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in Sultana's Dream*

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Introduction

This paper reacts to previous historiography concerning gender and reform in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century colonial India, such as Partha Chatterjee's "Nationalist Resolution of the Woman Question"^[1] and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?"^[2] I will try to complicate dichotomies of nationalist "tradition" and colonial "modernity" used to describe reformist projects and correct the critical lack of focus on women's writing by privileging female agency. *Sultana's Dream* by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain is one example of an act of female literary subversion which aims to craft an alternative reality fairer to women. Rokeya was born in 1880 in colonial Bengal. Part of an upper-class landowning Muslim family, she could not attend school or learn Bengali and English to prevent "contamination" by non-Muslim ideas. Instead, she learned Arabic and Urdu, Koranic study and books on "proper" conduct for women. She wrote *Sultana's Dream* in 1905 to test her proficiency in English only after she was secretly taught it by her brother. Her husband persuaded her to publish it in the Madras-based, English language periodical, the *Indian Ladies Magazine*, where it was well-received. Indeed, even though *Sultana's Dream* was unavailable to the majority of Indian womanhood among whom only the very privileged could read and write in English, it was still popular enough among its high caste women readers to emerge in book form in 1908.^[3] Since many women interested in such magazines, such as Swarnakumari Debi, were involved in social reform and female education, its ideas are likely to have filtered down to less privileged Indian women.

Rokeya relies on the literary tool of fantasy to subvert dominant discourses and reach women's true "home," a utopia in which women control their own lives. Thus while novels like Rabindranath Tagore's *Home and the World* reveal that "the home was not a complementary but rather the original site on which the hegemonic project of nationalism was launched,"^[4] *Sultana's Dream* transforms the feminized site of the home into the very nation itself. This is very different from the way it is constructed in the exclusionary discourse of nation-formation as the women's sphere. The home becomes the outside world and, ironically therefore, precisely where women belong. Rokeya thus rejects the characterization of the high class Hindu/Muslim woman as the female subject necessary for the survival of a patriarchal modern nation-state. She envisions the nation as Ladyland, a technologically advanced world where men are confined to the *zenana* and women guaranteed complete freedom.

I will begin by exploring the shortcomings of previous historiography before outlining my approach to *Sultana's Dream*, explaining the "alternative modernities" perspective I take and what Rokeya's literary act of gendered subversion entails. I will then move on to *Sultana's Dream*. Although it is only twelve pages long, its date of publication, 1905, when Bengal's partition spawned a huge wave of nationalism, and its very self-conscious feminism make it interesting to explore as the source of an alternative female discourse. By rebelling against its social context *Sultana's Dream* ends up determined by the reality it was bound to, reflecting the complexity, heterogeneous dissenting voices which make up discourses. It also provincializes Western male discourses to provide fresh, original insights into history.

Previous Historiography

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in colonial India, gender issues had become a vital site of contestation between various Indian and British groups committed to reform in the name of both "modernity" and "tradition." Indeed, Partha Chatterjee argues that the woman's question was the central issue in nineteenth century debates on Indian nationalism.^[5] For many Britons,

especially feminists, the abject condition of India's women affirmed the need for colonialists as guarantors of female emancipation.^[6] Meanwhile, Indian activists were split between those who regarded the Indian woman as belonging to a sacred sphere untouched by empire, insisting that women remain isolated in the domestic sphere as they were expected to by "tradition," and those who insisted that the anti-colonial struggle required the modernization of Indian society in which addressing the women's question and pursuing social reform were critical.^[7]

Much previous historiography has not acknowledged women's agency as defined by themselves in the colonial period. Thus Partha Chatterjee draws on literature mostly by men, to argue that the women's question "disappeared" with the rise of nationalism because its issues had been resolved. Using gender as an analytical category to expound dichotomies in nationalist discourse he defines the inner/outer, spiritual/material worlds as feminine/masculine respectively, demonstrating how the Indian woman represented the inner, spiritual world of the home and therefore was burdened with an authentic national identity.^[8] I contend, however, that emphasizing the nationalist *resolution* of the women's question is fallacious, made after overlooking women's writing. Chatterjee's assumption that the "nationalist mind" was male and colonized "self-identity" was fundamentally a crisis of masculinity reduces women's relationship to cultural processes as nothing more than reactive. In Chatterjee's account, the Bengali middle-class "new woman" writes about her relationship to the dichotomies that structure nationalist thought and perhaps her occasional subversions but never finds herself in a dynamic, dialectical relationship with cultural processes.^[9]

Deconstructionist and post-structuralist scholars have also sidelined women's voices. Thus Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak?"^[10] implies that subaltern women's texts cannot be read as having anything original to say because the colonized woman has no subject position: everyone else speaks for her, so she is continuously rewritten as the object of patriarchy or imperialism. In other words, imperialist discussion and practice, which constituted women as subordinate, structured what they said and how they said it. Although their

experience as women offers them a potential alternative to the dominant male discourse, Spivak among others questions whether any subjugated voice can speak against imperialism or represent a view outside it.^[11]

Rather than accept such an impasse, however, I feel that the deconstructive approach is by itself insufficient. As Priyamvada Gopal points out, Spivak's equating of the abstract, textualist notion of deconstruction with a principle of anti-colonialist/anti-imperialist subversion is dangerous because within such a schema almost anything can be read as a displacing gesture.^[12] For example, Spivak argues that Bhuvanewari Bhaduri, a young woman who hanged herself in 1926 while she was menstruating, deliberately waited to menstruate so death would not be read as motivated by illicit pregnancy. In doing so Bhuvanewari displaced the "sanctioned motive for female suicide."^[13] However Spivak's reading ignores that Bhuvanewari was an independence fighter entrusted with a political assassination she could not commit, reducing her agency to a gesture within the singular discourse of female sexuality.^[14] The deconstructionist approach alone is also inadequate because agency emerges out of specific historical conditions, rendering it fallacious to confuse discourses of representation with material realities. Since women are constructed within multiple social relationships and is the product of different class, caste and cultural specificities, it is possible to locate women's voices where women inscribed themselves as writers, singers, and artists and modify Spivak's silent subaltern.

I will therefore take an alternate, more historicist, materialist approach in exploring *Sultana's Dream*. I contend that the above research indicates the seeming absence of women themselves as a source of positive agency by ignoring the domain where reformist ideas were being actualized: the home, a space of central importance in *Sultana's Dream*. As Tanika Sarkar has shown through Rassundari Devi's autobiography, *Amar Jiban*, emancipatory female struggles were being carried out in homes across India.^[15] Such a perspective highlights the enormous potential for developing contextualized histories in which femininity

itself is not just subject to, but constitutes relations of race, class, sexuality and religion; it cannot be confined to its “proper” domain of male-female relations. Thus, by using gender as an analytical category one can explore how Rokeya and her ideas of womanhood redefined conventional constructed categories such as masculinity, nationalism, colonialism, “tradition” and “modernity.”

Theorising Alternative Modernities

Rokeya, I argue, wanted to construct an alternative “modernity” fairer to women. “Modernity” is a problematic term. Even a cursory survey of writings about it reveals a cacophony of disparate, dissenting voices: “modernity” is “stability, coherence, discipline” and “a discontinuous experience of time, space and culture as transitory, fleeting and fortitious.” It is also an “absolutist, unitary conception of truth’ but simultaneously ‘disorder, despair and anarchy.’^[16] Despite its semantic confusion, the term is also problematic because it is predominantly founded in a Western discourse, including Marx and Foucault among others. To think in terms of “alternative” “modernities” and abandon the Western discourse on “modernity,” we must provincialize Western “modernity,” as Paul Gilroy shows.^[17] This involves thinking through and against “modernity’s” frequent conception in universalist terms, thus historicizing and pluralizing experiences of “modernity.”

To think in terms of alternative “modernities,” then, means to temporarily privilege one particular angle of interrogation while acknowledging others. This includes examining Rokeya’s “modernity” from a specific cultural site. Charles Taylor defines a cultural theory as one where “modernity” always unfolds within a specific cultural context and where different starting points for the transition to “modernity” lead to different outcomes, rather than following inevitable paths.^[18] This, I hope, will negate the dominant discourse of Western “modernity” which moves inexorably towards establishing a certain type of mental outlook (scientific rationalism, secularism) and institutional order (popular government, capitalism) irrespective of cultural and political specificities. Nor, as Western “modernities” have often assumed, does cultural “modernity” invariably take the form of an

adversary culture that privileges the individual's need for self-realization over the claims of the community. For example, although Rokeya was a feminist in that she sought female emancipation, unlike Western feminism's stress on individualism, Rokeya's feminism is communal; when Ladyland is invaded, the Queen insists on dying with her citizens.

The second problem with the discourse of "modernity" is that it is gendered as essentially masculine.^[19] As Chatterjee shows, by being positioned outside the demands of public life by nationalist "tradition," Indian women became symbols of non-modern identity, allowing men to retain their comfortable "modern" experience in the masculinized public sphere.^[20] This masculine conception of "modernity" writes women out of history by ignoring their active and varied negotiations with society.

Theorising Gendered Subversion

This paper concurs with the distinction of sex, the biological condition of being male or female, from gender, a category classifying masculinity and femininity as cultural constructs and social artifice. As Judith Butler has argued, our ideas of what women and men are reflect nothing that exists eternally in nature. Instead they derive from social relations of power.^[21] Yet a lot of feminist historical discussion, as O' Hanlon notes, still tends to remain within the dichotomies of masculine and feminine themselves.^[22] Having noted that the imposition of these categories was a way of naturalizing colonial authority by painting Indians as effeminate in opposition to powerful, rational and masculine British, our most fruitful strategy, as Gyan Prakash has argued, is to disassemble them, reminding ourselves that they are not universal categories at all. In Ladyland, it is men who have all the supposedly womanly qualities and carry out "women's" work such as cooking and raising babies. Women who walk timidly, meanwhile, are "mannish." Rokeya, then, manages to destabilize gender.

But in neither case did these fights for self-expression represent some neutral space of freedom from Hindu patriarchy. For as I show about *Sultana's Dream*,

part of their cost was precisely the reproduction in an inverted form of some of patriarchy's own forms of sexual essentialism.^[23] Men in Ladyland are confined to purdah and objectified just as women in colonial Bengal were, enabling us to understand how forms of domination are themselves sustained and reproduced. Such an approach which recognizes women as helping to constitute the very cultures which oppress them, may also help understand the difficulties of employing a Western feminist approach to these texts which often represents Third World women as a homogenous group, eliding specific cultural, economic and historical contexts;^[24] only by placing them in their cultural context is it possible to grasp the subtle, complex ways in which women's experience was being sculpted and how particular women were negotiating, subverting and yet reproducing dominant discourses.

Despite recognizing women's socio-cultural specificities which both structured and were structured by their agencies, however, I contend that there *was* a relatively unique place from which women could defy dominant discourses and hold themselves apart, and it was literary. Since women were expected to remain in the domestic sphere, the literary genre offered them a way in which they could simultaneously conform to and dissent against such conventions, using textuality to enter the masculinized public sphere. Although the written medium was only available to small numbers of the high-caste elite, the outpouring of women's writing during the time, and the propagation of their ideas by public writers and activists such as Pandita Ramabai, meant that one can assume they were able to reach a larger audience. Rokeya, like many other female writers of the time, would also have contributed to the spread of her radical ideas by becoming involved in civil affairs. She not only founded women's associations and schools, she was also active in debates and conferences concerning the advancement of women until her death.^[25]

A basis for these activities, then, was her literary praxis, particularly the tool of "fantastic utopia" used as a liberating agent for women. I define fantastic utopia as an imaginatively derived ideally perfect place, especially in its social, political,

and moral aspects. Indeed, literary fantasies have appeared to be “free” from many of the conventions and restraints of more realistic texts: they have refused to observe unities of time, space and character, doing away with chronology, three-dimensionality, self and other, life and death. As Rosemary Jackson describes it, “fantasy is a story based on and controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility; it is the narrative result of transforming the condition contrary to fact into ‘fact’ itself. Such violation of dominant assumptions threatens to subvert rules and conventions taken to be normative.”^[26] Indeed, *Sultana’s Dream*, like other fantasies can be seen to be transcending reality, “escaping” the human condition and constructing superior alternate worlds. My critique of *Sultana’s Dream* looks at literary fantasy both from a structuralist position, exploring narrative qualities of the mode, and from a psychoanalytical perspective, considering these features as the narrative effects of basic psychic impulses.

The use of psychoanalytical frameworks in a postcolonial and feminist context may be considered problematic given that psychoanalysis has often been used against female, colonized subjects. Colonial accounts of the human psyche often equated European with male, civilized and rational on the one hand, and non-Europeans as effeminate, primitive and mad on the other. Thus, Freud himself, in *Totem and Taboo* (1913) and *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) likened “primitives” to children by visualizing historical and cultural development as akin to individual, psychic and biological growth. Nevertheless psychoanalytical analyses are still valid when combined with postcolonial and feminist readings of specific historical contexts. This is not to argue for the universalization of Freud as if he accounts definitively for the development of identities everywhere, as if no other differences of class or cultures shape the formation of subjectivities. It is to say, however, that psychoanalysis may allow us to overcome racism just as it spawns it; in the specific historical contexts of colonial India and Africa, psychoanalysis was used as a dissenting Western school of thought that could be turned against the dominant discourses of the West. The most prolific example of

this is Fanon whose deeply historicist socio-economic analysis of Martinique's anti-colonial struggle rooted itself in a radical psychoanalytic account of the split-subjectivity.^[27]

Fantastic Utopia and the Quest for Home in *Sultana's Dream*

Sultana's Dream is structured around the depiction of a nation of women – an anti-colonial utopian space, opposite of colonial Bengal in every way. Rokeya's subtle references and refutations of both colonial and nationalist ideals for an opposite version of reality allows us to view Ladyland as East Bengal created by Curzon's partition of the Bengal Presidency in 1905, but one significantly transformed by its female inhabitants and existing outside the boundaries of British India. *Sultana's Dream* is, then, I will argue, an example of imaginative subversion in which literary images of freedom are the beginnings of a critique of social reality, not an escape from it. To demonstrate this, I will first discuss Sigmund Freud's concept of the "uncanny" and Ernst Bloch's concept of "home" as constituting the liberating impulse behind Rokeya's projection of fantastic utopia, her primary tool towards critiquing social reality. I will then demonstrate how these concepts are implemented to defamiliarize colonial Bengal and destabilize Bengali women's conceptions of reality so as to awaken within them potential for a more egalitarian future. This is specifically carried out through the delineation of Ladyland's imaginary utopian space as having three unique characteristics: first, that it has never been colonized, second that the lives of women have been reformed drastically, third that this alternative "modernity" does not have a formal religion governing its ethical life.

I will, then, begin by explaining why Freud's concept of the "uncanny" and Bloch's concept of "home" are fruitful conceptual approaches to *Sultana's Dream*. Freud carries out a close reading of E.T.A. Hoffman's fairytale *The Sandman* to argue that there are two levels of meaning to the German term for the uncanny, das Unheimlich, both vital for understanding his theory in relation to fantasy. Das Heimlich, the un-negated version, is ambivalent. On the first level of meaning, it signifies that which is homely, familiar, friendly, comfortable,

intimate. It gives a sense of being “at home” in the world, and its negation therefore produces a feeling of estrangement, of not being “at home” in the world. A second level of meaning begins to explain the uncanny’s disturbing powers; Das Heimlich also means that which is concealed from others: all that is hidden, repressed and obscured in the individual’s psyche. Its negation, Unheimlich, then, functions to discover, reveal, expose normally hidden areas. The uncanny combines these two semantic levels: its signification lies precisely in this dualism. It uncovers what is hidden, making the unfamiliar familiar and thus, simultaneously, effects a disturbing transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar.^[28]

This is precisely the logic behind Rokeya’s utopia who seeks to present the familiar world of colonial Bengal as actually uncanny to her female readers because women have had to suppress their real desires and accept a reality which is at odds with them. Instead, the reader is familiarized with an alternative “modernity,” Ladyland, as the true reality. Thus using and modifying Freud’s category of the uncanny, I want to argue that the very act of reading the utopic *Sultana’s Dream* for colonial Bengali women is an uncanny experience in that it separates them from a restrictive reality from the onset and makes the familiar, unfamiliar and the repressed unfamiliar, familiar again. Once we begin our journey into Ladyland with Sultana there is an estrangement or separation from a familiar world including an uncanny feeling which is both frightening but comforting, because, the uncanny is simultaneously being made familiar; Ladyland is actually depicted as an alternative home. Thus it is literally “Heimlich,” a word which etymologically means not just familiar but “homely.”

The process of reading, then, involves dislocating the reader from his/her familiar setting and then identifying with the dislocated protagonist so that a quest for the Heimlich or real home can begin. *Sultana’s Dream* ignites a double quest for home: first, a return to the primal repressed desires for equality, respect and freedom present in every purdahnishin Bengali woman’s mind, the desires which were women’s real homes. The second quest for home lies within the tale itself

since Rokeya transforms the entire nation or Ladyland into women's home, literally taking them out of the uncanny home of Bengal's zenanas. Thus despite the uncanny setting and motifs of her utopia, Rokeya opens us up to what Freud calls "unfulfilled but possible futures to which we still like to cling in fantasy, all the strivings of the ego which adverse external circumstances have crushed, and all our suppressed acts of volition which nourish in us the illusion of Free Will"^[29] by reminding women of their true "home."

Ernst Bloch supports such an interpretation through his argument that fantasies are important to cultivate and defend since they represent our revolutionary urge to restructure society so that we can finally achieve our true home. Dreaming which stands still is no good, "but if it becomes a dreaming ahead, then its cause appears quite differently and excitingly alive.... wishful thinking is capable of revolutionary awareness." Bloch's "good content of dreams" is synonymous with liberating fantasy about human beings who actively struggle against unjust conditions to find "home": a place nobody has known but which represents humankind coming into its own. He thus writes:

Once man has comprehended himself and established his own domain in real democracy, without depersonalization and alienation; something arises in the world which all men have glimpsed in childhood: a place and a state in which no one has yet been...home or homeland.^[30]

Indeed, *Sultana's Dream* opens up a space of hope with its utopic Ladyland through Sultana's dreaming, in which Rokeya is able to enact her desire for an ideal home, i.e, both a world and state in which women come into their own. On a psychological level, then, through the use of unfamiliar or unheimlich symbols, liberating literature must incite its readers to return to repressed ego disturbances, that is, to familiar (Heimlich) primal moments in their lives, but the tale cannot be liberating unless it projects the objectification of home as real democracy under non-alienating conditions on a conscious, literary, and philosophical level. This means the fantasy must reflect a process of struggle against all types of

suppression and authoritarianism and posit various possibilities for the concrete realization of utopia. Otherwise the words liberating and emancipatory have no aesthetical or categorical substance. Indeed, Rokeya depicts the successful struggle of women in Ladyland against political, gendered and religious suppression.

The Struggle Against Political Suppression

I will consider the struggle against political suppression first. Unlike colonial Bengal, Ladyland is autonomous. Foreign armies have been long-defeated, not through military strength but through women's "brainpower" which harnessed scorching solar energy as a weapon. This is a pointed rejoinder to colonial Bengal's state of subjugation, which Rokeya suggests can be overcome; India is only colonized because of the stupidity of men. Furthermore, despite different methods of running the country, this does not mean Ladyland's women are less nationalistic. The latter term, in its proper usage, Rokeya suggests, means true patriotism insofar as the citizens are loyal to and proud of their nation, with justice being its chief virtue. The Queen is willing to "commit suicide if land and honor are lost."^[31] Justice is more important than her own life which she values as equivalent to her soldiers' lives. Thus Rokeya contrasts the Queen to local Indian princes who sold their loyalties to the East India Company and caused Bengal's colonization. She makes it a point to demonstrate that Ladyland does not subscribe to British colonial ideals, noting that in Ladyland, "we do not covet other people's land, we do not fight for the Kohinoor;"^[32] the Kohinoor was taken by the East India Company as part of the indemnity levied in 1849, and was subsequently presented to Queen Victoria at a sparkling levee marking the company's 250th anniversary. A subtle contrast is therefore drawn between Queen Victoria, the "empress of India," and Ladyland's Queen whose generosity and morality are above any desire to steal wealth.

Indeed, although like the British the Queen permits her subjects to trade with other countries, "no trade was possible with countries where the women were kept in the zenanas and so unable to come and trade with us." This is a sharp retort to

the British civilizational critique of India based on the condition of women, which was then used to justify colonisation. James Mill wrote:

The history of uncultivated nations uniformly represents the women as in a state of abject slavery, from which they slowly emerge as civilization advances...A state of dependence more strict and humiliating than that which is ordained for the weaker sex among the Hindus cannot be conceived.^[33]

Thus the construction of the women's question was doubtless a strategy that was political in nature. It became a crucial tool for colonial ideology to establish and assert the moral superiority of the colonial rulers over the colonized. Rokeya subtly demonstrates the hypocrisy of such an assertion, showing what true morality actually is; if the British find Indians morally weaker for their treatment of women, this does not justify the political and economic exploitation of India. In contrast, they should refuse to have anything to do with such a country.

The Struggle Against Gender Suppression

The second struggle in Rokeya's utopia is, then, against gender suppression. Indeed, the issue of colonialism in Ladyland is depicted not as an occupation by a foreign power but as a gendered oppression that has been successfully overturned, with the new nation being run by female inhabitants who underline their feminist ideology to the visitor from colonial Bengal. Sultana thus describes the situation in colonial Bengal where man "has taken to himself all powers and privileges and shut up the women in the zenana," leaving them with "no hand or voice...man is lord and master"^[34] as a clear parallel to the British seizing the 'powers and privileges' of Indians; Bengali women have been colonized by men. However, in Ladyland the colonization of women by men has been successfully overturned. Thus women's lives have been reformed drastically. There are girls' schools, later marriage at the age of 21 and no purdah for women. The critique of purdah through its transformation into the *murdana*, a domestic space in which men are

confined, is carried out in three ways: satire of purdah, Ladyland as a viable, historical alternative and a constant destabilisation of gender roles.

First, it is through the satirical representation of the rationale for the *murdana* that the novella offers a critique of the values of its patriarchal society, thus demonstrating how ridiculous these are. Just as in colonial Bengal women are told that they belong in purdah, in Ladyland men are “in their proper places.” When Sultana asks why, Sara replies “How can you trust those untrained men out of doors?”^[35] In Ladyland men are treated as animals, just as in colonial Bengal women are. Furthermore, when the country is about to go to war against invaders, the Queen insists that “before we go out the men must enter the zenanas...for the sake of honor and liberty.”^[36] The statement is deliberately ridiculous, effectively endorsing the *entrapment* of men for the sake of *freedom*, two contradictory terms, and supposedly saving their honour by doing so. The point is that Bengali men have done precisely this; in a similarly absurd configuration, they have entrapped women into symbolizing the nation’s honor and true spiritual essence.

Satire apart, Rokeya is also simultaneously being serious about confining men to purdah so that women have all power, insofar as the juxtaposition of the two very different spaces in the same historical moment allows the female Bengali reader to see what she is missing and what *could* be; it therefore allows Sara to reprimand Sultana for neglecting “the duty you owe to yourselves, and losing your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interests.”^[37] Indeed, Sultana cannot wait to get back and describe women’s lives in Ladyland and Sara encourages her to “tell them all that you see here.” Rokeya’s aim is to estrange women readers from their familiar surroundings, or make the familiar uncanny and awaken in them their potential for transforming their present condition. Indeed, it is this strategy of defamiliarization which shocks Sultana into a realization of the strangeness and mutability of all that she had taken for granted. Thus she uses alienating techniques which use jarring symbols that demand an end to superimposed illusions. The aim is to make readers perceive the actual limits and possibilities of

their deep personal wishes - the familiar, which through repressed ego disturbances have been made unfamiliar.

Rokeya employs these literary tools of defamiliarization from the very start of the novella. The text opens in the space of the zenana with Sultana thinking of the “condition of Indian womanhood.”^[38] The reader leaps from this familiar enclosed space of her bedroom to the bustling world outside. Thus both the reader and Sultana simultaneously realize that they have never before fully confronted a busy street in “broad daylight.” Indeed, upon stepping into Ladyland everything becomes unfamiliar to Sultana and through her for the reader. While in Bengal, Sultana takes the woman who greets her as her “friend, Sister Sara,” in Ladyland she is jolted into the recognition that “my companion was not Sister Sara, but a stranger. Oh, what a fool had I been to mistake this lady for my dear old friend, Sister Sara.”^[39] Similarly when Sultana is in Bengal, she “looked again at the moon through the open window” and recognizes the time as being “not morning, but starry night.” Yet once in Ladyland “I found to my surprise that it was a fine morning. The town was fully awake and the streets alive with bustling crowds.”^[40] Thus Rokeya sets up a situation where everything the narrator and, vicariously, the reader believes in is actually not the true reality, the Heimlich or familiar is revealed to be the uncanny. Sultana’s and therefore colonial Bengal’s reality is skewed, unnatural and must be changed. The stage is therefore set for Rokeya to make the repressed unfamiliar, familiar once again.

The strategy of defamiliarization of Bengal as Unheimlich and simultaneous transformation of Ladyland as Heimlich stretches to a stark portrayal of the interiors of homes in colonial Bengal, an aesthetic condemnation designed to awaken Bengali women to just how disagreeable their confinement is. Rokeya does this by continuously highlighting the luxury of nature compared to the dull, indoor existence of purdahnishin women. Thus Sister Sara’s house is admirable because it is “situated in a beautiful heart-shaped garden.”^[41] The dark, coal-fired kitchens of colonial Bengal are replaced in Ladyland with a hygienic outdoors where “the kitchen was situated in a beautiful vegetable garden” and “every

creeper, every tomato plant, was itself an ornament.”^[42] There is no “smoke, nor any chimney in the kitchen... no sign of coal or fire.” Instead “it was clean and bright; the windows were decorated with flower garlands.”^[43] Flower garlands in Hindu “tradition” were used as an ornament of worship to be hung around sacred objects – the act of placing garlands around windows is therefore symbolic; daylight itself has become worthy of worship. The outside world becomes the real home, with nature taking on the characteristics of the very home which women are meant to manage; in this outdoor home the ornaments are tomato plants and creepers. In contrast to Bengali men, Ladyland’s “noble” Queen is exceedingly fond of botany; “it is her ambition to convert the whole country into one grand garden.”^[44] Unfortunately Bengali men “would think it useless to give so much attention to horticulture, while they have so many other things to do.”^[45] For Rokeya, these other “things to do” are less important than maintaining gardens. What would have seemed like a ridiculous statement at the beginning of the story becomes plausible due to a continuous build up of aesthetically pleasing descriptions of the outdoors as women’s true home. Female readers would have reacted strongly to these descriptions when seated in their dark, crowded interiors.

In fact nature becomes the means through which everything Rokeya considers negative in Bengal, can be overcome. The women “do not find time to quarrel with one another” because they “are all very busy making Nature yield as much as she can.” “We dive deep into the ocean of knowledge and try to find out Nature’s precious gems.”^[46] “Nature” is capitalized to emphasize its importance.

Knowledge is metaphorized as the ocean, which *pardahnishin* women cannot enjoy. Furthermore, nature’s solar energy is used to defeat foreign armies and rainwater is harnessed through showers, thus leading to a more comfortable lifestyle. Nature for Rokeya, as it was for the Romantics, is presented as a work of art, a healing power, a refuge from the artificial constructs of civilization, the true place for women and a source of energy and comfort.

Thirdly, the case for women’s freedom is also made through a continuous defamiliarization of the gender roles Bengali women consider normal. By

highlighting the constructed nature of gender, Rokeya demonstrates that women should not be confined to a set model of womanhood, as the nationalists have done in colonial Bengal. Thus women in Ladyland are not naturally timid or stupid, nor do they possess a smaller brain as Bengali women believe. Sultana's timid way of walking and shyness, seen as a natural, inherent trait of womanhood in Bengal, is interpreted as "mannish" in Ladyland. Yet at the same time as Rokeya highlights the fluidity of gender roles to demonstrate the potential of women, she imposes a set biological role on men. They are lunatics, animals, do not have enough concentration to even thread a needle, waste time when it comes to work and fight wars. This may seem contradictory, but I contend that her criticism of men does not mean she believes that they are all biologically wired as wild animals and lunatics. Instead her intention may be to consign men to negative traits in the same manner as they do to women so she can highlight that women are unfairly treated. This simultaneously enables her to demonstrate that gender roles are constructed by reversing oppressive patriarchal ideologies and highlighting female potential. What may seem contradictory in *Sultana's Dream*, may, therefore, be a clever literary strategy of double speak.

Similarly, Rokeya familiarizes her female readers with the idea of engaging in traditionally male disciplines. In Ladyland, women are scientists inventing air-cars, heating, showers and electricity for farming and cooking. This utopic state of affairs is achieved because unlike in Bengal, education is geared towards making women well-rounded citizens rather than homemakers. In Ladyland, since "our good Queen liked science very much...she circulated an order that all the women in her country should be educated. Accordingly a number of girls' schools were founded."^[47] The importance of science to the Queen, both literally and syntactically leads directly to women being educated. Sister Sara tells the narrator that this is a right not a privilege, and Bengali women have "neglected the duty you owe yourselves and lost your natural rights."^[48] Such a revolutionary, unfamiliar idea could not be presented to Bengali women without raising doubts about whether they were really capable of everything they can do in Ladyland,

having been brought up to believe as Sultana has, that “men have larger brains.” Thus Rokeya demonstrates the value of women’s work and intelligence compared to men’s before introducing the issue of education. One of the first things Sara shows Sultana on her tour of Ladyland is the beautiful embroidery done by women. Sara comments that they “do not trust *zenana* members with embroidery...as a man has not patience enough to pass thread through a needle hole even!”^[49] After this statement, which must have had her female readers nodding with newfound confidence, Rokeya describes how women in Ladyland are able to complete office work which takes men days in only two hours.

The Struggle Against Religious Suppression

The third *unheimlich* trait of Rokeya’s utopia which she transforms into the *Heimlich*, is a conception of “modernity” free of religious dictates. In Ladyland religion is “based on Love and Truth.” Anyone not respectful of these principles is “asked to leave.”^[50] Rokeya’s description of religion, I contend, is vague for a reason; it is positive that Ladyland should not be governed by specific religious laws. By contrast the *Manusmriti*, a foundational work of Hindu law, containing rules of conduct corresponding with the ethical principle of “dharma,” was widely cited in nationalist arguments regarding women. Similarly Muslim nationalists appealed to Islam to define roles for women, confining them to *purdah* and limiting their education to Koranic study. Rokeya strongly objected to such abuse of religious authority. Her views were considered so radical that in her article *Amader Abanati* (Our Degradation) of 1908, published in *Motichoor*, the following lines were expunged by the publishers:

whenever a woman has tried to raise her head, she has been brought down to her knees on the grounds of religious impiety or scriptural taboo... What we could not accept as correct, we had to in the belief that it had the authority of a religious dictum... Men have always propagated such religious texts as edicts of God to keep us women in the dark... the scriptures are nothing but a set of regulating systems prescribed by men. You hear that the prescriptions were laid down by saints. If a woman could

have become a saint, perhaps she would have prescribed opposite regulations... We must not allow ourselves to bow down to the undue authority exercised by men in the name of religion. It has been seen time and time again that the stricter the religious restrictions, the more severe is the women's victimization.^[51]

Women are "brought down to their knees," by religion, a significant choice of words because Islamic prayer is carried out on one's knees, which while symbolizing the act of prayer is also a symbol of submission and begging. For Rokeya, prayer in the nationalist age is synonymous with degradation. In a radically sacrilegious argument she argues that religion is a male construct. Her words divide the world up into opposing gendered camps, with religion belonging solely to men and being forced on women. Stressing the importance of her point she uses strong words and repetition, allowing no space for doubt. Men have "always" propagated religion to keep women subjugated, religion is "nothing but" a set of regulating systems prescribed by men, it has been seen "time and time again" that men use religion to victimize women. This, for Rokeya, is not a case of individual men dominating women through religion, it is an elaborate construction of men's "regulating systems."

Another reason why Rokeya's wording of Ladyland's new religion is so vague may be found in the context in which Rokeya was writing. Following the "divide and rule" policy, Bengal was divided by the British, on October 16, 1905, into Hindu and Muslim areas, hoping to increase tensions between the Hindus and the Muslims, thus consolidating their rule further. In *Sultana's Dream*, the existence of only one religion, informal and organic in structure, composed of vague universal principles of goodness, means that there cannot be conflict between religions in Ladyland; divide and rule cannot work.

Conclusion

During the nineteenth century the reform of Indian women became a major socio-political issue. If early reform was largely conducted by men, by the late

nineteenth century their wives, sisters, daughters, and others affected by campaigns, such as that for women's education, had joined in. Although exploring their agency through Rokeya is problematic because she was literate and part of a high caste elite of small numbers, she nevertheless offers valuable representations of the predominant struggles of Indian womanhood during the time. Indeed, the similarities in her agenda, exemplified by her focus on religion, purdah and education, with female contemporaries such as Pandita Ramabai, Krupabai Sathianadhan and Tarabai Shinde, all writing from vastly different contexts, indicates the broader themes, common across class and caste, affecting women all over India as they tried to negotiate the dominant discourses of colonial "modernity" and nationalist "tradition."

Like them, Rokeya's experimentation is geared towards transforming the modernizing process. Uniquely, however, she interjects herself into a utopic fairy tale discourse on "modernity" by distancing herself from conventional forms of writing and thinking: the familiar is made unfamiliar only to regain a sense of what authenticity might be on a psychological level. The fantastic traces the unsaid and unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, and made invisible: women's real homes. Or, to put it another way, by seeking what "unadulterated" home might mean under non-alienating conditions, Rokeya provokes the reader to reflect critically upon the conditions and limits of socialization. Her work ultimately reveals that alternative modernities produce combinations of reality that are endlessly surprising - simultaneously real and fantastic, new and familiar - not just unheimlich but also Heimlich. And just as Rokeya's utopia is unfinished, turning out to be only a dream, it demonstrates that "modernity" is incomplete and always a work in progress.

Endnotes

^[1] Partha Chatterjee, "Nationalist Resolution of the Woman Question," in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.), *Recasting Women*, (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1990).

^[2] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds.) *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, (New York: Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1994).

^[3] Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, “Sultana’s Dream” (henceforth “SD”) in Roushan Jahan, *Sultana’s Dream* (New York: Feminist Press, 1988), 1.

^[4] Sangeeta Ray, *En-Gendering India: Woman and Nation in Colonial and Postcolonial Narratives*, (North Carolina: DukeUP, 2000), 120.

^[5] Chatterjee, “Nationalist Resolution of the Woman Question,” 250.

^[6] In *The White Woman’s Other Burden*, (London: Routledge, 1995) Kumari Jayawardena relegates male reformers to the background, instead investigating how foreign feminists in a colonial situation could promote feminist, nationalist or socialist causes. Antoinette Burton in *The Burdens of History*, (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), meanwhile. demonstrates how British feminists appropriated imperial ideology and rhetoric to justify their own right to equality, relying on images of an enslaved, primitive “Oriental womanhood” in need of liberation by their emancipated British “sisters.” This unquestioning acceptance of Britain’s imperial status and Anglo-Saxon racial superiority created “imperial feminist ideologies.”

^[7] Priya Joshi, *In Another Country*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 173.

^[8] Chatterjee, “Nationalist Resolution of the Woman Question,” 250.

^[9] Priyamvada Gopal in Neil Lazarus, (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004) 164.

^[10] Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” 66-111.

^[11] Although Spivak’s view has now changed - see *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1999), her earlier view outlined

in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” is still influential for the range of issues it throws up.

^[12] Gopal, *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, 149.

^[13] Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” 104.

^[14] Gopal in Lazarus, (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, 150.

^[15] Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2003), 95-134.

^[16] Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, (Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1995), 11.

^[17] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: ‘modernity’ and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993).

^[18] Charles Taylor, “Two Theories of ‘modernity’,” in Dilip Gaonkar, *Alternative Modernities*, (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2001), 172-197.

^[19] Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, 18.

^[20] Chatterjee, “Nationalist Resolution of the Woman Question,” 250.

^[21] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, (London: Routledge, 1999).

^[22] Rosalind O’ Hanlon “Issues of Widowhood in Colonial Western India,” in Gyan Prakash and Douglas Haynes, *Contesting Power*, (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1992), 74-75.

^[23] O’ Hanlon, “Issues of Widowhood in Colonial Western India,” 103.

^[24] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” *Critical Inquiry* 12, (Autumn 1985), 243.

^[25] <http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/Hossain.html>.

^[26] Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981), 21.

^[27] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (London: Pluto Press, 1986).

^[28] Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, vol. XVII (London: Hogarth, 1953), 219-252.

^[29] Freud, "The Uncanny," 240.

^[30] Ernst Bloch in Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, (London: Heinemann, 1983), 175.

^[31] SD 13.

^[32] SD 17.

^[33] James Mill, *History of British India*, vol.1, (London: Routledge, 1997), 445-7.

^[34] SD 9.

^[35] SD 9.

^[36] SD 14.

^[37] SD 9.

^[38] SD 7.

^[39] SD 8.

^[40] SD 7.

^[41] SD 10.

^[42] SD 11.

^[43] SD 11.

[44] SD 15.

[45] SD 8.

[46] SD 17.

[47] SD 11.

[48] SD 9.

[49] SD 10.

[50] SD 16.

[51] Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain “Amader Abanati” in Bharati Ray, *Early Feminists of Colonial India*, (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2002), 109.

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First Response

This article engages issues of anti-colonial nationalism, gender and modernity in turn of the century India, defining its own approach to the liberatory possibilities of contemporary women's writing and thinking. It tackles refreshing material in the form of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* (1905) and combines feminist, materialist postcolonial and psychoanalytical readings in examining the

politics of this 'fantasy' novella and the utopia of Ladyland. Central to the argument is a reframing of discourses of home. The piece constitutes a stimulating intervention in postcolonial debates about agency and voice and will serve to introduce many readers to the work of Hossain and her peers.