

Reimagining Ladyland: Women's Education, Science, and Social Transformation in Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream*

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ABSTRACT

Published in 1905, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* is widely recognised as one of the earliest feminist utopian narratives produced in colonial South Asia. While existing scholarship has examined the text from literary and feminist perspectives, this article situates it within the historical context of Muslim women's education and social reform in colonial Bengal. It argues that Ladyland represents more than an imaginative reversal of gender relations; it is Rokeya's vision of an alternative society founded upon education, scientific knowledge, ethical governance, and social responsibility. By placing women at the centre of universities, scientific institutions, and public administration, Rokeya challenged contemporary assumptions regarding women's intellectual abilities and questioned the social practices that confined them to the domestic sphere. The article further demonstrates that *Sultana's Dream* critiques not only patriarchy but also militarism and imperial expansion by presenting scientific inquiry and peaceful coexistence as the foundations of an ideal society. Drawing upon *Sultana's Dream* alongside Rokeya's essays and contemporary scholarship on women's education and reform, the study employs a contextual historical approach to examine the relationship between gender, education, science, and social transformation. It concludes that *Sultana's Dream* should be understood not merely as a feminist fantasy but as a historically grounded intervention that articulated Rokeya's broader programme for women's emancipation and the reconstruction of society through knowledge.

Keywords - Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*, Ladyland, Women's Education, Colonial Bengal, Muslim Women, Science and Society, Feminist Utopia, Social Reform, Colonialism.

INTRODUCTION

Published in 1905 in *The Indian Ladies' Magazine*, *Sultana's Dream* occupies a distinctive place in the intellectual history of colonial India. Written by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932), the narrative imagines a country called *Ladyland*, where women occupy positions of authority in government, education, and scientific research, while men remain confined within the *mardana* (male counterpart of *zenana*). Through the framework of a dream, Rokeya reverses the prevailing gender order and constructs an alternative society that questions accepted assumptions regarding women's intellectual ability, public participation, and social responsibility. Although she presented her work as a fantasy, but the concerns that shape Ladyland emerged from the social realities of colonial Bengal and the contemporary debates surrounding women's education and reform.

The publication of *Sultana's Dream* coincided with a period when women's education had become an increasingly important subject within reformist discourse in colonial India. Among Muslims, educational opportunities for girls remained extremely limited. As Gail Minault observes, girls rarely received education outside their homes because the observance of *purdah* restricted their movement from an early age. Instruction generally took place within the household under the supervision of *ustanis* (female tutors) or educated relatives, and for many girls education remained confined to the religious instruction. A small number acquired Persian, Urdu, or Arabic through male members of the family, but domestic responsibilities occupied much of their time and prepared them primarily for their future roles as wives and mothers rather than for intellectual pursuits. These conditions formed the wider historical background against which Rokeya developed her ideas on women's education and social advancement.

Scholars have approached *Sultana's Dream* from a variety of perspectives. Debali Mookerjee-Leonard argues that the narrative goes beyond a critique of *purdah* by presenting women's education as the principal means of overcoming oppressive social and religious practices. Barnita Bagchi situates Rokeya within the broader movement for Muslim women's education in Bengal and highlights her role as an advocate of educational reform. Rajeshwari Sundar Rajan emphasised that science and education constitute the intellectual foundations of Ladyland, where women demonstrate mastery over fields generally considered the preserve of men. Nilanjana Bhattacharyya interprets the reversal of gender roles as a strategy through which Rokeya exposes the constructed nature of masculine and feminine identities, while Samadrita Kuite argues that Ladyland rejects not only patriarchal authority but also the ideals of militarism, territorial expansion, and domination by presenting scientific knowledge and peaceful governance as the basis of political order. Yasmin Hossain similarly views the narrative as Rokeya's vision of a female society made possible through education and public responsibility. Collectively, these studies have established *Sultana's Dream* as an important feminist and utopian text (the term Utopia is generally mean as an imagined form of ideal or superior society), yet comparatively less attention has been given to reading it as a historical intervention within the social and intellectual environment of colonial Bengal.

This article approaches *Sultana's Dream* from a historical perspective by situating it within the wider context of Muslim women's education and social reform in colonial Bengal. It argues that Ladyland was more than an imaginative reversal of gender relations. Through the centrality of women's education, scientific inquiry, and ethical governance, Rokeya articulated an alternative vision of society that challenged patriarchal convention. The article therefore asks three interrelated questions: how did Rokeya reimagine women's participation in public life through Ladyland; what role did science and education play in the organisation of this imagined society; and how did Ladyland reflect Rokeya's broader vision of social transformation? To address these questions, the study employs a contextual historical reading of *Sultana's Dream*, analysing the primary text alongside secondary scholarships on Rokeya, Muslim women's education, and reform movements in colonial India. By placing the narrative within its historical setting, the article examines how imaginative fiction became a medium through which Rokeya articulated her ideas on gender, knowledge, governance, and social change.

Historical Context: Colonial Bengal, Rokeya, and the Imagining of Ladyland

Sultana's Dream was published in 1905, at a time when questions concerning women's education and social reform had become increasingly prominent in colonial India. While the nineteenth century witnessed the growth of educational institutions and reformist initiatives, these developments benefited different communities unevenly. As Gail Minault observes, Muslim girls rarely received education outside

their homes because *purdah* required them to remain within the domestic sphere from an early age. Their education generally depended on *ustanis* (female tutors) or educated family members. During childhood, girls often learnt to recite the Qur'an alongside their brothers, but as they grew older, instruction increasingly became confined to the household. For most, education extended little beyond religious learning. Domestic responsibilities such as cooking, sewing, caring for younger siblings, and assisting their mothers occupied much of their day, leaving little opportunity for sustained study. Education was therefore intended to prepare girls for their expected roles as wives and mothers rather than to encourage intellectual or professional development.

The restrictions Imposed by *purdah* affected much more than education. They determined women's movement, limited their access to public spaces, and reinforced their dependence on male authority. Roushan Jahan notes that elite Muslim women spent much of their lives within the *zenana*, where opportunities for independent activity remained extremely limited. Yasmin Hossain similarly argues that Rokeya regarded such conditions as a form of social bondage. In her essays, she repeatedly questioned a system that denied women freedom of choice, reduced them to dependence, and measured their respectability through seclusion rather than intellectual ability. It was within this social environment that Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain developed her ideas on women's education and imagined an alternative social order in Ladyland.

Rokeya's own life reflected many of these realities. Born in 1880 into a wealthy but conservative Muslim zamindar family in Rangpur, she was denied formal schooling while her brothers received systematic education. Nevertheless, with the encouragement of her elder brother Ibrahim, she secretly learnt Bengali and English alongside Arabic, Persian, and Urdu. Karimunnessa (sister of Rokeya) herself had struggled against similar restrictions. Having secretly educated herself by listening to the lessons given to her brothers, she later became an important intellectual influence on Rokeya. Her questioning of prevailing customs encouraged Rokeya to examine the position of women critically and shaped many of the concerns that later appeared in her writings (Yasmin Hossain).

Marriage offered Rokeya greater intellectual freedom. Her husband, Syed Sakhawat Hossain, encouraged her interest in learning and supported her study of English, which was an uncommon attitude at that time. While living in Bhagalpur, where her husband served as a government official, Rokeya wrote *Sultana's Dream*, which appeared in *The Indian Ladies' Magazine* in 1905 (Bagchi). Recalling its composition many years later, she explained that she wrote the story during her husband's absence on official duty, partly to occupy her time and partly to improve her English. After reading the manuscript, he reportedly remarked, "*A terrible revenge!*", recognising the deliberate reversal of gender relations upon which the narrative was built.

Rokeya's criticism of *purdah*, however, extended beyond imaginative fiction. In her collection *The Secluded Ones*, she documented incidents that illustrated the human consequences of rigid seclusion. In one account, she described a woman trapped inside a burning house. Although she had gathered her jewellery and reached the doorway, she refused to leave because unrelated men were attempting to extinguish the fire outside. Rokeya ended the account with bitter irony, "*she burned to death but did not come out. Long live purdah!*" (Report Eight, *The Secluded ones*). In another incident, she narrated the death of a woman who fell from a railway platform while travelling in a burqa, although numerous men witnessed the accident and wished to assist her, none dared to touch her because social conventions forbade physical contact with a secluded woman. After suffering for several hours, she died from her injuries (Report Fourteen, *The Secluded ones*). These accounts reveal that, in Rokeya's view, *purdah* was not

merely a matter of modesty or domestic life; it was a social institution that could endanger women's dignity, mobility, education, and even their lives.

It was against this historical background that *Sultana's Dream* should be understood. By the time the story was published, Rokeya had already emerged as a prominent advocate of Muslim women's education. Debali Mookerjee-Leonard argues that the narrative offers more than a critique of *purdah*; it presents education as the principal means through which women could challenge oppressive social practices. Barnita Bagchi similarly places Rokeya within the broader movement for Muslim women's education in Bengal, demonstrating that her literary writings formed part of a sustained programme of educational reform that later included the establishment of the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School in Calcutta and her active involvement in the Anjuman-i-Khawatin-i-Islam (Bagchi; Debali Mookerjee-Leonard).

Ladyland therefore emerged not as an escape from reality but as a response to it. Instead of accepting the social arrangements that confined women to the domestic sphere, Rokeya imagined a society in which women occupied the centre of public life. The dream enabled her to reverse the existing order and demonstrate what might become possible when women were no longer denied education, mobility, or intellectual freedom. As the narrator enters Ladyland and discovers that men are secluded within the *mardana* while women administer the state, the reversal immediately exposes the arbitrariness of the conventions governing gender in colonial society. The historical realities of colonial Bengal thus provide the essential context for understanding Ladyland not merely as a literary fantasy but as Rokeya's vision of social transformation grounded in education, knowledge, and women's public participation.

Women in *Ladyland*: Reimagining Gender and Public Life

The most striking feature of *Sultana's Dream* is the reversal of conventional gender roles. Upon entering *Ladyland*, Sultana immediately notices the absence of men in the streets and is surprised to find women occupying public spaces without fear or restraint. When she expresses discomfort at walking outside unveiled, Sister Sara (Sultana's companion and guide in Ladyland), calmly assures her that there is no danger because "the men are shut in the Mardana." This simple exchange introduces the central premise of the narrative and immediately challenges the assumptions governing gender relations in colonial society. By assigning men to the secluded domestic sphere traditionally occupied by women, Rokeya exposes the socially constructed nature of gender roles rather than treating them as natural or immutable. The reversal is reinforced through humour and irony. As Sultana walks through Ladyland, groups of women laugh at her because of her hesitant behaviour. Curious about their reaction, she asks Sister Sara why they are amused. Sara explains that they think Sultana looks "very mannish." (*Hossain*, Sultana's Dream). When Sultana asks what this means, Sara replies, "They mean that you are shy and timid like men" (*Hossain*, Sultana's Dream). The exchange deliberately inverts the language commonly used to describe women. Qualities such as timidity and hesitation, usually regarded as feminine virtues, are instead associated with men. Nilanjana Bhattacharyya argues that this reversal demonstrates how ideas of masculinity and femininity are socially produced rather than biologically determined. By transferring these characteristics from women to men, Rokeya questions the assumptions upon which gender hierarchies were built.

The same conversation also challenges the belief that physical strength naturally justifies male authority. When Sultana wonders how women could have gained control over society, Sister Sara dismisses the argument that strength alone confers power. She remarks, "A lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race" (*Hossain*, Sultana's Dream). The statement shifts the basis of

authority from physical force to intellectual ability. Power in Ladyland is not acquired through bodily strength or coercion but through knowledge, reason, and scientific achievement. Rokeya thus rejects one of the most common arguments used to justify women's exclusion from public life by suggesting that intellectual capacity, rather than physical superiority, should determine leadership.

Although Ladyland places men within the *mardana*, Rokeya does not depict their confinement as an act of revenge. Rather, the reversal functions as a satirical device that enables readers to experience familiar social practices from an unfamiliar perspective. Samadrita Kuite observes that by confining men to the domestic sphere, Rokeya exposes the double standards of patriarchal society and reveals the injustice of excluding women from public life. The role reversal therefore becomes a means of criticising the structures that sustained female seclusion rather than an endorsement of female domination.

Women's freedom in Ladyland is inseparable from their active participation in public affairs. They are not merely visible in public spaces but occupy positions of responsibility throughout the state. They administer educational institutions, conduct scientific research, advise the Queen, and contribute directly to governance. The Queen herself presides over political affairs, while women scientists and university teachers participate in decisions affecting the welfare and security of the kingdom. Public authority is therefore presented not as an exclusively masculine domain but as one open to those possessing knowledge and competence.

Education forms the foundation of this transformation. Debali Mookerjee-Leonard argues that Rokeya viewed education as the principal means through which women could overcome the social restrictions imposed by *purdah*. Ladyland reflects this conviction by portraying women whose intellectual abilities have been fully developed through systematic education. Rajeshwari Sundar Rajan similarly notes that Rokeya deliberately places women at the centre of scientific and educational institutions, thereby challenging contemporary assumptions that advanced learning belonged exclusively to men. In Ladyland, education is not simply a personal accomplishment but the basis upon which women participate in governance and contribute to society.

Rokeya's vision also reflects her broader commitment to women's educational advancement beyond her writing *Sultana's Dream*. Barnita Bagchi demonstrates that her literary work formed part of a sustained campaign to expand educational opportunities for Muslim women, a commitment later realised through the establishment of the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School and her involvement in women's organisations. Ladyland therefore represents not an impossible fantasy but an extension of the educational ideals that Rokeya sought to promote in colonial Bengal.

By reimagining women's relationship with public life, Rokeya also questioned the principles upon which authority itself was organised. Leadership in Ladyland depends neither on gender nor on inherited privilege. Instead, it rests upon learning, rational judgement, and service to society. Through this reconfiguration, *Sultana's Dream* challenges the assumption that women were naturally unsuited to governance and public responsibility.

Science, Education, and the Making of Ladyland

One of the most distinctive features of *Sultana's Dream* is Rokeya's decision to place science and education at the centre of Ladyland's success. Rather than presenting social progress as the outcome of political reform alone, she argues that an educated society is capable of transforming every aspect of public life. In Ladyland, scientific knowledge is not confined to laboratories or universities but is applied to agriculture, environmental management, public welfare, and national security. The narrative therefore

links women's education directly with scientific advancement, suggesting that intellectual development is the true foundation of a prosperous society.

Education is presented as the first step towards this transformation. When Sultana asks how women attained such an advanced position, Sister Sara explains that the government deliberately expanded educational opportuni-

-ties for girls. She states, "According to the number of girls, schools were founded and supported by the Government. Education was spread far and wide among women" (*Hossain, Sultana's Dream*). Education in Ladyland extends well beyond elementary literacy. Women receive university training and pursue advanced scientific research, enabling them to participate fully in public administration and intellectual life. Rajan argues that Rokeya deliberately assigned women mastery over scientific disciplines at a time when girls' education generally emphasized domestic accomplishments rather than the sciences. Ladyland therefore demonstrates that women possess the same intellectual potential as men when given equal educational opportunities.

The emphasis on higher education reflects Rokeya's own belief that knowledge was the principal means through which women could overcome social restrictions. Debali Mookerjea-Leonard observes that *Sultana's Dream* presents women's education as an antidote to oppressive social practices rather than merely an instrument of personal advancement. This vision closely parallels Rokeya's own educational works. In Ladyland, education is not simply valued as an individual achievement; it becomes the basis upon which society itself is reorganized.

Scientific research occupies an equally important position in Ladyland. Unlike the contemporary belief that scientific knowledge belonged primarily to men, Rokeya imagines women directing laboratories, conducting experiments, and producing innovations that improve everyday life. Explaining one such invention, Sister Sara tells Sultana, "We have invented a machine by which we can draw as much water from the atmosphere as we please." This technology enables the inhabitants of Ladyland to regulate rainfall, prevent floods, and supply water whenever necessary. Rather than attempting to dominate nature, scientific knowledge is employed to manage natural resources responsibly for the benefit of society.

The women of Ladyland also develop methods of utilizing renewable sources of energy. Sister Sara proudly explains, we have collected the sun-heat and kept it in a store. And we can use it as we wish. Solar energy is subsequently employed for a variety of public purposes, including agriculture and national defence. Long before the modern discussion of renewable energy, Rokeya imagined a society in which scientific research focused upon harnessing natural resources without destructive exploitation. Scientific advancement is therefore represented not as an instrument of industrial expansion but as a means of improving human welfare.

Science proves its practical value when Ladyland is invented by a neighbouring king after the man failed to defend the Kingdom, the queen interested the responsibility to the lady principal whose scientific innovation defeats the enemy without bloodshed. Employing the concentrated solar energy developed through scientific research, she directed intense heat towards the advancing soldiers. Victory resulted not from physical force but from scientific innovation. Samadrita Kuite argues that this episode represents Rokeya's rejection of militarism and her preference for intellectual progress over violent conflict. The collapse of the invading army illustrates that knowledge, rather than military aggression, constitutes the true source of national strength.

The Queen later explains the principles upon which Ladyland is governed. Rejecting conquest and imperial ambition, she declares:

“We do not covet other people’s land, we do not fight for a piece of diamond, though it may be a thousandfold brighter than the Koh-i-Noor... We dive deep into the ocean of knowledge and try to gather the precious gems which Nature has kept in store for us. We enjoy Nature’s gift as much as we can”.
(Hossain, *Sultana’s Dream*)

This passage represents one of the clearest statements of Rokeya’s political philosophy. National greatness is measured neither by territorial expansion nor by military success but by the pursuit of knowledge. Rather than celebrating empire or military power, Ladyland privileges education, scientific inquiry, and peaceful coexistence.

At a time when Muslim girls in colonial Bengal often received little education beyond domestic and religious instruction, Rokeya imagined women directing universities, laboratories, and scientific institutions. By making knowledge the basis of authority, *Sultana’s Dream* challenges contemporary assumptions about gender while presenting education and science as the essential foundations of social transformation.

Ladyland: Rokeya’s Ideal Society

The scientific achievements described in *Sultana’s Dream* ultimately serve a larger purpose. Rokeya does not celebrate science for its own sake; rather, she uses it to imagine an alternative social order founded upon peace, security, education, and ethical governance. Ladyland is therefore not simply a kingdom ruled by women but an ideal society in which public institutions function for the collective welfare of its inhabitants. Every aspect of daily life—from the organization of cities to the conduct of government—reflects values fundamentally different from those of the patriarchal world from which Sultana arrives.

The first Impression of Ladyland immediately establishes this contrast. Expecting to encounter the familiar restrictions of her own society, Sultana instead finds herself walking freely through broad roads and well-maintained gardens. Observing her curiosity, Sister Sara remarks, “Better come into the garden.” The invitation is significant. Rather than introducing Sultana to a palace, military camp, or marketplace, Ladyland first presents a carefully cultivated landscape. The prominence of gardens, flowering plants, and cultivated spaces reflects Rokeya’s association of civilization with harmony, order, and beauty rather than with displays of political or military power. Nature is neither neglected nor exploited but carefully integrated into everyday life.

The absence of crime is explained through the narrative’s characteristic satire. Sister Sara observes, “Since the Mardana system has been introduced, there is no more crime nor sin in the country” (Hossain, *Sultana’s Dream*). The statement appears to celebrate the confinement of men. Yet Rokeya’s intention is clearly ironic. By placing men in the position historically occupied by women, she exposes the irrationality of a social order that justified female seclusion as a means of preserving morality. The reversal compels readers to confront the absurdity of arguments that had long been used to restrict women’s movement and participation in public life.

Ladyland is also characterized by an intimate relationship between human society and the natural environment. Scientific innovation enables the inhabitants to regulate rainfall, cultivate productive gardens, and harness solar energy without disturbing ecological balance. Sister Sara proudly tells Sultana, “Our gardens are full of fruits and flowers.” Gardens in Ladyland are therefore not merely ornamental spaces; they symbolize abundance, environmental care, and the productive application of scientific knowledge. Unlike societies that pursue wealth through conquest or exploitation, Ladyland derives prosperity from the intelligent management of natural resources.

Rokeya's vision of ideal governance extends beyond material prosperity to include moral principles. When Sultana inquires about religion, Sister Sara replies simply, "Love and truth are the only religion of our country" (*Hossain, Sultana's Dream*). This brief statement is among the most profound in the narrative. Rather than defining society through sectarian identity or ritual observance, Rokeya places ethical values at its centre. Justice, honesty, and compassion become the principles that regulate public life. Such an understanding also reflects Rokeya's broader critique of those social practices that invoked religion to justify women's exclusion from education and public participation.

Barnita Bagchi argues that Rokeya consistently imagined educated women as agents of social transformation rather than passive recipients of reform. This conviction is reflected throughout *Ladyland*, where women administer educational institutions, conduct scientific research, advise the Queen, and participate directly in governance. Similarly, Yasmin Hossain observes that Rokeya regarded education as the means through which women could achieve both intellectual independence and responsible citizenship. *Ladyland* therefore represents the practical realization of the educational ideals that Rokeya sought to promote through her school, public speeches, and reform organisations.

Perhaps the most significant achievement of *Ladyland* lies in its ability to make readers reconsider the familiar world outside the dream.

Ladyland thus emerges as far more than a feminist fantasy. It represents Rokeya's vision of a society governed by education, ethical values, scientific inquiry, environmental harmony, and social justice. By replacing domination with cooperation, conquest with knowledge, and exclusion with participation, *Sultana's Dream* presents an alternative model of civilization that challenged both patriarchal authority and the broader political values of the colonial age.

Conclusion

Sultana's Dream occupies a distinctive place in the intellectual history of colonial India because it combines social criticism with an imaginative vision of reform. Written at a time when Muslim women faced severe restrictions on education, mobility, and participation in public life, the narrative transforms a simple dream into a powerful critique of the social order that confined women to the domestic sphere. Rather than directly confronting patriarchal institutions through polemical argument, Rokeya employed satire, role reversal, and utopian imagination to expose the inequalities that governed everyday life in colonial Bengal.

This study has argued that *Ladyland* should be understood not merely as a feminist utopia but as Rokeya's broader programme of social transformation. At the centre of this vision lies women's education. Throughout the narrative, education enables women to become scientists, administrators, and political leaders, demonstrating that intellectual ability rather than gender should determine an individual's place in society. Scientific knowledge similarly functions as a practical instrument for improving agriculture, protecting the environment, ensuring public welfare, and defending the state. In *Ladyland*, education and science together replace ignorance, violence, and inherited privilege as the foundations of governance.

The article has also shown that Rokeya's critique extends beyond patriarchy. *Ladyland* rejects militarism, territorial conquest, and the pursuit of imperial power, proposing instead a society guided by knowledge, ethical responsibility, and peaceful coexistence. The Queen's refusal to seek expansion through war, together with the preference for scientific innovation over military force, reflects Rokeya's criticism of political systems founded upon domination rather than public welfare. In this respect, *Sultana's Dream* may also be read as a subtle critique of the militaristic and imperial values that shaped the colonial world.

in which it was written. As Samadrita Kuite has argued, Ladyland represents an alternative political imagination in which scientific progress replaces conquest and cooperation replaces coercion.

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