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Exploring the rhetorical constitution of a safe space for women in Begum Rokeya and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's works

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EXPLORING THE RHETORICAL CONSTITUTION OF A SAFE SPACE
FOR WOMEN IN BEGUM ROKEYA AND FRANCES ELLEN
WATKINS HARPER'S WORKS

An Abstract of a Thesis
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Rifat Rezowana Siddiqui
University of Northern Iowa
December 2021

ABSTRACT

This thesis studies the literary texts of two womanist authors, Begum Rokeya and Frances E. W. Harper, who are from different cultural and geographical backgrounds. The thesis attempts to uncover how both authors envision feminist utopian safe space for women of their society. Being the representative from the global south, Rokeya elaborates on 19th century social customs such as *purdah* and *zenana* to demonstrate sex segregation in her society. Harper, on the other hand, illustrates the social crisis of slavery and racism through her work. Criticizing the social norms that create obstacles for racialized women, both the authors assert the necessity to have a space where marginalized people will be safe. Though both authors have diverse cultural values, their vision of a safe space for their people is analogous. Rokeya envisions a feminist utopian space for her fellow women whereas Harper dreams of an inclusive safe space where men and women of African American heritage will enjoy rights equal to any other races in their society. Both authors envision a place where their peers will be safe from oppression.

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This Study by: Rifat Rezowana Siddiqui

Entitled: Exploring the Rhetorical Constitution of a Safe Space for Women in Begum
Rokeya and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's Works

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the
Degree of Master of Arts

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Dr. Jennifer Waldron, Dean, Graduate College

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all the mothers, womanists, and warrior women.

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Finally, I am grateful to Begum Rokeya, who initiated and ensured women's access to education in the 19th century global south – current Bangladesh.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Introducing Begum Rokeya and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

Emphasizing the liberty of mind, Virginia Woolf demands a safe space for women through her feminist treatise, *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf published her book in the beginning of the twentieth century when she extensively focused on the exclusion and inequality women experienced in British society and urged them to gain financial independence and to get involved in scholarship. Woolf proposed the idea of a feminist safe space through her work by incorporating subjective experiences in her rhetoric where she challenged the exclusion of women from the dominant space controlled by patriarchy. *A Room of One's Own* encouraged her readers to set their minds free.

Even though her work inspired feminist movements across time, and it is a precious canonical work to American and British feminism, it ignores underprivileged women. Coming from an affluent social background, Woolf's narrative struggled to connect with the demands of women of color, working-class women, and minority women because of her presumed white, wealthy reader. Her subjective narrative excluded women from different classes and races and spoke to a very particular type of feminism overlooking the distinctiveness of women of color and women from the global south. Given these exclusions, it is important to look for other potential texts that are more inclusive. For women who could not afford a room of one's own, what space could be envisioned?

Woolf was not the only one to promote a feminist utopian safe space where women could participate in producing scholarship. Women of color and women of the global south have also written about their longing for a safe space. Challenging the narrowness of white feminism, Black and Global feminisms brought forth their demands as women which also addressed their ethnic and racialized identity. While thinking about a feminist canon, authors from the global south and African American ethnicity should be included in the consideration. Authors like Begum Rokeya and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, who participated in women's rights movements in their respective geographical locations, should be included in the canon.

Although both activists are from different continents, their visions for women shared similarities and they promoted women's right to education. Both Harper and Rokeya were concerned for the racialized groups to which they belonged, African Americans and colonized Indians respectively. Both were determined to improve women's position in their societies. Through a comparative study of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's and Begum Rokeya's texts, this thesis explores a fresh perspective on women's movements for equal rights. This study unveils insights into their rhetorical journeys and their visions of a safe space for women across the globe. The study also includes analysis of their shared ideology through the lens of womanism and contemporary transnational feminist theories.

To understand and analyze Frances Harper and Begum Rokeya's womanist activism, this work focuses on the literatures produced by these two different women from diverse cultural and social background and their literary contribution to the society

where both anticipated a prosperous future for women through establishing their own space. Focusing on Rokeya's essays "Woman's Downfall" and "The Female-half" from *Strings of Sweet Pearls* and her feminist utopian story "Sultana's Dream," together with Harper's novel *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted*, this thesis explores how a woman from colonized India and a free Black woman living during slavery engaged in the rhetorical constitution of a safe space for women.

This chapter incorporates a short description of the topic along with brief biographical sketches of Begum Rokeya and Frances Ellen Watkin's Harper. Apart from the authors, this chapter also provides a brief explanation of my methodology, works on utopian fiction, and the purpose of this study as well as goal of this thesis. Focusing on the analogous vision of both the authors, this chapter provides a compact illustration of the argument of this paper as well as the chapter divisions of this thesis.

Begum Rokeya

Begum Rokeya (1880-1932) was born in a noble family in Pairaband village in Rangpur, Bangladesh (*Essential Rokeya* XVI). She was born during a challenging time when the Indian subcontinent was plagued by British colonialism. Despite coming from a Muslim aristocratic family of that time, Rokeya was not provided formal education. It was her elder sister Karimunnessa and her brother Ibrahim Saber who taught her to read and write Bengali and English. Later, her husband Syed Sakhawat Hossain encouraged her to keep learning and writing. Being an educated person, Sakhawat knew the value of education. He and Rokeya shared similar thoughts regarding women's education.

Rokeya fought to ensure that her fellow citizens got access to education and basic human rights. After her husband's death, Rokeya established a girls' school in Bhagalpur with the help of the savings he left for her. In 1910 she moved to Calcutta and a year later she established Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School with only eight students. Her school was the first school for Muslim girls, and she went from door to door to convince her fellow women to join her in this sacred endeavor. Five years later, she established the Muslim Women's Association (*Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam*), which was an organization to help poor Muslim women to gain literacy and financial independence (*Sultana's Dream* xi-xii). In 1926, Rokeya delivered a presidential address to the Bengal Women's Educational Conference inaugural session advocating for women's education and liberation (*Essential Rokeya* xiii-xiv).

Begum Rokeya, in one of her narratives, urged her fellow women to come forward and take charge of their lives. She questioned all forms of social hypocrisy that imposed rules and regulation on women. Despite being a devout Muslim woman who constantly stayed behind *Purdah* (a religious and social convention among Muslims requiring women to stay out of sight of men, behind the curtains), she never failed to question the hypocritical conventions of patriarchy, which manipulated religious values to dominate and suppress women. She illustrated her experience of living in a colonial period and explained why it is excruciating under double colonization and why her fellow women might be incapable of breaking out of this oppressive system. While she worked to convince the women of her society, she also acknowledged that this vision was a perilous one as a colonized mind is not easy to decolonize.

Being the first female advocate of women's rights in the Indian Subcontinent, Begum Rokeya, left a visible imprint on the records of history in support of women's liberation in southeastern Indian subcontinental society. She strongly advocated education for women and fought for the rights of her fellow women through her activism and scholarship. She produced several literary texts that reveal her vision of women's future where they will be able to claim and exercise their agency. Some of the significant literary texts she produced are "Sultana's Dream" (1905), *Strings of Sweet Pearl* (1904), *The Zenana Women* (1931), *Padmarag* (1924), *Education Ideals for the Modern Indian Girl* (1931), and several other essays and stories. Even though she was a feminist activist in British colonized India from 1903 until her death in 1932, she is not as well-known as her peers from the British and United States suffrage movements.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

During the early years of the United States' woman suffrage movement, a notable African American suffragist named Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911) passionately participated in that movement. Born to a free African American family of Maryland, Harper lost her parents when she was only three years old. Later, she was raised by her uncle's family and became a prominent abolitionist who participated in the woman suffrage movement and worked throughout her entire life for women's emancipation. Her uncle was an abolitionist who valued education and established schools for educating Black people.

Harper's love for books and literacy inspired her to write at a very young age. She was one of the first Black woman authors published in the United States. Apart from her

contribution as an abolitionist, Harper had immense significance as an educator who was directly involved with the human rights movements during the antebellum, Civil War, and Reconstruction periods.

In 1852, her career as an educator began when she was appointed as an instructor at The Union Seminary in Wilberforce, Ohio. The school educated free African American people. Within a year, she was moving from state to state for the noble purpose of educating people. Her activism as an abolitionist commenced when her home state of Maryland passed a law saying free African American people who moved out of state to the North and then attempted to return to Maryland, if found, would be imprisoned and sold as slaves (Bacon 24). Being out of state, she could no longer return to her home state; instead she took this as an opportunity to travel and raise awareness against enslavement and racism.

Throughout her career, Harper wrote numerous literary pieces for anti-slavery newspapers. Her first collection of poetry is called *Forest Leaves* (1845). Apart from this collection she wrote novels, essays, short stories, and prose. Some of them are *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (1854), *Sketches of Southern Life* (1872), *The Martyr of Alabama and Other Poems* (1892), *Atlanta Offering* (1895), *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted* (1892), and “The Two Offers” (1859). She was the first African American woman to publish a short story in *Anglo-African Magazine* and her other works appeared in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* and *The Liberator* (Bacon 21-43). As a lecturer at the Maine Anti-Slavery Society and the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, Harper dedicated her career to fight against slavery, racism, and sexism.

Harper valued women's rights, and her activism during the suffrage movement indicated the need for womanism rather than western feminism, which marginalizes the interests and needs of women of color. Her advocacy for educating women and making them aware of their rights made her a notable figure during that time. She dreamt of a free nation, a place where women of color will have freedom and enjoy equal rights as men. Her literary creations also indicate a yearning for a place that they can call their own.

Analogous Vision of Rokeya and Harper

Both Rokeya and Harper are extraordinary women who worked for the emancipation of others in social locations like theirs. Their contributions to their own communities are of immense importance but at the same time they are also significant role models for the rest of the world. Despite coming from two different sides of the globe, both share analogous visions of women's future where they will be free, intellectually sound, and capable of claiming their rightful position in the society. Their dreams share a common agenda of a suitable place, a safe space where women will be treated equally. Both share a similar vision, which involves educating women so that they build a better future and have a place of their own where they are free from concerns, receive equal treatment, and enjoy basic rights like any other person. Their concept of a perfect place somehow resembles a utopia even though utopia itself is a western philosophical concept.

This is how Begum Rokeya's and Francis Harper's discourses connect to each other: Both acknowledge the significance of education and talk about double oppression.

Rokeya criticizes colonial and patriarchal domination, and Harper criticizes racial discrimination and patriarchy. Their struggle to ensure education for all and their analogous experiences of oppression are what make them different from White feminists. While the influential White suffragists were fighting to establish legal voting rights for women, Begum Rokeya was fighting against patriarchal domination, illiteracy, and seclusion and France Harper was battling against slavery, racism, classism, and sex segregation. Dominant feminists lack the understanding of marginalized women's interests and needs which could be one of the reasons why dominant feminists like Virginia Woolf failed to connect with the experiences of African American feminists and generalize their situation with them. It is hard to claim a room of one's own if one does not have a home of one's own, or even a body of one's own. Their goals to ensure literacy and women's equal rights certainly differ from the dominant feminist because of their Black and Southeast Asian identities.

Works on Utopia

The fight for women's equal rights has been a prominent theme of feminist utopian novels. Around 1405, Christine de Pizan published one of the early works on feminist utopia called *The Book of the City of Ladies* (*Le Livre de la Cité des Dames*). Pizan's works unequivocally demanded equal rights for women of her time. Almost five hundred years later, several other feminist utopian novels by women writers conveyed similar thoughts on having a safe space of their own. Some of the noteworthy works include *Mizora* (1881) by Mary E. Bradley Lane, *New Amazonia: A Foretaste of the Future* (1889) by Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett, *Unveiling a Parallel: A Romance* (1893)

by Alice Ilgenfritz Jones and Ella Merchant, and *The Republic of the Future: Or, Socialism a Reality* (1887) a novella by Anna Bowman Dodd. These works were produced by Rokeya and Harper's contemporaries who dreamt of a feminist utopia. In addition, an interesting collection of novels called the *Herland Trilogy* penned by Charlotte Perkins Gilman was published ten years after Rokeya's "Sultana's Dream" was published. These literary creations enriched women's activism against sex segregation, which is still predominant in different societies all over the world.

Shaping Feminist Demands

The fight for equality and justice occurs across the world and a significant portion of the fight is illustrated through literature. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf illustrated the challenges women faced during the early 20th century and the need to cultivate their agency. Her scholarship is an important element for all women's emancipation, but her intended audience was white, middle class women who could afford the luxury to have their own intellectual space. Does that mean women of color and different social background are uninvited into this utopia? Does race and class demand secluded safe space from that of western feminists? Although Woolf, Gilman, Corbett, Lane and other authors and their works contributed greatly to the awakening and invigorating of feminist movements, they also marginalized specific group of women by omitting their existence.

During the early 20th century, on the eastern side of the globe, women from the Indian subcontinent were fighting against *Purdah*, Sati custom, child marriage, polygamy, and colonialism. *Purdah* confined Muslim women inside their homes out of sight of men, forced them to abide by religious and social rules, and limited their access

to certain privileges men enjoyed. Sati custom was a ritual for ensuring the chastity of a married woman and compelled Hindu widows to die with their husbands by forcing them to sit on the burning pyre with their husband's remains and commit suicide. Child marriage was a common practice among people irrespective of religion and class. Having a daughter was considered as a burden during that time. Women struggled because of polygamous social norms where their husbands could marry more than one woman. Finally, under British colonization, women of the Indian subcontinent were victims of double colonization by patriarchy and British empire. Their fight against patriarchy and sex segregation was quite different than western feminists' struggles.

Where do women of color stand then? Do they lack representation through literature? Begum Rokeya's literary works and activism are one of the instances of women's rights activism which center women from the global south as a subject and address them as the audience. Though she was a prominent activist of the feminist movement in South Asia, her contribution is scarcely known in the western world/global North.

Being an activist from the 19th century United States, Harper's involvement in the feminist movement is noteworthy because of her participation in the woman suffrage movement, involvement in the abolition movement, and the scholarly and creative works she produced. Her works addressed women of color as well as their white peers. She clearly indicated demands of Black people and the necessity of proper representation through her works.

Both Rokeya and Harper's scholarship reveals that their different identities had different aspirations than those offered by white-centered feminism. Could it be womanism that serves best for this purpose? To find out the answers, I now turn to Alice Walker's views on womanism.

Walker suggests that women loving and supporting women irrespective of race, class, and sexuality could be one sign of womanism which is inclusive of all women from diverse cultural background. Understanding womanism is essential for this paper as it interweaves concerns of race, sex, class, and culture (O'Reilly 1277) with the experiences and identities of women from a racially stratified and colonized world.

Though *womanism* was coined in 1983, much later than *feminism*, the necessity to devise it was due to the different experiences of women of color and their diverse perspectives. By creating a generalized category to represent women irrespective of race, class, ethnicity, and nationality, western feminism operated as monopolized discourse (Ashcroft et al. 117). The concept of womanism thus addresses issues which white, middle-class feminism fails to incorporate such as wisdom, spirituality, motherhood, communal feelings, and experiences of Black women and women of the global south.

Works on Rokeya's and Harper's Scholarship

Feminist utopian space has long been an interesting topic of investigation. Literary scholars have discussed Rokeya's perceptiveness on feminist utopia. Her entire life and her works have been significant issues of research in the Bengali literary world. Apart from preserving her literary works in collections, scholars like Roushan Jahan, Mohammad A. Quayum, and Bharati Ray researched her biography and her ideological

discourse. Other scholars have studied her literary creation in the light of feminism and the private-public dichotomy, but there are no instances of studying Begum Rokeya's texts contrasting them with texts from an African American author.

Similarly, Harper's versatile career as a rhetor, educator, poet, journalist, and activist have been studied from numerous angles. Renowned scholars like Michael Stancliff, Frances Smith Foster, Melba J. Boyd, and countless other scholars have studied Harper's life and works. Their studies illustrate Harper's ideological discourses on social issues like education, women's rights, racism, abolition, human rights, religion, temperance, as well as motherhood. Both Harper's and Rokeya's works have been extensively studied by numerous scholars, but their works have never been studied in parallel.

Methodology

This thesis uses literary and rhetorical criticism to study Begum Rokeya's "Woman's Downfall" and "The Female-half" from *Strings of Sweet Pearls* (collected in *The Essential Rokeya: Selected Works of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932)*), and her feminist utopian story "Sultana's Dream" from *Sultana's Dream: And Selections from The Secluded Ones* together with Frances Harper's novel *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted*. Close reading of the primary texts as well as secondary texts are done using critical literary and rhetorical theories. My analysis is informed by the vocabulary of transnational feminism, womanism, and postcolonial feminist theories. Analyzing Rokeya's and Harper's literary works in the light of transnational and Black feminism, this paper will counter western feminist perspectives by embracing womanism. The

methodology used for this thesis is literary analysis which engages critical theories to study the primary texts as well as secondary texts.

These specific primary texts are selected because of the similarity of the subject matters and their significant contribution to the women's rights movements in America and Indian Subcontinent. Harper's novel is the first novel by an African American woman written during the Reconstruction period that illustrates the journey and aspirations of a Black woman. Rokeya's novel, on the other hand, was written thirteen years after Harper's novel and is a unique utopian novel about the short journey of a young woman. Rokeya's essays are selected because they complement the social context. Because both authors convey significant thoughts on a utopian land for women, these novels are selected as the primary texts of this study.

Since the proposed study indicates the necessity of theoretical research, discursive analysis is engaged for best results. It involves discussion, interpretative analysis, critical theoretical investigation, and contextualized knowledge and insight to study the texts. As the texts are literary texts, specifically fictional texts, literary theories as well as critical theories are employed. Biographies of both the authors are also studied, which provide important contextualized knowledge of their literary creations. Intense critical scrutiny is done, and diversified lenses are engaged to study those texts so that a panoramic vision could be ensured.

Secondary materials used in this study are gathered from the existing scholarship on both authors with the help of specific key words and relevant concepts. The key words used for searching materials inside online databases are Frances Ellen Watkins Harper,

Begum Rokeya, womanism, transnational feminism, feminist utopia, and safe space. As there are no secondary resources on both authors, materials are selected separately for the authors. Scholarship on Begum Rokeya was searched and selected based on the transnational feminist association and involvement of feminist utopian concepts. On the other hand, secondary resources on Frances Ellen Watkins Harper are selected based on the black feminist perspective and womanist perspective.

The methods of analysis of this paper involves critical theories like transnational feminism, womanism, and literary theories such as postcolonialism, deconstruction as well as political theories such as utopia and dystopia. Intense scrutiny of the primary and secondary sources is done with the help of these theories since this is a literary analysis. The language of the texts as well as the themes are also analyzed. All the texts are scrutinized in three steps, the content of the text, thematic patterns, and discourses which are associated with the texts based on their cultural variety.

These particular methods are selected to study the research question because these are the most appropriate to analyze this topic. Obviously, there were some obstacles while gathering secondary resources for this research, but the approach made things accessible. One of them was finding a reasonable translation of essays as well as getting access to secondary sources which are written on a less common topic like this.

Rationale of this Study

The reason I have selected novels and essays written by Harper and Rokeya is because their narratives share analogous rhetorical styles theorizing safe space. Through their literary and rhetorical activism, they conversed with women of color from their

respective society. Their rhetorics are capable of connecting with the unique experiences of women of color unlike western feminism. Both Harper and Rokeya come from distinctive cultures and geographical locations but their ideologies connect them with one another as allies. The similarities in Harper's and Rokeya's beliefs and motivation convey interchangeable philosophy regarding the necessity to constitute utopia for women and their emancipation from social oppressions. Rokeya urged her fellow women from her society to enrich themselves with knowledge, not blindly mimicking the western feminist ideologies which did not align with religious and cultural values. Similarly, Harper appealed to her fellow African American women to educate themselves and build up a powerful resistance against racism. The contribution of these unsung heroes in the feminist realm inspired me to select their works for this thesis.

The authors' similar ideological discourses were one of the major reasons behind selecting Rokeya's "Sultana's Dream" and essays from *String of Sweet Pearls* and Harper's *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted* for this thesis. Both authors valued education and dedicated their lives for women's emancipation. Their literature conveys their vision of a utopian land where women will be free from oppression. They envisioned a safe space for women where they will exercise their agency and enjoy equal rights as men. These specific literary texts are chosen because they present rhetorics of constituting an ideal land for women, where they will be free from racism, classism, and gender discrimination.

Chapter Division

In the first chapter, I introduce what this thesis is going to do. The argument, methodology, and range of study is included alongside the brief introduction of the activist authors. It includes two early feminists: Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a prominent Bangladeshi author, feminist, activist and pioneer of women's education and the tremendously significant antislavery activist, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. Critical theoretical aspects such as feminism, womanism, and transnational feminism are studied with Harper's and Rokeya's texts to determine the possible presence of these concepts.

The second chapter consists of analysis of the texts of Rokeya. Two essays named "Woman's Downfall" and "The Female-half" from *Strings of Sweet Pearls* and a feminist utopian story "Sultana's Dream" will be studied with the help of transnational feminist point of view. The concepts of utopia, safe space, and *purdah* are scrutinized involving respective cultural and historical contexts.

The third chapter analyzes Harper's novel *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted*. The secondary sources related to Harper's text are studied extensively using a womanist lens. Concepts of temperance and abolition alongside utopia and safe space are studied in this chapter from a different cultural context which include a history of oppression against the Black people of America during the antebellum, Civil War, and Reconstruction periods.

The fourth and final chapter addresses the conclusion of this thesis. It addresses a seldom compared study of the rhetorical styles of two feminists who were prominent, but their careers are less explored in the dominant feminist spheres. It also addresses the goal of this study: to identify the way both engaged in the rhetorical constitution of a safe

space for women. The study reveals the similarities they share despite coming from diverse cultural and financial backgrounds. By doing so, this study demonstrates that Black feminists and feminists from southeast Asia contributed to the global feminist movements. The study discusses the contribution of the lesser known feminists like Frances Harper and Begum Rokeya and opens a broader scope of study. It also addresses the scope of future study engaging broader and diversified rhetorical, literary, and feminist lenses.

Finally, the goal of this study is to understand the rhetorical journey of Begum Rokeya and Frances E. W. Harper through their literary and political activism and identify their analogous vision of a feminist utopia. Through conducting this study, I intend to explore the shared, and distinct, ideological aspects of the two feminists and the alliance they constitute through their advocacy for women, despite their diverse racial and cultural identity.

CHAPTER 2

BEGUM ROKEYA'S FEMINIST UTOPIA

Rokeya envisioned a better future for women of her society, and she worked relentlessly for the sake of uplifting women's social status by ensuring their equal rights. She wrote, taught, and spoke against injustice. She not only criticized patriarchal domination but also the women of her society who failed to recognize their rights by silently obeying the rule of patriarchy. She believed literature guides people and she produced constructive criticism of her peers through literature, urging them to recognize the colonized state of their mind. Through her literature, she insisted that education liberates the colonized minds of women, and a feminist utopia can be established only by educating women. She hoped to ensure a safe space for female members of her society and women of the future.

To comprehend Rokeya's criticism of the secluded spaces that imprison women in the private chambers of the domestic sphere, it is important to discuss the 19th and 20th century social convention of the Indian Subcontinent called *Purdah*. Rokeya critiqued *purdah* in "Sultana's Dream," *Strings of Sweet Pearls* as well as her other works by clarifying that *purdah* impeded women's equal access to education. Not only did Rokeya critique *purdah* for its dystopic elements, but she also offered a utopic alternative: Ladyland. Through "Sultana's Dream," Rokeya created a world where women are free from the seclusion of real life, and they flourish through innovative education.

Rokeya advocated for powerless women of her time, and she envisioned a feminist utopia for her fellow women. Through her literary and political advocacy, she promoted a safe space for women which resembles a feminist utopia. Her essays and her feminist fiction elaborate her vision of an equitable society where women would be free from forced seclusion. Her visions and her works were met with enthusiasm and criticism by her peers which further motivated her to continue her advocacy for women's equal rights and transform the society for the wellbeing of women.

Purdah as Dystopia

Social transformation in the Indian Subcontinent during 19th century was influenced by several aspects, including colonialism and religious values. Azra A. Ali notes that, with the invasion of western values and power, the Muslim community was baffled by the social changes they were experiencing and their thought of reforming their values and status in the 19th century society. Compared to the other religious groups, the Muslim communities were very conservative and cynical about colonization-induced changes in the society. Their skepticism left them out of all the significant social and governing positions.

To recover from the loss, Muslim men gradually integrated with the change and changing women's status was also part of it. Ali explains,

With the political power slowly but constantly slipping out of their control, they turned their attention to the so-called private world as the focus for their reforming urges. Muslim women and their lives became crucial to this process of

reform: they provided the barometer by which its ‘successes’ or ‘failures’ very often came to be judged. (xi)

Through the reformation, *purdah* was brought to attention and the religious norm which turned into a rigid cultural practice was addressed. Women’s social position became an important aspect which could determine the triumph of patriarchy over the invasion of westernization. Ali explains that Muslim elites “reform[ed] women not according to the standards of the West but according to the standards which they generated for themselves in response to the West within their own Indian cultural framework” (4). In response to the social transformation caused by colonization, Muslim men called for reformation that allowed women to get access to education, balancing with the religious obligations where they will nurture progressive ideologies and at the same time uphold their moral values.

During that time women, irrespective of religion and social status, had to endure the predicament of colonization. Ali also states that powerful Muslim men “turned their attention towards adopting strategies necessary to overcome foreign occupation or to cope with it” so that the native people were able to control their political, social and economic changes (xii). These strategies were constituted to validate their cultural values in a transitioning society where the battle of power was intense among different ethnic and religious groups. As the social and religious system was founded upon patriarchal values, contesting for power was solely concerned with the male members of the society. Thus, the power dichotomy is centered around male domination; suppressing women’s rights and colonization aggravated the existing crisis women faced during that time among which *purdah* is one of the strictest examples.

Women's social status during the late 19th and early 20th centuries was shaped by their own ethnic indigenous culture and the colonizers' invasive culture. *Purdah*, Sati custom, child marriage, and polygamy were prevalent in a society which was now under British colonization. Having no control over their state, women were forced to get married at a very young age and had no say in their husband's polygamous practice. In some cases, such as in Hinduism, women even had to sit on their husband's burning pyre and die with them. All these social norms confined women within the domestic sphere expelling their agency. For Muslim women, *purdah* was a central norm that crippled their agency.

Purdah is a social custom rooted in religious practice, specifically in Muslim communities where women are secluded from the sight of outer world, from men (except their immediate family), and from women they do not know. This custom was a common convention during the 19th century and is still widely practiced in Muslim cultures and societies.

Purdah refers to a range of practices, including bodily covering practices, movement restrictions, interpersonal interaction limitations, and confinement to the home. Papanek explains this complexity:

It is not easy to define *purdah*; the word is a kind of shorthand for practices that might include, depending on choices made by families, veiling the face, wearing a concealing cloak, living in secluded quarters, and never meeting the men outside the family. (59)

Purdah clearly relegates women to the domestic sphere, and away from any form of public, non-familial contact. Though the practice is rooted in religious belief, the social norm makes women invisible by forcing them to live in seclusion and out of sight of the world. The space women are allowed to occupy is only the private chamber called *zenana*.

Zenana, the domestic space of the home, is central to *purdah*. Rajan provides a detailed description of *purdah* and how it is related to *zenana*,

[In] the practice of *purdah*, the minimal requirement [. . .] is the covering of the woman's body with the *hijab*, or veil. *Purdah-nishan* women, or women who practice *purdah* formally, may be further enclosed in the *zenana*, the private space within the home allocated only for women; those women may be obliged to cover themselves in front of male relatives outside of their immediate marital family.

While less formal practices require women to cover hair and chest with the *hijab*, more conservative expressions of *purdah* require women to be transported in enclosed carriages or to wear a *burkha*, a full-length outfit that completely covers their body when appearing outside of the home. (155-156)

Women are confined to a domestic space and, if they venture outside of that space, must create a mobile space of seclusion through covering practices.

Women who strictly practice *purdah* are called as *purdah-nishan* women. The term carries more weight than it expresses. It attributes certain qualities on women observing *purdah* such as purity, chastity, morality and so on. *Purdah-nishan* women not only engage in complete body covering, but they also keep their bodies in *zenana* – a

secluded private space usually part of the domestic sphere and accessed only by male members of the immediate family and women of the same religious status. Although *Purdah*, in a way, occasionally creates a woman-only space, it is not a space in which women have agency. Instead, it is a place of confinement. The social conventions such as *sharif* culture and *purdah* enforced limitations formulated by a cultural polity that required women to stay indoors within *zenana*, and out of sight of the outside world.

Apart from the imposition of rules and regulation of a patriarchal society, Muslim women were now facing double oppression due to colonization. Ali observes that “*purdah* was the subject of strong attack by Christian missionaries. They criticized it in particular for its baleful impact on the education and the general health of women” assuming the religious values at fault and misrepresenting it in media (9). For example, literature was published during the transformation which considered Muslim women as inferior to western women (Ali 11).

Placing the native values of spirituality in an antagonistic position, the colonizers created a representation of the colonized culture. Rajan elaborates on this issue:

English imperial ideology was based on abstract, theoretical notions of gender and racial difference. Those constructions of difference allocated to imperialism a “moral” and “natural” authority to justify the physical conquest of foreign peoples and lands. In particular, colonialism engendered the English culture and language’s Orientalist ideologies—the imagining, reproduction, and reduction of colonized peoples and spaces into succinct and limited categories of imperial desire and anxiety. (156-157)

Creating a monolithic representation of the Indian culture, the Eurocentric ideology discarded its diversity. On the other hand, Eurocentric ideology fails to understand the core value of diverse spirituality and blames religion instead of pretentious social customs.

Individual willpower contributed to the development of a nationalist movement to confront the colonial invasion which failed to understand the diversity within India. The British colonists denounced *purdah* without understanding its connection to the conservative culture of the nationalists. Hanna Papanek argues,

In the first half of this century, the emancipation of women and the rejection of veiling were closely related to national movements for independence from colonial rule. Leaders of nationalist movements often encouraged women to join and to appear more freely in public, even if they had not been in seclusion and only custom or modesty had prevented their participation. (59)

The nationalists realized that women's participation is significant for resisting colonialism. Their approach indicated that women living in seclusion need to be modernized, so that they could challenge western ideology and build their nation according to their cultural values.

As their values promoted modesty and *purdah*, nationalists came up with an innovative idea where women could maintain their modesty, but also come out of seclusion. In order to keep pace with the changing social circumstances, Muslim women decided to come out of seclusion but in the process of modernization, they did not take off their veils, but rather reinforced *purdah* through modest wear such as the *burkha*.

Papanek also notes that during the second half of the 20th century, revival of modest wear created a huge nationalist spirit which illustrated the striking difference between western understanding of modernization and Indian values of modernization and women's emancipation (60).

Representation of Third World Women

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's argument in separating western feminist values from the values of "Third World Women" (17) is particularly significant here as it relates to the diverse ideological stance of the women from the global south. Mohanty identifies how women of the global south are represented "as a singular, monolithic subject in some (Western) feminist texts" which she counters through explaining how their images have been appropriated in western feminist discourse (17). She explains that western feminist discourse homogenizes women of the global south into a singular group overlooking their diverse priorities. Mohanty argues,

Discourses of representation are confused with material realities, and the distinction made earlier between "Woman" and "women" is lost. Feminist work that blurs this distinction (which is, interestingly enough, often present in certain Western feminists' self-representation) eventually ends up constructing monolithic images of "Third World women" by ignoring the complex and mobile relationships between their historical materiality on the level of specific oppressions and political choices, on the one hand, and their general discursive representations, on the other. (36-37)

Mohanty elaborates the problematic practice of universalizing women and their experiences which disregards their intricate historicity. She distinguishes “Woman” as a construct of diverse cultural discourses and “women” as the subject of collective history. Depicting the differences, Mohanty refutes the homogeneous representation of women of the world. The choice of engaging *purdah* in feminist movement of colonized India is an example of how “Third world women” are countering the monolithic representation which overlooks the diversity of their goals and interests. Mohanty’s observation reveals the intricate patterns of women’s activism for equal rights which does not always fit into the western feminist discourse.

Mohanty also recognizes that western representation of *purdah* is a “descriptive generalization” which overlooks the historical and cultural context and complexities of this practice (34). Universalization of women’s oppression irrespective of their cultural orientation misinterprets their experiences of *purdah* and overlooks their specific agenda. Thus, western feminism fails to understand the diversity in feminist discourse of the global South.

Is *Purdah* Good or Bad?

Purdah is not inherently bad. Rather, it is interpreted and represented in such a way that generates a distorted discourse. The overtly strict practice of *purdah* was a massive impediment against women’s empowerment and such a religious practice was imposed by patriarchy. As Islam supports patriarchal domination, it was easier for the *mullahs* (religious teachers), to interpret religious rules and regulations in the favor of patriarchy. This does not mean whatever they interpreted was accurate; rather, they used

the interpretation in men's favor so that they have control and power over women.

Purdah came in the religion as a way of preserving modesty of women, not as a means of policing women's agency. The scriptures also elaborate the rights of women where they are given greater respect and equal rights including their rights of working outside home as men. But none of these are emphasized by the *mullahs* which resulted in an unbalanced position of men and women in Muslim society.

As *purdah* was a conservative way of life, it created much tension in the transitioning society under the British colonial rule. Colonizers attitude towards *purdah* forced the Muslim elites of the Indian Subcontinent to cope up with the transitioning society. They realized that if they ignored the changing scenario of their society, they will straggle and lose their position in the society. But the Muslim elites and nationalists did not want to surrender to the expectations of the colonizers. So, they altered the rigid rules of *purdah* by eliminating seclusion and introducing modest wear which allowed women to come out in public while remaining fully covered by veil.

The modification of *purdah* into modest wear was an action that empowered women of the colonial period. Because it allowed women to come out of spatial seclusion and explore the public sphere. At the same time, modest wear as a form of visual seclusion was a response against the invasive modernization of culture due to the colonization process. By modifying and practicing their own cultural values, nationalists of the Indian Subcontinent kept fighting against the domination of the British colonizers.

Rokeya's Depiction of *Zenana*

Rokeya describes the inhabitants of *zenana* as “cursed zenana ‘inmates’” shackled by the convention of a conservative society that imprisons women in the private chambers of the home (*Essential Rokeya* 44). For women, home is not a place of domestic comfort, but is a place of forced imprisonment. This private space does not allow them to explore a comfortable sphere within domesticity; rather, it confines them and makes them invisible to the rest of the world.

However, Rokeya believes women's jailors are not just men, but also other women. Contrary to the popular belief where religion is blamed for imprisonment of women, Rokeya accused her fellow women of ignorance if they failed to realize that religious scriptures are interpreted by men and the interpretation varied from person to person. In the Bengal Women's Educational Conference, she addressed the crowd saying,

Women have now been given the right to vote, but Muslim women relinquish that right voluntarily. In the last election, only four women had cast their votes in Calcutta. Is that a matter of pride for the Muslims? What other time or opportunity are they waiting for? (*Essential Rokeya* 129)

She denounced those who do not recognize the potential of having voting rights as well as those who blindly follow the religious teachings of *mullahs* rather than addressing the gap in the produced interpretation of religious scripture.

Rokeya neither blindly followed what Eurocentrism preached at that time, nor obediently followed prejudiced Muslim values. Rather, she paved her own way to help women through an intellectual and realistic practice. She contested the normative practice

through interpreting theological lessons. Rokeya explains in her essay “God Gives, Man Robs,”

God gives, Man Robs. That is, Allah has made no distinction in the general life of male and female—both are equally bound to seek food, drink, sleep etc. necessary for animal life. Islam also teaches that male and female are equally bound to say their daily prayers five times, and so on. (*Essential Rokeya* 169)

She was aware of the significance of modesty in her culture. At the same time, she also knew that the rigid rules of *purdah* are social customs rather than religiously sanctioned behavior. In her essay, “The Female-half,” Rokeya clarifies that she is not against the *purdah* system and not trying to dismantle the peace and order of her society overnight; rather, she hopes for a future where women would enjoy equality while maintaining their modesty.

Her literature reveals her vision for an ideal society which adheres to her cultural values. Despite living in a colonized period, Rokeya did not surrender to the Eurocentric ideals. She criticized British colonists through her short allegorical story, “The Knowledge Fruit.” Quayum notes,

[Rokeya] exposes the British colonial atrocity against India through the fairy narrative of the fair-looking jinns plundering the resources of the Kanak Island. In the story, Rokeya cleverly fuses her feminist sensibility with her nationalist sentiments, by suggesting that the only way Kanak Island can get rid of the defrauding and domineering jinns is by having all men and women unite in

planting and protecting the tree that yields the knowledge fruit, i.e. by allowing equal access to education for both men and women. (*Essential Rokeya* 15)

In the story, Kanak Island represents the Indian Subcontinent and the fair skinned jinns are the British colonists who invaded Indian land, pretending to do business. Rokeya's short story also reveals the potential way of resisting against the colonial oppression, and she considered education as one of the biggest weapons in the war against the colonizers. In order to transform their society, she asserted that men and women should get equal access to education.

Ali notes that the social transitions at that time produced a new elite class of women in the Indian subcontinent who nurtured progressive ideologies mimicking Eurocentric values (1). Reforming the social status of Muslim elites required a strategy which is appropriate for them. Similarly, Rokeya formulated her feminist discourse in such a way that focused on the practical wellbeing of women of her society, while keeping in mind the cultural differences between western and Indian culture. Her feminist discourse is loyal to her own cultural values while at the same time criticizing the hypocrisy of the social obligations that assumes religiosity.

While Rokeya produced scholarly criticism of *pardah* to condemn the role of patriarchy and hypocritical social norms, she also acknowledged that religious views are misinterpreted and manipulated by patriarchy which results in norms like *pardah*, *zenana*, and *sharif* culture. All these norms prevented women from getting education by confining them within the four walls of the private chambers.

In the Bengal Women's Educational Conference in 1927, Rokeya argued that patriarchy intentionally suppresses women's right to education, even though Islam instructs the opposite (*Essentials Rokeya* 129). Emancipating women from such a state required a decolonizing of their individual minds. Rokeya appealed to her fellow women to recognize their "natural rights" and "self-interest" (Papanek 58).

Elaborating on women's low self-esteem in her essay, "Women's Downfall," Rokeya illustrates the essentialization of female characteristics and argues that patriarchal domination is responsible for such condition. In "Women's Downfall" Rokeya explains, "our higher mental faculties of self-reliance and courage, having been nipped in the bud over and again for lack of cultivation, have probably stopped sprouting altogether" (*Essentials Rokeya* 22). Rokeya elaborates on the inevitability of cultivating mental faculties through an interesting analogy. To emphasize the necessity of education she states,

A scientifically trained eye sees charming and beautiful objects where an untrained eye sees only clay and dust. The earth that we trample on with contempt, taking it as mere soil, mud, sand and coal dust—scientists will, on analysis, find there four kinds of valuable items. For example, cultured sand results in opal; modified clay can be used in making porcelain or sapphire, and processed coal can make diamond. From water, we get vapour and mist. So you see, sisters, where an illiterate eye sees clay, an enlightened eye sees ruby and diamond. (*Essentials Rokeya* 29)

She validates her claim that unimportant materials can turn into invaluable resources with the help of education and cultivation. She explains that confidence, courage, and similar qualities are not innate features of a specific sex, but rather these are developed through nurture and practice. The lack of cultivation leads to the thwarting of one's growth, and education is necessary to overcome such an obstacle.

Criticizing the overprotectiveness of the patriarchy, Rokeya further explains the obstacle that subdue and condition women into meek, and fragile beings. Rokeya blames the constant surveillance of patriarchy for causing women to habitually become vulnerable. Rokeya claims that “[being] constantly protected from the dangers and difficulties of society, we have lost our courage, confidence and will altogether” (*Essentials Rokeya* 25). Providing a logical argument, Rokeya asserts that the chivalrous acts of men are harmful for the development of women as they delude women, convincing them they do not need to worry about the dangerous situations as men will take care of them. Focusing on the characteristics of human beings, the author reveals that neither men nor women are inherently chivalrous or vulnerable; they, instead, develop these qualities. Rokeya recognizes that men's “compassion is the source of our ruin. By cooping us up in their emotional cage, men have deprived us of the light of knowledge and an unadulterated air, which is causing our slow death” (*Essentials Rokeya* 25). Comparing illiteracy and lack of free will with slow death, Rokeya asserts that by forcing the women to be dependent on men, the patriarchal social system ensures that its female members are kept restrained. Depriving them of their basic rights to education, men ensure that women remain defenseless and dependent on men.

Rokeya understood that social transformation started at the root level and to emancipate women from their double oppression, their individual willpower was the most important aspect. Similarly, Rokeya's literature reveals this seemingly paradoxical presence of *purdah* which counters women's freedom of expression, and at the same time separates Indian women's ideological stance from westernized values.

Ladyland as Utopia

Advocacy for women's equal rights in the Indian subcontinent during the 19th and 20th century had a significant connection to the resistance against colonial aggression. It would not be wrong to say that the paradoxical response to *purdah* contributed to the nationalist concept, distinct from British imperialism. While illustrating an ideal nation in "Sultana's Dream," Rokeya associates the ideal land with a virtuous place "free from sin and harm" (*Essentials Rokeya* 160). In "Sultana's Dream" utopia is an idealistic place devoid of oppression, injustice, sorrow, and hardship that allows the inhabitants to practice equal rights.

In her feminist utopian science-fiction, "Sultana's Dream;" Rokeya illustrates Sultana's visit to a feminist utopian land called Ladyland. She wakes up from an evening nap and is immediately greeted by Sister Sara, a resident of Ladyland who gives her a tour of that place. While roaming the streets of Ladyland, Sultana realized that women's role and the social conventions of her world are the total opposite of what is being practiced in this place. She realizes that the rules and regulations of her world are imposed by patriarchy. She is astonished to discover that women work outside the domestic sphere and study at the universities. Her astonishment heightens when she

learns that this utopia is governed by a queen who believes in inclusive community and protects minority people, such as refugees. Their queen values scientific advancement and education which is the reason their kingdom is thriving. A futuristic illustration of their society reveals the usage of solar power and electricity used for basic power supply as well as the defense system of their kingdom. Sultana experiences amazing technological advancements and rides the air-car powered by hydrogen balloons. She also learns about the *mardana*: a section of the house reserved for men where women are not allowed to enter. This inverts the system of *zenana*: a secluded part of the house only for women. While exploring Ladyland, Sultana realizes that women of her society are living in shackles and transformation of her society into a feminist utopia will require intense efforts.

The concept of utopia was originally formulated by Thomas More in his work of fiction called *Utopia*. It was written in Latin in 1516 and this book deals a lot with commonwealth and collective wellbeing. More constituted this concept combining the Greek words *ou* meaning “not” and *topos* meaning “place;” thus utopia refers to “nowhere” (“Utopia”). This does not indicate a nonexistent place but a spatial space unlike anything that exists. It conveys a concept of living in an ideal place which nobody has ever experienced and, thus, no one is aware of the feeling of staying in a place like that. As More designs this ideal vision of a society, he argues that people are “free to believe as they should see cause” and based on their logical reasoning they should express themselves (67). Through liberty of their expression, they can “be citizens of a well-ordered commonwealth” which More claims as the perfect society (67). Through a

fictional satire, More constituted the idea of utopia as he believed in rationality and greater good of the community irrespective of social status.

More's design of utopia was based on an imaginative island where communitarian republic is practiced, providing it a realistic attribute (Nancy 3). In *Encyclopedia of Identity*, utopia is described as follows:

utopias and dystopias are described in terms of architecture and language, with a utopia predicated on an ideal city that is a harmony of space and built form and on freedom of speech and education, and a dystopia is built with repressive language and architecture. (Jackson 36)

Such a concept refers to the practice of freedom of speech in an ideal space. This fictional concept is formulated envisioning the collective benefit of ordinary people. Nancy elaborates Heidegger's point of view through "the desire for systematization [*volontà di sistema*] inherent in metaphysics" and claims that it gives rise to utopian concepts (17). Responding to the inequalities and injustice of a social system, this metaphysical concept enables people to design a society devoid of follies. Utopian space allows escape from reality into an imaginary space where people are free to express their thoughts.

The concept of safe space is particularly relevant here, as it provides protection from intimidation and offers area to freely express concerns and thoughts. The demand of constituting a safe space emerged with the mounting concerns of feminist activists demanding protection from oppression. It refers to a protected sphere for marginalized people, commonly indicating a shelter for women, gay, lesbian, intersex, and transsexual people where they have freedom of expression. It is a secured place where oppressed

people participate to share their stories, experiences, ideas, and so on (The Roestone Collective 1346).

The history of safe space is an old one and has direct connection to the feminist and queer movements because feminist and queer activists longed for a place where they would feel liberated, protected, and devoid of mistreatment (Paxson). In his article, published in *The Washington Post* in 2016, Paxson explains,

As for “safe spaces” — the term is used in so many different ways that it is impossible to discuss it without being precise about its meaning. The term emerged from the women’s movement nearly 50 years ago to refer to forums where women’s rights issues were discussed. Then it was extended to denote spaces where violence and harassment against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer community would not be tolerated, and then extended yet again to mean places where students from marginalized groups can come together to feel comfortable discussing their experiences and just being themselves.

(“Brown University”)

Articulating the demands of equal treatment of women and sexual minorities, the concept of safe space began to grow. The increasing demand of having a space where marginalized people can be free from judgement, lead towards coalition building of people who believe and preach similar discourse.

Safe space is a comparatively modern concept which emerged as a supporting resource for LGBTQ+ communities where they can freely express their sexual identity without the threat of coercion or judgment. In this thesis, safe space is used in a literal

way which refers to an idealistic place for women where they will be free from gender violence, will enjoy equal rights, and can express themselves without the fear of being mistreated or misjudged. Paxton argues that safe space constitutes an inclusive community providing comfort and care to oppressed people. Safe space is more than just a spatial concept; it is a coalition against coercion. Though this concept emerged as a place for LGBTQ+ community, people of color, women, and refugee communities find solace in safe space. Fostering a coercion-free environment, safe space serves potentially as a feminist utopia, a community that provides psychological support to subjugated people.

A feminist utopia is a potential safe space that offers an inclusive environment for feminists. Recognizing the flaws of utopianism, feminist utopia acknowledges the differences among race and sexuality and envisages a diverse space. Sargisson argues that:

Utopian thought creates a space, previously non-existent and still “unreal”, in which radically different speculation can take place, and in which totally new ways of being can be envisaged. In this space transformative thinking can take place, and paradigmatic shifts in approach can be undertaken. A newly formed and informed approach will enable new conceptualization of the phenomenon and significance of utopianism. (63)

Sargisson claims that the idealistic space can generate logical, realistic responses to crisis and these responses are innovative. A feminist utopia values inclusive space rather than

rigid rules of order and harmony and Sargisson suggests that rules are meant to be created and broken according to their own demand.

The concept of utopia began with the satirical expression of living in discontent. More utilized fiction to illustrate the follies of their society and suggested the way order and peace can be preserved. The literary concept of utopia provides with a well-ordered structure of a society, which is free from coercion, and is a safe space where people can express their ideas freely. However, the traditional model is not sufficient for the rising concerns of modern times. Sargisson describes feminist utopia this way,

It is a way of thinking that begins from dissatisfaction or disaffection with/in the political present as perceived and experienced by the writer concerned. It is critical of the present, destroys certainties, challenges dominant perceptions and, in the process, creates something new. (76)

This new concept that goes against the dominant concepts not only challenges the anomalies of society but also confronts the ideas of traditional utopia. The oversimplified demands for order and peace in a society overlooks distinct groups and cultural differences by forcing them into the so-called harmonized system. Confronting the dominant idea, feminists insist on creating a utopia that welcomes the differences and does not universalize the demands.

Ladyland as Utopic Revisioning of Space

Rokeya's utopian vision for the fellow women of her society speaks to the feminist concerns that rise from the dissatisfaction with a patriarchal system and a hope to create an inclusive matriarchy. Through "Sultana's Dream," Rokeya challenges the

traditional setting and convinces the audience that a feminist utopia can tackle patriarchal tyranny. Her works provide criticism of the model of utopianism which is constituted from the perspective of a male author and presumes patriarchal domination as the universal system (Mookerjee-Leonard 145). By urging her audience to see beyond the current picture, Rokeya challenges the politics of utopia and envisions a feminist utopia. Sargisson argues that utopia “has the potential to transform feminism from a politics of exclusion to a politics that is open to difference” (98). Rokeya’s vision of utopia resonates with Sargisson’s argument. Addressing the marginalized community of the society in “Woman’s Downfall,” Rokeya argues that development of a society is impossible if half of its population is left behind (*Essentials Rokeya* 21). She negotiates and recognizes the necessity to incorporate inclusive feminism.

In “Sultana’s Dream” Rokeya embraced a dystopic representation of patriarchy and challenges it with the feminist utopian vision of Ladyland. The custom of *zenana* is countered through *mardana*, and Rokeya illustrates men being accustomed to their own *purdah* system which is called *mardana* (*Essentials Rokeya* 165). Illustrating the dystopian custom of *purdah*, Rokeya convinces her audience that the customs are deceptive as men can also be kept secluded. For example, Sister Sara explains to Sultana, “Now that they are accustomed to the *purdah* system and have ceased to grumble at their seclusion, we call the system ‘mardana’ instead of ‘zenana’” (*Essentials Rokeya* 165). The inversion of the concept of *zenana*, enables the audience to see beyond the picture and recognize the unfair suppression of women. The reversal of gender role works perfectly as it reveals the hypocrisy of the constructed social norms. She portrays a

feminist utopian society in “Sultana’s Dream” which questions and criticizes patriarchal domination and promotes women’s growth.

Her fictional feminist utopia is a safe space for women. Rokeya takes a step further to depict the true dystopic nature of patriarchy through this fiction where she claims that secluding the men through *mardana* will establish a safe space devoid of crime and sin (*Essentials Rokeya* 166). To expose the hypocritical concept of gender roles, she uses a reversal technique and creates a safe space called Ladyland where men’s gender role is confined in the same ways as that of women in real life. She confines the men of Ladyland in secluded sections of domesticity and limits their mobility which is just like the *zenana* practiced by her contemporary women. Women of Ladyland move freely without worrying about *pardah* or being seen by men because men are now under the provision of *pardah*. Through her novel, Rokeya swapped the concept of *zenana* and *mardana* to portray that gender roles are social constructs.

Exposing deceitful gender roles through her feminist utopian science-fiction “Sultana’s Dream,” Rokeya fights against the traditional norms and social expectations that are built upon stereotypical ideas. The story unravels reversed gender roles of women and men where men stay indoors, out of sight of the world, in seclusion, and women work outside and rule the kingdom. Rokeya portrays the constructed norms through the conversation between sister Sara and Sultana:

“Where are the men?” I asked her.

“In their proper places, where they ought to be.”

“Pray let me know what you mean by ‘their proper places.’”

“O, I see my mistake, you cannot know our customs, as you were never here before. We shut our men indoors.” (*Essentials Rokeya* 160)

The inversion of the social status of men and women makes us rethink about the fickle nature of gender roles and power structure of our societies.

The protagonist, Sultana, finds herself in a remarkable situation and discovers that her personality is considered very “mannish” according to the inhabitants of Ladyland (*Essentials Rokeya* 159). Surprisingly, she is described as “shy and timid like men” (*Essentials Rokeya* 159), which is the complete opposite of what mannish means in reality. Through this incident, the author defies the stereotypical gender role and expectation of the society which essentializes femininity and manliness. By reversing the meek and timid characteristics on male personality, Rokeya proves that feminine or masculine attributes are constructed according to the expectation of the society. The author elaborates that gender roles are nurtured and can be modified according to the expectation of the society. In Ladyland, the confined men behave timidly and that is considered as manly or mannish. They are kept in *mardana* and their confinement results in a crime free, ideal society. They are conditioned in such a way that they no longer behave violently. Through their condition, Rokeya suggests that the domineering nature of men is cultivated and is not an inherent quality.

Illuminating the crippled mindset of Indian women, Rokeya explains that their minds are colonized by patriarchy. In “Sultana’s Dream,” Sultana’s thoughts reveal the social conventions that burdened and crippled her mind. When she is asked to go to the garden and have a look, she hesitated for a moment and “looked again at the moon

through the open window, and thought there was no harm in going out at that time. The men-servants outside were asleep just then, and I could have a pleasant walk with Sister Sara” (*Essentials Rokeya* 159). Even inside the boundary of domestic sphere, she had to think twice before going to the garden. Sultana’s concern here is obviously encountering men or unwanted audiences and the darkness of night eliminates the chances of meeting anyone. Illustrating the nighttime, Rokeya describes that it is permissible to venture freely inside the domestic sphere when it is dark and there are no chances of coming across men. The rigid conventions of *zenana* and *purdah* colonized their minds in such a way that they cannot even explore their own house without worrying about being seen by unwanted eyes. Rokeya carefully illustrates the scenario which implies that women are kept in the darkness of illiteracy and now they have grown accustomed to the darkness. Sultana further reveals, “‘I feel somewhat awkward,’ I said in a rather apologising tone, ‘as being a purdahnashin woman, I am not accustomed to walking about unveiled’” and confirms that being accustomed to *zenana*, the reversed situation in Ladyland is uncomfortable to her (*Essentials Rokeya* 160). The reason Sultana is hesitant about her actions is because women of her society are conditioned to behave in a certain way. Even when in a space safe from men’s eyes, Sultana cannot be comfortable. Through addressing the colonized minds, Rokeya reveals the low self-esteem of women and how they are trapped in it.

Refuting myths that essentialize women’s ability, Rokeya portrayed that women’s inferior social status is constituted for the convenience of patriarchy and Ladyland is free from such myths. Through Sultana’s stereotypical beliefs and lack of self-reliance, the

author points out how the female mind is colonized and made incapable of realizing its own value. Sultana thinks that women are “naturally weak” and men are “stronger than women” (*Essentials Rokeya* 161). With the help of Sister Sara, she realizes that she allowed herself to blindly believe the myths that limit her competence and force her to doubt her ability. Sister Sara’s character, in this case, acts as a catalyst who transforms Sultana’s biased outlook.

Men’s domineering nature is also questioned through “Sultana’s Dream,” where sister Sara reveals that the confinement of *mardana* has changed men into meek and obedient beings. She explains that men’s seclusion has allowed their society to flourish without any sin and crime (*Essentials Rokeya* 166). The author provides strong arguments against the social convention using reason and logic which expose the hypocrisy of social conventions that confine women using baseless stereotypes.

The social criticism Rokeya produces through her essays also provides numerous suggestions towards building an equal society for both men and women. Recognizing the social scheme that essentializes femininity as weak and vulnerable, she urges her audience to realize the politics behind it. In her essay “Women’s Downfall” she states, “Do us this favour, do not do any favour to us” so that her fellow female members do not get accustomed to the comforts of being protected by men (*Essentials Rokeya* 25). Her observations and her suggestions produce constructive criticism of the social injustices as well as the cowardice of her own peers. She suggests that, to empower themselves, women need to be independent first. She also urges that women should come out of the

comforts of their domestic sphere and face the challenges of the world. Her thoughts on empowering women illustrate a vision of a society which treats men and women equally.

Rokeya believed that a society can flourish if men and women are treated equally. In her essay “The Female-half,” she extends her argument and proceeds to elaborate on why equal treatment of both sexes are inevitably required for the development of a society. Rokeya states,

Old, wise people often suggest that family life is like a two-wheeled carriage; one wheel of it is the husband, and the other is the wife. That’s why wives are habitually described as partners and better-halves in the English language.

(Essentials Rokeya 35)

Rokeya utilizes the analogy of a carriage to explain that the society requires both men and women’s contribution to flourish. Both wheels are necessary, and neither should dominate, or it unbalances the carriage.

She also acknowledges that her peers are falling behind and their unequal status to men is destabilizing the growth of their society. Rokeya argues,

let me emphasise that we make up half of society. How will society move forward if we remain inert? If we tie up one leg of a person, how far can he go hobbling?

The interests of men and women are not different, but the same. Whatever their aim or purpose in life is, so is ours. *(Essentials Rokeya 32)*

Rokeya describes the society as one body and men and women as two sides of that body which needs both the sides to function properly. If one side of the body stops working, the entire body will stagger. With a compelling metaphor, she portrays the realistic image

of her society and offers invaluable advice to resolve the situation. As she herself is a product of that time, she offers suggestions from her own experience that are invaluable to resolve the impediment society faces.

To overcome such a challenge, she proposes that education for women should be a must. In “Women’s Downfall” she explains, “Our conscience is making us aware of our degradation; now it is our duty to make an effort to move forward. We, ourselves, should initiate opening the door to our progress” (*Essentials Rokeya* 30). Advising her fellow women, she entreats them to pursue education even though “there are no suitable schools or colleges for girls” (*Essentials Rokeya* 28). She encourages them to take the first leap of faith and establish their own educational institution that will serve their unique purpose. Rokeya was well aware of the demands of her fellow women and she did not blindly follow Eurocentric philosophy. She knew that “society becomes agitated whenever there is an attempt to reform tradition, but gradually it comes to accept the new practice” (*Essentials Rokeya* 33).

Her rhetorical style involved compassion for religious values, but she also strongly condemned fanaticism. Her view on educating women reveals “the purpose of education is not to blindly imitate a community or a race. It is to develop the innate faculties of the individual, attributed by God, through cultivation” (*Essentials Rokeya* 29). Rokeya understood that the interests and goals of her fellow women of her society were unlike the interests of their western peers. Her scholarship elaborates the necessity to engage intellectual faculties so that they do not mimic the western feminist discourses risking in producing monolithic representation (Mohanty 17). The author also elaborates

in “Sultana’s Dream,” that the inhabitants of Ladyland are encouraged to pursue higher education so that they can contribute to the development of their society. The social system of Ladyland encourages them to explore their innovative interests and fulfill their goals. Her unique rhetoric is concerned with the culture-specific problems of her society which makes her rhetoric different from Eurocentric feminist values.

Her advice and her idealistic vision of a society is thus reflected through “Sultana’s Dream.” Though this novella does not illustrate a society where man and women are equals, it satisfyingly brings out the structure of a feminist utopia. Putting men in their “proper places,” which is called *mardana*, Rokeya illustrates how the society in Ladyland kept advancing (*Essentials Rokeya* 160). The system of this utopia embodies all the suggestions she provided in her essays and one of them was ensuing literacy for women. Sister Sara explains,

Education was spread far and wide among women. And early marriage also was stopped. No woman was to be allowed to marry before she was twenty-one. I must tell you that before this change we had been kept in strict purdah. (*Essentials Rokeya* 163)

Through the innovative technological advancement, Rokeya implies that secluded women can also contribute to the development of their society if they are properly educated. The social concerns of 19th and 20th century Indian subcontinent such as child marriage and *zenana* are thus countered through her novella. Portraying a safe environment for women, Rokeya’s rhetoric creates a feminist safe space where women prosper and support each other.

Rokeya's feminist utopia is also a safe haven for distressed people where they can get shelter and remain comfortably. The inclusive nature of a feminist utopian setting is revealed through Ladyland where marginalized people like refugees are provided protection. Sister Sara reveals,

[Certain] persons came from a neighbouring country and took shelter in ours. They were in trouble having committed some political offence. The king who cared more for power than for good government asked our kind-hearted Queen to hand them over to his officers. She refused, as it was against her principles to turn out refugees. (*Essentials Rokeya* 164)

The Queen of Ladyland ensures the protection of refugees and she does not hesitate to fight a tyrant king of another kingdom for this cause. The welcoming nature of the feminist utopia functions as a safe space for marginalized people where they are free from coercion and violence. Rokeya depicts her feminist utopia in such a way which questions the normative concepts of 19th and 20th century Indian society. Countering the challenges of her contemporary society, she offers a view of a future through "Sultana's Dream" where women encounter tough situations like war and prosper against all odds.

Reception of Rokeya's Utopian Vision

Very few people of her time appreciated Rokeya's efforts to stabilize the adverse social situation of her fellow women. Among them Sarojini Naidu was one of the most prominent feminists. Naidu was a popular poet and activist who had massive social influence and was given the nickname "The Nightingale of India." She expressed her appreciation in a personal letter to Rokeya.

The mission of spreading education among Muslim girls that you have undertaken and the sacrifices you have been making for such a long time to achieve its success is truly astounding. I am writing this letter only to convey my heart felt respect and admiration for you It is intended to let you know how often this sister of yours canonises your ideology and social work from a distance. May God bless your tireless endeavour for the wellbeing of Muslim women! (qtd. in *Essentials Rokeya XXIX*)

Naidu genuinely congratulated and supported Rokeya's literary and political activism. Her letter reveals a womanist bond, and she acknowledges the sisterly love through her appreciation. Apart from a few positive comments, Rokeya received a lot of criticism from the conservative literary society and general critics.

Quayum notes that Rokeya's advocacy for women's education received fame and fierce condemnation. Because of her unorthodox techniques, her personal, literary, and social life was under scrutiny. Quayum explains,

The *mullahs* (ultra-clerics) were constantly on her back with their mock-*fatwahs*, as obviously, being a woman and a widow she was an easy target for them; "the hidebound, bigoted Muslim clerics in the country think that it is their religious duty to oppress women"... Rokeya remarks bitinglly in one her essays. (*Essentials Rokeya XXIX*)

Rokeya realized that women are not oppressed because of the stern religious regulations, rather the orthodox view of the people. Despite facing harsh criticism, she continued to

produce literary scholarship and relentlessly kept working for the betterment of her society.

Quayum also elaborates the response of the literary critics who presumably criticized the literary nature of Rokeya's scholarship because they could not get out of their comfort zone of a patriarchy. Quayum notes,

Then there were the conservative literary critics, who found her thoughts and arguments too radical for their taste and tried to stigmatise her in every possible way. They accused her of “whipping” the society... of being overly Western and Christian in her imagination ... and of telling stories that were absurd and unreal. (qtd. in *Essentials Rokeya* XXIX)

Her feminist utopian fiction, “Sultana's Dream” was considered absurd as the critics felt uncomfortable about the inversion of men's social status. To them, this idea was overtly absurd, and they accused Rokeya of being a radical Eurocentric activist.

Quayum also notes that Rokeya's interpretation of the cultural norms met with stern denunciation because she was pointing out the inconsistency of the normative rules of the society. Quayum illustrates the critics' opinion,

[To her] everything Indian is bad and everything Euro-American good... Another critic accused that Rokeya's works were influenced by the Madras-based Christian Tract Society and their publications on Indian reform... yet another (and a female critic) said that the singular aim of Rokeya's writing was to persecute the men. (qtd in *Essentials Rokeya* XXIX)

Rokeya's response against such misinterpretation was striking which she expressed through her speech in the Bengal Women's Educational Conference,

I want to say, let's discuss it keeping within the bounds of Islamic tradition. It won't be an exaggeration to say that there is nothing similar between the Indian purdah system and the teachings on protecting women's dignity in the scripture.

(Essentials Rokeya 130)

To counter all the derogatory remarks, Rokeya produced logical response which brought her more fame and appreciation.

She was never against modesty because she herself was a very devout Muslim who regularly performed her religious duties. Despite all her efforts, fanatic traditionalists spread derogatory rumors about her. Quayum reveals:

[The] ugly elements of society were not done with her yet. They started spreading scandals against her. Many accused that "a young widow had set up a school only to show off her beauty to society" (Sufi 84). Others "alleged that her companions were prostitutes and the scum of society. Some even branded her a woman of loose morals." (qtd. in *Essentials Rokeya XXX*)

Despite all the harsh and derogatory criticism, Rokeya never stopped working for her fellow women. She was emotionally devastated but she also knew that the route she chose, was the most challenging one. Being a persistent advocate of women's rights, she countered all the criticism very wisely through her literary scholarship.

Rokeya as the Representative of her Era

Rokeya was a sincere representative of her age who believed literature should produce moral and ethical responses and should function as a didactic tool instead of just entertaining. Her literary works portray authentic illustrations of the society and she does not hesitate to criticize the hypocrisy of her society as well as her peers (Roushan 4). Quayum notes that, “Rokeya was primarily a realistic writer. She depicted the society around her as she saw it, impartially and objectively, without any attempts to glorify or magnify the truth” (*Essentials Rokeya* 2). Her works represent the era in which she lived and demonstrate the genuine situation which trapped her fellow female members of the society. She was a devout Muslim, but she never wavered when criticizing radical religious tradition which barred women from obtaining their basic rights. In her essays, “Woman’s Downfall” and “The Female-half” she depicts women as equally responsible as men for their failure. She elaborates on the way women of her time were caged by *purdah*.

Rokeya also described her peers’ materialistic greed for jewelry rather than literacy in “Woman’s Downfall”. As a true representative of her time, she knew that her fellow female members of the society will not be able to break the shackles of prejudice and ignorance if they are not educated. At the same time, she realized that blindly mimicking western values cannot be the solution to the problems of women from the global south. Instead, they had to generate their own innovative ideas to counter their culture specific issues.

Connecting the Dots

Reading Rokeya's literary works, I realized that she utilizes literacy and literature to amplify her rebellious voice, exposing the prejudices against woman's liberation. She was often misunderstood for her criticism of culture and religion. Rokeya's criticism of *pardah* was not directed toward the religious practice, but rather the intellectual blindness of her fellow women who misunderstood religious fanaticism as religion. I found that her rhetorical activism seeks to eliminate the blindness of mind. She fought against symbolic *pardah* that covered women's consciousness and makes them incapable of seeing or acknowledging the flaw in patriarchal domination.

Rokeya's literature was harshly criticized because of its rebellious contents and critics condemned her of blindly following Eurocentric idea. I think the criticism she attracted during her time was solely because she was a woman with a determination to question everything. She did not attempt to inject Eurocentric ideas in her work; rather, she condemned the blind mimicking of western culture by her peers.

Being a woman of that time, Rokeya's reputation suffered severe criticism and false accusations from the patriarchal society because she revolted against the monopoly of patriarchy. I think she was targeted because she did not conform to the essentialization of women's ability. I also believe that "Sultana's Dream" was her attempt to demonstrate how overturning the monopoly would result in a better and prosperous society. As she portrayed a "very disturbing" image of patriarchy in her literary works, she suffered stern denunciation from her society. Despite all the criticism, Rokeya successfully created the vision of safe space for women through "Sultana's Dream."

CHAPTER 3

FRANCES ELLEN WATKINS HARPER'S SAFE SPACE

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's rhetoric of safe space is built upon her criticism of enslavement, racism, sexism, and social injustice. As an abolitionist, Harper denounced the institution of slavery and emphasized obtaining freedom for her people. She condemned racism for suppressing African American people and depriving them of equal rights. Her literary works and her activism spoke of a safe feminist utopia where women of her kind will be free from coercion and enjoy their rights as any other human beings. Harper's works assert the importance of educating Black people so that they can claim their rightful position in the society and get the treatment they deserve, but Frances Smith Foster notes that "she did not have a room of her own when she created her most popular literature" which explains why she wanted a place of their own where people from her community will be safe and free (3). Being an abolitionist and a suffragist in a male dominated and white supremacist society, Harper spent almost her entire life fighting for African American people.

To understand Harper's activism against slavery and racism, it is important to discuss the 19th century US context when African American people were enslaved and deprived of basic human rights. Harper's advocacy indicated a didactic way of dealing with the social issues which crippled the mindset of Black people. Harper also addressed the double colonization of women who were suffering due to sex segregation and racial discrimination. Engaging a womanist perspective, Harper provides a lot of suggestions

which could help uplift the African American communities and ensure their liberty as well as equal rights as the white people.

Harper's suggestions are illustrated through the realistic fiction, *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted*. The novel offers a detailed illustration of the antebellum, Civil War and Reconstruction periods through series of events from the characters' lives. Many critics received this novel as a true representation of Harper's life's work and lauded her for recording the authentic experiences of Black people of her time. Through this novel Harper constituted a safe space for African American people and emphasized the uplifting of their social situation. Her activism indicates the necessity of creating a space where Black people will be safe from the inhuman torture of slavery and racism and, for this, education is the most significant element. Her novel offers a womanist vision of a safe space where collective wellbeing of the African American people is the most important way of improving their social circumstances.

During the antebellum, Civil War and Reconstruction periods of the United States, Harper travelled across the country to preach the songs of humanity (Ammons 64). Being an educator, she made sure that the light of knowledge reached African American people in every corner of their dreary life. But the social context was against the development of African American people. Foster explains,

Life was not easy for nineteenth-century African-Americans, free or slave. It was particularly problematic for free blacks, such as the Watkinses, who lived in a slave state. As Frances Watkins grew to adulthood, the racial situation in the United States was becoming increasingly precarious. The abolitionist movement

was but one of several transformative social and economic currents that were polarizing the young nation and that were affecting slaves and free blacks. (8) Battling against these massive drawbacks were not easy which was reflected through Harper's works. Harper was a skillful creator of realistic fiction and through her literary works, she revealed the genuine picture of her time.

Pedagogy and Harper's Activism

Harper's literary works are produced with a didactic purpose seeking to empower her fellow African American people who were fighting against slavery and racism. As an educator, she dedicated her life to uplift the state of her people so that they received education and the basic human rights they deserve. She had a unique rhetoric which engaged in producing scholarship and spreading knowledge. She continued "cultivating a knowledgeable readership by writing in explicitly didactic genres that addressed a range of topics, primary among them, the abolition of slavery and the importance of education for the social reform of the racial state" (Stancliff 25). Instead of just motivating people through her speech, she wanted to spread knowledge because she believed literacy could liberate the prejudiced mind of her fellow women. Harper's activism against illiteracy not only eliminated ignorance but also equipped the Black people of the transitioning era to stand up for their rights. Stancliff notes that Harper "taught rhetoric in the African American press throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, helping to train the next generation of activists for the reform work of uplift" (1). For Harper, pedagogy was a way of defying the social injustice that bars Black people from obtaining knowledge. Her stance against illiteracy persuaded African

American people to think afresh about the significance of education. She devoted her life for the sacred cause of educating African Americans and liberating their colonized mind from the shackles of ignorance.

Double Colonization of Women

Harper recognized the double colonization of women of her time: racial discrimination and patriarchal domination. Black women during the suffrage movement of the United States were subject to numerous social prejudices. Their enslaved minds were struggling to break free from the impacts of slavery. Ashcroft et al. explain double colonization:

The term refers to the observation that women are subjected to both the colonial domination of Empire and the male domination of patriarchy. In this respect, Empire and patriarchy act as analogous to each other and both exert control over female colonial subjects, who are, thus, doubly colonized by imperial/patriarchal power. (89)

African American women from the 19th century United States were subject to strict patriarchal domination and they were also suffering from the adverse effect of racial denigration. They were given lesser social status compared to white men and women in numerous aspects of life such as voting rights, access to education, and economic benefit. They were deprived of the rights enjoyed by their white counterparts because of their race. On top of that, the normative patriarchal rules of the society suppressed their freedom. Harper recognized the toils of having an intersectional identity and believed education could eradicate the prejudices that bar women from becoming independent.

Her approaches to eliminate the sexist obstacles were different than that of her fellow white feminists and suffragists. Focusing on intersectional identity, Harper confronted patriarchy and social norms. Her activism indicated traces of womanist philosophy which made her approach distinct from her fellow white feminists.

Conceptualizing Womanism

Womanism is a modern concept which was coined in 1983 by Alice Walker to offer “an alternative framework to analyze and articulate issues important to women equally oppressed by racism, sexism, and classism” (O’Reilly 1277). Despite a huge gap in the timeline, Harper’s approach demonstrates womanist traits. Womanism is women supporting women irrespective of their race, class, ability, social status, and religion.

Walker and she provided four different definitions of womanism. One of them states,

A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. (xi)

Recognizing the differences of race, class, ethnicity and culture, women expressing solidarity with other women is womanist discourse. The inclusive nature of womanist discourse is clearly comprehensible from Walker’s definition. Although womanists are woman-identified, this does not mean they are separatists; here race-identification plays a significant role. Addressing cultural diversity, womanism criticizes the exclusive nature of western white feminism.

The necessity to devise the concept of womanism was due to the different experiences of women of color and their diverse perspective. O'Reilly describes how womanists are distinct from feminists,

A womanist is a "black feminist or feminist of color," who fights against racism, sexism, and all types of oppression; fosters unity among the members of the black community; affirms the importance of self-naming and black people's ways of knowing and interpreting life; appreciates all aspects of black women's culture, including the nurturing role of mother; and acknowledges the spiritual and transcendental realm of human life. "Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender," concludes Walker. Thus, the womanist stance is a deeper hue of feminism in that it more adequately acknowledges and affirms the multidimensional aspects of black women's experiences. (1277)

Focusing on the diversity of life, womanism embraces women from all spheres of life. Walker's womanism recognizes the diversity and questions the monolithic representation of women. She suggests that womanism builds upon the love and support women share with each other, irrespective of their race, class, and sexuality and is inclusive of all women from diverse cultural background. The intersectional identity of Black women of the 19th century demanded a treatment which understood their needs. During that time, African American women were fighting against slavery, social injustice, illiteracy, and for their rights as women. The goal of their movement was not entirely similar to the demands of suffrage advocates, thus the feminist movement failed

to integrate their Black counterparts and womanism, even if not named that at the time, provided an alternative approach to those in need.

The early insights of Watkins presaged the critiques of feminism of the 1980s. Creating a generalized category to represent women irrespective of race, class, ethnicity, and nationality, western feminism was operating as monopolized discourse. Ashcroft et al. note that,

In the 1980s, many feminist critics ... began to argue that Western feminism, which had assumed that gender overrode cultural differences to create a universal category of the womanly or the feminine, was operating from hidden, universalist assumptions with a middle-class, Eurocentric bias. Feminism was therefore charged with failing to account for or deal adequately with the experiences of Third World women. In this respect, the issues concerning gender face similar problems to those concerned with class. (117)

Universalization of a feminist agenda eliminates the demands and experiences of women of color and lower-class women from the conversation regarding women's rights activism. Western feminism thus omitted the diverse goals, demands, and values of women from different races, ethnicities, and cultures.

Harper's works represent womanist philosophy as she designed her characters "to embody the dichotomy of race and gender, but unlike the tragic mulattos of nineteenth-century literature, her characters transcend these cultural contradictions by adhering to a higher calling in the liberation movements" (Boyd 171). The concept of womanism is thus portrayed through her works, addressing issues such as wisdom, spirituality,

motherhood, communal feelings and experiences of black women and women from the third world, which white middle-class feminism fails to incorporate, both then and (oftentimes) now.

Exploring *Iola Leroy*

Emphasizing motherhood, Harper's womanist vision of a safe utopian space for women is reflected through her novel *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted*. Harper illustrated a war-stricken image of the 19th century United States of America where the North and South were fighting over slavery. Harper's novel reveals the adverse impact of slavery where humanity was at stake. The author illustrated a number of social circumstances during the antebellum period and the reformation period which hindered African American people from moving forward. As enslaved people, they were not allowed to marry and have spouses and children of their own. They did not have the right to be in a relationship as they were owned by white plantation owners who enslaved them. Separating enslaved people from their family was a very common practice among the plantation owners and the protagonist of *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted* also suffers a similar situation. After emancipation, their struggles took a new turn as they searched for the relatives they had been torn away from. Harper also depicted incidents of African American people being lynched by white mobs.

With their newfound freedom, Black people were now eligible to vote according to the Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. They were moving one step closer to achieving their basic civil rights through voting rights for men but women's equal rights were yet to be achieved. Through Iola's activism, Harper illustrates the social

context in which women of color were struggling to secure equal rights to men and to whites.

Equity and Liberty

Iola's journey reveals a vision of a future where women will have equal rights as men and African American people will flourish as a community. Harper focuses on the collective development of her people and confronts sex segregation through her vision of a safe space. The novel unfolds the story of Iola Leroy who was the daughter of Eugene Leroy, a plantation owner and enslaver, and Marie Leroy, a creole woman who was enslaved by Eugene, later freed, educated, and married to him. Despite having mixed ancestry, Marie and her children appear to be white. She wanted her three children, Iola, Harry, and Gracie to know about their African American ancestry so that they are empathetic towards their own race. Sadly, before they could reveal it, Eugene dies, and his estate is acquired by his cousin who nullifies Eugene and Marie's marriage because the laws forbid marriage between whites and Blacks. Though Iola and her siblings were born free because their father freed their mother before marrying her, they were reduced to slaves after their father dies. This unfortunate event not only reduces Iola and Marie to slavery, but also separates them from each other. Iola loses contact with her brother who studies and lives in the northern side of the country, unaware of this catastrophic situation.

The narrative follows the ups and downs of Iola's life where she was rescued by the Union Army, and later she joins the military as a nurse. While taking care of the wounded soldiers during the Civil War, Iola meets Dr. Gresham, a white, prejudiced

military physician who falls in love with her, thinking that she is white. After he learns about her ancestry, he tries to convince her to give up her Black identity and marry him. Iola denies the proposal and after the war is over, she starts the expedition to find her mother.

While serving as a nurse, she also meets a wounded lieutenant named Robert Johnson, also known as Bobby, who turns out to be her mother's long-lost brother. Together they search for their lost relatives. Robert takes Iola to visit the house of Aunt Linda, a former enslaved person who used to work as cook. After the war, Linda reunites with her husband. Iola continues her journey as a teacher and seeks to do more for the uplifting of her race. Eventually, she is reunited with her lost family members, gets married to Dr. Latimer, and dedicates herself to the development of her race through which Harper focuses on a utopian state, a happy vision for future where everyone irrespective of their race and color are safe and free.

Critics' Response of *Iola Leroy*

As a literary and political activist, Harper attempted to constitute the vision of a better future for African American people. Her novel, *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted* was not the first work by a Black author but it “did firmly establish the novel as a viable genre in African American Literature” (Foster 4). Though the novel is a work of fiction, the highly authentic representation of 19th century America and the social context of the African American population “manifests historical accounts and political ideologies” in a reliable manner (Boyd 171).

Despite being a significantly important impression of the time, Harper's novel was not widely distributed across the United States. Foster notes that women barely had opportunities to appear as authors and in literature "references to women were confined primarily to footnotes" (5). Sex segregation in the 19th century America was intense which is why works of female authors were scarcely considered by the literary critics.

Foster reveals,

Iola Leroy, was for many years considered the earliest extant novel by an African-American woman, it was not available in paperback until 1987. The reasons for this reflect the general neglect and misreadings of literature by women. The ears of the American public are now, as they were then, more generally attuned to male voices. Even their supporters tend to undervalue women's words. (23)

Due to sexism, Harper's literary works were neglected. Literary fields were extremely competitive for women because they had to compete against male authors. For Harper, there were two different kinds of challenges, her gender and her race. The intersectional obstacles she faced due to her gender and race made her advocacy against racism and sexism more challenging.

Harper's activist aesthetics and her focus on racial identity were demonstrated through *Iola Leroy* and she chose to illustrate politicized slave narratives which added authenticity to the fictional characters (Boyd 171). Boyd also explains,

While her characters must struggle with the ambiguity of their identities the resolution to the dilemma lies in political involvement to alter the socio-economic structure that advocates and benefits from such confusion and class divisions.

Harper's characters are designed to embody the dichotomy of race and gender, but unlike the tragic mulattos of nineteenth-century literature, her characters transcend those cultural contradictions by adhering to a higher calling in the liberation movements. Without this political insight her characters would have to resign themselves to the popular fiction of law and custom, which valued caste and gender as class positions determined relative to the power of white supremacy. Hence Harper's literary thesis is an anti-thesis confronting literary and social traditions... (171-172)

Boyd's observation points out that Harper's character Iola Leroy was designed with the visions and ideologies of Harper herself. Just like Harper, Iola dedicates her life to educate Black people and thus performing their duties towards their race. Even their mixed race causes similar reactions and Harper mirrors the crisis she faced through Iola's character. Integrating her political ideology in her characters enabled them to form resistance against white supremacy and obtain their basic human rights which is highly praiseworthy. This is one of the reasons why critics praise Harper for tactfully illustrating her vision of a better future through her literary scholarship.

Despite all the hardships, Harper made her way through the prickly route of freedom, and she spread the messages of an inclusive society where everyone irrespective of gender and race will enjoy equal rights. Her lectures and her literature addressed social issue such as abolition of slavery, racism, significance of education, temperance, and human rights. Phebe A. Hanaford, a contemporary of Harper's, described her:

Frances E. W. Harper is one of the most eloquent women lecturers in the country.... She is one of the colored women of whom white women may be proud, and to whom the abolitionists can point and declare that a race which could show such women never ought to have been held in bondage. (qtd. in Foster 4)

Her career as an abolitionist and a lecturer was immensely influential. She participated in the suffrage movement and, in 1866, at the Eleventh Woman's Rights Convention. She addressed the crowd of white and Black people where she explained why universal suffrage would not transform women's social position overnight (Bacon 33-34). She was highly respected by the abolitionists and women irrespective of race respected her.

Harper is considered as "the leading colored poet in the United States" (qtd in Foster 5). She designed the characters of *Iola Leroy* with such details that they bring out the radical historical events and authenticity of her era (Boyd 172). The protagonist, Iola mirrors a lot of Harper's ideologies regarding pedagogy and collective wellbeing of African American people. Like Iola, a greater part of Harper's struggles was her African American identity. Foster reveals, "Harper's own letters note that members of her audience often debated whether she was an African-American or 'painted' to appear as one" (6). Her mixed ancestry occasionally raised questions about her identity. However, these issues could never stop her from spreading knowledge and creating awareness among people.

Foster also notes that Harper uses a highly moral and elevating tone in her literature and engages in didactic discussions (23). Similarly, in *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted* Harper employed a pedagogical tone to delineate her vision of a better future.

Cantiello notes that, “many critics have noted Harper’s pedagogical purpose in writing *Iola Leroy*, as well as her commitment to racial uplift ideology for Africans Americans post-Reconstruction” (575). Through her fiction, Harper combined all the elements together in her novel which demonstrates the potential ways of empowering African American people. Her attempts manifest womanist ideology, and her works reveal her “[commitment] to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Walker xi). Throughout the reformation period, Harper worked relentlessly to convince, teach, and involve African American people in their community development. A greater part of her “mission was to convince the newly liberated that they must construct a nation with a spiritual foundation” (Boyd 169-170).

Constituting a Safe Space for African American People

The vision of an ideal future is implied throughout the whole novel. Harper opens the novel with a reference to the ongoing revolution which will transform the state of enslaved people. The author shares the optimistic vision of a free state through Aunt Linda’s voice where she confidently states, “Mark my words, Bobby, we’s all gwine to git free. I seed it all in a vision, as plain as de nose on yer face” (13). Through Aunt Linda’s dream, the author shares the vision of a utopian state where every Black person is safe and free from slavery and racial discrimination. But Harper’s utopia is not an ideal, fictional place; it is rather a safe space for her people. The author demonstrates through Tom that utopic places, heavens, are useless if the white men are there. Tom exclaims about one of the enslaved persons,

when he 'gin talkin' to him 'bout savin' his soul an' gittin' to hebbin, he tole him ef he went to hebbin an' foun' he war dare, he wouldn't go in. He wouldn't stay wid any such rascal as he war. (22)

Describing the religious hypocrisy of the white man, Tom explains that if the ruthless plantation owners go to heaven after committing numerous crimes against humanity, then it is better for Black people not to go to heaven. Viewing the religious hypocrisy of the white men, the author explains why an unreal concept of utopia is not suitable for her people. Considering their situation, Harper offers a vision of a future where Black people are safe, free, and have control over their lives.

Marie's discontent about the future of her children and her own race reveals the communal feeling of freedom of the enslaved African American people. Marie proclaims, "I love liberty, not only for myself but for every human being" (80). She is married to the person she loves who happens to be her former owner, and her husband declares that she is free. She is not content with just her individual freedom. Marie's statement is crucial here as it demonstrates a womanist philosophy, woman loving woman and man irrespective of class, race and status. Through Marie, Harper creates an unusual situation for mixed race people who can pass as white.

Marie's enlightened mindset also explains Iola's parentage and how she overcomes her prejudiced mind. Her thoughts also reveal the urge to establish a utopian society. Marie notes,

The more intelligent of them have so learned to veil their feelings that you do not see the undercurrent of discontent beneath their apparent good humor and jollity.

The more discontented they are, the more I respect them. To me a contented slave is an abject creature. I hope that I shall see the day when there will not be a slave in the land. I hate the whole thing from the bottom of my heart. (79-80)

Through Marie's opinion, Harper delineates the way Black people formed resistance and countered slavery. They learned to conceal their emotions and waited for the right time to strike against it. She recognizes that enslaved people are never happy but if they are satisfied in their place, their minds become colonized. Harper demonstrates evidence of numerous occasions where enslaved people joined the Union to fight against the Confederate army. For example, Tom Anderson and Robert Johnson pretended to be naïve and ignorant of the ongoing Civil War whereas they developed a code language to share the updates of the war (8). Their discontent about the status of their race rose to an extent where they secretly joined the Union army to fight against slavery. Through the resistance of the colored people and Marie's discontent, Harper reveals the psychology of the oppressed people. The emotions and actions of her people foreshadow Harper's vision of a utopia where they will live safely.

Expanding on the rhetorics of utopia for African American people of her time, Harper engages in creating a safe space for her people through her literature. She repeatedly expresses that in the near future her people will be free and enjoy equal rights as any other human being. She asserts through Iola,

I believe the time will come when the civilization of the negro will assume a better phase than you Anglo-Saxons possess. You will prove unworthy of your

high vantage ground if you only use your superior ability to victimize feebler races and minister to a selfish greed of gold and a love of domination. (116)

Harper believed that with proper education and nurturing, her own race will climb to a position in the society where they will outsmart the white race. Her description of the ongoing Civil War is one of the examples which demonstrates how Black people are reclaiming their agency through confronting the oppressive Confederates. Countering the social prejudices that romanticize the African American people in a certain manner, the author asserts that they are capable of developing their status.

Uplifting Community Through Education

Drawing attention to the significance of education, Harper elaborates on the empowering and liberating experiences of enslaved African American people throughout her novel. The author portrays Iola's mother, Marie, an enslaved creole girl attending a northern academic institution and learning how to uplift the shadows of ignorance from her life. With the help of her future husband Eugene Leroy, she attains a degree and educates her children. Education awakens her agency allowing her to decide what is right and wrong and how she should educate her children. She recognized the importance of gaining knowledge and insists, "I see no other way of finishing the education of these children than by sending them to some Northern school" (83).

Sending her children, Iola and Harry, away to receive education from schools run by abolitionists, Marie ensured that the future generation will be capable of breaking the shackles of slavery and ignorance. Despite being happily married to Leroy, she is dissatisfied thinking about the future of her children. Her complicated marital status

makes her children's future vulnerable, and she wants to educate them to enlighten their minds.

Being an educator, Harper was aware of the way education empowered the suppressed population. She recognizes that depriving the colored people from getting education was another way of suppressing them and keeping them under control. She demonstrates how the obstacle of illiteracy forced them to accept their inferiority. They are not allowed to obtain education because of their race. Harper illuminates Tom Anderson's story,

When he was nineteen years old he did not know how many letters there were in the ABC's. One night, when his work was done, his boss came into his cabin and saw him with a book in his hand. He threatened to give him five hundred lashes if he caught him again with a book, and said he hadn't work enough to do. He was getting out logs, and his task was ten logs a day. His employer threatened to increase it to twelve. He said it just harassed him; it set him on fire. He thought there must be something good in that book if the white man didn't want him to learn. One day he had an errand in the kitchen, and he heard one of the colored girls going over the ABC's. Here was the key to the forbidden knowledge. (45)

Describing the horror of the torture, Harper reveals how the Black people were suppressed intellectually. Forcing them to stay illiterate was a way of crippling their intellectual capacity so that they are unable to rise against the oppression of slavery. To suppress any potential threats of resistance, the enslaved people were deprived of education and left powerless.

Empowering Through Education

Harper engages in a rhetorical discussion of how knowledge determines the power of an individual. Having the knowledge of the Civil War could prove beneficial to Black people and could help them determine their chances of escaping slavery. In the beginning of the novel, Tom and Robert are seen to be exchanging greetings and updates on the ongoing Civil War but they cannot talk freely about this revolution, so they choose to talk in code language (8). Encoding expressions to avoid repercussions and torture, they concealed that they were aware of the ongoing revolution. Knowing how to read the newspaper was a gift which was meant to be hidden, so they invented a different mode of communication. Through this innovative measure, Harper demonstrates that knowledge empowers them to resist against the institution of slavery. She recognizes that “the power of knowledge is the power of the strong to oppress the weak” and if the enslaved people want to overcome their distressing situation, there is no alternative than education (147). Emphasizing the necessity of education, the author designs the paths of the protagonist, where Iola gladly welcomes the idea of “[having] an opportunity to teach” (145). Through Iola’s career choice Harper demonstrates that African American people can conquer all the impediments if they are equipped with knowledge. In order to establish an ideal state, Harper argues that education is an essential skill that eradicates the barriers imposed by the society and uplifts the state of colored people.

Slavery and Racism

Revealing different kinds of social impediments that were dragging down the African American people of her time, Harper significantly focuses on the major issues of

slavery and racism through her novel. She reveals the deleterious impact of slavery on motherhood where mothers have no control over their relationship with their children. The sacred bond of a mother and a child is reduced to nothing because of the commodification of their bodies. Through a conversation between Eugene and Marie, Harper reveals that plantation owners have numerous children with enslaved women and they do not even consider the offspring their own. Marie argues,

Your friend wronged himself by sinning against his own soul. He wronged his wife by arousing her hatred and jealousy through his unfaithfulness. He wronged those children by giving them the status of slaves and outcasts. He wronged their mother by imposing upon her the burdens and cares of maternity without the rights and privileges of a wife. He made her crown of motherhood a circlet of shame. Under other circumstances she might have been an honored wife and happy mother. And I do think such men wrong their own legitimate children by transmitting to them a weakened moral fibre. (77-78)

Such is the horror of slavery where enslaved mothers had no control over their own body. Their children were considered as commodities with a financial value. They were deprived of basic human rights and were reduced to objects. Harper calls out the hypocrisy of the white people. Portraying the devastating scenario of enslaved people, Harper asserts that for the sake of humanity, the institution of slavery should be abolished.

As an abolitionist, the author advocated for the elimination of slavery and throughout her entire career she fought for ensuring the rights of her people. In her novel,

she illustrates the detrimental impact of slavery which rips apart families and communities of Black people. The author sketches Uncle Daniel's character as an old, enslaved person who lost his youth to the plantations of south. His character reveals the state of a colonized mind when he chose to stay behind and protect the estate of his master instead of escaping from slavery and joining the Union army. Through Uncle Daniel's story, Harper portrays the suffering of enslaved people and how they were abused by the plantation owners. Uncle Daniel describes,

ole Gundover's wife war de meanest woman dat I eber did see. She used to go out on de plantation an' boss things like a man. Arter I war married, I had a baby. It war de dearest, cutest little thing you eber did see; but, pore thing, it got sick and died. It died 'bout three o'clock; and in de mornin', Katie, habbin her cows to milk, lef her dead baby in de cabin. When she com'd back from milkin' her thirty cows, an' went to look for her pore little baby, some one had been to her cabin an' took'd de pore chile away an' put it in de groun'. Pore Katie, she didn't eben hab a chance to kiss her baby 'fore it war buried. (27)

The poor mother was not even allowed to say goodbye to her child and without her knowledge, the baby was buried. Uncle Daniel's story exposes that the enslaved people were treated like commodities and children lost their value after death. Instead of letting the mother mourn for the child, the slaveholders forced her to keep working as if she is devoid of humane emotion. Such horrible condition was the day-to-day life of the enslaved people where they had no power over their own familiar relationships and their

lives. They were deprived of basic human rights and the plantation owners inhumanely abused them, causing them physical and psychological trauma.

Years of abuse resulted in the crippled mindset of the enslaved people and Uncle Daniel is the perfect example of a colonized mind. When Robert and Tom were ready to join the Union army and asked Uncle Daniel to escape the plantation his response was, “Ef freedom comes it won’t do me much good; we ole one’s will die out” (18) because he is too old to enjoy the sweetness of freedom. The real reason he did not leave his master’s place was not old age, but rather the promise he made to his master to protect his wealth (166). The poisonous impact of being enslaved colonized his mind in such a way that he turned unable to stand up against the brutality of his master when his child died. His colonized mind even failed to realize that he was sacrificing his freedom to keep a promise to the slaveholder who enslaved him. Psychological and physical torture on the enslaved people destroy their ability to think freely and the plantation owners suppressed the enslaved people and deprived them of the light of knowledge and kindness so that no rebellion could take place.

Despite being tremendously suppressed, the African American people formed a strong body of resistance and fought against the Confederacy. After the Union Army succeeded in the war against the Confederacy, the initial vision of Harper’s utopian state came into reality. But the war against ignorance and prejudice was not over. Illustrating a conversation between Robert and Dr. Gresham, Harper reveals,

I am glad,...for the whole nation’s sake, that slavery has been destroyed. And our work...is to build over the desolations of the past a better and brighter future. The

great distinction between savagery and civilization is the creation and maintenance of law. A people cannot habitually trample on law and justice without retrograding toward barbarism. But I am hopeful that time will bring us changes for the better; that, as we get farther away from the war, we will outgrow the animosities and prejudices engendered by slavery. (218)

Harper understood that this entire process of abolition and national regeneration will take time and African American people cannot escape the cruelty of racism overnight. Despite achieving freedom and coming one step closer to her vision, she realizes that establishing a safe space for her people requires much work. Recognizing the necessity of collective contribution, Harper affirms that only abolishing slavery would not assure the progress of her race.

Womanist Revision of Utopia in *Iola Leroy*

Significance of Motherhood

Harper illustrates the series of events that rock Iola's world through condemning slavery. Iola suffers detachment from her mother. Her search for her mother becomes a crucial point for establishing a safe space as it is dependent on where her mother is. Her ideal safe space is not dependent on the concept of space, rather relations. Obtaining affluent social status and a comfortable life is meaningless to her if she cannot find her mother.

When Dr. Gresham proposed to marry her and live a prosperous life denying her African lineage, Iola confides,

I will relieve you from all embarrassment by simply saying I cannot be your wife. When the war is over I intend to search the country for my mother. Doctor, were you to give me a palace-like home, with velvet carpets to hush my tread, and magnificence to surround my way, I should miss her voice amid all other tones, her presence amid every scene. Oh, you do not know how hungry my heart is for my mother! Were I to marry you I would carry an aching heart into your home and dim its brightness. I have resolved never to marry until I have found my mother. The hope of finding her has colored all my life since I regained my freedom. It has helped sustain me in the hour of fearful trial. When I see her I want to have the proud consciousness that I bring her back a heart just as loving, faithful, and devoted as the last hour we parted. (117-118)

Through Iola's determination, Harper depicts that the safe space for her is where her family, her mother is. Motherhood is a significant source of comfort for Iola and her quest for finding her mother is thus connected with the safe space Harper intends to build.

Harper's illustration brings out the womanist perspective that values motherhood and connects communal feeling with the concept of a safe space. Asserting the importance of reuniting with her mother, Iola also expresses her determination by saying that, "[now], that freedom has come, I intend to search for my mother until I find her" (142). Through Iola's situation, Harper illustrates the obstacles that hinder Black people from gaining equal status as white people. At the same time, she engages a womanist approach to depict that Black people had their own way of addressing their concerns.

Harper's womanist motivation is once again portrayed through Iola's paper on "Education of Mothers" (253) which she proposes as a potential way of establishing an egalitarian society. Harper describes the assembly "of earnest men and women deeply interested in the welfare of the race" where they present their argument and discuss the prospective ways to improve the situation of African American people (246). Among the numerous people who attended the assembly, Miss Delany was a university graduate who opened a school for teaching Black women and Rev. Eustace represented the St. Mary's parish. In a conversation with Rev. Eustace, Miss Delany and her brother Harry, Iola reveals two significant steps of building a feminist safe space. Harper designs the conversation as follows,

"I agree," said Rev. Eustace, of St. Mary's parish, "with the paper. The great need of the race is enlightened mothers."

"And enlightened fathers, too," added Miss Delany, quickly. "If there is anything I chafe to see it is a strong, hearty man shirking his burdens, putting them on the shoulders of his wife, and taking life easy for himself."

"I always pity such mothers," interposed Iola, tenderly. (253)

This conversation clearly portrays the significance of education in building the future of a nation by educating future generations. Addressing the normative gender division through a mother's and father's role, they also question the social practice of holding the mother accountable for her child's education. Harper evidently criticizes the normative social rules through expressing the need to reform them. Through this conversation, she elaborated on the necessity to reform their society where everyone, irrespective of gender

and class, will be educated and there will be no sex segregation in their lives.

Acknowledging the social impediments of her time, Harper suggested possible ways of getting rid of such impediments so that they can transform their society into a feminist utopian land.

Ensuring Collective Well-being

Black women play a significant role in constituting and developing their society and Harper reveals how womanism contributes to it. Through the conversation of Iola, Rev. Eustace, Miss Delany, and her brother Harry, the author indicates that women should not surrender to the segregating gender norms, rather they should nurture communal feelings. She strongly suggests that Black women carry their racial identity as well as the responsibility of upholding their race wherever they go.

Harper's vision is reflected in Anna J. Cooper's thoughts where she argues that the Black woman takes the responsibility of her entire race. Cooper states,

Only the BLACK WOMAN can say "when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole *Negro race enters with me.*" Is it not evident then that as individual workers for this race we must address ourselves with no half-hearted zeal to this feature of our mission. The need is felt and must be recognized by all. (27)

Echoing Cooper's thoughts, Harper delineates that the educated African American women of the Reconstruction period do not think about their individual benefit, rather they invest their efforts for collective reasons. A Black woman carries the heavy burden

of her intersectional identity and at the same time she nurtures strong communal emotion which enables her to think and work for the betterment of African American community. Throughout the novel, Harper repetitively implied that the development of her race depends on the collective effort and regardless of gender, people of color should come forward to work for their own progress.

To illustrate the role of a collective effort, Harper demonstrates her vision of the future through the social situation of the formerly enslaved people of the Gundover plantation. After emancipation, most of the free people settled down close to the plantation and almost all of them had a respectable way of life. Harper illuminates her vision of a successful future through their socio-economic situation where they attained a dignified position in their society. Hazel V. Carby explains,

Iola visited the plantation on which her uncle was once a slave, and Harper used this visit to acquaint her heroine and her audience with the “true” nature of black “folk” characters as well as to define Iola's relation to the race. The Gundover plantation appeared as a picture of Utopian industriousness transformed since emancipation. Harper used her representation of a plantation to illustrate what had been achieved by freedmen and to present her case for what had still to be reconstructed. (77)

The author argues that after the emancipation, the free people have a long way to go. Their newfound freedom is not the only way they can attain success. They must work hard to obtain the respectable social status. Through Iola's visit to the former Gundover plantation, Harper demonstrates a bonding among the colored people which implies

collective efforts to uphold their status. The transforming scenario of the plantation also implies a near future which will be rewarding. Emphasizing on the hard work that needs to be done for reforming the situation of the colored people, Harper offers a glimpse of the future which she envisions for African American people.

Harper's vision of a safe space depends on the restoration and development of her community and familial relationship. Through reuniting Iola with her family, Robert with his mother, and Aunt Linda with her husband, Harper demonstrates the comforts of communal feeling. Her utopian state is rooted in the simplicity of their lives rather than extravagant Utopic concepts. Harper utilizes her rhetorical capability to constitute a safe space for her people where they can practice their basic rights as human beings. Her novel foreshadows the future of Black people in the United States at the same time recognizing the obstacles that might hamper their growth. At the end of the novel, the author reveals that education is the most significant resource for the development of future generations of colored people and that is why Iola wants to "help these boys and girls to grow up to be good men and women" (276). Depicting a realistic representation of her social scenario, Harper engages her rhetorics to constitute a safe space for African American people through her novel.

Afterthoughts

Harper was aware of the crippling impact of racism on the African American people, and she knew that racism cannot be eliminated overnight. She weaved a strategic response against racism, where she advised that education is a must to combat slavery and racism. For Harper, teaching was a rebellious act against the tyrannical institution of

slavery. I think Harper's pedagogical philosophy is presented through Iola's ideological stance because she relentlessly works for educating people of color.

Harper's work embodied womanism built upon the love and support women shared with each other. She also utilized motherhood and communal feeling as significant ways of recognizing womanist values through *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted*. At the same time, she envisaged an inclusive safe space where Black men and women will equally enjoy their rights.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Begum Rokeya and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper believed that literary creations should have a pedagogical purpose and both promoted the educational function through their works. Their rhetorics combine moral lessons for their fellow women on how to improve their position in the society. Studying Rokeya's and Harper's work side by side allowed me to explore the common ideological ground both the scholars share. Coming from two completely different geographical locations and cultural contexts, both acknowledge that their strategies to elevate women's status in their respective societies are different from white feminists' agenda. What fascinates me most is the striking similarity between their approaches to incorporate pedagogy and literature as tools to break free from the shackles and their common advocacy of education as central to women's emancipation.

Both Rokeya and Harper believed in the necessity to educate people so that they can claim their agency and have control over their lives. But their lessons vary as their targeted audience is culturally different. Rokeya believed that the major focus of any literary practice should be didactic which is more important than entertainment. Similarly, Harper also engaged her rhetoric to create didactic literature as she "insists on the moral duty accompanying literacy," and believed literature can teach moral and educational lessons (Stancliff 12). While Rokeya preaches to enlighten her fellow women of the colonized Indian Subcontinent engaging fictional conversations, Harper advocates for her entire race through literary realism.

As Rokeya is a representative from the global south, her suggestions and her targeted audience varies from Harper's. Rokeya focused on women's emancipation only as she recognized that men in the patriarchal society get all the privileges they want. On the other hand, women of her society are considered a burden, who depend on men and are deprived of the basic rights men enjoy. Rokeya incorporates ethical and intellectual lessons for such women who fail to recognize their worth. Being a representative of the Muslim elite class, Rokeya understood the demands and shortcoming of her peers and the state of upper-class women, who lived in seclusion, and can afford to live like that without working outside the domestic sphere. Acknowledging their colonized state of mind, Rokeya claims that their ability to think independently is nipped at the bud. In order to overcome their situation, Rokeya argues that there is no alternative to education. Considering the adverse situation in which women are segregated, Rokeya only focuses on the emancipation of her fellow women, which does not eliminate gender segregation rather enforce it to some extent.

Harper envisions a less gender-segregated society whereas Rokeya solely concentrated on women's development. Harper's rhetoric concerns the development of the entire race and that includes both the genders. Harper acknowledged that motherhood is an important aspect which is interconnected to the development of Black community, and it is not just the duty of a mother to be the teacher; rather, both parents need to perform their equal share of duties. Being an educator, Harper knew the significance of a gender inclusive society. As she was actively educating and preaching during the tumultuous years of antebellum, Civil War and Reconstruction period, a major portion of

her activism reflects the necessity to eradicate slavery and racial discrimination and to spread temperance and education. She was aware that slavery impacted their psychological state which crippled their mindset. Harper emphasized education as the key to elevate their social and mental status, and she claimed that with the help of education, their enslaved minds can be liberated.

Both Rokeya and Harper were actively engaged in the pedagogical development of their peers, and both encountered numerous challenges while working for the betterment of their society. Harper's teaching career was very demoralizing and demanding and for a while she genuinely thought about going back to her sewing business (Foster 10). Her frustrations rose to an extreme point, but she carefully handled this situation for a higher call, the call for humanity. Similarly, Rokeya's teaching career was also demoralizing because of the scandalous rumors regarding her fallen status (Quayum XXX). As she was a young widow, people assumed that she was leading a promiscuous life using under the guise of running a school. Both activists suffered from frustration, but their dedication and determination brought them back. Despite choosing the hardest path, they never gave up and continued to fight against social injustice. Both wanted freedom for their people, and both knew that they must endure the torment to obtain the greater goal.

Emphasizing the liberty of her people, Harper advocated not only for abolition but also for the moral uplift of African American people. Through her literary works, Harper created a realistic imitation of the 19th century United States. She illustrated the brutal impact of slavery on the colored people and how it was dehumanizing them. Reducing

their human state, slavery was forcing people to work on plantations like machines. The enslaved people were treated like animals and forced to live like animals. They were not allowed to have family and they were physically and psychologically tortured by the plantation owners. Harper illuminates the dehumanizing impact of slavery through her novel, where she expresses her vision of a safe space for her people.

Rokeya also wrote about slavery, but it was an analogy she made to demonstrate women's status in her society. She asserted that her fellow women are both psychologically and physically enslaved like the colored people. The reason she constituted this analogy is to demonstrate the similarities between the state of these minority groups. Rokeya describes in her essay, "Woman's Downfall" the entire process of how patriarchy enslaves women and forces them to abide by every rule constituted by them. They are treated worse than animals and kept confined within the domestic sphere just like the herds of cows and goats. They are deprived of the light of education and illiteracy drags their status down to that of an animal. By comparing women to confined animals, Rokeya also contends that slavery reduced human being into an inhuman state. Stressing on the abolition of slavery, she claims that her fellow women are still enslaved by the patriarchal social system. Fighting against the odds of her time, Rokeya worked hard to ensure that women get the taste of education and come out of confinement to create their safe space.

Both Rokeya and Harper envisioned a safe space that is very specific to the demands of their people. Rokeya demands a feminist utopian safe space for her fellow women of the Indian subcontinent, which will not blindly imitate the western cultural

values rather constitute a comfortable space where women can uphold modesty and at the same time be comfortably liberated. On the other hand, Harper envisions a future where her entire race, both Black men and women will bear the torch of education, morality, and freedom. She envisions a safe space which is devoid of racial violence and coercion and provides equal civic rights to all the races. Harper's safe space focuses on the inclusive participation of both men and women for their future generations, whereas Rokeya's safe space focuses on securing a feminist utopian space. Both authors engage dreams to illuminate their vision for a safe space but none of them consider their safe space as Edenic utopian space.

While conducting this study, I understood how the demands of feminists across the world varies from each other. Rokeya and Harper share a number of ideological similarities, but their position as feminists were different because of their different cultural background. Rokeya's activism aligns with the transnational feminist values and Harper's values echo a womanist point of view. This study also reveals that Rokeya and Harper's agenda were different from each other, but both practiced pedagogy and participated in producing rhetorical scholarship for the benefit of their society. Their shared philosophical stance inspired me to explore more about their rhetorical activism.

Both Harper and Rokeya fought to establish feminist utopian safe spaces through their political and literary activism. Their individual rhetoric styles constitute safe spaces for women which are distinct from utopia. As utopia presents an unrealistic expectation of a place which has never been experienced, the concept of utopia conflicts with the plausible future that Rokeya and Harper imagine for their people. Their vision is better

explained through the feminist utopianism which revises the flaws of utopia by reconfiguring it and bringing it close to reality. Feminist utopia generates realistic responses of crisis and strives to become a flawlessly inclusive space. Harper's works, in this case, reflect the inclusive space for both men and women, but Rokeya's safe space is offered exclusively for women. By defamiliarizing the idea of patriarchal reality through feminist utopian fiction, I offer a completely unique comparative study of the works of two lesser-known feminists: Begum Rokeya and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper.

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