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**COLONIALISM: FEMINIST UTOPIA IN ROKEYA HOSSAIN'S  
"SULTANA'S DREAM" AND THE PRESENT****DR. ANAVISHA BANERJEE**Assistant Professor,  
Department of English,  
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Janakpuri, New Delhi**ABSTRACT**

*My paper will focus on the imaginative utopia created in Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's (1880-1932) short story "Sultana's Dream" (1905) and the gender constructs it seeks to challenge. Her writings in the nineteenth and early twentieth century during the wake of reform movement, concerns itself with the emancipation of women during the colonial period. Although the reformers challenged religious and social customs that subordinated women, in "Sultana's Dream," Hossain creates a feminist utopia by questioning the basis of gender construct in terms of public and private spaces such as "zenana" or "ghar" and "bahir," as Partha Chatterjee terms it. These become contested spaces as the role reversal of men and women become the essence of the utopian fantasy in "Sultana's Dream." Her challenge of Purdah system through "murdana," where men are confined within the inner quarters of the house and the creation of "Ladyland," try to prove that women are superior to men and occupy important positions in education and research. Being an educated Muslim woman and an activist, Hossain's "Sultana's Dream" underlines a vision where women's control could create a better future. This questions the basis of patriarchy and reflects a feminist utopia. Although written during the pre-Independent era and in the early twentieth century, the reversal of gender roles becomes a possible glaring contrast (a kind of dystopia) in today's age with the onset of the Covid-19 Pandemic (2019), where many of the ideas have taken another dimension. With reference to the public and private space, both men and women are confined within the house. The concepts of self-isolation and work from home, have prevented men, especially the bread winners of the family from venturing out for the prospect of job. In many cases, the shutting down of industries have led to mass unemployment. The sharing of household chores by both men and women becomes a necessity in order to protect one's family from outsiders like the domestic help. In terms of gender constructs, does this lead to a possibility of gender equality or a gender clash due to adverse circumstances? Is it a possible dystopian reality that we are moving towards during the Pandemic? Can this situation be seen in contrast to the utopian vision of "Sultana's Dream" that is inverting certain gender roles? or Is 2020-21 oppressed/possessed by another invasion like the British colonial era, which has its own positive and negative aspects? These are some of the areas/questions that my article will explore.*

**Keywords:** Colonial Reforms, Women Empowerment, Utopia, Covid-19 Pandemic, Gender Hierarchy, Twenty First Century

My article is briefly divided into four parts- the first part discusses the women centric reform movements in nineteenth century colonial Bengal and the gender stereotypes being challenged with the colonial influence. The reforms primarily focussed on Bengali Hindu women of the middle and upper class and neglected the cause of Bengali Muslim women. The second part focuses on Rokeya Hossain's position as a woman writer and an activist for women's reform in nineteenth and early twentieth century and the utopian vision of gender equality in her fiction "Sultana's Dream." The third part of the paper compares the dystopia of the Covid-19 (2019) Pandemic situation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and how it has altered or rearranged the gender roles, thereby, re-visioning the utopia of "Sultana's Dream" to some extent and relating it to the present. The fourth and the last part of the paper, is the conclusion.

## I

Nineteenth century colonial Bengal had a spate of women's reform aimed at emancipation of Bengali women, "stri-swadhinata" as it was called. It was started by the middle class intelligentsia and mostly directed towards the women of their own class. Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833) and his Brahma Samaj pioneered the abolition of Sati (Act 1829), that is, abolition of the burning of the bride in the funeral pyre of the husband and issues related to the prevention of child marriage. Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar actively participated in encouraging widow remarriage (Act 1856) by going against Hindu orthodoxy. There were the Age of Consent debates (Act 1891) aimed at preventing pre-pubertal marriages as it was harmful for the under developed body of young girls. Moreover, notion of consensual sexual intercourse was also debated.

Scholars like Tanika Sarkar in *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* have discussed these issues and Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar's edited volume, *Women and Social Reform in Modern India* and K.S. Bhattacharya in *Bengal Renaissance*, Subrata Dasgupta *Awakening: The Story of Bengal Renaissance* have elaborated about the debates surrounding the Women's Reform Movement. Women's education and impact of English education by colonial administrators was seen in Macaulay's Minute (English Education Act of 1835). Some of the important developments related to the establishment of schools and colleges by British. Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, an Indian poet and radical thinker of Bengal Renaissance, was the second headmaster of Hindu College. It was formed in 1817, (now called Presidency College) and aimed to introduce English education in Bengal. The reformer, Raja Rammohan Roy supported these developments. Subsequently, Hindu College gave rise to influential writers like Michael Madhusudan Dutt and there was a gradual rise of the missionaries. They influenced women's education and institutions such as Loreto House, La Martiniere (for Girls, apart from Boys) and so on, encouraged women from middle and upper class families to step-out of the house and study in these educational institutions. Most of them were located in Calcutta, the centre of colonial rule. They played an important role in westernization and Anglicization of Bengali women.

Some more examples of Bengali women's Anglicization can be seen in Sumanta Banerjee's essay "Marginalization of Women's Popular Culture" where he discusses the "Brahmika sari style" for "bhodramohila," that is, primarily middle and upper class women, who were

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