

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's "Sultana's Dream": A Psychoanalytic Interpretation

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ABSTRACT

"Sultana's Dream" by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain describes a long journey of dream where Rokeya's motives behind the dream are revealed. The unconscious mind reserves repressed feelings, emotions, desires, thoughts, and memories that get satisfaction in dream and make the dream meaningful. This paper tries to discover Rokeya's inner desires that take shelter in her unconscious mind and find fulfillment in her dream. Interpreting her dream, this paper also tries to explore the hidden messages she wanted to give in the text. This study further analyzes the border between her dream and reality. We hope this paper will contribute to the existing body of research work on Rokeya.

1. INTRODUCTION

"Sultana's Dream" is a 1905 feminist utopian story written by Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain where the dream of Sultana reflects the repressed desires of Rokeya herself, as she disguises under the name of Sultana in the text. The story starts with a sequence of dream where Sultana enjoys liberation from the maxims of patriarchy in a utopian *Ladyland* - the land ruled by honesty, love, peace, truth, purity, knowledge and science. In this imaginative land, women live in a complacent state resisting masculine supremacy that always prevents feminine agenda to be audible and distant. However, Sultana cannot remain in that ideal land forever as she awakes from her blissful dream. Hence, her *unconscious* desires get fulfillment only in her dream. Critics have examined "Sultana's Dream" from multiple perspectives but none of them has explored the dream from Freudian perspective. Applying Freudian psychoanalytic interpretation, this paper focuses on how the repressed or unsatisfied wishes of Rokeya are partially satisfied in the dream. This paper also shows that the reality is completely reverse from her dream world and she consciously or subconsciously accepts this very fact.

2. DISCUSSION

Sigmund Freud believes that a dream is an escape-hatch or safety-valve through which repressed desires, fears, or memories seek an outlet into the conscious mind. When some wish, fear, memory, or desire is

difficult to face, we try to cope up with it by repressing it, eliminating it from the conscious mind. However, this does not make it go away rather it remains alive in the *unconscious*, like radioactive matter buried beneath the ocean. "All of Freud's work depends upon the notion of *unconscious*, which is the part of the mind beyond consciousness which nevertheless has a strong influence upon our actions" (Barry, 2002, pp. 96-100). Rivkin and Ryan (1998) observe that "the human mind contains a dimension that is only partially accessible to consciousness and then only through indirect means such as dreams" (p. 119). According to Freud, the mind can be divided into three parts: the *conscious*, the *preconscious* and the *unconscious*. The *conscious* mind includes everything that we are aware of. The *preconscious* mind includes our memories that are not always part of consciousness but can be retrieved easily at any time and brought into our awareness. The *unconscious* mind is a reservoir of feelings, thoughts, urges, and memories that are outside of our conscious awareness. Dreams are the workings of this unconscious mind. Freud assigns the mental processes to three psychic zones: the *id*, the *ego*, and the *super ego*. According to Freud (2005) "... to adopt a popular mode of speaking, we might say that the *ego* stands for reason and good sense while the *id* stands for the untamed passions" (p. 501). Peter Gay (1989) notes that "[D]reams are a product of dreamers own mind" (p. 143). To Freud, dreams contain two parts: *manifest content* and *latent content*. *Manifest content* describes

what a person remembers from a dream. *Latent content* refers to the true meaning of the *manifest content*. So, the underlying motives of the *unconscious* can be discovered by interpreting dreams. Dreams reflect not only the motives preserved in the *unconscious* but also the thoughts and concerns of our waking life. "The interpretation of dream does not itself indicate that these are fantasies and not recollections of actual events; it only provides us with content of the thought and leaves it us to decide what it is worth as reality" (Freud, 1999, p. 220). The ultimate goal of dream interpretation is not to understand the dream but to understand the dreamer. "*Dream-displacement* and *dream-condensation* are the two foremen in the charge of the dream-work" (Freud, 1999, p. 235).

In "Sultana's Dream", Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain advocates emancipation of women from their deplorable and inferior status by forming a feminine utopia in the dream of the very character Sultana who always internalizes patriarchal restriction and confinement and thus behaves accordingly in real world. However, in the dream she discovers a new world where her crushed desires are free to be satisfied. In this text, the readers are directed in the realm of dream to discover the value of equal contribution of women in every sphere of their lives.

2.1 Manifest Content of the Dream

"Sultana's Dream" describes a long journey in the dream world where the traditional roles of male and female are reversed. In her dream, Sultana walks with Sister Sara towards a garden like land in "a fine morning", though it is "starry night" in reality (Hossain, 2014, p. 403). This land is called the "Ladyland" where the women have access to public spaces without being subjected to male surveillance and the men are restrained to "Mardana" (an opposite word to zenana) (p. 410). Here, there is no sign of patriarchal domination as a Queen rules the land. "... 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" (p. 411). The women are supreme here and by using "brain power", women prove themselves worthier than the men do (p. 406). They are not only expert in laboratory work but also in household activities like "knitting and needle work" (p. 406). Early marriage is banned here and no woman is permitted to marry before she is twenty-one.

There are two universities for women in *Ladyland*: one of them invented a "water balloon" which is linked by

numeral pipes (p. 407). Through this balloon, they can drive above the cloudland and draw as much water as they want from the atmosphere. Another university discovered an instrument to gather sun heat to create solar heat for cooking and to keep the rooms warm in the cold weather. There is "no sign of coal or fire" (p. 407). They plow their land through electricity to supply the required power for their work. Earlier when the women in *Ladyland* were busy in different scientific researches, the men laughed at their invention by calling the whole thing as "a sentimental nightmare" (p. 408). The term "sentimental nightmare" was used to mock on their work, as the men could not imagine women outside the household and not even their scientific discoveries. Though the men laugh at their achievements, they finally acknowledge their deeds as the country is saved from the enemy only through the scientific invention of women. Now other countries do not dare to invade this land in the fear of its women capabilities. The *Ladyland* is free from flood, thunderstorm, mud or even a single mosquito bite. The "artificial fountain" (p. 411) is another invention to keep the environment cool in hot weather. The paths of this land are covered with "green grass", "moss and flowers" (p. 404). The kitchen seems to be a garden. "Hydrogen balls" are used to overcome the force of gravity and "air-car" is used as vehicle here (p. 412). Here "Love and Truth" are key concepts of religion and the relationships are sacred (p. 412). Sultana's visit in this *Feminist Utopian* land is the *manifest content* of the dream. The term *Feminist Utopia* points to a world where men and women are not stuck in traditional customs of inequality. The main concern of *Feminist Utopia* is to establish a world where women can enjoy all access to the private and public sphere in order to become self-reliant. In this dream land, girls through education and intellectual faculties achieve excellence in both individual and private space.

2.2 Latent Content of the Dream

The dream represents Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's desire to reform the society where a woman would not be treated as a secondary being. The images of her dream present an escape from the sad reality into the place where she wishes to be. The image of *Ladyland* symbolizes her desire to expel all forms of discrimination against women from the society and to make women educated. She believes that women possess the same quality as that of men and they have the power to prove their capability in both household chores and in ruling the country, if they are given proper opportunities. This is reflected in the "piece of

embroidery work” done by Sister Sara and her capability of finishing laboratory work in two hours (p. 406).

Again, Rokeya’s dreaming of the *Ladyland* ruled by a Queen implies her desire of women-empowerment. Dreaming about walking with Sister Sara in a garden-like land provides the writer with a link to her past days at Darjeeling, where she used to walk with Sister Sara in the botanical gardens. The time, “a fine morning” (p. 403) in the dream, suggests new beginning, new hope, new opportunities, and freedom from darkness. It reflects Rokeya’s wish to reform the society and provide women with new opportunities to prove themselves. She wants the women to be free from patriarchal shackles and to attain individual identity. The image of ‘kitchen’ (p. 406) reminds the reader of the time when women were considered as a part of hearth because they had to consume a certain portion of time in the kitchen. Rokeya’s unconscious mind wants to change this situation and that is why, in the dream the kitchen belongs to the men and they perform the domestic works. On the contrary, the social activities are conducted by the women.

Rokeya radically resists women’s restriction to “Zenana” (p. 404) and their seclusion from the outside world. Her dream reflects this protest when Sister Sara says, “[M]en, who do or at least are capable of doing no end of mischief, are let loose and the innocent women, shut up in the zenana! How can you trust those untrained men out of doors?” (p. 405). Thus, Sister Sara becomes the mouthpiece of Rokeya’s inner self as she (Sara) expresses her hidden desires.

In Rokeya’s time, the women were confined in domestic world, but she wanted women to be free from this confinement. In the dream when Sultana looks at Sister Sara’s bathroom, to her utter surprise she discovers, “[S]he could enjoy a shower bath whenever she liked, by simply removing the roof (which was like the lid of a box)” (pp. 411-412). The ‘box’ symbolically suggests the imprisoned condition of women, but being able to remove the lid or the roof of bathroom signifies Rokeya’s desire of freedom from this captivity.

Early marriage had created a strong influence on Rokeya’s mind while her sister was forced to marry at the age of fifteen. It gets reflected in her dream, “[A]nd early marriage also was stopped. No woman was to be allowed to marry before she was twenty-one” (p. 407). It suggests her concern for women education as she knows that early marriage hinders women education.

Though Begum Rokeya was born in a highly educated family, she could not get the scope of formal education. At the age of eighteen, when she got married, she found an opportunity to flourish herself through proper education. Her husband encouraged her to learn Bengali and English language. The female students in the universities of the *Ladyland* mirror her repressed desire for getting institutional education. It also suggests her hope to educate all women of Indian subcontinent. Because she realizes that education is the key tool for women empowerment. Education paves the way for women to perform socially, politically, psychologically and even technically. The images of the dream like “water balloon” (p. 411), “solar heat” (p. 406), “artificial fountains”, “air car”, and “hydrogen balls” (pp. 411-12) reflect Rokeya’s optimistic mind. They also suggest her desire for ensuring women of the knowledge of advanced science and technology so that they can contribute to the society with their “brain power” (p. 408).

Rokeya’s dream land is like a garden where the paths are covered with grasses and flowers. It suggests her love and concern for natural environment. She desires not only for a scientifically developed country but also for a country which is environmentally sound. Sister Sara utters in her dream, “Your Calcutta could become a nicer garden than this if only your countrymen wanted to make it so” (p. 404). It also symbolizes that Calcutta would be a better place if the men treat the women equally and allow them with proper education. The religion in the dream land reflects Rokeya’s humanist ideals as it is based on love, truth, mercifulness, and purity. A distant cousin is considered as sacred as a brother in her dream land. It suggests her desire for such a religion which would not lock up women in the domestic space and would not make discrimination between male and female.

2.3 Border between Dream and Reality

Rokeya gets a sudden jerk from her dream and is thrown into the world of reality: “After visiting the above places of interest we got again into the air-car, but as soon as it began moving, I somehow slipped down and the fall startled me out of my dream. And on opening my eyes, I found myself in my own bedroom still lounging in the easy-chair!” (p. 413). Rokeya realizes that her dream is totally opposite to the harsh reality. The reality is, though she dreams of reforming the society, the outcome is not gratifying as women are still marginalized in the society. Though a number of feminist movements take place over the period of time to impart women proper right, they are still victimized by the prevailing social customs. To achieve

sustainable growth of a nation, women empowerment plays a vital role; but it is as if Rokeya's dream of women empowerment and equal rights for male and female were possible only in a dream, not in reality. Women's spiritual freedom may come only when they would be free from patriarchal oppression and capable of establishing individual identity. But patriarchy always victimizes women to suppress them. Still women's position is inferior to the men and they are treated as secondary beings. Though a new era has been created in the field of science and technology all over the world, women's contribution to the development of a nation is concealed every day by the patriarchal power. The orthodox society still thinks women should be confined to household activities. Some forms of violence against women like rape, killing, sexual harassment, violence in the workplace, and domestic violence have become regular incidents. Early marriage is still happening.

The millennium development goal includes universal education and gender equality. But it is shocking that the goal has not been achieved fully. Though religion emphasizes the equal treatment between male and female, the dominating society is still oppressing women by keeping them physically, psychologically, and socially inferior to men. Education can uphold women's dignity, but the goal of educating women has not been achieved yet. It remains only a dream as Rokeya's "Sultana's Dream".

Like "Sultana's Dream", *Herland* is also a feminist utopian novel where Charlotte Perkins Gilman creates a society ruled by women without any aid of men. Both Rokeya and Gilman are compelled to move on the imaginary world--full of happiness and tranquility, due to the extreme misery and melancholy that triumph in the real world.

5. CONCLUSION

To sum up, this study has tried to discover the latent thoughts behind Sultana's dream- the thoughts repressed or unsatisfied in the real life take shelter in the *unconscious* part of mind and become partially satisfied in dream. Interpreting the dream, this study has attempted to analyze the inner messages of "Sultana's Dream", the radical feminist agendas of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. Through the dream

Rokeya has set up the paths for women development as well as for global prosperity, but the world has yet to achieve them. Hence, implementation of her notion is the demand of time. This study can help the future researchers to analyze other works using Freudian psychoanalysis. This paper can also raise many possibilities for the readers to look into other literary works from a new perspective.

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