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Utopia or Dystopia: Connecting Begum Rokeya and Bernardine Evaristo

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Abstract

This research paper attempts to bridge the voices of Begum Rokeya, a British Indian writer, and Bernardine Evaristo, a contemporary British writer. One of the primary texts is Rokeya's "Sultana's Dream," and another is Bernardine Evaristo's "The White Man's Liberation Front." This article follows the qualitative-descriptive method to analyze two primary texts with reference to Thomas More's concept of "Utopia" and John Stuart Mill's framework of "Dystopia." Many scholars claim these stories to be feminist utopias. However, the purpose of the study is to create an analogy between these stories by pointing out some discrepancies in these utopias. Nevertheless, this research does not posit any anti-feminist stance and does not question the celebration of womanhood in the two stories. It shows that none of the stories expresses any ideal solution for equality and harmony. The stories present men and women in opposition to each other instead of narrating them as partners. The questions they raise on patriarch are correct, but that never means it ought to be replaced with matriarchy. This research does not defend patriarchy but finds that the models of women's superiority presented in the two stories are dystopian. As the stories have a universal appeal with a similar essence, both of them create a bridge between the voices of local and global women's rights. Still, the paper suggests the settings as dystopian because of the lack of a tone for equality.

Keywords: *Cross-Cultural Voices, Faulty Utopias, Gender Opposition, Sultana's Dream, The White Man's Liberation Front, Women's Superiority.*

Introduction

Begum Rokeya (1880-1932) was a renowned feminist writer from British India. Rokeya's narrative dream vision story, "Sultana's Dream, (1905)" is often claimed as a feminist utopia by many literary scholars. The scientific aspects of this story indicate an idealistic visionary world for women. She points out many strict social dogmas and suppressions of those victimized women in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. She challenges social stereotypes and institutionalized oppression of women creating an "imagined Ladyland" (Khatun and Ahammed 1). In "Sultana's Dream," she takes a role-reversal narrative technique. Rokeya's protagonist, Sultana, dreams of a world where men are confined. This situation ensures women's freedom and security, creating a crime and sin-free Ladyland. The research paper takes "Sultana's Dream" as a primary text and analyses it as a dystopian narrative instead of treating it as a utopian one.

Similarly, the British writer Bernardine Evaristo (1959-present) covers women's rights, gender issues, and racial equality in her literary pieces. She, too, uses a role-reversal narrative style in "The White Man's Liberation Front" (2020). This story covers Brian's online activism for white-British men's rights. This story covers a similar setting to Rokeya's "Sultana's Dream," where women dominate men. However, Evaristo's women characters are limited to only enjoying morally accurate rights. They manifest several instances of immoral relationships, professional dishonesty, and excessive alcoholism. Evaristo's tone is satiric, and male characters are presented in a docile and meek style. This research article includes "The White Man's Liberation Front" as another primary text. Both stories create humor in some parts, but none can be regarded as an ideal model for equality and harmony.

To shed further light on the issues, this study focuses on the two stories to bridge the voices of two writers from different socio-political backgrounds writing for similar issues in different eras. The reader may consider Begum Rokeya's voice as a representation of the local narrative for the freedom of sub-continental women. This paper includes a British writer's narrative dealing with similar issues to create a global connection, as women's rights are not local but global issues to address. This research article praises the initiatives of the authors to celebrate womanhood; however, it argues that none of the models are flawless. As fictional stories, they are commendable. Nevertheless, the intended confinement, suppression, and confinement of men in the stories do not present any ideal model. In this sense, the stories sound dystopian instead of utopian. Moreover, two frameworks "utopia" and "dystopia" have been incorporated in the paper. Thomas More's *Utopia* envisions an ideal society rooted in equality, focusing on a place free from greed, hierarchy, and social oppression. On the other hand, John Stuart Mill's concept of "dystopia" suggests an imagined society characterized by misery, oppression, and control. This research article incorporates these two frameworks with the two short stories.

Method

This paper follows a qualitative descriptive method based on the two primary texts: Begum Rokeya's "Sultana's Dream" and Bernardine Evaristo's "The White Man's Liberation Front." Besides analyzing the primary texts, this article surveys a few existing research papers and opinions. There are many papers on Rokeya's story available. In Evaristo's story, the number of studies is limited. This study attempts to exemplify a compare and contrast in the two stories, addressing their thematic limitations as utopias. In addition, the research explores the possibility of these two stories as dystopian settings. The crafts of both writers are praiseworthy as feminist narratives, but addressing that is not a primary goal of this research. Instead, it looks at the possible social inconsistencies that may occur if the narratives were feasible. Essentially, these two stories are vastly claimed to be the best-presented feminine utopias, and this paper is significant to propose a counter-narrative.

Furthermore, this research takes into consideration two concepts; Thomas More's "utopia" and John Stuart Mill's "dystopia." The study adopts an analogical

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approach to compare the two primary texts with the said concepts. It is necessary to mention that plenty of researchers have looked into the feminist issues in such stories using different feminist literary theories. However, this research does not directly utilize any such approach but looks into the story from a socio-scientific point of view to comment upon men-women relationships. This paper also includes an essential review of some previously done analytical write-ups on the relevant topics. In essence, this research connects the concepts of "utopia" and "dystopia" with Begum Rokeya's "Sultana's Dream" and Bernardine Evaristo's "The White Man's Liberation Front" in an analytical and critical approach.

Results and Discussions

Many scholars claim Begum Rokeya's "Sultana's Dream" and Bernardine Evaristo's "The White Man's Liberation Front" as feminist utopias. Visuals are written in both short stories presenting celebrations of women-dominated societies. Nevertheless, the glorification of women and the "dreaming of domination" (Haque and Rashid 4) create a demeaning picture of men, treating men as inauspicious. By doing so these stories become further from "inclusive and intersectional" (Jones et al. 62), and sound more like the celebration of marginalization. Utopia ought to be a delineation of an ideal society rather than a deliberate under-representation through upside-down narratives. The writers justify gender role reversals in the stories as their reactions against male suppression. Depicting rightly so, the authors discredit men for all the positive contributions they bring to society. For this reason, a debate arises about whether Rokeya and Evaristo present seemingly perfect societies or whether their modules are just another vision of imperfection.

Recent studies on "Sultana's Dream" also suggest the story as a feminine utopia instead of treating it as a dystopian narrative. Rahman (2023) narrates in a research an indication of women's fear in society and hope for transformation. She adds Rokeya's view on "a utopian matriarchal society" (45) as an initiative dream of a long-desired harmony. According to Rahman, Rokeya's story emotes the appeal to "social and environmental change" (46). With references to different research and theoretical frameworks, Rahman underlines the complex connection between gender and environment. The story narrates oppressed feminine dreams and hopes, with patriarchy as the primary opponent. Rokeya's ambition of a women-governed society is a dream narrative framework as Sultana's dream shatters when she wakes up.

Some studies accentuate the story as a voice of humanity through the emancipation of women from social agony created by unequal gender roles. Akter (2019) notes in a research paper "harmony" and "humanity" as Rokeya's visionary exertion for equality (31). Rokeya's panting chant for women's rights indicates the absence of "liberty of mental strength" (32), for which the patriarchal society is responsible. As Akter explores the universal resonance of feminine feelings for freedom in the fantasy dream of Rokeya's protagonist, a trace of an inept patriarchy unfolds in the narration. In Akter's paper, the reader finds a trace of men's position as "lord and master" (34) in women's lives. However, whether the "cherished

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vision" (35) is a seemingly smooth social structure or equally pitiless as patriarchal practice remains a matter for deeper exploration.

In an article, Islam (2023) justifiably extracts the concerns with Rokeya's feminist utopia in "Sultana's Dream." Islam exclaims at Rokeya's representation of men as "unwanted" entities. The article views Rokeya's tone in "Sultana's Dream" as a "radical" one. However, some other narratives by Rokeya are less pinching in the portrayal of feminist utopia. Nevertheless, Islam argues against "feminist separatism" as it is not only misandric but also excludes more marginalized gender identities. This article stands out as a unique one because most other studies on Rokeya's "Sultana's Dream" zest to uphold the story as a justifiable vision rather than viewing it as imperfect as misogynistic patriarchy. The lack of a proportionate presentation of men and women in society and leadership seems to be a drawback in Rokeya's literary voice.

Another feminist literary resonance that upholds an imbalanced feminine utopia is Bernardine Evaristo's "The White Man's Liberation Front." Contrary to the abundance of research and articles on Rokeya's "Sultana's Dream," Evaristo's mentioned story has not yet been a significant focus for scholarly endeavors. Evaristo claims this piece is a satire. The story has a caustic narrative tone, and the writer adds a few more dimensions besides gender, such as "race and academia." In an article, Obi-Young (2020) suggests these dimensions as "juicy satire." The article points out the dissatisfaction of white men in both home and workplace. There is a significant similarity in themes and representations in Rokeya's and Evaristo's stories. An analogical discussion can open a further path for bridging two different cultures through a literary lens.

As Kirwan (2020) suggests, Evaristo's story manifests the misery of "middle-class white men," where men outcry for acceptance and recognition. Kirwan explains the story as a "dark parody" of the real world. The male protagonist, Brian, does not dream like Rokeya's Sultana. Brian tries "online activism" to raise his voice against misandry. His agony is caused not only by his wife but also by the matriarchal world. In a usual social scenario, women remain "trapped" in marriages, but Brian is the victim in the story that sets up the upside-down narrative. Like women do not have the option to get free from an unhappy marriage and subsequent "alienation and discrimination" (Sharma 115) in a patriarchal society, Brian is suffering a similar confinement. However, the temporal and spatial aspects are different for Sultana and Brian besides their gender. Seemingly, none of the stories narrates a utopia. Both of these reflect dystopian settings in a reversed fashion.

Evaristo's other literary writings exemplify an ambition for transformation in the worldview of black women. In an article, Russel (2022) comments on Evaristo's Booker Prize-winning novel, *Girl, Woman, Other*. Quoting Evans, Russel notes the presence of "multifariousness of identity in Black British womanhood" in Evaristo's work. Russel points out that Evaristo unusually presents her reflection on life, narrating the struggle and suffering of black women. Evaristo's work often reflects the intricacy of man-woman relationships, associated manipulation, cheating, and mental stress. These are

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some aspects indicating Evaristo's tumultuous relationships. Another issue that Evaristo frequently deals with is "interracial marriage," and a significant trace of this factor is visible in "The White Man's Liberation Front." Thus, race and gender coincide as motifs in Evaristo's literature.

From the existing studies on Rokeya and Evaristo, the reader deciphers a strong suggestion of feminine utopias. Most of the researchers and columnists have concentrated more on the feminist vision of the two authors. Nevertheless, counter-opinions are apparent and logically consistent with the two authors' writing. This paper, "Utopia or Dystopia: Connecting Begum Rokeya and Bernardine Evaristo," explores the inconsistency in the feminist frameworks of the writers. Apart from the practical impossibility of the frameworks, there are more flaws in the two upside-down role-reversed narratives. Moreover, this research attempts to build a bridge between Asian and British literature, drawing both an analogy and a juxtaposition of two thematically connected short stories. This study does not intend to counter-interpret the celebration of women but rather adds a new dimension to the voice of equality.

Begum Rokeya's "Sultana's Dream" opens with the overarching concern of the protagonist about "the condition of Indian womanhood." Considering the social structure of the early twentieth century and that time's British India, Rokeya's concern is valid. Bernardine Evaristo's "The White Man's Liberation Front" begins with a marginalized British white man, Brian, upset over not getting his deserved promotion in his workplace. The setting of the story tends to be twenty-first-century Britain. Whereas Sultana's thoughts are in a dream narrative, Brian creates an online space to raise his voice against matriarchal oppression. Rokeya's Sultana, in her dream with Sara, feels secure because "there was not a single man visible." Evaristo's Brian is deprived by the university council, primarily consisting of the "women of color." None of the beginning suggests a utopia. As the reader notices, men in Rokeya's story are labeled dangerous. Evaristo's narrative celebrates women, but men are marginalized. Thus, a theme of equality is absent in both cases.

Hereafter, Rokeya uses the word mannish" in a derogatory tone, suggesting men are "shy and timid" creatures. Evaristo draws a similar picture of men who are docile, meek, fragile, and susceptible to suppression. In her dream, Sultana feels uncomfortable without a veil because of patriarchal oppression. On the contrary, Brian's possessive matriarchal wife, Pamela, is indulged in her addiction to "wine bars and restaurants." Rokeya optimistically presents a "Ladyland, free from sin and harm" confining men. The idea sounds ideal but impractical; Rokeya signifies a utopia. However, the notion of equalizing men with "sin and harm" sounds sadomasochistic and dystopian. Likewise, Brian also wants to get rid of women's suppression, but he does not have any suitable choice or "replacement." So, both stories exhibit a sense of despair and disgust.

Rokeya's representation of manhood creates a delusional image of negative masculinity. She humorously exclaims that men and "virtue" are seemingly antonyms. Evaristo's women are presented more in a sinister style. Celebration of

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women delineates a positive and desirable society. However, in Evaristo's story, women's power has been aligned with malignant desire and corruption. One differentiator between Sultana and Brian is their perspective on sexuality. Rokeya's story does not explore women's sexual desire. However, Evaristo openly shows Brian's sexual desire for girls and women. She writes, "He can fantasize and indeed does, especially about the peachy ones straight out of school." Sultana's liberation remains confined in a dream, whereas Brian's is in an imagination. Pessimism dictates more in the stories than optimism and hope, inclining to a dystopia rather than a utopia.

Describing the setting of Sultana's dreamland, Rokeya shows her craft of creating ocular images in the beauty of "grass" and "street flowers." The street becomes similar to a garden in the absence of men. The writer uses a pinching note by suggesting men do not do anything productive. In Rokeya's story, Sultana, in her reality, is worried about men harassing women. The dream is Sultana's inner space for an unreal emancipation. In Evaristo's setting, men are more susceptible to flirting and teasing. To Brian's utmost disappointment, he is no longer a young man to make girls or women interested in him. None of the stories narrates a balanced relationship between men and women, creating a vacuum in social dynamics. Addressing and exploring that space of the social structure can be an ideal plot to be called a utopia.

Sultana's surprise at the men's disappearance in the Ladyland introduces a shocking truth. Sister Sara's reply attests that men are in confinement as, in reality, the women are. According to Sara, men are in "their proper places, where they ought to be." Rokeya's use of "zenana" indicates women's confinement in the contemporary period. For this reason, Rokeya coins a men's equivalent confined place named "mardana." However, Evaristo's male character, Brian, brings the reader to the modern equivalent of a woman. He is not a victim of confinement as Sultana. He adjusts his life between "job *and* domestic duties" like most modern working women. The two stories suggest temporal and spatial problems that women suffered. Sultana is an Asian woman suffering in the late 19th or early 20th century. Brian is a white man fighting for "liberation" from matriarchy in the 21st century. Practically, Evaristo's character Brian is a voice of oppressed black women in Western society. In all circumstances, a sign of order is absent, and all signs of chaos prevail.

Afterward, Rokeya compares "men" and "wild animals" on the same scale and equally dangerous for women. She emphasizes the importance of imprisoning the "lunatics" instead of benevolent people. Her argument is partially justified as men kept women in confinement to safeguard the women from lunatic men. So, enclosed "mardana" is a worthy punishment for violent and lunatic men. Nevertheless, the framework of indiscriminate confinement of men sounds dystopian. Moving on to the other story, Evaristo presents discrimination in the education system based on gender. In Evaristo's story, the parents tend to educate their girls in "STEM" subjects, whereas the boys are more involved in "humanities." Presenting it upside down does create humor and a sense of attention; still, the narrative does not propose a feasible positivity.

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Rokeya's story moves to a fascinating turn when she points out that physical strength is the means of domination that makes the Indian men "lord and master." Sister Sara counter argues, "A lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race." She emphasizes that women are not aware of their "natural rights." The very argument is logically consistent. Women's consciousness of their "own interests" is vital for equality. The reader finds Evaristo's Brain becomes aware of his rights and discovers "social media" as a tool for raising his "voice." Out of his frustration, he establishes the White Man's Liberation Front. Sultana's consciousness succumbs to a dream, and Brain's awareness dives into social media. A strong voice of the marginalized and an accepting attitude of the centralized are necessary to build harmony. Harsh and inconsistent criticism opens the path for more unsettling situations.

Hereafter, "Sultana's Dream" portrays a good-for-nothing image of men by stating that "they are fit for nothing." The statement is retaliation for the actual suppression of women by men. Then, the story turns to business, politics, commerce, and official duties. According to Rokeya's narration, men are insignificant and inept in these places. Neither are they any better in the household chores. Men boast about their utility in the real world but perform very little. Rokeya writes, "They talk much about their work, but do little." In the other story, Evaristo shows how men get labeled as underperformers instead of their efficiency at home and office. Brian dreams of being a "campaigner" to seek justice against such "systemic injustices that disadvantage mankind." However, he remains afraid of being tagged as unreasonable. In both stories, injustice is prevalent, and a tone of pacifism is absent.

Optimistically, Rokeya envisions scientific development to eradicate life-threatening problems like "epidemic disease" and "mosquito bites." Moreover, home science has improved dramatically in the Ladyland. For instance, utilizing "concentrated sunlight and heat" instead of "coal or fire" for cooking is a tremendous scientific thought experiment. A more valuable insight Rokeya expresses hereafter is the necessity of women's education. The imaginary Queen's interest in science and bringing a positive shift in contemporary society through education gives the story a fascinating turn. Proper schooling for girls, legislation against early marriage, and breaking confinement are some enthusiastic steps for equality. In Evaristo's story, the women are already "adept at technology." Men must be more "ambitious" and "stop blaming women" for their failures in Evaristo's story. An empty and tense space of appreciation is missing in both stories. Men and women are portrayed as unhealthy competitors, not partners in progress. As Evaristo's Brian sighs, "Women wouldn't have achieved anything without the support and encouragement of their male partners, and the matriarchy needs to acknowledge the role men have played in women's lives." The absence of acknowledgment in the stories creates a relentless opposition between men and women, leading the narratives further from the characteristics of an ideal society.

A vengeful attitude can never be a proper step in creating an ideal society. Before men were retreated in the "Mardana," they were involved in military affairs. In

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the meantime, the women progressed significantly in scientific research. The men used to poke fun at women's progress and called their inventions "a sentimental nightmare." Undoubtedly, the men were wrong, but a coarse and clever revenge by the women is unsuitable for an ideal society. The women of the Ladyland acknowledged that they were not physically stronger than men. They realized their strength, "Women's brains are somewhat quicker than men's." The women, with their scientific inventions, outsmart their opponents in war. Afterwards, men remain confined in the "Mardana." In the other story, Brian indulges in "some motivational empowerment messages" to improve the unfortunate condition of men. Brian is constantly disturbed by the "denied opportunities for promotion" of men. The reader experiences equally unsettling situations in both stories.

Confining men "for the sake of honour and liberty" is equally gruesome as confining women and cannot be an acceptable proposal in any ideal society. The men are striving for freedom from that secluded "Mardana." The forced imprisonment of men sets a "crime and sin" free Ladyland. So, this narrative works as a testament that only men are responsible for crime and sin, and women are naturally acquitted of these negativities. There must have been a space in the story, making it a narrative lacking inclusiveness. On the other hand, in Evaristo's story, Brain's "euphoric" sentiments after he posts on social media signify a state of hopeless rejoinder, having no impact in the practical world. Men getting "crushed by the matriarchy" sounds catchy as a plotline, but the idea is equally drastic as the suppression of patriarchy. Nevertheless, Evaristo humorously supports the brown working class, exhibiting her urge for inclusiveness. However, her tone towards white men suggests a reverse notion of exclusion. For this reason, in both stories, a tone of non-inclusiveness becomes apparent.

The dream of driving away crime in "Sultana's Dream" is praiseworthy. In the meantime, forcing men to engage in the kitchen and mocking the situation seems drastic rather than humorous. Rokeya's tone does not lead toward equality. Instead, she voices out a radically dystopian tone as "ladies rule over the country and control all social matters, while gentlemen are kept in the Mardana to mind babies, to cook and to do all sorts of domestic work...." It could have been a claim for equal participation in politics and the power of women in an ideal setting. Moreover, the father's assistance in taking care of the babies has been narrated negatively. Men's involvement in household chores and domestic work should neither be negative nor derogatory. Similarly, in Evaristo's "The White Man's Liberation Front," domestic activities of men are portrayed in a nugatory fashion. As in a patriarchal society, being a housewife is depicted with indifference; the word "househusbands" has been used by Evaristo. The radical celebration of womanhood sounds fascinating in literature, but this is not ideal or practical for application.

Near the end of the story, "Sultana's Dream" projects some more scientific improvements. Moreover, the story celebrates the glory of "Love and Truth." The person who lies must be evicted from that land. The Ladyland is envisioned as a land of purity. However, after Sultana's dream breaks, she finds herself "still lounging in

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the easy-chair." The utopian dream does demand feminine rights, but it is not flawless. Neither can it be regarded as an innocent hope for feminine equality as it excludes men's contribution to society. Evaristo's story also brings the reader to the same narrative tone, bridging the temporal and spatial differences of women's desire. She creates rather a fancy character like Brian, who is a depressed and cheated househusband, a husband who "represented stability but not sexual desirability" for his wife Pamela. Brian's life is equally distressing as Sultana's, with no hope of calling their stories utopias. A chart is given below to highlight the points of "utopia" and "dystopia" in the two short stories in a precise manner:

Table:
Points of utopia and dystopia

Aspects	Utopian Elements	Dystopian Elements
Social Structure	-Women govern, leading to peace and prosperity.	-Men are subjugated, creating imbalance. -Oppressive matriarchy stifles men's roles and dignity.
Gender Roles	-Women are free, autonomous, and respected.	-Men are powerless, diminishing their autonomy and dignity. -Gender imbalance breeds resentment.
Freedom and Oppression	-Women enjoy freedom from patriarchal oppression.	-Men lack freedom, becoming passive and oppressed. -Men are emotionally and socially oppressed.
Science and Progress	-Scientific progress thrives under women's leadership.	-Men's subjugation hinders true progress. -Intellectual stagnation due to suppression of men is visible.
Tone and Atmosphere	-Optimistic and idealistic view of female empowerment.	-Hidden dystopia under a utopian façade is evident. -Frustration and resentment create an oppressive tone.

Conclusion

As the side-by-side analysis shows, Rokeya's "Sultana's Dream" and Evaristo's "The White Man's Liberation Front" both exhibit the celebration of womanhood. The settings are different but uphold the same motto. The upside-down role reversals of gender attack patriarchy in the strongest way. The narratives connect and attune different places and centuries. However, none of the stories directly addresses equality and harmony. Notes of justice and ideal societies are absent in these stories as well.

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For these reasons, this research does not agree that the stories are utopian. The exclusion and abuse of men narrated in the stories rather give these dystopian ratings. The tones are satiric but vengeful and extract society's negative images without highlighting the positive ones.

This paper's framework is limited, and more feminist stories can be included in further research with quantitative data or data-driven from interviewing women regarding different feminist stories. Nevertheless, this paper thematically connects two cultural backgrounds in a thread by comparing Rokeya's "Sultana's Dream" and Evaristo's "The White Man's Liberation Front." This study does not claim either of the stories as misandric but posits that neither is utopian. To conclude, the stories' settings create a relentless opposition of genders instead of calling for practically feasible harmony and equality.

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