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Abdullah Al Mamun
Department of English,
Jahangirnagar University,
Jahangirnagar, Bangladesh

HE to he: Defeated Phallus in Rokeya's Sultana's Dream

Abdullah Al Mamun

Abstract

Hailed as one of the early feminist science fiction, Begum Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* (1905) advocates women's secret desire to be on equal footing with man. Accordingly, the narrator, Sultana envisages a gynocratic land that materializes a utopian scheme: female kind receives freedom and security. The "dream" magnifies women's authority in such a way that not only are the patriarchal rules and male-constructed ideas subverted but male control on the literal and symbolic levels are also resisted. The phallic power is deactivated to such an extent that phallus and its symbols appear to be showy puppets waiting to be completely dysfunctional under the canopy of female power. Through textual analysis, this paper aims to decode the metaphorical symbol of defeated phallus under the canopy of gynocentric power in this novella so as to expose different dimension of Rokeya's writing.

Keywords: phallus, vagina, power

Introduction:

Ode to Sultana's Dream

Rokeya Shakwat Hussain (1880-1932) published English version of *Sultana's Dream* in 1905, later she published it in Bengali version in the name *Sultanar Shopno* (সুলতানার সপ্ন). *Sultana's Dream* stands out in world literature for its depiction of the place where female rules supreme. After a passive revolution, the women come on top of the power. With their razor sharp intellect and scientific striding they become able to sustain their power. At the same time, they have started busking in the sun of freedom pushing the men into mardana. (Unlike 'zenana' this place demands confinement of men who are deprived of the opportunity to venture outside).

In *Sultana's Dream* Sultana represents the women across the subcontinent India who were hardly breathing in the sun of freedom inside zenana. No wonder, a secret desire may swirl inside her for getting the sun of freedom in hand, or flying and breathing in the open air, or taking part in the scientific striding of that era where men were actively taking part in the frenzy of creation in full swing. Rokeya leaves no stone unturned to explore a woman's psyche sketching Sultana's dream with intricate details that project a woman's repressed desire either directly or indirectly. She imagines women are not likely to be violated if phallus can be made inactive somehow. To revisit the constructed socio-cultural thought-line of gender and feminine/masculine power and to see Rokeya's texts through different lens this paper critically reads Rokeya's *Sultana's* with a view to understanding the novella's secret suggestion, how a feminine utopic land may become a productive ground when symbolic masculine power becomes dysfunctional. It is mostly a close textual analysis and so my effort is directed towards library research that includes data collection from printed books and journals as well as online resources. The theoretical frame work will encompass 'phallus' study. To strengthen my hypothesis I used the original English writing, *Sultana's Dream* and its Bengali version, *Sultanar Shopno* (2008).

Power of Phallus

From the perspective of psychoanalysis, 'phallus' is considered as more than a physical organ. In symbolic world this 'more than a penis' begets a sense of power and strength.

Correspondence:

Abdullah Al Mamun
Department of English,
Jahangirnagar University,
Jahangirnagar, Bangladesh

As a lucky owner of it, men think they are superior to their counter parts. They are of higher morals and the others are of lower morals. In Freudian explanation, “Any manifest object which suggests penetration, such as swords, guns, umbrellas, snakes, etc., can symbolize the penis” (Appignanesi 65). It is said further, “Objects suggesting receptacles, such as boxes, purses, caves, etc. can symbolize vagina” (65). Payne and Barbera, in their *A dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory* refer that Freud has used the term phallus in the sense of sovereignty, and Lacan says it “is used to emphasize the Symbolic value taken on by the biological organ in intersubjective relations and in the course of accession to the symbolic” (Payne, 529). Mitchell, in 1974, mentions “For some feminists the theory of the phallus offers a means of escaping Freud’s residual biologism and constructing a theory of sexual difference which places more emphasis on cultural and symbolic factors” (qtd in Payne, 529). Selden, Widdowson and Brooker quote further:

Lacan, as well as the theologians and people in anthropological literature, holds the same view about its metaphorical significance: and Lacan’s use of the term draws upon the ancient connotations of the phallus in fertility cults. The word is also used in theological and anthropological literature with reference to the organ’s symbolic meaning as power. (130)

Sultana’s Dream under Microscope

This novella rightly draws feminist criticism due to its depiction of the world where male power is absolutely dysfunctional. The path of criticism covers all the way from socio-realism to psychoanalysis. For example, Ferdousi says, Rokeya is a true social reformer and *Sultana’s Dream* is her manifest dream where she tactfully incorporates both situational humour and scientific knowledge (68). She says further, “Sultana’s Dream is a pioneering path shower of women development (68).” In contrast, Rajakannan likes to view the dream of such place is nothing but building castle in the air. From psychoanalytic point of view, he criticizes the misandry ignited by ‘penis envy’ (541). No wonder, Sultana can see in her dream such a significant number of phallus symbols and the authority of women over them. On another note, another critic opines that, though it is quoted “In SD, science, technology and humanism work in harmony to make women self-contingent. A distinction is made between ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ technology. Feminine technology is based on solar energy, is environment-friendly and non-lethal” (Hussaini, 87). The view can be contradicted in a sense that the women initiated inventions are not symbols of harmony; rather those carry metaphorical defeat of masculine power in the hands of weaker sex. In the battle between male female dichotomies, the male power is defeated, and so, female power is in superior position. With reference to Bacon, Hasanat says though man has the ability to subdue and control nature, the women in Lady Land have already took over the masculine space as they successfully defied the masculine notion of power (222). Now, men are nothing but subaltern. She compares the males with Lilliputs (229) whose visibility is almost reduced to the level of zero. And, she points out, in the hands of the winners both men and nature have become nothing but mere puppets. Therefore, the land is ultimately going to be a land of the tyrants (232). True is the

statement, but to establish women’s identity and to subvert male dominated society, it is necessary and Rokeya, rightly depicts an internal scenario of defeated phallus which this paper will try to depict.

Phallus in Sultana’s Dream

Browsing across the longitude and latitude of the ‘Ladyland’ in *Sultana’s Dream*, we come across a good number of phallus symbols which can be taken as metaphorical representation of men’s power. The tools or instruments or things that can be related to the phallus symbols in *Sultana’s Dream* can be divided into two parts: The ones that exist no more in the land but once they did, and the ones that exist now but in a controlled way. For the sake of discussion ‘the ones that exist now but in a controlled way’ can be subdivided into two other parts as well: the ones that are completely new and the ones that are traditional.

Phallus, No More

There are three things that have been vanished from the utopian land right after the women have come into power. The three things are: Chimney in the kitchen, heavy vehicles on the roads and rail way, and mosquito across the land. First and for most, a long slender chimney, which can be taken as a phallus symbol, has been removed from the kitchen: “I found no smoke; nor any chimney either in the kitchen...” (Hossain). It so happens largely because the inhabitants there use solar cookers that do not emit smoke. The protagonist seems comfortable in the absence of chimney like phallus. That is why she does not hesitate to comment, “Your kitchen is not inferior to a queen’s boudoir!” Her expression which is emphasized with an exclamatory sign and her analogy between the kitchen and the queen’s bed chamber are noteworthy to measure the depth of her sense of relief.

Next, in the description of communication, we find neither any vehicle plying on the road nor any train rolling over railways in the dream land as their necessities are replaced by the “aerial conveyance.” “Therefore neither street nor railway accidents occur here” (Hossain). In Bengali version of the novella *সুলতানার স্বপ্ন (Sultana’s Dream)* it comes with a little addition: “সেই জন্য এখানে রেলওয়ে দুর্ঘটনার ভয় নাই—রাজপথেও লোকে শকটচক্রে পেষিত হয়না” (135). It can be roughly translated as, “Therefore there is no rail accident here. In highway, people are not smashed here” (as translated by me). Here, the word choice “পেষিত” or “smashed” broods a sense of violation inside a reader. Such image of violation under vehicles leaves a scope of phallus study again. These threatening, moving and rigid vehicles can be equalized to phallus. Rail roads and street, in contrast, can metaphorically be considered as female’s limbs and the passers-by who are likely to be smashed in the roads can be taken as the weak or helpless that has always been under the threat of phallus power like bus, tram and train. Next, when the conversation rolls into the issue of epidemic, Sultana comes to know that nobody in that land falls victim to untimely death. They are never prey to mosquito bites as well: “আর তাঁহারা আমাদের ন্যায় হুলধর মশার দংশনেও অধীর হন না” (127) /The translation goes like: “And like us they are not disturbed by the stinging mosquitoes.” Once again the image of penetration is

depicted with the mentioning of the word ‘sting’ and it is shown that women are nothing but disturbed and helpless before that sting what can be otherwise considered as phallus or its symbolic power. I like to add as an explanation, may be for its threatening nature, the “stinging mosquito” or a phallus symbol or the representative of the masculine power has been kept out of the border of that land.

Phallus, Emasculated

Now I would like to bring focus into three striking new inventions, e.g. tools that collect and convey water from the clouds, tools that carry forth solar energy and the flying vehicle. A lady principal of a certain university invented the balloon that contains water and there is a pipe attached to it that can carry forth water when necessary:

In the capital, where our Queen lives, there are two Universities. One of these invented a wonderful balloon, to which they attached a number of pipes. By means of this captive balloon which they managed to keep afloat above the cloud-land, they could draw as much water from the atmosphere as they pleased. As the water was incessantly being drawn by the university people no cloud gathered and the ingenious Lady Principal stopped rain and storms thereby. (Hossain)

In other place it is said, “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.” On the whole, the uncontrollable clouds that pour rain, and so that are similar to phallus, cannot rule anymore over soft earth which as a receiver can be taken into consideration as vagina or women’s power. In Bengali version of the novella it is rightly put into words in a more expressive way: “**আমাদের সুস্বিঞ্চ বৃষ্টিধারার অভাব হয় না। তবে আমরা পিপাসী চাতকের ন্যায় জলধরের কৃপা প্রার্থনা করি না। এখানে কাদস্বিনী আমাদের সেবিকা – সে আমাদের ইচ্ছানুসারে শীতল ফোয়ারায় ধরণী সিক্ত করিয়া দেয়**” (136)। “We never suffer from the want of cool rain water. But, never do we pray to clouds for rain; here the clouds are our servants and serve our lands with cool water in our need” (as translated by me). It is a very clear indication indeed that the phallus or the men are bound to serve the women sexually according to the women’s need. It is an artistic expression indeed from the authoress’ side – be it consciously or subconsciously – to bring the description of clouds and show them at the mercy of the female power. Another example can be set forth from Bengali version, “**...এইরূপে জলধরকে ফাঁকি দিয়া তাঁহারা বৃষ্টিজল করায়ত্ত করিলেন। বিদ্যালয়ের লোকেরা সর্বদা ঐ বেলুনের সাহায্যে জলগ্রহণ করিত কি না, তাই আর মেঘমালায় আকাশ আচ্ছন্ন হইতে পারিত না। এই অদ্ভুত উপায়ে বুদ্ধিমতী লেডী প্রিন্সিপ্যাল প্রাকৃতিক ঝড়বৃষ্টি নিবারণ করিলেন**” (128)। In English it goes, “...thus they master over rain water tricking out the clouds. The sky can never be overcast with clouds as the pupils from the institution always collect water from the clouds using the balloons. Using this strange technique the lady principal has put bridle over thunder and storm” (as translated by me). This is a true indication how is the condition of men in Ladyland. They are bound to serve women as they wish.

Furthermore, the image of pipes attached with water balloons leave no option to think otherwise except in direction of man’s penis and testicles. The women can exercise full control of the tool. Thus the authoress suggests metaphorically how males and their dominance have gone through a paradigm shift. Another prominent symbol of phallus, the sun – what is famously known in India in various masculine names; like, arun, robi etc – is seen under their control. The solar weapon—though particular image is impossible to draw about that as Sara does not narrate its shape properly—has made that impossible possible to rule over the source of life and production and use them according to their utility and safety: “They invented an instrument by which they could collect as much sun-heat as they wanted. And they kept the heat stored up to be distributed among others as required (Hossain)”. In the battle field as well the women can use the sun as they wish:

Then the Lady Principal with her two thousand students marched to the battle field, and arriving there directed all the rays of the concentrated sunlight and heat towards the enemy. The heat and light were too much for them to bear. They all ran away panic-stricken, not knowing in their bewilderment how to counteract that scorching heat. When they fled away leaving their guns and other ammunitions of war, they were burnt down by means of the same sun-heat. Since then no one has tried to invade our country any more. (Hossain)

In this way the pipes in both cases can be considered as symbols of penis that carry energy and water respectively in time of necessity from the sources like the sun and the balloons which we can relate to testicles supplying the fluids needed for the production. Most striking is the image of flying vehicle, consisted of a plank attached with two hydrogen balls: “Then she screwed a couple of seats onto a square piece of plank. To this plank she attached two smooth and well-polished balls. When I asked her what the balls were for, she said they were hydrogen balls and they were used to overcome the force of gravity” (Hossain).

It is said further the “balls were of different capacities to be used according to the different weights desired to be overcome.” In Bengali version of the novella it has been added: “**তিনি আমাকে জিজ্ঞাসা করিলেন, আমার ওজন কত। আমি জীবনে কোনদিন ওজন হই নাই, কাজেই নিজের গুরুত্ব আমার জানা ছিলনা, ভগিনী, বলিলেন, “আসুন তবে আপনাকে ওজন করি। ওজনটা জানা প্রয়োজন। আমি ভাবিলাম, একি ব্যাপার! যাহা হউক ওজনে আমি একমনে ষোল সের হইলাম। শুনিলাম তিনি আটত্রিশ সের মাত্র**” (137)। In English translation, it reads: “She asked me to weigh. Since never in my life did I weigh myself, my weight was unknown to me. Sister said, “Come here, let me measure your weight. It is necessary to know your weight. / I thought, how strange! However I weighed 56 kg, and I heard she weighed only 38” (my translation).

This entire scene is noteworthy here because the inhabitants consider it essential that women will ride on the flying vehicles after the installation of those mechanical balls in accordance with their weight. The important thing is, the flying plank or symbol of the phallus, can be disjoined, joined or made functional or dysfunctional upon the wish and convenience of the women. Thus the imaginary vehicle (or symbolic phallus) seems neither

burden nor pain (especially for the weak or under-weight or under aged women). To be more explicit, women can ride on (not under) the suitable penis/phallus corresponding to their weights. Thus, there is little chance of imbalanced copulation and harm for the women. Furthermore, women can not only control it but also take it further to the destiny as long as they wish. Hence, once again we see, women are at liberty to go as far as they want using the vehicle as they wish. In a straight forward manner, the new rulers are just using it in accordance with their caprice. Thus the women here are reducing the possibility of imbalanced or painful intercourse down to the level of zero. In contrast, now they are capable enough to have sexual pleasure according to their limit and desire by putting control over phallus and maneuvering it. This is an important factor indeed to take the women power in consideration over the phallus power.

Phallus, Controlled

Now, let us consider the traditional things in the utopian land that the dreamer comes across. In Sultana's dream, the first phallus symbol that she comes across is a thread in Sarah's hand. The image gets its meaning in sexual sense when she tries to penetrate it through the needle. She blames the men kind for their impatience and imperfection, especially in such work. Hence, she says, "But we do not trust our zenana members with embroidery!" she said laughing, 'as a man has not patience enough to pass thread through a needlehole even!' (Hossain). Here her distrust is noteworthy probably because like the many other women around the globe, these women have had experience of copulation – to be more specific, penetration (Most of the time it happened due to unequal match making or lack of knowledge regarding sex). Therefore, Sara, being one of the women in a utopian society is reluctant to give the control of penetration in the hands of men. And, In course of her browsing across the land, Sultana inquiries about the farming system. Response comes from Sister Sara that they take advantage of electricity:

"Please let me know, how you carry on land cultivation and how you plough the land and do other hard manual work"

"Our fields are tilled by means of electricity, which supplies motive power for other hard work as well, and we employ it for our aerial conveyances too. We have no rail road nor any paved streets here."

"Therefore neither street nor railway accidents occur here," said I. (Hossain)

Interesting enough fields or earth is always seen as a representation of women, especially womb which will bear something new. But in Sultana's Dream, dominance or role of masculine symbols like hoes over lands are refused. Here the character seems hinting against the holy Quran, the prime scripture of the Muslims, "Your wives are your fields, so go into your fields whichever way you like...." (*The Qur'an* the Cow 2:223). Thus, women are seen to take control of the things those are masculine in metaphorical level.

Cuntocratic Victory

Naturally when one sees the different condition of phallus, s/he may ask about the symbolic condition of the other gender; that is vagina. Here, the thing that can be taken as the representative of vaginal power is on the verge of abundance throughout the country. That is flower. Browsing through the land with Sultana, we see the land is immensely covered with floral bed.

Of course, with the defeat of the phallus symbol, the victors are at frenzy to celebrate their triumph; and so they are not hesitant at all to hoist their symbolic flag. To let it be known to the inferior others, Sara invites Sultana to have a glimpse at their botanical abundance: "...Will you please come out and have a look at our garden?" (Hossain). And, undoubtedly, her intention is successful. Her deliberate intention makes Sultana wonder at the floral scenario that has been covering up everything: "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. 'How nice it is' said I." Besides, when Sultana seems to be afraid to tread on the soft flowers, Sara boldly declares the resistance power of the flowers. In other way round it is a declaration of intensity of vaginal resistance against phallic power: "but I do not like to tread on the tender and sweet flowers.' / 'Never mind, dear Sultana; your treading will not harm them; they are street flowers.'

From the surprised voice of Sultana, we come to know, the entire place has already been under the territory of flowers or symbolic vagina: "The whole place looks like a garden,' said I admiringly. 'You have arranged every plant so skillfully'". Sara even gives her symbolic suggestion, how Sultana can take control over her land with the increase of gynocratic power: "Your Calcutta could become a nicer garden than this if only your countrymen wanted to make it so". Sultana says they (women) are still not that strong to convince their counter parts: "They would think it useless to give so much attention to horticulture, while they have so many other things to do" (Hossain).

Next we see not only the exterior of the land but also the interior of the houses of the Ladyland is covered in floral beauty: "By this time we reached Sister Sara's house. It was situated in a beautiful heart-shaped garden" (Hossain). It is said further, "The kitchen was situated in a beautiful vegetable garden. Every creeper, every tomato plant was itself an ornament. I found no smoke, nor any chimney either in the kitchen – it was clean and bright; the windows were decorated with flower gardens. There was no sign of coal or fire." It is, in fact, a part of their plan to have the entire country covered in floral beauty: "Our noble Queen is exceedingly fond of botany; it is her ambition to convert the whole country into one grand garden" (Hossain).

Finally, the women in the land appear to be very prudent. They avoid coming in contact with the phallus. They know if they come much closer to phallus, there might be high probability to be in trouble. So, they start making new sets of law. Early marriage is banned from the very beginning: "And early marriage also was stopped. No woman was to be allowed to marry before she was twenty-one" (Hossain). Even distant male relatives are supposed to be considered as brothers. Henceforth marriage is not allowed in between them. Conversation between the two characters reveals it: '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.'

'That is very good. I see purity itself reigns over your

land...’ (Hossain)

A glaring example of avoiding phallus symbols is found in conversation between the ladies while they were planning to fight back the invaders:

A meeting of a number of wise ladies was held at the Queen's palace to advise as to what should be done to save the land. Some proposed to fight like soldiers; others objected and said that women were not trained to fight with swords and guns, nor were they accustomed to fighting with any weapons. A third party regretfully remarked that they were hopelessly weak of body. (Hossain)

Avoiding the symbols like gun and sword that immediately hint for phallus object is a good tactics from the women's end to be in safe mode. And finally, by creating 'murdana' or secluded place for men, they have tried their level best to save themselves and to make the land utopic.

In education sector also, the males and females are separated: "Accordingly a number of girls' schools were founded and supported by the government" (Hossain). Sara says further, "In a few years we had separate universities, where no men were admitted."

As we already have discussed that phallus is considered as symbol of power and productivity. As male organ, its functionality is expected to be masculine (in a traditional sense); violent, arrogant. But things are different in the new land. Most of the time, the phallus is either absent or aloof or dismantled.

Ode to the La-La Land

The men we hear about in *Sultana's Dream* do not and cannot believe in or dream of traditional or hegemonic masculinity any more. Their surrounding will not let them to express those traits of masculinity, e.g.: behaving like lion (that is how Sara compares them) (Hossain). Their identity and behavior dangles in between masculinity and femininity. This is good, at least in words of both Sarah and Sultana. Sarah likes to believe in such condition where men and women live in harmony, like the women are brains and the men are body. She is positive of the condition where Satan is locked up and this very 'Satan' will be shy enough to revolt against new system. At least their identity crisis will hinder the probability. In fact, how can the males do so, when their power is in the hand of the opposite sex? After a certain silent revolution, the women are tactical enough to reign over the phallus power. They know how to dismantle it or remove it or to keep distance from it, if the phallus poses any threat to them.

Ode to Reality

Rokeya's Sultana's Dream is a true feminist writing in a sense that it perfectly hints out how with their knowledge and intellect women can stand up against all odds. So, it is better to be strong, tactful and determined like Sarah, than to be hesitant and confused like Sultana.

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