

## ECOFEMINISM IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY BENGALI LITERATURE: ROKEYA SAKHAWAT HOSSAIN'S *SULTANA'S DREAM*

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### Introduction

Ecofeminism is a field of feminist inquiry and activism that has been used in literary criticism to illustrate the connection between ecology and feminism. To end women's oppression, ecofeminism believes that it is necessary to end all forms of oppression, particularly environmental oppression. In the last few decades, a wide range of literary works delve into the "link between the domination of women and the domination of nature."<sup>1</sup> Ecofeminism in literature explores the intersection between gender, nature, and patriarchal domination. This essay seeks to argue for the presence of ecofeminist thinking in early twentieth-century Bengali literature by analyzing Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's short story, *Sultana's Dream*.

Hossain was a pioneering reformer of Bengali Muslim society and an early twentieth-century utopian feminist writer who explored the close connection between the oppression of women and the environment through her works. She was born in colonial India in 1880, during a time when women were subjected to the conservative upbringing of purdah which included "veiling, dressing modestly, gender segregation, and the seclusion of women in the *zenana*, or women's quarters."<sup>2</sup> Despite the social restrictions women experienced at that time, Hossain managed to learn English and Bangla with the help of her brother and sister. However, her strict, traditional father did not encourage women's education and prevented Hossain from beginning her literary career at home. Her literary career began after her marriage to Syed Sakhawat Hossain, a highly educated man and, as Roushan Jahan puts it, "a man of liberal attitude," who encouraged her to pursue writing.<sup>3</sup> Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain produced many prominent works that still shape Bengali literature, and she also greatly contributed to the education of Muslim women in Bengal by establishing the Sakhawat Memorial Girls School in Calcutta. Hossain published *Sultana's Dream* in the journal *The Indian Ladies' Magazine*, a Madras-based English-language journal, in 1905 and it was the only short story she wrote in English.

*Sultana's Dream* is critical of the patriarchal system that existed in the Indian subcontinent, particularly the enforcement of purdah. In *Sultana's Dream*, she represents a feminist utopian vision of a fictional world in which women and nature

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<sup>1</sup> Plumwood, "Ecofeminism: An overview," 120.

<sup>2</sup> Mookerjee-Leonard, "Futuristic technologies and purdah in the feminist utopia," 144.

<sup>3</sup> Rajan, "Feminism's Futures," 39.

are no longer subjugated but rather dominate the social sphere. Hossain explores the close relationship between ecology and feminism by tying the slavery of women and nature and demonstrating that if women attain emancipation, nature would thrive as well. The primary ecofeminist goal is to define the interconnectedness of oppression by simultaneously providing a voice to women and nature. Hence, for ecofeminist writers, it is important to break the justification of nature and women's domination by "feminizing nature and naturalizing women."<sup>4</sup> According to Rahman, *Sultana's Dream* is an "ecofeminist celebration"<sup>5</sup> because of Hossain's creation of the female-dominated "Ladyland" which subverts the reality of male dominance in colonial India. Therefore, in this article, I examine the ecofeminist potential of this short story, as well as how Hossain attempts to combine the concept of freedom for both the environment and women in orthodox Muslim society during British colonial rule of the Indian subcontinent. In addition, I will dissect the reversed gender roles portrayed in the story to argue that the inextricable link Hossain makes between women's freedom and environmental freedom marks a deep ecofeminist consciousness in Hossain's writing. Finally, I will explore the ideas of sustainability presented in the story to reveal Hossain's subtle claim-making surrounding the radical potential of women's leadership and its possible positive ecological impacts.

### **British Colonial Influence on the Environment in the Indian Subcontinent**

In colonial Bengal, according to Chatterjee, men and women were respectively categorized along gender dichotomies such as public and private, world and home, material and spiritual, outward and inner, and so on. Nationalists, as part of framing an anti-colonial rhetoric of resistance, instrumentalized these dichotomies and compelled women to take on roles that aligned with the narrative of the private, inner spirituality of women as bearers of religious traditions and ancestral values, thereby contrasting women with "modern Western society."<sup>6</sup> Consequently, it was essential to separate the realm of women from the colonized, materialistic world. However, Hossain shows in her short story that women can lead by simultaneously grappling with culture, nature, and modernity. She also subtly refers to the colonial office culture's gender divisions. In the story, the titular character and protagonist, Sultana (who is contending with the possibilities of the utopian feminist world she sees and the realities of gender divisions in her own world) converses with her friend Sister Sara who shows her this utopia:

[Sister Sara:] I have seen some of them [men in colonial offices] doing their work.  
Do you think they work all the seven hours?  
[Sultana:] Certainly they do!

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<sup>4</sup> Gaard, "Ecofeminism," 5.

<sup>5</sup> Rahman and Sarker, "Eco-Feminist Vision," 39.

<sup>6</sup> Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution," 122-127.

No, dear Sultana, they do not. They dawdle away their time in smoking. Some smoke two or three choroots [sic] during the office time. They talk much about their work, but do little. Suppose one choroot [sic] takes half an hour to burn off, and a man smokes twelve choroots [sic] daily; then, you see, he wastes six hours every day in sheer smoking.<sup>7</sup>

Hossain is thereby asserting that the colonial office culture has removed men from contact with nature and agriculture and repositioned them in an artificial world bereft of meaningful work.

According to Rangarajan, India's environment underwent devastating changes during the colonial period, such as large-scale ecological interventions (including marsh- and forest-clearing) that attempted to increase the land available for commercial cropping and housing.<sup>8</sup> The colonial environmental history of India is marked by the commodification of nature through railway and dam construction projects that severely disrupted local ecological cycles. In addition, colonial land-mapping rhetoric developed specific forms of ecological antagonisms. The colonial concept of “wasteland,” for instance referred to uncultivated marshes, forests, and chars (a newly emerged land in the middle of an ocean, sea, lake, or stream surrounded by water), which were cleared by human labor for resettlement and farming purposes to generate revenue under British control.<sup>9</sup> Evidently, such terminology creates a normative axis of ecological “utility,” wherein the “uncultivated” is undesired and “cultivated” land brought under human control is of value.

Consequently, the ecological equilibrium of Bengal suffered. Based on the new heuristic of materialistic ecological priorities, the local peasantry began to clear vast lands containing numerous now-extinct species' habitats. This extractive colonial logic concerning ecology resulted in mass deforestation, drastic changes in vegetation patterns due to commercial cropping, and excessive pressure on farming land in former colonies (including the Indian subcontinent).<sup>10</sup> In the mid-nineteenth century, the British Empire infrastructurally penetrated India through railway lines that cut across not just cultivable land but also forested areas and brought with it a series of famines in Bengal.<sup>11</sup> Even though the British Empire projected that the Indian railway system would reduce famines and increase employment for Indian people, it had in fact created an extractive infrastructural complex and “employment system [conducive to the economic interests of] Britain rather than India.”<sup>12</sup>

As a vigilant observer and writer, Hossain challenges, through her work, the colonial, materialistic worldview which was visibly influencing Indian men who served as low-level colonial administrators and workers in her critique of the dysfunctionality,

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<sup>7</sup> Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*.

<sup>8</sup> Peers and Gooptu, “India and the British Empire,” 212.

<sup>9</sup> Iqbal, “The Bengal Delta,” 19-22.

<sup>10</sup> Pouchepadass, “Colonialism and Environment in India,” 2064.

<sup>11</sup> Iqbal, “The Bengal Delta,” 117-119.

<sup>12</sup> Satya, “British Imperial Railways,” 71.

futility, and inefficiency of the latter. Furthermore, the utopic country in *Sultana's Dream* resembles a “garden,” which can be considered to be Hossain’s attempt to “escape the battered [colonial] cities” that bear the marks of a dysfunctional colonial ecological logic and divisive gender relations.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Reversed Role of Nature**

Ecofeminism attempts to highlight the dual marginalization of women and nature as social “others” because of their definition in relation to men. It also highlights that feminist “emancipation” rests on ecological “emancipation,” since both rest on the same or interrelated logics of oppression. As Rosemary Radford Ruether asserted, “women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination.”<sup>14</sup> This demonstrates the connection between women and nature as being systematically subjugated by men.

Therefore, in *Sultana's Dream*, Hossain posits a radically different logic of organizing power and interpersonal relations as a way to challenge the contemporary ways of thinking that constituted systems of oppression. She presents a defiant, new vision of society that is inherently different and starts from fundamentally different foundational values: empathy, self-reflection, and compassion constitute the cornerstones of social relations in Ladyland. In the story, the women of Ladyland design a new (in relation to the system in place at the time) punishment system without the death penalty, wherein people who are otherwise sentenced to death are instead asked to “sincerely repent,” after which they will be forgiven. If they do not, they would be obligated to leave the country. Hossain’s contention and radical claim-making go even further, and she asserts that the only religion in Ladyland is one that is based on “Love and Truth.” As Sister Sara tells the narrator, “It is our religious duty to love one another and to be absolutely truthful.”

It is clear from the story that nature is cherished and valued in Ladyland. As Sister Sara says, “Our noble Queen is exceedingly fond of botany; it is her ambition to convert the whole country into one grand garden.” In this radical new vision of the world, with the power that women wield, not only are they emancipated from gendered social and power restrictions, but they also use this power to reverse the ecological indifference characteristic of the colonial administration. With reversed and reimagined gender roles, Hossain attempts to present a world that is able to bring together scientific innovation, environmental sensitivity, and the emancipation of women and nature from oppressive social logics in *Sultana's Dream*.

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<sup>13</sup> Rahman and Sarker, “Eco-Feminist Vision,” 39.

<sup>14</sup> Glazebrook, “Karen Warren’s Ecofeminism,” 13.

### **Futuristic Sustainability Ideas of Nature**

Furthermore, Hossain attempts to oppose colonial and patriarchal rule by incorporating futuristic ideas such as sustainability. In *Sultana's Dream*, Hossain shows that all the men are kept at “*mardana*,” (men’s area in a house) and leadership is given—almost performatively and emphatically—to women who then bring to effect various revised social policies. As Sister Sara tells the narrator, women in Ladyland convinced all men to confine themselves to the *mardana* because the latter was defeated in war and needed the help of women in securing the nation’s sovereignty, so the women demanded they be sanctioned in the domestic sphere. The men, being tired and broken, relented:

[Sister Sara:] On the following day, the Queen called upon all men to retire into *zenanas* [women’s area in a house] [...] they [the men] took the order for a boon [...] and] entered the *zenanas* without uttering a single word of protest. [...] we call the system “*mardana*” instead of “*zenana*.”<sup>15</sup>

As soon as men quit the public sphere and enter the domestic sphere, women take charge, and Hossain explains that the country transitioned to one where “gender hierarchy [exists] not by physical power, but by intellectual power.”<sup>16</sup> Through this contentious claim-making, Hossain depicts the way women, using their “intellectual power” and leadership, introduce reforms that bridge science and ecological stability through a series of innovations. For instance, there are “wonderful balloon[s] [...] that could draw as much water from the atmosphere as they pleased,” instruments that “could collect as much sun-heat as they wanted,” eco-friendly “air cars,” and even mechanisms wherein fields could be “tilled by means of electricity,” among others – all of which men in Ladyland disregard as “sentimental nightmares.”<sup>17</sup> Not only does this present a radical vision of women as individuals with a then-paradoxical, simultaneous affinity to scientific innovation and nature, but it also heightens the antagonistic role men play in this women-science-nature nexus in Ladyland.

### **Conclusion**

This article explored the depictions of British colonial authority and patriarchal influence on Indian ecology, its relations with gender roles, the intertwining of women’s and ecological “otherness,” and Hossain’s musings on sustainable futurism in *Sultana's Dream*. In this work, Hossain blends utopian fiction, science fiction, and ecofeminist themes to show the agency women and nature can have if they are free from patriarchy and colonialism. She provides a dual criticism of patriarchal society and the colonial era by reversing the gender roles of men and women in conservative Bengali society. Hossain, through this piece, envisions a world in which women,

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<sup>15</sup> Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*.

<sup>16</sup> Bhattacharya, “Two Dystopian Fantasies,” 174.

<sup>17</sup> Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*.

science, and nature collaborate to build an eco-friendly and sustainable society, thereby making *Sultana's Dream* a powerful case in the ecofeminist genre, even though the piece may be seen as overreaching and reductive in its generalizations of gender roles. By drawing closer connections between ecofeminism and environmental utopianism, this article attempts to show how *Sultana's Dream* engenders a vision of society that inverts social logics, gender roles, and other normative axes to transcend networks of patriarchal and colonial oppression.

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