

Education as a tool of Women's Empowerment in Begum Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream*

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Abstract

*All around the world, people are struggling for the rights and equality of women. In Bangladesh the struggle started two hundred years ago and still it is going on because the world does not meet the equality of women as they want. Though the Western countries have achieved their target mostly, we are still far behind the target. Though Nawab Faizunnesa (1834–1903) and Begum Rokeya (1880-1932) have straggled and shown the path, we have failed to understand their motto. Why women are lagged till now is not difficult to find out. We are not emphasizing the education for all to awaken men and women. Moreover, we have to think only education can remove the darkness of all and then men and women can contribute equally to develop the society. So, the paper emphasizes education for all as it is used as a tool of women's empowerment in Begum Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* i.e. getting education and how women can enjoy their empowerment is going to be shown in the paper.*

Keywords: education, empowerment, equality, suppression, and wisdom

Introduction

More than a hundred years ago 'in what was then an undivided India, now Bangladesh' (Ray, 2002:17), a veiled Bengali woman wrote a fifteen-page novella called *Sultana's Dream*. Begum Rokeya was an early self-conscious feminist for her writings and activities. She was fortunate to have a brother who taught her how to read and write after he returned home from office each day. Moreover, Begum Rokeya was fortunate to have married a progressive man who encouraged her to continue her education—theirs was a love match.

Years later, as an adult woman, she creates her own utopian vision when she writes her allegorical satire, *Sultana's Dream* in 1905. It takes place in the country of *Ladyland* where women run the country: they are the politicians, the scientists, the soldiers and the traders. There men languish inside the *zenana*-the harem if you will –in *purdah* (Vaile used by Muslim women) (Tharu, et al, 1995:340)

The same woman establishes a school for Muslim girls; at the time, no formal education exists for girls in India; each day Rokeya's students travel by carriage to school. (Quayum,2001:2) According to unwritten customary laws their transport is also 'veiled' if the young women are travelling outside their homes. , behind the heavily curtained windows of the wagon sat heavily veiled, heavily perspiring young girls in the stifling heat. While Rokeya does not believe in the imprisonment in the name of religion, she is prepared to compromise if this is the only way for her girls to receive education.

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In the last century, when Rokeya identified the problems of women, the ideas of gender issues did not establish as discourse academically anywhere. (Selina Hossain, 2013:10)

She does not confine herself in writing and suggestion but also takes practical steps to encourage women to come forward so that they can overcome the social barriers by establishing a girl school and Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam (Muslim Women's Association). (Quayum, 2001:3) Though in our society we see most of the cases we like to suggest, we do not show our interest to do something practically for the women. Even most of the time women are expecting that men will do something for them. As a result, they cannot remove the chain from their mind. (Siraj, 2013: 206-212)

After those steps more than a hundred years have passed and till now the women are treated to some extent as animal and slave of men. Regarding it, most of the critics claim that men are responsible for the suppression of women but here this paper aims to find out the other reasons too. If we observe the women's activities of *Ladyland* closely, we can see most of the time women are also responsible equally to be suppressed and ignored as they are not aware about their rights and they do not think how to get rid of the suppression of men. In order to ensure the gender equality in society, we ought to use the women's wisdom which Begum Rokeya depicts in *Sultana's Dream*. At the same time this paper shows how women can attain the empowerment in a society. But we have to remember education is the main power of being wise and exercising empowerment.

Incidences in *Sultana's Dream*

In *Sultana's Dream* the protagonist Sultana visits a faraway *Ladyland* in her dream. She is accompanied by a lady named Sister Sara. When Sultana walks on the street of *Ladyland*, she finds no man there and the female pedestrians laugh at her. As Sultana wants to know why they are laughing at her, Sara replies that Sultana looks as 'timid and shy' as a man. Later Sultana is known that even fifty years before this *ladyland* had been just like another male dominated society. But when the last king died and his daughter came to the throne, she took huge initiatives to educate women by establishing women's schools, colleges and universities and particularly endeavored to train women in scientific knowledge. At that point the positions of the commander-in-chief, all cabinet posts, indeed the power stricter, were controlled by men. But, 'when a war broke out with a neighbouring country, the warriors of the country, all male, fought with huge courage but ultimately failed to achieve victory'. (Khan. 2010) A woman scientist of the state then urged the queen to keep the men at home for some days and let her look into the matter. The injured and tired men were easily given up. Then the lady scientist defeated the enemy army by using technology and after that men in *Ladyland* began to stay at home.

Since then, the men of *Layland* have lived in the *zenana*, now called *mardana* (the masculine form of *zanana*), and now that they are used to have ceased to complain. Women do all work since men are considered unfit for most things; the country is a giant and beautiful garden; solar energy is used for cooking and electricity for flying vehicles.

Critical analysis of *Sultana's Dream*

While walking in the outstanding beautiful garden accompanied by Sister Sara, 'some of the passers-by made jokes at' (Rokeya, 2004:475) Sultana because of her 'manish' attitudes. In reply to her quarry, Sister Sara tells her that she is 'shy and timid like men' of *Ladyland*. (Rokeya, 2004:474) But so far as we see Sultana does not have any idea about the nature of *Ladyland* let alone the attitude of men and women of it. Actually here Sultana is rebuked for her cowardice or 'timid' nature. It does not mean that here Sultana is asked to go against men.

Sister Sara claims that *Ladyland* is 'free from sin and harm' (Rokeya, 2004:474) but undivided India was full of sin and harm because the Indians are doing 'unfair keeping the harmless women in 'the *zenana*.' (Rokeya, 2004:475) In their conversation, Sultana claims that as they are 'naturally weak,' and they 'have no hand or voice in the management of' (Rokeya, 2004:475) their 'social affairs'. In India 'man is lord and master' (Rokeya, 2004:475). Moreover, they have 'powers and privileges' (Rokeya, 2004:475) to dominate women.

In another reply to Sultana, Sister Sara mentions that the undivided Indian women themselves are responsible to 'be shut up' in 'the *zenana*'. Even she states that as they allow men to shut up in the *zenana* without question, they get the power to misuse or dominate women. Then Sister Sara argues very intellectually saying 'a lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race. You have neglected the duty due to yourselves and you have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interests?' (Rokeya, 2004:475) Here Sister Sara emphasizes the mental strength and intellectual power of women, and she does not bother about physical capability of women. Later she establishes the idea of using head rather than physical strength.

Coming out from the *zenana* in *Ladyland*, she could realize how a woman of *Ladyland* enjoying her freedom is vividly depicted here. She says that education must be 'spread far and wide among women' (Rokeya, 2004:478); for improving women's condition Sister Sara suggests that child marriage should be stopped. At the same time, she opines that 'the seclusion is the same' (Rokeya, 2004:477) everywhere. To give men lesson, the Queen of *Ladyland* sends the men to the *zenana*. Here, Sister Sara does not suggest women to avoid men. Rather she tells education and other works will have to be ensured side by side between men and women. She encourages the women to awaken themselves for establishing their rights. Moreover, she echoes the same idea in her 'Women's Downfall' (Istrijatir Abanati) saying 'We ought to have such qualities in us so that we can walk side by side with men in both the material and spiritual sphere of life.' (Rokeya, 2011: 15)

From their discussion we see that the women of *Ladyland* use a special kind of balloon for gathering water which has been invented by one of the professors of the two universities of the capital city. Using it, Lady Principal can control 'rain and storms'. Here it is clear that because of education and opportunities, women are able to use their faculty for inventing new things for the betterment and welfare of human being.

When Sultana asks Sister Sara, ‘how you managed to put the men of your country into the *zenana*. Did you entrap them first?’ (Rokeya, 2004:476) Sister Sara replies they have done it ‘by brain’. They have never thought to use any force or trick against men because ‘men’s arms are stronger than those of women.’ (Rokeya, 2004:478) If one wants to establish one’s rights in society, s/he must use brain i.e. wisdom is the main power of being established in society. Sister Sara continuously says, ‘An elephant also has got a bigger and heavier brain than a man has. Yet man can enchain elephants and employ them, according to their own wishes.’ (Rokeya, 2004:478)

Whenever men of *Ladyland* think all the achievements of women as ‘a sentimental nightmare’ (Rokeya, 2004:478), Lady-principals advise them ‘they should reply, not by word, but by deed.’ (Rokeya, 2004:478) Here patience and wisdom are merely emphasized and encouraged.

Even later, when men have failed to save their country from the attack of the neighbours, the Queen asks the Royal Highness Lady, ‘If you cannot save your country for lack of physical strength, try to do so by brain power.’ (Rokeya, 2004:479) After getting the suggestion, the Lady soldiers of *Ladyland* have been able to destroy ‘guns and other ammunition’ (Rokeya, 2004:480) of the enemies easily and quickly by ‘the sun-heat’, and the enemies have fled away. As a result, they have lost nothing in the war.

Because of their failure, the men of *Ladyland* ‘are accustomed to the *purdah* system and have ceased to grumble at their seclusion’, (Rokeya, 2004:480) they (the women of *Ladyland*) ‘call the system ‘*Mardana*’ instead of ‘*zenana*.’ (Rokeya, 2004:479) So, the incidence proves that here ‘*purdah*’ is used as synonymous of ‘enchained’ and ‘negligence’ not used from religious perspective. And even the men are sent into ‘*Mardana*’ because of women’s wisdom.

While Sultana meeting the Queen, the Queen exposes their future plan to Sultana saying,

We do not covet other people’s land; we do not fight for piece of diamond though it may be a thousand- do not fold brighter than Koh-I-Noor, nor do we grudge a ruler his Peacock Throne. We dive 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. (Rokeya, 2004:483-84)

Here we see the female education is emphasized again. Nowhere have we seen any collision between men and women.

Importance of education, wisdom and Rokeya’s view

Rokeya emphasizes education because it is the key tool for human beings to establish equality, enjoying rights and exercising the ability as human being. And education is emphasized from the ancient period till now. But all the time, some people are deprived from education for a certain reason. ‘Education is a major catalyst for human development.’ (Sharmin, 2013:11) One of the reputed proponents of modernization theory, Rostow (1960:182) believes ‘the education of a generation of modern men’ was a precondition for an economy to begin to grow.

Education is a systematic process through which one can acquire 'knowledge, experience, skill and sound attitude' (John Parakimalil, 2012:38). Without getting systematic process, one can also gain 'knowledge, experience, skill and attitude', but s/he cannot use it for the welfare of human being. Education always teaches one how to distinguish 'true and false' or 'write and wrong', or 'good and evil'. Because of education, a human being can apply his/her 'sense of faculty'. Moreover, 'education is the harmonious development of the physical, mental, moral or spiritual, and social faculties, the four dimensions of life, for a life of dedicated service'. (Parakimalil, 2012: 25)

The educational system we had better aim at producing in the future is one which gives to every man and women an opportunity for the best that exists. 'The ideal system of education must be democratic, although the ideal is not immediately attainable. This matter of democracy and education is one as to which clarity is important.' (Russell, 2000:14-15)

Plato (1987:203) compares human nature in respect of education and its lack to such an experience as this. Similarly, Aristotle (1987:86) believes 'all men by nature desire to know.' Moreover, he (1987:86) tells that 'the human race lives also by art and reasoning.' 'The reason is that experience is knowledge of individuals, art of universals, and actions and productions are all concerned with the individual' (Aristotle, 1987:87). Knowledge and understanding belong to art rather than to experience, and we suppose artists to be wiser than men of experience (which implies that Wisdom depends in all cases rather on knowledge); and this is because the former know the cause, but the latter do not. 'For men of experience know that the thing is so, but do not know why, while the others know the why.' (Aristotle, 1987:87)

Wisdom has some certain power as Aristotle (1987:88) says:

Wisdom is knowledge about certain principles and causes. We suppose first, then, that the wise man knows all things, as far as possible, although he has not knowledge of each of them in detail; secondly, that he who can learn things that are difficult to all, and therefore, easy and no mark of Wisdom. Again, that he who is more exact and more capable of teaching the causes is wiser, in every branch of knowledge; and that of the sciences, also that which is desirable on its own account and for the sake of knowing it is more of the nature of Wisdom than that which is desirable on account of its results, and the superior science is more of the nature of Wisdom than the ancillary.

No doubt the word 'intelligence' properly signifies rather an aptitude for acquiring knowledge than knowledge already acquired. Moreover, Bertrand Russell (2000:49-52) claims:

I regard the cultivation of intelligence, therefore, as one of the major purposes of education. if curiosity is not to be fruitful, it must be associated with a certain technique for the acquisition of knowledge. There must be habits of observation, belief in the possibility of knowledge, patience and industry. . . . Courage is essential to intellectual probity, as well as to physical heroism.

And in *Sultana's Dream*, the Queen of the *Ladyland* cultivates the intelligence of women ensuring education establishing school, college and university. As a result, we see women here

can take their own decision, can contribute to the economical development and can even save their country from attack of enemy.

‘The purpose of education is not to blindly imitate a community or a race. It is to develop the innate faculties of the individual, attributed by God, through cultivation. Proper use of these qualities is incumbent upon us, and their dissipation is a vice.’ (Rokeya, 2011:13) Moreover, she says:

God has given us hands, legs, eyes, ears, imagination and the power to think. If we strengthen our hands and legs through exercises, do good deeds with our hands, observe attentively with our eyes, listen carefully with our ears, and learn to make our thinking ability more sophisticated through reflection, then that is true education. ‘We do not consider the pursuit of academic degrees as real education. Let me give you an example of the flowering and enhancement of visual powers’. (Rokeya, 2011:13-14)

A man who is puzzled and wonder thinks himself ignorant. As a result, when Sultana walks with Sister Sara, seeing everything in *Ladyland* she gets puzzled and starts thinking herself as ignorant person because of having no idea about the rules of *Ladyland*. That is why, she thinks herself inferior there. And we know education aims to remove the ignorance and education is journey from ignorance to knowledge. So, Sultana is educated by Sister Sara and she is able to enter from ignorance to light.

Selina Hossain (2013:9) claims, ‘Rokeya marks out education as origin of social development.’ Education properly imparted offers women a guided, supervised, controlled, solid set of rigorous skills; simultaneously, it also allows the free unfolding and development of a self which can dare to be adventurous, and break over-rigid, over-controlled patriarchal and sexist norms and bounds.

Similarly St. Augustine (1992:161) thinks that ‘everything is just good, and that it is just to punish sinners and to reward those who do right’. Both punishment and reward would be unjust if man does not have free will. Moreover, ‘there must needs be justice both in punishment and in reward. Our freedom then consists in submission to the truth.’ (Augustine, 1992:162) Sister Sara encourages Sultana to expose her free will. Moreover, through the whole novella, we see that poetic justice is established. It is possible when the ruler uses their wisdom and obviously wisdom establishes through education.

Besides them, Maimonides (1992:199) believes:

various classes of men, each man in proportion to his ignorance, bring great evils upon themselves and upon other individual members of the species. If men possess wisdom, which stands in the same relation to the form of man as the sight to the eyes, they would not cause any injury to themselves or to others; for the knowledge of truth removes hatred and quarrels, and prevents mutual injuries.

Similarly here we see there are no quarrels between men and women. None is hurt or injured in the battle field because the Queen and the Royal Highness use their wisdom.

As Begum Rokeya (2004:27) writes, 'what we want is neither alms nor gift of favour. It is our inborn right. Our claim is not more than Islam gave women 1300 years ago.' Here she claims the equality of women and wishes to establish women's voice in society. 'She led the way to empowering and enlightening women.' (Khan, 2010) So far there we can say with her realization that in order to be independent women need to be educated first-she led this one woman campaign against tradition, prejudice, laws of the land, and a whole lot more. Now it can be asked how the women will be independent being educated. We remember when a woman becomes educated; she does not depend on the fathers, brothers and husbands. They can get the self-identity. At least most of the women are still depending on and are deprived by their brothers, fathers and husbands though they are educated. Because of not being aware in their rights and tendency of following what men tell them to do.

Rokeya understands that the scientific invention is nothing but the revelation of knowledge. And knowledge is the centre of power. She gives the power of knowledge to women in *Ladyland* by which men have dominated for a long time over women. As a result, in *Ladyland* women reach the peak of all power. In order to establish the idea, Rokeya makes an analogy of men's brain's size and importance with elephant. By enchaining, the power of knowledge of men, Rokeya makes all understand that only knowledge can give the independence as knowledge is power. But 'the knowledge can be expanding through education'. (Hasan, 2013:189)

Sultana's Dream presents the lives of ordinary women in the troubles that they face, many of them which waste today as well-little access to education, seclusion in the name of honour, the refusal to allow them any say in the decisions that impact them. But they are also a look at what could be a different world that Rokeya envisages for women, a world where they are free of these constraints and can play their roles boldly in the intellectual life of a nation.

On the education and duties of women, Mary Wollstonecraft (1975: 79-80) opines:

The education of women should always be relative to that of men. To please, to be useful to us, to make us love and esteem, to educate us when young to take care of us when grown up, to advise, to console us, to read our lives easy and agreeable; these are the duties of women at all time, and what they should be thought in their infancy.

In *Sultana's Dream*, we see because of illiteracy women are deprived everywhere. So, if they become educated they cannot be ignored and they will act wisely as men do.

So far, the paper emphasises the importance of the education for women as a prerequisite for their development. Amartya Sen (2005:222) also echoes the same thing of Begum Rokeya:

Women are [. . . .] not passive recipients of welfare enhancing help brought about by society, but are active promoters (which) influence, of courage, the lives and well-being of women, but also those of men and all children-boys as well as girls. This is a momentous enrichment of the reach of women's movements. So, women can be active recipients of welfare being educated.

The good world can only be created and sustained by fearless men, but the more they succeed in their task the fewer occasions there will be for the exercise of their courage. Education is the key to the new world. (Russell, 2000:55-56')

Arthur W. Foshay (1991:288) also believes:

The one continuing purpose of education, since ancient times, has been to bring people to as full a realization as possible of what it is to be a human being. Other statements of educational purpose have also been widely accepted: to develop the intellect, to serve social needs, to contribute to the economy, to create an effective work force, to prepare students for a job or career, to promote a particular social or political system. These purposes offered are undesirably limited in scope, and in some instances they conflict with the broad purpose I have indicated; they imply a distorted human existence. The broader humanistic purpose includes all of them, and goes beyond them, for it seeks to encompass all the dimensions of human experience.

We know for establishing equality in society, democracy is a must but 'the democratic process can be established through science. And without science, democracy is impossible. The tendency makes national greatness the supreme of education.' (Russell, 2000:35)

According to the Queen's will, women schools are established in *Ladyland*. After that, half of the total ignorant people have become educated. In it, Rokeya's desire is clear that women can be educated and qualified for doing everything if centrally it is taken steps to establish schools, colleges and universities. At the same time the novella shows the path to a ruler what s/he should do for the welfare of a society. (Siraj, 2013:209)

So, it is clear education is the prerequisite condition to be conscious of anyone's rights but it is not all. That is why; Rokeya suggests coming out from *purdah* and women should not marry before twenty one. In education, concern for equalities, discrimination, opportunity, vulnerability, disaster, conflict, peace, stability and employment have always got priority as concerns for inclusive development.

Conclusion

The utopian imagination in *Sultana's Dream* is fresh, funny, delightful, and witty. In the earlier work, too, as in the later, education holds the key to women's empowerment and progress. The role of knowledge, science, technology, and the fact that the lady principal of the college directs the strategy that leads to men willingly going to selection in the *mardana* all highlight Rokeya's faith in women's education as holding the key to a world where women are happy and powerful. In the widest sense, knowledge as a tool of women's empowerment in civil and political spheres as much as the domestic and the private one. (Islam. 2013:335-339)

Those working in adult education as well as those working in formal education can benefit richly by analyzing Rokeya's oeuvre, *Padmarag* and *Sultana's Dream* in particular. As a crusader for girls' education, Rokeya sees integral link between adult women's life-long learning and growth

that is women's own self-development and emancipation, and the education of millions of girls who even today lack access or security in schooling. (Islam. 2013:340)

The fact that *Sultana's* narration does not merely attempt an inversion of the 'natural order' but transcendence is suggested by the symbolism of gardens and her extensive metaphor of science. It is not however, a simple 'female space' which represents her desire to be understood, to be harmonized, to be able to withstand the various elements that threaten her existence. It also represents her rebellion against the 'cramped confines of patriarchal space'. (McCarty, 1991:368) From which she wants to write her way out. It is an equivalence of a textual space that *Sultana's Dream* works up. (Islam, 2013:317)

Rokeya clears two things for women. First is civilian rights, which can sublime the democratic spirit. And it can ensure gender equality. Second is gaining the basic rights which can strengthen women's economic development. Her desire was women can contribute to decorate the society working hand in hand with men. In order to contribute in society, they must be educated. (Wadud, 2013:162)

Moreover, they are not valued for their domestic activities (Dutta, 2013; 11). Being realized it, Rokeya encourages women to revive craft industries and in *Sultana's Dream*, she sends men inside the house for doing household chores so that women can be conscious about their rights and males can feel the value of domestic tasks and suffering of women.

Though her non-fiction is primarily concerned with the benefit of the family, her fiction affirms that women must be educated to be able to fend off themselves and be economically independent. Education thus becomes a mandatory pre-requisite for the 'empowerment' of women in colonial India which may be a 'process' or an 'outcome'. (Datta and Kornberg, 2002:2)

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