

ESSAY

SHORT STORY

# Begum Rokeya, Sultana's Dream and woman power



AUDITY FALGUNI

*"But dear Sultana, how unfair it is to shut in the harmless women and let loose the men. Why? It is not safe for us to come out of the zenana, as we are naturally weak. Yes, it is not safe so long as there are men about the streets, nor is it so when a wild animal enters a marketplace."*

*Sultana's Dream in Begum Rokeya Rachanabali, 3rd edition (Feb 2010), published by Bornayan.*

Sultana, a woman in seclusion (*pardah*) in British India, had a daydream of a lady land, free from sin and harm, where virtue itself reigns. Men are kept in confinement in that cherished lady land to safeguard society from crimes like theft, murder, arson, rape, plunder, burglary and so many other evils. The 'logic' of a 'stronger' physical composition of men to dominate women is overruled in that state on the principle that 'a lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race.' As men are confined to *mordana* (men's secluded area) in that lady land, society no longer needs lawyers in the courts and there is also no warfare and bloodshed. Women look to the official duties and also manage the home as, naturally, better time managers. It needs a woman only two hours to finish office chores as she is seldom a habitual smoker like men (a man smokes twelve cigarettes daily and if one cigarette needs half an hour to be burnt off, he wastes six hours every day in sheer smoking).

Dear readers, More or less everyone who is part of the Bangladeshi educated class will have heard of the reputed feminist utopia epitomised in *Sultana's Dream* by Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, the first Bengali Muslim feminist thinker, writer and activist educator. She was born in Pairabad Union of Rangpur district in 1880 to a conservative landlord family and passed away on 9 December 1932. In a relatively short span, a mere 52 years', of life, Rokeya authored around ten volumes of write-ups, including essays on feminism and other social issues, utopias, novels, poems, humour and satirical articles. Apart from writing, she established a girl's school for Muslim women and argued all her adult life, with the patriarchs of the then Muslim society, in defence of the necessity of women's education.

Although Rokeya's father was orthodox in his attitude to women, his elder brother Ibrahim Saber helped her learn Bengali when it was forbidden for even elite Muslim women to learn anything except the holy Qu'ran in Arabic. Rokeya's elder sister Karimunnessa was also an eager learner of Bengali language and literature. But this 'eagerness to learn' made her parents worried and she was given away in marriage at the age of only fourteen. Rokeya was also married off at the age of eighteen to a man more than twice her age. He was a widower and his name was Khan Bahadur Sakhawat Hossain. He was placed in a dignified government position at Bhagalpur, Bihar province of India. Fortunately enough, Sakhawat Hossain inspired Rokeya into learning English, which she managed to do very quickly. She emerged as an authoress in 1902 for the first time. She established the 'Sakhawat Hossain Memorial Girls' School' in 1909 within five months of her husband's death. But her step-daughter and step-son-in-law tried to create confusion over the ownership of her property and hence she came to Kolkata from Bihar. In 1911, she re-started the school in her husband's name in Kolkata. Although Rokeya gave birth to two children, none of them survived more than six months. A childless Rokeya died in 1932.

The major books penned by Rokeya are *Matichur*-first volume (1904, it's a collection of columns in different magazines and newspapers, particularly on women's condition in the then India), *Matichur*-second volume (1907), *Sultana's Dream* (authored in English in 1908), *Padmarag* (novel, 1924), *Oborodh Bashini* (Women in Purdah, 1931) and compilations of short stories and utopias. Of them, *Sultana's Dream*, *Padmarag*, *Oborodh Bashini* and *Gyanphol* (Fruit of Knowledge, another feminist utopia) are unique for their insight, satirical observations, critiques of social taboos and freshness of perspective.

In *Sultana's Dream*, the protagonist Sultana visits a faraway lady land (*nari rajya*) in her dream. She is accompanied by a lady named Sister Sara. When Sultana walks on the streets of the lady land, she finds no man there and the female pedestrians laugh at her. As Sultana wants to know why they are laughing at her, Sara replies that Sultana looks as 'timid and shy' as a man. Later Sultana comes to know from Sara that even fifty years earlier this lady land had been just like another male dominated society. But when the last king died and his daughter came to the throne, she took huge initiatives to educate women, establish women's schools, colleges and universities and particularly endeavored to train women in scientific knowledge. At that point the position of the commander-in-chief, all cabinet posts, indeed the power structure, were controlled by men. But, when a war broke out with a neighbouring country, the warriors of the country, all male, fought with huge courage but ultimately failed to achieve victory. A woman scientist of the state then urged the queen to keep the men at home for some days and let her look into the matter. The injured and tired men easily gave up. The lady scientist defeated the enemy army with the help of technology and after that men in that lady land began to stay at home.

It is said that Rokeya's husband handed over this write-up in English to one of his senior British supervisors, the purpose being to check the language. The supervisor did not change a word and just replied, 'What a terrible revenge!' after reading it. In *Gyanphol* (Fruit of Knowledge), Rokeya questions conventional views regarding the Semitic myth or the common myth in Judaism-Christianity-Islam wherein Eve or the first woman is condemned to seduce Adam into eating the forbidden fruit of Eden.

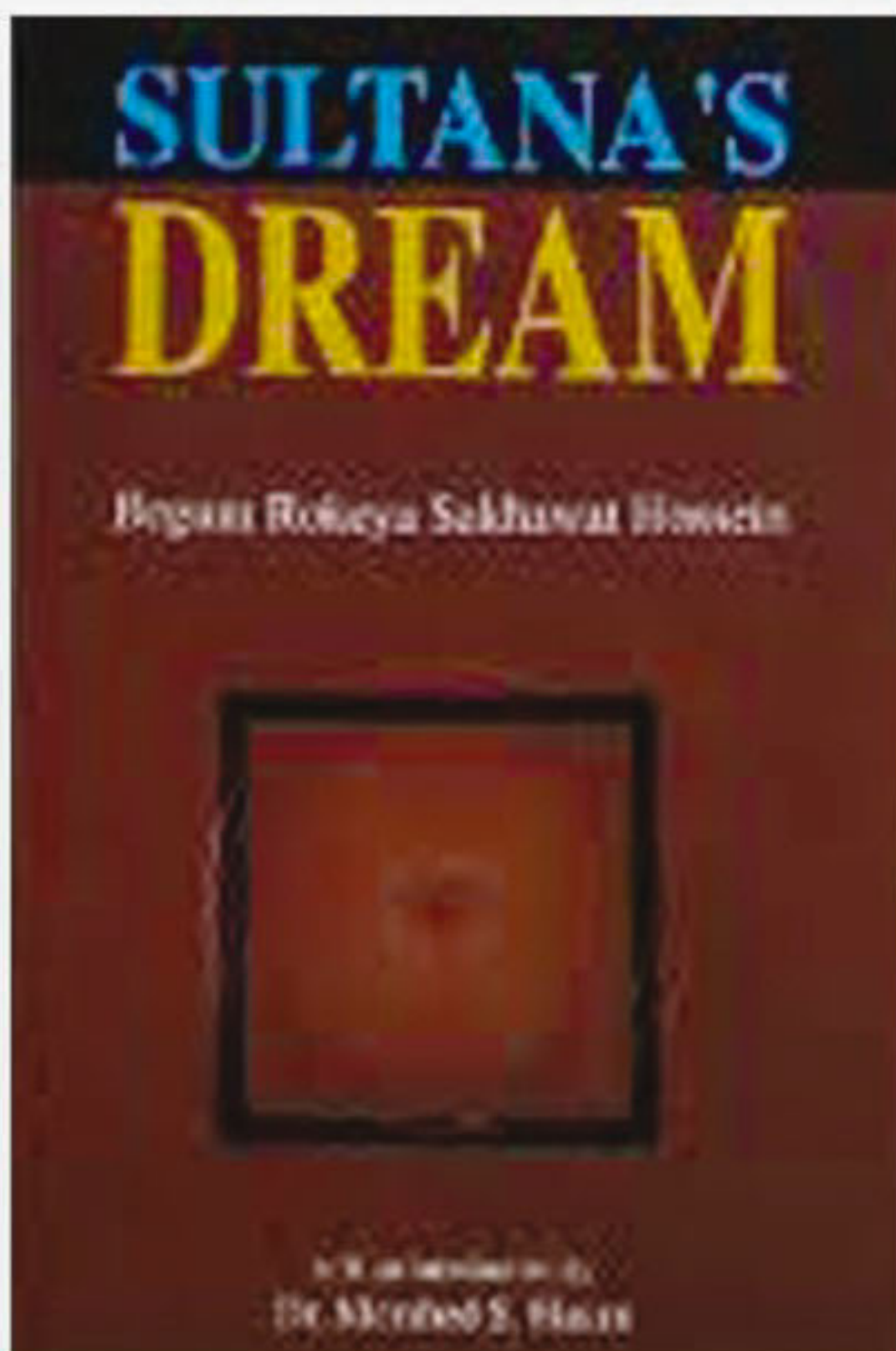
The two thus lose their innocence and are sent to earth by an indignant God. In *Gyanphol*, the writer shows that Eve was so passionate about knowing everything and so eager about taking up challenges that she influenced Adam into eating the fruit. Thus they gained knowledge, came to earth and established this great human civilization. Without the inspiration of Eve, life would not have been possible on earth. But it is the ungrateful Adam who still condemns Eve rather thanking her for this contribution.

It is in men's nature to reproach women. But, again, it is men who cannot live without women. Thus Rokeya mocks the ever impulsive nature of men. In her outstanding novel *Padmarag*, an extremely secular and feminist Rokeya reveals how women are oppressed in all communities and countries irrespective of their distinctive faiths and social customs. In this novel, oppressed women from Hindu-Muslim-Christian communities take shelter in a home set up by Mrs. Tarini Sen, a Brahma or a Hindu reformer. Jainab, an aristocratic and educated young Muslim woman and abandoned by her in-laws over her family's failure to arrange her dowry, comes to this home after losing her elder brother. Subsequently her husband understands his and his family's fault and comes to take her back. But Jainab answers, "If today I get back with you, our conservative grandmothers will say to other women rebelling against gender injustices, 'Look, even a rebel like Jainab has also surrendered.' I don't believe that only married life can be the ultimate success for women."

In her fiery essays, Rokeya called upon parents to educate their daughters properly so that 'they can earn their livelihoods on their own and need not depend upon men.' She even noted that 'as the Holy Scriptures are all authored by men, they have always tried to subjugate all women who have tried to raise their voices against injustices over the centuries!'

We salute this pioneer of women's freedom on her 130<sup>th</sup> anniversary of death.. The trail she blazed all those years ago is yet ours to travel on.

Audity Falguni is a critic, writer and social activist.



MUSINGS

# Literature and the reader

ANDAZ

How are readers affected by literature? Apart from how writers look at literature and language, how does genius treat language? What do words do to us, and what can we do to words? What are the effects of technology on language? Can lowbrow readers offer their views on literature? Or is it 'like corpses looking for an undertaker', as Ronald Coase has remarked. He is the Nobel Prize winner for economics in 1991, and one who never had any formal education in this discipline.

Technology is like looking at a starry sky -- the great and mysterious unknown, the macrocosm of language. Language is fossil poetry, said Emerson, while the limitations of words create a resistance to overcome it, driven on by divine discontent; not for development, but more for enrichment, of a tool at once creative and communicative.

Every man is a quotation from all his ancestors, asserted Emerson (he thought a lot about literature and language), and the ultimate source is aboriginal power. Individuality unsuccessfully tries to clamp copyrights on the world, bites the python, but is ultimately gobbled up by the primeval aboriginal boa. If the earth looks like an apple from the moon, it is too big to eat when standing on it. We are back to square one -- words are fashioned by beliefs, traditions and mythologies. On the other hand, literature is the Olympics of talk and of writing. The records are in the books, to be broken.

Technically minded readers are reminded of the movements of the electrons in the semi-conductors (transistors, ICs), which carry information in a medium neither fully conductive nor fully insulated.

Three larger-than-life topics (language, literature and technology) cannot be contained within the confines of a restricted column. But the urge to communicate with readers (I am one myself) is irresistible, after having gone through Richard Poirier's *The Renewal of Literature -- Emersonian Reflections* (Random House, 1987). Literary criticism that stimulates comes along after long intervals. Poirier is well practised in the game, with earlier displays, such as *The Place of Style in*

*American Literature, Compositions and Decompositions in the Languages of Contemporary Life*; and studies on Henry James and Robert Frost. As a former editor of the *Partisan Review*, he sparks ideas by his astute observations, urging on the latent creativity in his readers.

The author draws extensively from the sentences of Emerson to find nuances which are elusive to the captured readers of this great American poet, philosopher and essayist.

There are many paradoxical statements which are likely to puzzle the innocent reader of literature, who wishes to spend some time in non-critical bliss. The origin of language is outside culture; and the use of language is to go beyond it. Emerson put it this way: "Language is a hindrance to the infinitude of private man." Modern books are complex as God is not needed, said Henry James. So watch out for 'the nakedness of learned nakedness', as Poirier would say.

How about this? "Works of art are not required to exist because there is nothing outside of them that requires their existence". Then comes William James (via Emerson) with the comment that "language works against our perception of truth".

Several pages are devoted to the role of the genius in literature, as the tyranny of language haunts the genius, and its limitations remind us of Godel's mathematical treatment of the limitations of the human mind. Santayana comes in with 'the kindly infidelities' of the language, viz, the 'slip' in a belt-drive or a clutch plate. Hence silence is a solvent, says Emerson by way of solace. A genius is unfathomable, and uncontrollable, and breaks all rules of conventions, only to set new ones, at higher or different levels. He increases the radius of consciousness of the human mind, exposing solid materials out of foggy foregrounds, and shifting existing backgrounds to no-man's-land.

Language is mediation, not media, unlike the products of modern technology --- radio and television. Literature should not leave a clear image, unlike TV; but, like classical Chinese paintings, leave something to the reader's imagination, enabling him to be interactive, a concept, by the way, used by modern computers. Originality is a

hard taskmaster, for the creator and the partaker, calling for a mixture of concentration and dedication, for minds seeking entertainment in this rarefied world of language and literature.

Using a modern technical term, perhaps there is the human urge to digitalize the language, as a tool of creativity, although the appreciation of the final product, as in all arts, including Nature, is in the analogue domain.

An Eastern mind, familiar with Emerson's intuitive mind, faces a sharp contrast in the presence of Poirier's analytical nuances, trying to explain Emerson's enigmatic thoughts, using Western tools. But he does his job brilliantly, teasing the reader to be alert, and to switch on his thinking mode. The first Emerson cannot be analysed and a second Emerson cannot be synthesized by the scientists, or by the critics.

This book is a good escape from babelic Dhaka's maddening strife. I end with a secret wish: I would love to see Clifton Fadiman writing a similar book.

Note: you have never read anything like this, because it comes out of a Bengali mind.

Once again, here is another scoop for you. It is so original it might jolt the gurus of English (and language and literature buffs) in the country. As I said earlier, I read for pleasure, and I write for pleasure. This is not a book review.

This elusive essay took quite some time to be captured in black and white. I was in two minds whether to send this piece to the local editors, as the topic is not topical. Part of daily life is not topical either. To topical minds, the intervals of silence are inserted for pause and rest.

Does literature fill the functional columns of a daily newspaper? In developing countries, newspapers become a dumping ground for extracurricular activities (in the absence of journals). Hence this intrusion.

Give the readers some rest, Mr Editor, from man's ignoble strife -- this missive is safe, harmless, intriguing and invigorating and not likely to invoke a call for hartal!

Over to you, Sir . . .

Andaz, observer and critic, writes on a diversity of themes

# The White Cloud

REHNUMA ARONI

It took him a couple of minutes to settle down as he woke up. After a while, he switched on the bedside lamp and looked at the little alarm clock. It was 5.30 am, almost dawn.

He had slept late, so he had woken up earlier than expected. It was still dark outside. For once he thought of getting back to bed, making another attempt to search for some sleep. He had taken the day off for the next day. But knowing his habits, he knew very well that sleep would not be easy to come anymore. So he lay on the bed leisurely looking at the white walls.

The interior of his bedroom was a little different, though not too different from what a bachelor's room should look like. The empty walls of the large room had a story of its own. Seemingly for long none had taken care of them. There were no framed and enlarged photographs or expensive paintings hanging on them like it should be on the walls at such an aristocratic home. Actually there was no one to listen to the mourning of the vacant walls. The ageing walls had been guarding its residents with much care from the cold and rainy days for years, but there was none to return some care to them.

After waiting hesitantly for a while, he got up and put the geyser on. Soon the rays of dawn came through the window. The chirping birds began their day's work to spoil any hopes of sleep for him. He took a long shower in the hot water and readied himself to go out. He had an important appointment later in the day.

When he was getting ready, there was mild knocking at his door and then came in the trusted old face of Azhar Mia. He must have been woken up by the noise.

'Should I bring your breakfast?' Azhar Mia asked.

'No, Chacha, I'll go out for a walk', he replied, tying the laces of his shoes.

'Going out this early in the morning?' Being his only guardian now, Azhar Mia seemed a little worried.

'Don't worry about me, Azhar Chacha, I just have an appointment, I'll return at night.'

'What is the appointment? Didn't you take the day off?'

'Nothing special...' He smiled while replying to disguise a sigh coming from deep within, as if it hurt him a lot to say the two little words.

Azhar Mia knew very well what the appointment was all about, so he did not ask anymore about it and went out of the room.

This was their family of two amidst the vast emptiness of the house. Azhar Mia had come into this house long before he was even born. Since his parents had died, Azhar Chacha was the man who held things together, and brought him up with all the care he needed.

The day had started with a strange feeling. There are some special days that start with such special feelings deep inside. Today was one such day. It started with an abundance of memories. Memories lost in time, and not quite lost yet, engraved in the depths of the mind and soul.

He went out, to take a walk at the nearest park. His sole intention was passing some time just to get rid of the 'hard to pass by' morning time. There were health conscious people galore even in the early hours of the morning. Still people living in this busy metropolis have enough time to care about health. After half an hour's walk he entered the park. He did not rest there; he was rather enjoying his unscheduled morning stroll. While wandering around the park, he also detected a couple walking together. The sight of an early morning rendezvous felt pleasing to his eyes.

As he walked on, he did not feel quite well, as if he was not quite himself, the mind floating around somewhere else. He could not wait to meet her. But he had to wait till the evening. Their appointment was set in a public place and he had to wait till the evening to meet her, avoiding inquisitive eyes. He was rather happy drifting away in his memories of her.

She would often play sweet games with him. One day when they were taking a walk together, without any hint she had merged with the crowd of the metropolis. As with a look of bewilderment he searched around, he saw her looking at him from a distance with a smile. There was curiosity in her eyes, which seemed to say, 'Let me see what you do if you lose me for a moment!' Perhaps there is nothing to say. Perhaps there is nothing left to say. That is all I have for you. He had silently answered through his eyes. That moment was to become the longest moment in his existence.

On her last birthday, she had worn the green sari he had gifted her. She was all green that day, her favorite colour. It was raining very heavily that day. Rain. That was one thing they both dearly loved. They had celebrated the day walking for long, drenched in heavy rain. He felt like holding her hands again, but he had to wait. He looked up to see if it would rain today, but all he saw was a world surrounded by the blue sky, a world where the clouds were playing around, a world lightened by a scorching sun.

He looked for a bench to rest his tired feet. Most of the benches were looking out of shape due to extensive use. He walked towards a vacant one where he could spend his next few hours. No better ideas came to him for spending the time he had in hand.

At a certain point the thoughts of a certain white cloud overwhelmed the world of his dispersed thoughts. That is what he calls her; the White Cloud - the tamer of dark clouds. She is always bright as a white cloud against the background of a purple blue sky or he could see her smilingly, overwhelming all wrongs just the way a white piece of cloud would be over the dark clouds once the thundershowers have gone away. She has a similar calming influence over everyone she would come across, just as the impression a fair sliver of cloud would create on an onlooker deeply lost in thoughts.

That was what he did for quite some time, looking up at the sky which was full of fairy clouds, the bearer of autumn. He was playing the role of a carefree observer with nowhere to go. The appointment he had was scheduled for late. It was till the evening he had to wait till he could start walking again to join the invitation. It was nearby, so he had time to be by himself.

He was sitting on a bench in complete suit, a man in black. People passing by him gave him an inquisitive look, wondering who he was waiting for, at that odd hour of the day all tidied up. He watched them back in turn. People were walking all around the park, people of all ages and with all sorts of purposes --- work-out, business talk, love affair, debauchery, begging, unnecessary waste of time and everything else possible. He could not find much interest in them, as he went back to his chain of thoughts.

People say, the most beautiful thing about the world is, of course, the world itself. He didn't quite go with it. Rather with his white cloud around himself, he always had an added meaning to the saying. The world would never be as beautiful as it seemed to be without her existence in it. Just like the lines from his favourite song are, "How wonderful life is, now you're in the world." It is just the ways of looking at things which differentiate human minds. One just needs to change the viewpoint and the world around will show up in a different appearance altogether.

He did not know when he had dozed off. Perhaps the drowsiness from last night's lack of sleep had taken over. As a result the evening gloom set in unnoticed. At times time passes by like a little stream; one would never know how swiftly it would pass by. He got up and started walking towards his destination. On the way he went to a flower shop and bought a bouquet of yellow roses. That is what she liked the most.

He looked up towards the sky. The clouds were all gone, leaving behind an empty dark sky. He knew his white cloud was somewhere in there, watching over him from a distance. He went through a feeling well known to him, that she had been the lighthouse he had been looking out for all along. Today he had thrown away his feelings on the antique primordial platter of ever-starving time; and now it is unbounded leisure on his side that allows him to wait for the invitation to an appointment, between the two of them, to observe her death anniversary.

Later that evening, as he went to see her, he sat down beside her grave, presented her with the flowers and then leaned back to sit and relax himself. He tried to reflect on some more memories from the past. The most magical moments of his life; the most painful part of his life. Moments that will never come back to him. And pain that will never go away from him. Moments that he would never let anyone look at. Pain of which he would never let anyone take a share from him. Because he would cherish those moments as much as he possesses them. As much as the moments raised the belief in him that once he had lived, his pain kept reminding him of the truth that once he had loved.

Rehnuma Aroni is a freelance writer and works in a multinational organization. For comments, slash\_0003@yahoo.com