

**NPTEL**  
**Nation and Narration**

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**Transcript from the Video**

Hello everyone! In the previous lecture we saw Radha Kumar's distinction between colonial and democratic influences on Indian feminism, tracing its evolution through major historical phases. Initially shaped by colonial modernity and reformist efforts (e.g., by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Vidyasagar), early reforms like the abolition of sati and promotion of widow remarriage often reinforced Brahmanical patriarchy. During the Gandhian era, women entered political life, but largely in roles tied to traditional gender expectations. Post-independence feminism turned to constitutional rights, but by the 1970s, disillusionment led to a more intersectional focus on violence, labor, and bodily autonomy, revealing the limits of universal legal remedies—especially evident in the Shah Bano case. Feminist thinkers like Kumkum Sangari and Uma Chakravarti emphasized intersecting patriarchies, cautioning against homogenized views of womanhood. We also analysed the role of women's autobiographies in identity formation, particularly within Anglo-American feminist theory and Indian contexts. These narratives challenge dominant, individualistic, and masculine forms of autobiography, offering collective, resistant self-representations. Scholars like Barbara Johnson and Sheila Rowbotham describe the autobiographical self as divided, navigating between cultural imposition and personal experience. This internal split, likened to Du Bois' "double consciousness," allows for the emergence of new feminist subjectivities.

In the Indian context, women's autobiographies reveal how the 'Indian woman' was historically constructed, especially during colonialism and nationalism. Social reformers and prescriptive texts promoted an idealized modern woman—educated yet domestically confined. J. Devika calls this the 'order of gender,' where women's freedom was conditional, requiring them to remain moral guardians of the home. A central text discussed is Rasasundari Devi's *Amar Jiban* (1876), a pioneering autobiography by an Indian woman. While praised by male contemporaries for aligning with ideals of domesticity and religiosity, feminist scholars like Karlekar, Sarkar, and Mazumdar argue that the text subtly resists patriarchal norms. Rasasundari reclaims the domestic sphere (antahpur) as a site of intellectual agency, learning to read and write in secret. Her desire for knowledge is justified through religious devotion, allowing her to navigate social constraints.

However, the autobiography also reinforces caste and class hierarchies. Rasasundari, from an upper-caste family, critiques women working outside the home and presents her life as a universal female experience—thus excluding lower-caste and working-class women. Scholars like Partha Chatterjee and Sumanta Banerjee highlight how nationalist discourses shaped a binary between the 'new woman' (moral, upper-class) and the 'common woman' (immoral, lower-class), reinforcing social divisions. Ultimately, Indian women's autobiographies serve as critical interventions—both conforming to and contesting dominant gender ideologies. They reflect the complex interplay between individual agency, cultural prescriptions, and nationalist frameworks, offering nuanced insights into gender, identity, and self-representation.

Today we will discuss another text that marked a significant contribution to women's writing both in terms of literary style, use of dream narrative, science fiction in imagining an alternate utopia where women rule the world. We will talk about the story, "Sultana's Dream" (1905) by Begum Rokeya. The story, 'Sultana's Dream', begins with an attack on the Indian patriarchy who "lounge in an easy chair" and think "lazily of the condition of Indian womanhood". Hence, the moment the female narrator begins her discussion about women's position in Indian society, she is unsure whether she is awake or asleep. "The moonlit sky sparkling with thousands of diamonds like star" indicates that it is still night, but the moment she goes on a walk with Sister Sara, she finds out that it is a fine morning. Thus, from the very beginning the narrator, as a representative of the women who live in a society dominated by patriarchy, engages in a battle with the dominant discourses that provides us with presupposed definitions and binaries of day/night, awake/ asleep and so on.

The sudden appearance of Sister Sara baffles the narrator who says, "how she came in, I do not know." Sister Sara's arrival brings the news of a change. She blurs the edges of the binaries and makes the narrator question the dominant social system by providing an example of an alternative society. This story is thus unique in that it does not stop after voicing the concerns regarding women, but seeks to find an answer to it in the form of Ladyland.

The knowledge about women's condition, i.e. the 'purdah' system through which men keep women in veils, has led the women of Ladyland to come up with a new methodology, where women now run the government and men now live behind veils. They have completely discarded the patriarchal language and have introduced new terminologies and new meanings to old terminologies, as is evident in the replacement of the word "zenana" with "mardana" where men stay behind the doors (in the dominant terminology 'mardana' refers to male sexual prowess, which is now completely undermined with the new meaning that shows as inefficient and irrelevant, to the extent that women do not trust them even with needlework). In the same way the term "mannish", which would come closer to what we refer to 'manliness' in a patriarchal society, means "shy and timid" in the Ladyland. The narrator's comment, "Shy and timid like men? It was really a joke," is very pertinent in a male dominated society. But immediately she is forced to re-navigate her knowledge about women and men at large when she finds out that her companion is not Sister Sara but a stranger. This "stranger" signifies all those alternative ideologies, which bring out the voices of the oppressed. Therefore, concern and fear for the strangeness is not so much in terms of visual appearance of Sister Sara, but in terms of the new morning she brings with her. Sister Sara's words bring out all those discomforts which the society always keeps aside. It is this dominant voice that speaks through the narrator when she says, "I feel somewhat awkward, as being a purdahnishin woman I am not accustomed to walking about unveiled."

Ladyland appears with all its grandeur in front of the narrator. Sister Sara claims that it is "free from sin and harm" because men no longer run the country and they are not allowed to go outside without veils. Sister Sara's invitation to the narrator and the reader, "Will you please come out and have a look at our garden?" literally implores us to come out of our comfortable closets, where we have accepted patriarchy as a norm, and come up with new choices. This garden is not the Garden of Eden where Eve is shown as the sole reason for the Fall of man; instead, with the Queen as the ruler and women in the important positions, the garden of Ladyland flourishes to its utmost level.

Women in the Ladyland are not only resourceful, they are efficient in establishing a symbiotic relationship with nature as contrast to men who “think it is useless to give so much attention to horticulture, while they have so many other things to do.” Women, on the other hand, distribute their time equally for every work and hence can complete it in time. Sister Sara finishes her work at the laboratory in two hours, whereas men spent six hours to do the same work. This indicates the introduction of a new work ethics where women prioritise both embroidery and laboratory work as “work” in Marxian terms (a practice that is recognized by the society and the laborer gets wage for that), unlike the accepted social system where house work for women is never counted as paid labour. The very fact that the women of Ladyland have divided their “work-hours” between governmental work, embroidery and so on, show that women do not spend their time in gossiping (as the general notion goes) but spend their time by engaging directly into production of materials.

Sister Sara challenges the conventional religious and cultural justifications for the seclusion of women, which pronounces women are “naturally weak”. She compares men to “lunatics who cannot be trusted out of doors”. She further accuses the narrator that women in the narrator’s society are shut up in the zenanas because they had allowed themselves to be ruled by men. Physical prowess cannot determine one’s dominion over the other; it is intellect and ideology that makes one a ruler and the other a slave. That is why even though tiger is physically stronger than man, it is man who has put chains on the tiger. Similarly, it is wrong to predict that men are “supposed to” rule over women because women’s brains are smaller than that of men. As we seen in case of Ladyland, it is the women who succeed in scientific and technological inventions and bring victory to the country with their sheer intelligence while the physically stronger men fail in the battle.

Education has been interpreted as a major reason for liberating women. The time when the writer is writing this story, 1905, is an important time when protests were going on against the British Empire’s decision of dividing Bengal, and women were active participants in these protests. Considered as the Renaissance of Bengal, this era also brought the question of women’s education to the front. Although women were taking parts in freedom movements, home was still seen as the sacred place for women. That is why, women’s education in Bengal, like feminism in India, looked like a group of enlightened men benevolently educating their teenaged brides. Women themselves were mostly absent from the public debate about whether women should be educated or not. Even when the question of women’s education arose, they usually maintained to make women better wives of men. Like the Victorian women, the education of women in Bengal catered to promote conduct books, books on morality and so on. That is why, when the Queen of Ladyland circulates the order that “all the women in her country should be educated” and especially in science, the question of education gains a different momentum because science is primarily seen as “men’s subject” – something beyond women’s capacity. Women, however, prove to be even more innovative than men in their utilization of science to control rain and heat (albeit in a positive manner –without destroying nature). When women win the battle using the heat-controller, they prove that their invention was not “a sentimental nightmare”, as men had predicted, but is sue to a fruitful application of their “brain”.

It is interesting that men agree to go to the zenanas for the sake of “honor and liberty”, two predominantly male attributes, and eventually get used to the “purdahs”. By the time they claim their freedom, women are already ruling the country successfully and the Queen pronounces that “if their services should ever be needed they would be sent for, and that in the meanwhile they should remain where they were.” Crime is eliminated because the

tyrannical men no longer roam around freely. Ladyland freely practice forgiveness because their religion is not based on rigid rules, as Sister Sara claims, but on Love and Truth. We are never told whether this “love” should pertain to heterosexual category or homosexual category or something else, but we see a subtle camaraderie between women when the narrator feels shy as she holds hands with Sister Sara. Their relationship with men is not bound in social (marriage) or sexual bonding; “a distant cousin is as sacred as a brother.” Nevertheless, there is always an attempt to make every human interaction sacrosanct. Ladyland is portrayed as the ultimate paradise where no one steals other’s possession; no one covets the Koh-i-Noor; all they are interested in is the welfare of the country.

Yet, after everything, hierarchy is maintained in this land. We are told how the Queen’s word is the ultimatum in the land, and how the two lady principals compete with each other in professional level. The very fact that women study in separate colleges, and men must remain into the mardana while women are out in the world, show that man and woman cannot stay together in this land. One’s existence is determined by the absence (whether consented or forced) of the other. The binary thus remains in this land. Ironically, therefore, this society is not much different from the ones ruled by men because here “gentlemen are kept in the Mardanas to mind babies, to cook and to do all sorts of domestic work”, but there is no mention that they get paid, or are acknowledged, for their house work. Instead, it is presumed that “cooking is so easy a thing that it is simply a pleasure to cook!” Plato’s *Republic* and Thomas More’s *Utopia* had no place for women; in the similar way, the female utopia can be established only when men are removed from the society, or are kept behind curtains, “in their proper place, where they ought to be.”

Sister Sara can now laugh when the narrator says, “we must leave it now; for the gentlemen may be cursing me for keeping them away from their duties in the kitchen so long”, but the ladyland can remain only in Sultana’s dream. At times it would seem Sultana is somewhat skeptical about the existence of Ladyland (as is evident in her incessant questions to Sister Sara). On one hand, it presents a probable picture of a female utopia; but on the other hand, despite men’s absence, anarchy is retained in the society in the form of social and racial hierarchy (Sister Sara continually accuses Sultana for being an Asian woman; there is a sense of superiority in her). That is why the story must end abruptly and Sultana has to wake up; she must slip and fall from lady land.

Now let us summarise today’s lecture. Begum Rokeya’s *Sultana’s Dream* (1905) is a pioneering feminist utopian narrative that blends elements of science fiction, dream allegory, and social satire to critique patriarchal norms and imagine a society where women are empowered through education, intellect, and governance. The narrative subtly interrogates and mirrors real-world gender inequalities in colonial Bengal, particularly the purdah system and the limitations on women’s education. Although the era was witnessing a growing involvement of women in nationalist movements, their role in debates on education and public life remained minimal, often dictated by male reformers. By envisioning a society where the Queen mandates universal education for women — particularly in science — Rokeya pushes against these prevailing norms. However, the utopia is not without its contradictions. Although men are now subordinate, the story reproduces a binary structure: one gender’s freedom is built upon the seclusion of the other. Additionally, class and racial hierarchies subtly persist, as seen in Sister Sara’s condescending remarks towards Sultana as an “Asian woman.” The ultimate irony is that while Ladyland seems an inversion of patriarchy, it still relies on exclusion to maintain order — thus mirroring the flaws of male-dominated societies. The story challenges dominant ideologies and rewrites social,

cultural, and linguistic norms that marginalize women. By inverting the purdah system and assigning public roles to women, Rokeya exposes the arbitrariness of gender roles. Rokeya innovatively uses the dream form and utopian genre to bypass the constraints of her time and imagine radical alternatives to patriarchal society. This narrative strategy paved the way for future feminist writers to explore speculative fiction as a tool for social critique. Rokeya foregrounds women's access to education — especially scientific education — as the key to liberation, contrasting with the contemporary perception of education as a tool to make women better wives. Her portrayal of women as inventors and intellectual leaders was revolutionary for its time. The story situates the question of women's rights within the broader political context of colonial Bengal, subtly critiquing both British imperialism and native patriarchy.

In the next lectures we will learn more about women's writings and activism.

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