressed upon rethinking or reinvestigating the representation of women in literature and popular culture. The assumed 'naturalness of gender' was interrogated as a 'social construction' that needs deconstruction. Similarly, a tendency towards aiming to satisfy a female readership was undertaken by presenting female protagonists.

Therefore, the narrative strands of SF novels bear implicit cultural assumptions on gender normativity. Feminist theorists have revolted against the universalizing tendencies of the masculine cultural text that traditionally presents itself as an expression of "homogenous human nature" (Hollinger 125). Since the Enlightenment, the white, middle-class male has been the representative of "universal 'human nature'" (125), and, as a result, women or even men of other races or classes have played supporting roles only. Veronica Hollinger in "Feminist Theory and Science Fiction"(2003), therefore terms a female reader, in the words of Judith Fetterley, a 'resisting reader', who "activates elements in a text which may be neither dominant nor deliberate. In this instance, feminist reading will often amount to a critique of a particular text's narrative project" (Hollinger 126). To serve this purpose, the feminists borrowed and perfected the 'utopian' tool in SF. Although 'feminist utopia' has taken up the patriarchal utopic depiction of the alternative universe that voices the societal discrepancies for its generic potential, a resistance has been channelised towards patriarchal normativity. According to Russ and Bryant,

> Through binary oppositions, patriarchal expectations have normalized and stereotyped gender behavior into hierarchies of acceptability, associating the highest or most desirable attributes with masculinity. Thus, within the feminist discourse community, a new socially shared discourse was shaping up, with old patriarchal dichotomies being its first target. (36)

Utopia and its Representations of Gender Hierarchy

Utopia is generally assumed to be the fictional representation of a writer's imagination of a 'better place' where the current societal discrepancies are recognised and addressed. The term has Greek origins, which literally means 'no place'; hence, it came to be known as a 'nowhere land'. The genre saw its heyday in the hands of Sir Thomas More, who, in his work, *Utopia* (1516), presented to his readers an 'ideal world' marked by goodwill, reason, freedom, camaraderie, peace and harmony. Private property, greed, jealousy, theft and similar causes of state strife were dispelled in such an ideal estate. Although, 'a better world' or an 'alternative possibility' is what both utopias and SFs aim at, the post-war generation failed to retain faith in such idealised fictional representations. It is due to the anticipation that an idealised 'perfect' setup can in reality pave way for 'dystopias' or 'oppressive societies' as a result of the tyrannical dominance of the state over the will of the

individual or that of the elite on the minority (James 219). In the 2nd chapter, "Utopianism and Feminism" of *Feminist Utopian Novels of 1970s* (2003), Russ and Bryant argued that even though More's *Utopia* advocated for complete social homogeneity, it introduced a strongly patriarchal setup where women were portrayed as subservient to their husbands:

> More's insistence on female subservience in his otherwise 'equal' society reveals his conformity to the existing patriarchal paradigm. At that time, male supremacy was such an obvious and apparently natural idea that it might have never occurred to Thomas More to include gender inequality among the other social hierarchies leveled in his society. (37)

This is however a reflection on the profound embeddedness of gender inequality in the society.

'Utopia', therefore, became "a potent tool for feminist imaginative projects that are the necessary first steps in undertaking the cultural and social transformations that are the aims of the feminist political enterprise" (Hollinger 128). A feminist utopia can be considered an expression of the social dreams. The women's liberation movement aimed at disrupting the gender binaries, by changing the position occupied by the female subject in society. Russ deconstructs the female subjectivity in *The Female Man* (1975) as she voices the oppression and dissatisfaction of women in a patriarchal setup by imagining a parallel universe where these issues can be addressed. At the same time, she believed that social transformation can be aimed at through possible solutions. Her novels induce the mechanism of 'becoming the subject'. "Largely through the conscious manipulation of language-both in word choice and in language structure" (Russ and Bryant 166), Russ was able to construct,

> …female sexed texts. Through privileging free indirect discourse, circular reasoning rather than analytic logic, and open-ended story lines, these novels approach the feminist values. At the same time, they demonstrate the inadequacy of the patriarchal language by either exposing it, deconstructing it. (Russ and Bryant 166)

She furthermore gives insight into the various feminist concerns regarding the portrayal of the image of women through a thematic analysis of the novels. Therefore, feminist utopias are 'reactive' to the sexism prevalent in the society. A sort of homogeneity, however, could be found in the presentation of the concerns by female authors in feminist utopias. She undermines the common tendency of women SF writers to present a 'woman-only' world or a matriarchal society where gender roles are reversed. Although framed as a counter-discourse to critique the dominant social order, such a society advocates gender 'inequality' and often gives way to totalitarianism. Another theme that finds recurrence in these early feminist utopia novels is the presentation of a kind of separatism: a society where men are relegated to the background or are kept outside the society as they are conceived of as harmful. Such a world is characterised by freedom of movement and speech for women, followed by enhanced physical access to the outer world beyond the boundaries of the "home" (Lefanu 55). Such societies are characterised by female camaraderie and the scientific advancements within such societies do not cause any damage to nature. Nature, science and '(wo)men' exist in glorious harmony with each other. Some utopian societies would bring in themes with extensive scientific changes in the biological processes of child-bearing and motherhood by bringing in alternatives such as homosexual co-parenting or babies artificially conceived in jars in laboratories. Furthermore, a tendency to present a disaster that could only be recovered through women's agency could be seen as a means of criticising patriarchal means. Patriarchy, as a hegemonic social setup, does not recognise its 'others' as gender bias is central for the balance of power relations within the patriarchal social order. Feminist theory contests this notion of homogenous representations and utopia as a literary device that defamiliarizes the familiar, taken-for-granted aspects of human reality, so as to denaturalise oppression and inequalities that otherwise appear to be commonplace or usual. Utopia has facilitated socio-cultural reconstructions

of feminine subjectivity and agency that gives ample scope for interrogating the women's cause as has been conceptualised by a woman writer.

Feminist SF arose as a counter-discourse in response to the profound sexism recurrent in the society. While the first wave feminists were concerned about women's position within patriarchal institutions such as family, motherhood and prostitution, "they did not explore the female sexuality in their analyses of woman's social condition, except when it affected other institutions, such as motherhood" (Russ and Bryant 38). However, the second wave feminists argue that the notion of female inferiority has been ingrained in human psychology ever since the history of humanity. Simone de Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex* (1949) inaugurated the discussion on the subject of sex and power, for her analysis of the cultural construction of women as the 'other', laid the foundation for second wave feminist criticism. According to Beauvoir, the feminine is a societal construction where men predominantly occupy the subject position. According to Russ and Bryant in "Utopia as Rhetorical Subject",

> …being the more powerful gender group, men conveniently impose patriarchal "scenes and contexts" on the masculine/feminine opposition. All the negative characteristics of humanity (as men perceive them) are projected into women. Therefore, according to this argument, in the existing socio-symbolic order, women are "naturally" perceived as "deviant," peripheral, or invisible. Radical feminists attempted to deconstruct the total cultural context in which patriarchal oppositions were operating. (41-42)

However, the feminist utopian SFs in the 1970s were the product of white Western feminism, and conclusively, they relegated to the background the representation of the other races. They were even ambivalent towards the question of class as the genre and, as has been previously mentioned, favoured the middle class as its prime focus. Russ and Bryant have further argued on Baccollini's contention that since genres themselves are "cultural constructions", the binary opposition between the "normal" and the "deviant" has been put under feminist deconstruction as women are consigned the deviant or inferior status naturally (160).

The Indian Science Fiction

In the Indian literary context, the emergence of SF can be "traced back to two adventure stories written in Hindi between 1884 and 1888: "AascharyaVrittant" (A Strange Tale) by Pandit Ambika Dutt Vyas and "Chandra Lok Ki Yatra" (Journey to the Moon) by Keshav Prasad Singh" (Kuhad 24). The first instance of a utopian SF novel was Swami Satyadev Parivrajak's *Aascharya Janak Ghanti*, published in 1908 in the magazine *Saraswati*. The novel envisages a future society marked by technological advancements. From fantasy and magic to nanotechnology and artificial intelligence, the purview of SF in India has broadened over the years. During the initial years of the inception of the genre, Western themes and narrative patterns were meticulously followed. However, an 'Indianness' was introduced into the SF genre through theme, setting and characterisation by authors like Naval Bihari Mishra and Yamunadatt Ashok in the 1930s. Bengal particularly witnessed the proliferation of this genre in the late 19th C– a period marked by Industrialisation and scientific advancements. Bengali SF is commonly known as 'Kalpabigyan'. Hemlal Dutta's "Rahasya" (1882), published in *Vigyan Darpan*, is considered to be one of the firsts in this genre. Next came in line, Premendra Mitra's "Piprey Puran" (The Story of the Ants) and "Mangalbairi" (The Martian Enemies). The eminent Bengali writer/ director Satyajit Ray also contributed to this genre with his Professor Shanku series. A recurrent pattern could however be discerned in the SF in these times: presentation of the middle-class characters– that is, the protagonist belonged to the same strata of the society as the author.

Begum Rokeya Hossain gained a position as one of the eminent writers of SF in an age when the Indian literary canon, or to be precise, the Bengali literary scenario, was male-dominant, similar to that of the West. She was considered the earliest feminist SF writer of India and earned a prominent place in the writings of feminist critics with her novella *Sultana's Dream*, published in the *Ladies Magazine* in 1905 from Madras. Apart from being a renowned literary figure, she was a women's rights activist and reformist who relentlessly worked for women's education. Feminist movements that started in the West also raised a consciousness among women in India. Refuting to conform to the societal gender norms, her novella voices the concerns of women in contemporary Indian society.

Discussion on the Select Novella

The story depicts a dream sequence in which the narrator, a fictional representation of the author herself, encapsulates a story when, one evening, she dozed off to sleep in her easy chair while speculating upon the "condition of Indian womanhood" (Hossain 3). The story opens with the subtle hint of the author being cautious of the socio-political condition of women in her contemporary times. She imagines in her sleep, a moonlit sky adorned with the beauty of the twinkling stars, and she been approached by a woman whom she mistakes for her friend, Sister Sara. The woman urges Sultana, the protagonist, to accompany her on a tour of the garden. At this point, Sultana "looked again at the moon through the open window, and thought there was no harm in going out at that time. The men-servants outside were fast asleep just then, and I could have a pleasant walk with Sister Sara" (Hossain 3). Sultana's extreme consciousness of the male gaze highlights the idea of purdah that women, particularly those belonging to the Muslim community, were supposed to maintain according to their religious beliefs and customs. Sultana's apprehension of the dark signals the entrapment of women within the dark and dreary customs of society where women's minds are conditioned to behave in a certain manner as a result of 'internalisation of restrictions'. However, as the protagonist comes out of her room, she is amazed to witness a bright morning. This instance could be considered a woman's entrapment in the sheer darkness of the lack of knowledge and education.

While roaming the streets along with her companion, Sultana notices, to her utter surprise, that "there was not a single man visible" (Hossain 3). The women passing Sultana on the road are seen to make jokes about her countenance. She was commented on as 'mannish' in her behaviour. On asking Sister Sara, Sultana was informed that her shy and timid nature is representative of the behaviour of the men in that land. Surprised at such a comment, Sultana confesses her reluctance to her lady friend in walking around without a veil as throughout her life, she has been a "purdahnishin woman" (Hossain 4). At this juncture in the story, Sister Sara introduces Sultana to a 'better' world, called Ladyland, which is characterised by "reverse segregation of sexes" (Bhatti et al. 814). The land has been described as 'free' from sin and harm, where virtue prevails. The very association of a 'gynocratic' land to a virtuous place and the simultaneous association of men with the mischiefs of the world is representative of the feminist SF trait that Lefanu has talked about while accounting Joanna Russ' contention in *Feminism and Science Fiction*. According to Lefanu, while defamiliarizing the familiar through an inversion of normative gender roles, separatism is maintained, and as a result men are kept out of these female-constructed societies as they are considered dangerous. Such a society is presumed to provide greater physical freedom for its female inhabitants. The same could be asserted about Ladyland where the practice of purdah has been discarded in the absence of the male gaze. Furthermore, when Sultana enquires about the men, she is provided the answer that they have been disposed off to their 'proper places'.

The reverse segregation of sexes deconstructs the binary oppositions by shutting men behind closed walls as per the customs of Ladyland. This imprisonment or seclusion of men has been given the name 'mardana'. The idea of 'mardana' works as a counterfoil to the practice of 'zenana' preached by the Muslim community in the name of protection of women. It is a concept developed by the author as a reactive measure towards the injustices women have been subjected to in the 'zenana'. As a result of failure at warfare, the men of Ladyland were pushed into the mardana, where they were never allowed to come out and become a part of the society. They were imprisoned and secluded under the false assurance by the Queen of Ladyland that if their services were required in future, they would be released. Since then, the seclusion and domination have been so ingrained in the 'male psyche' of Ladyland that there has been no revolt. Ladyland, therefore, borders on a totalitarian system of governance. While demanding educational and professional rights for women through her fictional work, the author has visualised and treated the men as the 'other'.

In contrast to the women in the real world the author inhabits, where they have no say in the social and political affairs of the state, Ladyland privileges women's liberation. Sister Sara's comment on the women of Sultana's world, "You have neglected the duty you owe to yourselves and you have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interests" (Hossain 6), is a scathing criticism of the internalisation of patriarchal domination and discrimination by women themselves. However, the complete abolition of men, as they are deemed to be unfit for every task, borders on a matriarchal setup that preaches gender inequality and discrimination. Men have been assigned this secondary position in society as a result of their failure at warfare. When attacked by a neighbouring king in a political dispute, the men proved inefficient with arms, and it was the women scientists, under the guidance of the Queen, who, through their technological superiority, won the battle without shedding a drop of blood. Rather than muscle power, scientific wisdom became a tool in the hands of women. Apart from warfare, women have contributed towards the advancement of society through scientific progress in the form of rainwater harvesting, solar cooking, eco-restoration drive, water management and the invention of a vehicle named the 'captive balloon' that floats above the clouds, inventions unthinkable during those times.

There is also the frequent mention of a Queen in Ladyland who works in harmony with her female subjects towards women's empowerment. This hints at the necessary association of women in the political matters of the state. However, social hierarchy is not entirely abolished in this work. Utopian settings are sites of socio-politico-economic equality and harmony. The classification of women into various strata negates this characteristic of utopia. Furthermore, keeping in line with the representation of women of the same social strata as the author– a common trait in Bengali SFs– Rokeya fails to portray any woman of the lower strata of society. Only women of higher social and economic backgrounds find expression and voice in her work.

The textual analysis of the selected novella can bring in a discussion of women's agency and subjectivity– key aspects in feminist study. Agency is the development of consciousness regarding one's own ability to make choices and act upon them accordingly. Women can exercise this agency through the roles they act out in society, both at individual and collective levels. The various sites of exercising this agency could be the family, workplace or society at large, through an involvement in the social, economic, political and cultural functioning of the State and society. The idea of self-efficacy is pivotal to the study of women's agency. It is the awareness of the capabilities of one's own self so as to make the best use of available resources. The personal history of the author also comes into play when we investigate the women's agency in the novel. Her own life has been subject to oppressive social practices like the system of zenana or the purdah. Despite belonging to an aristocratic family, she was barred from receiving any formal education, by her father, solely on the aspect of being a woman. Hence, the fictional representation of a 'woman-only land' was a reaction towards her forceful seclusion by patriarchal forces.

Sultana's Dream reinforces the idea of women's agency by painting the female characters in her story with scientific zeal and socio-political consciousness. Such a woman is at once conscious of the gender discrepancies and reactive towards her subordinate position as the 'other' in the society. The sites of exercising agency provided by the author in the novella are the community or society and the workplace or laboratory. She talks about women's efficiency in scientific ardour through the excellence achieved by female brains over male strength in Ladyland. Women are portrayed as scientists and principals, quite contrary to the actual positioning of women as the other in the then society. A woman aware of her agency, deconstructs the gender rigidities by voicing her choice of life and livelihood. Women in Ladyland are shown to work more efficiently by spending just two hours in the lab for which men generally spend seven hours. It is due to the fact that men,

> …dawdle away their time in smoking. Some smoke two or three choroots during the office time. They talk much about their work, but do little. Suppose one choroot takes half an hour to burn off, and a man smokes twelve choroots daily; then you see, he wastes six hours every day in sheer smoking. (Hossain 7)

Furthermore, healthy competition is evident among the women from different universities regarding scientific experimentations. While one group of students produced captive balloons that can float above the cloud level and can be used as an efficient mode of modern transportation in Ladyland, the other university students have invented an instrument that can store the sun's heat for future use. Rokeya provides her readers with a society where women have received abundant opportunities to prosper. In addition to that, the rules laid down by the Queen for the prosperity of the Ladyland comply with the basic tenets of women empowerment: that is, women should be educated and not married off before the age of twenty-one. These could be accounted as suggestions offered by the author to rectify what was deficit in the-then Bengal. In the period during which this piece of literature was written, "…there were reform movements making waves in Bengal. There were discussions on women's education. Both the Muslim and Hindu reformers had contemplated on the women's question" (Chakrabarty 34). In order to channelise any social transformation through agency, women need to be aware of the gender inequalities and its infiltration into society, so as to be able to act upon them. Begum Rokeya's text acts as a medium to catalyse awareness in the society.

Agency is the central component in enhancing empowerment within a society. Whether it is participation within a household by decision making or gaining economic independence through employment opportunities, agency can be considered synonymous to empowerment. It aims at elevating the subject position of women by enabling them to have a better understanding of their capabilities to function within the society around them. The theory of empowerment developed by Jo Rowland needs special mention. According to him, empowerment is a 'process'. He critically examines the problematic term 'empowerment' in the context of political thought and development-agendas of Bill Clinton and John Major. Debating upon the power dynamics in a given societal setup, Rowlands considers 'power' as a tool to control or influence "men over other men, by men over women, and by dominant social, political economic or cultural groups over those who are marginalised. It is thus an instrument of domination whose use can be seen in people's personal lives, their close relationships, their communities and beyond" (Rowlands 86).

The way in which a woman should behave has been internalised within her by the silent functioning of this power politics. The concept of empowerment, therefore "could be traditionally related to the idea of conscious decision making so as to maximise the opportunities available to an individual despite State control and intervention" (Rowlands 86). However, feminist interpretations of empowerment "go beyond the formal and institutional definitions of power and incorporate the idea of 'the personal as political'. From a feminist perspective, interpreting 'power over' entails

understanding the dynamics of oppression and internalised oppression'' (Rowlands 86). It is evident that the protagonist Sultana has internalised this power dynamics when she becomes conscious of not using a veil to cover herself in public. Furthermore, her notion that men are superior to women in both arms and intellect naturally consigns her position as the other or the inferior. 'Empowerment', therefore, highlights the individual's ability to perceive oneself and act in accordance to their ability to influence the world around them, thereby functioning within the categories of 'power to' and 'power from within', so as to voice a full ability and potential. In *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya talks about two out of the three dimensions of empowerment: personal and collective. Personal is the act of subduing the internalised oppression so as to develop individual potential, whereas, collective empowerment, as the name duly suggests, focuses on "collective action based on cooperation rather than competition" (Rowlands 87). The idea of empowerment holistically acknowledges the urgency of awareness and action among the marginalised. Jo Rowlands compares this idea of empowerment with Freire's concept of 'conscientisation' which "centres on individuals becoming 'subjects' in their own lives and developing a 'critical consciousness'" (Rowlands 88). Women in Ladyland exhibit signs of collective empowerment through female companionship. The inhabitants of the land exist in harmony with their natural surroundings.

Conclusion

In *Sultana's Dream,* Begum Rokeya conjures up a gynocritic society to voice female agency that is materialised through the utopian scheme of female camaraderie and communal harmony. Hailed as one of the earliest utopian critiques of patriarchy by a female SF writer, the novel voices the innate desire of women to occupy the subject position that has been reserved by men for themselves from time immemorial. However, Sultana was a mere spectator or visitor to Ladyland who was narrated about the functioning of the place through an occupant of the land. Sultana herself was presented as a 'token-woman' who did not participate in the plot development of the story. The novella merely became an 'info-dump'. However, the authorial tendency to manifest a matriarchy that gave expression to the female desires and potentials was aptly portrayed by the author. The novel exhibits qualities that were the basic tenets of the initial feminist SFs. However, an Indianisation is provided through the positioning of the story within the specific community of Muslim women in Bengali society.

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