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## Rokeya's Dream Vision: An Indian Lady Philosophy and Conversion to Feminism

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### *Abstract*

This essay examines Begum Rokeya's pivotal work *Sultana's Dream* (1905) in the context of medieval dream vision by foregrounding its matches with the dream vision genre. With *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya takes women in the Indian community to a realm of freedom away from purdah and the zenana via mainly treating the concerns of gender and education. Rokeya endeavours to raise female consciousness in her story written in a dream format featuring Sister Sara as the guide to forging a self-sufficient female identity equal to men. I read Sister Sara as a wise woman, an exemplar of Boethius' Lady Philosophy, appearing in medieval dream visions to bring people to the truth, the conversion to Christianity in the medieval setting as in *The Dream of the Rood*. The essay concludes that, apart from her community, Rokeya's call in *Sultana's Dream* stretches out from medieval to contemporary society within the milieu of a dream vision to a feminist utopia respectively.

**Keywords:** Begum Rokeya, *Sultana's Dream*, medieval dream vision, feminist utopia

### **Introduction**

“What should a woman-child pray for? A husband, if she is not married;  
or, if she is, then for a better husband at her next re-birth.” (*Mother India* 90)

In her controversial book *Mother India* (1927), Katherine Mayo details the dismays that an Indian mother has to endure during childbirth, coupled with well-known nationalist imagery of the country as Mother India. As she clarified in her follow-up book, *Slaves of the God* (1929), Mayo purposefully preferred the heading to stir Indian women by drawing a contrast between the way they are actually treated and how they are worshiped in nationalist discourse. To Aparajita Basu, this nationalist discourse serves the same with all Asian women as it established standards for women that were unbreakable to preserve bourgeois respectability. Accordingly, the “new woman” of the early twentieth century was to be methodically shut out of involvement on several frontages such as “political agitation against the state for rights, horizontal ties with

the masses, or women from subordinate classes and from fashioning an ‘autonomous subjectivity’ outside of the hegemonic claims of male nationalist culture” (xiii). The place of this new woman was limited to the “home” which included limitations on civic and sexual freedom. Basu further affirms that the literary and artistic motif of the “Eastern woman” is either a creation of Hindu nationalist fancy or merely an expansion of the concept of the “Indian woman” rendering “Mother Asia” essentially the same as “Mother India” (xiii).

The observation of Basu is compatible with the mother role attributed to Turkish women during the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923. It was the responsibility of Turkish women to support men during this modernization process and to raise patriotic children. Serpil Sancar notes that Turkey’s early modernization was based on a nation-state to modernize the nation and the development of modern families as role models to instil and carry out the values of the new state. In this nationalist portrait, the nation was revealed as a family led by men, and women and childbirth were associated with the motherland, and losing it meant losing reputation and self-respect. From that point on, women’s duties to the nation were restricted to raising children (19, 32, 54). Despite the deep-seated improvements that Turkish women have experienced, particularly in the legal, political, and economic spheres since the Republic’s declaration in 1923, Turkey is still recognized as a nation dominated by men that upholds patriarchal norms and places women in the home, justifying the well-known statement by Deniz A. Kandiyoti that Turkish women are free but unliberated (317). Traditional gender roles are still promoted in Turkish culture today, where men are allotted an active public role as breadwinners and women are assigned a passive private one as caregivers for the home and family. Hence, as in the case of Indian women, the mother role attributed to Turkish women under the pretext of patriotism, has confined them to the private zone where they live a passive life away from the public zone under the domination of men. Begum Rokeya’s *Sultana’s Dream* (1905) serves as a rebellion against this passive role and a warning for women to open their eyes to the secondary position specified for them. The text, which Rokeya wrote to awaken women in order to be equal to men and to seek their rights, was widely examined in line with contemporary literary forms such as science fiction, ecocritical and utopian literature. With a radical perspective, in this article, I will examine Rokeya’s *Sultana’s Dream* written in a dream format parallel with dream vision—a medieval literary genre, by being true to its feminist cause.

### **Medieval Dream Vision and the Wise Female Figures**

It is vital to have some sense of what dream vision is to evaluate Rokeya’s work accordingly. In his work *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*, Macrobius Ambrosius Theodosius categorises dreams into five main forms: *somnium*, *visio*, *oraculum*, *insomnium*, and *visum*. There is no

prophetic significance to *insomnium* and *visum*. Yet, the remaining three types possess the “power of divination” (90). An *oraculum* tells the dreamer what will or won’t happen through a specific agent. A *visio* explains a prophecy that really occurs. Lastly, a *somnium* depicts bizarre shapes to convey hidden and mysterious messages (90). Medieval people acknowledged dreams as a means of light on the afterlife, the future, and the meaning of the cosmos. Dreams, instruments of divine insight, were believed to act as a bridge between man and knowledge beyond his normal comprehension (Pfannkuche 1-2). To enjoy the unique status associated with visionary experience, poets imitated dreams in their works bringing about the dream vision genre. A dream vision, sometimes known as a *visio*, is a form of fiction in which a dream or vision is described as having disclosed the truth that the dreamer would not be able to access in a conscious state. Though dreams have been written about throughout the history of literature, the genre of visionary writing was particularly prevalent in early medieval Europe (Kabir 78). The poems addressing the social and spiritual quandary of late 14th-century England were presented in the form of a dream vision to convey a religious or spiritual message as in *The Dream of the Rood* and *The Debate of the Body and Soul*. In a typical dream vision genre, a disturbed narrator drifts off to sleep, awakens from a dream, and becomes a wiser person (Bornstein 10). The narrative is commonly symbolic as the events in real life grow into the impetus for the dream. Through the imaginative landscapes provided by the dream state, the vision appeals to the concerns of the dreamer who is presented with viewpoints that could potentially address his worries, frequently with the assistance of a guide. Throughout the Middle Ages, dream visions were very widespread and thrived throughout Europe, especially in Britain, where it first emerged in the Old English era. The high Middle Ages saw a huge rise in the popularity of dream literature drawing on momentous works such as *The Vita Nuova* and *The Commedia* by Dante. The genre reappeared during the Romantic period when people believed that dreams were fantastic portals to worlds beyond reason (Jones 293-294). The medieval dream vision tradition was later tracked by copious writers, to name a few, John Bunyan in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), Percy Bysshe Shelley in *The Triumph of Life* (1822), William Morris in *News from Nowhere, A Dream of John Ball* (1901) and James Joyce in *Finnegans Wake* (1939).

All over the Middle Ages, Macrobius’ thoughts on dreams in *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis* were the main source of information that presented dreams as the representations of truth in fiction. In this sense, fiction with the intention of “drawing the reader’s attention to certain kinds of virtue” is referred to by Macrobius as “fabulous narrative” (84). This approach employs fictive language to bear philosophical ideas as in medieval dream-vision poetry,

particularly dealing with religious subjects. The use of the dream vision in medieval literature can be largely attributed to Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy* which serves as a model for dream-vision poetry. Celebrated as a reference book of Dante and Chaucer, *The Consolation* dwells on fate, fortune, and free will, embracing a collage of Aristotelian, Stoic, Epicurean, and neo-Platonic thoughts. The work features Lady Philosophy as a guide to Boethius, who is wrongfully imprisoned and doomed to die. Lady Philosophy, believed to be a fictitious representation of Boethius, gradually comforts him via her teachings through a dialogue much like a teacher attempting to impart knowledge to a student. Lady Philosophy in *The Consolation* is the embodiment of wisdom and such guiding female characters frequently appear in medieval literature, to exemplify, Geoffrey Chaucer's Lady Fame in *The House of Fame* (1374-1385) and Nature in *The Parlement of Foules* (1380-1390), and William Langland's Lady Holy Church and Lady Meed in *Piers Plowman* (1370-1380).

### **Rokeya's Sister Sara as "The Lady Philosophy" and A Contemporary Feminized Vision**

*The Consolation* belongs to the dream vision genre even though it doesn't have any scenes of a dreamer drifting into sleep and waking up. This is because the text is rhetorically framed and the Lady Philosophy has figurative connotations that are typical of dream literature. The narrator is dejected at how unfair and wicked the world is. Lady Philosophy unexpectedly pays him a visit and educates him until he starts to see the world more optimistically. The narrative tracks the narrator's ascent to hope as he discovers that while pleasures on earth fade, consequences and benefits in the afterlife are everlasting. Indeed, as remarked by Bede Jarrett, it was widely believed that women mystics and dream-vision writers have exceptional understandings of the nature of reality (84) shown in wise woman counsellors in medieval dream visions. To Diane Bornstein, this wise woman figure dates back to the classical period: "Abstractions such as the Virtues were personified as women in classical art and literature, and this practice was continued in the Middle Ages. Sometimes a classical personification was identified as female merely because the abstract noun it represented was feminine in gender" (10). In a similar vein, to Rosemary Radford Reuther, a holdover from past mythology, where many of the most powerful deities were feminine, was the female counsellor role. One should go back as far as possible to find models for the strong and/or wise woman since Roman mythology was derived from Greek and Near Eastern mythologies, which in turn was commonly referenced in medieval literature as the Mother Goddess Namnu in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> millennia BC Sumerian creation tales (38).

Rokeya's Sister Sara as the wise female figure in *Sultana's Dream* serves the same function as the Lady Philosophy in *The Consolation*. Begum Rokeya, also known as Rokeya Sakhawat

Hossain (1880-1932), published her feminist utopian text *Sultana's Dream* in *The Indian Ladies* in 1905. The utopian texts are particularly utilized by female writers to delineate independent female societies free from male subjugation and the established male literary canon. As Sally Miller Gearhart puts it, feminist utopias are political since they unveil women as being either equal to or above men and give them control over their reproductive functions. They also disparage modern values and conditions and view men or masculine systems as the main root of problems in society and politics (298). To Carol Pearson, these texts “portray women as the creators of a new consciousness and a new vision” (61). Rokeya’s *Sultana's Dream*, a little over ten pages long, aims to raise this new consciousness in Muslim women and has a solid place in the canon of feminist and utopian literature. Writer, journalist, educationalist and groundbreaking reformer of Bengali Muslim society, Rokeya campaigned for women’s increased engagement in public life, mostly through education, in response to women’s restricted domestic existence in privacy, particularly that of Muslim women. In line with Bharati Ray’s assertion in *Early Feminists of Colonial India* that Indian women were “willing collaborators in their own oppressions” (61), Rokeya’s goal was to empower women to attain their own freedom.

*Sultana's Dream* tells the story of a fancy dream in which a young woman travels to a strange place she refers to as “Ladyland”, where women rule and govern alone and find peace in a stunning scenery made possible by advancements in science and technology introduced by women. In Rokeya’s dream world of Ladyland, gender roles are reversed by depicting a future in which women govern a nation and men are restricted to the “mardana” in lieu of the “zenana”. Parallel to a typical dream vision, the story begins with the narrator’s (Sultana’s) falling asleep revealing her subject, the position of the Indian woman: “ONE EVENING I was lounging in an easy chair in my bedroom and thinking lazily of the condition of Indian womanhood. I am not sure whether I dozed off or not” (17). Analogous to Boethius’ *Lady Philosophy*, Sultana suddenly finds her guide beside her: “All on a sudden a lady stood before me; how she came in, I do not know. I took her for my friend, Sister Sara” (17). Sister Sara welcomes Sultana to the glories of the dream realm full of gardens which are also typical settings for medieval dream visions as in a classical dream vision text, Guillaume de Lorris’ *Roman de la Rose* laid in a picture-perfect square garden, which is overlooked by lovely trees, birdsongs, flowers and squirrels. In a similar vein, Rokeya’s Dreamer is bewitched by the scenery of splendid pasture and flowers: “I mistook a patch of green grass for a velvet cushion. Feeling as if I were walking on a soft carpet, I looked down and found the path covered with moss and flowers” (18). When Sultana admiringly states that the entire place appears to be a splendid garden, Sister Sara

replies: “Your Calcutta could become a nicer garden than this, if only your countrymen wanted to make it so” (18). The nature landscape, associated with the ideal in medieval dream vision as well as utopian literature, is thus, in Rokeya’s call for feminism, identified with societies where women are on equal terms with men. When they reach Sister Sara’s home located in a garden, Sultana is again captured by the beautiful scenery:

It was situated in a beautiful heart-shaped garden. It was a bungalow with a corrugated iron roof. It was cooler and nicer than any of our rich buildings. I cannot describe how neat and nicely furnished and how tastefully decorated it was. (20)

It is reasonable to suggest that Sultana’s astonishment is due to her avowal of second-class status, supposing that the garden and beautiful nature are symbolic of women’s equality. The kitchen of Sister Sara is also “situated in a beautiful vegetable garden. Every creeper, every tomato plant, [is] itself an ornament without “smoke”, “the windows [are] decorated with flower garlands” with “no sign of coal or fire” (21). The women of this dreamland cook with solar heat and “no one died in youth except by rare accident” (21). When Sultana asks about the secret behind this improvement, Sister Sara explains that the queen forbids women from marrying before the age of twenty-one and mandates obligatory schooling encouraging female scientists who carry out astonishing studies and invent devices that can extract liquid from the atmosphere and retain solar heat. Sister Sara adds that when the intruders invaded the nation, women used their heat machines to defeat the invaders while the males went to battle and perished. The men were forced to withdraw into confinement by the Queen, who assumed control of the government and kept them there since then. The Queen reiterates Sara’s views on scientific education, saying, “We dive deep into the ocean of knowledge and try to find out the precious gems that Nature has kept in store for us” (27). Then, to Barnita Bagchi, “the driving force behind the success of the Utopian feminist country of Ladyland is women’s education” (xii). Bagchi further remarks that Ladyland “embodies the triumph of the virtuous, enquiring, scientific, enlightened and welfare-oriented spirit in women” (xiii). Put another way, for Rokeya, women’s education and more importantly opening their eyes to the truth will lead to a perfect society in which women are treated equally. The following statements made by Sister Sara to Sultana are a clear example of this in the text: “You have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interests, and you have neglected the duty you owe to yourselves” (19). That is how Sister Sara as the spokeswoman of Rokeya holds women responsible for their captivity. To Jahan and Papanek, the discussion surrounding women’s education in Rokeya’s times must also be considered while analysing her accent on science and technology in Ladyland:

Among her contemporaries, even the most forward-looking Brahmos, who were generally in favor of education for women, emphasized a curriculum that was not strong in science and mathematics. In this context, Rokeya was not only stressing the need for female education in general but also a type of education that enabled women to excel in science. (15)

Sultana, having seen every educational facility in Ladyland, including the observatories, labs, and universities, wakes up from her dream and that is where the story ends. Just as the dreamer, led to Christianity by his guide -the Cross on which Christ was crucified- in *The Dream of the Rood*, the forerunner of medieval dream visions, who is asked to go and call people to Christianity, Sister Sara also asks Sultana to tell other women about what she saw and the existence of such a world to call them to feminism: “How my friends at home will be amused and amazed, when I go back and tell them that in the far-off Ladyland, ladies rule over the country and control all social matters, while gentlemen are kept in the mardanas to mind babies, to cook, and to do all sorts of domestic work” (25). Thus, Rokeya’s story exhibits the same textual wrapping that is so functional in dream visions. As Sarbani Guha Ghosal pinpoints, the rise and development of women’s studies in India are closely related to feminism and represent women’s deliberate participation in the politics of knowledge embracing a wake-up call (793). Rokeya aptly amalgamates this “wake-up call” with a story in a dream format as if trying to awaken women from a frightful dream through a dialogue between Sister Sara- a fictitious representation of herself- and Sultana, analogous to Lady Philosophy and Boethius. Similar to Boethius slowly directed to the truth by Lady Philosophy, Sultana is gradually led by Sister Sara to believe that it is achievable to live in equality with males.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have traced the striking parallels between medieval dream visions and Rokeya’s *Sultana’s Dream* by examining the text in light of the main characteristics of the dream vision genre. Mainly, the wise female figure, the setting and the end of the text are parallel with the typical medieval dream visions. More to the point, as I suggest throughout the article, Sister Sara in Rokeya’s text is the embodiment and successor of wise female figures of medieval dream visions coupled with the utopian feminist point of view aiming to achieve a female consciousness required for root-and-branch transformative thought and action awaited since centuries following feminism. Maitrayee Chaudhuri associates the beginnings of feminism in India with colonialism and the “modern democratic project” of 19th-century India which, to her, meant rights not for all but for some since, in practice, it meant the “refashioning of households and families led to women being recast as creatures of domesticity, and the housewife” (26) pursuant to the culture of Victorianism. This culture demarcated an ordinary Indian woman as “gentle, refined and skilled in running a home” (26) outlined by the literary

personas of Antigone, Nora Helmer, and Jane Eyre. In this regard, Rokeya in *Sultana's Dream* addresses all Jane Eyres, regardless of religion, ethnicity, time, or geography, by italicizing an independent woman image who has the same rights as men, besides Muslim Indian women. To me, it is especially significant to read Rokeya's feminist credo within the context of a genre that dates back to a time when women were viewed as inferior in order to awaken the Sultanas of the modern world.

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