

The Men Died, Long Live the Women: A Comparative Analysis of Begum Rokeya Sakhwat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* and Virginia Bergin's *Who Runs The World*

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Abstract: Rokeya Sakhwat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* (1905) imagines a utopian society where the men have withdrawn behind the zenana, following a humiliating defeat in a war and the women have successfully replaced them in all walks of life creating a peaceful and happy world. A little more than a hundred years later, Virginia Bergin re-imagines a similarly happy world in her novel *Who Runs the World?* (2017), but it shatters when a boy, named Mason finds his way into this world. Mason reveals the dark underside of this utopia. The men here have not willfully withdrawn into the zenana, but are being held captive in various secret facilities, and are reared for their semen. Surprisingly, the entire world of women instead of turning a sympathetic ear to Mason's words, bares its claws and teeth and pounces upon the little boy to keep his existence a secret and have him sent back from the hell hole from where he has escaped. This paper wishes to compare both these two texts, and using the critical tools of Feminism and Deconstruction; bring out the very tenets that had enabled Bergin to turn a utopian dream on its head and paint a picture of a dystopian society.

Keywords: Rokeya Sakhwat Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*, Virginia Bergin, *Who Runs The World*

I

Published in 1516, Thomas More's *Utopia* had marked the formal introduction of the term "utopia" that was used to describe a fictional island society and its near perfect social, political, economic and religious organization. Ever since then, the term "utopia" has gained such wide acceptance and coinage that every author, political leader or religious guru has gone on to claim that utopias are achievable dreams if one only dares to follow their particular ideology or principles. Take for instance, Leibniz believed that the world that we live in is the best possible alternative which God has chosen to create in reality, and "therefore we live in the best possible world, originally provided with a lifetime warranty" (Mihailescu 241). In tandem with the Leibniz world, utopian worlds have been envisioned time and again by the great literary masters, such as William Shakespeare's portrayal of *The Forest of Arden* or the *Island of Prospero*; the epic delineation of Eden in Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the Blakean world of *Beluah* or *Innocence*.

In stark contrast to this blissful, happy and ordered existence of the utopia is the fallen world of dystopia. In this world, the Leibnizian world vision is replaced by a Nietzschean vision, where God is either dead or he is replaced by an old "Inquisitor" who has not only thwarted the second coming of Christ or the Godly father and but has also usurped his position by declaring himself as a secular God and has "chosen this world for the thousands of millions of people, finally happy for not being supposed to choose in their turn" (Mihailescu 241). Mihailescu has chosen to define dystopia as:

Stories that contrast the failure of the main character with the unstoppable advance of society towards totalitarianism. The loss of the self is the character's final acknowledgement of, and ultimate contribution to, society's being definitively victorious. This story of hope, deception and decay strongly opposes dystopia to its utopian predecessors almost as strongly as narrative is opposed to description. (Mihailescu 215)

Thus, dystopia is a subgenre of the utopian fiction and connotes a negatively imagined world, one that is dark, desolate and corrupted by the passion and desires of the human mind. It is nevertheless interesting to note that although proto-dystopian worlds have been imagined by authors before, such as the condition of Scotland during the reign of Macbeth as depicted by William Shakespeare, or the fallen world of Ulro in Blakean imagination; the norm of imagining a dystopian future has gradually picked up since the fag end of the twentieth century with the publication of such foundational works as Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *1984* (1949), Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), until in the modern century, there has been a boom in writing dystopian fiction, with almost every author penning something that has contributed to the richness of this subgenre. This popularity of the dystopian subgenre does not stem from "a satirical critique of 'cynical reason'" (Mihailescu 215) alone, but also from the realistic degradation of life and society owing to environmental pollution, gendered oppression and inequality, wars and famines, the mad progress of science with the aim of replacing the "human" factor from all walks of life; and most importantly, the general apathy of the government and administration to commit themselves to the general good of all. Thus, contemporary dystopian fiction like *Never Let Me Go* (2005) by Kazuo Ishiguro, *The MaddAddam* trilogy (2003-13) by Margaret Atwood has truly established this subgenre as the only one that closely mimics the reality of today's modern life.

However, perhaps the most significant contribution to this subgenre of fiction is being made by the movie industry that turns out each year a new horror that seems sure to plague humanity in the coming years. The most popular among them is of course, the outbreak of the mad cannibalistic horde of the undead, popularly called zombies; while others include the invasion of the earth by giant sized alien organisms called the Kaiju or an alternate reality where the human beings have been enslaved by an army of super-intelligent robots and machines. Be as it may, one cannot also escape the fact, that much of the popularity of this genre of fiction and movies is also owing to the fact that all readers/viewers carry within their unconscious a fear of the future, one that has been indoctrinated in them by their religious upbringing—the Judgement Day for the Christians, Qu'amat for the Muslims and the coming of the Kalki Avatar for the Hindus. In other words, people love to be told in different ways and through varied narratives that one day the world is surely going to end by such and such way or by such and such agent; but until that happens one can enjoy the cake while it lasts.

The following paper is built up on this pretext, as it tries to trace the cause that had led Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's dream of Ladyland turn into the dystopian land run by women as

delineated by Virginia Bergin in her latest novel *Who Runs the World?* with the passage of time.

II

Born in 1880, Roekya Sakhawat Hossain is regarded as one of the forerunners of the Indian feminists, and had made significant contributions towards the propagation of women's education and making them self-reliant.

Her novel *Sultana's Dream* published in 1905 in the Indian Ladies Magazine was first written as a trial exercise in English that had been secretly taught to her by her brother. Her husband, Khan Bahadur Syed Sakhawat Hossain greatly encouraged her to publish the novel, and it is said to be largely his encouragement that helped the novel to see the light of the day.

The novel *Sultana's Dream* envisions a utopian feminist society which is primarily based on a role reversal between men and women; where men live a secluded life inside the zenana, while the women are tasked with job of performing an array of duties ranging from public administration and scientific inventions to cultivating crops. The novel begins with the titular protagonist Sultana dozing off one evening, but is soon woken up by the arrival of a visitor, who she mistakes as Sister Sara. The visitor invites Sultana to take a walk with her outside, and Sultana accords; believing that a brief walk in the garden under the cover of darkness, accompanied by a woman would not call forth the disapproving eyes of the neighbors. However, to her surprise, Sultana discovers that, it is broad daylight outside and instead of men; the streets are filled with women engaged with a variety of different jobs. In her surprise, Sultana enquires of her companion that what is this place called, and in return she receives the reply that this is Ladyland, a realm that is ruled by Virtue itself. With the turn of the pages Sultana comes to know of the social, political and economic organisation of Ladyland.

Before the beginning of the reign of the Queen, Ladyland was ruled by a patriarchal Prime Minister who enforced strict "purdah" for the women, and thereby confining them to the zenana or the household; leaving the men in charge of all walks of life. Nevertheless, soon enough the tables turned, as the men were badly beaten back in a war that had erupted with the king of a neighboring kingdom, leaving no other option but the women to take stock of the situation. The Queen quickly understood that muscle power could not defeat the foes at the border and therefore she needed to defeat them with brain power. Likewise, the Queen appealed to her fellow womenfolk for help, and the Lady Principal of a Women's university came up with the ingenious idea of using concentrated solar energy upon the foes for vanquishing them. Soon enough the women won the war both at home and at the border: for not only did they successfully repel the attack of the king of the neighboring kingdom; they also effectively reversed the confinement of the women by asking the men to withdraw into the zenana (which now came to be known as the *mardana*) leaving behind the women the job of running the world. Although Sultana is clearly delighted at this role reversal, she feigns surprise only to question her guide that did the men never protest? The guide is equally witty enough to reply that they did plea and protest a lot, but the Queen was firm in her decision because: "It is not

safe so long as there are men about the streets, nor is it so when a wild animal enters a marketplace” (Hossain 7).

Various, the guide is heard to remark that men are no better than lunatics and wild animals, who if let free are only good enough to pounce on hapless and innocent women and cause them much harm and woe, that is further complicated by the extreme corruption and high levels of crime that plague the society. The guide genuinely gloats over the fact, that in the absence of the men, there has been no need of police or armed forces, as the rates of criminal activities has fallen to a negligible low. According to the guide, the only punishment that is meted out to the criminal/errant is that she is exiled and forbidden ever to return to Ladyland; while the truly penitent is forgiven by the Queen.

Hereafter, the guide points out onto Sultana a number of key features of the state of Ladyland, ranging from the most trivial to the most extraordinary—features that are specifically imagined to voice a vituperative criticism at the sorry state of general affairs in an administration run by men. For instance, the guide states, in the reign of the virtuous Queen, great emphasis is laid on the cause of women’s education which had always been neglected during the reign of the men. The emphasis on women’s education is said to have greatly benefitted the nation of Ladyland as the nation is said to have progressed in leaps and bounds in scientific innovations: the nation of Ladyland faces no drought as rainwater necessary for irrigation of the fields is directly drawn from the clouds, the fields are accordingly tilled with the help of electricity and cooking is carried out in the homes using solar energy leading to zero pollution from burning wood and coal. Furthermore, road accidents have been brought down to nil, as women in Ladyland travel by flying cars, and this has further helped in ensuring a road that is never muddy again. Sultana’s guide, the presumed Sister Sara also informs her naive listener, that despite such great achievements and great workload, the women of Ladyland are effectively able to finish off their daily assignments within two hours as unlike the men at work, the women do not waste “six hours every day in sheer smoking” twelve “cheroots daily” (Hossain 10). Thereafter learning much about the nation of Ladyland and after a brief interaction with the Queen, Sultana while touring on the flying car with Sister Sara, falls asleep and wakes up only to find that she had been all the while “lounging in the easy-chair” (Hossain 19) dreaming this wonderful dream of women’s liberation.

III

Published in 2017, Virginia Bergin’s novel *Who Runs the World* is a graphic realisation of Sultana’s dream about the conditions of women in Ladyland. Here Virginia Bergin has achieved to paint a world that has brought to absolute reality the socio-political, cultural, scientific and economic conditions that Begum Rokeya Sakhwat Hossain had imagined in her novel, as the men here have been secluded for purposes of conservation in sanctuaries, while the women are left in charge of carrying out all the necessary functions for the upkeep of the world.

The novel begins with the young girl, River making her way down a wood accompanied by her pony, Milpy dragging a cartload of cider apples. At once, River notes that a person is lying

prostrate on the ground, in the middle of the path through which River is to pass. Upon closely observing, River is startled to find that the person lying across is a boy; and upon further enquiry learns that his name is Mason. River is clearly startled at her discovery, because this is the first time, she has seen a boy ever in her life. Although Mason is at first hostile towards River, but the deep gnash in his arm along with his poor health conditions, makes him pass out, leaving River no other option to haul him on to the cart and carry him off to her home in the village, populated by three generations of women—the Granummas, the Mummas and the Little Ones, made up of girls of all ages from teens to infants.

At her home, River finds Granumma Kate perceptibly worried about her return, but when she finds that the cause of River's delay has been her sudden encounter with the opposite gender, Granumma Kate becomes suddenly very conscious about the wellbeing of Mason and does everything in her power to help the boy tide over the present crisis of life.

With the progress of the story much is revealed about the present society of Granumma Kate and River. The social, political and economic structure of the society that had prevailed when the men were alive is completely overturned in this modern era where the political administration run by the womenfolk is solely based on a mutual acknowledgement and understanding of each other's arguments; that is in short referred to as "accord". Furthermore, the administration of the entire world is based upon a hierarchical structure, where the world council comprised of representatives drawn from the entire world meet and "accord" upon how to conduct the business of global administration. Just below the world council is the national council—River's mother is a part of one such national council of representatives, and thus having the capacity to wield enormous administrative and political influence—which is followed by the "group of 150"—River would later on remark, that the very purpose of calling this group by the numerical "150" is not because of its strength, but because of the fact that this is largest number of persons with whom a human being can maintain a social relation—which is mainly tasked with the job of administering to the local issues; and also serves as a quasi-court for settling petty disputes. In addition to this, similar to Ladyland, the women here are tasked with the job of mending to every profession—starting from peasantry and deep sea fishing to running the armed security service; and much like Ladyland, in this world run by women alone, there is a great emphasis on living a life that is in harmony with nature.

However, what is strikingly dissimilar in this world run by women is that, unlike in the Ladyland, where men have willingly withdrawn into the *mardana*, the men in this world run by women had not willingly withdrawn into isolation but was forced to do so, as owing to the pandemic outbreak of a virus that only selectively targeted the XY chromosome. Young male babies across the globe were willingly given up by their mothers so that they maybe "preserved" in these "sanctuaries, and return when the threat of the virus was no more. However, in reality the threat of the virus was willingly over-emphasised by a few in power, so that the men may never escape and turn the world order to topsy-turvy again. The escape of Mason and his successful survival in the larger world outside clearly helped prove the shrewd politics and the mad hunger of power that was going on in the world outside.

Furthermore, Mason's escape from this prison like "sanctuary" also clearly helped to reveal the kind of life they were forced to live inside. According to Mason's testimony, the life in these sanctuaries was nasty and brutish, as the young boys repeatedly ran the risk of being gang-raped by older men (men who were old enough to be their uncles or fathers) or being severely beaten up if they refused to serve as slaves under them. Moreover, according to Mason, the male population within these sanctuaries are treated little better than cattle as they are raised for the sole purpose of their semen. One is likely to find a close similarity here with the role of the Handmaids in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, where the Handmaids, dressed in their red habits are no better than a womb walking on two legs. This inhuman treatment of either the male or the female body and its evaluation/appreciation only on the basis of what it contributes to the purpose of reproduction/procreation is a sin against humanity itself.

Virginia Bergin's novel *Who Runs The World* thus helps to bring to light the aporia of the dream dreamt by Sultana, that had contributed in turning her utopian vision into a dystopian nightmare. It is perhaps owing to this reason, that Bergin ends her novel on a note of hope, where we find River successfully breaking up a meeting of the national council and arguing in favour of releasing the XYs from their captive life. The novel ends, a few months later after this disruption, River travelling back to her village using the same cart track as the one she had been using the beginning of the novel, only to find that a free Mason standing in the middle of the road, waving towards her.

Thus, to conclude, it can be ideally remarked that the cause behind a dystopian worldly existence should never be squarely placed on the shoulders of one particular gender, but should rather be ascertained to the unequal treatment of genders and the mutual disrespect shown to each other. In other words, if man and woman would only treat each other as fellow human beings, and nothing more, the world would truly be a better place to live in.

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