

Women in Hiding

Sultana's Dream and Selections from The Secluded Ones

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain

Edited and translated by Roushan Jahan

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It's remarkable that Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain—essayist, educator, and occasional fiction writer—ever wrote a word. Born in 1880 into an orthodox Indian Muslim family that kept its women in seclusion (*purdah*) and denied them an education, she grew up learning to read in secrecy. Her teacher was a sympathetic older brother who tutored her in English and Bengali late at night when the household was asleep and they were safe from discovery. Later her collaborator was her husband, a liberal thinker who shared her unconventional views on women's rights and encouraged her to speak out on them. One of the rare literate Muslim women of her times, Hossain early realized that literacy armed her for rebellion.

In a series of five articles on *purdah* published in her twenties, Hossain argued to abolish the tradition in which she had been reared, a tradition that segregated women within their own households and circumscribed their social relationships to a handful of family members. Advocating women's education and independence, she openly disputed the Islamic legal position, based on the Koran, that considered men inherently superior to women. And she was among the first Indian feminists to recognize that women's economic independence preceded their emancipation. "If our liberation from male domination depends on our ability to earn independently, then we should begin," she proposed. "We should be lawyers, magistrates, judges, clerks. . . ." However, like the early American feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Hossain believed that true liberation rested not in social reform but in a transformation of female consciousness that would allow women to reimagine themselves men's equals and free them from a habitual "mental slavery."

In *Sultana's Dream and Selections from The Secluded Ones*, editor Roushan Jahan has compiled a satirical short story by Hossain and excerpts from her journalism with informative if prosaic essays on Hossain's work, her life, and the dilemma of Muslim women in India today. It is a hodgepodge of writings that serves as a sampler rather than collection of Hossain's long-neglected works. But the few glimpses we catch of the author offer an engaging introduction



Moorish woman taking a walk. From *The Colonial Harem* by Malrik Alloula by permission of the University of Minnesota Press.

to a woman whose talent lies in her humor and frankness. For all those who imagine feminists as strident crusaders, here is one with a comic sensibility.

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In the story *Sultana's Dream*, Hossain's naive alter ego, Sultana, is sent on a whimsical odyssey through a land of reverse *purdah*: men live in seclusion and attend to domestic duties while women control public affairs. Hossain relies on this simple role reversal to reveal the absurdities of her own society and suggest what women can accomplish (patently fantastic in this tale) if given the chance. Her Ladyland is a flawless paradise run by a clan of highly educated, efficient women. Homes are supplied with solar heat, women are schooled by legal ordinance, child marriage is banned, floods are prevented by an enormous

weather-regulating balloon released into the clouds. A fabulous technology fashioned by women, in fact, far surpasses whatever Ladyland's males accomplished before they suffered exhaustion and defeat in war and were retired to their homes. Women win in this utopia because they have garnered control. Sister Sara, Sultana's guide through Ladyland, makes a political claim for self-interest, chiding Indian women's passivity. "You have neglected the duty you owe to yourselves, and you have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interests."

Not only is Ladyland a well-organized, pristine world, it embodies a higher moral order as well. With the men off the streets, there is no crime or sin, and society functions smoothly according to the religious principles of truth and love. Hossain's sense of humor fortunately averts a tone of piety, and her satire sometimes turns to a playful sort of teasing. As Sultana steps out of her guide's immaculate kitchen, she archly remarks, "Your kitchen is not inferior to a queen's boudoir . . . but we must leave it now; for the gentlemen may be cursing me for keeping them away from their duties in the kitchen so long." The text appears, with few corrections, as it was written in Hossain's turn-of-the-century Indian-English prose, a style that is at times quaint yet always an instructive reminder that the struggle for women's rights has a long history and roots in even the most patently oppressive societies.

Excerpts from Hossain's *The Secluded Ones*, a collection of nearly fifty anecdotes originally serialized in a popular Bengali monthly, document the absurd and tragic consequences of *purdah* in the lives of Muslim women. These brief real-life accounts offer an often chilling counterpoint to Hossain's fictional utopia. There is the black comedy of a burglar breaking into a room of *purdah*-observing women whom he rouses awake and strips of their jewelry. Though the women hear the men of the house stirring outside their room, none of them screams because the thief is excluded from the infinitesimal "permitted category" of people allowed to hear their voices. The *purdah* dictum that forbids women to appear unveiled in public is taken to a tragic extreme, we learn, in the tale of a woman who chooses to die inside a burning house rather than run outside bare-faced and confront the strangers fighting the fire. Hossain's sketches amply illustrate how women became their own jailers—even their own annihilators—by internalizing the fearsome restrictions of *purdah*. She recalls the grisly story of a distant aunt who was traveling with a maid when she tripped on her cumbersome *burqa*, the sheet-like garment that covers a Muslim woman from head to foot, and fell onto the tracks at a train station. Though coolies rushed to the begum's aid, her maid drove them away, as unknown males were not permitted to touch

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