

Reimagining Feminist Utopias: A Reading of Sultana's Dream through Chandra Talpade Mohanty's Under Western Eyes

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Abstract—Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* (1905) is important in South Asian feminist and anti-colonial thought. The text depicts a hypothetical feminist society-Ladyland-in which women have scientific, political, and public authority and men are restricted to the domestic sphere. The paper uses Mohanty's essay *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* (1984) to demonstrate how *Sultana's Dream* provides an alternative view of feminism as an indigenous epistemology that is critical of the application of Western feminism to the Third World. Specifically, *Sultana's Dream* critiques Mohanty's homogenising image of 'Third World women' by placing emphasis on historical gender relations, as well as the power dynamics of colonialism and the connection between patriarchal power and imperialism. Hossain's utopia is not simply a reversal of gender roles, but rather a radical critique of both patriarchal modernity, colonial science and epistemic dominance. The paper further analyses how Hossain's work may have anticipated several of the core themes articulated by Mohanty in her later work concerning postcolonial feminism.

Index Terms—Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, feminist utopia, postcolonial feminism, Third World women.

I. INTRODUCTION

Feminist literary criticism has been increasingly interested in recuperating early women's texts that disrupt accepted patriarchal and colonial views. One of these extraordinary but frequently overlooked texts is Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream*, published for the first time in 1905. At a time when women in colonial India particularly Muslim women were expected to conform strictly to purdah and a restricted lifestyle, this text envisions a radical alternative society governed by women. While

Sultana's Dream is often interpreted as a feminist utopia or a satirical reversal of gender norms, this article argues that the author's political significance can be strengthened if we apply the lens of a postcolonial feminist critique.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's book, *Under Western Eyes*, provides a compelling theoretical framework for rereading Hossain's work. Mohanty critiques the work of many Western feminist scholars for creating a "Third World woman" who exists as a homogenised and oppressed being, defined only by her victimisation and dispossession of power. She claims that these representations disregard historical, cultural and political specificities, thus reinforcing colonial power relations within the feminist canon itself. By examining *Sultana's Dream* alongside Mohanty's critique, we are able to view Hossain as an independent, non-derivative feminist thinker producing a culturally specific, anti-imperialist feminist utopia.

This article will show that *Sultana's Dream* is an example of feminist resistance in a country colonized by a Western power. It critiques European views on knowledge, truth and science as a way to empower women to participate in science and technology. The article will contain four main sections, including an overview of *Sultana's Dream*, an overview of the main arguments of Mohanty's *Under western Eyes*, an analysis of *Sultana's Dream* using Mohanty's theory, and a discussion of the relevance of *Sultana's Dream* to the present-day Feminist movement.

II. CONTEXTUALISING SULTANA'S DREAM

Sultana's Dream was written during the period of British colonial rule; a time when there was a high

degree of social segregation based on gender and a lack of educational opportunities for females so that the context in which the narrative exists can be seen as specially constructed historically. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880 – 1932) was an early feminist who was dedicated to educating women, especially within the Bengali Muslim community. The experiences of purdah and gender oppression that she personally endured during her lifetime are reflected in the text of *Sultana's Dream*.

In her narrative, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain has employed a literary device known as the dream vision which has allowed her to create dramatic images of radical possibilities without challenging directly either Britain's colonialism or the patriarchal dominance of her own community. Sultana, the central character of the narrative, wakes up to find herself in a place referred to as Ladyland; a female society that has developed scientific knowledge, social peace, and logical governance. In this dream world, the male population is viewed as physically weaker and more violent, and therefore restricted to the home. The reversal of the traditional equality of the genders and the resulting feminist views of male behaviour provide evidence of the arbitrary nature of how the patriarchal system has used logical reasoning to justify the subjugation of women.

Hossain does more than invert the hierarchy of power; she actively reinterprets what constitutes "progress" and "civilisation". The technologies of Ladyland, such as modern solar energy systems, water balloons for killing rather than bombs, and other systems designed for 'less destructive' technologies are an antithesis to a militaristic and exploitative industrial modernity that is premised on colonialism. Therefore, although *Sultana's Dream* focuses primarily on a critique of patriarchy and male-dominated culture of science, it also critiques a masculinist and imperialist view of what constitutes science.

Mohanty's Under Western Eyes: Key Arguments

Chandra Talpade Mohanty questions the theoretical arguments used by Western feminists to support their arguments about feminism related to women in developing countries in her book entitled, "Under Western Eyes". One of the main points Mohanty argues is that many forms of feminist literature depicting women's status and role in third world countries creates the idea of a single, standardised

'third world woman', which places all women from developing countries into a similar categorisation, being viewed only as oppressed by; Tradition, the Oppression of Religion and Patriarchy. This way of viewing women from the developing world has parallels with Colonial Discourse in that colonial power places all white women as being liberated and all non-white women as being dependent and victimised. Mohanty argues that when one looks at oppression of women based on gender, the issues associated with Gender Oppression need to be examined relative to the historical and material context of the women. Mohanty also critiques the use of patriarchy in terms of Gender Oppression, as it has been related to women's oppression by separating the concept of Patriarchy from the local power structure of society. Mohanty identifies the need to examine multiple levels of oppression through class, race, Colonialism, Nationalism and how these different factors work together to oppress women. Mohanty believes that Feminist Solidarity must be built on a comparison of women's lives and the varying experiences of women to build solidarity between women based on differences of Power and not assumed similarities. Agency is at the core of Mohanty's discussion surrounding her work. Mohanty believes that Western Feminist Literature has portrayed all 'third world women' solely as an oppressed group prevented from showing resistance, creativity and political action. Mohanty believes that Feminist Methodologies should focus on the Lived Experience of female, both in terms of their struggles and challenges within their localised context. Mohanty believes that Feminist Methodologies cannot impose any universalisation.

Mohanty's argument centers on the issue of agency. Western feminist discourse has defined Third World Women as nothing but oppressed. The message implies that these women are incapable of either resisting their oppression or creating their own culture. As such, Mohanty believes that a feminist methodology should prioritise women's own experiences, therefore creating new frameworks for understanding women's lives.

Challenging the Homogenised "Third World Woman"
Mohanty's critique of *Sultana's Dream* creates a contrasting account to the homogeneity of the image of non-Western women. The women in Hossain's novel do not exemplify silence, but rather are scientists,

educators, and politicians who are shaping their society. Intellectual authority and technological knowledge, represented through Lady Principal, are counter to the stereotype of Muslim women being uneducated and submissive. Hossain's representation, is consistent with Mohanty's argument that women should have agency in specific contexts.

Although Hossain wrote in the colonial context, her feminist perspective does not stem from the Western model. It incorporates indigenous issues such as purdah (veil), women in education, and ethical governance, all seen through speculative fiction.

III. FEMINISM, SCIENCE, AND COLONIAL MODERNITY

According to Mohanty's analysis, Western feminists often accept the idea of progress as an essential to the Enlightenment view of modernity and rationalism without being critical. Mohanty also points out that the content of Sultana's Dream goes against the view of the Enlightenment that glorified male domination through science. The science that takes place in Ladyland is an instance of a type of science (technology) that is ethically and ecologically based rather than being violent in nature. Alternative modernity undermines the idea in colonialism that progress means domination and militarism. The feminist science created by Hossain does not support the views of sociobiology, patriarchy, or an imperial point of view. Hossain's work shows how women's leadership creates peace and sustainable societies, not chaos as is often said in patriarchal discourse. Therefore, Sultana's Dream anticipates the postcolonial feminist critique of Western modernism that were introduced by Mohanty and others.

IV. GENDER REVERSAL AS POLITICAL STRATEGY

Although there are some critiques of Sultana's Dream stating that it is merely a role-reversal fantasy, using Mohanty's methodology we can see that the idea of gender reversing is used as a means of critique and not as an end goal. In creating an environment where men have to wear purdah, Hussain shows how irrational it is to segregate people by gender and that there is much social waste created by excluding 50% of the

population from participating publicly in their communities.

This tactic aligns with what Mohanty says about exposing power structures rather than normalising them. The sense of discomfort created by male restriction makes [us] to examine why similar restrictions on women have been accepted as normal for so long historically.

V. COLONIAL POWER AND FEMINIST IMAGINATION

Sultana's Dream does not show British colonial rulers directly in their work, but it is possible to infer a critique of colonial power through its rejection of militarism, violence, and the abuse of scientific knowledge. Mohanty helps identify the anti-imperialist element of Hossain's work as well as showing how Mohanty's postcolonial feminism views the oppression of women as part of a larger structure of domination.

The peaceful society governed by women in Ladyland stands in stark contrast to the colonial authorities, who use violence to govern. By creating a vision of a society without wars, Hossain is questioning the validity of colonial powers using violence as a means of "civilising" the societies they invaded. In this sense, feminism is intertwined with the ethics of anti-colonialism, which is a fundamental aspect of Mohanty's postcolonial feminism.

VI. LANGUAGE, FORM, AND FEMINIST INTERVENTION

Hossain uses the English tongue here for a politically motivated reason; by writing in the language of her colonizer, she places herself in a position to engage in conversation with people from the global community while also contesting and undermining the very foundations upon which their ideas are based. Mohanty disapproves of the perception that Third World writers who write in English are simply copying the Western intellectual tradition and asks that readers appreciate that these writers are creatively using the language of those in power to express their ideas and to provide an alternative view of the world that is based on the lived realities of oppression and struggle. The dream format allows Hossain to side step any potential censorship and develop fantasies of extreme

liberation without having to justify how such fantasies could actually occur. The speculative nature of this work has links to feminist utopian thought but is firmly grounded in the reality of his community. While short in length and easy to read, it has significant ideological ramifications.

VII. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that Sultana's Dream, when read through Chandra Talpade Mohanty's Under Western Eyes, emerges as a foundational text of postcolonial feminist thought. Hossain's utopia resists the homogenising tendencies of Western feminist discourse by presenting women as historically situated agents capable of imagining and enacting alternative social orders. Far from being a simple fantasy, Sultana's Dream is a nuanced critique of patriarchy, colonial modernity, and epistemic domination.

By foregrounding context, agency, and ethical science, Hossain anticipates many of the concerns articulated by Mohanty decades later. This comparative reading not only enriches our understanding of Sultana's Dream but also challenges us to rethink the genealogy of feminist theory itself. Recognising texts like Hossain's as theoretical interventions in their own right is essential to building a more inclusive and decolonised feminist canon.

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