
Gender, Technoculture, and the Utopian Dream: Reading Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* and Vandana Singh's *The Woman who Thought She was a Planet*

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Abstract:

Feminist science fiction narratives that speculate a utopian vision carries the imperatives of victimized reality set against the potentially liberating possibilities envisioned by the author. The science fiction writings by two South Asian women writers, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* and Vandana Singh's *The Woman who Thought She was a Planet* discussed in this paper engages with a similar dialogue. The paper elaborates on the tradition and convention of utopian consciousness the authors employ to expose the ideals and contradictions endemic to their social and cultural space. With a desire to reinvent or rewrite their identities, they engage in a search for a 'beyond' which manifests into a utopic third space. Furthermore, the paper foregrounds the mobility narrative, to move from the original delimiting space they occupy, into a third space 'rooted in...a recombinational and radically open perspective" (Soja, 5), where they can negotiate and claim their individuality and identity.

Keywords: Utopian studies, South Asia, mobility, third space, Science Fiction

Introduction

The dialectics of utopianism and feminist science fiction have blended together since long to articulate a narrative of flows, shifts and multiplicities. Utopianism and feminism “embody two large, dialectically active principles: resistance to injustice and a sense of the possibility of change” (Stimpson 2). This possibility manifests itself in the writings of the South Asian female science fiction writers, who for over a century have brought together feminism, utopia, and science fiction to engage with personal and/or political mobility along with a critique of the patriarchal discourse. With a compassionate imagination and a scientific rationale, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain in her novella, *Sultana's Dream* (1905) written in colonised India and Vandana Singh, writing in the contemporary times, in her short story, *The Woman who Thought She was a Planet* (2008), engage with the complexities of science in literature that implies a change in ethics of the oppressive social order.

The mobility quotient in both the narratives with its radical potential allows the protagonists in the text to reorganize their subjectivity, to question the fixed notions of home and identity. With a desire to reinvent or rewrite their realities, mobility ascribes new meanings to their lived space, with the utopian science fiction landscapes functioning as the Bhabhaian Third Space where they can reconstitute their identities, enunciating a desire for escape, liberation and adventure. This third space manifests itself as a space of contestation and open possibilities, it is "continually fragmented, fractured, incomplete, uncertain, and the site of struggles for meaning and representation" (Pile 273) . The utopian impulse in both the narratives stimulates a desire for a spatio-temporal reality that is 'beyond' the lived reality, and this concept is central to the third space framework. The protagonist in both the texts celebrates the third space for initiating a dynamic representation of their identities that is essentially fluid occupying space(s) which can be continuously negotiated. This third space in Sakhawat's fiction becomes a gender-separate world, whereas Singh imagines a gender-free paradigm.

Mobility in *The Woman who Thought She was a Planet*

In *The Woman who Thought She was a Planet*, when Singh's protagonist, Kamala announces, "I know at last what I am... I am a planet" (Singh 39), it comes across as a fact that her continual search for mobility within her utopian consciousness finally fixates on an identity that will not endure the liminal position of female subjectivity. She creates a third space, synthesizing a new identity initiated by transhuman metamorphosis of the female body into a planet, inhabited by index finger sized insectoids. But, Kamala's husband, Ramnath's patriarchal repose is disturbed by this revelation and he tries to bring his apparently delusional wife back to her senses, or out of her third space into his reality, invoking her delimiting identity as that of a wife/mother. "You are not a planet but a living soul, a woman. A lady from a respectable household who holds the family honor in her hands" (Singh 40). For Ramnath, his bourgeois upper-class sentimentality could not endure his wife spiraling down into madness like his aunt, "a mad person in a respectable upper class middle family" is a "terrible dishonor... [to] the family" (Singh 41). The mobility narrative allows Kamala to move into and out of the posthuman utopic space transcending the boundaries of the patriarchal social and cultural dystopic spaces. Kamala's frequent attempts of disrobing herself to reveal the planet that she embodies, is curbed by Ramnath who sees this as a shameless exposition that threatens his socio-spatial respectability. But, as Kamala revels in her newly discovered identity, this act of undraping her saree allows her to escape the constraints of cultural ideal, which no longer bothers her and she moves into a space through which she unpacks the contradictions of the position she is in. The women writers, as Donawerth writes, "create alien women... [who] insist on their own subjectivity and pleasure" (59).

As Kamala had announced, she "'used to' be a human, a wife, a mother" (Singh 40), Kamala is capable to exist freely in two spaces, the human and the post-human, which is achieved in the text through the dialectics of utopian science fiction and its estranging narrative strategy. Kamala can willingly embody a post human body, i.e., as a planet with symbiotic potential, and the insectoids parasitically resides on her body in this post human stage. As

Donawerth talks about the "recuperative reworking of the woman as alien" (48), Kamala's post human body which is colonized by alien creatures "restore[d] her health" (Singh 48), because of them she does not have to take her liver pills. These insectoids even attack Ramnath while he was contemplating to strangle Kamala in her sleep. Through the radicalism of Kamala's final post human embodiment as a planetary body, sailing across the sky, losing every piece of garment as she floats upwards, she escapes the dilemma of dichotomies and hierarchies of social identity to claim her individuality. Meanwhile, Ramnath is still transfixed in his deflated notion of dignity which brings his ultimate downfall, as the narrative ends with the "insectoids... marching up his back, over his shoulder and into his terrified open mouth" (Singh 54). Kamala's utopian mobility which brings her liberation stands in contrast with Ramnath's rootedness in his patriarchal sense of honor and dignity.

Mobility in *Sultana's Dream*

The speculative utopianism in Sakhawat's fiction, *Sultana's Dream* manifests itself through the dream narrative, "a dream of an ideal place ("eu-topia") which is, at the same time, no place ("ou-topia")" (Bagchi 18). Ladyland is a utopic, gender separate transcendental space, which is characterized as the third space by Rokeya Begum that attends explicitly and thoroughly to the democratic hopes of a purdahnashin woman, who strives to draw attention to the practices and limitations of gender hierarchies in the existing imperialist discourse of the early twentieth century India.

Mobility is organized and ascribed with nemeaning as Rokeya Begum initiates a narrative, which allows her protagonist to move from a private place into the public space within a backdrop of the nationalist discourse. As Partha Chatterjee writes, the nationalist imagination divides the social space into ghar and bāhir, or the home and the world, or the spiritual and the material. "The world of external...is typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by...the material world-- and woman is its representation" (Chatterjee 238-39). Challenging this particular narrative, Rokeya Begum enunciates a desire for a flux of spiritual, social, and geographical mobility in the novella, a mobility that moves her protagonist, Sultana from ghar to bāhir. To achieve this, Rokeya builds up a narrative in which her protagonist Sultana when "thinking lazily of the condition of Indian womanhood" (Hossain), dozes off only to wake up in a utopic third space, a single-sex society of Ladyland, in which the men are not absent, but are "shorn of [their] power" (Calvin 140). They are banished into the inner quarters of the mardana (as opposed to the women who in reality are forced to live a life of seclusion in the zenana). The men in mardana now occupy the spiritual realm while women step into the material world. But this material world does not manifest itself in a similar manner as that which has been historically occupied by men. Sister Sara, the Lady Principal and the Queen form a different kind of practical trinity in Ladyland, with each invested with a different kind of power over the domains of society: familial, scientific, and political respectively (Chattopadhyay 10). They look after the Ladyland, which is "free from sin and harm. Virtue herself reigns here" (Hossain). This is inherently a feministic utopian world, "liberated from a deep-seated masculinist ideology of individualism" (Wagner-

Lawlor 19) and hence the women in the text reconcile virtue with commerce to promote an alternate ideal of altruistic social and moral economy.

In Ladyland, the "methodology and purpose" of scientific knowledge pursued by women is "designed to work in collaboration with nature instead of competing with it" (Mathur 123). The materialist extraction from nature which happens in the world dominated by masculine transactions starkly differs from Rokeya Begum's vision in which nature is equal to man. For the women of Ladyland, "Nature yield 'as much as we can'-- not exploitation or transcendence of nature through artifice" (Mathur 123). Hence, the mobility ideal relocates the women in the public sphere that is utopic in every sense. As Roushan Jahan writes, "'Sultana's Dream' was one of many stories in her [Rokeya's] lifelong and relentless jihad (holy war) waged against some of the basic principles of her society" (Jahan 3). The basic principles in this "self-consciously feminist" (Jahan 1) utopian story contends for an idealistic war for the oppression against women and nature. According to Alaimo, "Popular science writing...is one of the most crucial genres for environmentalism.... [it] transmits not only facts and data, but also narratives, ideologies, values, ethics, politics, affect and sometimes even a sense of species identity" (3-4). It cannot be overlooked that Rokeya Begum's novella contends for each of this aspect to develop the narrative of her science fiction writing.

Walking and flying in aircraft are both modes of mobility in 'Sultana's Dream' in Ladyland (Bagchi 4). While Rokeya Begum uses the language of science fiction and its estranging narrative, it does not seem to be overtly based on fantasy, but instead propels a vision and a zeal for technology that Rokeya Begum possesses. The flying machine that is described in the story, makes use of "hydrogen balls...to overcome the force of gravity" and the "air-car two wing-like blades... worked by electricity" (Hossain). Begum Rokeya speculates with possibilities in this third space of her fictional world, grappling with the existing scientific narratives, and makes it more fluid and varied to make positive use of science and technology in order to contribute to social change.

Ladyland as a third space, deconstructs and reconstitutes the city of Calcutta. It stands 'beyond' what Calcutta in the colonized India represented and through radicalism of this fictional space, Rokeya Begum advocates for a mobility for women's employment, franchise, and their education, which is accessible to women in Ladyland and is the reason behind the prosperity prevalent in this space. As Sister Sara says to Sultana, "Your Calcutta could become a nicer garden than this if only your countrymen wanted to make it so" (Hossain), Ladyland becomes a site of resistance, contending for a similar historical alteration which could be made feasible in the real world, to make the lived reality a better place. Ladyland is extensively a utopian space where power relations are reversed, and the oppressed come to surface, articulations are negotiated and cultural hierarchies are altered. Women's mobility in Ladyland, is contrasted with the immobility of men who have been pushed into the mardana. The radicalism of the space imagined by Rokeya Begum, "celebrates- imagination's political and ethical possibilities" (Wagner-Lawlor 19), which the women of colonized Bengal had never inhabited.

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Conclusion:

The speculative methodology and metaphor allows the feminist science fiction writers to manifest a third space that is not homogeneous. Instead, with the help of metaphorical pluralism, the protagonist construe for a space and identity that is in constant struggle with their present reality. Singh's protagonist, Kamala is mentally occupied with her search for an identity that is something more than being a wife or a mother, and her husband keeps invoking these defined roles to constrain her within his reality. Similarly, Sultana's manifestation of a parallel land, the Ladyland which she dreams of is in constant tussle with the world she occupies, where the patriarchal construction stops her short from achieving any of the vision she manifests.

It is interesting to note that the utopian fulfillment in both the text does not vouch for escapism, it rather has a transformative function. The hegemonic patriarchal society contends for a division between inside/outside, private/public life, and with the help of tropes of science fiction writings that allows for a more fluid movement, it helps the marginalized female protagonists in both the text to decentralize and deconstruct these notions. In doing so, they do not merely occupy the outer space which the mobility quotient helps them to inhabit, but instead, they initiate a dialogue which aims to reconcile both the spaces.

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