Chaudhuri, Maitrayee. "Ecology and Virtue in Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain, *Sultana's Dream*." *Feminist Moments: Reading Feminist Texts*. Ed. Katherine Smits and Susan Bruce. : Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 107–114. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474237970.ch-014>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 08:32 UTC.

Copyright © Susan Bruce, Katherine Smits and the Contributors 2016. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Ecology and Virtue in Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain, *Sultana's Dream*

Maitrayee Chaudhuri

You see the big balloon and pipes attached thereto. By their aid we can draw as much rainwater as we require. Nor do we ever suffer from flood or thunderstorms. We are all very busy making nature yield as much as she can. We do not find time to quarrel with one another as we never sit idle. Our noble Queen is exceedingly fond of botany; it is her ambition to convert the whole country into one grand garden.

The idea is excellent. What is your chief food?

Fruits.

How do you keep your country cool in hot weather? We regard the rainfall in summer as a blessing from heaven.

When the heat becomes unbearable, we sprinkle the ground with plentiful showers drawn from the artificial fountains. And in cold weather we keep our rooms warm with sun heat.

She showed me her bathroom, the roof of which was removable. She could enjoy a shower (or) bath whenever she liked by simply removing the roof (which was like the lid of a box) and turning on the tap of the shower pipe.

You are a lucky people! Ejaculated I. you know no want. What is your religion, may I ask?

Our religion is based on Love and Truth. It is our religious duty to love one another and to be absolutely truthful. If any person lies, she or he is...

Punished with death?

*No, not with death. We do not take pleasure in killing a creature of God-
especially a human being. The liar is asked to leave this land for good and
never to come to it again.*

Is an offender never forgiven?

Yes, if that person repents sincerely.

Are you not allowed to see any man, except your own relations?

No one except sacred relations.

Our circle of sacred relations is very limited, even first cousins are not sacred.

But ours is very large; a distant cousin is as sacred as a brother.¹

Rokeya Hussain's *Sultana's Dream* describes life in 'Ladyland', a land where 'virtue herself reigns'. It is run by women, and men are kept 'in their proper places', shut 'indoors' for streets are 'not safe as long as there are men about' (8–9). The text, barely eleven pages long, written in the first person, reads as a conversation in a dream between 'Sister Sara'² and the protagonist Sultana who had fallen asleep while 'thinking lazily of the condition of Indian womanhood'³ (7). The conversation is carried on while the protagonist, a 'purdahnishin woman' who is not 'accustomed to walking about unveiled' is led through the bustling town, visiting the 'good Queen', who 'liked science very much', and the 'famous universities, factories, laboratories and observatories' (18). She is viewed by the people in Ladyland as 'mannish', 'shy and timid like men' feeling 'very shy' walking on the streets in broad daylight (8). *Sultana's Dream* offers a satirical critique of the enforced practice of seclusion, 'purdah'.

Ladyland however is not just a land where women are free to explore their full potential. It is about a good society where its inmates 'do not covet other people's land' (17), where there is 'no crime or sin', where they do not want any 'magistrate to try criminal case', where 'fields were tilled by means of electricity' and where neither 'street nor railway accidents occur', nor 'floods and thunderstorms' (15). The world in *Sultana's Dream* reflects both a society witness to a colonial rule of rapacious greed and the many hazards of a poor country. The themes that surface prominently in the chosen extract are: (i) want, scarcity and technology; (ii) labour, idleness and sloth; (iii) the public, private and the sacred; (iv) and religion, love, law and justice.

Sultana's Dream is perhaps an unexpected text, written by a Muslim woman from colonial South Asia who understood purdah as an insider. Hussain had

also written a series of accounts of life in purdah titled *The Secluded Ones* and described seclusion as a 'silent killer like Carbon monoxide gas' (20). A hundred years later, the use of the veil by Muslim women has acquired different meanings: assertion of identity, a convenient way to assess public spaces and individual choice. In Hussain's world, the practice of seclusion meant total confinement of women to the household. This would deprive women of healthy and natural growth (47). Similar ideas are raised in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's later text *Herland* (1915); the existence of both counters Shulamith Firestone's 1970 claim that 'There is not even a utopian feminist literature in existence'⁴. Given the domination of western texts in literary canon, it is not surprising that *Sultana's Dream*, published in 1905, was discovered in the global knowledge circuit much later. It shares with *Herland* a playful depiction of a 'good society' run by an all-female community harnessed by technology, and living in peace, sharing, sustainability and solidarity. Both texts radiate with the quiet confidence of strong women who betray neither the aggression nor the cruelty usually associated with power. *Herland* offers 'a land in a state of perfect cultivation, where even the forests looked as if they were cared for; a land that looked like an enormous park, only it was even more evidently an enormous garden.'⁵ In *Sultana's Dream*, the 'whole place looks like a garden' (8) and 'every creeper, every tomato plant, was itself an ornament' (11).

In both texts, women are interested in science and invent marvellous new technologies that help manage natural resources and enable perfect ecological equilibrium. A central theme in both, evident in the extract chosen, is the historical engagement of humans with the matter of want, scarcity and technology. Most descriptions of paradise share the idea of abundance where people are 'lucky' for they 'know no want'. Egalitarian movements of different hues have all crafted the demands of distributive justice into an economic strategy. In Hussain's India, as in Gilman's *Herland*, it was science and technology buttressed by collective organization, that was the panacea for want. It is particularly useful here to invoke J. C. Davis's argument that what sets utopias apart from other ideal world narratives is that in them, neither humanity nor nature is idealized.⁶ Organization is the utopianist device to manage issues of supply (of satisfactions) with those of demand (of human desires). Efficient management of natural resources (solar heat and water balloons) and time (for unlike men they do not dawdle away time smoking) (10) is what makes this utopia possible. The managed order where women 'control all social matters' is however not frightening. For present through the text is an avowed critique of 'power' and celebration of love and beauty. Feminist views on technology have been varied. The radical

tech-utopian Firestone argued that advances in science would change material conditions to make equity possible. Cybernetics would eliminate the need for work; new reproductive technologies would eliminate the need for giving birth.⁷ Development since the Second World War saw incredible advances in science and technology, bringing unimaginable amenities, better living conditions and possibility of sexual revolution. But it also brought in its wake new risks. A recent commentator, located in the West has read *Sultana's Dream* as a science fiction and an eco-feminist text but is critical that 'Rokeya's utopian women were abusing nature's bounty' so 'prominent in the text'.⁸ Roushan Jahan, Hussain's biographer and translator, who is located in Bangladesh on the other hand, has a very different take on Hussain's use of technology. She writes how 'extraordinary things' that happen in Ladyland are 'all explained in terms of advanced technology' which 'serves human needs to beneficial ends'. Jahan notes that 'an India of horse-drawn carriages, gaslights, smelly, smoke-filled kitchens, dusty streets, natural disasters, famines and epidemics, cockroaches and mosquitoes-all the big problems and petty nuisances of Indian everyday life' is the context that enables one to appreciate Hussain's trust 'in the power of science and technology' (4). I invoke the two commentators: one located in South Asia and the other in the West, to emphasize that contexts matter, a point that I develop later in this chapter. Many of the themes Hussain raises remain relevant, for agriculture in South Asia is still largely dependent on the monsoons: 'The rainfall in summer [is] a blessing from heaven' (16). And even now 'when the heat becomes unbearable, we sprinkle the ground' though not from Hussain's imagined 'plentiful showers drawn from the artificial fountains'. And solar energy, rain harvesting, clean fuel, river cleaning, food security, water saving and reuse remain a concern just as women's toilets do.

Common to *Sultana's Dream* and Gilman's *Herland* is a second theme: a quiet celebration of labour and productivity and disapproval of idleness and sloth. Ladyland too disapproved of sitting idle for 'We are all very busy making nature yield as much as she can. We do not find time to quarrel with one another as we never sit idle' (15). The two sentences though placed together summon two different points. The first refers to the relationship between '[m]an' and nature; the second refers to idleness. Here, the 'we' is women who are 'making nature yield as much as she can'. They 'are all very busy' engaged in productive work unlike (one presumes) women in purdah who 'sit idle' and have all the 'time to quarrel'.⁹ Hussain's emphasis on labour suggests that she believes that it is through material production that humanity comes to be what it is. Therefore, purdah by foreclosing women from productive work

forecloses the realization of their full human potential. In *Herland*, the women are astonished at the idea that humans need 'stimulus to industry'. They ask 'But don't you like to work?'¹⁰

We turn now to the third theme of the public, private and the 'sacred'. Rules of marriage, family and kinship in South Asia are intimately bound up with the ways that women are socialized within the family and thereby excluded from rights in the public domain. Norms of gender-based segregation ensure an all-male public domain, making it not just difficult but often dangerous for women to enter public spaces. The practice of cross-cousin marriages meant that even within the family a girl child would not be free to interact indiscriminately with male cousins. Hussain inverts the idea of the 'sacred' to critique the taboos that existed.

Are you not allowed to see any man, except your own relations?

No one except sacred relations.

Our circle of sacred relations is very limited, even first cousins are not sacred.

but ours is very large; a distant cousin is as sacred as a brother (16).

There are a couple of meanings that one can read here. The idea of the 'sacred' is redefined and extended: to reach out to a wider world beyond the family, to break any necessary association with prohibition of sexual relationships and to allow free interaction between men and women. This has been a recurrent theme for feminism: radical second-wave western feminists imagined a new world of the private without the tyranny of biological reproduction and monogamy. Hussain also imagines a world for women free from the constraints of society, although the context here is not romantic love but *purdah*.

The fourth theme of religion and love, law and justice is as relevant if not more in the twenty-first century world where sectarian conflicts have acquired a scale and intensity that few could have imagined as a characteristic of a 'modern' world. The statement that 'Our religion is based on Love and Truth' and 'it is our religious duty to love one another and to be absolutely truthful ...' at one level can be read as reflective of a specific South Asian context, where violent conflicts on grounds of religion are an intrinsic part of its history. At a more universal level, it articulates a vision of the good world where religion unites. In *Herland*, fears of afterlife do not haunt the women for 'we have no punishments in life, you see, so we don't imagine them after death.'¹¹ Expressing very similar sentiments Hussain states, '... We do not take pleasure in killing a creature of God – especially a human being. The liar is asked to leave this

land for good and never to come to it again' (16). The international academic division of labour presumed for a long time that theorization (both explanatory and normative) is the preserve of western expertise and that there is an active lack of interest in non-western societies where the sheer urgency of our people's problems demands immediate alleviation. Recent years have, however, seen efforts to redress this. Both the choice of Hussain's *Sultana's Dream* as a text and myself as a commentator in the present collection can be seen in this light. This inclusion is however not unproblematic. Though the native is speaking back, in the contemporary global context the 'native scholar' resides both in the West (often as leading intellectual voices of a burgeoning postcolonial scholarship) and also in the non-West. The differential location (institutional, intellectual and everyday) and not the 'identity of origin' of 'native' scholars perforce imply very different articulations. It is in this regard that I had sought to highlight the markedly different takes of Hasanat and Jahan on Hussain's use of science and technology.

Pushing this matter of locations further, I would like to refer to the turn towards intersectional analysis within feminism in the West. In the South Asian context, the women's question was from its very moment of inception inextricably interlinked with: colonialism and nationalism, tradition and modernity, caste and religion and class and multiple identities. These concerns, which postcolonial studies have articulated in western academia, have been long-standing in these parts. South Asian feminism was invariably intersectional (though the term itself like 'postcolonial' entered our lexicon only after its emergence in the West). In that tradition, *Sultana's Dream* too addresses not just an undifferentiated patriarchy but one that intersects with religion and community; family and kinship; and nature, ecology and development. Intersection here is not about multiple identities alone.

As a sociologist, I am prone to emphasize contexts: whether of production, circulation or reception. The text is a necessary, though not the sole key to its own meaning, even though histories of different intellectual pursuits are marked by some 'fairly stable vocabulary' variously associated with social justice and peace.¹² Yet, contexts do play out in the way that the themes are articulated. Hussain lived in a colonized India. British control is dated from the victory in the Battle of Plassey in 1757, even though the British state formally took over only in 1857. Bengal, where Hussain was born in 1880, was already under British influence for more than a century. The influence of English education is unmistakable in *Sultana's Dream*. But, its most

tangible evidence is that this delightful fable was written in English. 'Rokeya's motivation to write was partly to demonstrate her proficiency in English to her non-Bengali husband, who encouraged her to read and write English, and who was her immediate and appreciative audience.' (1) Hussain's husband was so impressed with the story, that he sent it to his friend Mr McPherson, the British divisional commissioner of Bhagalpur, for comments who wrote that 'the ideas expressed ... are full of originality and ... written in perfect English ...' (2). Readers located elsewhere may not fully fathom the colonized mind's ambiguous relationship with English: a cultural capital one aspired to acquire and yet wanted to reject for colonialism rendered one's own culture, language and religion inferior in one's own country. It may be relevant here to mention the English Education Act of 1835 and the colonial vision 'to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect'.¹³

I would like to emphasize this point, for even in a multicultural, informed West, this location of the 'native' rendered 'alien' in her own land and situated at once in multiple cultural sites within an extraordinarily diverse society is not adequately appreciated. English was the fifth language that Hussain learnt, but she read classical texts in English: Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, for example, is a book she enjoyed a great deal. She lived in a Bengal which saw an extraordinarily rich public discourse on a range of issues including gender through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Much of this was within Hindu Bengal, which both shared and differed from Muslim Bengal. Rokeya had to engage with both, just as she had to engage with English, Arabic and Persian apart from Urdu, which was the language of her husband and his family.

The story about supportive male members is also typical of the story of feminism in South Asia.¹⁴ Feminist scholars in South Asia have dwelt on this matter and theorized the distinctiveness of a social context defined by: colonialism where women's organizations recognized early that women cannot be free as long as the nation was not free; relational selfhoods;¹⁵ and multiple patriarchies.¹⁶ One view has been that such efforts by men were solely to construct a 'new patriarchy' influenced by modern West's ideas of conjugal companionship and bourgeois domesticity. Even if it were so, a point that I have made earlier is that the very construction of 'new patriarchy' opened up possibilities for consequences that were not always intended.¹⁷ Hussain's early life was spent in purdah. She had no formal education and was married at sixteen

to a man much older, a widower with children, but without whose support she 'might have never written or published anything'. And, she grew to be a tireless activist in promoting education for women even when she met stiff opposition from 'traditionalists' (40–41). Rokeya shared her faith in the liberating possibilities of education with social reformers and nationalists in colonial India. The same was not true for her beliefs about science and technology as Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* would suggest in its scathing critique of machinery and modern civilization. Rokeya's dream sits uneasily in today's South Asia. This is not because her understanding of ecology, seclusion, religion, scarcity and want, labour and sloth does not matter anymore. Indeed, they matter more than ever before. Rather, South Asian – like other – modernized nations no longer welcome utopian fantasies which offer a standard by which to judge existing practices and imagine different and better societies.