

Women's empowerment in "Sultana's Dream" by Begum Rokeya

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Abstract

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a person with mighty personality, gifted with creative talents, was the pathfinder if not the pioneer of women's awakening in Bengal. During an era of social crisis in twentieth century Begum Rokeya did remain fairly visible like a star in the night sky and illuminated as a lamp in the darkness. She has turned into a rebel to free the captives of the gynaeceum going against the contemporary eroding, emaciated society that was submerged in manifold superstitions. Because wherever she went she experienced the horrible sight of bondage and slavery of women folks everywhere. Apart from that she felt that gradual daily morbid livelihood of women in a patriarchal society. Under such circumstances, Begum Rokeya, to emancipate women from their shackled state took the vow and inspiration to fight for it till death. She had this strong faith that women's awaking is a must prior to any kind of national awakening and without a vitalized mother-power a nation cannot progress towards development. So, she delved into a world of imagination and fantasy to appear as a revolting soul against the patriarchal society and in this context, in 1905 she wrote "Sultana's Dream". In "Sultana's Dream" Begum Rokeya, indeed has introduced a very high idealism. In her dream she finds a splendid, surprising reign of women's kingdom where men are under veil and women with a magical power took control over the nature and dominating all the world and nature. In the imagined reign of women of Begum Rokeya, there are no places for grief or suffering, of sin and remorse, of old age or pain, or chaos. It's filled with peace and only peace towards every direction. So, it proves, how high was her idea of womanhood and her belief in it was paramount. Here appears the writer's real plan and idea for an empowered womanhood. In a nutshell, the dream that Begum Rokeya imagined in the wake of her youth, she spent all her remaining days of life to actualize it. As a consequence, path to the future movements for women's emancipation became broadened.

Key words: Imagination, Pioneer, Empowerment, Creativity, Farsightedness.

At the outset of the twentieth century the Muslim society was in fact virtually encircled with its own illiteracy, ill-practices, numerous superstitions and

darkness. Instead of light of progressive education there were the stern impositions of religious doctrines that were so hard to break through. In other word this era was a dark age in the history of Muslims in India. In the disguise of 'Parda' or veil sneaked the forces of confinement and inside this confinement the women had been dying little by little each and every day.

Muslim women had always been captives in their veiled chambers in a house, without any right to access the outside world. They had no permission to see any other man, not even their own husbands during the day. In this critical era, not only a woman's body was veiled even her hand-writing was forbidden to be seen by other men, otherwise it was termed same as being without a veil. Thus, training and education for women was denied. Throughout the whole nineteenth and twentieth century women had been let to mutter Koran Sharif just as a parrot being strictly in accordance with the traditional permissible laws. This would obviously fail to saturate the heart and mind of Muslim women. The utter surprising incident is, how in that repressive social condition a woman of Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's (1880-1932) stature was born. Among the women litterateurs in twentieth century Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain strived in creating literatures with her exceptional personality and afflictive realization of life. She, with her vast empathic heart and compassion with the suppressed women folk, represented their plights with satire and pain simultaneously through her

writings. Her influential and weighty writings would help change the traditional society and resuscitate the advancement of women awakening.

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain has never uttered the word 'feminism', although, the present traits and aspects of women awakening were present in her writings. Her writings have a hidden flow, things unuttered, and her words give voice to the hitherto kept dumb, women thus inspirational to their freedom. In this context, the founder of Gokhle Memorial School, Mrs. P.K.Roy has observed that – "Bharotio naritter je aadorsho ami Chirodin mone mone poshon koriacchi jaha akantoi Bharater boisishtyo bolia ami mone kori- tahari bikash dekhiachilam Begum Rokeyer Jibone."¹ (the idea of ideal Indian women that I have always nurtured in me which I have always felt as entirely of Indian essence – is seen realized in the life of Begum Rokeya. Translation mine). In other words Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain did remain fairly visible like a star in the night sky and illuminated as a lamp in the darkness.

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain could not leave behind much literary contribution in her short-lived 52 years of life. Her important writings were – 'Pipasha' (1902), 'Motichur' (1904), 'Aborodhbasini' (1931), 'Narir Adhikar' (1932) etc. Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, in fact had penned her own desired dreams in real life in her small 38 page book "Sultana's Dream". "Sultana's Dream" was Begum Rokeya Sakhawat

Hossain's first book written in English. This one was first published in the 'Indian Ladies Magazine' from Madras in 1905 edited by Kamala Sathia Nathan and Sarojini Naidu. Afterwards it was published by S.K. Lahiri and Company of Kolkata in 1908 from College Street as a pamphlet. Latter on Begum Rokeya herself did a translation of this work.

About "Sultana's Dream" Begum Rokeya has said –" Se bohudiner kotha (1905 A.D.) amra thokhon Bhagalpurer banka Subdivisione chilam. Amar pujonio Swami tour-e giachilen, Ami basai Sompurno ekaki chilam. Somoy Japoner nimmitto kichu ekta likhlam."² (it's been a story of long back, (1905), when we used to stay at Banka subdivision in Bhagalpur. Once my revered husband went on a tour and I was all alone at home and just to spend that much free time I wrote something. Translation mine). In "Sultana's Dream" Begum Rokeya, indeed has introduced a very high idealism. In her dream she finds a splendid, surprising reign of women's kingdom where men are under veil and women with magical power took control over the nature and dominating all the world and nature. In the imagined reign of women of Begum Rokeya, there are no places for grief or suffering, of sin and remorse, of old age or pain, or chaos. It's filled with peace and only peace towards every direction. So, it proves, how high was her idea of womanhood and her belief in it was paramount. Keeping this ideal of her, its expected without any doubt that women in the forthcoming eras will keep

on striving towards freedom and liberation. In this writing, the true features on women's empowerment that she dreamt to realize are depicted. It's mentionable that here the topic going to be observed is about "Women's empowerment in "Sultana's Dream" by Begum Rokeya."

In the introduction to "Sultana's Dream", the writer has posed "Sultana ekjon aboruddha nari. Griher chuturskon hoitecche taheer bichoron O Karmokhetro – Surjer alok, Chander kiron O prokitir nirmal baui taheer pokkhe haram- taha voge koriber jonno etotuku adhikar taheer chilo na. Visvar aishwarya, dhonosampad O Souvaggya taheer padotole chilo."³ (Sultana as a captive lady. The four corners of the household is her dwelling and working space – Sunlight, gleam of moon or the fresh air of nature – she was not entitled to enjoy any of these. The treasures, riches and fortunes of the world were under her feet. Translation mine). Sultana has dreamt that together with her sister Sara she left the restricted chamber of the house to an open liberated nature that is known as 'Lady Land'. In this Lady Land the men are captives and it's an emancipated, crystal transparent, unadulterated Garden of Eden. It's a country for women that has reached its ultimate zenith with the virtue of women's talents, intelligence and versatile discoveries. In this land the country is run by laws that are formulated only by women and women's sense of practicality, farsightedness, personalities and talents, always maneuvers the country to a new

direction. In the writer's own word – "Purusher karje O ramonir karje ei praved. Purushera kono valo kaj Sucharu rupe koriber upojukta noi. Nari Jaha dasbothore korite pare, purush taha Satto Satto barsey-o korite akkhom."⁴ (there is the difference between men and women's efficiency at work, that is – what a woman can achieve in 10 years, the man is unable to complete it even after thousands of years. Translation mine).

The female is utterly powerful and much superior in talents and creativity. If women awaken their potential strength they can create boundless possibilities of unblemished beauty, resource and welfare on earth. The principal reason to writing "Sultana's Dream", was to germinate the seeds of self confidence and self spirit in the heart of helpless captive women folk in Bengal. In the writer's own word- "Ei Sankot Samoye Samrangi Jonakotok buddhimoti Mohilake loiya Sabha aahaban korilen... Maharani bolilen, Jodi aponara bahubole desh rakksha korite na paren, tobe mostiseko bole desh rakksher chesta korun."⁵ (in this time of crisis, the queen summoned a meeting consisted of a few intelligent women.... And said, if you cannot protect the country with muscles then try to save it with the brain. Translation mine).

In this Dream-country, constructed by Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, nobody is allowed to indulge in ugly or unethical behavior, as in a Dreamland there are no thieves or police or things that are unjust or atrocious. This Dreamland

made by women is truly a garden of heaven. According to the writer- "Ei desh boro Sukher sthan. Aha mori. Eiher name Sukh Sthan hoi nai keno?"⁶ (this land has so much happiness and comfort. Ah... this land should have been named Happiness land. Translation mine). Not only this, in this Dreamland there has never been anything like plague, epidemic, famine or scarcity of food and as a result nobody has an untimely death, and poverty or helplessness are issues that are unknown.

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain had rightly realized that to ignite the light in that darkness the need was of a comprehensive awakening, specially a rejuvenated women race. And that desired awakening is possible only through education. For her education was- "Our girls should not only obtain university degrees but must be ideal daughters, wives and mothers- or I may say obedient daughters, loving sisters, dutiful wives and instructive mothers."⁷ Her thought was- "Nari Siskher prosare adhopotito narisamajke unnoto korar mukkyho upai."⁸ (to infuse women - education is the primary way to upgrade their fallen condition. Translation mine), as education is a power that generates consciousness and shows the stairs towards awakening. A woman when educated can get herself free from the shackles of ill-rites and superstitions. In her "Sultana's Dream" she has described that in her 30 years of regime numerous schools for girls were established, golden flow of higher education reached even to the villages,

laws incorporated against child marriage, dowry system and polygamy; universities established in the capital, scientific researches, chemical laboratories and observatories started in the only-woman universities. Not only have these women begun manufacturing modern warfare weapons but they have come to know the usages also. In other words, a greater renaissance has been created with the revolutionary reshuffling in the education sector.

In 'Sultana's Dream' the writer has shown a bizarre structure in the Land of Women, where women went victorious against the patriarchy not with muscle power but with intelligence. Established by only women, in this land men are 'minor' or second class citizens and restricted into men's ascertained places or they are just "Mordanabasi". Begum Rokeya has described the way women managed the royal state affairs, finance and business, scientific researches, education and culture, war strategies, organizing meetings or political farsightedness in resisting enemies etc , all these actually surfaces ambitions of her own inner self and proving the credibility of women courageously running a state of their own with utmost firmness.

When Begum Rokeya Sakhaawat Hossain wrote "Sultana's Dream", she was aged only 25. Hence in this book the dream of a young feminist woman to realize female domination is obvious, which is soft and sweet but ruthless and merciless in vengeance. The writer has not

analyzed the social life in the Women's Land, but has banished the males entirely. In fact "Sultana's Dream" is a scientific utopia. Here she has not created any golden age of any by gone eras but proposed a future female society based on science as she believed that only science could liberate women freeing her from all kinds of garbage and superstitions. So, her Women's Land is scientific and opposite to the concept of motherland. In her imaginary Women's Land, all the social diseases have been terminated thus "Sultana's Dream" is the story of the paramount victory of the matriarchy and decisive defeat of the patriarchy.

In "Sultana's dream" , the writer's Dream State is an opposite state machinery to the colonialism as in this state there would be no warfare (in fact they have no time to fight), no divisive disturbances, no foreign rule or extortion, not even the need of keeping a defense system. The writer says that - "Uponibeshe dariddro ese Jonogonke grash kore. Ei dariddroter karonei Bharotioder roge byaddhi hoi. Nana roge vuge tader okal mrityu ghote."⁹ (in colonies poverty exhumes the mass and because of this poverty Indians suffer from numerous diseases and die premature deaths. Translation mine). Begum Rokeya has written in her 'Sultana's Dream' that - "Tahader (sarader) nari sthan kokhono mahamari roge akranto hoi na. tahara amader nyai hooldhar mosher dongson e adhir hon na. Bishes ekti kotha Sunia ami ontoto bismitto hoilam, naristhane naki kaharo okal Mrityu hoi na."¹⁰ (their

(sara's) women's land has never been plagued with epidemic and they never suffer so much with bites of mosquitoes and I was so surprised to hear a certain thing about them - that in the Women's Land nobody dies a premature death. Translation mine).

In terms of modernization, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hosssain is an unique theorist. In a wider perspective she wrote for the marginalized mass staggering behind in a society. In all her activities the concept of reading history from below is manifested, as we are promised in the Subaltern studies to focus the limelight on the hitherto overlooked marginalized people (laborers, farmers, lower middle class, the poor lay people of the villages and cities, tribal communities and women). Begum Rokeya's writing has fulfilled the same promise. Ranajit Guha has constructed a neo-perspective on the subaltern mass that is termed as alternative modernity and this alternative modernity could be traced first in the thoughts and writings of Begum Rokeya. Dr. Sonita Sarkar too observes that the signs of an alternative modernity is clearly present in Begum Rokeya's thoughts and visions because – the dream Sultana dreams is the dream for modernization, a dream to free and transform the soul or person from their confined situations.

In the history of women's movement or Bengali literature, Begum Rokeya possessed a stern farsightedness. In the "Sultana's Dream" while imagining a gradual development of modern science

and its outcomes, she dreamt of travelling in the sky, which is nowadays a daily reality of our lives. She herself wrote- "Je Somoy ami sultanar Swapno lekhiachilam tokhon aeroplanes O Japelineser astitto chilo na. Emonki sei somoy Bharote motorcar-o ase nai. Baidutick alok ebong phakha kolponar atit chilo. Ontoto ami thokhon sesab kichu dekhi nai."¹¹ (when I did write "Sultana's Dream", there were no existence of aeroplanes or Japelines, not even motor cars were being used in India and electric lights or fans were something beyond our imaginations. Atleast I did not see any of those things. Translation mine). After 25 years of writing "Sultana's Dream", Begum Rokeya travelled for the first time in an aeroplane in 1930. She said about it – "Banger prothom muslim piloter (Morader) Sohit Je prothom abrodhbondhini nari urilo se ami."¹² (the first captive lady of Bengal who flew first time with the first ever Bengali Muslim pilot (Morad), was none other but me. Translation mine). The biographer of Begum Rokeya, Shamsun Nahar Mahamud said, Begum Rokeya's heart must have been over flooded with joy and contentment while traveling by air, seeing her long cherished dream in the book "Sultana's Dream", being a reality in her lifetime. It's a matter of joy that her dream just did not remain an utopia that she could see her dream come true in the last years of her lifetime.

The unique ambition or dream Begum Rokeya had seen was to awaken women race of their plight and also of their golden youth. She had spent and persisted all her life to materialize it. She was in fact like

an illuminated lotus in the darkness of an age of gloom. Working hard for a lifetime she could finally make the impossible possible for the 'imprisoned' womenfolk of Bengal and it's a surprising story at the way her dreams have come true. Through her efforts in literature Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain had dreamt of the women of this country with their full strength and vigor and pride. "Sultana's Dream" actually depicts only the tip of her vast dream.

End notes

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4. Ibid. P- 122.
5. Ibid. P- 118.
6. Ibid. P-122.
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10. Ghosh, A. Ibid. P-114.
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12. Ibid. PP- 63-64.

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