

FROM PAGES TO PIXELS

A dream rewritten: Rokeya's radical vision and its cinematic afterlife

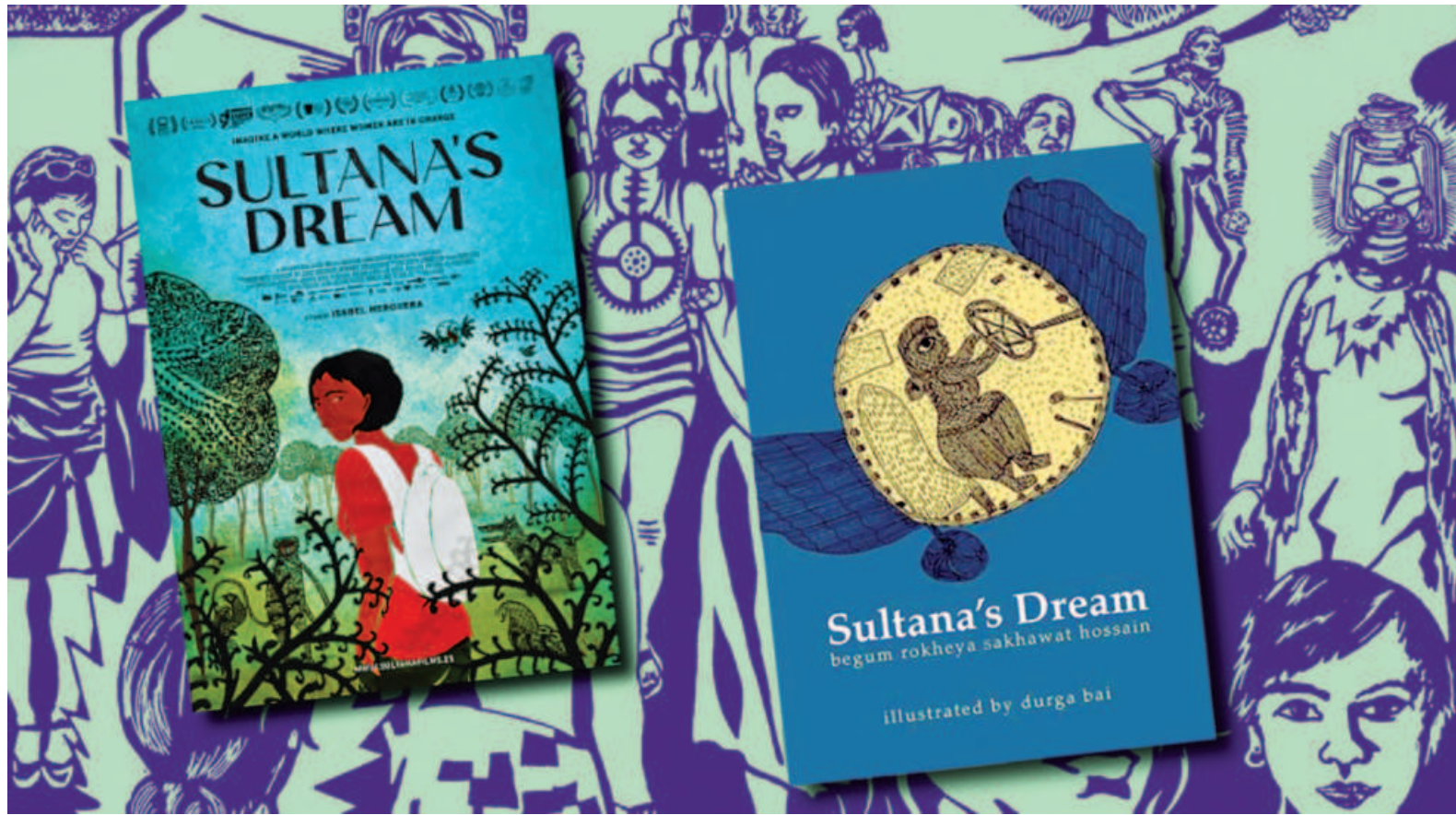


ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

Ladyland's environmental futurism is thus inseparable from its postcolonial critique: sustainability, self-sufficiency, and nonviolent technological defense function as rejections of imperial science and its hierarchies of knowledge.

SARA KABIR, SABRINA SAZZAD, KASHFIA NAHREEN

"There is no place on earth where women are safe," declares Inés, the protagonist of Isabel Herguera's animated film *Sultana's Dream* (2023). Loosely inspired by Begum Rokeya's seminal short story of the same name, the film follows Inés's journey of self-discovery after she encounters a copy of *Sultana's Dream* (1905) and is profoundly affected by its vision. As the narrative moves through the bustling streets and intimate encounters she experiences along the way, the film weaves Inés's personal search for a safe space for women with fragments of Rokeya's life and legacy. Yet, as the story unfolds and the adaptation increasingly departs from its literary source, an unavoidable question emerges: does the film ultimately do justice to the radical imagination and historical significance of the work it invokes?

This film has emerged from an unconventional method of production that shaped both its aesthetic and its narrative form. Developed through a series of drawing workshops conducted across India between 2013 and 2014—with widows rooted in tradition, self-

employed women, and art and design students—it adopts a collective, open-ended approach in which participants reinterpreted Begum Rokeya's text through their own social and cultural experiences. These responses influenced the script and visual language of the film, resulting in a mixed-media structure: hand-drawn ink and watercolor animation depicts Inés's contemporary journey, Begum Rokeya's life appears in shadow silhouette cutouts evoking pre-cinematic shadow theatre, and *Ladyland* is rendered through intricate mehendi-inspired patterns. Unified by monochromatic palettes in muted browns and pastels, the film privileges atmosphere and symbolism over material specificity. While this methodology reflects a feminist commitment to participatory authorship, it also helps explain the film's diffuse focus, positioning *Sultana's Dream* less as a direct book-to-screen adaptation than as a collage of reflections that prioritises multiplicity over fidelity to Rokeya's speculative vision.

Any adaptation necessarily involves interpretation, compression, and creative liberty, particularly when translating a century-old literary

text across cultures and media. Artistic license is not, in itself, a failure. However, *Sultana's Dream*—the movie—positions itself less as a direct adaptation and more as a meditative response to Rokeya's legacy, increasingly privileging Inés's personal journey and contemporary side-plots over the structural and ideological core of the original text. It is within this shift—from adaptation to abstraction—that many of the film's representational shortcomings begin to surface.

While the animated film is rich in evocative imagery, its storytelling remains thin and uneven, with characters that often feel underdeveloped and one-dimensional. The film does thoughtfully attempt to demonstrate the many shared experiences and struggles faced by women across the globe, yet the storytelling did not translate well into a cohesive narrative. One such instance is when Inés travels to Vrindavan in India, she encounters widowed women who are portrayed as guarded and unwelcoming—an interaction that is framed without sufficient context or nuance. Rather than interrogating the social and historical conditions that shape their lives, the film presents their

resistance through a lens that risks stereotyping, reinforcing a flattening and categorical depiction of South Asian women. This tendency to gesture toward complexity without fully engaging it—substituting atmosphere and symbolism for depth—emerges not only in the film's characterisations, but also in its approach to Rokeya's speculative world.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the film's treatment of *Ladyland* itself. Gone are the sustainable, renewable innovations that form the backbone of Begum Rokeya's *Ladyland*: the solar- and wind-powered technologies devised by women to till fields, cook food, regulate indoor climates, enable travel, and even defend the nation without bloodshed. In Herguera's adaptation, this carefully articulated solarpunk infrastructure is replaced by a single speculative device—a "frequency amplifier" that repels enemies by amplifying sonar energy. This substitution does more than streamline Rokeya's worldbuilding; it fundamentally alters the political and epistemic force of her science fiction. Writing in English under British colonial rule, at a time when women in Bengal were systematically denied access to higher education and scientific authorship, Rokeya's vision positioned women as scientists and engineers whose renewable technologies directly challenged both patriarchal authority and colonial models of extractive, militarised modernity. *Ladyland*'s environmental futurism is thus inseparable from its postcolonial critique: sustainability, self-sufficiency, and nonviolent technological defense function as rejections of imperial science and its hierarchies of knowledge. By erasing these elements, the adaptation reframes *Sultana's Dream* as a symbolic feminist fable rather than the pioneering work of science fiction it was, obscuring Rokeya's most radical claim—that women from the colonised world could imagine, design, and sustain technologically advanced futures on their own terms, decades before such ideas entered Western speculative discourse.

Throughout the narrative, the film weaves in different languages. Spoken by different characters, the incorporation of Spanish, Bangla, English, Hindi, Basque, Italian signifies Inés's journey throughout the globe in search of safe spaces for women. While this attempt at showcasing different languages and dialects from around the world is commendable, the transition between the languages feels ornamental and devoid of meaning. An instance of which is seen in the

inclusion of the folk song in Bangla that Inés experiences during her visit to Pairaband, Bangladesh, the birth place of Begum Rokeya. While the song is beautifully sung with its tune, the lyrics feel inorganic and have a rather conversational tone. Instead of capturing the typical nuance of folk songs, the song opts for direct exposition in recounting Begum Rokeya's story. In doing so, the film oversimplifies the very cultural aspects rooted in Begum Rokeya's abode and disregards the unique flairs of Bangladeshi folk songs.

In addition to failing to engage the complexities of South Asian cultures and womanhood, the adaptation reproduces subtle but telling cultural misrepresentations—most notably in its costuming of the characters. Begum Rokeya is depicted in a salwar kameez, while Sakhawat Hossain appears in a tupi and panjabi, visual choices that read less as historical accuracy than as a generalised, western-facing shorthand for Muslim identity. Historical photographic evidence available online, however, shows Rokeya wearing sarees and Sakhawat Hossain dressed in a suit and tie, reflecting the cosmopolitan, reformist milieu in which they lived. More broadly, Bangali men in the film appear visually indistinguishable from one another, uniformly rendered in tupi-panjabi and long beards, as though regional, class, and ideological differences did not exist. Such aesthetic homogenisation raises an unavoidable question: does the film reflect a European tendency to view the cultures of the Indian subcontinent as a monolith, stripped of internal diversity? Whether born of indifference or unconscious bias, these choices echo the same logic of simplification that undermines the film's engagement with Rokeya's radical, historically grounded vision.

This is an excerpt. Read the full essay on *The Daily Star* and *Star Books and Literature's* websites.

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BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

The wilderness in me

Review of 'The God of The Woods' (Riverhead Books, 2024) by Liz Moore

TAHMINA HOSSAIN

The God of the Woods caught my attention while I was excavating for my next read on Goodreads. It is the latest novel by Liz Moore. The mystery genre is my guilty pleasure; the fact that this novel won the Goodreads Choice Award for Readers' Favourite Mystery & Thriller in 2024 made me pick it up. The book, *The God of the Woods*, is about the coincidental disappearances of Bear and Barbara. Both are separate incidents as Bear goes missing in the 1960s, and Barbara goes missing in 1975. They are the children of the Van Laar family—an affluent and influential family situated in the Adirondack Mountains, New York, United States. Their source of fortune comes from banking. Money is their only notable power; it brings them comfort but never peace. Rather than making them formidable, it renders them as dependent as the people who rely on the Van Laar for employment. However, deluded by their financial power, the Van Laar family never comprehends this dependency. Moreover, they are obsessed with maintaining a pristine reputation to safeguard their business alliances. All decisions revolve around protecting this reputation, such as the marriage between Peter Van Laar III and Alice, or the events that erupt after the disappearances of their children.

The mother of Bear and Barbara is Alice, who stays in a wonderland. She faces many

betrayals and misfortunes and is a true definition of fragile in every sense. Alice gets mentally abused by her ruthless husband. However, you feel neither sympathy nor pity for her. It's because she is more of a nuisance, considered a burden, even to herself. She is never cruel; at the same time, she is never kind either. She is emotionally reckless and irresponsible, but never naïve. She can be as demanding as her husband to people whom Alice considers socially lower than her, but fails to be as assertive as he is. She is not childish, but her thoughts are more like a teenager's than like an adult's. Sometimes, I feel she is as arrogant and as narcissistic as her in-laws and as hypocritical as her parents and sister, in a more palatable form.

Alice believes that Barbara eats too frequently and should restrain herself. Alice disregards the fact that Barbara is physically healthy, actively exercises, and is never fat. Alice finds it difficult to look at the physical changes that Barbara is going through, and Alice wants to carve those changes by restricting Barbara's food intake.



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

For Alice, love comes easily for her first child, Bear, who is perhaps the only person she has ever truly loved in her entire life. Unfortunately, Alice does not feel the same affection for her second child, Barbara.

Peter and Alice were happy with Bear because he was a son who would eventually inherit the Van Laar legacy and protect it. After his disappearance, the second child, Barbara, is supposed to be his replacement. But Barbara is rebellious and has a bold and daring sense of style. Everything about her is loud and eye-catching. Her rebellious nature and eccentric choice are a cry for

attention from her family; a fight against the negligence she has faced since childhood. Alice is physically weak and appears fragile and malnourished, yet in her mind, this is the ideal body. As a result, she occasionally forbids Barbara from eating and instructs the cooks not to give her any food. Barbara is 12 years-old, and her body is naturally undergoing changes. Alice believes that Barbara eats too frequently and should restrain herself. Alice disregards the fact that Barbara is physically healthy, actively exercises, and is never fat. Alice finds it difficult to look at the physical changes that

Barbara is going through, and Alice wants to carve those changes by restricting Barbara's food intake. Thus, starved, Barbara would occasionally tiptoe to the kitchen to eat. The cook would leave quietly, giving her privacy and hiding her activity from her emotionally distant parents.

Now, let's start with the shortcomings, which are foremost about the chronology. The timeline oscillates excessively, almost abruptly, jumping from 1950 to 1975 with no chronological order. As a result, it is hard to keep the story in line. You feel jostled every few pages. Secondly, Moore swiftly changes points of view among a plethora of characters. And, this book carries many characters. Moreover, the frequent shifts in the timeline and points of view do little to aid the plot. Although this makes the plot and motive clear, it gives you a hefty background. However, it also made the story appear incoherent. Lastly, Moore overused cliffhangers. It was redundant and clichéd. Nonetheless, if you can push through these interruptions, then the book will be totally worth your time. The writing is smooth, and the cliff hangers do keep one engaged till the end.

Tahmina Hossain is first and foremost a reader, a lover of literature, and then a writer. If you enjoy rambling about literature like her, then reach out at: literary.ramblings.by.t@gmail.com.