Sanskriti
JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES
Volume 1, Issue 1, April 2024

Rokeya's Utopian Imagination: Revisiting Medieval Dream Allegory through a Feminist

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Abstract

This essay reinterprets Begum Rokeya's Sultana's Dream (1905) through the lens of the medieval dream vision genre, drawing parallels between Rokeya's feminist utopia and traditional dream allegories. Sultana's Dream envisions a fantastical world where women transcend the confines of purdah and the zenana, advocating for gender equality and education as central themes. By constructing the narrative as a dream journey, Rokeya aligns with the medieval tradition, using Sister Sara as a guiding figure akin to Boethius' Lady Philosophy, a motif often seen in medieval dream visions like The Dream of the Rood. Sister Sara serves as a wise mentor, leading the protagonist towards a revelation of truth and a new societal order, reminiscent of the spiritual awakening found in medieval allegories. This paper argues that Rokeya's utopian vision not only challenges the patriarchal structures of her time but also extends a broader critique relevant to both medieval and modern contexts. Through the dream framework, Rokeya crafts a feminist narrative that reimagines a self-sufficient, egalitarian society, demonstrating the transformative potential of the dream vision genre. Ultimately, the essay highlights how Sultana's Dream bridges historical literary traditions with contemporary feminist discourse, presenting a radical vision of liberation and equality.

Keywords: *Allegory, Medieval Dream Vision, Postcolonial Feminism, Feminist Utopia, Patriarchal Critique*

1. INTRODUCTION

In her controversial book *Mother India* (1927), Katherine Mayo discusses the challenges faced by Indian mothers during childbirth, blending these accounts with the prevalent nationalist image of "Mother India." Mayo clarified in her subsequent book, *Slaves of the Gods* (1929), that she intentionally selected the title to provoke Indian women, highlighting the disparity between their actual treatment and the idealized reverence they receive in nationalist narratives. As Mayo provocatively asks, "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" (90). According to Aparajita Basu, such nationalist discourse enforces rigid expectations on all Asian women, meant to uphold bourgeois respectability. As a result, the "new woman" of the early twentieth century was systematically excluded from participating in "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 role of this new woman was confined to the domestic sphere, limiting her civic and sexual liberties. Basu further asserts that the literary and artistic motif of the "Eastern woman" is either a product of Hindu nationalist imagination or an extension of the concept of the "Indian woman," making "Mother Asia" essentially equivalent to "Mother India" (xiii).

A similar dynamic can be seen in the role assigned to Turkish women during the formation of the Turkish Republic in 1923. Turkish women were expected to contribute to the nation's modernization efforts by supporting men and nurturing future patriots. According to Serpil

History:
Received : 13 December 2023
Revised : 26 March 2024
Accepted : 12 April 2024
Published : 30 April 2024
DOI: **10.5281/zenodo.15381884**

Website: www.sanskritijournal.com
Publisher: Siksha O Anusandhan

Sancar, the early modernization agenda in Turkey aimed to build a nation-state alongside modern families that would embody the values of the new republic. Within this nationalist framework, the country was represented as a family structure dominated by men, with women and childbirth closely associated with the motherland. The severing of this bond was equated with a loss of honor and dignity. Consequently, women's responsibilities became limited to child-rearing (19, 32, 54). Despite notable advancements in legal, political, and economic domains for Turkish women since the Republic's inception, the society remains steeped in patriarchal norms, relegating women primarily to domestic roles. This situation aligns with Deniz A. Kandiyoti's view that while Turkish women have gained freedom, they have not achieved true liberation (317). Traditional gender roles continue to prevail, with men occupying active public roles as providers, while women are consigned to passive, domestic roles as caregivers. Much like their Indian counterparts, Turkish women have been restricted to the private sphere under the guise of nationalism, maintaining a passive existence under male authority.

In this context, Begum Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* (1905) emerges as a powerful critique of women's passive roles and a call for them to acknowledge and resist their subordinate status. Written with the intent to awaken women and urge them to seek equality with men, Rokeya's text critiques these traditional roles. The work has been analyzed through various literary lenses, including science fiction, ecocriticism, and utopian literature. This article will examine *Sultana's Dream* through the framework of the medieval dream vision genre, positioning it as a radical feminist narrative that calls for gender equality and education, while reinterpreting traditional medieval allegories within a feminist context.

2. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach, using literary analysis to explore Begum Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* through the lens of the medieval dream vision genre, focusing on feminist themes. The primary methodology involves a close reading of the text, analyzing its narrative structure, symbolism, and character development. Special attention is given to Sister Sara, who functions as a modern reinterpretation of the wise female guide figure, commonly seen in medieval dream visions. The study also compares *Sultana's Dream* with medieval allegorical works such as *The Dream of the Rood* and Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy* to highlight how Rokeya subverts traditional gender roles. Secondary sources, including feminist literary criticism, utopian studies, and historical context on women's status in early 20th-century Bengal, provide a broader framework for understanding the text. By drawing on these scholarly perspectives, the paper situates *Sultana's Dream* within the larger tradition of feminist literature and explores its critique of patriarchal societal structures. This methodology allows for a detailed examination of how Rokeya uses the medieval genre to present a radical feminist vision of gender equality, challenging both contemporary norms and literary conventions. This research article very definitely follows MLA 9th manual for the quotations and references of the works cited in this paper.

3. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The Medieval Dream Vision and the Archetype of the Wise Female Guide

To effectively examine Begum Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* within the framework of the medieval dream vision genre, it is necessary first to understand the concept of a dream vision. In his *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*, Macrobius Ambrosius Theodosius identifies five primary types of dreams: *somnium*, *visio*, *oraculum*, *insomnium*, and *visum*. Of these, *insomnium* and *visum* are typically viewed as lacking any prophetic significance. In contrast, the remaining three are believed to possess "the power of divination" (90). An *oraculum* delivers predictions through a divine messenger, a *visio* relates to a prophecy that eventually comes to pass, and a *somnium* features fantastical imagery meant to convey hidden or symbolic meanings (90).

Medieval thought often regarded dreams as channels for divine wisdom, believed to offer glimpses into future events, the afterlife, or the cosmic order. Dreams were perceived as a connection between human understanding and a higher, often spiritual, realm (Pfannkuche 1-2). This elevated view of visionary experiences led poets to emulate dream narratives in their literary works, establishing what is now known as the dream vision genre. In this form of writing, also called *visio*, an imagined dream or vision reveals insights or truths inaccessible to the dreamer in their conscious state. While literature has explored dream themes throughout history, the genre of visionary writing gained particular prominence during early medieval Europe (Kabir 78).

By the late 14th century in England, poems addressing complex social and spiritual issues often adopted the dream vision format to convey deeper religious or spiritual messages, as seen in works like *The Dream of the Rood* and *The Debate of the Body and Soul*. Typically, a dream vision narrative features a troubled narrator who falls asleep and experiences a dream, waking up with newfound understanding or wisdom. The dream's events are symbolic, often mirroring real-world concerns that fuel the narrative's progression. Through the creative and symbolic landscape of the dream, the vision provides the dreamer with fresh perspectives on their problems, frequently guided by an instructive figure.

The dream vision genre gained immense popularity throughout the Middle Ages, especially in Britain, where it initially appeared in Old English literature. By the High Middle Ages, dream poetry reached its peak, with notable examples like Dante's *Vita Nuova* and *The Divine Comedy*. The genre experienced a revival during the Romantic period when dreams were increasingly viewed as portals to imaginative worlds beyond rational understanding (Jones, 293-294). The influence of medieval dream visions persisted into later literature, shaping works such as John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), Percy Bysshe Shelley's *The Triumph of Life* (1822), William Morris's *News from Nowhere* and *A Dream of John Ball* (1901), and James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939).

Throughout the medieval period, Macrobius's classification of dreams in *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis* served as a crucial framework, where dreams were interpreted as carriers of truth within fictional narratives. Macrobius describes such narratives as "fabulous," employing fictive language to communicate philosophical ideas (84). His influence is evident in medieval dream-vision poetry, often used to explore religious themes. The use of the dream

vision as a literary device can be traced back to Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*, which became a foundational text for the genre. This work, revered by writers like Dante and Chaucer, delves into themes of fate, fortune, and free will, incorporating ideas from Aristotelian, Stoic, Epicurean, and Neo-Platonic philosophies.

In *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius, unjustly imprisoned and awaiting execution, engages in a dialogue with Lady Philosophy, a personification of wisdom who offers him solace and guidance. Lady Philosophy's role as a mentor closely resembles the archetype of the wise female guide, which recurs in medieval literature. For example, Geoffrey Chaucer introduces figures like Lady Fame in *The House of Fame* (1374-1385) and Nature in *The Parlement of Foules* (1380-1390). Similarly, William Langland portrays Lady Holy Church and Lady Meed as guiding figures in *Piers Plowman* (1370-1380). This motif reflects the tradition of using allegorical female characters to embody wisdom, comfort, and moral instruction, a common feature of medieval dream-vision poetry.

Sister Sara as "The Lady Philosophy": A Feminized Dream Vision for the Modern Era

Although *The Consolation of Philosophy* does not feature scenes of a dreamer falling asleep and awakening, it is still considered part of the dream vision genre. This classification arises from the text's rhetorical structure and the symbolic role of Lady Philosophy, which aligns with the figurative qualities typical of dream literature. The narrator, disheartened by the perceived injustice and wickedness of the world, is unexpectedly visited by Lady Philosophy. She enlightens him, gradually shifting his perspective to a more optimistic view of the world. The narrative tracks his journey from despair to hope as he realizes that while earthly pleasures fade, the consequences and benefits in the afterlife are enduring.

As Bede Jarrett observes, it was widely believed that women mystics and dream-vision writers possessed profound insights into the nature of reality, a belief evident in the portrayal of wise woman counselors in medieval dream visions (84). Diane Bornstein further explains that the archetype of the wise woman can be traced back to classical antiquity: "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). Similarly, Rosemary Radford Reuther notes that the role of the female counselor has roots in ancient mythology, where many of the most powerful deities were female. This role can be traced back through Roman, Greek, and Near Eastern mythologies, which were often referenced in medieval literature, including the Mother Goddess Namnu in the 3rd and 4th millennia BC Sumerian creation myths (Reuther 38).

Rokeya's portrayal of her sister Sara in *Sultana's Dream* parallels the role of Lady Philosophy in *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Begum Rokeya (1880-1932), also known as Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, published this feminist utopian work in *The Indian Ladies* in 1905. Utopian literature, particularly works by women, often imagines societies where women are independent and free from male oppression and the patriarchal norms of the literary tradition. As Sally Miller Gearhart notes, feminist utopias are inherently political, depicting women as

either equal to or more powerful than men while granting them control over their reproductive rights. These texts critique existing societal values and position masculinity and male-dominated systems as the root causes of many societal issues (298). Carol Pearson adds that such works "depict women as the creators of a new consciousness and a new vision" (61).

Despite being only slightly more than ten pages long, *Sultana's Dream* aims to foster this new consciousness, particularly among Muslim women, and holds an important place in feminist and utopian literary traditions. A writer, educator, journalist, and pioneering reformer of Bengali Muslim society, Rokeya championed the active involvement of women in public life, with a strong emphasis on education. This was in response to the restrictive domestic roles imposed on women, particularly Muslim women. Echoing Bharati Ray's observation in *Early Feminists of Colonial India*, which argues that Indian women were often "willing collaborators in their own oppressions" (61), Rokeya's aim was to empower women to attain autonomy and freedom.

Sultana's Dream narrates a fantastical vision where a young woman dreams of a place called "Ladyland," a utopian world where women rule and govern independently, fostering peace through scientific and technological advancements led by women. In Ladyland, gender roles are reversed, depicting a future where women hold power and men are confined to the "mardana," analogous to the "zenana." The story follows the structure of a typical dream vision, beginning with the narrator, Sultana, drifting off to sleep as she contemplates the position of Indian women: "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).

Similar to the role of Lady Philosophy in Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Sultana's guide, Sister Sara, unexpectedly appears: "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 ushers Sultana into the dream realm, a paradise full of gardens—a common motif in medieval dream visions. For instance, in the classical *Roman de la Rose* by Guillaume de Lorris, the dreamer is taken to a picturesque square garden, surrounded by lush trees, birdsong, flowers, and squirrels. Similarly, Sultana is captivated by the beautiful scenery in Rokeya's Ladyland: "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 remarks that the entire place seems like a magnificent garden, Sister Sara responds: "Your Calcutta could become a nicer garden than this, if only your countrymen wanted to make it so" (18).

In Rokeya's feminist vision, the natural landscape symbolizes ideal societies where women are equal to men. As they arrive at Sister Sara's home in the garden, Sultana is once again struck by the beauty of the surroundings:

> "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).

Sultana's astonishment can be understood as a recognition of her second-class status, with the garden and its beauty symbolizing women's equality. Sister Sara's kitchen, situated in a "beautiful vegetable garden," is described as being free from "smoke," with "creepers" and "tomato plants" serving as natural ornaments. The windows are adorned with flower garlands, and there is "no sign of coal or fire" (21). In this dream world, women cook using solar energy, and "no one died in youth except by rare accident" (21). When Sultana questions the reason behind this improvement, Sister Sara reveals that the queen has enforced a law prohibiting women from marrying before the age of twenty-one and has made education compulsory, encouraging women to pursue careers in science. These women conduct innovative studies, developing devices that extract liquid from the air and harness solar heat. Furthermore, when invaders attacked, the women used their heat machines to defend the nation while the men went to battle and died. The surviving men were subsequently imprisoned by the Queen, who took over the government and has maintained control ever since. The Queen aligns with Sister Sara's perspective on scientific education, stating, "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).

Barnita Bagchi asserts that "the driving force behind the success of the Utopian feminist country of Ladyland is women's education" (xii). Bagchi further emphasizes that Ladyland "embodies the triumph of the virtuous, enquiring, scientific, enlightened, and welfare-oriented spirit in women" (xiii). For Rokeya, the key to achieving a perfect society where women are treated equally lies in educating women and awakening them to the truth. Sister Sara articulates this idea when she tells Sultana, "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). As Rokeya's spokesperson, Sister Sara holds women accountable for their own subjugation.

The context of women's education in Rokeya's time is crucial for understanding her emphasis on science and technology in Ladyland. Jahan and Papanek note that even among the most progressive Brahmos, who supported women's education, there was little emphasis on science and mathematics. In this context, Rokeya's advocacy for not only general female education but also a type of education focused on scientific excellence was revolutionary (15).

After visiting various educational institutions in Ladyland, including observatories, laboratories, and universities, Sultana awakens from her dream, signaling the end of the story. This moment parallels the dreamer's experience in *The Dream of the Rood*, an early medieval dream vision, where the dreamer is led to Christianity by the Cross on which Christ was crucified and is entrusted with spreading the message of faith. Similarly, Sister Sara instructs Sultana to share her dream with others. She encourages Sultana to inform women about the existence of such a world and inspire them toward 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).

Rokeya's narrative thus reflects the structure of traditional dream visions, with a clear call to action at its conclusion. As Sarbani Guha Ghosal notes, the rise of women's studies in India is closely connected to feminism and represents a conscious engagement in the politics of knowledge, acting as a call to awareness (793). Rokeya effectively intertwines this "wake-up call" with her dream-like narrative, using the dialogue between Sister Sara—who symbolizes Rokeya herself—and Sultana, much like Lady Philosophy's gradual enlightenment of Boethius in *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Just as Lady Philosophy guides Boethius to the truth, Sister Sara helps Sultana understand that achieving gender equality is not only possible but within reach.

4. CONCLUSION

In this analysis of *Sultana's Dream*, I have explored how Begum Rokeya's radical feminist vision aligns with medieval dream vision traditions, creating a narrative that critiques patriarchal structures and envisions a transformative societal order. By utilizing the dream framework, Rokeya challenges the gender norms of her time, offering a utopian world where education, scientific progress, and gender equality empower women. Through the character of Sister Sara, Rokeya channels the archetype of the wise female guide, akin to Lady Philosophy in Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy*, reinforcing the intellectual and spiritual awakening central to medieval dream visions.

This analysis demonstrates that *Sultana's Dream* is not only a critique of the gendered roles in Rokeya's contemporary society but also a broader, timeless call for gender equality. Sister Sara's role as a guiding figure within this medieval tradition emphasizes the transformative potential of feminist thought. Rokeya's engagement with classical literary traditions highlights the enduring relevance of *Sultana's Dream* as a pioneering work of feminist utopian literature. Moreover, Rokeya's reimagining of societal structures challenges the norms of her time, suggesting that the work transcends the limitations of its historical context and contributes to ongoing discussions about gender and power.

Maitrayee Chaudhuri links the origins of feminism in India to the colonial era and the "modern democratic project" of 19th-century India, which, according to her, did not extend rights to all, but only to select individuals. In reality, this "modern democratic project" resulted in a transformation of the family structure, where women were recast as symbols of domesticity, primarily as housewives, in line with Victorian ideals. This cultural shift defined the typical Indian woman as "gentle, refined, and skilled in managing a household" (26), with literary archetypes like Antigone, Nora Helmer, and Jane Eyre serving as representations of this ideal. Through *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya challenges this image by presenting an independent woman who enjoys equal rights to men, addressing not only Indian women, but also Muslim women, transcending religious, ethnic, temporal, and geographical boundaries.

By reading *Sultana's Dream* in the context of both medieval literary traditions and modern feminist discourse, this study underscores its significance as part of a long-standing tradition of using dream literature as a tool for radical social critique. In doing so, Rokeya awakens a feminist consciousness that resonates beyond the confines of her own era, offering a vision of equality and empowerment for women that challenges both past and present gendered roles. Through this lens, *Sultana's Dream* not only critiques the limitations imposed on women but

also envisions a future where women, like their male counterparts, can shape the world around them.

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