

## A Contemplation on 'Sultana's Dream'

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### Abstract

Sultana's Dream is a piece written by the most prolific Muslim woman intellectual Begum Rokeya Shekhawat, published in the *Ladies Magazine* in 1905, from Madras. She spoke against patriarchy in Muslim community. Her *Sultana's Dream* depicts a dream sequence but it is not simply a sequence for entertainment. It rather speaks for a transformation in society to bring women out of the boundaries of four walls of home and to work in the public sphere without interference of men at all. Through a dream, she challenges the dogmas, associated with Muslim women. Her own life is an example of many such practices, like confinement in a *jenana* system, etc. This piece attempts to review as to how beautifully the text is written and how radically forceful it is that encourages the readers to think of the degraded condition of women and how women particularly, never question the same. She brings about certain unbelievable sequences of those days through her writing. At that time, women's education itself was a taboo. However, some consensus were developed by the reformers in both Hindu and Muslim communities—for them education for women was essential so that she become a good companion for her husband and a good mother. An idea that women need education for her individual growth was very rare. In spite of living and growing in such a society, it is contemplative as to how Begum Rokeya Shekhawat could manage to be so radical in her thoughts to challenge the patriarchal culture itself. She had managed to bring women into politics and scientific world, both traditionally male-dominated bastions. She had pronounced certain scientific marvels, which is relevant even today. Her idea of women's participation in politics is simply ahead of her time but relevant in contemporary Indian politics. Here, an attempt has been made to review her pioneering work. Towards the end, there is also an effort to see the condition of Muslim women in contemporary India.

**Key words:** Dream, Sultana, Review, Muslim, Radical, India

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## Introduction

Feminism is not only a concept but also a way of life.<sup>1</sup> It stands for giving voice to the oppressed whose rights are violated or even, trivialised. Many trends of feminism emerged in the West (Bhattacharya, 2009; Tong, 2014) but some powerful thoughts and assertion emerged in the East too but little is known of these trends. Nevertheless, most trends believed in equality between men and women—these are Liberal, Marxist and Socialist feminist. They believed that if men and women receive equal opportunity they can be equal to each other (Bhattacharya, 2009). That is the reason why feminism is not simply an 'ism' but rather, feminism(s).

The radical feminist believed that there is a difference between men and women. So their needs and scope for development cannot be seen on sameness. Unlike the liberal feminists, they do not see men as ideal for women. Among the radical feminists, there are two camps, namely, radical cultural and radical libertarian. It was the radical feminist who believed that there is difference between men and women (Tong, 2014). The radical cultural maintains that femininity is not a curse. They celebrate womanhood. They respect women's reproductive and their other feminine roles. However, radical libertarian negates women's biological destiny and believes that women's subordination is due to her biological compulsions. It is a general belief that radical feminism emerged in the West during the 1960s (Bhattacharyya, 2009, 2013; Tong, 2014). It was during that time in the US when there were debates on abortion, use of contraceptives, etc. (Rampton, 2008).

Notwithstanding, if we see the writings of early Indian feminists, we can see that the radical element against patriarchy was highly visible in their writings. Though, most feminist texts contain views and opinions of Western feminists but the zeal to speak against oppression was very prominent in the writings

of women writers from India too. However, Eunice De Souza (2006) in her article *Recovering a Tradition: Forgotten Women's Voices* points that there were many writers from India whose writings were ignored. One such text is *Sultana's Dream* published in *The Ladies Magazine* in 1905, in Madras written by Begum Rokeya Shekhawat Hossain. She wrote at a time when education for women was more or less a taboo. Particularly, in the Muslim community, the zeal for reform came much later when compared to that continuing in the Hindu community (Sur, 2014; Sanghi and Srija, 2014). However, later on her writings have been published into books by the Feminist Press, at the City University, New York and Tara Publishing, United Kingdom (Hossain, 1988; 2005).

## Sultana's Dream

Begum Rokeya Shekhawat is the earliest and most original critique of patriarchy in Bengal (Hossain, 1988; 2005). Like any Muslim girl of her time, she too grew up in strictest seclusion and denied formal education. Although, the condition of Hindu women of her time was no far better, she had criticised the anti-women customs among Muslims in contemporary Bengal (Hossain, 1988; 2005). Nevertheless, her arguments to speak on women's subordinate condition were applicable for other communities as well. During the time of her writing, 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. There were debates on whether women should be educated or not or if at all educated, then to what extent?

Generally, elite women from Muslim families were taught at homes. Like the Hindu reformers, the Muslim reformers also felt that with education, women would become better wives and mothers. However, going out of home for formal education was not accepted

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<sup>1</sup> About Everyday Feminism, available at: <http://everydayfeminism.com/about-ef/> (accessed on 5 May 2014)

by many Muslim elites. They preferred the *jenana* system<sup>2</sup> for educating their daughters.

Born and brought up in an elite family, her father was very restrictive of her movement outside home. However, her elder brother and sister were supportive of her education and learning. She had learnt English and scientific enquiry from her brother. After her marriage, her husband was also supportive of her learning spirits.

In spite of all restrictions in her natal home, she dared to write *Sultana's Dream*—a challenge to the contemporary consideration for discouraging English education for women.

As the title goes, the story opens in a dream sequence. A girl called Sultana once noticed a woman in her room with whom she befriended and considered as Sister Sara, who had invited her to come out of her room. Initially, Sultana was surprised and apprehensive of the dark. As she walked out of the room following the glowing light of the bright new moon, to her

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<sup>2</sup>*Jenana* system was prevalent in Muslim culture, where women were confined within specific spaces, which were away from the vision of men. It is kind of women's private space, which women share with other women in family or outside family like friends. References of *Jenana* system were also available during the Mughal Period, Maratha period (Subramanian, 2013). *Jenanas* are also spelled as *Zanana*. It is most popularly called as Harems—Arabic *ḥarīm*, in Muslim countries, the part of a house set apart for the women of the family. "The word *ḥarīmī* is used collectively to refer to the women themselves. *Zanāna* (from the Persian word *zan*, 'woman') is the term used for the harem in India, *andarūn* (Persian: 'inner part' [of a house]) in Iran. Although usually associated in Western thought with Muslim practices, harems are known to have existed in the pre-Islamic civilizations of the Middle East; there the harem served as the secure, private quarters of women who nonetheless played various roles in public life. Muhammad did not originate the idea of the harem or of the seclusion and veiling of women, but he sponsored them, and, wherever Islam spread, these institutions diffused along with it. The virtual removal of women from public life was more typical of the Islamic harem than of its predecessors, although in many periods of Islamic history women in the harem exercised various degrees of political power." (Please see 'Harem', *Encyclopædia Britannica*, available at: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/255234/harem> (accessed on 6 May 2014))

utter surprise she discovered that it was actually morning. Such sequence itself draws on the restriction of women and their confinement in darkness of sheer ignorance. Once they decide to come out of it, there is a bright world waiting for them.

Sultana's encounter with a typical opposite world than her own world shows how much she has been internalised with restrictions on women. The incidents and the encounters faced by Sultana make the reader think of her as a fictional extension of Begum Rokeya herself. The part of Sister Sara refers to that part of her understanding where she had argued against the norms of patriarchy, which decides on women's fate.

This dream sequence presents many images, which were unthinkable for women at the time when Begum Rokeya was writing. She had mentioned that Sultana had reached a place called Ladyland where women were not behind *purdah*<sup>3</sup> or living in *jenana*.

The women were busy in scientific work, and they were free to move without any restriction. The extreme radical element in Begum Rokeya's writing is visible in this text when she made many references saying men are good for nothing. She also mentioned that Ladyland

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<sup>3</sup>"Purdah, also spelled Pardah, Hindi Parda ('screen', or 'veil'), practice that was inaugurated by Muslims and later adopted by various Hindus, especially in India, and that involves the seclusion of women from public observation by means of concealing clothing (including the veil) and by the use of high-walled enclosures, screens, and curtains within the home. "The practice of purdah is said to have originated in the Persian culture and to have been acquired by the Muslims during the Arab conquest of what is now Iraq in the 7th century AD. Muslim domination of northern India in turn influenced the practice of Hinduism, and purdah became usual among the Hindu upper classes of northern India. During the British hegemony in India, purdah observance was strictly adhered to and widespread among the highly conscious Muslim minority. Since then, purdah has largely disappeared in Hindu practice, though the seclusion and veiling of women is practiced to a greater or lesser degree in many Islāmic countries." (Please see: Purdah, *Encyclopædia Britannica*, available at: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/483829/purdah> (accessed on 6 May 2014))

consists of no Police or jail as all men were inside *mardana* (opposite of *jenana*).<sup>4</sup> Therefore, as described by Sister Sara, as people those who actually commit crime are indoors, there is no need for such measures.

The celebration of scientific temperament by women in *Sultana's Dream*, itself makes it a radical feminist text. Not only she had glorified women's participation in science as a safer option but also maintained that given a chance, men had only misused it. If women receive a chance to participate in scientific learning, they can use it productively for future generations without wasting resources like men. She discusses on wars where women had taken part and had won the same. This war actually took place when few people, who had committed political offence, took refuge in the Ladyland. The King in the neighbouring country wanted to get them back. However, the Queen of Ladyland was not willing to do so. It was not her principle to turn out refugees. Therefore, the King had declared war. The men in the land stood up with arms, instantly, to defend their country. Nevertheless, all their attempts seemed to be failing one by one. The wise women in the land decided to take the matter in their hands. They knew that they will not be able to defeat men by arm or muscle power. So they decided to utilise their wisdom, here meaning scientific wisdom. It is commendable that the war was fought with wit and wisdom and scientific knowhow but never bloodshed. This is indeed commendable as it shows women's productive and constructive sense which was not recognised during those days. Certain scientific thoughts and imageries prescribed by her is in process and practice in today's scientific life like the concept of rainwater harvesting (Hossain 1988; 2005), an eco-restoration drive, a greenery movement that bears immense water management potential in areas of water crisis (Bhattacharya and Borah, 2014).

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<sup>4</sup> Mardana is a concept coined by Rokeya Shekhawat herself. It is an imaginary space where men are suggested to live just as women live in *Jenana* (Hossain, 1988; 2005; Subramanian, 2013).

Next, she mentions the role of a Queen in the text who is very dedicated to her Ladyland, who works very hard for its development. This can be compared with the importance of women in politics, which was literally unthinkable during that time.

In this way, *Sultana's dream*, although happen to come in a dream sequence, shows the author's inner desire to break all the barriers related to women. It is simply ventilating the ire that remains suppressed due to customs, which are patriarchal in nature and practice. A woman in an Indian family is considered as the 'honour' (Bhattacharyya, forthcoming).<sup>5</sup> For maintaining this honour, many restrictions are imposed on her. There is restriction in her mobility and learning, her decision in her life and her 'dreams'. Even today, we hear ignominious cases of honour killing (Siwach, 2010). This generally happens when women or even men cross the set norms imposed on them by family, religion and society.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, *Sultana's dream* speaks of a utopian Ladyland. It can come to reality if women themselves come out of the mental slavery to men. This subordination is internalised in any woman so much so that they forget to realise their own potential. Seldom women try to assert their identity as it goes against their given role and responsibility towards their familial duties.

Notwithstanding, the text of Begum Rokeya inspires one to take a dive into the status of Muslim women in contemporary India. It may be noted that the position of women under Islam have been the subject of debate, more among the educated Muslims. This trend becomes more prominent since the impact of Western liberalisation. "The controversial subject of women's rights has assumed great importance in the Islamic world and is a burning issue today" (Kaushik and Munjial, 2013). One of the most striking parts of the

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<sup>5</sup> Honour means pride (for details please refer to Thousands of Women Killed for Family "Honor", *National Geographic News*, available at: [http://news.nationalgeographic.co.in/news/2002/02/02\\_12\\_020212\\_honorkilling\\_2.html](http://news.nationalgeographic.co.in/news/2002/02/02_12_020212_honorkilling_2.html) (accessed on 7th May 2014).

Indian Constitution is the fundamental right related to equality of religion and freedom of cultural practices. Our Constitution has laid down in Articles 25 to 30 the rights of religious, cultural and linguistic minorities and thus made India a truly democratic and pluralist nation (Kaushik and Munjial, 2013). Indeed this is a very progressive right for the sustenance of all the communities. However, the communities' emphasise on Personal Laws in matters of family, inheritance, adoption, etc. As Kaushik and Munjial (2013) writes:

Islam supervises the entire lifespan of a woman in sufficient detail. Islam also contributes to the improvement of the status of women in many ways—for example, meting out good treatment and respecting a foster mother, by making a woman the mistress of her own property with no interference, by giving her the right to claim divorce on certain grounds, permission to hold any public office, remarriage, encouragement to study.

However, Muslim girls are among the least educated sections of Indian society (Shinde and John, 2012; Sur, 2014). "The Constitution of India in Article 15(1) on right to equality provides the basic policy framework that enshrines the vision of girls' education and the spirit in which their education is to be provided" (Shinde and John, 2012).

The deprivation of Muslim women also goes at par with the status of Muslims in general. The Sachar Committee Report was itself a revelation, conducted in order to analyse the role of Muslims in India. It gave the picture of relative deprivation of Muslims in various dimensions like education and employment (Basant, 2012; Sur, 2014; Sanghi and Srijia 2014). The 1991 Census reveals that that there were 48 million Muslim women in India. In 2001 census, this figure increased to 62.5 million. Currently, over 50 per cent of Muslim women in India are illiterate. This literacy rate merely includes anyone who can read and write a sentence or two. Compared to the Southern States, the condition of literacy, particularly, in

rural areas is quite dismal. As high as 85 per cent of rural Muslim women in India are illiterate (Shinde and John, 2012). The Indian Muslim population stands with a strength of 170 million as per the National Family Health Survey-3 (NFHS-3). The future trend of population growth rate indicates that by 21st century, India's total population will stabilise. The Sachar Committee notes that the Muslim population would stand at only 20 per cent of the total population.

The growth of Muslim population is higher than many other communities. NFHS-3 has observed that the use of modern contraceptives is low among the Muslims when compared to other religion. "Religious differences in the use of modern contraception, based on the latest NFHS-3 (2005-06) data, clearly indicate the prevalence rate of modern contraception is the highest among Jains (69%) and lowest among Muslims (36%)" (Mohammed, 2013). I argue that this trend of higher fertility rate can also be related to their low percentage in education, particularly among the women, which is supposedly the result of a dominant patriarchal structure that controls women's fertility.

Many Muslim scholars like Ashgar Ali Engineer of contemporary times say that Islam has much higher reverence for women. He takes the note of the case of Shah Bano<sup>6</sup> (see, Sur, 2014) where the Muslims were blamed nationwide for ill treatment towards their women after

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<sup>6</sup>The Shah Bano case is a landmark case in the history of India. It has fuelled various debates on rights of women within various religions, the rights of minority religion in country and women's right and rights of religion through exercise their personal Laws (religious code of conduct). "A 60-year-old woman went to court asking maintenance from her husband who had divorced her. The court ruled in her favour. Shah Bano was entitled to maintenance from her ex-husband under Section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code (with an upper limit of ₹500 a month) like any other Indian woman. The judgment was not the first granting a divorced Muslim woman maintenance under Section 125. But a voluble orthodoxy deemed the verdict an attack on Islam." For more information, please refer to The Shah Bano Legacy (10 August 2003). *The Hindu*, available at: <http://www.hindu.com/2003/08/10/stories/2003081000221500.htm> (accessed on 20 May 2014).

divorce. Engineer blames the national media for defaming Islam without taking the ill treatment of women in other religion. In similar context, Sur (2014) argues that the status of Muslim women is to be seen from the point of 'difference'. Even the Muslim women themselves are not homogenous (Sur, 2014). However, certain commonality is observed in terms of their participation in education, politics, economy and workforce, which is very low. As per 2011 Census, the work participation rate of the Muslims is as low as 31.3 per cent. It is lowest among all the major religion like Hindus (40.4), Christians (39.7), Sikhs (37.7), Buddhists (40.6) and Jains (32.9). The 2011 Census also reveals that while the total work participation for Muslim men stands at 47.5 per cent, for Muslim women it is only 14.1 per cent (see also, Sanghi and Srijia, 2014).<sup>7</sup>

The dictum of *talaq*<sup>8</sup> and *purdah*, though seem expressions of religious rights, as sanctioned by Personal Laws, these cannot be generalised for all Muslim women. There are conservative, progressive and fundamentalist sections within Muslim community. It is also divided along caste lines like any Hindu community. Among these, the progressive group are very positive of women's progress and emancipation. They "have not only relentlessly challenged the conservative interpretations but also exhorted for reinterpretations of the Quranic verses."<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, there is still a long way to go for improving the condition of Muslim women. It is only recently that there has been some interest to research on Muslim women (Sur, 2014). The dominant trends have been to research on Hindu women who belong to the majority Indian group. The deprivation of Muslim women is also attributed to religious fundamentalism, which deprives the minorities of their rightful position. However, in spite of some privileges for maintaining religious

identity, rather, it further deteriorates the condition of Muslim women within the community. Here, the debates between collective rights and individual rights intersects and causes clash with each other.

Nevertheless, in the beginning of the 20th Century, Begum Rokeya, through her writing, had attracted international attention to understand the condition of Indian women. However, in Indian context, such writings are popular only among the learners of feminism. The society in general is patriarchal. Therefore, such writings should be published in day-to-day popular texts available for people in all academic and non-academic fields. Indeed, it calls for a social transformation, but such spirit is not decentralised. There need to be assertion among women of all class to assert their own identity. In all possible way, *Sultana's Dream* is purely a feminist text, which has relevance in the contemporary times. Indeed, this text was written much ahead of its time and thereby, sustains interest with its radical approach.

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<sup>7</sup>Distribution of Population by Religions. *Drop-in-Article: Census of India 2011*, p 5.

<sup>8</sup>*Talaq* is an Arabic word for divorce. It means to set free. For more information, please refer to Divorce in Islam, *Islamic Centre.org*, <http://www.islamiccentre.org/presentations/divorce.pdf> (accessed on 20 May 2014).

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