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**From Zenana to Murdana: A Study of Misconstruction, Deconstruction and Subversion  
of Gender Stereotypes in Begam Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream***

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**Abstract**

Gender is the root of all politics and polemics. It categorizes men and women according to their physical differences and limitations. This process of gender division increases the issues of discrimination or subordination of their position in the society. That gives birth to the gendered subjects, gendered places and works. So the differentiation of definite works, places and activity is based on the division of gender. But when any gender surpasses his/her physical demarcation and performs entire activities that problematize the whole process of categorization of gender based on body and work. That is to say gender is no longer a biological term, but more a socio-cultural ideological mask to cover the power politics of domination of the societal disciplines and all the institutionalized practices in terms of class, caste, gender, race, community and religion. Traditionally in Indian Muslim and Hindu community, woman is confined within four walls of zenana even beneath the purdah or burqa that delineates their confinement, deprivation and restriction. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain deconstructs this conventional misconstruction of gender and also subverts the gendered work and place from zenana to murdana in order to demonstrate equal opportunity of education, women emancipation and empowerment. Hossain brings the transformation in society to reform conventional practices and restrictions imposed on women.

**Keywords:** Gender, zenana, education, emancipation, empowerment

*“The great question which, in all ages, has disturbed mankind, and brought on them the greatest part of their mischiefs... has been, not whether be power in the world, nor whence it came, but who should have it.”*

John Locke (An Essay Concerning Human Understanding)



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Knowledge is the root of the creation of human beings on the earth through the hands of Eve. In that sense woman is the creator of mankind as well as knowledge so does power. But the whole earth is under the control of the dominant masculine patriarchy. That is why patriarchal society holds socio political, economical, judicial, and commercial power and authority to make rules, discipline and to sustain order, equilibrium. Society establishes a set of rules for exercising soft power relations so that they can shrewdly discriminate people in terms of their caste, class, gender, race, colour of skin and religion etc. This gives birth to the concepts of discrimination, subjugation, minoritization. The masculine society inculcates into the psyche of women as Shakespeare did in “Hamlet” that ‘Frailty, thy name is woman’ (146-149) through myth, conventional prejudices, ideologies, hegemonic, and institutionalized practices. That problematizes the way of treatment of woman more as a woman than human. Women are taught that they are not strong, but weak, inferior and dependent not only physically, mentally but also intellectually and morally. That is why they should be confined within the four walls of the house called ‘Zenana’ for safety and security like the caged birds though have wings to fly. It increases the issues of deprivation or seclusion, marginalization and dehumanization. In this way the patriarchal society annihilates their dreams, desires, latent potentialities, educational rights, opportunity and equality years after years and ages after ages. A Bengali muslim woman writer Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain in her textual work “Sultana’s Dream” changes and challenges this stereotypical social, cultural, political construction of gender in order to look back in women and to reform or reverse the traditional system for the development of family, society as well as the country.

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) was one of the pioneers of women awakening in Bengal, India. She was born in a conservative Muslim family at Pairaband village in Rangpur district, now in Bangladesh. She never had any opportunity to go to school like her two brothers, but still she was taught Arabic, Urdu, and Persian at home with the help of her elder sister and brother. Her knack and love for education enforced her to write “Sultana’s Dream” which was first published in 1905 in the Madras-based journal Indian Ladies Magazine and then as a booklet in 1908, was translated into Bengali by Hossain and published in her book, entitled “Motichur” volume two in 1922. She experienced from her own life of triple marginalization for being a woman, then a Muslim woman and a Third World woman. That



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is why she often compared women's subordination under patriarchal system with India's exploitation under British colonial rule. Her restricted and oppressed life insisted her to take an active role or participation in women's education, women's movement, and any other organizational activities of women. Her writings are an extension of her activist self through which she attacks on social prejudices or practices, discriminatory conventions, restrictions, oppression, and patriarchal chauvinism to demonstrate gender equality, equity, and justice. Almost all of her writings such as "Sultana's Dream" (1905), "Padmarag" (1924), "Abarodhbasini" (1931), "NarirAdhikar" (unfinished essay), and "Education Ideals for the Modern Indian Girl" (1931) deal with the women issues of the contemporary Indian society. This paper attempts to focus on "Sultana's Dream" that exposes the issues like purdah system, deprivation and exploitation of Indian women and early marriage that prevent their educational journey and also makes a world of their own.

Hossain wrote in many different genres such as essay, novel, short story, and poem which were impregnated with satire, irony, sharp wit, and humour. Apart from "Sultana's Dream", her "Padmarag" (The Essence of Lotus, 1924), and "Abarodhbasini" (The Secluded Women, 1931) also deal with women issues. In "Padmarag", she criticizes the institutionalized familial, marital and sexual violence of women beyond religion, region, community, and ethnicity. She describes TariniBhavan where women from diverse cultures live and work together with their painful experiences of patriarchal oppression in order to break heteronormative relations and reform an alternative world to get education, emancipation, and empowerment. In this text, we get some collective women's experiences to universalize their issues when Saudamini says:

"I want to show people ...there are paths other than keeping house open to us. Keeping house for a husband is not the essence of women's lives. A human life is a precious gift from God—it is not to be wasted by blowing on the coals of a cooking oven and crying. We must declare war against society.

Usha: Then the pyre of war will be lighted in the homes of peaceloving Bengalis.



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Raffia: We don't want peace. We don't want a peace that is inert and neuter. And we have to crush the head of this custom of 'abarodh' or purdah—it is the root of all evil. No more keeping the dignity of 'abarodh' and tolerating kicks and broom-beatings".(Bagchi, 2)

In "Abarodhbasini", she satirizes the absurdity, indignity and cruelty of the foolish practice of purdah that endangers women lives, thoughts, dreams and desires. She exposes the ways how this prejudiced misconception, religious ideologies, and misinterpretation of purdah confined and deprived of Muslim women of their basic rights as human beings. Hossain unmasks the masked politics of patriarchy that inculcates a sense of weakness into the strong psyche of women for exercising power relations. Leila Ahmed in her "A Quiet Revolution" (2011) explores controversial issues of the use of hijab or veil. It needs attention to reconsider hijab's significance and symbolism. That blind practice of hijab or purdah is signifying the degradation of women and backwardness of religion to the Western world.

In "Sultana's Dream" Hossain presents the contemporary deplorable and pathetic condition of women. The term zenana refers to the place of women where they are locked by the invisible iron chains within four walls even beneath the purdah or veil and murdana means the alternative world for men. Hossain exposes the issues of categorization of women, the process of dehumanization and construction of gender, gendered place and work. It was believed that if a woman goes to school for education, she will be indifferent towards in-laws and will be widow. An educated woman will neglect social, cultural, and religious practices such as purdah system, dowry system as well as early marriage. But Hossain realizes that this kind of gender biases are manmade construction behind their power mechanisms and more a political act rather than biological and scientific. Her central motifs are women education, gender equality and women empowerment. Because she genuinely believes that only proper education can eradicate this superstitions and prejudices of gender biases. That is why she deconstructs the traditional construction of gender and gender roles. As Judith Butler in her book '*Gender Trouble*' states that gender identity depends on its performance 'there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender, that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results'(Butler,25). Butler also states that 'the



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gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality' (Butler, 136). Hossain subverts the world of stereotypes from zenana to murdana and murdana to zenana in order to awaken our conscience, widen knowledge as well as break our psychological borders of mind.

“Sultana’s Dream” presents two women characters; one is the title character Sultana and another is Sister Sara. The text is a kind of reaction to the masculine narratives because of the absence of male characters. Here two characters describe two different ways of the world. When Sultana represents traditional masculine society of the contemporary world; Sister Sara represents Ladyland or the subversive hegemonic patriarchal world. Male writers fail to represent women’s psyche properly. That is why it produces misconceptions and misrepresentations of women as vulnerable to be victimized, object or commodity. In the process of writing through dream form, Hossain presents the strong psyche of women and the bliss of an educated scientific mind of women. In terms of women writing Marks and de Courtivronin in *New French Feminisms* wonderfully remark: “It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility which will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded...it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric [male-dominated] system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophic-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate” (253). Hossain enters into the threshold of women’s inner landscape in order to find out treasures of latent potentialities. By Sultana she presents powerlessness of woman’s name, subjugated status and inferior position in the society. Though her name Sultana means queen, but she possesses no power. She represents the world which is dominated or manipulated by the autocratic patriarchy. Michel Foucault in the introduction of *The History of Sexuality volume 1* says, “Where there is power, there is resistance” (95-96). That is to say when power and authority are at the hands of men, there is possibility of resistance from women. For that purpose, Hossain presents Sister Sara to deconstruct the constructed misconception of women or gendered place or work. Sister Sara is the representative of the empowered woman in all aspects of the ladyland.



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Hossain's presentation and projection of Sister Sara is considered as well as compared to the new woman. The term new woman is used by Sarah Grand in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The new woman refers to a woman who is educated, independent, career woman or working woman who controls her own life from personal to socio-economic and political level. That woman breaks traditional sacrificing womanhood and subverts her inferior position where she is considered as a shadow of men and a second sex. In order to describe the new woman, Coolney in *The New Womenhood* says "The new woman, in the sense of the best woman, the flower of all the womanhood of past ages, has come to say- if civilization is to endure. The sufferings of the past have but strengthened her, maternity has deepened her, education is broadening her – and she knows that she must perfect herself if she would perfect the race, and leave her imprint upon immortality, through her offspring or her works"(31).

Education is the pillar for the integral development of personality as well as society and the country. So the lack of education or illiteracy is the root of all evils. But still the condition, deprivation and position of women in the society are too negligible to describe. Though it is universally acknowledged that mother is the first teacher for everyone. She gives birth to a doctor, teacher, engineer simultaneously prophet, saint and even God in flesh and blood. So the fertility of the womb indicates the fertility of the world. That is why Hossain realizes the value and necessity of women education. Women should learn the entire lessons of life beyond bookish knowledge such as spiritual or moral, physical, intellectual, socio-cultural ethics, and responsibility. In her essay "SubehaSadek"(The Dawn), Hossain says:

The girls must be given at least the elementary education! By education I mean true and proper education; to be able to read a few books or to write two lines of poetry is not education. I want that education which will enable them to acquire the rights of a citizen, develop them as ideal daughter, ideal sister, ideal homemaker and ideal mother! Education is also required to be both mental and physical. They should be aware of the fact that they have not come to this world to be dolls decorated with beautiful saries, clips, and very valuable ornaments of gems; rather, they were born as women to perform special duties. Their lives are not to be sacrifices to entertain and



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please the husband-god! They must not be dependent on anybody for their food and clothing. (434)

But early marriage, purdah system, dowry system and all kinds of prejudices regarding women education were prevalent in the contemporary Indian society. Hossain challenges those systems and social code of conduct in order to eradicate illiteracy and build a scientific bent of mind through proper education and technological advancements. Besides that, there are many other factors preventing the expansion of women education such as social attitude towards women education, lack of female teachers and lack of adequate number of schools and economic hardship, parents' negligence or indifferent attitude towards girl education. Hossain realizes that the psychological barriers or misconceptions and restrictions on female education are more dangerous than socio-cultural and religious barriers. That is why she herself establishes school in Kolkata for women to awake them from this long slumber of ignorance of education. She teaches as well as preaches the value and necessity of education and emancipation in any possible way. In her essay "Burqa" she says:

...we have become dispirited, narrow-minded and timid, not because of maintaining purdah, but because of lack of education...we have to engage ourselves in attaining knowledge in all fields. Only education can bring emancipation of women and her equality to men. (46-45)

"Sultana's Dream" is a kind of reaction to the unjust hegemonic patriarchy and its ideologies, man-made social cultural formation of the institutionalized practices and prejudices. Because society manipulates, as well as dominates everyone's life from personal level to professional. Sultana at the beginning of the text through the conversational mode with Sister Sara describes the contemporary Indian society, role and position of women as well as men in the management of social affairs:

In India man is lord and master. He has taken to himself all powers and privileges and shut up the women in the zenana. (Sultana's Dream, 9)

Men claim that they are stronger than women physically and their brains are bigger and heavier than women intellectually. Hossain changes the status-quo and challenges the unjust



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masculine social order, equilibrium. She derogates male pride by dehumanizing their false heroic power when Sister Sara says, “A lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race”(Sultana’s Dream,9). She does not afraid to react to the illogical illusions or assumptions of men’s intellectual power and potentiality “An elephant also has got a bigger and heavier brain than a man has”(Sultana’s Dream,12).Though the way she attacks men problematizes the humanitarian values. Hossain subverts the conventional gendered place and work and position through the measurement and empowerment. In order to get equality and power she reconstructs women’s status by deconstructing men’s egotistical sublime “...They are fit for nothing. Only catch them and put them into the zenana”(Sultana’s Dream, 9). So, zenana is no more a women’s place but a place for men to do household duties or works in the ladyland.

Hossain insinuates the way of the world of men. She also criticizes their insensitiveness, lack of patience to do embroidery work, and wasting quality time by smoking. She exposes the mechanism of power of the masculine patriarchy and how the society, the country, family are dominated and manipulated by the authoritarian men. Even a queen is powerless because the country is ruled by the prime minister. The neighbouring country king is less concerned about the welfare of the state and good government and makes him busy with the declaration of war against queen in order to conquer ladyland. They fight for religion having with low moral sense. Men can be defeated and destroyed but they never negotiate with women and their empowerment. Apart from all these criticism of masculine power politics and subversion of patriarchy, Hossain never forgets humanitarian aids and welfare of the country as well as solidarity or negotiation with the countrymen. Because in ladyland during war men will be free from zenana to fight for the sake of honour and liberty of the country.

Though Hossain is a critic of the predominant masculine society, but she is not a misandrist. Her purpose is not mainly to criticize men and the existing contemporary unjust or biased system by exposing power politics behind all formation of the disciplines, practices, but also to awake women’s conscience,lead them to fight for equal right, women education, emancipation, and empowerment. Mary Wollstonecraft in her book *A Vindication of the* sharpen the senses, form the temper, regulate the passions as they begin to ferment, and set



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the understanding to work before the body arrives at maturity...the important task of learning to think and reason(30). She also says that only education can bring emancipation “...the most perfect education, in my opinion, is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart. Or, in other words, to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render it independent”(31). Sister Sara condemns Sultana that women are also responsible for their subjugation and exploitative or subordinate position. Women are defined and confined not just by men, but by their own psychological barrier of mind that never let them to question the authority of patriarchy and to change the whole system in order to celebrate own freedom. Sister Sara questions Sultana “Why do you allow yourself to shut up?” (Sultana’s Dream,9).Sister Sara insinuates women for their ignorance, negligence and indifferent attitude towards their own rights, dreams, desires, potentialities “You have neglected the duty you owe to yourself and you have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interests”(Sultana’s Dream, 9).

Besides that, Hossain interrogates the dictatorship of the masculine patriarchy and exposes the politics behind the projection of women as weak. Because the misrepresentation of women through literature, film and myth weakens the psyche of women and suppresses their ability. Amzed Hossein describes the text: “But feminists have also implied that as gender specific attributes and stereotyping are socio-cultural constructs,-originating in particular time and place, and not natural, immutable, universal or timeless- they can be dismantled, deconstructed and then reshaped and regenerated in a more gender –just social and cultural formation. This is what Sultana’s Dream undertakes to do” (A Critical Edition Sultana’s Dream, 41).RokeyaSakhawat Hossain empowers the powerless and gives the voice to the voiceless. The text emphasizes the purpose of it that women should be active and engaged in all fields to transform the perceptions of gender role and gender status. She demonstrates the latent potentialities of women and their contribution in almost every sphere. She projects that women are not only equal to men but also superior to them if they get opportunity to prove themselves. Women must have to fulfill their duty to challenge the unjust masculine social order and to change their inferior position only through empowering them. Sultana asks Sister Sara “...how you managed to put the man of your country into the zenana. Did you entrap them first?” In response to this question Sister Sara replies, “It is not likely that they would



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surrender their free and open air life of their own accord and confine themselves within the four walls of the zenana! They must have been overpowered”(Sultana’s Dream, 12).

“Sultana’s Dream” presents a utopian land called ladyland where women will get opportunity to do justice. A land which will be ruled by women in all spheres “...in the far off Ladyland, ladies rule over the country and control all social matters, while gentlemen are kept in the murdana to mind babies, to cook and to do all sorts of domestic work” (Sultana’s Dream, 15). The country with its clean roads and lush greenery looks like a grand garden. However, as women’s brains are quicker, Hossain projects her own vision of a desirable social formation and vision of women at the helm of the universities and it’s scientific laboratories, handling complex technological devices, directing military strategy, cultivating lands and the defense of the nation, conducting internal and foreign trade and running the overall administration of the country. She proves that women can think much ahead of their times. The university educated women of the ladyland prove that they must endeavor to utilize their faculties, must wage a struggle to end the unjust masculine domination over them and get back their natural rights and powers and do justice to their capabilities.

There are two women universities that provide women emancipation and empowerment through education and research in modern science and eco-friendly technology. The lady principal of one university invents a captive balloon with the help of science and ecology. The balloon performs several functions such as to collect rain water, supply that water through pipelines to every home in the ladyland, use this water for bath, keep the roads free of mud, keep the country cool during hot weather and sprinkle the ground with artificial fountain. The other women’s university invents an instrument to preserve sun-heat for cooking through pipes, make a smoke free kitchen and also to keep house warm during cold weather. Even they protect their country from the invaders by burning down their weapons with the help of the concentrated sunlight and scorching sun-heat to make a bloodless battle.

In mechanizing agriculture and transportation, the contribution of women is remarkable. They cultivate the land with ploughs through electricity. There is no rail road or paved streets available in the lady land. They move from one place to another by air car having attached with two hydrogen balls and two wing like blades powered by electricity. Apart from the



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achievements in the field of science and technology, moral and judicial system management in the ladyland is incredible. They never destroy any living being and thing created by God because the country is totally free of crime and punishment. Their religion is based on love and truth to each other. Sins and sinners are considered to be forgiven through self-rectification. There is purity, innocence, and sacredness in the relationships between men and women. In the ladyland during Queen's reign as Sultana says "I see purity reigns over your land"(Sultana's Dream, 16). As the queen is so sagacious and farsighted to make rules and roles of women in her land. Queen states that "We dive deep into the ocean of knowledge and try to find out the precious gems, which Nature has kept in store for us. We enjoy Nature's gifts as much as we can"(Sultana's Dream,17). The ladyland is a harmonious place where everyone lives their own way of life, can walk freely in the outside and study at the university to do innovative work by breaking the boundaries of four walls as well as the psychological barrier.

"Sultana's Dream" is often considered as a feminist science fiction. It presents a world where science is used to control the nature as well as the atmosphere. But the most interesting fact is that this science is the pioneer of the women. Hence the woman is said to have the power to control the atmosphere. The scientific discoveries control nature to prevent wastage of natural resources and eco-consciousness can be traced within this text. Science is the medium through which women ascend to the power as described by Sister Sara:

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 and supported by the Government. Education was spread far and wide among women. And early marriage also was stopped. No woman was to be allowed to marry before she was twenty – one. (Sultana's Dream, 11)

Education helps them to acquire scientific knowledge that leads them to attain power to sustain order and equilibrium in the ladyland. The overwhelming development in the field of science is pioneered by the women in the ladyland. The text is thus expresses the multi-dimensional nature of women power and the proper usage or utilization of that power. In this



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way Hossain presents an alternative world where women are superior to men. They are independent, university educated, and working women. Their latent potentialities are not confined within four walls of the house or under the purdah, but they provide their dreams the wings to fly high for ascending the infinite or unlimited power. Through this text Hossain paves a path for women especially Indian women to dare to dream. That is why we can say that this text is her bloodless revolutionary attempt to shake the contemporary way of the world as well as predominant hegemonic patriarchal society.

However, the text is basically a sexual transformation from the seclusion of women to the seclusion of men. This kind of transformation does not happen in a single day, but has a past history of thirty years when Queen was powerless. Sister Sara criticizes the harmful and unjust patriarchy where purdah system never let women to look the outside world “I must tell you that before this change we had been kept in strict purdah” (Sultana’s Dream, 11). That prejudiced system conceals their dreams and potentialities. It also gives women intolerable pain and sufferings years after years. That is to say that the text is the outburst of Hossain’s hidden traumas that she experienced in her own life. That is why she presents an alternative world where men are secluded and women are free to manage the outside world affairs “The lady principal rose again and said, ‘Before we go out the men must enter the zenanas. I make this prayer for the sake of purdah’” (Sultana’s Dream, 14). Sister Sara describes this transformative system to Sultana “Now that they are accustomed to the purdah system and have ceased to grumble at the seclusion, we call the system ‘murdana’ instead of ‘zenana’.” (Sultana’s Dream, 14).

In “Sultana’s Dream” Hossain reverses the binary oppositions of men and women, public space and purdah, murdana and zenana, centre and margin or periphery. She intends to dismantle and abolish stereotypical roles, prejudices, and practices in order to pave the way for women for their education, emancipation and empowerment. In order to challenge the traditional misconception or assumption and restrictions on women, Hossain gives full scope to women to fulfill their dreams, desires and latent potentialities. She changes gender roles, temperaments and status to bring equality and justice to the unjust social systems in order to prove that gender is nothing but a performative act of identity. That is why gender role and



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identity is not fixed but ever changing and dynamic concept. Zenana is not a natural place for women and murdana is not the place only for men. For that purpose Hossain deconstructs the misconception of gender through the subversion of its role and status, place and work in the society. Hossain exposes the politics that there is power mechanism behind categorization of gendered role, place and work, compulsory heterosexuality and domination. Only education, knowledge, and power can eradicate that kind of assumptive duties, definite place, and identity for men and women. So the power and the possession of power can subvert the established patriarchal norms of life that is reflected in Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's "Sultana's Dream."

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