

Affective Forces and Ecofeminism in “Sultana’s Dream”: An Intersectional Analysis

Afsana Rahman¹

ABSTRACT

This research paper critically investigates the intriguing intersection of affect and ecofeminism within the narrative of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's novella, “Sultana's Dream.” Affective forces, such as hope and fear, are intricately interwoven with the storyline, engendering emotive depth in the feminist utopia. Concurrently, the novella confronts ecological concerns, evoked through representations of fear and despair, compelling a call for transformative action. Informed by ecofeminist and affect theory frameworks, this analysis unravels the manner in which “Sultana's Dream” forges an emotional connection with its readers while poignantly addressing pressing environmental issues. The research highlights the contemporary relevance of this literary work, underscoring its contribution to ongoing discussions encompassing affective turns and ecofeminism. As a profound exploration of the interplay between affect and ecofeminism, “Sultana's Dream” offers invaluable insights into the intricate relationship between human emotions, ecological consciousness, and feminist visions. Beyond its literary merits, this work also demonstrates the power of literature to elicit introspection and catalyze transformative change, urging society to adopt comprehensive approaches in the quest for environmental and social equity.

KEY WORDS

Affect, Ecofeminism, Affect and Nature, Intersectionality, “Sultana's Dream.”

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1. Introduction

“Sultana's Dream” is a feminist utopian novella written by Hossain in 1905. The story imagines a world where women have taken over the roles of men in society and created a utopia- free from patriarchal oppression. The novella has been the subject of much critical analysis, with scholars exploring various themes such as feminism, colonialism, and

religion. This ground-breaking utopian work explores the intersection of affect and ecofeminism. In “Sultana’s Dream,” Hossain, through her depiction of a utopian matriarchal society, wanted to show that in a society devoid of patriarchy, nature can flourish under the care of women since the relation of women to nature can be traced back to the prehistoric period where

¹ Lecturer, Department of English, International Standard University (ISU)

women were deeply rooted to nature. The text represents an affective turn in ecofeminist discourse, emphasizing the role of emotions and feelings in motivating social and environmental change. Through the character of Sultana, the protagonist of the novella, Hossain portrays the transformative power of affective forces such as hope and joy. Sultana's experience in the utopian world of Ladyland, where women hold positions of power and live in harmony with nature, inspires her to re-imagine her society and strive for a more just and sustainable world. Certainly, "Sultana's Dream" challenges dominant patriarchal narratives and imagines a world in which women have agency and autonomy.

This paper aims to explore the affective forces and emotions that shape our reading of "Sultana's Dream," with a particular focus on ecofeminism and intersectionality. By examining the affective forces that shape our understanding of "Sultana's Dream," we can better understand how literature can shape our relationship with the environment and contribute to developing environmental ethics. "Sultana's Dream" also highlights the interconnectedness of women, nature, and social justice, a central tenet of ecofeminist theory. Ecofeminism is an important

theoretical framework that explores the interconnectedness of environmental issues and feminist concerns. The novella challenges patriarchal and anthropocentric norms, depicting a society in which humans and nature coexist in a mutually beneficial relationship. By emphasizing the importance of affective experiences in building connections between humans and nature, "Sultana's Dream" provides a model for an intersectional approach to environmental issues and emotions that delve within the hegemonic gender norms.

2. Intersectional Understanding of Affect Theory and Ecofeminism

While looking into a text from affect theory as well as ecofeminism, we need to understand what intersectionality is and why it is relevant to this research. Intersectionality is a theoretical framework that examines how various forms of oppression (such as gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability) intersect and interact with one another to shape individual and collective experiences. Intersectionality posits that individuals experience multiple forms of oppression simultaneously and that these forms of oppression cannot be understood in isolation from one another. Besides, intersectionality is a multidisciplinary concept that has been developed and expanded upon

by various theorists and scholars across different fields, including law, sociology, gender studies, and critical race theory. While Kimberlé Crenshaw is often credited with introducing the term and popularizing the concept, many other scholars have contributed to its development and application. Although this concept, initially framed in the context of identity politics, has transcended its origins to encompass a broader spectrum of human experiences. Beyond the traditional categories of race, class, and gender, intersectionality now extends to various aspects of life, including emotions and environmental consciousness. This paper explores the intersectionality of emotion, gender, and ecofeminism, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of environmental narratives.

Ecofeminism is a theoretical framework that combines feminist and environmentalist perspectives to analyze and address the relationship between humans and the environment. Ecofeminism posits that the oppression of women and the exploitation of the environment are interlinked and that patriarchal structures and capitalist systems are responsible for both forms of oppression. The ecofeminist perspective also acknowledges that marginalized communities, such as Indigenous people and people of

color, are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation and climate change.

Prominent ecofeminist scholars Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies argue that patriarchal and capitalist systems exploit both women and nature, leading to ecological degradation. This perspective emphasizes the need to recognize the emotional connection between women, the Earth, and environmental activism. It highlights how women, particularly Indigenous women, have historically played crucial roles in environmental preservation. In ecofeminism, the link between gender and environmentalism becomes apparent, as some argue that the devaluation of the feminine is mirrored in the exploitation and degradation of the environment.

On the other hand, emotions are not monolithic but rather multifaceted, influenced by various factors, including identity and context. Intersectionality, in the realm of emotion, acknowledges that individuals experience and express their feelings differently due to their social identities. Sara Ahmed and Brian Massumi in their work on affect, discuss how emotions are shaped by cultural norms and social structures. They highlight how certain emotions can be pathologized or invalidated, particularly concerning gender and sexuality. Moreover, gender, a central

component of intersectionality, intersects with emotion and environment in nuanced ways. The intersectionality of emotion, gender, and ecofeminism reveals the complexity of environmental narratives. Emotions are not neutral but are shaped by our identities, and these emotions are intertwined with our relationships with the environment.

3. Affective Force in “Sultana’s Dream”

Affect Theory is a theoretical framework that examines how emotions and affective states shape individual and collective experiences. Theorists dealing with affect posit that emotions are not simply individual experiences, but are also shaped by social, cultural, and political forces. Affect theory also acknowledges that emotions are not simply “inside” individuals, but are also distributed across social and cultural spaces (Ahmed, “Cultural Politics” 193-195). Affective and emotional responses to literature have always played a vital role in how we engage with and interpret texts. Our emotional responses to literature shape our reading experience and understanding of the text (Goetz et al. 362-363). The emotional impact of a text is not only limited to its content but also influenced by the reader’s personal and cultural background (ibid. 362). Similarly, Brian Massumi

argues that affect is not just a subjective feeling or emotion, but a non-discursive, pre-linguistic intensity that exists independently of conscious awareness (3-5). He suggests that affect is a form of embodied knowledge that shapes our perception of the world and our actions within it (ibid. 20).

In our case, this feminist utopian novella, “Sultana’s Dream,” explores the themes of gender roles, technology, and societal structure. However, underlying these themes are various affective forces that shape the narrative and contribute to its overall impact. For instance, hope is a recurring theme in “Sultana’s Dream” and it serves as a driving force for the narrative. The story is set in a world where women are in charge, and there is no gender-based oppression. The protagonist, Sultana, is hopeful that this world can become a reality, and her hope motivates her to explore this new society and share her experiences with others. Hope, in this sense, is a form of affective force that creates a sense of possibility and potential for change (Snyder 252). It is through Sultana’s hope that readers can envision a world where gender equality is the norm, and this is a powerful message in a world where gender-based oppression still exists. However, despite the utopian world presented in “Sultana’s Dream,” there is still an underlying sense of fear. The

narrative makes it clear that this world is not without its problems, and there are potential dangers that must be addressed. Even we can see that sometimes these negative emotional forces intersect with positive energies like hope. According to Richard S Lazarus, optimism exists on a spectrum that extends from pessimism and can also intersect with hope, which may range from completely positive expectations to a mindset that is predominantly positive but includes some uncertainty, resembling the blend found in hope (672). This intersection can also be seen several times in the story. For example, the hope of a better future for Sultana comes from the fear of patriarchy ruling in her world as well as the men's world in "Ladyland," which is portrayed as violent and dangerous, is presented as a threat to the women's world (Hossain). Fear, in this sense, is a form of affective force that creates tension and conflict in the narrative. It also highlights the potential dangers of patriarchal structures and serves as a warning against their continuation. Despair, on the other hand, is a complex emotional state often associated with hopelessness, powerlessness, and a sense of futility. In "Sultana's Dream," we find despair to be a recurring theme, particularly among women living in a patriarchal society where they are confined to

pardah (seclusion) and denied access to education and public life. The affective turn of despair is a central component in the novella as it drives the narrative and motivates the characters to envision and pursue an alternative reality. The utopian society in the story, Ladyland, stands in stark contrast to the patriarchal society. In "Ladyland," women are empowered, educated, and hold positions of authority. Despair is transformed into hope and agency as women in Ladyland actively shape their destinies. This transition from despair to hope is central to the narrative and exemplifies the transformative potential of affect in literature (Lazarus 671-673). In "Sultana's Dream," despair serves as a catalyst for change. The women in the story are trapped in a patriarchal society where they are denied opportunities for education and personal growth. This despair becomes a driving force for them to imagine and eventually create "Ladyland," a utopian world where women are educated, independent, and in control. Despair fuels their determination to break free from societal norms, challenging the status quo and pushing them to envision a different future.

Therefore, certainly, affective forces play a significant role in shaping the narrative of "Sultana's Dream." Hope and fear are present in the novella,

and they contribute to its overall impact. The utopian world presented in "Sultana's Dream" is not without its problems, and the affective forces at work in the narrative create tension and conflict. However, the message of hope and the importance of valuing empathy and compassion are powerful and serve as a reminder of what is possible when gender-based oppression is eliminated. In "Sultana's Dream," affective forces are evident in the descriptions of the utopian world of Ladyland, where the emotions of joy, hope, and love shape the social and ecological fabric of society. The affective forces of fear and anger, on the other hand, are associated with the dystopian world of Mardana, where patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist forces dominate.

4. Women and Environment in "Sultana's Dream"

In the hegemonic order of patriarchy, women are mainly characterized by their emotional drive and non-rational thinking; therefore, it remains questionable whether they can be considered capable of rational action (Karen Warren qtd. in Glazebrook 15). Women have therefore always been excluded from the advancement of human civilization no matter how important their input has been. In "Ladyland," we see that when the country was under patriarchy and a nearby

country attacked, the women were not allowed to interfere since women's rationality was not deemed to be worthy of politics or ruling. However, it was proven that women were rather better at ruling, and "Ladyland" flourished under the rule of its queen.

On the other hand, Western industrial civilization regards nature as something to be controlled, defeated, and enslaved to the needs of man. In this thinking process, unlike the organic view of nature, in which nature is seen as a nurturing mother, the mechanical perspective on nature is excluded from all kinds of meanings and mysteries (Carlassare 89). According to this notion, Stacy Alaimo argues, with Donna Haraway's approaches to negotiating feminist environmentalism, that nature is dead matter in motion where man stands above nature and has the right to dominate and exploit it (133-134). Here again, the similarities between nature's exploitation and the oppression of men over women in the patriarchal society, can be seen.

Furthermore, Western philosophy of history is written by white, wealthy middle-aged men and according to them, women and nature were always something that could and should be mastered and controlled (Hoel, Nina and Elaine Nogueira-Godsey 9). Similarly, Linda Vance argues that both nature and women

have been hegemonized and exploited to satiate patriarchal desires, and "both have been denied autonomous expression and self-determination" (60). From this connection of women to nature emerged ecofeminism, where ecofeminism reinscribes gender essentialism, according to Karen Warren (qtd in Glazebrook 13).

In ecofeminism, elements of feminism and the ecological movement are combined and at the same time critically questioned. Ecofeminism links the oppression or subordination of women with the exploitation and extermination of nature. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's "Sultana's Dream" eloquently questions men's notion towards nature and the destructive nature of men. "Sultana's Dream" is a tale of a feminist utopia where gender roles are reversed and a better alternate world is seen through a writer's futuristic eco-critical approach. In this beautifully written story, Hossain shows how a reversed world can be much better and functional without the presence of any imbalance and discrimination. Therefore, Begum Hossain's depiction of the dichotomous relationship of men and women with nature makes it an intriguing topic to investigate.

Cultural ecofeminism refers positively to women's closeness to nature, which is based on their ability to bear

children, according to Lori J. Swanson (86). She argues that women are closer to natural processes and have developed strong feelings of responsibility for others. In "Sultana's Dream," we see that the connection between women and nature is projected through their use of solar energy and rainwater instead of coal energy which brings harm to nature. No matter in which position a woman finds herself, she tries to connect with and save nature through her actions. The French feminist Simone de Beauvoir clearly positions herself in this context as well. Beauvoir argues that the biological task of reproduction means that the proportion of connection to nature is higher in women (qtd in Glazebrook 19-20). She assigns a naturally conditioned creative task to women, which is only assigned to men through their cultural activity (qtd in Glazebrook 20). It is therefore assumed that all women in the world have a biologically based closeness to nature and are thus more strongly connected with ecological processes. Therefore, this approach of ecofeminism creates more promising conditions for a "holistic worldview," as Marlene Longenecker ascribes, which establishes a physical reference and also assigns intuition, emotionality, and spirituality to the "formerly disembodied subject" (2). Ecofeminists trace the origins of

patriarchy back to the biologically determined relationship of men to women and nature, the beginnings of which can be found in the earliest history of mankind. In this regard, women, the eco-feminists emphasize, experienced their whole body as productive already in prehistory. The experience of their own body suggests that women understand nature as a cycle in which they are integrated (Swanson 86). On the other hand, men experience nature in this concept through a qualitatively different body than women. Male biology does not directly indicate that men are a part of nature. Men see nature as something outside themselves. Therefore, they do not have a cooperative nature but try to make it useful to themselves. Male self-consciousness, that is, awareness of their humanity, is therefore closely linked to the invention and control of technology (Alaimo 133-134). Consequently, this leads men to a dominating nature. Without domination over nature and women, men could not build up productive systems and could not understand themselves as productive. Therefore, inherently men continued the domination over women and nature, by which patriarchy prevailed. In this way, nature has been turned into the "other," which is very different from domination; which could be reduced to an object and

thus suppressed. In the same way, women identified with nature have been reduced to objects and oppressed in a patriarchal society. In this sense, nature and women are both "others." Simone de Beauvoir already clarified this relationship by saying that "transcendence" is a work of culture, a work of man. As a process that aims to prove its rationality in "immanence," it is a process of culturally based domination over nature. Immanence, thereby, is symbolized by women as that which calls men home, but which also reminds them of the things that made them repress. Therefore, women's ability to give birth is separated from the creative power, the creations of culture, with which men made their immortality. This indicates the dichotomous relationship of patriarchy and femininity projecting biology as destiny, where male superiority is "natural"; women's destiny is reproduction and not production (Longenecker 1).

Moreover, during Hossain's time, women were not allowed to take part in scientific explorations. In "Ladyland," Hossain showed that the world was more efficient and logically constructed by science that was practiced by women. Women, in Hossain's "Ladyland" also showcase their intellectual power in that they are "more qualified than men to protect their land and then run it

peacefully" (Hasanat 121). Sister Sara declares this supremacy when she shows Sultana by saying "While the women were engaged in scientific research, the men in this country were busy increasing their military power" (Hossain); although this military power did not help keep their country safe from the outside world. When the country was threatened, only the women with their power of wit and intelligence saved their country by using their inventions. Therefore, only education and empowerment helped them to save their existence while men just wanted to show off their muscle power. Even seemingly simple tasks like gardening and embroidery were traditionally excluded from the purview of men, perhaps due to a perceived inclination towards destruction associated with their actions. Donna Haraway's concept of the destructive nature of our world's capitalist mode of production aligns with this perspective, asserting that it is a product of human creation, giving rise to issues such as war, violence, discrimination, and imbalance. This notion is also reflected in "Sultana's Dream." According to Fayeza Hasanat, in "Sultana's Dream," "the ecocritical view of the country becomes quite obvious as Sister Sara informs Sultana that women of this country only eat fruit and that their Queen is fond of botany and wants to

transform the whole world into an grand and magnificent garden." (122). Moreover, science and environment seem to bend under the laws of women in this land where fields are tilled "by means of electricity." Ecology and the ecosystem itself therefore can provide us with every modern need and at the same time no harmful industries are needed to enrich the country.

5. Conclusion

Through her depiction of a perfectly functioning peaceful society, Hossain wanted to show that men's intention lies in destruction whereas women possess the ability of creation. In the patriarchal normativity, with the disenchantment of nature, conditions for scientific research and uncontrolled technological exploitation were created (Alaimo 138). Today we suffer the consequences of blind faith in the unlimited ability of science to solve any problem. Atomic plants are built without any provision for waste disposal, satellites are launched into space without having studied their possible effects. More importantly, in today's capitalistic society we can see that because of the profit-driven intentions of men, the ecosystem of the earth is shifting and is alarmingly moving towards a self-destructive mode which can also indicate a culminating effect of patriarchy.

In "Sultana's Dream," Hossain depicted that patriarchy has fallen into its own dug hole by giving in to matriarchy because they did not use their brain. Men's audacity after being the supreme power in the society made them blind towards the fact that women could rule better than them and a country would prosper under women's touch. In the "Ladyland," women encouraged scientific evolution based on nature reservation while preventing any detrimental process of development that harms nature and ecology. In our world, industrialization is the main cause behind modernity and modernity has taken us towards the inevitable extinction. Human beings and their choices are outlined in a design of history that appears to lead us towards our self-annihilation, and the patriarchal pride is to blame for such inclination towards destruction. Moreover, the affective forces are collective in "Sultana's Dream." Women in the story share similar experiences of hope and despair in the patriarchal society. Their collective affective experience unifies them, fostering a sense of solidarity and collective action. This is reflective of real-life social movements where shared emotions and experiences act as a powerful force for change. Through affect theory, we can better understand the role of collective emotions in driving social and political

movements. The novella also introduces the concept of affective politics. By challenging the emotional landscape of society, it advocates for a transformation in the social and political order. The emotional transformation from despair to hope is central to the political transformation that occurs in "Ladyland." This highlights how emotions can be instrumental in shaping political discourse and activism. Therefore, "Sultana's Dream" is a prime example of how affective forces can be instrumental in both the analysis of literature and the exploration of social and political themes. It showcases how emotions such as despair, hope, and collective action can be harnessed to challenge and change oppressive societal structures. By employing affect theory in the analysis of the novella, we gain a deeper understanding of the emotional underpinnings of the narrative and the transformative potential of affective forces in feminist literature.

"Sultana's Dream" provides a unique perspective on intersectional ecofeminism, as it critiques not only patriarchy but also classism and the affective turns. The text challenges the notion that the liberation of women can be achieved solely through their emancipation from patriarchy but rather requires a dismantling of all systems of

oppression. However, no matter how beautiful Sultana's dream was, she had to wake up and face her real world where patriarchy ruled and women had no rights whatsoever. Overall, "Sultana's Dream" offers a unique perspective on feminist utopia and the role of affective forces in shaping society. The dissertation has contributed to the existing scholarship on "Sultana's Dream" by exploring the novel's affective dimensions and its intersection with ecofeminism.

In Conclusion, Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain with her sheer talent in using satire, produced a wonderful piece that beautifully projects how retarded the modern hegemonized society has become and we are bound to face our extinction because of patriarchy's destructive nature. After more than one hundred years, in this early twenty-first century, we are

confronted with the plight of climate change, natural disasters, global pandemics, and overpopulation that will soon lead to a extinction level crisis. However, we do not see through the spectacle that patriarchy has put in front of us almost three thousand years ago. Therefore, we need our own "Ladyland" now which will allow us to save our planet since Earth is the only place that we can live in.

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