

Begum Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream*: A Marxist Reading

Shipra Mondal¹

Abstract: *Begum Rokeya's Sultana's dream is considered worldwide as a feminist utopian story. However, Sultana's Dream does not talk about women's empowerment and women's issues only. The story talks about a complete social transformation. It visualizes an ideal country and social system free of hunger, theft, and untimely death. This is a country where people live in harmony with nature. A country whose economic and political affairs are based, not on profit mongering, but on ethical standards. A country which is uncompromising to the imperialists and revolutionary in ideals. Most importantly, this is a country where women take active roles in scientific research, economical activities, country planning and political decisions. Marxism is a philosophy which calls for the transformation of the worn-out society and women's active participation in all the state's affairs. The paper aims to show that many Marxist thoughts have been implemented in Begum Rokeya's imaginary country, 'Ladyland,' showcasing a complete social transformation based on perceived Marxist ideals that emphasize equality, justice, and the well-being of all members of society. The article presents an analysis of the Marxist elements in the text through a close reading and comparison to Marxist theory. The article also explores the historical and social context of the author and the text to gain a deeper understanding of the Marxist elements present in the work. Through this analysis, the article presents Begum Rokeya as a Marxist feminist.*

Keywords: *Marxism, Feminism, Women, Society, Emancipation*

Introduction

The paper attempts to study the Marxist thoughts in Begum Rokeya's feminist utopian story *Sultana's Dream*. The study objective is to analyze the Marxist elements in *Sultana's Dream* and demonstrate how the portrayal of views on social, political, and economic change to bring about a just and equal society in it aligns with Marxist philosophy. This paper presents an analysis that reveals the Marxist perspective inherent in Rokeya's feminism as

¹Department of English, Daffodil International University

Email: shipra@daffodilvarsity.edu.bd

she perceived the struggle of women's emancipation as an integral part of the greater social emancipation.

This paper analyzes Begum Rokeya's portrayal of women's situation in *Sultana's Dream* in a capitalist, colonized, patriarchal, fundamental society and scrutinizes her dream about women's supremacy and empowerment in an imaginary country through a Marxist lens. This paper also inspects Rokeya's view on social, political, economic, ecological, educational, scientific, and ethical matters in light of Marxist theory. The methodology used involves a close reading and analysis of the text, comparing it to Marxist theory and identifying the elements that correspond to Marxist ideals and subsequently present Begum Rokeya as a Marxist-Feminist. The primary sources of information are both the English and Bengali versions of *Sultana's Dream*. Moreover, a number of books, research papers and web sites have been referred as secondary sources. All the information have been used in the paper for their logical relevance.

Begum Rokeya (1880-1932) is recognized as the pioneer of women's education and emancipation in early twentieth-century British Bengal. Her entire life was lived in a bleak era for women, who were deprived of education and rights and confined to the four walls of their homes. Being a woman herself, she endured the torments inflicted by a capitalist-colonized-patriarchal society which happened to be under British colonialism. The appalling state of Indian women's lives prompted her to wield her pen against the capitalist-patriarchal social system. She is regarded as "the first and foremost feminist of Bengali Muslim society... [who employed her] pen...as a weapon in her crusade for social reform" (Jahan, 1988, pp. 1-3). Although she was a writer, her primary identity was that of an activist for women's emancipation, as her writing aimed not to create aesthetic literature but to instigate social revolution. As Jahan noted, "She did not write primarily to entertain. Rather, she marshalled her thoughts and arguments to question the existing order of things, to raise doubts about seemingly accepted facts, and to motivate people to take the necessary actions to change customs she considered evil and unjust" (cited in Miah, 2018, pp. 158-159). The Marxist concept of "the artist as a social enlightener" is fitting for her as a writer (Eagleton, 1989, p. 41).

Rokeya is widely recognized as a leading feminist in the sub-continent and has been referred to as a "feminist foremother" (Jahan, 1988, p.7). Women were generally marginalized in Rokeya's time, but Muslim women were especially unfortunate, as they were bound by extreme social and religious restrictions. Begum Rokeya made it her life's work to emancipate women, and particularly Muslim women, from their oppressive circumstances and miserable life. As one commentator has noted, "In Muslim Bengal, no one - before or after her - dealt with women's issues in equal or greater magnitude" (Hasan, 2013, p. 53). Throughout her life, she devoted herself to the cause of women's emancipation in a society that was both deeply patriarchal and fundamentalist. In her time, it was an incredibly bold and daring task to speak about the rights and education of women, particularly Muslim women. However, Rokeya persevered in the face of all the challenges presented by this patriarchal and fundamentalism laden society and emerged as one of the most prominent women's rights activists of early twentieth-century India, and quite possibly, one of the most prominent women's rights activists of her time.

Her influence as an exponent of women's progress extends far beyond the sub-continent. She is widely regarded as one of the most important feminist thinkers in the world literature of the twentieth century (Hasan, 2018, p. 175). Rokeya was a strong advocate for the emancipation of all women in society. She expressed, "concerns about the worldwide marginalization of women and for awakening and uniting women of all societies towards liberation" (Hasan, 2018, p. 183).

Begum Rokeya and her literature have so far been studied a lot from feminist perspective. Rokeya "is often regarded as a "feminist" author" (Hasan, 2016, p. 739) and in her writings "she expressed her feminism, creativity, and commitment to female education" (Bagchi, 2010, p. 68). Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* has been analysed from the viewpoint of utopian feminism. As commented about Ladyland, Rokeya brought "a role reversal in the feminist utopia" (Hasan, 2013, p. 52). The story is also globally acclaimed as, "feminist utopian novella" which is "taught in western universities" (Hasan, 2016, p. 749). However, this paper investigates that Rokeya's thoughts on women and social issues easily takes her beyond just the 'feminist' label. Like most of her literature, in *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya's thoughts were not engrossed only with women's issues, rather she connected women's issues

with the greater social issues. The views Rokeya put forward in *Sultana's Dream* on social, political, and economical issues manifest her thoughts like that of a Marxist thinker. Rokeya's feminist thoughts blended with her social thoughts exhibit her as Marxist-Feminist. Thus, the aim of this paper is to shed light on an unexplored aspect of Rokeya's feminism, to explore Marxist-Feminism in Rokeya's feminist utopian story *Sultana's Dream*. According to Clara Zetkin, a Russian revolutionary and a Marxist-feminist, "the question of the emancipation of women is not an isolated one but rather constitutes a part of the great social question" (Zetkin, 2015, p. 46).

This Marxist-feminist thought has been demonstrated clearly in *Sultana's Dream*. Begum Rokeya longed for women's advancement. However, Begum Rokeya did not isolate women's issues from social issues. Rather she related women's progress with social progress. She showed that women's development is required for the betterment of society. As Lenin famously considered "the woman question as a part of the social question" (cited in Zetkin, 1934, para. 26). Alexandra Kollontai, another Russian revolutionary and a Marxist-feminist stated, "The feminists seek equality in the framework of the existing class society" (Kollontai, 1909, para. 6). However, "Marxist feminism, on the other hand, does make the connection between the oppression of women and capitalism" (Gimenez, 1998, para. 14). In *Sultana's Dream*, Begum Rokeya depicted a capitalist society and criticized all the by-products of capitalism, such as imperialism, war, poverty, inequality etc. and related women's humiliation and oppression with the capitalist system. Marxist feminists insist on developing politics that put women's oppression and liberation, class politics, anti-imperialism, antiracism, and issues of gender identity and sexuality together at the heart of the agenda (Luxton, 2016). Not only she sketched the evils of capitalist society and women's deplorable plight under the system, but she also called for a revolutionary transformation of the society. In *Sultana's Dream*, she envisaged the transformation in the form of a utopia. Rokeya's urge for societal change relates her thoughts more to a core philosophy of Marxism, as Karl Marx said, "Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways: The point, however, is to change it" (cited in Kumar, 2019, para. 26).

Context for developing revolutionary thoughts in writing of *Sultana's Dream*

Begum Rokeya was born on 9th December 1880, in Pairabond village in Rangpur district. Back then Pairabond was a primitive village where modern civilization was unknown. She was born in a conservative landlord family where girls were not allowed to be educated. Rokeya overcame all the prohibitions due to her thirst for education. Though she was deprived of institutional education, she got herself self-educated. Secretly she continued to pursue her craving for education and knowledge with help from her elder sister and brother (Bagchi, 2010, p. 53). She was married off at only 16 to Syed Shakhawat Hossain in 1896 and just after thirteen years of marriage, she lost her husband in 1909 when she was only 29 years old. She gave birth to two daughters and lost both at infancy. Despite undergoing so many misfortunes, Rokeya held herself strong and after her husband's death, she started to stay in Kolkata alone only for one reason – to struggle for the progress of women. Back then, it was a backward society where illiteracy, superstition, religious fundamentalism, and patriarchy were prevailing. At that time, staying alone for a woman in a city was almost beyond imagination and social acceptance. Nevertheless, Rokeya overlooked all the social denunciations for one reason – she had to fight for the advancement of women. She did not care about her personal happiness, comfort, or safety because she was engrossed with only one thought – emancipation of women. After five months of her husband's death, in his memory, she opened a girls' school in Bhagalpur in October 1909 with only five students but was unsuccessful due to her stepdaughter and step-son-in-law's hindrance. She started the school again in Calcutta at Waliullah Lane in March 1911, with only eight students, which gradually increased turning it into a full-fledged educational institution that continued to flourish amongst all the social and patriarchal oppositions and economic hardships. In 1916, she founded the Muslim Women's Association 'Anjuman-e-Khawateen-e-Islam'. "Anjuman became memorable for its social work. Anjuman provided economic help to many widows, rescued many helpless wives from oppression and torture by their characterless husbands, arranged suitable marriages for marriageable aged poor girls, helped in poor girls' education in many ways. Anjuman took practical steps to help socially abandoned and impoverished women and orphan children" (Sufi, 2001, p. 54).

Rokeya fought for women's emancipation through both her writing and activism and she established the school and the organization to reach all sectors of women. As stated, "In every instance, she emphasized education because she believed that education was the only way for women to overcome their present misfortune and find their subjectivity and selfhood. But her efforts were not limited to her writings; she stepped out of the world of imagination into that of practicality and praxis, by opening up a school especially for the education of Muslim girls, who were the most backward segment of society at the time, and also by founding an association for Muslim women in order to create a sense of sorority and collective identity in them, as well as to serve those living in the slum areas through various financial and literacy programmes" (Quayum, 2016, p.149).

Rokeya's real-life experience, struggle, and activism help us to perceive her literary works. She wrote literature to depict the patriarchal – capitalist society she lived in, to portray the widespread misogyny in that society, to instigate women to rise against the humiliation and take active part in the reformation and development of society. She started the story *Sultana's Dream* thinking about women's condition in India and how women can work for India. She said, "One evening I was lounging in an easy chair in my bedroom and thinking lazily of the condition of Indian womanhood – can't we do any good for the country?" (Rokeya, 2006, p. 102). That is the noteworthy feature of Rokeya's feminism – women's development not for women's sake only, but for the betterment of the country. As Salimullah Khan commented, "Rokeya's criticism was not limited for the patriarchy only. She continued her struggle against the subjugation of her country also" (Khan, 2013, p. 254). In *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya described the disrespectful situation of Indian women's life, "We have no hand or voice in the management of our social affairs. In India man is lord and master. He has taken to himself all powers and privileges and shut up the women in the zenana" (Rokeya, 2006, p. 479). She said in another place, "In India, the men perceive the women as the most worthless beings" (Rokeya, 2006, p. 115). "As early as 1844, in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx argued that women's position in society could be used as a measure of the development of society as a whole" (cited in Brown, 2014, para. 5). This co-relation between women's development and social development was very much relevant for Rokeya's society. Rokeya showed that belittling women was a major reason behind the country's backwardness.

Thus, she called the women to play important roles for the country's progress. She told, "If you took part in social work, the society would have been more advanced. You have not worked for society, so the society has lost its half strength and become weak and degraded" (Rokeya, 2006, p. 105).

Begum Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* is read as a story describing women's empowerment and superior capacity. However, along with women's empowerment and superiority, *Sultana's Dream* also reflects Rokeya's social, political, ecological, economic, educational, philosophical, and scientific thoughts. The ideology Rokeya expressed about an ideal country system in the imaginary country 'Ladyland' is pretty much similar to Marxist ideology. Rokeya never openly called herself a Marxist. However, consciously, or subconsciously, she exhibited Marxist consciousness in many of her writings, including *Sultana's Dream*. The period of Rokeya's mature age, the early-twentieth century, is a very significant period in history. The early-twentieth century was that time when both the Russian revolutionary movement and India's independence movement were gaining momentum. In the early twentieth century, Marxist thoughts were being spread worldwide. One of the most important events of the twentieth century is the Russian revolution which "was inspired by Karl Marx" (Gray, 1999, para. 4). India's movement for independence from the British colonial rule got stimulation from the Russian revolution. As stated, "In India, the struggle for independence from British colonial rule was deeply enriched by lessons from the world's first successful revolution, which was socialist in nature ... the first Russian Revolution in 1905 ... made Marxism-Leninism a potent ideological force internationally" (Kumar, 2019, para. 2 – 4). Rokeya wrote literature existing in such a tumultuous political environment in India and worldwide when Marxist political ideology was prevalent as inspiration. It's very normal that Rokeya, as an intellectual, a politically conscious person and a patriot knew the contemporary political situations worldwide and might have known about Marxist thought as it was widespread at that time. Rokeya wrote *Sultana's Dream* in 1905, coincidentally the same year the first Russian revolution took place. The successful Russian revolution took place in 1917 abolishing the monarchy and bringing out revolutionary transformation. Socialist Soviet Russia was formed following Marxian ideology. Rabindranath Tagore termed this new Russia as a 'pilgrimage'. In his travelogue, *Russia r Chithi* (Letter from Russia), Tagore said, "I have come to

Russia – otherwise, I would not complete my pilgrimage in this life” (Tagore, 2020, p. 246). Salimullah Khan compared women’s revolution in Ladyland with the Russian revolution. He said, “This women’s revolution is a lot similar to the Russian revolution in 1917. In Russia, the workers took the power in their hand, and in Ladyland, the women” (Khan, 2013, p. 252). The depiction of various state policies and undertakings in Ladyland, can be vividly related with that of a socialist country in real-world, like the Soviet Union in its early formative years, contemporary to Begum Rokeya. A number of similarities in the policies between Ladyland and Soviet Russia will be pointed out in the following discussion.

Analysis of Marxist ideology in Sultana’s Dream

In *Sultana’s Dream*, Rokeya demonstrated that in country planning, due importance should be given to forestation, preservation of nature and maintaining ecological balance. The people of Ladyland live amidst nature and in harmony with nature. The roads of Ladyland are covered with flowers, “By and by I was enjoying the scenery. Really it was very grand. I mistook a patch of green grass for a velvet cushion. Feeling as if I were walking on a soft carpet, I looked down and found the path covered with moss and flowers” (Rokeya, 2006, pp. 477-478). The whole country is like a garden, “The whole place looks like a garden” (Rokeya, 2006, p. 478). Ladyland is beautiful, not for the big buildings and opulence, but for the greenery and the aesthetic beauty of nature, “we reached sister Sara’s house. It was situated in a beautiful heart-shaped garden. It was cooler and nicer than any of our rich buildings” (Rokeya, 2006, p. 479). The people of Ladyland eat fresh vegetables by gardening vegetables themselves, “The kitchen was situated in a beautiful vegetable garden. Every creeper, every tomato plant was itself an ornament” (Rokeya, 2006, p. 480). Their food habits are healthy and natural. The main food in Ladyland is “Fruits” (Rokeya, 2006, p. 484). People do not live a life of luxury and consumerism in Ladyland. They live a tranquil and blessed life amid nature’s generosity. It’s not the principle of Ladyland to build big buildings and skyscrapers to show off wealth, rather forestation in the whole country, “Our noble queen is exceedingly fond of Botany; it is her ambition to convert whole country into one grand garden” (Rokeya, 2006, p. 484).

As stated about the co-existence of nature and human beings, “Marx and Engels viewed humans not as something separate from the environment, as capitalist ideological orthodoxy does, but dialectically interconnected. Marx wrote on the relationship between nature and humanity:

Nature is man’s inorganic body, that is to say, nature in so far as it is not the human body. Man lives from nature, i.e. nature is his body, and he must maintain a continuing dialogue with it if he is not to die. To say man’s physical and mental life is linked to nature simply means that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature” (cited in Williams, 2010, para. 22-23).

Rokeya’s *Ladyland* is free from the environmental pollution and nature’s demolition typical in a capitalist system. Rokeya’s *Ladyland* is a criticism of the capitalist policy where like all other things, nature is also a target of profit. “Capitalism simultaneously and of necessity exploits the land and the people and sacrifices the interests of both on the altar of profit. Philosophically, the approach that capitalism takes to the environment, and the attitude it forces us to adopt, is one of separation and alienation. As a species we are forcibly cut off from the land, separated from nature, and alienated from coevolving with it” (cited in Williams, 2010, para. 20).

Rokeya expressed her frustration about her own city’s natural environment being under a capitalist-colonized system, “Your Calcutta could become a nicer garden than this if only your countrymen wanted to make it so” (Rokeya, 2006, p. 478).

On forest policy, similarities between *Ladyland* and Soviet Russia could be observed. After the revolution, Russia placed importance on forestation and took steps. “In May 1918, in a meeting chaired by Lenin, the government responded by passing the decree “On Forests,” which created a Central Administration of Forests of the Republic to design a plan for reforestation and sustained yield” (cited in Williams, 2010, para. 38).

About nature and the environment, Marx declared in *Capital*, “Even an entire society, a nation, or all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not owners of the earth. They are simply its possessors, its beneficiaries, and have to bequeath it in an improved state to succeeding generations as *boni*

patres familias [good heads of the household]" (cited in Foster, 2015, p. 13). Nature must not be destroyed, but rather developed and preserved for human existence and survival. This Marxian ecological thought has been reflected in Rokeya's Ladyland.

In *Sultana's Dream*, by showing the state policies of Ladyland, Begum Rokeya made clear her anti-imperialistic stance. As stated, she "contested both patriarchy and imperialism through her work" (Bagchi, 2009, p. 743). The queen of Ladyland is not willing to make any relationship with the imperialists. The queen loathfully pointed out the greed of imperialists to plunder other country's assets, she indicated two imperialistic countries, England, and Persia by mentioning Koh-i-Noor and Peacock Throne. Koh-i-Noor and Peacock Throne were historically two invaluable assets of India which were imperialistically grabbed by England and Persia respectively. The queen mentioned these country's names as examples of imperialistic countries and asserted her anti-imperialistic policy by saying that she does not have any wish to deal with imperialistic countries, "We do not covet other people's land, we do not fight for a piece of diamond though it may be a thousand-fold brighter than the Koh-i-Noor, nor do we grudge a ruler his Peacock Throne" (Rokeya, 2006, 485).

One of the Marxist policies is anti-imperialism. Lenin called imperialism the highest stage of capitalism. He wrote a book of the same name. In this book, Lenin criticized imperialism by saying, "Monopolies, oligarchy, the striving for domination and not for liberty, the exploitation of an increasing number of small or weak nations by a handful of the richest or most powerful nations — all these have given birth to those distinctive characteristics of imperialism which compel us to define it as parasitic or decaying capitalism" (Lenin, 1999, p. 120).

Imperialist countries exert power and domination over other countries. Instead of submission, the Marxist perspective upholds an uncompromising stance against that domination, "Marxism shares with other progressive social movements an uncompromising hostility to all forms of domination — sexism, racism, and so on" (Blunden, para. 3). The queen of Ladyland was fearless and uncompromising against imperialistic power and domination when it went against her ethical standards as proven from an incident where

“certain persons came from a neighboring country and took shelter in ours. They were in trouble having committed some political offence. The king who cared more for power than for good government asked our kind-hearted Queen to hand them over to his officers. She refused, as it was against her principle to turn out refugees. For this refusal, the king declared war against our country” (Rokeya, 2006, p. 482).

Begum Rokeya also showed her stand against imperialist wars. Imperialistic “Wars are not fought for the sake of killing but in order to conquer resources, raw materials, and markets. In other words, for profit” (Mitchinson, 2000, para. 20). Against Ladyland, an imperialistic war was waged to control it. Rokeya described the horror of war, “A terrible war was waged – the country was inundated by bloodbath! Everyday innumerable soldiers were sacrificing their lives in the war” (Rokeya, 2006, p. 110).

In contrast, by showing the women’s war strategy, Rokeya revealed her position against war, killing and bloodshed, “No one was killed by the hands of the women – the earth was not stained by even a drop of blood – nevertheless the enemies were defeated” (Rokeya, 2006, p. 112).

The Marxist policy is against imperialistic wars. As stated, “Marxists are irreconcilably opposed to any war waged by the capitalist ruling class” (Mitchinson, 2000, para. 22).

In *Sultana’s Dream*, Begum Rokeya showed the evils of the capitalist system. She said “only the starved people become objects of a lot of diseases. It becomes clear if it is noticed that there is more outbreak of plague in villages than in cities, - in cities, poor people are more attacked by plague than the rich, and poor women die more by plague than poor men. So, it is clear, what is the root of plague – the main reason is the scarcity of food” (Rokeya, 2006, p. 107). In a capitalist system, profit, not humanity, is the most important matter. Inequality and commodification are typical traits of capitalist society. Rokeya described Indian capitalist society where inequality, poverty and starvation are the prominent features. Where poor people have to starve and suffer from many diseases. That means poor people’s lives do not have any value at all in a capitalist system, that is, humanity is a lame word in capitalism. She pointed out different types of inequalities, inequality between rich and poor, inequality

between city and village and inequality between men and women. All types of inequalities are the general characteristics of capitalism. Food scarcity is another characteristic of a capitalist society. In a capitalist society, food is a commodity, Marx talked about “the commodification of food in capitalist society” (cited in Foster, 2016, para.7). In a capitalist society, there are lots of foods, but people starve. It is a commodity; people who have money can afford it only.

Starvation, disease, food scarcity and the relation between starvation and disease for the exploited, unprivileged people are some burning issues which Marxist societies address with the utmost importance. Marxism calls for the demolition of inequality and the resultant food scarcity and starvation. Studies had been conducted by Marx and Engels on these issues:

“The diet of a great part of the families of agricultural laborers,” Marx wrote, “is below the minimum necessary to ‘avert starvation diseases.’” Drawing on a study by one of Simon’s researchers, Dr. Edward Smith, that surveyed the nutritional intake of convicts, Marx constructed a statistical table on the nutrition of various workers, and the results were startling: agricultural laborers received only 61 percent as much protein, 79 percent as much non-nitrogenous nutrients, and 70 percent as much mineral matter as convicts did while laboring twice as much” (cited in Foster, 2016, para.13).

“Frederick Engels was equally concerned with nutrition. In 1845 he pointed in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* to the artificial food scarcity and inflated prices that contributed to the poor nutritional intake of urban workers, along with problems of contamination and spoilage. He treated scrofula as a disease arising from nutritional deficiencies—an observation that, as Howard Waitzkin explains in *The Second Sickness*, “antedated the discovery of bovine tuberculosis as the major cause of scrofula and pasteurization of milk as a preventive measure.” Likewise, Engels discussed the skeletal deformities associated with rickets as a nutritional problem long before the medical discovery that it was due to deficiencies in vitamins” (cited in Foster, 2016, para.14).

Rokeya also showed the children’s condition in a capitalist society. The children, the most innocent and adorable ones, are not cared for in a capitalist

society. The lives of children, who are the future of a country, are neglected in a capitalist country. In a capitalist society, children are subject to undernourishment, starvation, ill health, child labour etc. Food is a commodity in a capitalist society. Those unfortunate children born to poor families are not fed properly. A lot of children die due to hunger and malnutrition. "Sister Sara was shocked to hear about innumerable children's death in Hindustan. She could not imagine it" (Rokeya, 2006, p. 107).

On the other hand, Sultana was surprised to hear about the value of people's lives in Ladyland. She said, "We talked on various subjects; and I learned that they were not subject to any kind of epidemic disease, - nor did they suffer from mosquito-bites as we do. I was very much astonished to hear that in Lady-land no one died in youth except by rare accident" (Rokeya, 2006, p. 480). Unlike capitalist society, it is the responsibility of the state in Ladyland to protect people's lives so that people do not die due to hunger or disease.

The ideal social system Rokeya imagined in Ladyland is in contrast with the actual capitalist society she lived in. In this regard, an example of the Soviet Union can be excerpted with which Rokeya's thoughts about an ideal country match to a good extent, "There is a country without unemployment. A country where a worker who cannot work because he is ill or growing old is never afraid of losing the job, is never penniless, or forgotten. A country where a woman can take a few months away from work to have a baby and receive her regular wages for the job that is still hers when she returns. A country where the welfare of children is the first consideration. The full name of this country is the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics" (Hutchins, 1933, p. 18).

Rokeya imagined women's supremacy in a country, "Women hold supremacy in the paradise-like Ladyland" (Rokeya, 2006, p. 113). However, she knew that supremacy of women is only possible in dreams keeping in mind the actual social context of her time which was extremely patriarchal. Or, Rokeya might have known about the supreme position of women in primitive societies. To refute the prevailing idea that women have always been inferior to men, Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* gave historical information about women's superior position in primitive societies. About the role of women in the old communistic society, Engels wrote,

“the communistic household implies the supremacy of women in the house” (2004, p. 60) where “Woman occupied not only a free but also a highly respected position” (2004, p. 60).

Rokeya showed women's inferior and suppressed conditions which are usual in a capitalist society. A complete social transformation is necessary to bring women's dignified position in society, “women can become truly free and equal only in a world organised along new social and productive lines” (Kollontai, 1909, para. 1). Rokeya also imagined a social transformation in *Sultana's Dream* by which women were emancipated and “she puts patriarchal power players into shame” (Islam, 2013, p. 315).

Through Rokeya's depiction of women's situation in a capitalist society, it can be said that women's emancipation is not possible in a capitalist society. The realisation of Rokeya's dream is possible in a society based on Marxist ideals. As Lenin said, “The women must be made conscious of the political connection between our demands and their own suffering, needs, and wishes. They must realise what the proletarian dictatorship means for them: complete equality with man in law and practice, in the family, in the state, in society; an end to the power of the bourgeoisie” (cited. in Zetkin, 1934, para. 34).

In Rokeya's time, in her society, women were confined within the four walls of the house, were deprived of education, and they could not work outside. This was one of the main reasons for women's subservient position in her contemporary society. So, Rokeya called the women to be educated and self-dependent. In *Sultana's Dream*, the Queen of Ladyland said, “Those countries where women are confined in the homes or women lead only a doll like life being adorned with a lot of beautiful clothes and ornaments, they do not work for the country, they are not worthy to deal with commercial or any issues with Ladyland” (Rokeya, 2006, p. 116). That is, women have to work to achieve emancipation. As Engels said, “the first premise for the emancipation of women is the reintroduction of the entire female into the public industry” (2004, p. 80).

Rokeya was a crusader for women's education throughout her life. In her society, women's education was mostly not permitted. She herself was not allowed to have institutional education by her father. Rokeya realised the

importance of education in elevating women's lives. She realized that without education, women's enlightenment and emancipation are not possible. As stated, "Education and emancipation – these two are great achievements in Rokeya's fables" (Ghosh, 2013, p. 70). She spent her whole life striving for women's education standing against the conservative society. However, if a little portion of women in that society got the privilege to get education, there was a set idea about women's education. Although educated, women could not be free of men's guardianship and any attempt to cross that set limit was tremendously discouraged. As Mahua Sarkar said, "As the debates around issues such as higher education for women in the last two decades of the nineteenth-century show, the only context in which women would be allowed visibility and agency were under the guardianship of men, and to further the nationalist cause in some way. Any agency shown by women that fell outside these acceptable limits was liable to be ridiculed, denounced, and ultimately given short shrift within nationalist historiography" (Sarkar, 2001, pp. 229-30). However, Rokeya had a revolutionary notion about women's education in the context of that time. Rokeya's thoughts about women's education were not limited to the specified criteria prescribed by society. Marx and Engels said, "The Communists have not invented the intervention of society in education; they do but seek to alter the character of that intervention and to rescue education from the influence of the ruling class" (1969, p. 24). Rokeya did not dare to listen to the mighty patriarch rulers of the society and showed courage enough to advocate women's education in all sectors equal to men. As stated, "Rokeya did not believe in any disparity or discipline differences between male and female education and sought women's access invariably to all branches of knowledge" (Hasan, 2013, p. 50). She sought to make "chemistry, botany, horticulture, personal hygiene, health care, nutrition, physical education, gymnastics, and painting and other fine arts open to women" (Hasan, 2012, p. 188).

Rokeya's thought about women's education "was highly revolutionary considering the material culture in which she launched her educational movement. Even the forward-looking Brahmins and Brahmos of colonial Bengal did not teach women much beyond socially accepted subjects" (Hasan, 2013, p. 49). As Ghosh stated, "Even long after women's education was accepted by the society, women were considered inferior to men in intelligence. They were not given the opportunity to study science. Perhaps it was thought what was

not needed for household chores such as cooking, raising children, knitting, writing letters or keeping daily accounts were unnecessary for them. Sarala [Devi Chawdhurani] and Shanta [Nag] were students of Bethune College which was founded in 1849 exclusively for girls. No science subject was taught there" (cited. in Hasan, 2013, p. 49). In *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya put her thought about women's education into practice in Ladyland where there is no prescription for women's education. Women can learn anything and do anything in Ladyland. "In *Sultana's Dream*, she portrays Sister Sara as someone who is proficient in modern branches of knowledge such as history, politics, military strategy, education and science" (Hasan, 2013, p. 50). Sister Sara said about their knowledge-thirsty Queen, "Our respected Queen loved to study science since her childhood. She would not dawdle in her time like the other ordinary princesses. One day she thought that all the women in the country should be educated. Queen's wish, - so it was immediately executed. Soon, a lot of girls' schools were founded by the government. The wave of women's higher education flowed to the remote villages even. The darkness of superstitions was being removed by the light of education, and custom of child marriage was prohibited" (Rokeya, 2006, pp. 107-108). Rokeya wished women to hold political power and scientific knowledge which was implemented in Ladyland, "She had managed to bring women into politics and scientific world, both traditionally male-dominated bastions" (Chakrabarty, 2014, p. 33).

The paper would give a brief description of women's condition in Soviet Russia. The relevance is, Rokeya's dream about women's lives shown in Ladyland had been, to a great extent, implemented in Soviet Russia, the country which was formed based on Marxist ideals.

"The Soviet woman is a full and equal citizen of her country" (Kollontai, 1946, para. 1)

"Our women have mastered professions that have long been considered the exclusive domain of men. There are women engine drivers, women mechanics, women lathe operators, women fitters, and well-qualified women workers in charge of the most complex mechanisms.

The women of the Soviet Union work on an equal footing with men to advance science, culture, and the arts; they occupy an outstanding place in the national education and health services.

The women of the Soviet Union do not have to demand from their government the right to work, the right to education, or the right to the protection of motherhood. The state itself, the government itself, draws women into work, giving them wide access to every sphere of social life, assisting, and rewarding mothers” (Kollontai, 1946, para. 7 - 11).

In Rokeya’s society, the custom of girls’ childhood marriage was prevalent, it is prevalent even at the present time. If girls are married off at an early age, their education life comes to an end. To ensure girls’ education, Rokeya set a minimum age for girls’ marriage in *Sultana’s Dream*. She said, “No woman was to be allowed to marry before she was twenty-one” (Rokeya, 2006, p. 480). *Sultana’s Dream* was written in 1905, more than a century ago. Within this time, the world has advanced a lot in different sectors, this South Asian part of the world also tried to keep pace with the advancement. However, a lot of girls are still married off in childhood. In Bangladesh, the minimum age for girls’ marriage had never been twenty-one as Rokeya recommended more than a hundred years ago. The minimum age for girls’ marriage had been eighteen in Bangladesh. However, there are laws that in the name of ‘special situations’, under aged girls can also be allowed in marriage.

In *Sultana’s Dream*, Rokeya indicated that women are more meritorious than men. The Queen of Ladyland said to the women, “If you cannot save your country for lack of physical strength, said the Queen, try to do so by brain power” (Rokeya, 2006, p. 482). Rokeya’s belief has been proved. In Bangladesh. Almost every year, girls do better in SSC and HSC exams than boys. In Bangladesh, girls live amid a lot of adversities, and they are more underprivileged than boys. Despite so many impediments, girls outdo boys in academic results. That proves Rokeya’s thought that women have superior brain power to men. Women can do better in every sector if they get opportunities and “if their innate abilities and skills were developed, honed and utilized” (Hasan, 2013, p. 52).

Rokeya perceived the utmost importance of science for social advancement and placed great emphasis on science education. In *Sultana's Dream*, she exhibited her scientific mind and scientific knowledge. Her science consciousness presents her more as a progressive thinker. In the era and society, she lived in, religious superstitions were pervasive and were very much antagonistic to scientific thought. Standing at such a backdrop, Rokeya was progressive enough to promote science by overcoming the prevailing prejudices. Marxism advocates scientific thoughts, "Marxism sides wholeheartedly with science" (Woods, 2005, para. 115). As stated, "Karl Marx and Frederick Engels were acutely attuned to the science of their times and integrated their awareness into the core of their thought process in developing the intellectual tradition and political movement that came to be called Marxism" (Sheehan, 2022, para. 4).

In *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya's stance about religion takes her beyond usual limitations and narrowness. About Ladyland's religion, sister Sara said, "Our religion is based on Love and Truth. It is our religious duty to love one another and to be absolutely truthful" (Rokeya, 2006, p. 484). This statement places her above all the communalism, religious hatred, and intolerance typical of her time. Though being a devoted Muslim, she upheld non-communal values and placed humanity on the top. The Marxist concept of equality is reflected here also.

Conclusion

Rokeya integrated women's emancipation with social emancipation and manifested that women's progress is imperative for the country's progress. Living in a capitalist-colonized society, witnessing people being crushed and exploited by the system and women being suppressed, repressed, humiliated, incarcerated, deprived, and disgraced, Rokeya dreamed of a country like Ladyland to find some temporary solace in dream. Moreover, by depicting Ladyland's social, political, economic, and administrative system, she also showed the world how should an ideal system be.

In *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya put forward her thoughts on an ideal social system. The thoughts she expressed are highly consonant with Marxist thoughts. Marxism endorses the thoughts which Rokeya showed in *Sultana's*

Dream: maintaining ecological balance, anti-imperialism, anti-imperialistic war, uncompromising to the imperialists, equal, hunger-free society, women's respectful life, science-consciousness, humanity above religious divisiveness – all these things present her as a progressive thinker. It can be said that she had Marxist ideals, unconsciously though in her views on women and social issues. Rokeya was a champion for women's emancipation. Along with that, she was a social revolutionary. Her views on women's progression and social reformation delineate her as a Marxist thinker, more precisely, as a Marxist feminist.

Rokeya's writings and activism reflected her conviction that women's emancipation was essential to the progress of society. Through her work, she emphasized the need for women to take on leadership roles and for the creation of an ideal social system that prioritizes women's rights. Rokeya's vision of an ideal society, as portrayed in her work "Sultana's Dream," was not just a dream, but a reflection of her Marxist beliefs. In Ladyland, she envisioned a society where women were not oppressed by patriarchal rule and people lived in harmony with each other and with nature. Ladyland's social, political, and economic systems were based on Marxist principles, and women's leadership was integral to its success. Thus, it can be stated that Begum Rokeya was not only a feminist, but a Marxist feminist who believed in the need for economic and social justice for women. Finally, the paper can be concluded that Rokeya's thoughts on women and social emancipation in Sultana's Dream match with Marxist feminism.

Endnote

The quotations from Sultana's Dream have been taken from both Bengali and English versions. All the quotations of Bengali version of Sultana's Dream and other Bengali sources have been translated from Bengali to English by the author herself.

References

- Bagchi, B. (2009). Towards Ladyland: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and the Movement for Women's Education in Bengal, c. 1900-c. 1932. *Paedagogica Historica*, 45(6), 743-55.

- Bagchi, B. (2010). Two Lives: voices, resources, and networks in the history of female education in Bengal and South Asia. *Women's History Review*, 19(1), 51–69.
- Bagchi, B. (2010). Ramabai and Rokeya: The History of Gendered Social Capital in India. *Women, Education, and Agency, 1600-2000*. (J Spence, S Aiston, and M. M. Meikle Eds.) . London: Routledge, 66-81.
- Blunden, A. Marxism. Retrieved September 25, 2022,
- Brown, H. (2014). Marx on gender and the family: a summary. *Monthly Review*, 66 (2).
- Chakrabarty, P. (2014). A Contemplation on 'Sultana's Dream'. *Space and Culture, India*, 2(1), 33-39.
- Eagleton, T. (1989). *Marxism and literary criticism*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Engels, F. (2004). *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Sydney, Australia: Resistance Books.
- Foster, J. B. (2015). Marxism and Ecology. *Monthly Review*, 67(7).
- Foster, J. B. (2016). Marx as a Food Theorist. *Monthly Review*, 68(7).
- Ghosh, S. (2013). Rupkotha, Rupkotha noi: Rokeya r Kolome (Fables are not fables: In Rokeya's Writings). *Ushaloke*, 9(7), 56-70.
- Gimenez, M. E. (1998). Marxist / Materialist Feminism. Retrieved September 10, 2022, from <http://www.feministezine.com/feminist/philosophy/Marxist-Materialist-Feminism.html>
- Gray, J. (1999). Ideology. *The Guardian*. Retrieved September 18, 2022, from <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/1999/jun/12/weekend7>
- Hasan, M. M. (2012). Marginalisation of Muslim Writers in South Asian Literature: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's English Works. *South Asia Research*, 32(3), 179-97
- Hasan, M. M. (2013). Commemorating Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Contextualising her Work in South Asian Muslim Feminism. *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature*, 7(2), 39-59.
- Hasan, M. M. (2016). Muslim Bengal writes back: A study of Rokeya's encounter with and representation of Europe. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 52(6), 739-751.
- Hasan, M. M. (2018). Writing from the Margins: Multiple Subalternity of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature*, 12(2), 174-191.

- Hutchins, G. (1933). *Children Under Capitalism*. U.S.A.: Union Labor.
- Islam, S. M. (2013). Subaltern's World View: A Reading of *Sultana's Dream*. *Ushaloke*, 9(7), 314-318.
- Jahan, R. (Ed.) (1988). *Sultana's dream, a feminist utopia, and selections from the secluded ones*. New York, USA: The Feminist Press.
- Khan, S. (2013). Begum Rokeya r Utopia (Utopia of Begum Rokeya). *Ushaloke*, 9(7), 248-254.
- Kollontai, A. (1909). The Social Basis of the Woman Question. Retrieved September 10, 2022, from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1909/social-basis.htm>
- Kollontai, A. (1946). The Soviet Woman — a Full and Equal Citizen of Her Country. (S. Ryan. Trans.). Retrieved September 20, 2022, from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1946/full.htm>
- Kumar, S. (2019). How Russian Revolution Inspired Undivided India's Literary, Political Figures. Retrieved September 14, 2022, from <https://www.newslick.in/Russian-Revolution-Inspired-Undivided-India-Literary-Political-Figures>
- Lenin, V. I. (1999). Imperialism the highest stage of capitalism. Sydney, Australia: Resistance Books. from <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/help/marxism.htm>
- Luxton, M. (2016). Marxist Feminism and Anticapitalism: Reclaiming Our History, Reanimating Our Politics. *Studies in Political Economy*, 94, 137–160.
- Marx, K. & Engels, F. (1969). *The Communist Manifesto*. (S. Moor & F. Engels, Trans.). Moscow, Soviet Union: Progress Publishers. (Original work published in 1848).
- Miah, M. M. (2018). The Begum of Bengal had a Dream: A Liberal Feminist Reading of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's Life and Works. *International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities*, 11(6), 153-177.
- Mitchinson, P. (2000). Marxism and War. Retrieved September 25, 2022, from <https://www.marxist.com/marxism-and-war.htm>
- Quayum, M. A. (2016). Gender and Education: The Vision and Activism of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. *Journal of Human Values*, 22(2), 139–150
- Rokeya, B. (2006). *Rokeya Rachanaboli* (Collected writings of Rokeya). (A. Kadir. Ed.). Dhaka, Bangladesh: Bangla Academy.
- Sarkar, M. (2001). Muslim Women and the Politics of (In)visibility in Late Colonial Bengal. *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 14(2), 226-250).

- Sheehan, H. (2022). Marxism, Science, and Science Studies. *Monthly Review*, 74(1).
- Sufi, M. H. (2001). *Begum Rokeya: Jibon O Sahitya* [Life and works of Begum Rokeya]. Dhaka, Bangladesh: Subarna.
- Tagore, R. (2020). *Rabindra Rochona: Bhromon Songroho* (Writings of Rabindranath: Collection of Travelogues). Dhaka, Bangladesh: Bhashaproskash.
- Williams, C. (2010). Marxism and the environment: An excerpt from the new Ecology and Socialism. Retrieved September 18, 2022, from <https://isreview.org/issue/72/marxism-and-environment/index.html>
- Woods, A. (2005). Marxism and Religion. Retrieved September 25, 2022, from <https://www.marxist.com/marxism-religion-liberation-theology220701.htm>
- Zetkin, C. (1934). Lenin on the women's question. (S. Ryan. Trans.). Retrieved September 6, 2022, from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1920/lenin/zetkin1.htm>
- Zetkin, C. (2015). *Selected Writings*. (P. S. Foner Ed.). Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books.