An Ecofeminist Foremother[1]? Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's oneiric representation of nature, technology and gender roles in "Sultana's Dream"

Leslie de Bont, PRAG docteure, Nantes Université

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> Our Bengal is well-watered, fertile, green with crops – but why is the peasant's belly empty? … No. This was not the fancy of a poet, not some literary text; this was our truth. All this existed in the past, and does not anymore. *Arre*! Now we are civilized. Is this progress? (Hossain, *Freedom* 91)

The questions raised by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's narrator in "The Peasant's Sorrow" clearly echo one of her most famous texts, "Sultana's Dream," which, as the overwhelming number of recent critical pieces suggests, is deceptively simple. "Sultana's Dream" first appeared in *The Indian Ladies' Magazine* in 1905. As Sultana, the narrator and protagonist, dreams of Ladyland, a country where men are "where they ought to be […], shut […] indoors" (4-5), she marvels at the harmonious relationship between all female Ladylanders and their natural environment. Not only does "the whole place look like a garden" (4), as she exclaims to Sister Sara, her guide in Ladyland, but all technological innovations rely on a reasonable and

[1] This title is derived from a brilliant collection of essays entitled A *Feminist Foremother*: *Critical Essays on Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain,* edited by Quayum & Hasan in 2017 and one of the most comprehensive references on Hossain written in English.

sustainable use of the surrounding natural resources, which foreshadows Arne Næss' concept of ecosophy (1989)[2]. According to Hasanat, the story

> transforms into an ecofeminist's vision for a harmonious world where Woman lives only under Nature's care. For the wishful utopist narrator, Nature and her abundant resources offer alternative power source and thus open the door to a new world where Woman and Nature stand as the unmistakable agents of power. (Hasanat 117)

At first sight, "Sultana's Dream" might seem like "an unexpected text, written by a Muslim woman from colonial South Asia" (Chaudhuri 108[3]) and it might similarly seem anachronistic to speak of ecofeminism when examining a text written and published in the early twentieth century. However, the story's sense of agency and subtle depiction of the interactions of environmental and gendered issues resonate with the life and other works of Hossain and with late twentieth and early twenty-first century concerns.

Hossain is often portrayed as a tireless advocate for women's rights and education in the Indian subcontinent during the time of the British rule (Quayum, *Essential* xxiv-xxv). That she was also a writer who wrote in a number of genres, developing a distinctive literary style and a wry sense of humour is no mean feat. "Her essays have been compared with Mary Wollstonecraft's (in tone and content) and her fiction with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's" (Sengupta 2). She has also been called an inheritor of the Bengal Renaissance (Quayum, *Foremother* 47) and of the *jagaran* movement[4] and quite logically found an audience in the "Bengali language publications [that] flourished in this period" (Sengupta 17). If the turn of the century also witnessed the emergence of other influential feminist writers and activists, such as Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati or Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, as Ray notes in her fascinating *Early Feminists of Colonial India,* Hossain's wide range of interests and multifaceted activism in female education, paid work, religion, social class, hygiene, anticolonialism and agriculture stand out.

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[2] In her study of ecofeminism in Indian fiction, Patil (2020) gives us an overview of the many ecological attitudes and relationships to nature and defines ecosophy as "a philosophy of ecological harmony and equilibrium within human beings and nature" (Patil 11). In this paper, I will argue that Hossain's story develops a feminist ecosophy.

[3] Bharati Ray also shares her surprise (xi).

[4] "A term often used by Muslim writers literally meaning awakening […] from the late nineteenth century and the birth of the Muslim women's movement from the early twentieth century" (Ray 44). Historians like Amin and Ray have noted the proximity and resemblance between the "new type" of Muslim and Hindu gentries that emerged at the turn of the century (Amin 1996; Ray 44). To our knowledge, only Mukherjee (2019), drawing from the study of Sarkar (2008) has explicitly studied Hossain through the prism of

> the nationalist representations of Muslim women as 'backward' and 'victimised' whose "relation to the category of 'modern, ideal, Indian woman'" (Sarkar 49) was intrinsically associated with the image of a Hindu, upper caste, middle class *bhadramahila*, who were celebrated as signposts of 'progress' and 'enlightenment' among Bengali *bhadrasampraday* (Sarkar 49). (Mukherjee 5)

Drawing on Mies and Shiva who advanced that "ecofeminism is a new term for an ancient wisdom" (3), I will explore the ecofeminist dimension of this "utopic science fiction that shows a strong adherence to a feminist ecocritical narrative long before utopian fiction, science fiction or ecocriticism offered to establish any links with gender politics" (Hasanat 115). I aim to demonstrate that the most innovative aspects of the text lie both in its multi-layered approach to ecofeminism, which boldly redefines key terms such as strength, power or home, and in its aesthetics. In other words, I hold that Hossain uses the fruitful ambiguities of dream narratives so as to put forward a feminist eco-fiction that engages a complex relation to both technology and space.

An early, fictional example of a pluralistic ecofeminist utopia

The story's double representation of an ecological utopia and of a feminine society has led many critics to suggest that it enacts ecofeminism as its key principle or premise before the term was even coined by d'Eaubonne in 1974. For instance, Lakhi holds that "nature becomes the means through which everything Rokeya considers negative in Bengal can be overcome" (17) while Chaudhuri asserts that the story relies on a "perfect ecological equilibrium" (109), referring to the importance of fruits as the key food in Ladyland, as well as to the Ladylanders' focus on a balanced use of natural resources. However, the story's articulation of utopia, dream-narration, political discourse and critique of colonialism produces a pluralist ecofeminist discourse that articulates defining trends of ecofeminism (spiritual v. political ecofeminism (Mies & Shiva 16) or essentialist v. material ecofeminism[5] (Gaard 2011)) and actually anticipates twenty-first century attempts at reconciling them[6].

These diverging ecofeminist concerns come together in the story where nature is feminine, generous, spiritual and beautiful as much as it is political. This is conveyed by the internal focalisation and the embedded narratives: as Sister Sara guides

[5] "Cultural and spiritual feminists celebrate the liberatory potential of 'feminine values,' even as they acknowledge that many such attitudes are historically imposed upon women" (Salleh 9). By contrast, "political ecofeminists" tend to focus more on systematic change, on education, and on developing new tools towards inclusive environmental education and action. See also Lahar 93 and Mallory 309.

[6] For instance, later ecofeminist scholars revisited Mies and Shiva's groundbreaking theorisation and distinguished between the "universal and the particular in ecofeminist ethics" (e.g., Kao 2010), investigating the application of Western concepts, such as the woman-nature connection, to other cultural contexts or developing a typology of these woman-nature connections (Eaton & Lorentzen 2003). In the final chapter of her fascinating book entitled *Ecofeminism and the Indian Novel* (2020), Patil shows how late twenty-century and early twenty-first century fictions "reconceptualised ecofeminism" but I claim that in pre-conceptualising ecofeminism in ways that both anticipate and differ from Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (2009) for example, Hossain's story also develops an ecofeminist ethics and praxis.

Sultana through Ladyland, readers rely on Sultana's dream, reactions and questions and witness a dialogic experience of an ecofeminist ideal. A conversation between Sultana and Sister Sara fittingly exemplifies Hossain's encompassing approach to ecofeminism, despite its seemingly straightforward structure and nearly allegorical content. As Sultana argues that an elephant's brain is bigger and heavier than a human's and that a man's brain is bigger than a woman's (9), she relies on what Mies and Shiva called essentialist ecofeminism. By contrast, Sister Sara refers to circumstantial considerations as she explains that "women's brains are somewhat quicker than men's" (9) and that women just had to wait for the right opportunity to find a way to evade *purdah*, embrace natural resources and develop their own system.

This pluralistic proto-ecofeminism plays a key role in the story's politics and aesthetics. We first find hints and signs of spiritual ecofeminism in Sultana's repetitions of terms such as "beauty" or "harmony", which reinforce the dream-like, or perhaps heaven-like, quality of the text and contribute to its utopic dimension that breaks free from the repression of *purdah*. The religious or spiritual dimensions in the story are indeed grounded in the characters' relationship to their environment. Even though there is no detailed description of the Ladylanders' spiritual practices, Sister Sara suggests that their faith and religious habits stem from their idealised ecofeminist organisation (12). This is in line with Hossain's other essays, such as "God gives, man robs" (1927), in which she defends religious practices that are equalitarian, adapted to and respectful of one's context. In addition, there are very few challenging questions (even if the text is riddled with exclamations signposting Sultana's enthusiasm and desire to know more), and the narration somehow evokes religious texts, parables or allegories that foreshadow, among others, spiritual ecofeminist essays and fictions relying on a Mother Nature figure (such as Mies and Shiva's "female principle," 17).

Interestingly, this essentialist and spiritual approach is not solely that of Sultana, the external onlooker in Ladyland. Features ranging from the importance of motherhood embodied by the text's most powerful figure, the Queen, the sole mother of the text (who is shown walking with her daughter in her garden) to the grandeur of botany and horticulture (which rank first in the Queen's political agenda) are also thoroughly endorsed by Sister Sara, whose perspective triangulates supposedly diverging approaches and highlights the complexity and richness of Ladyland's

oneiric settings. And that botany (i.e., the aesthetic and sustainable care of gardens) is referred to as a properly valued feminine art, does point to the essentialist or spiritual approach of femininity depicting nature as a compellingly positive environment that is closely associated with femininity. According to Paul, this approach is actually the opposite of "radical feminism that locates the source of oppression in women's biological capacity for motherhood" (41). It is, however, akin to what Mies and Shiva termed "the subsistence perspective" (xxix), which is a long-term vision and praxis that aims at sustainability through the promotion of feminine values and connectedness to nature (Schultz 67).

As examples of these feminine values, community and sorority are the pillars of Ladyland, with Sister Sara patiently talking Sultana through the premises of her country's politics. This led Hasanat (121) to draw a parallel with Audrey Lorde, who famously pointed out that women's

> need and desire to nurture each other is […] redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power is rediscovered. It is this real connection which is so feared by a patriarchal world. Only within a patriarchal structure is maternity the only social power open to women. (26)

While the Queen and Sister Sara guide Sultana through "the famous universities, […] their manufactories, laboratories and observatories" (12), Hossain's text displays the wide range of perspectives that are being offered to female characters whose dominating position is also described as a product of logic and rationality, with a high level of details that complicate the initial spiritual premise. In the utopian world that Sultana dreams of, the feminine use of nature is actually derived from a gradual liberation movement that relies on science and research. Sister Sara explains that the Queen first promoted education programmes for every girl, which enabled women to escape male domination simply by making the best of natural resources. As the women in the story become the sole decision makers, they pledge to only trade with countries that do not exploit women. This is a textbook example of what Mies and Shiva call political ecofeminism, which relies on social organisation and progress through female values and ecology. A group of female scientists in Ladyland became able to "stop rain and storms" and "accumulate water from the atmosphere in pipes"; as a response, another group strove to "collect as much sun-heat as they wanted. And they kept the heat stored up to be distributed among others as required" (8-10). Their use of natural resources clearly aims at collective welfare, with protection and resource sharing as the two main subgoals.

Hasanat observes another consequence of these technological inventions:

> women seem to have shifted their focus from domesticities of life to scientific discoveries and education: The female fertile form […] seems to have reinvented herself here through her connection with and power over fertile aspects of Mother Nature" (121).

The essentialist and spiritual ecofeminism in the story is thus more than a mere starting point and thereby refines Mies & Shiva's dichotomy. Noting that "Nature" is capitalised in the story, Lakhi claims that "Nature for Rokeya, as it was for the Romantics, is presented as a work of art, a healing power, a refuge from the artificial constructs of civilization, the true place for women and a source of energy and comfort" (18). However, in the story, women are actively working with Mother Nature but still abide by its communal values: "We dive deep into the ocean of knowledge and try to find out the precious gems, which nature has kept in store for us. We enjoy nature's gifts" (12). Hasanat therefore concludes that in Ladyland

> the whole environment is woman friendly, Nature works for the benefit of women's progress and provides women with the resources they need to implement a harmonious relationship between science, women and environment, and instead of Mother Nature, it is women in Ladyland who control the climate and the whole ecosystem. (121)

In Ladyland, female agency and autonomy are indebted to a sustainable, knowledgeable and pleasant use of natural resources. The message here is that for women, knowledge, comfort and environmental care are political. In addition, this distinctly political subtext foretells many debates around the notion of agency and authority. First, the anticolonial tone, especially in the Queen's short speech at the end of the story, has been noted by many (Lakhi 2006, Chatterjee 2018, Rahman & Sarker 2018, Sengupta 2020 etc.). It also echoes Hossain's other writings in which she advocates cultural and educational independence from Western values (for instance in "Education Ideals for the Modern Indian Girl" published in 1931 in *The Mussalman)*. Rahman and Sarker also explain that the story provides us with

> an escape from the battered cities and ranting countryside that Hossain feels in colonial India. […] India was then forcibly transformed from being a country of combined agriculture and manufactures into an agricultural colony of British manufacturing capitalism. (3)

This articulation of colonialism and environmental changes is perhaps one of the most innovative discourses in the story, which focuses on the organisational power of ecofeminism and stands out as a particularly rich response. As Ray (2011), Bandyopadhyay (2018) and Sharan (2020) have noted, the industrialisation of

Bengal induced major changes in landscape and sanitation and all three authors observe that deforestation, along with water and air pollution were rampant during the British rule. That the Bengal Smoke Nuisance Act was enacted in 1905 clearly shows that air pollution arising from industrial furnaces and fireplaces in towns was already identified as a concern. Sultana's comment that she "found no smoke, nor any chimney" in Sister Sara's bright and clean kitchen can also be read within that context[7].

The complexity of the story's underlying political and ecofeminist message is also perceptible in a critical dispute about the Ladylanders' use of natural resources, with Chaudhuri arguing that everything in the story can be explained in terms of advanced technology while Hasanat indicates that Ladylanders are actually "abusing nature's bounty" (121); as such, they enact

> [what would later] happen in Western society: modern chemistry, household technology and pharmacy were proclaimed as women's saviours, because they would 'emancipate' them from household drudgery. Today we realize that much environmental pollution and destruction is causally linked to modern household technology. (Mies & Shiva 7)

The story's considerable reliance on electricity might make environmentally aware twenty-first-century readers somewhat uncomfortable but its emphasis on solar heat, and most importantly, its overall focus on balance and harmony point to another direction. Similarly, other critics disagree about whether the story is a female illustration or a refutation of Francis Bacon's well-known thesis about the domination of nature[8]. In the story, "women undoubtedly usurped that masculine space as they defied the masculine notion of power by gaining control over both man and nature" (Hasanat 115) but I argue that they do not "shake nature to her foundations," be it only because of their insistence on collective well-being and social progress. Instead, as Rahman and Sarker suggest, the text contains a multi-layered dialogue "moving spatial boundary of nature and women's freedom" (5) and actually shaking *male* domination to its foundations, as we shall see in the following section, which aims to examine the story's redefinition of phallogocentric concepts and modes of being (Paul 37).

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[7] Similarly, Lakhi notes that "the dark, coal-fired kitchens of colonial Bengal are replaced in Ladyland with a hygienic outdoors where 'the kitchen was situated in a beautiful heart-shaped vegetable garden'." (Lakhi 19)

[8] "The discipline of scientific knowledge, and the mechanical inventions it leads to, do not merely exert a gentle guidance over nature's course; they have the power to conquer and subdue her*, to shake her to her foundations*." (Bacon 93. Italics mine)

Home as a locus for ecofeminist emancipation and exploration

The story's dialogic rendition of an ecofeminist utopia brings about a gendered reversal of the masculine power over nature. But beyond the enlightening dialogue between Sultana and Sister Sara, the story also engages in an unexpected dialogue with set dichotomies, which destabilises gender roles or norms. For example, power is actually "brain power" (10) and "strength" refers to the women's harmonious adaptation to their natural environment. Lakhi sees another crucial reversal in Hossain's story, namely that:

> *Sultana's Dream* transforms the feminized site of the home into the very nation itself. This is very different from the way it is constructed in the exclusionary discourse of nation-formation as the women's sphere. The home becomes the outside world and, ironically therefore, precisely where women belong. (3)

The extension of the domestic space, i.e., a place of comfort and welfare, really fits with the story's overall values and politics. Csikszentmihály defined home as being

> much more than a shelter: it is a world in which a person can create material environment that embodies what he or she considers significant. In that sense the home becomes the most powerful sign of the self of the inhabitant who dwells within. (123)

In Lakhi's account, "such a perspective highlights the enormous potential for developing contextualized histories in which femininity itself is not just subject to, but constitutes relations of race, class, sexuality and religion; it cannot be confined to its 'proper' domain of male-female relations" (6). Expanding on this argument, I consider the characters' proto-ecofeminism as another component in the construction of female identity in Hossain's text. In that respect, the concept of place-identity proves particularly useful. Proshansky and his colleagues coined the term place-identity, to describe the "physical world socialization of the self", or the self-definitions that are derived from places (57). Place-identity can contain an affective, emotional and behavioural dimension. Cuba & Hummon add that place-identity is

> an interpretation of self that uses environmental meaning to symbolize or situate identity. [The concept] answers the question Who am I? by countering Where do I belong? […] Place identities are thought to arise because places […] provide a significant framework in which identity is constructed, maintained and transformed. (112)

In the story, Ladylanders seem to have developed a solid place-identity that goes beyond the confines of the *zenana* or of the domestic home as female characters have an informed, collective and relational identity that fully includes their natural

environment. Ladylanders aim at comfort and practicality, with the roads forming a "soft carpet" (4) and even their means of exchange and communication are convenient and green, nurturing and empowering with the flying cars preventing road accidents and allowing for a splendid bird's-eye view that embodies the Ladylanders' critical distance and perspective. Not only does the story show the importance of space as a component of identity but it also explores the potential benefits of a positive and eco-friendly relation to space on feminine identity and growth.

That is why Lakhi argues that "the outside world becomes the real home, with nature taking on the characteristics of the very home which women are meant to manage; in this outdoor home the ornaments are tomato plants and creepers" (Lakhi 17). Thus, Ladyland is a home, but it is also a progressive space, a locus of subversion, reflection and experimentation. Unlike Bachelard's famous claim[9], Hossain's utopian text explicitly subverts Bachelard's temporal limitations; it exposes the gender bias in spatial studies and somehow anticipates twenty-first-century environmental feminism (which responded to Betty Friedan's exclusive focus on domesticity and paid work). As Lakhi has it, home is actually the "liberating impulse" in Hossain's story (8), whether it is the eco-friendly kitchen or the plant-based ornamental arrangements, or because these domestic endeavours are depicted as part of a broader system designed to empower women whilst guaranteeing sustainable and comfortable interactions with the natural environment.

These "playful" numerous lexical and spatial reversals have made both Chaudhuri and Hasanat argue, however differently, that the text "radiates with the quiet confidence of strong women who betray neither the aggression nor the cruelty usually associated with power" (Chaudhuri 109; see also Hasanat 115). For example, Sultana laughs at the male criticisms that had previously described female science as "a sentimental nightmare" (9), following Sister Sara's demonstration of the power and efficiency of Ladyland's women-led research precisely because it had teamed up with nature.

That the women derive their confidence, strength and power from their educated and respectful relationship to nature is perceptible on several levels. First, education and a scientifically-based use of nature enabled the women to get rid of the enemy nations waging war on them (as they used sunrays to blind their enemies). Second,

[9] "It is a good thing for us to keep a few dreams of a house that we shall live in later, […] so much later, in fact, that we shall not have time to achieve it. For a house that was final […] would lead to thoughts—serious, sad thoughts—and not to dreams. It is better to live in a state of impermanence than in one of finality." (61)

the text's "disapproval of idleness and sloth" with Sister Sara mocking men who pretend to work but "dawdle away their time in smoking" (6-7) stands in sharp contrast with the Ladylanders "never sit[ting] idle" (12). Their attitude helped them to get rid of conflicts, Sara claims, and to reach comfort through their nature-based technologies. For example, electricity enables Sister Sara's roof to open like a lid and lets her take a shower whenever she wants, while fountains sprinkle water from the atmosphere when the heat becomes unbearable (10). All in all, the constant references to research and knowledge reveal that the women's system is flexible, adaptable, efficient and empowering. Last, the Ladylanders' rational and research-based use of nature helps them foster a strong sense of morals. Sister Sara explains that their "religion is based on Love and Truth" (12) which is why Paul points out that the queen values only knowledge and not the traditional signs of power (37). Being inclusive and constructive, rather than competitive and productive, is perhaps the key value in the story's ecofeminist system. As Sengupta has it:

> What constitutes being "mannish" (the word Rokeya uses) is not simply a reversal of roles. For instance, there is a great emphasis put on science, aesthetics […], and scientific cooking as the domain of women. While war is considered a part of the moral world of men, Universities and knowledge production expand only under the leadership of women. (34)

Crucially, the segregation of men raises questions and leads Bhattacharya to call the story a dystopian fantasy (2006); it also implies that we should not read it as a political manifesto nor as a reformist essay (even if Hossain's husband famously had called the text "a terrible revenge," but had done so with utmost pride, Quayum, *Essential* xxii). Instead, I aim to show that the story is a unique combination of fable, science fiction, satire and utopia. The following section will thus hold that Hossain's story eludes easy categorisation in both form and content: because it relies on a dream narrative, it is dialogic more than it is definite. As such, the story seems to apply utopian thinking, less as a destination and more as a means of actually being in the world. This is evidenced by the blurring of the home / outside and dream / reality dichotomies which associates feminist and ecosophical concerns. In other words, the story's dialogic bent provides a political and an ethical framework for ecofeminist action through its innovative representations of consensus, cooperation, sustainability or respect.

Writing an ecofeminist dream

The stylistic and narrative devices of Hossain's dream-narrative and their relations with the ecofeminist politics have attracted little critical attention. Dreams are, however, a recurring literary device in first-wave feminist short fiction with Annie Denton Cridge's *Man's Rights or How would you like it?* (1870) or Olive Schreiner's *Dreams* (1891) as two of the most extensive examples. Dreams enable writers to explore discrepancies and circumvent censorship while constructing possibly endless alternate perspectives. That is why Sultana, the main character's seemingly powerful name, is rather paradoxical given that she is being passively guided through the text. Despite the onomastics and despite her abilities for critical thinking, she comes out as an enthusiastic (albeit docile) character. The story is indeed punctuated with fertile contradictions, which contribute to the construction of the text's complex discourse. For instance, unlike what the opening sentences imply:

> One evening I was lounging in an easy chair in my bedroom and thinking lazily of the condition of Indian womanhood. I am not sure whether I dozed off or not. But as far as I remember, I was wide awake. (3)

the title of the story unambiguously indicates that Sultana is dreaming. As a dreamer, she might thus be considered both as an unreliable narrator whose psyche fabricated the oneiric content and as a perfectly authoritative source with a self-referencing oneiric material. To say it differently, the story relies on the polysemy of dreams, which imply both desirable and displaced narratives.

This oneiric dimension has mostly been documented through psychoanalytical approaches (Lakhi 2006; Yeasmin & Sayed 2019) as well as with references to cultural and religious studies (Murphy 2015). In addition, in her fascinating analysis of the recurrence of the waking dream in Hossain's work, Sengupta explains that:

> Unlike the explicit (and at times didactic) style with which she tackles girls' education or the strict gender segregation, questions of imagination and composition are addressed more obliquely through […] the metaphor and the frame of the waking dream. (22)

Following Sengupta's analysis, we could say that Hossain deliberately resorts to Sultana's dream as a metonymical device, or as a metaphor for the act of writing from a female point of view. That Hossain was "openly rebuked for her writing and forced to self-censor" (*ibid.*) should be taken into account when considering the aesthetic of uncertainty that playfully frames the text and is concentrated in the following line: "I am not sure if I had fallen asleep, but I believe I was awake" (3). The

story also points to other feminine creative crafts, knitting and needlework, which enact patience and delicacy and might work as another metaphor for female writing and expression thereby refining Barthes' analysis of the text as textile[10]. As Sultana admires Sister Sara's tasteful embroidery, the latter declares: "a man has not patience enough to pass thread through a needlehole even" (6), proposing that, when it comes to creating arts or a stable and sustainable environment, feminine equanimity is actually a more dynamic value than stereotypically male attitudes.

Clearly, through its distinct endorsement of stereotypical feminine values, Hossain's story does not aim at psychological realism or oneiric verisimilitude; instead, the dream sequence is used as a literary device that combines fantasy, displacements and reversals as strategies to subvert aesthetic and social categories. This is in line with analyses of later pieces of feminist utopias in which "female characters retreat into the interior space of the mind" (Kumar 98) thereby creating an intimate safe space that enables them to experiment and explore. If Hossain does not go as far as to portray altered states of consciousness that waver between madness and utopia, as a deliberate strategy to avoid patriarchal censorship while instilling doubt (Fancourt 2002), the combination of dream and utopia in "Sultana's Dream" essentially anticipates Piatti's conceptualisation of "projected places", which

> can be seen as genuinely literary concept […]. Although they are not settings, sequences of action can also be linked within the frame of projected places: Past action, planned action, action that might be desirable. (185)

Ladyland is indeed much more than a background setting as it contains the seeds for political and social reform: because of its oneiric dimension, the country is presented as a desirable or safe space for both readers and the protagonist, thereby playing a central role in the fictional economy. Through its engagement with proto-ecofeminism, the story topples aesthetic categories and develops new forms of interaction between characters and settings, with nature being the central organising principle without being associated with an explicitly spiritual practice. As such, Ladyland can also be read as an example of the Platonic Khôra, a "place, space, receptacle, container, […] in which paradigma unfolds and the cosmos is created" (Wilde 99) or "the middle ground between the visible world and the eternal ideas or else the medium through which the deal models are copied in sensible bodies"

[10] Following Barthes' famous essay "Le Plaisir du texte" (1973), the feminine dimension of this trope has been extensively documented by Roussillon-Constanty and Dickinson (2018) for example.

(Mingarelli 83). That Plato links the Khôra to the nourishing countryside and to dreams in *Timaeus* makes it a particularly relevant tool for reading Hossain's text[11].

Such connection is also perceptible in the Ladylanders' alluring relationship with their natural environment, which also incarnates the quest, described by Macé, that underlies all reading experiences and aims at helping readers to come to terms with the alterity depicted in fictional texts (45). To say it differently, through its idealised and oneiric depiction of nature and of a feminine system, the story forces both Sultana and the reader to try to make sense of an unknown, yet desirable world that still challenges core landmarks of social identity. Similarly, Lakhi suggests that:

> *Sultana's Dream* ignites a double quest for home: first, a return to the primal repressed desires for equality, respect and freedom present in every purdahnishin Bengali woman's mind, the desires which were women's real homes. The second quest for home lies within the tale itself since Rokeya transforms the entire nation or Ladyland into women's home, literally taking them out of the uncanny home of Bengal's zenanas. (10-1)

These quests also rely on satire and defamiliarisation. For example, the overarching trope of more or less symmetrical dual inversions (with women dominating men; Mardana v. zenana; honour v. liberty, night v. day; dream v. wakefulness etc.) is particularly rich, and points to a *reductio ad absurdum*, establishing the absurdity of domination over women and nature. This is achieved through the text's use of mostly invisible forces (such as air and electricity), which become yet another symbol of the women's "brain power". If Lakhi convincingly contends that "the fantastic traces the unsaid and unseen of culture, that which has been silenced, and made invisible: women's real homes" (21), I argue that Hossain's dream narrative works on a larger scope. By representing the oneiric organisation of liberated female characters, the text also helps uncover a systemic domination over women and nature while fostering openness and developing a holistic response.

That is why Lakhi explains that Hossain "uses alienating techniques which use jarring symbols that demand an end to superimposed illusions" (18), and she further holds that:

> Rokeya's aim is to estrange women readers from their familiar surroundings, or make the familiar uncanny and awaken in them their potential for transforming their present condition. Indeed, it is this strategy of defamiliarization which shocks

[11] According to Botz-Bornstein (173-4), the khôra is

> "the place" is a third kind of being which overlaps with neither being nor becoming. It advances a "logic other than that of the logos" and that is "neither 'sensible' nor 'intelligible' " (Derrida 15). The point which interests me most, however, is that in the *Timaeus*, Plato suggests that because the discourse on the *khôra* is not purely "logical," it would be "like a dream" (52b).

> Sultana into a realization of the strangeness and mutability of all that she had taken for granted. (18)

Even if I agree with Lakhi (as well as with Chatterjee's work on defamiliarisation in Hossain's story), I argue that Hossain's story subsequently unfolds a skilful familiarisation process through which readers are guided to the text's oneiric logic.

This familiarisation works as a strategy of the reader's involvement. As readers, we gradually discover the feats of Ladyland and, along with Sultana, we appreciate its inner coherence and are made to review our "horizon of expectation" (Jauss 22). Sultana's emotional responses first express surprise but quickly betray her enchantment ("the idea is marvellous" 12) as she begs Sister Sara to provide her with more details ("please let me know how you carry on land cultivation…" 12). While Bagchi imparts that Hossain "plays with [processes] of self-formation and processes of gendering" (127), I reason that these processes are aimed at readers and that Hossain's text aims at destabilising readers and at progressively conveying a compelling egalitarian message that stems from this defamiliarisation. Referring to what she called the "prolepsis approach," Paul wrote that the story shows "how women-centric societies can exist, not in the absence of male members, but despite their presence; and how such societies can be built on models of co-dependency and mechanisms of mutual support" (44). What the story emphasises is that these mechanisms need to be explored through the safe space of fictional and dreamlike experimentations first. Through its recurring uses of liminal moments (such as dialogues, dreams and defamiliarisation processes) as well as rich articulations of modes and devices, the story also conveys the possibility of co-dependency between humans and nature provided that women, like men, can dream and experiment with fiction, with the ethics of care and with nature.

Hossain was not just a social reformer with a keen awareness of gender and environmental issues, but also an innovative writer experimenting with the powers of fiction. That is why this story is both a convincing example of feminist and utopian science fiction and an eco-critical answer to androcentric attitudes, as it relies on the fruitful ambiguities of fiction both as a means to depict this intricate and intimate connection and as a vehicle for exploration.

In his now classic study, Kumar argues that there is "a fundamental contradiction between religion and utopia," because "religion [is] typically an otherworldly concern;

utopia's interest is in this world" (10). This is in line with Touraine who explained that "utopia began only when society abandoned the image of paradise. Utopia is one of the products of secularization" (29). Yet "Sultana's Dream" challenges these supposedly western (and perhaps masculine) labels: precisely because of its oneiric basis and settings that displace and remodel social, political and environmental issues, Ladyland is constructed as a direct response to the realistic world without being a product of secularization as it both criticises and integrates religious or spiritual habits, discourses and experiences. In addition, even if the story depicts an idealised relation to nature, the rest of Ladyland's premise does not really convey an ideal or a fully desirable world *per se*. As Hasanat noted "such an audacious attempt raises more questions than it can answer, especially when the questions that are raised are yet to be asked by her fellow contemporary women" (114). These questions include Hossain's educational and religious concerns, but also feminine depictions of dreams or eco-fantasies, and an invitation for more female narratives showing the richness and complexity of the history of South Asian feminism. "*Sultana's Dream* too addresses not just an undifferentiated patriarchy but one that intersects with religion and community; family and kinship; and nature, ecology and development" (Chaudhuri 112).

The systemic vision of oppression and its oneiric response foreshadow more recent works on ecofeminism and on social and environmental psychology (presaging studies or concepts such as intersectionality, place identity or gender and environmental risk perception for instance), which really point to its relevance for 21st-century readers. That "Sultana's Dream" also drew recent critical and artistic attention (with Durga Bai's illustrated edition of the story published by Tara Books in 2014 or Chitra Ganesh's linocuts exhibition at the University of Michigan in 2018) suggests that Hossain's text might eventually engage in the ambitious dialogue it had sought to open on feminine imagination, ecofeminism and female spaces, whether they are utopian or projected. All in all, Hossain's story, and other ecofeminist utopian narratives, might then be read as a feminist and literary version of Foucault's heterotopia, a locus of exploration and experimentation with a variety of ecofeminist currents, that is, in Foucault's words, one of those places that

> do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. (3)

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