



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

VIEWS

SULTANA'S DREAM

and the issue with feminist utopias

Most feminist utopias argue some form of feminist separatism, a concept that is harmful to the overall feminist movement because of its historic exclusion of transgender and transexual individuals. Feminist utopian worlds do suffer from an erasure of trans identities.

ADRITA ZAIMA ISLAM

"They should not do anything, excuse me; they are fit for nothing." Such was how Sister Sara, a character in Begum Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain's novella *Sultana's Dream* (The Indian Ladies Magazine, 1905), perceived men. It is, indeed, the tone that the whole piece of work adopts towards men, viewing them as vermin in a world where they are unwanted and uncared for. While it is consistently hailed as one of the finest works exploring the possibility of a feminist utopia, I am very reluctant to label it as such.

The world of *Sultana's Dream* is essentially one that arises due to the reversal of gender roles. Men are oppressed, the society is technologically and structurally advanced as a result of women ruling. However, it does not feel utopian. A utopian society should be one where everyone feels fulfilled, not one where a group of people continues to be oppressed by virtue of their biological sex.

Feminism is a movement rooted in the search for equality, and a feminist utopia should be one where all people

exist on an equal footing. All this is not to say I don't understand why Begum Rokeya adopts such a radical view. The extreme forms of purdah and gender inequality that she and her contemporaries had to endure surely made her deeply angry, which took root in her near-vindictive narrative. It is an important piece of feminist history, but calling it a brilliant feminist utopia is not entirely justified.

In her less well-known works, Rokeya appears less zealous about the eradication of the male species and more open to the idea of an equal society, free from the bonds of gender and sex. In *Motichur* (1904) and *Padmaraag* (1924), she openly advocates for the abolition of gender-specific norms. The undercurrents of the dream of a feminist utopia can still be seen in her wish for a female-led governing body. But those wishes do not metamorph into misandric desires.

Annie Denton Cridge's satirical work *Man's Rights; or, How Would You Like It?* (Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly, 1870) takes a similar form to *Sultana's Dream*. Cridge spends the first part of the book describing

dreams about a Martian society where every gender stereotype is reversed, giving vivid imagery of the mistreatment Victorian women faced by thrusting said mistreatment upon men. She then follows this with a pair of dreams about a reformed world where men and women together lead a balanced life. Cridge's ultimate utopia does not rely on the degradation or disenfranchisement of men; rather, it rests on women taking charge of their fates and fighting for equity in socio-political standing. It tackles the same themes as *Sultana's Dream*. But, by placing a picture of equality side-by-side with a picture of feminine radicalism, it presents the question: "What should a feminist utopia truly look like?"

Over the years, countless authors have tried to answer this question. I feel, however, that most have failed in creating a truly captivating, fulfilling world. In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (The Forerunner, 1915), the idea of a self-propagating, supportive community is tainted by the author's persistence on a racially pure group of females. In portraying a society

where white women are living a happy, isolated life, the book entirely ignores the struggles of women of colour. In celebrated author Ursula L. Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (Ace Books, 1969), a seemingly androgynous, same-sex society is continuously referred to by the "he/him" pronouns, breaking the fantasy of a world beyond biological sex. Many of these worlds seem concerned with the few men that survive after a calamitic event wipes out the others and the fates they suffer as a result of being endangered, such as in *Afterland* (Penguin Random House, 2020), instead of focusing on the utopian aspect itself.

Most feminist utopias argue some form of feminist separatism, a concept that is harmful to the overall feminist movement because of its historic exclusion of transgender and transexual individuals. Feminist utopian worlds do suffer from an erasure of trans identities. They are fundamentally based on the biological definitions of sex, giving rise to trans-exclusionary radical feminism (TERF).

Additionally, these worlds promote gender essentialism which is rooted

in the belief that certain values are possessed by certain people because of their biological sex. In *Sultana's Dream*, for example, being timid is considered akin to being mannish. With the reversal of gender tropes, this means that all females are considered as being timid and meek. In *Herland*, the society is prosperous because of feminine prudence. A feminist society is supposed to look beyond the confines of the social definitions of gender and sex. But they seem to hold on to these superficial standards even harder. Moreover, the narrative that a world led exclusively by women will be devoid of crimes and wars is too idealistic, particularly given that historical evidence suggests otherwise.

The idea of what a female-centric world could look like is a vastly interesting concept that has, unfortunately, not been executed to a satisfactory degree yet.

Adrita Zaima Islam is a struggling student and writer, and she is trying her best to be the best version of herself. Send her your condolences at zaima2004adrita@gmail.com.

TRIBUTE

Celebrating Rokeya

MANMAY ZAFAR

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932) was exceptional in many different ways. Born on December 9, 1880, in a sleepy village in Rangpur, undivided Bengal, she died on the same day, 52 years later, in colonial Calcutta. Despite being born into great wealth, she was denied formal education by her rather notorious zamindar father, known for his gambling, wining, and whoring. Had it not been for her brothers, Rokeya would have remained illiterate all her life, like many of the Muslim women of her generation. However, during her lifetime, Rokeya became so famous that her untimely death was mourned by the dignitaries of colonial India at Albert Hall in Calcutta. Even almost a century after her death, her social contributions are discussed and celebrated on both sides of Bengal.

Her accomplishments make one wonder how she managed to achieve so much in the relatively short span of her life. After all, for Rokeya, it was an uphill struggle from the start: struggle to learn Bangla and English surreptitiously, struggle to find her own feet in Bhagalpur amongst her hostile in-laws, struggle to get on with a much older and ailing husband, struggle to survive after being evicted from her late husband's house in Bihar, struggle to find a foothold in Calcutta, struggle to run her school for Muslim girls against financial odds and social disapprobation, not to mention

her struggle to make peace with her long and painful widowhood. Other people in her place probably would have given up much earlier in trying to fix a world that seems to have terribly gone wrong. After all, the money she was left with by her late husband would have allowed her to spend the rest of her life sitting at home and doing nothing. But Rokeya was not one of the wasteful kinds. She used her small fortune for the advancement of female education in colonial Bengal.

In many respects, Rokeya could be compared with Vidyasagar (1820–1891), that great Bengali pundit, writer, and social reformer who dominated the social, cultural, and literary life of Calcutta. Rokeya was only a 10-year-old girl, domiciled in East Bengal, when Vidyasagar died as a Calcutta luminary, but like Vidyasagar, Rokeya's life also reached its full potential in Calcutta. When faced with the insurmountable task of legalising Hindu widow marriage, Vidyasagar adopted a multi-pronged strategy. He found out evidence for widow marriage in Hindu religious scriptures, wrote about widow marriage as a social ill that required urgent attention, publicised the case of Hindu widows among his fellow Bengalis, launched a signature campaign to petition the British administration, and used his influence as a public intellectual to have widow marriage legalised by the British. Vidyasagar was a writer, intellectual, activist, and social reformer all rolled into



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one. Much like her celebrated predecessor, Rokeya also took recourse to a range of methods for the upliftment of women. Rokeya wrote to create social awareness about women's condition in India, reached out both to her friends and foes to win their support for her school, battled social prejudices, and put on a brave face when things did not go her way. Some of her contemporaries saw her as a Madonna, some as a monster, but nothing could deter her from trying to achieve women's emancipation through education.

Rokeya wrote on a plethora of subjects.

Besides her now-classic *Sultana's Dream* (1908), in which she contemplated a female utopia, she published two volumes of essays titled *Matichur* (1904, 1922), a novel called *Padmaraag* (1924), and *Abaradhasini* (1931), a collection of short articles based on her real-life experience of observing Indian women living in seclusion. In a literary career stretching just over two decades, her output might be meagre in quantity but profound in its overall impact on subsequent generations of readers, scholars, feminists, and social reformers. During this period, Rokeya's

views on various social and religious issues also went through a myriad of changes. Those who cite Rokeya's endorsement of the burka tend to overlook her vigorous questioning of the very tenets of religion. Those who take comfort in her Anchal-clad portrait often forget that Rokeya's attitude towards religion was highly ambivalent. Her writings on religion that came out in contemporary journals were considered to be hard meat by many, prompting Rokeya not to republish them in *Matichur*. Just as Vidyasagar strategically used his connections with the British administration to have widow marriage legalised, Rokeya also made a strategic use of religion to achieve women's emancipation.

In my view, Rokeya was far more of a radical thinker than what she has been made out to be, especially after her death. A real tribute to her could only be paid by reading her work in its entirety so that the various shifts in her positions could be better understood and her zeal for social reform appreciated. Her writings have survived a century because they document the issues that still plague the lives of millions of women around the world.

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