

Chapter 24

“Knowledge Is Power, Power Is Also Knowledge”: Revisiting Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s “Sultana’s Dream”

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ABSTRACT

The chapter explores the complex intersection of gender, knowledge, and power as manifested in Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s feminist text Sultana’s Dream. In this story, she imagines a world of women beyond the patriarchy. She reverses the stereotypical process of gender roles and reclaims women’s space in socio-cultural and political domination. There is an idea that subverting the performative role of gender will lead women to autonomy and power. For her, scientific education and sustainable use of nature are the abundant sources of alternative power. The tactical use of women’s scientific knowledge displeases and controls the superior authoritative forces of patriarchy. This decisive role of science is an alternative mode of organizing society and the exceptional development of the particular category of alternative apparatus. The chapter delineates Kate Millett’s notion of the reversal of gender roles by mediating Michel Foucault’s concepts of power and knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

Rokeya Sakhwat Hossain did not have a formal education, but she was a pioneering figure in Bengal’s woman’s education. She is a forgotten marginal author; being a

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woman, she belonged to the “second sex,” which provided her secondary access to rights and privileges. Her identity has been convoluted by much intersectionality regarding religion, gender, and power. Her colonized Muslim woman identity had victimized her two layers of patriarchy: within the Muslim household and outside the colonial authority. Her pioneering story *Sultana’s Dream* (1905/2005) is a manifesto of women’s liberation; it unequivocally expresses that women can achieve emancipation by accessing scientific education. The text comprises multilayer themes of a feminist utopia, science fiction, and ecofeminism. The paper tries to understand the complex intersection of gender, knowledge, and power manifested in Hossain’s multilayered text, *Sultana’s Dream*. It also conceives Kate Millett’s (2009) claim of reversal of gender roles by mediating Michel Foucault’s notion of power and knowledge.

In *Sultana’s Dream*, Hossain (2005) envisions a world of women through the illusory experience of freedom beyond the patriarchy. She propagates the accessibility of a space for women outside the four walls of *Zenana*. Hossain considers the patriarchal discourse of gender and religion and plays with the authoritative state power. Transversing the gender role allows women to produce and regulate the social system and counters the religious-social constructed gender identities. Hossain realizes that the barrier to women’s emancipation is their lack of physical vigor and their acceptance of “natural weakness” and incompetency. She reiterates the supremacy of knowledge over physical strength with the example of the fierce lion and elephant. She states that both these animals are physically powerful, but they yield against the power of human knowledge. She argues that “A lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race. You have neglected the duty you owe to yourselves, and you have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interests” (Hossain, 2005, p. 6).

Hossain not only questions gender identity but also reverses the stereotypical process of the formation of gender roles. She vehemently criticizes women for losing self-respect and blames the Muslim patriarchal system for neglecting women’s equal opportunity. She blames the Muslim social system for secluding women in the confined zenana and depriving them of the right to education and physical and mental health. This seclusion for her is nothing but the imprisonment of women that causes degradation. Women, in her view, are “willing collaborators in their own oppression” that men’s dominance and women’s slavery were the two main factors in the degradation of Muslim women (Hasanat, 2013, p. 116). She expresses that “you have neglected the duty you owe to yourselves, and you have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your interest” (Hossain, 2005, p. 6).

She envisions a place where the virtue of humanity determines everything. She constructs an alternative space for women outside the four walls of the zenana. The reclamation of gender roles and courageous assertion regarding women’s

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