

## **An Analysis of the Significance, Social Relevance and Importance of “Sultana’s Dream” by Begum Rokeya; Then and Now**

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### **ABSTRACT**

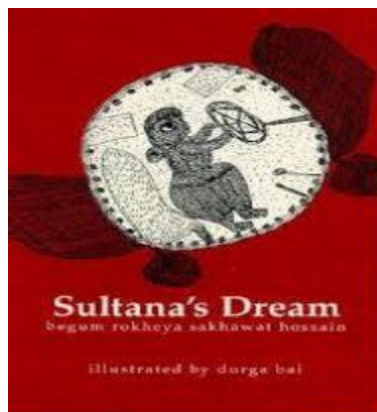
*This analytical paper studies the impact of Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's short narrative Sultana's Dream on traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Born into a traditional Bengali Muslim family, Begum Rokeya shed cultural expectations by advocating for women's education and literacy. Sultana's Dream, a pioneering feminist science fiction work, satirises patriarchal society by imagining a utopian future with gender roles reversed. Through a critical evaluation of Sultana's Dream, this paper exhibits Rokeya's revolutionary views on gender equality, education, and intellectual empowerment, contrasting her work with contemporary feminist works such as Barbie (2023). The essay emphasises Rokeya's constant struggle for women's liberation and its continued relevance in today's evolving world.*

**Keywords:** Gender inequality, Sultana’s Dream, Begum Rokeya, feminist literature, patriarchy, gender roles, social reform, women’s rights

**Research Question:** The paper would analyse the impact of Sultana’s Dream in today's world. How far is the author’s (Begum Rokeya) views on gender equality, education, and intellectual empowerment relevant today? Does her narrative on writing it as a dream indicate the farfetchedness of a feminist society? Does her dream indicate rebellion on the type of existence women then and now? Does the world today encourage masculinity by bringing out works such as Barbie and similar characters? These and similar such questions would be attempted to be addressed in my paper.

### **1. Introduction**

In colonial India where women were treated as slaves, shackled to their homes without means of education and literacy, Begum Rokeya Sukhawat Hussain dared to dream of an alternate earth shattering reality with her short story Sultana’s Dream. Born into a conservative Bengali Muslim



family living in the capital city of Calcutta, Begum Rokeya was shackled by the tenets of religion and strong gender biases. While her brothers were sent to the best schools and were highly educated, Rokeya was prohibited from gaining any form of education and literacy. However, she learnt to read and write Bangla, Urdu and Hindi with the help of her brothers and later, her husband. Her upbringing strengthened her belief in the idea that education and literacy were the most important weapons of resistance in the fight for equality. She not only wrote multiple works of literature in various languages, she also became a beacon of hope for Bengali Muslim women and a pioneer for women's education all over the country. In 1917 she started her own educational institution, the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School in Calcutta and successfully convinced parents all over the city to send their daughters to school. She ensured her school taught an extensive curriculum ranging from the teachings of the Quran to physical education.

## **2. Feminism in the 19th and 20th centuries and its Evolution Over Time**

Although feminism as a term was only coined in the late 19th century, women's movements have been a much earlier phenomenon. Pre-independence feminism was largely encompassed by social reforms movements, in what is known as the First Phase of women's movements between the years of 1850-1915. This period was characterised by the belief in ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity by the educated middle class who, educated in England, were eager to bring these qualities into Indian culture and social practices. However, they realised that the potential of these new concepts could erode Indian culture and tradition. To prevent this colonial hegemony, the reformers attempted to root out social evils while remaining connected to Indian heritage, a phenomenon referred to as 'Cultural Defense' by K.N. Panikkar. This 'cultural defence' led to a paradoxical situation. They wanted to build a modern society, adopting these new ideals while staying rooted in Indian culture. Reformers desired to eliminate social issues including illiteracy, polygam, sati, child marriage- all which they considered to be impediments to the progress of

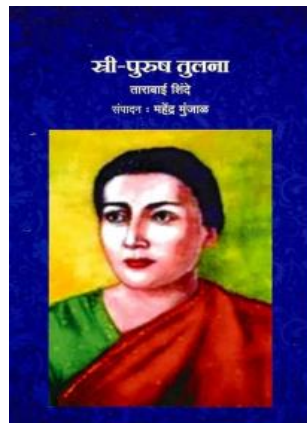
women. They firmly believed that progress of society as a whole was impossible if women remained in the backward state they were in.

However, this belief did not radically change the patriarchal structure of Indian society. The reformers only picked on social issues that the British found to be a justification for the portrayal of Indians as barbarian and backward. This movement itself was primarily led by men, women were far and between. The limited women's organisations that were set up also followed the ideology set up by male reformers, unable to establish a strong political identity of their own. The focus was on transforming Indian women themselves, and not the social structure that was responsible for their oppression.

Post independence, there was a steady rise in women's activism and a shift from reform based activism to addressing larger socio-cultural problems that plagued the social system. Different waves of feminism utilised different approaches to forward the basic definition of feminism- advocacy of women's rights on the basis of equality of the sexes.

### **3. Other Feminist Literature During the 18th and 19th century**

#### **3.1 Stri Purush Tulana by Tara Bai Shinde**



Translated to 'a comparison between women and man', Stri Purush Tulana is known as the first modern feminist text of India. Written in 1882 by Tarabai Shinde, it is a critique of both the patriarchal and caste system present in Indian society. The text was originally published in Marathi in 1882 as a response to an article written by an orthodox Hindu newspaper. The newspaper reported an incident in which criminal charges were filed against a widow who aborted her unborn child. Tarabai Shinde decided to speak up against this injustice through her powerful writings.

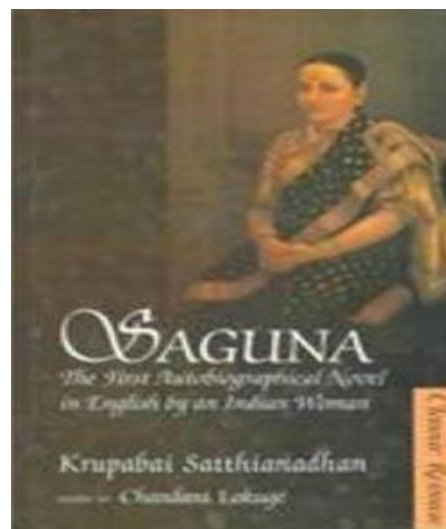
Born in the Berar province of Buldhana, Shinde was a women's rights activist known for her defiance towards traditional Hindu scriptures. Educated by her liberal father, Tarabai Shinde would move on to be a founding member of the Satyashodak Samaj, a social reform society.

Shinde begins by questioning God, "Let me ask you something, Gods! You are supposed to be omnipotent and freely accessible to all..What does that mean? That you have never been known to be partial. But wasn't it you who created both men and women? Then why did you grant happiness only to men and brand women with nothing but agony?" She goes on to challenge the caste system, the denial of education to women, polygamy and the ostracisation of widows.

The book caused immediate outrage amongst the orthodox Hindu society. Jyotiba Phule, a prominent anti-caste activist lauded her work, calling it a "Courageous attempt by a courageous writer, original feminist thinker and critic." He even wrote the second issue of Satyashodak Samaj's magazine in defence of Tarabai Shinde's work.

### **3.2. Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life by Krupabai Saththianadhan**

Between 1887 and 1888, the Madras Christian College serialised an English story called Saguna. An autobiography of Krupabai Saththianadhan, it was posthumously published by Srinivasa, Varadachari and Co. in Madras. It was even presented to Queen Victoria, who upon reading it, was impressed to the point of asking for more novels by the same author. "Saguna captures factual details about the author's life as well as the prevailing mood of the time with the help of wonderful descriptions, vivid character sketches, and poetic language" (Oindrila Mukherjee, 2016). Similar to Begum Rokeya, Krupabai also received education in a time where women were usually unable to.



*Saguna* follows the life of Radha, a young girl with hopes and dreams born into a Christian family. Fiercely proud of her education, she acknowledges her desire to be taught equally to her brothers. Despite all odds, Saguna pursues a medical career, an echo of the author's own life. *Saguna* is not only prominent for its feminist message, it also addresses themes of racism, questioning why her family is treated differently by white Christians. She depicts the struggle of women in the 19th century, restricted to the household and forced to stay in the private domain. "The refined, civilised mind shudders or looks down with pity on the exhibition as a relic of savagery; and yet these are the daughters of India whose lot is considered as not needing any improvement by many of my countrymen who are highly cultured and who are supposed to have benefitted from Western civilisation." (Krupabai Sathianadhan)

#### **4. Sultana's Dream and Its Relevance**

When it came to her debut in English literature, *Sultana's Dream* was her first and only novel in the language. What started as an endeavour to impress her husband with her prowess over a newly learned language, became the first feminist science fiction literature in the Indian subcontinent. As stated by the blog 'Guerilla Girls', Begum Rokeya's writings consisted of a distinctive literary style, characterised by "creativity, logic and a wry sense of humour". *Sultana's Dream* is a satirical novel which highlights the absurdity of patriarchal oppression by flipping gender inequality on its head. She attempts to describe a new social structure which provides women with an avenue for exerting agency and gaining basic rights and life opportunities.

The short story elaborates on two main aspects. First, the reversal of gender roles and second, the growth and development of science and technology. The story is structured in the form of a friendly and informal conversation between Sultana and her friend Sister Sara, a resident of Ladyland. The main switch between gender roles takes place in the form of the public-private divide through the Islamic practice of the 'zenana' (The zenana were the inner rooms of a house where the women of the family lived and where men and strangers were not allowed to enter).

Begum Rokeya systematically deconstructs backward social practices to highlight the flaws of the existing structure which become much more apparent when practised on the male population. These include restriction on education of women, seclusion by the purdah customs and the denial of participation of women in all forms of social affairs.

In the complete reversal of gender roles as envisaged by her, men are required to observe purdah and do all the domestic chores which women have been subjected to for centuries. Begum Rokeya expertly addresses the issue of cerebral equality over physical equality between the genders, a subject still discussed in today's conversations around feminism. When the men of

Ladyland have been killed off due to the war, the ladies discuss various methods to defend their country. While they accept their limited physical abilities in fighting in comparison to men, they utilise their knowledge and superior brain power to combat the enemies. This brought forth a new way of visualising gender inequality; of diminishing the importance of biological limitations while simultaneously empowering women through new avenues of education.

To expose the gaping inequalities between both sexes, Begum Rokeya uses twin metaphors of lunatic asylum escapees and wild animals running free to substantiate her ideas. When asked why men are the ones kept inside the ‘mardana’, Sister Sara asks Sultana whether it makes more sense to allow lunatics to run free and force sane individuals to be imprisoned or vice versa. Using the logic of a lunatic asylum, Begum Rokeya substantiates the existence of Ladyland with a question posed in recent years- why should women stay inside to protect themselves from the ‘gaze’ of men?

In the utopian vision of Ladyland, women are emancipated from the shackles of patriarchy through extensive education. Women are not only educated in the basic sense of literacy, but are instead the highest intellectuals of their society. They attend world class universities to sharpen their minds and develop and grow technology to be useful for their land. They harness new scientific methods to not only be equal to traditional societies but also excel past them. This revolutionary concept not only proved the expertise of women in scientific, political and economic spheres of life, but brought out the idea that women may actually be far superior in the running of a country.

### **5. Begum Rokeya’s Understanding of Gender Systems in the Early 20th Century and its Relevance Today**

The theme of empowerment of women through education has been a common denominator throughout Begum Rokeya’s life, beginning from childhood and significantly impacting her social work and feminist movements in the future. This understanding of the unfair inequality between sexes also stemmed from the atmosphere of the Bengal Renaissance at the time. It saw the reawakening of intellectual thought and rationality in social, religious, cultural spheres. She became the pioneer of Muslim Bengali women in this ‘Renaissance’ experienced by the region. She founded the Muslim Women’s Association or Anjuman-e-Khawateen-e-Islam to empower women by offering financial and educational support to Bengali Muslim women. Her speech at the “Bengal Women Educational Conference” reflected these beliefs: “I have been crying for the lowliest creature in India for the last twenty years. Do you know who that lowliest creature in India is? It is the Indian women... There are also people who feel for animals, so we see animal’s rights groups everywhere. If a dog is hit by a car, we hear an outcry in the Anglo-Indian media.

But there is not a single soul in the whole of the subcontinent to mourn for incarcerated women like us.”

Her literary fiction does not vaguely touch upon the manner in which women plan on ruling their own country, but rather, she extensively details every aspect of the managerial, administrative, political and social ways of life in the dimension of Ladyland. This utopian vision of an alternate reality is actually not as far fetched as it may seem in the time it was written.

She authored many other texts including Pipasha ("Thirst") (1902) Matichur 1st Vol. (Essays) (1904) Matichur 2nd Vol. (Essays) (1922) which addressed similar feminist thoughts. The author extensively documented her advocacy for women's rights throughout her life. The magnitude of Begum Rokeya's works can be understood by measuring it against creative works produced in recent years. Barbie (2023) is a contemporary retelling of a similar story of matriarchy in which women rule Barbie Land and men are banished to the fringes of society. The movie lauded as a brave feminist narrative today provides context to comprehend the shock waves her texts would have caused in early 20th century India. She proved to be a trailblazer for Indian feminists for centuries to come, often equated to Western authors such as Virginia Woolf. These comparisons are important in the context of this work as a part of history as a whole and not in isolation.

In 21st century India, women have still not achieved half the respect and status Begum Rokeya talks about. Although progress has been slow and gradual, certain milestones are being achieved. In September 2023, Indian legislators passed the Women's reservation bill, ensuring that women occupy 33 percent of seats in state legislative assemblies and the Lok Sabha. The Panchayati Raj Act provides a total of 1/3rd seats reserved for women, to promote the participation of women in politics and decision making. The Companies Act 2013 paved the way for women to attempt to break the corporate glass ceiling. According to this legislation, it is mandatory by law to appoint at least one woman director as a board member in certain kinds of companies.

Despite improvements in certain spheres, Begum Rokeya's utopian world is far from reaching fruition. The Women's Reservation Bill, though passed in the parliament, shall only be implemented in 2029 due to delimitation of constituencies and pending census, delaying an already overdue legislation. Other laws passed lack efficient implementation, leading to limited progress only on paper. Even though laws exist for the protection of women, they are far from adequate. Slow judicial processes often delay justice in cases involving women's rights. Many women in rural India continue to remain unaware of rights and protections available to them under the Indian constitution. Women who do try to utilise their rights face social stigma, isolation and pressure to withdraw their complaints. Gender inequality continues to be a complex issue that urgently needs to be addressed.

## **6. Conclusion**

Even though feminism may be a relatively novel term, there is no dearth of examples of Indian feminists of the 19th and early 20th centuries. They proved themselves to be immensely strong women of indomitable spirit, exerting their agency and standing strong in their beliefs. Through examples of Tarabai Shinde, Krupabai Sathianadhan and Begum Rokeya, this analytical paper exhibits the range of feminist works produced in this period of Indian history. Their understanding and interpretation of feminism was greatly impacted by their circumstances and the political climate of the time. Adapting and growing their beliefs from those of male social reformers, these women refused to adjust their expectations to the structure they were born into. Sultana's Dream by Begum Rokeya Hossain is a revolutionary work that still holds immense relevance today. The historical background of the novel provides a framework to understand the social context of 20th century India and the brave, courageous women who did not let prejudices and stereotypes affect their ambitions and dared to dream as big as possible.

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