

Worlds Rewritten: Feminist Resistance in South Asian Speculative Fiction

by

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**Worlds Rewritten: Feminist Resistance in South Asian Speculative
Fiction**

Koç University

Graduate School of Social Sciences and Humanities

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*To the women in my life, may we know leisure. To my Ammi, and her Ammi, I
pray we pass down rest, not labour.*

ABSTRACT

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This thesis positions South Asian Speculative Fiction not as escapism but as a vital technology of feminist resistance against British colonialism, religious fundamentalism, and patriarchal nationalism. Mapping a literary lineage from early twentieth-century reform movements to present-day authoritarian anxieties, the study argues that these narratives function as counter-hegemonic spaces where the female body refuses inscription by the laws of men or the state. The research examines Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's visionary works, *Sultana's Dream* (1905) and *Padmarag* (1924), within the context of Colonial Reform Movements in Bengal. It analyses how Hossain utilised utopian imagination to dismantle the logic of the zenana, constructing instead a 'realist utopia' founded on secular education and interfaith sisterhood that defied the conservative norms of her era. The investigation pivots to the 'intermedial afterlives' of these texts in the visual art of Chitra Ganesh (2018) and Shehzil Malik (2022), demonstrating the enduring vitality of Hossain's vision in modern feminist consciousness. Transitioning to the post-colonial nation-state, the thesis examines the critical dystopias of Bina Shah's *Before She Sleeps* (2018) and Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* (2008). It explores how contemporary regimes weaponise religion and technology to enact total reproductive governance, reducing women to state resources. Yet, the study concludes that even within these enclosed landscapes, the utopian impulse survives. Through the fugitive survivalism of Padmanabhan's wasteland or the subterranean networks of Shah's heroines, the genre insists that the future is not a closed circuit of oppression but a horizon of possibility, sustained by the persistence of memory.

ÖZETÇE

Yeniden Yazılan Dünyalar: Güney Asya Spekülatif Kurgusunda

Feminist Direniş

Omamah Arif Mir

Karşılaştırmalı Edebiyat, Yüksek Lisans

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Bu tez, Güney Asya spekülatif kurgusunu bir kaçış yöntemi değil; İngiliz sömürgeciliğine, köktendinciliğe ve ataerkil milliyetçiliğe karşı hayati bir feminist direniş teknolojisi olarak konumlandırır. Çalışma, yirminci yüzyıl başı reform hareketlerinden günümüzün otoriter kaygılarına uzanan bir edebi silsile üzerinden, bu anlatıların kadın bedeninin eril yasalarca mühürlenmeyi reddettiği karşı-hegemonik alanlar olduğunu savunur. Araştırma, Begüm Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain'in *Sultana's Dream* (1905) ve *Padmarag* (1924) eserlerini Bengal Sömürge Reformları bağlamında inceleyerek, yazarın "zenane" mantığını yıkmak için ütopyayı nasıl kullandığını analiz eder. Hossain, laik eğitim ve inançlar arası kız kardeşlik üzerine kurulu, dönemin muhafazakâr normlarına meydan okuyan bir "gerçekçi ütopya" inşa eder. İnceleme daha sonra, Chitra Ganesh (2018) ve Shehzil Malik'in (2022) görsel sanatlarında bu metinlerin "mecralar arası yaşam sonrasına" yönelerek, Hossain'in vizyonunun modern feminist bilinçteki canlılığını gösterir. Sömürge sonrası ulus-devlete odaklanan tez, Bina Shah'ın *Before She Sleeps* (2018) ve Manjula Padmanabhan'ın *Escape* (2008) distopyalarını inceler. Rejimlerin, kadınları devlet mekanizması içinde kaynaklara indirgemek için dini ve teknolojiyi nasıl silahlaştırdığını araştırır. Çalışma, bu kuşatılmış manzaralarda dahi ütöpik dürtünün hayatta kaldığı sonucuna varır. Padmanabhan'ın beyabanları veya Shah'ın yeraltı ağları aracılığıyla bu tür; geleceğin kapalı bir baskı döngüsü değil, hafızanın ısrarıyla açık tutulan bir olasılık ufku olduğunu iddia eder.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures	xi
Chapter 1: Defining and Mapping	1
1.1 Introduction	2
1.2 Evolution of South Asian Speculative Fiction	6
1.3 South Asian Women and Speculative Fiction	9
1.4 Critique of Feminist Universalism and Limitations of Western Frame- works	16
1.5 Scope and Limitations of the Thesis	18
1.6 Theoretical Scaffolding	19
Chapter 2: Dreaming Dissent: Feminist Utopias, Colonial Resis- tance, and Speculative Afterlives in Begum Rokeya's Imaginations	21
2.1 Introduction: Utopian Imagination as Feminist Resistance	21
2.2 Begum Rokeya in Context: Colonial Bengal, Subcontinent and Fem- inist Reform	22
2.3 Sultana's Dream: Zenana Subversion and Civic Reimagining	26
2.4 Padmarag: Realist Utopia and Interfaith Sisterhood	34
Chapter 3: Survival, Not Autonomy: Biopower, Custodial Patri- archy, and the Markets of Care	59
3.1 Intimacy as Resistance in <i>Before She Sleeps</i> : Biopower and the <i>Panah</i>	61
3.2 Custodial Patriarchy in <i>Escape</i> : The Last Girl and Her Guardians . .	72
3.3 Survival Agency vs. Structural Autonomy in South Asian Dystopias .	80

Chapter 4:	Conclusion: The Architecture of Resistance in South Asian Speculative Fiction	87
Chapter 5:	Avenues for Further Research	90



LIST OF FIGURES

1.1	Shehzil Malik, Illustration from <i>Sultana's Dream</i> series, 2022.	10
2.1	Chitra Ganesh, <i>In the Zenana</i> , from the series <i>Sultana's Dream</i> , 2018.	48
2.2	Chitra Ganesh, <i>Sultana University</i> , from the series <i>Sultana's Dream</i> , 2018.	49
2.3	Chitra Ganesh, <i>Over the City</i> , from the series <i>Sultana's Dream</i> , 2018.	50
2.4	Chitra Ganesh, <i>City in Broad Daylight</i> , from the series <i>Sultana's Dream</i> , 2018, linocut on paper.	51
2.5	Chitra Ganesh, <i>Sultana's Dream: Justice is Virtue</i> , 2018	52
2.6	Shehzil Malik, <i>Sultana and the Queen in the Garden</i> , from the series <i>Sultana's Dream</i> , 2022.	53

Chapter 1

Defining and Mapping

The locus of this thesis will orbit around utopian and dystopian South Asian writing, specifically that of the former Indian Subcontinent, now Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India. This thesis will examine alternative imaginations rooted in specific historical contexts, ranging from colonial-era utopian visions to contemporary dystopian narratives, to examine how patriarchy is challenged. In direct contradiction (as far as can be managed in the scope of this work) with Western feminist universalism, ‘waves,’ or tropes, the examined texts will engage with layered local realities which interact with and intensify patriarchal subjugation; from anti-colonial struggles and overzealous cherry-picking of, and distortion of religious teachings, to intensification of sectarian and extremist discourses and transnational authoritarianism.

This chapter will begin by introducing speculative fiction and defining utopias and dystopias through genre and socio-historical context. It will then look briefly at colonial speculative fiction and delve into the evolution of South Asian Speculative Fiction (SASF), in terms of thematics, genre and form, the traditions and language of the region. It would then take on a gendered approach to SASF, introducing a range of feminist works from the past and the present, connecting them. To support the analysis of the coming chapters, this chapter will underline the justification behind the selection of these works in terms of their time gap, anglophone nature, and form, finally answering the question as to why these texts matter and how they are connected in the grander constellation of South Asian feminism and feminist speculative fiction. Alongside Eastern theorists and scholars, the chapter will further develop the work in speculative scholarship by critiquing Western universalism, whether in feminist theory or speculative discourse. The goal is not to entirely

separate from Western scholars, rather to ensure that scholars of the region being studied are given their due diligence; the aim is to have dialogue with rather than centre around commentary from the West.

Chapter 2 will explore the practicality of Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's utopias, *Sultana's Dream* (1905) and *Padmarag* (1924), when seen as a unit, their role in feminist resistance through institutional and inter-faith social technologies, alongside their historical context and influence on local contemporary feminist movements. Hossain's intermedial afterlife will also be examined through recent adaptations in other media and their links to specific feminist issues in contemporary South Asia. Chitra Ganesh's linocut prints (2018) and Shehzil Malik's digital illustration (2022) will explore direct causation and influence from Hossain's work.

In chapter 3, the thesis will deal with dystopias; I have chosen Manjula Padmanabhan's novel *Escape* (2008), and Bina Shah's *Before She Sleeps* (2018). The aim is to connect through recurring women's issues the two types of speculative pieces, analyse the elements of necropolitics and reproductive governance, look at the politics of care, labour, and intimacy, and ultimately, the hope that utopia inspires and dystopia undoubtedly evokes. The section further questions the definition of resistance and the dissonance of non-Eastern feminist theory and the crude universalism with which it approaches the East. The thesis would establish connections among all these texts and their necessary roles in SASF and feminist resistance.

1.1 Introduction

Speculative fiction, encompassing utopian and dystopian imaginations, offers alternative fictive realities, which may or may not be reflective or predictive of the society in which it is born. They could be "difficult or impossible to actualise in reality," but it is a realm of possibilities that elucidates capabilities or consequences of human intervention (Bagchi, *The Politics of the (Im)possible* 1). "Social theory and speculative fiction are two sides of the same coin," as they both examine "the rules that undergird a society and its human and more than human relationships" (Wolf-Meyer 5). The future that is imagined is reflective of the sociopolitical and cultural

reality of the writer, whether what is written is a world where brighter days lie ahead or we are to become enslaved to the consequences of our actions; be it global warming catastrophes catapulted by capitalist consumerism, ethnonationalism or the numerous forms of fascism currently plaguing our consciousness.

Anthropologist Matthew Wolf-Meyer furthers the connection between speculative fiction (SF) and theory by offering that a way to counter the elusion of the future is through the “confines of a novel or film or study,” as in the case of an apocalypse-level event, the dystopia maps out the symptoms of the catastrophe, allows us to “imagine its aftermaths,” and helps us map out how we might redeem or rescue ourselves from it (4). This realm of possibilities, viewed through an optimistic lens, is called utopia. First introduced by Sir Thomas More in 1516 and playing on the Greek words eu-topos and ou-topos, ‘good place’ and ‘no place,’ utopia utilises fantastical possibilities in both “topographical as much as moral-political contours” (Bagchi, *The Politics of the (Im)possible* 1-2).

The term SF itself was coined in the 1940s by the science fiction author, Robert Heinlein, “Speculative fiction is not fantasy fiction, as it rules out the use of anything as material which violates established scientific fact, laws of nature, call it what you will, i.e., it must [be] possible to the universe as we know it” (Heinlein 49). Heinlein also states, “Speculative fiction (I prefer that term to science fiction) is also concerned with sociology, psychology, esoteric aspects of biology, impact of terrestrial culture on the other cultures we may encounter when we conquer space, etc., without end” (49).

This is also corroborated by Marek Oziewicz:

The term “speculative fiction” has three historically located meanings: a subgenre of science fiction that deals with human rather than technological problems, a genre distinct from and opposite to science fiction in its exclusive focus on possible futures, and a supercategory for all genres that deliberately depart from imitating “the consensus reality” of everyday experience. In this latter sense, speculative fiction includes fantasy, science fiction, and horror, but also their derivatives, hybrids, and cognate

genres like the gothic, dystopia, weird fiction, post-apocalyptic fiction, ghost stories, superhero tales, alternate history, steampunk, slipstream, magic realism, fractured fairy tales, and more. (1)

This ‘supercategory’, though expansive, does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, the evolution of one of its most prominent subgenres, like Western utopian fiction, reveals a foundational debt to specific theological and political traditions. Western SF, more specifically Western utopian fiction, lies in the foundation of “Classical and Christian heritage,” one that embodies “messianism”¹ and if we were to focus on nineteenth-century Western utopias, they reeked of the coloniser’s intent (Bagchi, *The Politics of the (Im)possible* 3, 95). Jessica Langer, in her book *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction* (2011), discusses two markers of science fiction, which are considered central to the genre: “the figure of the alien. . . and the figure of the far-away planet ride for the taking” (Langer 3). These match the “twin myths of colonialism. . . the Stranger, or the Other, and the Strange Land” (3). There may not be a coherent answer to the causality dilemma between the two; one could say they are conceived together. However, as Langer continues, post-colonial science fiction lampoons these tropes, the other and the strange land, removes the imperial veneer that justifies their

¹While this thesis privileges South Asian counter-narratives, it is instructive to recognise how the utopian genre was historically weaponised by colonial projects to manufacture consent for dispossession. Sonia Dayan-Herzbrun argues that colonised territories were frequently reimagined as empty stages for European social experimentation, noting how fiction was utilised to frame these regions as places to ‘bring in a better form of civilisation’ (95). A potent example is Theodor Herzl’s *The Old-New Land* (1902), which envisions a Zionist utopia that serves as a ‘rampart of Europe against Asia’ (96). Such narratives rely on the colonial trope of terra nullius, depicting indigenous landscapes as barren voids awaiting civilising intervention. This erasure is starkly visualised in Ephraim Moses Lilien’s 1901 postcard (May Our Eyes Behold Your Return in Mercy to Zion) for the Fifth Zionist Congress, analysed by Faris Shomali and Zina Zarour in *Negation of the Exile*. The image contrasts the ‘feebleness’ of European exile with a ‘barren and arid’ Palestine, erasing the existing Palestinian social fabric to frame settlement as a productive redemption (Shomali and Zarour 00:01:08–00:02:32). Thus, the colonial utopia functions not merely as fiction but as a political technology that silences indigenous dissent through the seductive promise of Western modernisation (Kulchyski 51).

taking, and explores diasporas, movements, and all kinds of otherness, until “the colonial imagination... is turned in on itself” (4).

Returning to the colonial mindset and its production of SF, these other spaces and people were depicted as savage or barbaric, and their backwardness and less civilised ways were bludgeoned into the consciousness of not just the spectators, but also the colonies themselves. The internalised racism that resulted from this, still persists in the contemporary consciousness of the former colonies, on an interpersonal and institutional level (Adhikari et al. 2-4); colourism or ethno-religious tensions in the former Indian subcontinent are superb examples of that. Utopias should have been a respite, a dream, a far-off possibility, but one that enforces hope, instils a sense of responsibility, not just for one prejudiced group, or at the expense of another. A “nowhere” meant to become “somewhere, if women and men first worked and struggled for that” (95).

Thomas More is often credited with inventing the genre; however, the roots of Western utopianism, as Lyman Tower Sargent suggests, lie within the specific tensions of Christian theology. Western utopia has been influenced by Christianity as can be seen by how it simultaneously instils hope for a better life, while deferring that life to a divine future; as Sargent posits, for the orthodox Christian, “humankind is condemned to an awareness of Eden’s past and Eden’s future, but both are beyond human control” (Sargent 20). There was immense theological tension which further developed utopian social theory when critics dared to suggest that the idealised world of the Millennium could be achieved by humanity rather than through divine intervention (21). This argument led to the twentieth-century rationale that utopia had inherent danger to it. This view is famously articulated by Karl Popper who argued that “the Utopian enterprise of creating an ideal state according to a comprehensive blueprint, cannot go forward without a strong, centralised government... which will likely become a dictatorship”; because the vision must be monolithic in nature, any deviation could lower its quality, thus the builder must use force to maintain the vision against imperfect human nature (24). Yet, these Eurocentric conclusions that this specific lineage makes utopia exclusively Western (that are upheld by scholars like Krishan Kumar), are challenged by Sargent. While Sar-

gent admits that the specific literary genre of utopia is Western, he firmly contends that the broader phenomenon of social dreaming is not; he cements that there are universal impulses, such as the “body utopia” or dreams of “sensual gratification” (10), noting that “there were body Utopias in China, India, and Southeast Asia well before More,” which concludes that the drive for a better life, rather than being a merely Christian trait, is a universally human one (20).

1.2 Evolution of South Asian Speculative Fiction

SASF encompasses hundreds of languages, traditions, and narrative techniques. It is both independent of the Western influence, in how it weaves culture-specific folktales, oral narratives, myths, and religious influences; and unfortunately, influenced by colonial impediments, reflective of the consequences of the colonial empire.

Mimi Mondal, an SF writer, compiled an almost exhaustive list of SASF (2018); her work, coupled with other scholars like Nudrat Kamal, Aroosa Kanwal, Asma Mansoor and Shazia Sadaf, will be the basis for this overview. The analysis begins with the reminder that Western literary thought has dictated what forms and genres are acceptable. Before the British colonisation, the literature of South Asia utilised numerous languages and, alongside religious texts, included “poetry, plays, non-fiction, and oral narratives” (Mondal Part I). These works did not fit the [Western] mould of what constituted novels, short stories, or could be considered religious or a-religious texts; the confines of what is mythology and what is real or imaginary/fantastical could not be more indiscernible (Mondal). Kanwal and Mansoor back this; it is not possible to trace the origins of even just the genre of Pakistani anglophone SF, as the region is too culturally, linguistically and historically diverse (245). The earlier speculative works, those from the colonial period, were published in Lucknow, Madras, and Calcutta, in Bengali, Tamil, and Urdu (Kamal). As SF can be categorised as science fiction, it is, of course, morphed through and influences other sub-genres, like horror and mystery; there would be a “folkloric style” to these works (Kamal). In Urdu periodicals or serialised works, like *Dastan-e-Amir Hamza* (*The Adventures of Amir Hamza*) (1801), it was expected to have regional folk crea-

tures like *Jinns*, *Parris*, or *Bhoots* (genies, fairies and ghosts), which had their own common tropes, like the battle of good v evil, with the villain's powers ultimately being no match for the golden-moralled heroes (Kamal; Kanwal and Mansoor 250). Punjabi folktales like *Hir and Ranjha*, *Sohni Mahiwal* and *Mirza Sahiban*, with their didactic writing, also contributed to SF in the region (Kanwal and Mansoor 247). In Hinduism-derived texts and mythology, there was emphasis on the paranormal, supernatural and the rituals of the occult, all set in varying topographical climates, on ancient temples and ruins, with all forms of fanatic devotees to match the setting (248). The work evolves later in the twentieth century; a perfect example of this is *Chandrakanta (Beloved of the Moon)* (1888), an epic fantasy novel in Hindi by Devaki Nandan Khatri (Mondal). Taking from Islam, eschatology, jinn mythology, and local supernatural oral narratives, made for grand tales ripe with magic and cosmic powers. For instance, *Tilism-e-Hoshrubā (The Enchantment of the Senses)* (1883) continues the story of the *ayyar* (vagabond warrior) Amir Hamza (from *Dastan-e Amir Hamza*), and his many sons and grandsons as they navigate quests to find magical tablets, fight evil vazirs (wizards) and ancient prophecies in a land entrenched in sorcery (Kamal).

Bengali literary traditions were equally rich; Hemlal Dutta, Jagadananda Roy, and Jagadish Chandra Bose were among the most influential figures in the development of Bangla SF. The entire lineage and works are beyond the focus of this work, but they're important to note for the birth of a subgenre and the advent of the magazine era in the Indian Subcontinent (Moulick 42). Some of the truly foundational science-fiction pieces in Bangla were Jagadananda Ray's *Shukra Bhraman (Journey to Venus)* (1879), Hemlal Dutt's *Rahassya (The Mystery)* (1882), and Bose published *Niruddeshar Kahini (The Story of the Missing One)* (1896). These had themes of extra-terrestrial beings, accounts of other planets, weather control and innovations such as automatic doorbells, burglar alarms, and self-functioning coat brushes" (39-40).

From the late eighteenth to early twentieth century, there was a period where anti-colonial and nationalist thoughts took root, and this is where the reformist movements also began. All social and religious groups began to introspect, al-

beit at different times and in different forms. This resulted in major renovation of subjugating laws against minority groups, education reform (however limited and in favour of colonial syllabi), nurturing of rationality and philosophical debate in the rising middle-class, and increased inter-faith harmony (Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India*). It is during this time that the subgenre of Bangla Science Fiction, or Kalpabigyan was born; coined by Adrish Bardhan, in the late twentieth century, it was meant to catalogue Bangla fantasy, science fiction, and the various science based works that were being produced, all published in multiple up and coming magazines, including Bardhan's own, *Ashchorjo* (*Wonder*) (38).

Around the mid-nineteenth century, print technology had begun to spread all across Colonial India. It began with the capitals of the Presidencies, Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras, with missionary presses in Serampore, but print rapidly spread; “what had taken Europe three centuries to achieve, the emergence of a full-fledged book culture, was compressed into a single century” (Gupta 1). These presses printed in a variety of regional languages, including English (4). In Bengal, Bengali was not the dominant language; Odia, Assamese, Hindi, and Urdu works were enthusiastically produced (5). Calcutta was mostly printing in Bengali, and alongside typography, lithography was also immensely popular; it made printing in other languages easier, which meant the readership in those areas was also quite diverse (6). By 1838, there were missionary presses set up in Serampore and Calcutta, and Baptist tracts and Bibles were distributed extensively; “by one estimate, six million tracts were distributed during 1823-1868” (6). It is during the early to mid-nineteenth century that the prolific printing of periodicals began and by the twentieth century these periodicals gave way to literary magazines, which furthered the genre of science fiction generally, and SF, specifically (Moulick 47). Apart from *Ashchorjo*, *Fantastic*, *Vismoy*, and *Kishor Gyan Bigyan* were among the most responsible for carrying forward the Kalpabigyan (52).

1.3 South Asian Women and Speculative Fiction

What is the significance of this historical background? The answer lies in that which is absent from the context. In most historical accounts, whether they centre around print, language, or genre, women are left out entirely, or they are just a footnote, an entirely passive, unconscious voice, a lame being. Women are absent from written word, from political spheres, from the socio-political movements; their absence, though seemingly hyperbolic, reflects the reality of not just Colonial India, but also the present. Women's absence, whether it is in the written word, recorded history, or physical space, is all that is apparent and necessary in the scope of this project. Where are the women and what were they doing; what do they think and how does it translate in their writing of utopias and dystopias? The aforementioned socio-political movements, the educational reform, the printing press and the many languages it has sustained have had both invisible and explicit labour of women. Let us explore that, and add to the growing cacophony that is calling their name.

When we think of feminist speculative fiction, some of the first names that come to mind are Christine de Pizan's *Le Livre de la cite des Dames* (*The City of Ladies*) (1405), Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood* (1902-3), Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915), Charlotte Haldane's *Man's World* (1926), Katherine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (1937), Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), Samuel R. Delany's *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* (1976), and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976). While these works established the tradition, it is Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) that has arguably achieved the most singular status within the feminist dystopian canon.

It is glaringly obvious that the feminist works are from the West. There is an arrogant and equally ignorant stance, aforementioned in the context of the colonial mindset of the origins of SF. If we were to recall, the process of colonisation influences the collective consciousness of the people; both spectators and eventually the progeny of the indigenous get fooled into thinking all that exists and even just the capacity to imagine, belongs to the colonisers (and their next of kin). Prior to this

thesis, my own exposure to Eastern feminist works was limited. What changed this for me was Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932). In 2022, Pakistani artist Shehzil Malik posted the following artwork on her Instagram profile:



Figure 1.1: Shehzil Malik, Illustration from *Sultana's Dream* series, 2022.

Her enthusiasm over Hossain's work was endearingly obvious; her illustration evoked immense joy. After reading the short story, the only plausible next step was to tell everyone about it. This thesis is just the continuation of that.

Sultana's Dream (1905) (predating *Herland*) is the first feminist utopian piece out of South Asia (41). Her other feminist utopia is *Padmarag* (1924), which is equally revered. The socio-political context of Hossain's work will be thoroughly mapped out in the second chapter. For this section, we will first recall the feminist issues and the movements surrounding SASF of colonial and post-colonial times, then look at the main elements of their writing, commenting on language, genre, and content, and finally briefly look at global feminist struggles, and how they coincide with South Asia.

The Subcontinent's view and treatment of women varied across different class and religious structures, however, their subjugation was undoubtedly worsened by colonial rule. The early nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century marks an almost continuous series of reform movements (Sen 16, 123). The women's question can be considered the epicentre of these reforms as any and all social movements

debated the role of the woman (Bagchi, “Towards Ladyland” 744). Within the Sub-continent, gender relations, with the focus on the marriage system became a major source of contestation, among both middle and elite classes, as well as Hindu and Muslim men (16, 124). One of the major results of the reform movement was in 1829 with the banning of the self-immolation or *Sati*, a Hindu practice in which women had to burn alive on the pyre of their deceased husbands (123). Another major act of reform passed in 1872, regarding the marriage law to allow Hindu widows to remarry, as before there was this draconian assertion that the reverent bond of marriage between a Hindu couple outlasts their mortality, and the woman must remain chaste to her husband even if he passes (140). The issue of child marriages was also dealt with in 1891 (140). These social ills were reinforced by Hindu revivalists, obsessed with keeping the woman “pure,” and fearing that “to grant women freedom of choice in marriage was to invite the very demise of the marriage system and the family. . . [leading] inevitably to the rejection of female chastity and an assertion of female promiscuity, destroying the sexual and reproductive economy of Hindu society” (141). These men feared “sexual anarchy” above all, and any form of liberty given to a woman would result in just that (125). There was a growing concern that the reforms regarding women’s issues were resulting in a “new woman,” one who would neglect the house and her husband and would be an educated, independent, and otherwise “sexually transgressive” individual (123). This concept was thoroughly explored and satirised through tracts; these pieces were considered low-brow by the emerging middle-class men, but that did not slow down their distribution. The complex and deeply critical social commentary of one such piece, *Meye Parliament* (*Parliament of Women*) (1886), can be parallel to *Sultana’s Dream* in how it subverts gender roles. However, unlike the feminist utopian nature of Hossain’s work and how it boasts harmony due to the inverted gender roles, these tracts were seen as deeply disturbing and dystopian, instilling fear into the male readership of a world ruled by these “new women,” who ironically just behaved as these men had the leisure and liberty to do (125). Indeed, as mentioned by Bagchi, “one (wo)man’s utopia is often another’s dystopia, and vice versa.” (2).

Alongside (and indirectly impeding) education reformists like Sarala Devi and

Hossain, Indian nationalists created a 'new patriarchy' which approved of women's education, as long as it was confined to the home, "and the ability to run a household according to the new physical and economic conditions set by the outside world" (Sen 168). These exacting standards are also somewhat mirrored in the Muslim middle and upper-class society. Though across social, religious, and regional labels, the practice of women's modesty varied, all of them sought to contain the woman within the home. In Muslim societies, the practice of *purdah*, or *abarodh pratha* (seclusion) had become distorted to such an extent that women had no access to education and to interaction with the public sphere. Their confinement to the home was ridiculously extreme, to the extent that Hossain herself recounts instances where she had to hide from visiting women under the bed, so as to not be seen when they entered the room (Jahan 42)! The practice was seen as a status symbol of the elite; the more affluent the family, the stricter the *purdah* and the more monetary lengths the family would go to 'preserve' their 'pure' women (Hussain 164).

Muslim reformists' writings largely condemned draconian customs and wrote of restoring Islamic law in Indian society, believing that the condition of the Muslim women would improve due to the reinstatement of the practice of widow remarriage, inheritance of property by daughters, consensual marriages and of course, education (85). There were educated, progressive men in the intellectual sphere rallying for the rights of women; multiple manifestos, books, and essays were being published at the time to highlight the glaring gap between the rights of Muslim women in Islamic law, and their treatment by Indian society (Qadeer and Arafath 15; Hussain 80). Though many supporters of women's causes were altruistic to some extent, some were concerned only with society's welfare, not with women in particular (Qadeer and Arafath 16). Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, a Muslim reformer and educationist, is considered to be a vital figure in the advancement of Muslim society in India. However, his views on women's education were ambiguous at best; "in his testimony before the Education commission in 1882, Sir Syed declared that Muslim women's education could follow only after a large number of Muslim men were educated and that the present state of education among the Muslim women was enough for domestic happiness" (Mushtaq 170). He believed that the extreme practice of

pardah was harmful, but did not think it contributed to women's illiteracy; it was the men who should be focused on. Western education was considered necessary to fit with global intellectual standards, and it would be the Muslim men who would "educate their female relations" (Qadeer and Arafath 16; Mushtaq 170).

The nuance of reform movements should be highlighted here: numerous scholars like Samita Sen, Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay and Haris Qadeer speak at length about the male anxiety regarding women. The predominant literature produced by male reformists shows genuine empathy to the plight of their female counterparts; however, it is equally true that both Hindu and Muslim male reformists were more concerned with restoring the Subcontinent to its former glory days and defining the ideal woman (Bagchi, "Towards Ladyland" 744). This meant the end of British colonisation, yes, but both sides were reminiscent of their religion's golden age, and vehemently believed in the superiority of their religion. Many attribute religious nationalist spirit as a response to the British Raj and their divide and conquer practices; the growing resentment amongst the religious groups is what ultimately attributed to the Partition of India in 1947 (Kuiti 241). Let us remember that Bengal was the hub of nationalist movement; Calcutta served as the capital of British India from 1773-1912, several printing networks originated from there, and several major cities like Calcutta and Dhaka were centres of printing (Gordon viii; Gupta 5). Through print, Bengal was seen as where the intellectual and the political were most prolific. Chattopadhyay discusses how the written work is weaponised in the quest for the return to "mythical ancient Indian glory;" how the epics or the mythology reproduced reinforces the rhetoric through depictions of ancient technology much superior than the current times. This is because they're "read as evidence of a more advanced ancient Indian science [and that which was] destroyed successively by successive waves of Islamic rule and British Raj. . . [this is considered] an unholy alliance to science and nationalist mythmaking" (11). This breeding resentment, alongside political practices like allowing for history books in the syllabi of government-funded schools that demonised Muslim rulers, showing them as Hindu hating tyrants (Kuiti 250), effectively othered the Muslim population, ensuring that the socialisation of the younger generations had bred enough

prejudice and hostility, guaranteeing inter-generational carrying of this animosity. Our current socio-political conditions in South Asia confirm this, the religious and ethnic nationalism is reflected in the political sphere, but specifically in the jingoism evident through almost daily news of forced conversions, abductions, honour killings, sinister blasphemy laws, destruction of mosques and temples, and of course, general readiness for bloodshed. Bagchi recalls how Indian male nationalists, “such as B.G. Tilak,” weaved women into the role of the domestic, unsullied by the public world, secure in her home, in charge of nothing except child-rearing and pleasing her husband (Bagchi, “Towards Ladyland” 744).

Women were both infantilised and deified, confined to keep pure, by both Muslim (Qadeer and Arafath 14) and Hindu male nationalists (Bagchi, “Towards Ladyland” 744). This confinement, like a leash when loosened, only wanted to educate women in order for them to manage the household better, as seen through the immense writing and publishing of domestic manuals, and novels depicting the perfect Indian woman (whether she be Hindu or Muslim, her treatment and the expectations for her would be the same) (Qadeer and Arafath 14).

Connecting all of this to the women reformers of colonial Bengal, be it Hindu or Muslim, they were suffering through immeasurable ignorance and those that could educate themselves worked against these chauvinist men, through the written word, but also through direct political activity (Tharu and Lalita 341). Hossain started a school and maintained her position in several women’s associations that were starting, one of the most notable being Anjumane-Khawatin-e Islam (the Association for Muslim Women); Hossain is known for her welfare efforts and for essentially putting Bengali women on the map of speculative fiction (341). She has written extensively, dabbled in many genres; her work has become immortalised due to the sheer volume of work produced inspired by her, especially now. Her role towards women’s emancipation, and her seminal speculative contributions will also be further discussed in chapter 2. Another notable writer, known for her resolute voice is *Banglar agninagini* or Bengal’s fire-serpent, Masuda Rahman. In *The Mistake* (1922), she writes:

[The mistake]... is [indeed] totally ours. Whom do we expect our rights from, from men! Those who do not have any claims on anything, who themselves seek to... [be] beggars, who... [caught in the vice grip of slavishness] have reduced their life's ideals [to nothing], whose very souls have become enslaved, they will grant us our rights? They will give us freedom? [Are we] mad...? (qtd. in Sarkar 12)

There are more, dozens of other women and their work that we ought to read, Ayesha Ahmed, Razia Khatun, Sufia Kamal, Mahmuda Khatun Siddiqua, numerous others who have contributed to the literature that has uncaged women, helped them dream, aspire, and achieve. Writing united them against the rules that shackled them, the inexhaustible list of rules of seclusion and purity that they had to adhere to in order to be deemed respectable. Their influence, these “micro-initiatives” (Bagchi, “Towards Ladyland” 746) towards access to education, be it through private and even secret tutoring, inheritance being invested into opening schools, publishing of manifestos or collections of journalistic recounts of women’s subjugation at the hands of weaponised religious ideals regarding purity culture (See: *The Secluded Ones* by Hossain), has all led to fill the pool of resistance and emancipation.

Why is Hossain still relevant? Why is the thesis centred around her texts from over a century ago, connecting it to seemingly unrelated works by authors of now two separate countries? The male anxiety, the purity culture, the need to control and police women’s roles and their bodies, the fear of emasculation through the empowerment of the women, the seclusion, the lack of access to education, do they not demonstrate a disturbingly remarkable continuity in contemporary discourse? In the twenty-first century, from legislative rollbacks on women’s reproductive autonomy, to the (red-pilled) frothing-at-the-mouth vitriol spewed across secular, religious, and political spaces (virtually, in public, and private spaces) regarding women’s lives, bodies, and sexuality have buried us deeper into the past, a mythic time of the primitive; does it not tie us with the women who dreamt such big futures for us a century ago? We are far more primitive with all our technology and advancements, and it is precisely why we must reach out to these women again, learn of their

dreams, and create an inter-generational resistance that can only become stronger with the passage of time. The speculative interventions of Hossain, and later women like Shah and Padmanabhan, is urgent precisely because of the continuity of patriarchal anxiety, from colonial reform debates to contemporary digital echo chambers. We will be utilising this trans-historical framework of resistance that necessitates a critique of the universalist feminist models that so often fail to grasp these specific, localised struggles.

1.4 Critique of Feminist Universalism and Limitations of Western Frameworks

It is often expected to utilise the Western canon of feminist theory to establish any potential argument or addition to the discourse of feminist fiction. In the context of SASF, applying the frameworks derived from works like *The Handmaid's Tale* or *Herland* without critical interrogation is an act of “discursive colonisation,” and a disservice to our progress (Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” 334). They produce a rescue narrative, gloss over local histories, might even have eugenic undertones, and fail to account for the interlocking systems of oppression (one of the main culprits being the Western Colonial empire), that are central to the South Asian context. Although their contribution is still crucial to feminist SF, their critiques are limited and SASF ensures a more intersectional approach.

There is a “monolithic” caricature of the “Third World Woman,” which is the central problem; there is a tendency to universalise (333). Chandra Mohanty, a foundational postcolonial feminist scholar, in her pioneering essay, “Under Western Eyes,” contends that Western feminist scholarship often composites this figure as an uneducated, traditional, meek, and thoroughly victimised ‘other.’ This strips them of their specific contexts, recasts them as a “homogenous, powerless group” (336). If this lens was applied to the texts of this thesis, it would flatten the nuanced, historically specific struggles of colonial-era reformers, like the debates on purdah or nationalist education, into a simple universal struggle against patriarchy.

This universalist gaze often generates a rescue narrative, a framework this thesis unequivocally rejects. Lila Abu-Lughod's critical question, "Do Muslim women really need saving?" exposes the problematic ethics of this impulse, which she identifies as having "resonances of... colonial and missionary rhetoric" (Abu-Lughod 784). The self-righteous altruism of this rhetoric, frames the Eastern women as in need of liberation by the West, a repugnant saviour-complex that only the Occident would be audacious enough to have. This is categorised as "white ignorance... an approach that fails to account for... the lack of knowledge towards cultural contexts," and the nuanced, varied forms of agency and resistance that women already possess (Waheed and Cabezas 1). This thesis seeks to "work with" these texts or figures, turning away from the impulse to "save" them (Abu-Lughod 789).

Furthermore, the stiff, "wave-based" chronology of Western feminism is a poor fit for South Asian history. It posits the West as the originator of ideas and the yardstick of feminist success. The focus of this thesis' second chapter being issues of women's access to education, the critique of domestic seclusion, and the right to public space, coincides with the first and second feminist wave, which were characterised by the fight for suffrage and legal personhood, and later the struggle for reproductive rights and liberation from the domestic sphere (Kroløkke and Sørensen 2-4). The third chapter's texts are set in the third wave (and consecutive) era which is concerned with intersectionality or transversalism (in response to universalism) and digital activism against systemic violence, but the focus remains on bodily sovereignty and the persistence of memory against state surveillance. These periods are set in retrospect and though primarily they were used to categorise and understand major feminist issues of those times, they can become quite constrictive and exclusionary. The themes of the texts should not fall innately under the feminist wave they might have been written during, the thesis will keep emphasising that all these texts, as an example, take from their predecessor and continue the fight they started. Hossain's work lives on through the reimagining of the authors of today primarily because the issues of today are somewhat a continuation of the issues of Hossain's era. Due to colonisation, the results of feminist resistance of South Asia, especially the former Indian Subcontinent, remains limited. Though pertinent issues pertaining

to women's labour, sexuality, and the fluidity of gender identities is part of current feminist discourse, women's leisure, space, and bodies are still under threat. Thus, there is plausible critique that this thesis might be restricting the texts to certain older waves or feminist issues, but it is necessary for this work to not be viewed through that means of measurement. The interlinking of current texts to those of the past is intergenerational collaboration of anticolonial and decolonial feminism. This work should thus remain within context while not being restricted by the models used to categorise specific feminist efforts. This ensures that SASF is looked at through a non-universalist, non-linear lens of feminist achievement.

Crucially, this argument does not posit that South Asia is behind on feminist issues, rather the current political trajectories of the Global North demonstrate that the erosion of women's rights is a global phenomenon, challenging the western assumption of linear progress. Women's autonomy is still restricted, but it is now done so at the home and the workplace, their labour is exploited in more realms than before. All that has happened is merely the widening of the enclosure. That connotation might seem regressive to the work that has been done on the feminist front, but the focus should not be on what has been achieved; rather, we should look at the cancerous successors of colonial era patriarchy, how both imperialism and patriarchy lives on now, amidst these resistance movements. We must wake up to the powers that continue to exploit so that we can hold them accountable.

The approach of this thesis is to integrate intersectionality to understand the many forms of oppression in South Asia, linking gender with colonialism, religious nationalism, caste, and class. Decolonial feminist ethics will also be employed to analyse the social technologies of resistance (as seen in *Padmarag*) and the biopolitical control (in *Before She Sleeps*) through the lens of interlocking systems, which will be the central work of Chapters 2 and 3.

1.5 Scope and Limitations of the Thesis

This thesis does not attempt a comprehensive survey of all SASF. Instead it undertakes an intentional genealogical trace, positioning Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain

as a central figure. It is a deliberate choice to link Hossain's colonial-era utopias, *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag* to the contemporary dystopias of Bina Shah and Manjula Padmanabhan. The temporal gap is central to the thesis in how it allows mapping of continuity and transformation; the patriarchal anxieties over women's bodies and education in the colonial era are shown to evolve, but not disappear in the biopolitical and surveillance states of the 21st century.

Furthermore, the study's focus on Anglophone and English-translation texts is likewise, a conscious methodological choice. English, though forced upon the colonised, is a means of expression in how we reclaim our narratives through it. For instance, for Hossain "[it] is also a reconfiguration of what may or may not be said in the language when spoken by a person who is both, a native and a non-native speaker at the same time. . . writing back but belonging to it too" (Chattopadhyay 14). The language is also "fractured" in how Urdu, Persian, Arabic, or Hindi words in the analysed texts are being configured (14). This decentres the language as a colonial tool, and becomes instead a means of resistance itself. Having one of the texts being a recently-translated one (from Bengali), allows for the work to further be cemented in contemporary SASF discourse. It establishes its relevance and need by the scholars of today. The language, alongside the genre, will both be explored more thoroughly in regards to each text, in the coming chapters.

It is also necessary to delimit the scope linguistically; the vast, untranslated speculative traditions in Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, and the hundreds of other regional languages, as well as the diverse oral and visual traditions, are far outside the boundaries of this specific work. They are, of course, critical and an exciting field to utilise in building upon this work.

1.6 Theoretical Scaffolding

The thesis will utilise a blend of interconnected theoretical fields, primarily post-colonial feminist critique, drawing from the work of scholars like Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Lila Abu-Lughod and Deniz Kandiyoti. This allows for an intersectional analysis, dismantling universalist convictions. This will be combined with a new

historicist methodology, which insists on reading the texts as active interventions in historical debates, not mere isolated aesthetic objects; be it the colonial-era reform movements or the 'War on Terror' paradigm and the encroachment of the security state that follows it. This is further grounded by a materialist feminist lens, to analyse the roots of the patriarchy in economic and reproductive labour systems, from the unpaid domestic labour in *Padmarag* to the reproductive governance seen in *Before She Sleeps*. Finally, to understand how the genre itself functions as resistance, the analysis employs speculative theory by scholars like Barnita Bagchi, Samadrita Kuiti, Mohammad A. Quayum and Aroosa Kanwal, Lyman Tower Sargent, Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini.

South Asian feminist speculative fiction serves as a critical site of rebellion, where authors repurpose utopian and dystopian tropes to challenge specific regional subjugations. By synthesising these theoretical lenses, I demonstrate that resistance in these narratives is a layered process of reclaiming agency within restrictive social and biological systems. Chapter 2 will explore Begum Rokeya's early twentieth-century visions, arguing that *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag* propose practical, grounded utopias that continue to inspire contemporary digital feminist interventions. The analysis will then shift in Chapter 3 to the darker landscapes of Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* and Bina Shah's *Before She Sleeps*, where reproductive governance and necropolitical control are contested through the politics of care and subtle forms of resistance. Ultimately, this study illustrates how the South Asian speculative tradition provides a necessary challenge to Western universalism, framing these narratives as active interventions that redefine autonomy for the regional female subject.

Chapter 2

Dreaming Dissent: Feminist Utopias, Colonial Resistance, and Speculative Afterlives in Begum Rokeya's Imaginings

2.1 Introduction: Utopian Imagination as Feminist Resistance

Sultana's Dream (1905), and *Padmarag* (1924), are two of the most foundational feminist utopias, both written by Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932), and both reflecting the colonial-era feminist discourse in the Subcontinent at that time. These works, as we will see in this chapter, have such distinct speculative features and imagination that they continue to be relevant today. *Sultana's Dream*, a satirical English-language short story, imagines "Ladyland," a world where gender power dynamics have been reversed, where peace has finally been achieved through women's scientific prowess, cooperative governance, and communal ideologies. *Padmarag* (*Ruby*), a novel originally written in Bengali and translated very recently (2022) into English by Barnita Bagchi, offers a feminist microutopia within colonial India. The novel centres around a women-led community, *Tarini Bhavan*, which acts as a safe haven to women of all ethno-religious backgrounds, offering them a second life where they can become educators, practice medicine, and help run the very institution that took them in. These texts are far from idle fantasies. They're interventions in the early 20th-century debates on women's status, education and rights; envisioning worlds that directly defy imperialism and misogyny through revolutionary optimism, decolonised curriculum, and intersectional sisterhood.

This chapter is divided into several sections, the first of which contextualises Hossain historically, politically, and culturally in colonial Bengal and the broader South Asian feminist reform movements of her time. It then offers close readings of both texts, beginning with *Sultana's Dream*, examining utopic tropes like the dream sequences or the depicted scientific prowess of the people. Alongside this,

the chapter will also look at the complete subversion of gender roles and the peace that materialises from the women's symbiotic living to highlight a daring defiance by Hossain, and how that reflects and adds to the feminist resistance of that time. This is then further showcased through the second text, *Padmarag*, which will explore how *Tarini Bhavan* is a utopic model of institutional reform and feminist technology, through decolonial education, inter-faith harmony, and sisterhood. The final section of the chapter will connect Hossain's century-old texts to the 2018 linocuts of Chitra Ganesh, and the 2022 digital illustration by Shehzil Malik. By looking at the intermedial afterlife of Hossain, the chapter hopes to connect feminist resistance across time and media; proving that within a utopian frame, Hossain has dreamt of and manifested an anti-colonial, intersectional, and post-sectarian feminist world, mapping it out through the course of the texts; a world whose relevance endures in contemporary discourse and movements. Her work has obvious ecocritical and Marxist resonance, explored by scholars like Barnita Bagchi and Shipra Mondal; the thesis doesn't directly pursue these frameworks but supports them when viewed intersectionally.

2.2 Begum Rokeya in Context: Colonial Bengal, Subcontinent and Feminist Reform

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was born in 1880 into a well-off, upper-caste Muslim family in the village of Pairaband, in Rangpur, northern colonial Bengal, now Bangladesh (Ray 16). Her father was a *Zamindar* (landlord), and was deeply entrenched in typical patriarchal markers of affluent and conservative Muslim men of that time: he had four wives, ensured his daughters were married off early (Hossain at sixteen, her sister at fourteen), and practiced a severe form of *abarodh* (seclusion), a custom where women had to conceal themselves not just through garment, but also by restricting themselves to their homes, prohibited from being seen not just by men but also unknown women (16-18). Hossain was not allowed to get a formal education, while her brothers, true to upper-class customs, were sent to English medium schools and universities, taught Arabic, Persian and Urdu, and were heavily

invested in (16, 19). They were however, not like their father, and her elder brother, Abdul Asad Ibrahim, alongside their sister, Karimunnessa secretly tutored Hossain to read and write (20). Hossain dedicated *Padmarag* to her brother; she writes, “I have little or no idea how good a teacher one’s parents can be, I know that you have been my only instructor” (qtd. in 20). Rokeya dedicated the second volume of her essay collection, *Motichoor*, to her sister; she writes, “it was only because of your caring concern... that I could learn to read and write Bengali... I recall you were afraid that after my marriage I might totally forget [it]... I consider it a sign of your favour... that even after ... fourteen years after my marriage where I did not know a single soul with whom to speak in Bengali, my knowledge of Bengali did not rust” (qtd. in 20). Despite the hindrances by father and customs, Hossain was not deterred from learning, and with the help of her siblings, “in the depth of the night... in candlelight” Hossain, the “earnest pupil” (qtd. in 20), came to learn five languages, Urdu, Persian, Arabic, Bangla and her fifth, English (Agathocleous 7).

Ibrahim was also responsible in arranging the marriage between Rokeya and Syed Sakhawat Hossain; Syed was a civil servant and travelled often due to it (Ray 21). Her marriage to Syed was peaceful and full of support. He encouraged her to continue her studies and writing, and left her a sum of 10,000 rupees (which is roughly \$40,000 today), to start a school for girls (Agathocleous 11). Hossain who had been learning and writing during the course of her marriage, recalls,

We were then stationed in Bhagalpore. My husband was away on tour, and I was left alone at home. He returned after two days and asked me what I had been doing during his absence. I then showed him the draft of ‘*Sultana’s Dream*’, which I had just written. He promptly read through the whole book without even bothering to sit down, and remarked, ‘A terrible revenge!’ (Qadir 2)

The complex class and colonial dynamics of that time reflected in the way Hossain engaged with language in her work. The choice of language was a social and political marker; “Urdu had become the lingua franca of the Muslim elite,” and was

the primary medium of instruction in private schools of Muslims; Bengali was vehemently opposed in the upper-class Muslim circles in Bengal, despite being the widely spoken language of the region (Ray 20). A lot of her work is in Bangla (*Motichur/ A String of Pearls*, *Pipasha/Thirst*, or *Alankar, na Badge of Slavery/Jewellery, or Badge of Slavery* for example), to address her community more directly, and to shift public opinion; but she also understood the vocational and political necessity of English (Agathocleous 7). English was imperative to social and economic advancement: government jobs and prestigious institutions, such as St. Xavier's College (which her brothers attended), operated in English. Hossain leveraged this "English currency" when she published *Sultana's Dream* in *The Indian Ladies' Magazine*, the first-ever English-language periodical run by and for Indian women (8). Kamala Satthianadhan (a Christian Indian) treated the magazine, perhaps with syncretic hopes, as a means to blend both Indian nationalist, and non-anti-imperial sentiments (8-9). This can be seen when despite the political caution in publishing explicitly anti-British articles, Satthianadhan promoted the idea of women's right to education and opposed the restraints of gender segregation and *purdah* (9). This periodical had showcased early feminist writings by reformers like Cornelia Sorabji and Annie Besant, allowing for Hossain's radical vision to enter a burgeoning, if elite, conversation about women's rights (9).

As discussed in chapter 1, the reform movements of the late 1800s and early 1900s had two strands. One was to revive indigenous Indian culture against colonial influence by looking back at the past glory days (both historical and mythic) (Chattopadhyay 11; Ray 44). The second was to modernise, which meant to adopt Western advancements, as seen with the use and application of English in periodicals, curriculum, and government job requirements (Ray 44; Agathocleous 8-9). Furthermore, the goal of the movement, in how it pertained to women, was not to liberate them from segregation, but to make them better equipped to handle their roles as wives and mothers (Ray 50). The male anxiety regarding new womanhood, says Ray, must have been internalised by some of the female writers as well, for instance Swarnaprabha Basu, as the assumption that women had a natural inclination toward nurturing children and maintaining a household was rampant (54).

Basu linked the contributions of a great man to their mothers, further promoting the fervent idea of women's integral role into a man's life, be it in nurturing him as a mother or servicing him as his wife (54). There was also this uneasy enthusiasm to be appreciated by their husbands, elders, and society, and aspiring "to become *sugrihini* (a competent housewife), *pativrata* (a devoted wife), and *sumata* (a good mother)" (54). There was also the making of the *Bharatmata* (Mother Goddess India) as the nationalists evoked goddesses and made the country a maternal figure; intellectuals like Rabindranath Tagore, Ramendrasundar Trivedi, and Abanindranath Trivedi were mobilised to create prayers and songs, equating India to the warm embrace of a mother, while simultaneously worshipping the divine feminine strength the land possesses (51).

Women had become the unwitting torch-bearers of virtue, of Indianness, a guiding light for their husbands and sons, lest they become too "Westernised," the role of *grihalakshmi* (goddess of the home) was imagined, "to suit the men intellectually colonised, but emotionally rooted in Indian tradition" (52). Overall, but specifically in the Muslim context, tracts, domestic manuals and articles were being published and widely circulated; these were often in Urdu (Qadeer and Arafath 14-15). These may not all serve the purpose of limiting the woman or apotheosising her; the goal could just be to educate the Muslim woman on Islamic principles (15). However, it isn't within the scope of this work to look at the selection of principles in manuals like Abd ul Qadir's *Risala-e-Adab-e-Nikah* (Manual of Etiquettes of Marriage) or Karim ud Din's *Taleem-un-Nisa* (Education of Women) (14).

Hossain stood at the intersection of multiple reform currents during colonial Bengal's era of contested modernities. She engaged with the issues of her time and context as a Bengali, upper-class woman, while simultaneously engaging with contemporary debates on child marriage, *purdah*, education and nationalism. By situating her fiction in this context, we can confirm that both of her texts are imaginative blueprints for social change rooted in lived realities. They were meant to inspire and instruct as much as to entertain.

2.3 *Sultana's Dream: Zenana Subversion and Civic Reimagining*

Sultana's Dream is a satire that turns the world upside down literally through a dream. The frame is simple: Sultana, a modest Bengali woman, falls asleep “thinking lazily of the condition of the Indian womanhood;” and dreams of “Ladyland,” a country ruled entirely by women, where men are locked away in the home, and thus all social ills have been cured (Hossain, *Sultana's Dream* 19). Guided by a person she assumes is her friend, Sister Sara, Sultana tours this feminist utopia, marvelling at its technological wonders and its common-sense inversion of her own society's gender norms. The use of the common but highly-effective dream-sequence speculative tool, “offered ways to imagine and live past the structures of daily life, lent fluidity to reason, and above everything else, allowed a ‘science’ of unvoiced desires” (Chattopadhyay 9). Dream revelations also held reverence in indigenous religious contexts (Sadaf and Kanwal 18), depicting possible future, warning against impending evil or bringing glad tidings to the believer; in Islam for instance, there is the “terrestrial, the imaginal, and the celestial,” which coincides with the triad of knowledge, “the senses, the imagination and the intellect” (18). Kanwal and Sadaf, in one of the chapters of their book, look to the role of Islam in Pakistani fantasy fiction, exploring the connection between what is known about the Jinn and how that translates into modern depictions of it; the chapter details the imaginal world and how it affects our reality through dreams, and how it “brings about the embodiment... of immaterial things... even though they do not gain all the attributes of corporeality” (19). For the dreams to hold such significance in religious contexts that Hossain has grown up with, it is no wonder that she would employ this tool to explore an Indian woman's imagination, foresee a possible future devoid of the ills of her current society, and perhaps offer her audience a chance to witness their own esoteric, invisible realms through Sultana's journey. Additionally, by having Sultana note how “the condition of Indian womanhood” weighs on her mind before the dream (Hossain, *Sultana's Dream* 19), Hossain firmly anchors the satire in her contemporary reality. The dream technique connects Hossain to a broader feminist literary mode where dreaming allows her to safely imagine, fundamental to the genre

(Kara and Baktir 71).

The genius of Hossain's satire lies in its light-hearted delivery of cutting role reversal. It is precisely because women run it that Ladyland is peaceful, prosperous, and scientifically advanced. Men, deemed too aggressive and unruly, have been sequestered "in their proper places, where they ought to be... indoors," a witty subversion of the real-world purdah practices that kept women cloistered (Hossain, *Sultana's Dream* 20-21). When Sultana expresses shyness at walking outside unveiled, she herself is mocked as "mannish" for her timidity, since in Ladyland cowardice is considered a male trait. Through such absurdly-sounding commentary Hossain expertly exposes the ridiculousness of patriarchal conventions; equating the practice of keeping women indoors to keeping the insane out while the sane are locked up, or to lock up the people when a wild animal enters a marketplace (21). Alongside the dream, the matter-of-fact tone when delivering such a world to us enhances the uncanny, other-worldly nature of Ladyland.

A defining feature of Ladyland is its embrace of science and rationality. In direct consequence to the segregation and seclusion women faced, access to education was an inherent right they were stripped of; the women were confined to learning domestic skills or those important to successful child rearing (Ray 50), "domestic science" was what was reserved for them (52). In this utopia that is no longer a right they're deprived of. Instead, women's education, especially in the sciences, has propelled society to great heights. The Ladylanders have harnessed solar power for all energy needs, using solar heat and steam to run kitchens and drive an air-car years before aeroplanes or cars were common (Hossain, *Sultana's Dream* 22-24, 29). They control the weather with a device that stores and distributes rainwater, and they have agricultural innovations that yield plentiful fruits and flowers (23-4). Notably, these technologies are not mere whimsies, or self-centred inventions to merely curb curiosity; they directly address practical problems like food production and clean energy, areas traditionally considered part of nation-building and modernisation, from which women were largely excluded. Hossain overturns the colonial and patriarchal narrative that women, especially Eastern, were inherently feeble or intellectually inferior, by making solely "women engaged in scientific research" (24). There is an-

other lens through which to see men's use of science, explored by Chattopadhyay in regards to speculative fiction and myth-making he mentions "a masculinist discourse of science itself as a means of controlling nature" (10). The men in the story show just motivation for violence or use of force, especially when tackling threats to the land; it is the women that utilise science to deter, not destroy. It is not surprising to see how tools that could be used to subjugate or strong-arm into compliance, like science and technology, are instead utilised towards the development of Ladyland. Their universities produce women scientists who solve problems that men could not, such as devising a method to repel foreign invaders without violence, instead harnessing the sun to concentrate heat towards the enemy, who in turn retreated, never to return (Hossain2005sd). Utilising technology for development rather than war, is a radical notion to explore through the imaginative inventions offered through utopian world-building. Additionally, imagining this during the era that was just beginning to adopt and become familiar with global technological advancements, is no small feat. The scientific advancement of Ladyland thus symbolises a decolonised modernity, one where the fruits of progress (electricity, aviation, urban planning) are in the hands of colonised women, not British engineers or Indian male elites. Hossain's engagement with science in the story also reflects contemporary debates on gender and imperialism. At the turn of the century, Western science was upheld by colonial rulers as proof of Europe's superiority, while Indian reformers were themselves embracing science and industry as tools for national progress (Ray 59). Hossain giving Bengali women the mantle of scientific innovation allows women to have their stake in the gendered subject.

Satire permeates every layer of the narrative, not just thematically but also through the language. Perhaps most biting is how casually patriarchal, religious, and moral justifications of Hossain's contemporary time are dismantled. In Sultana's reality of colonial India, purdah is often defended by men both Hindu and Muslim, as safeguarding female virtue and upholding family honour (as seen through Ray and Qadeer's historical accounts). But in Ladyland, "virtue 'herself' reigns", and evidently does so by removing men from the public sphere (Hossain, *Sultana's Dream* 20). Sister Sara comments that men, being "shy and timid" by nature, could not

be trusted outside and are kept indoors “for their own good,” a direct mirroring of the justifications used to lock away women (20). The effect is to show that those arguments were never really about virtue or protection, only about power and control; their male anxieties could not be curbed otherwise. The exaggerated and parodical tone, the ridiculousness of the subversion only enhances the sense of injustice. It is a perfect use of satire, and done so without losing the fantastical atmosphere of the world; as right after informing Sultana that “ladyland is free from sin and harm,” Sultana, immediately at ease, continued “enjoying the scenery, looking at the way the natural world is integrated into the city’s plan (20). It is also interesting to note that the men of Ladyland retreated into seclusion quite willingly. The story even hints at how men secretly enjoy leisure while women work: in Ladyland’s universities and laboratories, women labor to improve society, while the confined men apparently spend their days in domestic tasks or idleness. One Ladyland woman jokes that the men are experts at cooking and childcare (27), a barb at the absurd male pretensions of superiority at a time where they considered themselves enlightened in comparison to their “uneducated wives” (Ray 47). This mentality, and inadvertent comparison to the British ideal of what a wife ought to be (“intellectual companion”), audaciously gave way for these enlightened men to seek female company outside the home, an affront the women had to accept (as will be explored in *Padmarag* as well) (47-8). Considering this established norm in Hossain’s world, her insistence to create a world so virtuous, so untainted by notions of power that corrupts is radically feminist. By swapping the script, Hossain gives colonial patriarchy a view of itself in a funhouse mirror. The exaggerated scenario has a purpose, much like Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), which Hossain had been heavily impacted by (Kuiti 245), to make readers critically laugh at norms they take for granted. The polemical satire carries an undercurrent of urgency: if Ladyland seems ridiculous in its emphasised subversion, so too, by reflection, does the actual mistreatment of women in India. Hossain’s subversive humour thereby becomes a weapon. Looking back at the reception received by *Meye Parliament*, Ladyland would be considered highly lascivious; enlightened or high-class folks, especially women would be disparaged for reading it, considering that the subversion

it offered merely changed genders, the role and behaviour of the oppressing party stayed true to that time (Sen 141):

“The author sketched the terrible consequence of this women-ruled land—a prostitute colony in the outskirts of the city with men as service providers and women as clients... well-dressed young sisters flocked to the streets under cover of blankets.... The well-dressed young men grabbed the ends of their garments inviting them to their houses” (141).

Sultana's Dream manages to touch on issues of marriage, education, religion, law and order, environmental balance, colonisation, and international relations, all from a feminist perspective, and all despite the brevity of the story, a mere dozen or so pages. The utopian history that Sister Sara recounts is particularly telling: how did Ladyland come to be? Sultana is shocked that the men would enter into seclusion so readily, thinking they must have been forced, but upon asking if force was required since they're physically stronger than women, she was told it was through the women's intellect (Hossain, *Sultana's Dream* 24). This too astonishes her as their brains are “bigger and heavier than women's,” to which Sister Sara replies with a hilarious quip, “Yes, but what of that? An elephant also has got a bigger and heavier brain than a man has. Yet man can enchain elephants and employ them ...” (24). In other words, the point is not to endorse domination, but to mock the assumption that size or strength naturally equals authority.² Sister

²It is important to note that though these analogies do seem somewhat limited, they should be viewed as Hossain intentionally making comparisons to induce critical thinking. They also draw on a recurring vocabulary of bondage and captivity to expose how “natural” hierarchies are made to feel normal. This is the same author who equated jewellery to handcuffs and chains, she says, “We desire the badges of slavery [jewelry] since we are accustomed to slavery just as an alcoholic hankers after a drink! ... Your jewelry, of which you are so proud, is nothing but badges of slavery. Prisoners wear handcuffs made of iron, we wear bracelets made of gold or silver. Our gem-studded chokers are probably imitated from dog-collars.” (Hossain qtd. in Jahan 57) The tonality of servitude shown in these remarks is a direct reference to the state of women in Hossain's world. Sultana is amongst the same women who are subdued through brainwashing, Sister Sara offers rebuttals equally ridiculous to that propaganda. It merely strengthens the satirical tone and

Sara then goes on to explain that Ladyland had taken in refugees, the king of their country demanded their extradition, and upon refusal began a war which the male army of Ladyland was not equipped for at the time (25).

As mentioned earlier, the women scientists all banded together and used the sun to intimidate the invader, who fled (26). This highlights that the crisis opened the door to revolution, a comment on how the turmoil of colonisation and nationalist unrest might offer opportunities for women's leadership in the real world. Women's visible role in Bengal's nationalist front is also a clear example of this, Hossain reinforces this role through her depiction of women dauntlessly shaping Ladyland. A contemporary of Hossain's, a Hindu-Brahmo Bengali, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani for instance, is seen as the first Indian woman leader of the nationalist movement (Ray 16). Through music, direct political involvement, literature, and by establishing several women's associations, just like Hossain, Devi has become a household name for Bengali and women's liberation in colonial India (10). Their roles, as can be seen through Hossain, have been integral to the representation of women, and their concerns. Other than highlighting the capability of an educated Indian woman, and drawing parallel to her reality, Hossain's second accomplishment was of revolutionary optimism. The fact that women's rule has only existed for a decade in Ladyland (Hossain, *Sultana's Dream* 25) and is still something of a marvel evokes a sense of optimism; within less than a generation, radical change is possible. Hossain's Ladyland is fast-forwarded to a desired future, compressing what in reality would be a protracted struggle into a perceived instantaneous triumph. The utopia is a guiding star, an imagined roadmap for what decolonial feminist emancipation might achieve if one could break free, utilising the same means of decolonial education and sisterhood.

Sultana's Dream's construction of the state of Ladyland, the monarchy and its reliance on and collaboration with her community is also in stark contrast to Hossain's life in colonial India. There, women were confined to their homes, their access to education was severely limited, their participation in public life and state func-

tions was unfathomable, it was a direct opposite of the world experienced by most in Hossain's world. The synergetic biome of this world should be attributed to education reforms by the Queen, "Virtue herself" as Sister Sara anoints her (20). The Queen is revered as a benevolent leader, one that does not turn away those in need of help; she also is in possession of keen sagaciousness, having ordained at just thirteen years of age (thirty years before Sultana's visit) that "all the women in her country should be educated... and early marriage [should also] stop" (23); a ruler in stark contrast to the deity that colonial and colonised men wanted to make out of women, a "*grihalakshmi* (goddess of the home" (Ray 52). Their expectation was that women were morally superior, thus responsible for the society's moral condition; meaning they were the scapegoat to pin all societal ills on; women supposedly possessed an innate *dharma* or righteousness, derived from their gender alone (52).

Hossain's creation of such a successful leader and women-led society is not based on some gender-based superiority but a structural overhaul. It is in fact the men and their arrogant and belittling perspective on women's inferiority that guaranteed women's rule by the end of the war in the story. Women's scientific advancements, harnessing water, light, and heat from nature, was mocked as a "sentimental nightmare," (*Sultana's Dream* 24), and the researchers and educators had to hold their tongue, waiting "for an opportunity" to reply "not by word, but by deed" (25). After the spectacular failure of the male army, a meeting of a number of wise ladies was held at the Queen's palace to advise as to what should be done to save the land," and after much deliberation on the futility of using physical strength, one of the Lady Principals of the women's universities devised the plan to use concentrated sunlight on the enemy (25-6). The men took to the plan which needed them to retreat into the *mardana*, male seclusion quarters, opposite to the real world's *zenana*, which is the female seclusion place women were forced into. They did so without protest due to their rejected defeat in the battle with the enemy, and despite the innate and apparent fragility of the women, "two thousand [female] students marched to the battlefield... directed all the rays of the concentrated sunlight and heat... [and] the enemy... panic-stricken... fled (26). The story asks the rhetorical question on women's innate virtue and paradoxical inferiority and ensures there is no room for

misinterpretation when it is concluded that it is men's misrule and misogyny, not women's inherent nature or weak dispossession, that is the cause of any societal decline they complain about.

While Hossain adopts a more explicit critique of religious orthodoxies in *Padmarag*, even *Sultana's Dream* demonstrates a clear separation of religion from statecraft in Ladyland, as evidenced by absence of priests or religious laws in governance. Sister Sara, when asked about the religion and punishment of criminals, answers, "Our religion is based on Love and Truth. It is our religious duty to love one another and to be absolutely truthful. If any person lies, she or he is... [punished] not with death. We do not take pleasure in killing a creature of God, especially a human being. The liar is asked to leave this land for good and never come to it again... [unless] the person repents sincerely" (28). Hossain's vision of a rational society is guided not by dogma, but by ethical values. Ladyland then becomes this quietly secular model of a feminist nation, where faith remains a private matter and public life is guided by empathy and reason. Hossain's utopia should be seen as anticipating of the arguments of later postcolonial feminists who advocate for "intersectional secularism;" this term found in Dr Austin Miller's 2023 dissertation, looks at the conjunctions between queerness and religion in the US, focusing on white religion. Ladyland is a nation where individuals of all faiths or none coexist without sectarian conflict, where women are not constrained in the name of religious piety. It also suggests Hossain's position on extreme purdah, as recalled from Ray's work, in how Hinduism and Islam justified their subjugation of women's spaces and access to education. The women of this land move freely and choose whether to cover or unveil, with no implication of divine disapproval. What a bitter contrast to the world Rokeya lived in.

Apart from *Sultana's Dream's* satire and subversion of patriarchy and colonialism, the text functions as a paradisaal projection which serves as a wake-up call. It showcases the need for educational reform and how a society liberated from gender and imperial subjugation can thrive, highlighting the sheer hypocrisy and ridiculousness of segregation in colonial India. Mohammad A. Quayum in his work entitled *The Essential Rokeya*, begins his book through Hossain's rallying call to action. In

one of her works, “Woman’s Downfall,” she says:

Wake up, mothers, sisters, daughters; rise, leave your bed and march forward. There, listen, the Muezzin is calling for prayer. Can’t you hear that call, that command from God? Don’t sleep any more; wake up, the night has ended, it is dawn now; the Muezzin is calling for prayer. Whilst women of the rest of the world have awoken and declared war against all kinds of social injustices— rising to the level of education minister, doctor, philosopher, scientist, defence minister, chief of army, writer, poet and so forth—we, the women of Bengal are still sleeping profoundly on the damp floors of our own homes, where we are being held captives, and dying in thousands as victims of consumption. (qtd. in Quayum 10)

2.4 *Padmarag: Realist Utopia and Interfaith Sisterhood*

In *Padmarag* (1924), these ideas are extending into a more complex, but realistic utopia, one which addresses the practical challenges of reform in Colonial Bengal. Where *Sultana’s Dream* (as its name suggests) is the seed, while *Padmarag* operates as a handbook; together offering a comprehensive framework for feminist resistance in both design and execution. The story brings Hossain’s utopian aspirations down to earth, into the streets of Calcutta and the lived experiences of women in Bengal, with the local and colonial patriarchies at large. Published in Bengali nearly two decades after *Sultana’s Dream* (and translated to English by Bagchi in 2022), this novella (the title of which means “Ruby” also the name given to its heroine) is a more layered work, written after her husband’s passing, once Hossain had begun a school of her own, much like the novel (Agathocleous 15). It is a hybrid novel consisting of utopic, realist, melodramatic, didactic themes, all woven together through its depiction of a female-led safe haven in the centre of a patriarchal colonial state. The text is ripe with stock characters representing good and evil, tragic and the heroic; the dialogues are deeply emotional and poetic, and the Sisyphean work of the organisation can only be described as revolutionary (Bagchi, Inside Tarini

Bhavan 1,6). The novel tells the story of the many women working and residing in *Tarini Bhavan*, a welfare establishment that homes and educates women from all walks of life. It is a microcosm through which “a complex educational and philanthropic female utopia” establishes itself in “contemporary Bengal,” nurturing women from diverse religious, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds to empower not just others, but through that process, themselves. *Tarini Bhavan* is a small flag of resistance in the heart of the patriarchal empire. In symbolism and function, it should also be categorised as utopian; it is a decolonial, interfaith, and intersectional women’s commune, as shall be reinforced in this part of the chapter. Through the monastic, almost spiritual sisterhood amongst Hindu, Muslim, and Christian women all from different social backgrounds (and even residing with the Indian women, a few Englishwomen), all showcase the shared subjugation they faced, and how plausible it is for them to live in harmony despite their differences. The beating heart of *Padmarag* is interfaith sisterhood and the education they use to uplift themselves and each other through the institute of *Tarini Bhavan*.

The plot of *Padmarag* revolves around a mysterious young Muslim woman, Siddika, who arrives at *Tarini Bhavan* under apparently dire but mysterious circumstances. At the novel’s outset, Siddika’s brother implores three kind women he meets on the road at midnight to shelter his “unmarried sister” who is in danger. These women turn out to be associated with *Tarini Bhavan*, a refuge for women. Soon Siddika is brought to the home, nicknamed “Padmarag” (Ruby) for her beauty, and gradually becomes part of its community, even while concealing secrets about her true identity and past. As Padmarag recovers and contributes to the work of *Tarini Bhavan*, the reader learns, through her eyes, the pasts of the other women and the daily operations of this female-run institute. Each woman has a tale of suffering inflicted by a man, often in marriage: one was abused, another abandoned, a third deceived. As one resident wryly summarises, “Rafiya-di’s husband was a scoundrel, Helen-di’s was insane, Sakina-di’s was dissolute, but mine could not even lay claim to any one of these attributes,” meaning her husband was so insignificant he had no notable vices; a tongue-in-cheek way to say all their marriages were disasters in different ways (Hossain, *Padmarag* 107). By sharing their stories of deep familiar

and marital betrayal, the women forged bonds and justified the founding of *Tarini Bhavan* as a direct response to patriarchy. The home is thus a utopia born through and despite collective trauma, recounting and indicting the cruelties that led to its creation.

The first and most important aspect to address is that of the parallels between *Tarini Bhavan*, Hossain's own life and the numerous micro and macro initiatives that resembled the work of this establishment (**Agathocleous2005**). *Tarini Bhavan* was started by Dina-Tarini, whose name translates to the saviour of the distressed. She did so after the passing of her husband and against the wishes of her relatives (39). That was based on Hossain's experience; despite her marriage to Sakhawat being a peaceful one full of support, upon his passing in 1907, Hossain had to endure a painful ordeal with her step-daughter and in-laws. Quayum explains,

Sakhawat... knowing where Rokeya's heart lay, he left behind, in addition to her lawful share of the inheritance, Rs.10, 000 for his wife to set up a school for girls after his death... Rokeya set up a school at Bhagalpur the same year... But Sakhawat had a daughter by his first marriage and things became unpleasant with her. The fact that Rokeya had inherited money from her husband... which was unthought-of in those days... and that she also dared to spend it on women's education (which was also almost taboo in the Muslim community at the time), outraged her and her dogmatic, chauvinistic husband. They became so mean and hostile towards her that Rokeya was forced to close down the school and move to Calcutta permanently in 1910. On 13 March 1911, Rokeya set up a new school, Sakhawat Memorial School..." (XXIII)

Hossain also modelled *Tarini Bhavan* after other schools set up by aristocratic women, again from all religious backgrounds. By the time she moved to Calcutta, there were already two schools for Muslim girls, established in 1897, and 1909. Additionally, since she had never received formal education, Hossain would visit Brahmo and Hindu schools to gain "first-hand experience of classroom teaching" and managing a school administration (Quayum XXIV).

Another reflection of real world systems in place in *Tarini Bhavan* is the *ashram* or monastic aspect of the home, in not only how it nurtures and gives respite to the women, but also how it gives them a sense of purpose which keeps the home running. Dina-Tarini managed to create “a home for widows,... established a school and formed a society called the Society for the Upliftment of Downtrodden Women,... a girls’ school, ... [and] as time went by... found a Home for the Ailing and the Needy” (Hossain, *Padmarag* 39). The school had Muslim, Christian, Hindu and Brahmo teachers, and the Society for the Upliftment of Downtrodden Women empowered its members “[occupying them] in various kinds of work-sewing, spinning, weaving... binding books... selling [sweetmeats]... some were given training that would make them eligible for a teaching job; some learned typing... [some became] nurses,” all serving the various systems in place in *Tarini Bhavan*, so it was an almost entirely self-sufficient institution (43).

These initiatives can be seen in parallel to Hossain’s work outside the novel. Alongside the school Hossain had set up, she too had started many other initiatives, adding to the growing efforts to uplift women from all societies in colonial India. She had founded *Anjuman-i-Khawateen Islam* (Muslim Women’s Association) in order to build a collective movement that addresses the issues of women, and organise initiatives to promote female education (Quayum XXVII-XXVIII). Additionally, while her school initiatives targeted the middle class or the elite, her work with the association allowed her to support the homeless or those in the slum regions, the poor widows, those sexually abused or those trying to get their daughters married off with proper means (XXVIII). Most importantly, she ran literacy campaigns for the poor, both Muslim and Hindu; “...volunteers comprising both Hindu and Muslim women, went from door to door to teach the women the rudiments of reading, writing, sewing, embroidery or matters related to child care and personal hygiene...” (XXVIII). Other women, like Pandita Ramabai were also equally active around this time; Ramabai “founded the institutions *Sharada Sadan* (Hall of Learning), *Kripa Sadan* (Hall of Mercy), and *Mukti Sadan* (Hall of Freedom)” (Bagchi, “Towards Ladyland” 751). These institutions were for Hindus of all castes, for rescued prostitutes, and the disabled (751).

There are many other colleagues of Hossain with similar initiatives that have all compounded towards a serious education reform in Colonial India. Examples to note are, Sarala Ray and Abala Bose, best known for opening the Gokhale Memorial school in 1920, which still exists alongside a college by the same name, “known for its rigorous teaching, and its inclusion in the curriculum of subjects such as Hindi, comparative religion, domestic science, and physical education” (752). Sarala Ray also founded numerous women’s associations as she moved and settled all over Bengal, namely the Women Friends’ Association, which provided aid to widows and orphans, alongside “*zenana* education” where women were visited in their homes in order to be tutored there (753). Abala, Sarala’s sister, was also heavily involved towards the development of education, founded the *Nari Shiksha Samiti* or the Society Women’s Education, which started hundreds of schools across Bengal, especially in more underprivileged areas and villages (753).

Bringing these initiatives together in *Tarini Bhavan*, Hossain showcases numerous cases where women, or those from underprivileged backgrounds were helped. In the “Home for the Ailing and the Needy,” the sick were nursed, taken off the streets, and those permanently disabled would remain in the facility; additionally it catered to victims from abusive famines, disease outbreaks, and natural disasters (Hossain, *Padmarag* 43). The protagonist Siddika’s love interest, Latif Almas, is another injured person they found and nursed back to health, not knowing or caring about the circumstances (54). One of the women of the institute, in a joint lamentation of the women’s suffering, explains *Tarini Bhavan* best, “Come, all you abandoned, destitute, neglected, helpless, oppressed women—come together. Then we will declare war on society! And *Tarini Bhavan* will serve as our fortress” (110).

Another biographically resonant aspect is the curriculum of *Tarini Bhavan*, with its decolonial and holistic focus on nurturing their students into self-sufficient, capable, moderate-minded women; it is derived from the curriculum of Hossain’s school, and reflects her philosophy for women’s empowerment quite explicitly. “Everything is taught in her school, from Quran recitation and its tafsir [exegesis] to English, Bengali, Urdu, Persian, Home Nursing, First Aid, Cooking, Sewing and whatever else are essential for Muslim girls to learn” (qtd. in Quayum XXV). The lack of

education being justified as a means of preserving the women's purity, or a boast of superiority to hinder women from even learning their mother tongue, Bengali, was heavily criticised by Hossain. This elite preference for Arabic and Persian over Bengali was driven by immigrant *ahsraf* Muslim elites seeing Bengali as the language of the *atraf* Muslims, those who had converted to Islam from Hinduism, and considered it "in-Islamic," as compared to authentic "Arab and Persian traditions... [and] culture (XVII). It is also important to interject here regarding language, Hossain has always favoured Bengali and has written extensively in it. It is the language she uses to resist the system that deprived her of it and made her learn it in secret; and since the entire premise of her work revolves around unlearning propaganda by the colonial state and the draconian norms practiced as religion by her family and society, she uses the language "to shift public opinion... [and] as a way to address her community directly (Agathocleous 9). *Padmarag* thus becomes a tribute to the language itself, all the while acting as an ode and a plea to her people, to read the story of their women, recognise the cruelties these women face, and resist against the norms that have contributed to their subjugation.

This rationale for withholding education was bound up with Aborodh, or seclusion, to which Hossain directly writes for the Bengal Women's Educational Conference, "...many consider it a mark of honour to keep their daughters ignorant and deprive them of knowledge and understanding of the world by cooping them up within the four walls of the house" (XVI). The limited access to books that these secluded women did have had to do with their domestic role. Yes, there were journals and articles criticising the women's marginalised condition, but the sort of indoctrination that existed and was reinforced had to do with keeping the woman the bearer of virtue for the home. Thus domestic manuals (important to note that these were usually in Urdu) were popular and largely consumed; for instance *Abd ul Qadir's Risala-e-Adab-e-Nikah* (Manual of Etiquettes of Marriage), was a well-circulating book for Muslim women at the time (Qadeer and Arafath 14). Compare that to what Hossain and her contemporaries have said, as illustrated throughout this thesis thus far, about the women waking up to the bastardisation of religious text aimed at confining them and keeping them docile and virtuous, and examine the work of

Hossain's utopias, the passionate fantasy of *Sultana's Dream*, and the in-practice realist utopia of *Padmarag*, to conclude that ultimately resistance and literature are sisters, that to imagine is to bring into existence, to imagine is to resist, and that optimism is revolutionary.

Connecting Hossain's world to that of *Padmarag*, the girls at *Tarini Bhavan's* school are prepared to become good, serving women to their nation and their home. However, to ensure their self-sufficiency and that the girls don't become "lifeless puppets," they are taught "science, literature, geography, astronomy, history and mathematics... ethics and religious studies," and at school ceremonies, they prepare and write poetry in Urdu, English and Bengali (Hossain, *Padmarag* 42,128). Their education is on par with the men, as rigorous and intercultural as can be, and one that ensures they do not grow to hate their identities or those of their fellow countryfolk (42). To compare what these girls learn, to that which a normal upper-class Muslim girl is likely to, we don't have to look beyond the heroine, Padmarag herself. When she first joins *Tarini Bhavan*, she is asked about her education and training, her replies showcase the lack of utility in what she has been taught, and how none of it could generate an income should the need arise; she could do fine embroidery and knitting, but had not been taught mathematics, or other formal subjects, alongside skills like typing (52). Women of that era were educated to be presentable to society, not to become self-sufficient. They lacked the skills needed for it, and in contrast to the finishing school training that was employed for girls and women like Padmarag, *Tarini Bhavan* offers the necessary skills and knowledge to actually participate in society. As Bagchi notes in *Fruits of Freedom*, Hossain "also gives us vignettes of pioneering working women typing, writing, teaching, or taking care of other duties, trying to create a utopia in an everyday, humdrum world" (43).

The utopia of *Padmarag* is decolonial, anti-imperialist, and revolutionary in the manner in which it tackles state intervention and avoids self-deprecating worship of the colonisers. *Tarini Bhavan* does not take support from the government (42), nor does it allow native aristocracy's donations if they were known to be loyal to the British colonisers (43). This ensures that the curriculum is free from being used as a tool of indoctrination (42) (recalling the mass printing and spread of anti-Muslim

narratives in some Indian state schools, which vilified Muslim rulers as bloodthirsty (Kuiti 250)). The students and workers of *Tarini Bhavan*, were also showing no signs of abiding by the rules of the ‘civilised.’ Shoes and socks were absent from their uniform (Hossain *Padmarag* 44). Alongside decolonised syllabi and dressing, the focus on native languages, development of ethics, and priority being given to women learning beyond what is needed in their domestic spheres, Hossain also ensured in nuanced ways to empower the native against the internalised sense of inferiority that had taken root. This could be seen vis-à-vis the rise of western education and the promotion of it in upper-class circles (Agathocleous 7). When a guest of honour was needed for a prize distribution ceremony, one of the organising volunteers suggested getting a “notable Englishman’s wife,” to which Dina-Tarini replies smartly, “we are poor, humble women. We don’t need any notable Englishman’s wife. The wife of any other government servant will do” (Hossain, *Padmarag* 128). They end up calling the wife of a constable of a nearby road crossing, a government servant whose “pay is [a] meagre [eight rupees]” (128). This is a direct insult to any native population that catered to the adoration of the British colonisers, and the colonisers themselves that were used to such protocols and veneration.

Tarini Bhavan is an operating, realist utopia, one that isn’t sustained just by high ideals or interfaith harmony, but by the never-ending, relentlessly unglamorous machinery of daily administration. The novel employs melodramatic tropes to highlight the emotional and spiritual plight of its residents, as will be explored in the next section; however, it shifts into a “mundane, workaday strand” frequently, which Bagchi argues is central to the text’s function as a manual for feminist existence/resistance (Bagchi, “Fruits of Freedom: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s Writings as Genre Fiction” 127). This utopia does not focus on leisure directly, but the labour that is needed to bear such a fruit. *Tarini Bhavan* is a hub of frenetic activity where the minutiae of women’s everyday struggles” takes priority over abstract philosophy (Kuiti 246). *Tarini Bhavan*’s utopia is grounded in tedious Sisyphean labour required to keep a female-led institution afloat in a patriarchal society; vividly illustrated when Dina-Tarini, the beleaguered founder, is shown grappling with a “host of details” ranging from humorous mishaps to fending off litigations, like arbitrating

fight between clerks and coachmen, managing lame horses, and fending off lawsuits from the “Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals” regarding the condition of the coaches (Hossain, *Padmarag* 40-1). When Padmarag arrives at the home, Dina-Tarini’s response is not a grand welcoming speech on sisterhood, but a breathless plea for the postponement of introduction, saying “please leave me alone now- I am terribly busy” (41). This rather drab show of the commune serves as a vital narrative function, demystifying the feminist utopia here, presenting it as a plausible, tangible endeavour rather than a fantasy, fully rooted in the friction of the real world.

The business acts as a direct mirror to Hossain’s own lived experience as an educational reformer. The chaos of *Tarini Bhavan*, for instance, when the teachers are scrambling to find girls to play “wood nymphs,” or when the Muslim students are struggling with Urdu poetry because “every word is laced with a Bengali accent” (and vice versa) (125), reflects the actual trials faced by Hossain as she managed Sakhawat Memorial School. In a letter cited by Quayum, Hossain writes of the crushing weight of her own administrative duties, saying “I have to keep an eye on everything. I even have to make sure that the horses are regularly massaged in the evening” (XXVI). Hossain is so preoccupied with the work that she declines an invitation to visit her cousin, stating her explanation, that she does not even have time “to attend even an invitation from God” (XXVI). By embedding these unromantic details, like the care of the horses, the arduous paperwork or the unruly students, into *Padmarag*, Hossain validates the tedious work of the women’s emancipation.

Consequently, this labour in the novel should be read as a reclamation of agency, as while the tasks are repetitive, it is a Sisyphean cycle of teaching, healing, managing, the nature of the work is fundamentally different from the domestic labour or drudgery, or the lifeless existence imposed on the women of India. In the prize-distribution scene of the novel, for instance, the workers are described as having a “festive joy,” where “each was intent on completing their respective duties” (124). These women are active agents of their own governance. It is as Kuiti suggests, this focus on the daily grind anticipates the “Anglo-American feminist second wave’s focus on micropolitics” (246). In the face of a society that wishes to render them

invisible, confined to their *char divari* (four walls), *Tarini Bhavan* asserts their existence through the sheer volume of their work. To adapt Camus, one must imagine the women of *Tarini Bhavan* happy, their work is the very evidence of their liberty and self-sufficiency.

While the administration of *Tarini Bhavan* represents the realist engine of the novel, its internal culture represents its utopian soul, a space where the ethos of *Sultana's Dream's* Ladyland, where “virtue herself reigns,” is translated into the tangible architecture of a shelter. *Padmarag* radically redefines value, its utopian capabilities lies in how it rejects the material extravagance of the “civilised” colonial world in favour of a “monastic ideal of service and renunciation” (Bagchi, “Fruits of Freedom: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s Writings as Genre Fiction” 44). When Siddika first enters the commune, she is struck by the scrupulously clean, spare environment, not the opulence, where daughters of sages and ascetics” seem to have renounced the world for a mission of social healing and service (Hossain *Padmarag* 44). This is liberation, not constraint, and the women’s uniform, simple saris of blue and saffron devoid of the “badges of civilisation” like shoes and socks, functions as a social technology of resistance. By stripping away class markers and fashion, the institution erases hierarchies that defined these women outside the walls. This aesthetic is a direct manifestation of Rokeya’s political critique regarding jewellery, which she viewed not as a means of adornment and decor, but as “handcuffs...made of gold and silver...perhaps in imitation of dog collars we have fashioned our neckbands” (Ray 102). In the utopia of *Tarini Bhavan*, the women are no longer mere ornaments “to be conserved,” or “live luggage”, they are stripped of their bondage to men, allowing their intrinsic humanity to emerge (117-8).

There are alchemical and spiritual metaphors used to describe *Tarini Bhavan*; “[it] will turn [women] into gold, as though at the touch of a philosopher’s stone” (Hossain, *Padmarag* 49), says one of the residents Nalini. Another, Ishan, compares the home to the Ganges river, where “a single dip is enough to purify anyone,” regardless of their “antecedents” (58). These metaphors suggest that the utopian function of the home is not just a shelter, but a means to transmute the leaden weight of social stigma into golden agency. In the world outside, these women

were discarded as widows, or abandoned as wives, or victims of crime, but inside, the “cruel vicissitudes” of life are neutralised by a code that values the woman as an individual capable of great things, and where other measures of worth deemed important by Indian society, like her marital status, caste, or creed are absent (48). Here, women cease to be victims, and recognise that they are “begetters of the world” (Ray 117).

The most pertinent feature of this utopia is the radical interfaith sisterhood that operates as a microcosm of a secular, pluralist Bengal. The list of residents, Siddika, Soma, Helen, Rafiya, Sakina, creates a tapestry of Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Brahmo identities that coexist through the shared language of kinship, addressing one another as “di (didi) or bi (bubu)” (Hossain, *Padmarag* 44). While Hossain does not present this sisterhood as conflict-free, she presents it as functionally cohesive, empathetic, and united by a shared moral mission rather than divided by dogma.

In *Padmarag*, the narrative machinery is powered by a mode of excess, where the conflict between Good and Evil is not a subtle gradient but a stark, Manichaeian collision. This polarisation is essential to the genre of melodrama, which Peter Brooks argues is built on an “irreducible Manichaeism” where the ‘conflict of good and evil as opposites [is] not subject to compromise’ (Brooks 36). This dynamic is most visibly staged in the antagonism between the heroine Siddika, who is often elevated to the status of a celestial being or a “wilting rosebud” (Hossain, *Padmarag* 51), and the villainous Mr Robinson, the indigo planter who embodies the absolute corruption of colonial power.

The character of Mr Robinson is not designed to be psychologically complex in a realist sense; rather, he serves as the locus of “pure destructive sentiment” (Brooks 42). His dying confession is a quintessential melodramatic moment where the villain “lets loose in nomination of his villainy” (42). When Robinson cries out, “I have killed a man in a rage! ... I destroyed innumerable fields of crops” (Hossain, *Padmarag* 164), he fulfils the genre’s demand for a “public recognition of where virtue and evil reside” (Brooks 32). There is, as Brooks notes, a “certain scandal” in such moments because they articulate “those very terms that cannot be used in normal, repressed psychic circumstances” (42). Robinson does not merely admit to

a crime; he creates a spectacle of his own malevolence, admitting to slitting throats and terrorising the peasantry with a “personalised menace” that reduces innocence to powerlessness (34). This intensity is necessary. It scratches at the pain of the colonial wound, forcing the hidden oppression, the moral occult, to surface so it can be ethically judged.

Against this backdrop of “sensational elements” and “liberal doses of melodrama” (Bagchi, “Fruits of Freedom: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s Writings as Genre Fiction” 43), Siddika functions as the perfect foil. Her sainthood is exaggerated, described by the other women through poetry and song as a “gem of purest ray serene” or a flower born to “blush unseen” (Hossain, *Padmarag* 51). While a modern reader might view this sentimentality with scepticism, within the text’s melodramatic logic, it serves as a necessary counterweight to Robinson’s brutality. By nursing the man who murdered her brother and ruined her life, Siddika enacts a “drama of recognition” (Brooks 32). Her forgiveness is not passivity but a demonstration of superior moral strength. When she reveals her identity to the dying man, “I am, indeed, the same, hapless Zainab” (Hossain, *Padmarag* 167), she completes the cycle of the “moral occult”, ensuring that the spiritual value of her suffering is finally made legible to the oppressor.

However, Hossain subverts the traditional trajectory of melodrama in the novel’s final act. Typically, the “eradication” of the villain is followed by the reward of virtue, usually signified by marriage (Brooks 32). Yet, when the romantic hero Latif Almas proposes, expecting the narrative to resolve into a domestic union, Siddika rejects the “romance plot” entirely. She refuses to be the passive recipient of a happy ending. “Are we women puppets that men can reject us at will and take us back again when it suits them to do so?” she asks (Hossain, *Padmarag* 175).

Here, the text pivots from the sentimental to the political. Siddika declares that her life’s ‘ultimate quest’ is not marriage but the “welfare of women” (176). By choosing the sisterhood of *Tarini Bhavan* over a union with Latif, she transforms her melodramatic suffering into a manifesto for independence. She acknowledges that her choice is a symbolic act, intended to prove that “a housewife’s responsibilities do not constitute life’s essential duties” (176). In doing so, Hossain utilises the

heightened emotions and “expressive language” of melodrama not to reinforce traditional family structures, but to “say everything” (Brooks 42) about the systemic subjugation of women, ultimately offering a radical alternative where the heroine’s reward is not a husband, but her own autonomy.

Padmarag functions as the pragmatic counterpart to the visionary aspirations of *Sultana’s Dream*. While *Sultana’s Dream* explores the radical possibilities of a gender-inverted world, *Padmarag* addresses the practical challenges of constructing autonomy within existing societal structures. Hossain’s vision materialises in *Tarini Bhavan*, a hybrid space serving as a refuge, educational institution, and stronghold of resistance. By situating this ambitious and unusual work within the realities of Calcutta, Hossain bridges the gap between theoretical discourse and lived experience, illustrating that emancipation requires both daily management and adherence to high ideals. *Padmarag*’s ultimate decision to reject the conventional legitimacy of marriage in favour of the kinship of the ashram reflects a political commitment to collective and systemic transformation rather than individual romantic fulfilment. Through this realistic utopia, Hossain asserts that “Ladyland” is not an unattainable fantasy, but a tangible possibility that can be realised through persistent, everyday efforts by women to redefine their own existence.

Intermedial Afterlives: Chitra Ganesh and Shehzil Malik

Begum Rokeya’s feminist utopias have continued to inspire and take new forms in the 21st century. In recent years, artists from South Asia and its diaspora have revisited *Sultana’s Dream* through visual media, producing intermedial reinterpretations that both honour Hossain’s text and reinterpret its themes for contemporary audiences. Notably, Chitra Ganesh, a Brooklyn-based artist of Indian origin, and Shehzil Malik, a Pakistani graphic designer and illustrator, exemplify this trend. Ganesh’s *Sultana’s Dream* linocut print series (2018) and Malik’s digital illustration of *Sultana’s Dream* (2022) function as modern “afterlives” of Hossain’s narrative. By translating the literary utopia into visual form, these artists reaffirm the story’s relevance and extend its feminist resistance into new discursive spaces. Both artists engage with Hossain’s ideas thematically, using *Sultana’s Dream* as a platform to interrogate political justice, gender roles, environmental concerns, and intersectional

feminism within the context of contemporary South Asia. This section analyses how the intermedial works of Ganesh and Malik resonate with Hossain's original text, emphasising the continuity of utopian imagination and feminist critique across time and media.

Chitra Ganesh's *Sultana's Dream* (2018) comprises of 27 linocut prints that sequentially reinterpret the narrative. Renowned for her feminist and queer reimagining of myth and literature, Ganesh selected the linocut technique for its graphic clarity and historical resonance. Each print corresponds to an episode or theme from Hossain's tale, blending fantastical and familiar elements. For instance, the widely exhibited print "In the Zenana" (see fig. 2.1) depicts the moment when Sultana observes men confined in the zenana, idly behind a lattice screen, while women move freely outside. Ganesh employs stark black-and-tan contrasts, emphasising the purdah screen (jali), which she transforms into the Tree of Life motif from the Sidi Saiyyed Mosque in Ahmedabad. This incorporation of an Islamic architectural motif visually anchors the utopia in South Asian Muslim culture. The carved screen evokes both the historical seclusion of women and its inversion in Ladyland, where men are now behind the screen. The reference to an African-ruled pre-Mughal mosque in India alludes to the subcontinent's layered history of cultural exchange, subtly reinforcing Hossain's vision of borderless sisterhood and mobility. The men behind the veil are depicted as relaxed and content, mirroring Hossain's text, which suggests that men might enjoy the leisurely life traditionally afforded to upper-class women under purdah if gender roles were reversed. Ganesh's intricate line work and symbolic elements encourage prolonged engagement, inviting viewers to decode each image as one would savour layers of meaning in the text. Ganesh's prints embody the weight of futuristic idealism and redemption, visualising Hossain's world in a manner that foregrounds its idealistic and utopian dimensions.



Figure 2.1: Chitra Ganesh, *In the Zenana*, from the series *Sultana's Dream*, 2018.

A notable feature of Ganesh's work is her emphasis on women's agency and visibility. Many prints prominently feature women, examples can be seen below (fig. 2.3): piloting aerial vehicles, operating solar technology, and cultivating urban gardens. By centring brown women in positions of power and autonomy, Ganesh addresses the historical and speculative absence of such representation. This approach offers a correction to narratives that have excluded women of colour from visions of technological and political futures. Ganesh's Ladyland is distinctly South Asian, with tree-lined streets, Indo-Islamic architecture, women in sarees or flowing garments, and lotus motifs (fig. 2.4), in contrast to Western science fiction utopias that

often depict sterile, culture-less futures. This grounding in cultural iconography extends Hossain's project of indigenising modernity and asserts that scientific progress is not exclusive to the West. Ganesh's choice of the labour-intensive linocut medium further reinforces this message. She has explained that the process of carving and hand-printing each sheet metaphorically represents the balanced relationship between technology and human touch in Ladyland (Ganesh, *City in Broad Daylight*). By eschewing digital reproduction, Ganesh invests each image with physical effort, echoing the labour that Hossain's women contributed to building Ladyland. The tactile quality of the work, with solid colour blocks and textured cuts, evokes early modern illustrations or political posters, creating a retro-futuristic tension. This graphic novel-like visualisation invites contemporary audiences, especially younger ones, to engage with Hossain's ideas in an accessible format.



Figure 2.2: Chitra Ganesh, *Sultana University*, from the series *Sultana's Dream*, 2018.

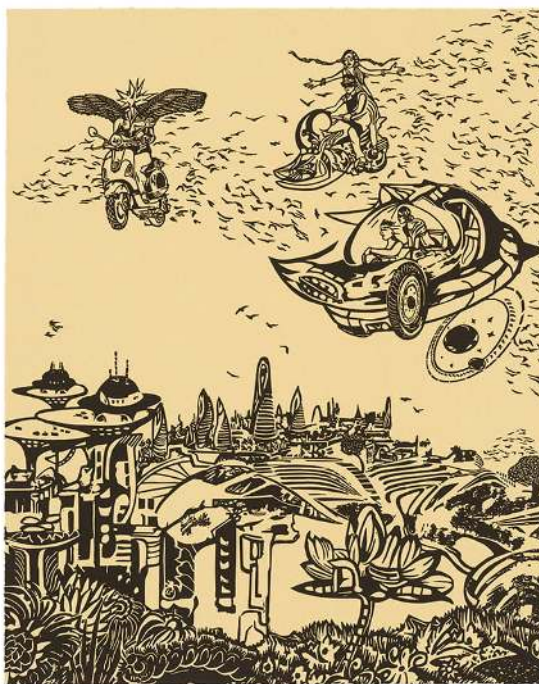


Figure 2.3: Chitra Ganesh, *Over the City*, from the series *Sultana's Dream*, 2018.

Ganesh's prints function as both visual depictions and critical commentary. For instance, one print depicts the Ladyland parliament's dedication to justice through the syncretic visualisation of a figure reminiscent of a Hindu goddess, possessing three heads and four arms (see Figure 2.5). However, Ganesh subverts traditional iconography by replacing religious implements with secular symbols of governance and science: one hand balances the scales of justice, while a third eye emits rays of concentrated light, perhaps alluding to the solar technologies central to Hossain's utopia. By placing this multi-faceted figure against a celestial backdrop, surrounded by thriving flora and fauna like the peacock and pangolin, Ganesh visually anchors Hossain's "visionary secularism" in a mythic, yet deeply South Asian, aesthetic framework. Additionally, the inclusion of a pangolin and monkeys within the composition emphasises the ecological harmony of Ladyland, where humans and animals coexist in a space no longer dominated by patriarchal violence. As an Indian-American artist, Ganesh consciously archives a feminist history that may be underrecognised in Western contexts. Through her art, Ganesh re-narrativises *Sul-*

tana's Dream for the 21st century, reaffirms Hossain's place within a global feminist canon, and ensures that the memory of Ladyland continues to inspire dialogue.

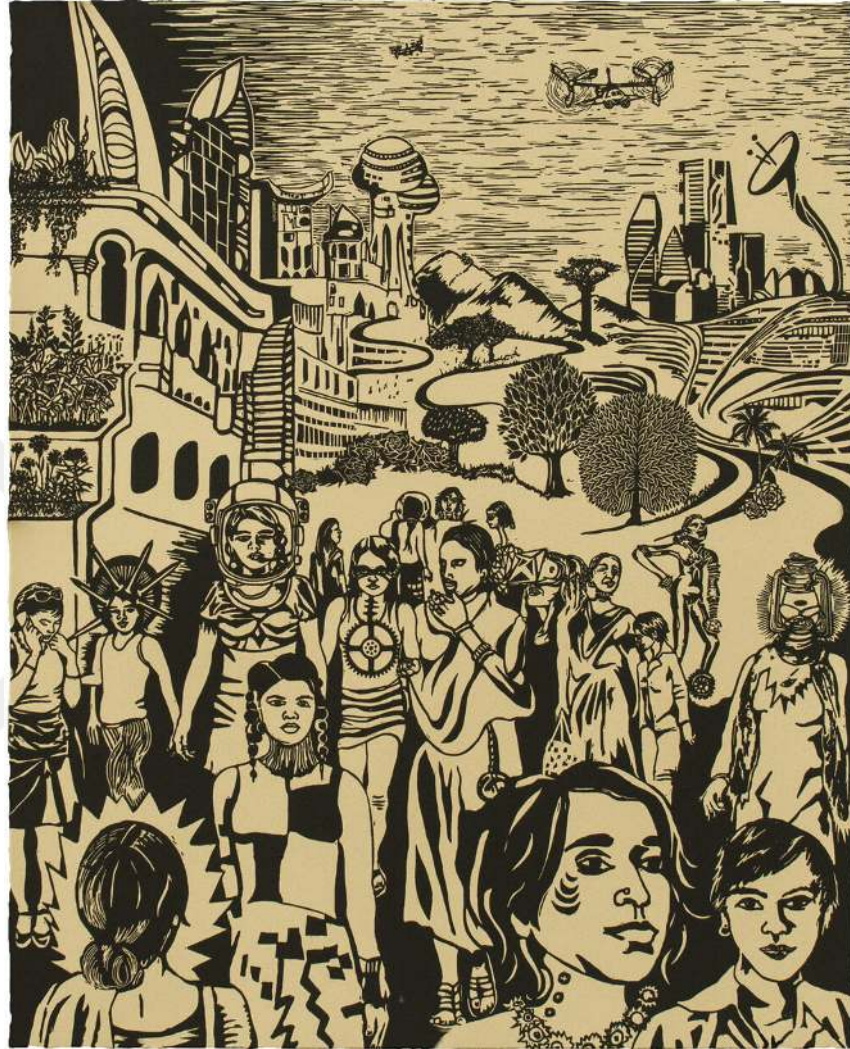


Figure 2.4: Chitra Ganesh, *City in Broad Daylight*, from the series *Sultana's Dream*, 2018, linocut on paper.



Figure 2.5: Chitra Ganesh, *Sultana's Dream: Justice is Virtue*, 2018

Shehzil Malik's *Sultana's Dream* (2022) adopts a distinct yet complementary approach. Malik produced a single large-scale digital illustration in the style of a Mughal miniature, encapsulating the entire landscape of Ladyland within a single frame. While Ganesh presents the story episodically, Malik offers a panoramic synthesis. Her artwork, initially shared on Instagram and later exhibited, is a vibrant tableau populated by women engaged in diverse activities, visually realising Bari's observation of "countless women engaged in various activities" (Bari) simultaneously. The illustration features scenes from Hossain's narrative: women piloting solar-powered vehicles, scientists at work, lush gardens, and men peering from barred

windows of the *mardana* quarters (fig. 2.6). By integrating these elements into a single image, Malik encourages a non-linear reading, akin to the spatial multiplicity of traditional miniature paintings. This approach mirrors Hossain’s narrative structure, which is more a guided exploration than a plot-driven story. The Mughal miniature style, historically associated with imperial and male patronage, is repurposed here to foreground women’s narratives. While traditional miniatures often include inscribed text, Malik’s illustration is accompanied by her reflections on social media, effectively pairing image and commentary in a contemporary format.



Figure 2.6: Shehzil Malik, *Sultana and the Queen in the Garden*, from the series *Sultana’s Dream*, 2022.

Malik’s stated motivations, as reflected in her interviews and social media posts, are explicitly feminist and contemporary. She describes her initial encounter with

Hossain's story as "fresh, subversive, and bold," and is surprised by its continued relevance in 2022 (Bari). In a Daily Star interview, Malik elaborates: "even though it's now 2022, we in Pakistan are still arguing over whether girls should be educated; whether it's wrong to marry girls off when they're underage; whether a woman is capable of doing a job... whether a good Muslim woman should step out of the house... it feels like the world that Begum Rokeya was escaping, is still the world I live in (Bari)." This statement draws a direct connection between colonial India and present-day Pakistan, and by extension, much of South Asia. Malik identifies Ladyland not as a distant utopia but as a commentary on persistent issues: female education, child marriage, women's labour, and the regulation of women's mobility. By articulating these parallels, Malik updates *Sultana's Dream* for the 21st century. Her artwork is not nostalgic; it challenges viewers to consider why these struggles endure. The depiction of Ladyland thus becomes aspirational, suggesting that Hossain's vision remains relevant. Malik's observation that advocating for "men to be kept in the house" would provoke online backlash highlights the enduring power of satire to expose double standards. She further contextualises *Sultana's Dream* during the COVID-19 pandemic, noting that while many men resisted lockdowns, women, accustomed to restrictions, complied, yet domestic violence increased (Bari). This real-world scenario echoes Hossain's premise, underscoring the ongoing need for alternative visions. Malik's art, therefore, functions as a critical mirror to contemporary societal failures, in line with Hossain's original intent.

Malik's illustration visually aligns with Hossain's emphasis on community and harmony with nature. The original text describes Ladyland's natural beauty, clean air, abundant gardens, and the absence of industrial pollution. Malik's composition is filled with greenery, skies populated by birds, and distant mountains. Women are depicted watering plants and strolling in orchards. The inviting pastel pink of the artwork, coupled with the intricate greenery and a business in the environment that is buzzing with energy and harmony, conveys optimism and serenity. By rendering Ladyland in visual form, Malik enhances the imaginative appeal of Hossain's utopia. For viewers, particularly those in South Asia accustomed to male-dominated public spaces (Lali et al.), the image of a woman-centred world is both revelatory and

disorienting. Malik's work thus provides contemporary audiences with the same cognitive dissonance that Hossain's prose evoked, demonstrating that a society centred on women can be both functional and beautiful.

Both Ganesh and Malik position their works within global feminist and activist frameworks. Ganesh's series was exhibited at the Dhaka Art Summit 2020, highlighting the regional celebration of Hossain's legacy (Ganesh, Dhaka Art Summit 2020: *Sultana's Dream*). Malik explicitly connects her print to feminist activism, participating in initiatives such as the Aurat March in Pakistan, donating artwork to women's rights fundraisers, and using her platform to address feminist issues (see (Al Jazeera) and (Malik)). Her *Sultana's Dream* print was auctioned in London to support causes in Pakistan, exemplifying the use of art for social change, much as Hossain used her writing to support educational and social initiatives (Malik). This convergence of art and activism mirrors Hossain's own practice. Malik's art has also reached new audiences through social media, introducing many to Hossain's pioneering work. Similarly, Ganesh's prints, acquired by institutions such as the Whitney Museum have brought Hossain's narrative into academic and artistic discourse beyond South Asia (Whitney Museum of American Art). This widespread dissemination demonstrates that *Sultana's Dream* has become a key reference in discussions of feminist utopias, comparable to Western works such as Gilman's *Herland* and Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Thanks to artists like Ganesh and Malik, Hossain's story is now recognised as a dynamic source of inspiration for contemporary South Asian feminist thought and activism.

In analysing these intermedial afterlives, it is evident that the artists engage in critical adaptation rather than mere ekphrasis. They interpret *Sultana's Dream* in a manner akin to scholarly analysis, foregrounding specific themes. Ganesh emphasises transnational history, women's labour, and ongoing struggles, consistent with her broader practice of amplifying suppressed narratives. Malik focuses on contemporary feminist issues in Pakistan and the persistence of patriarchal norms. Both artists align with Hossain's critiques of patriarchy, colonialism, and orthodoxy, and both highlight the ideal of collective female agency. Notably, neither artist centres an individual heroine; Sultana is often subsumed into the collective. In Malik's

print, there is no central figure, whereas in Ganesh's series, Sultana appears among many women. This approach reflects the collective ethos of Hossain's feminism, where utopia depends on communal action rather than a singular saviour. As Mohanty observes, Third World women's feminist politics are grounded in "the idea of the simultaneity of oppressions" and the "crucial role of a hegemonic state" in circumscribing daily survival (Mohanty, "Introduction: Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism" 10). Mohanty further posits that the "significance of memory and writing" is fundamental to creating "oppositional agency," while acknowledging the "differences, conflicts, and contradictions internal" to these communities (10). Hossain anticipated this multifaceted perspective by weaving scientific reform with a critique of the colonial state, and Ganesh and Malik reinforce it today by visualising a community that is not a monolith, but a site of active, collective resistance against those very "simultaneous" forces of marginality.

In conclusion, the works of Chitra Ganesh and Shehzil Malik demonstrate the vibrant afterlife of Hossain's utopian imagination. By re-engaging with *Sultana's Dream* through visual art, they not only introduce Hossain's ideas to new audiences but also reiterate and refract those ideas to comment on present conditions. Ganesh's prints bridge early 20th-century Ladyland and 21st-century feminist art, underlining themes of technological empowerment and transnational solidarity. Malik's illustration connects Ladyland to today's South Asian gender debates, underscoring how Hossain's "feminist dream" remains a potent, even urgent, horizon for change. Both attest to the story's elasticity and depth; *Sultana's Dream* can speak simultaneously to colonial Bengal and to postcolonial South Asia, to an elite magazine readership of 1905 and to Instagram-scrolling youth of today. This intermedial journey of Hossain's work confirms its status as a timeless piece of resistance literature. It also exemplifies how feminist cultural memory is kept alive: through re-telling and re-visioning by each generation's artists and thinkers. As Ganesh and Malik show, utopian imagination continues to be a powerful tool for critiquing existing realities and inspiring alternative futures, exactly as Begum Rokeya intended over a century ago.

In our present moment, rife with regressive patriarchal politics, religious extremism, and new forms of imperialism (economic, cultural, digital), Hossain's work challenges us to reinvigorate the utopian impulse as a form of resistance. By dreaming of Ladyland, Hossain helped bring about, however gradually, the reality of more women in laboratories, legislatures, and leadership in South Asia. By envisioning *Tarini Bhavan*, she arguably prefigured the rise of NGOs and women's collectives focused on empowerment. Utopian thinking, far from distracting from concrete action, can galvanise and guide it, what Robin D.G. Kelley in a different context calls "freedom dreams" (Kelley 2). Hossain's dreams were freedom dreams for the women of her land. They continue to inspire freedom dreams today, whether it's a young feminist in Dhaka imagining a protest where men are allies not threats, or an artist like Malik picturing a city where a woman walking, veiled or not, is as unremarkable as a man walking free.

As we conclude this chapter then, we acknowledge Hossain's unique contribution to the lineage of feminist resistance: she expanded the imaginative repertoire. Through utopia, she showed that imagining an elsewhere is itself a method, a way to rehearse alternatives and make the 'unthinkable' legible. In doing so, she demonstrated that resistance is not only rallies and reforms, but also the radical act of thinking otherwise, of refusing to accept that how things are is how they must always be. Worlds rewritten in fiction can precede worlds remade in reality. Hossain's worlds, Ladyland and *Tarini Bhavan*, remain reference points, reminding us that the fight for a just society must simultaneously occur on multiple fronts: gender justice, colonial justice, economic justice, and communal amity. Her integration of these fronts is her enduring lesson to us.

In a speech in 1926, Hossain declared, "We must have the courage to dream, and the courage to act on our dreams" (Hossain, *Speeches*, translated from Bengali). This chapter, echoing Hossain, posits that the utopian imagination is indeed a form of feminist courage, a way to resist by daring to envision a future radically freer than the past. Feminist futures, as Hossain's work exemplifies, are forged by bridging past and present: learning from foremothers like her, critiquing the shortcomings of our inherited world, and carrying forward the torch of utopia, the "no-place" that guides

us to carve out new places of freedom and equality in the here and now.



Chapter 3

Survival, Not Autonomy: Biopower, Custodial Patriarchy, and the Markets of Care

In the dystopian futures depicted in *Before She Sleeps* (2018) by Bina Shah and *Escape* (2008) by Manjula Padmanabhan, feminist resistance is characterised by survival rather than triumphant autonomy. These dystopian novels are “built around the construction of a narrative of the hegemonic order and a counter-narrative of resistance” (Baccolini and Moylan 6). They typically begin “directly in the terrible new world” where the reader encounters a protagonist who has already begun to “question the dystopian society” (5). These South Asian speculative dystopias envision societies where women’s lives are strictly controlled by biopolitical state power and perpetual custody within the patriarchal structure. Within these oppressive frameworks, women develop fragile strategies of endurance that constitute resistance. This chapter investigates how, under regimes that treat female bodies as state property or expendable resources, resistance emerges through the formation of illicit sanctuaries, emotional economies, and covert acts of care.

Building on the previous chapter’s analysis of utopian imaginaries such as Begum Rokeya’s *Ladyland* and *Tarini Bhavan*, the discussion now shifts to dystopian realities where open emancipation is unattainable and survival itself becomes a political act. These “historically specific texts negotiate the necessary pessimism of the generic dystopia with a militant or utopian stance” (7). By resisting the “anti-utopian temptation that lingers in every dystopian account,” Shah and Padmanabhan align their work with the “critical dystopia,” a form that “normally includes at least one eutopian enclave or holds out hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with a eutopia” (Sargent qtd. in 7). Shah and Padmanabhan depict patriarchal systems that weaponise intimacy and surveillance, compelling women into

what Deniz Kandiyoti describes as “patriarchal bargains,” or strategic accommodations that “maximise security and optimise life options” within oppressive structures (274). Even as their protagonists outwardly conform, they transform traditional feminine roles of nurturing and obedience into instruments of subversive agency.

In both novels, authoritarian regimes enforce biopolitical control through laws that regulate women’s reproductive cycles, sexual behaviour, and daily movements, all justified by rhetoric about safeguarding the nation’s future. This masculinist statecraft, which is dedicated to maintaining male dominance, functions through gendered surveillance and coercion: from the omnipresent agency patrols and data networks in Shah’s Green City to the “watchers in the sky” and regimented drone society in Padmanabhan’s narrative (Padmanabhan 68). Mahmood’s concept of “docile agency” (the idea that compliance with norms can mask subtle forms of resistance) illuminates the protagonists’ survival strategies (202). The women in these texts often appear compliant or concealed, such as the courtesan-like companion in *Before She Sleeps* or the obedient ward in *Escape*, yet their very existence outside patriarchal design constitutes an act of defiance. Furthermore, Mohanty’s caution against homogenising Third World women as voiceless victims underscores the importance of situating these dystopias within their specific South Asian contexts. Rather than presenting generic female victims, Shah and Padmanabhan create nuanced characters who navigate power within local patriarchal systems (post-war authoritarianism in *Before She Sleeps* and genocidal patriarchy in *Escape*). Their resistance, though limited to survival, actively contests the “monolithic victim” stereotype and portrays women as agents making calculated choices under severe constraints.

The following sections provide close readings of each novel to trace the narrative construction of feminist resistance as survival. In *Before She Sleeps*, an underground sisterhood known as *Panah* creates a liminal market of intimacy, offering not sex but the comforting illusion of love to powerful men, thereby establishing an economy of care and companionship. The analysis explores Green City’s draconian reproductive policies (the Wives system and Perpetuation Bureau) as exemplars of biopolitics, and demonstrates how the women of *Panah* subvert these policies by repurposing

their assigned roles (mother, wife, lover) as camouflage for rebellion. In *Escape*, the narrative shifts to a world where women have been eradicated; here, “custodial patriarchy” is embodied by three men secretly raising the last girl, Meiji. This section examines how Padmanabhan’s novel critiques patriarchal control through Meiji’s cloistered upbringing, from surveillance drones to the manipulation of her body and knowledge, and how her survival becomes a silent protest against a regime that denies her existence. Throughout the chapter, it integrates selective theoretical commentary (Kandiyoti’s concept of bargaining with patriarchy, Mahmood’s idea of agency, and Mohanty’s analysis of postcolonial, non-universal feminism), which deepens the analysis, while foregrounding the novels’ voices and the present writer’s critical perspective. The objective is not to let theory overshadow the originality of these texts, but to use it as a lens that clarifies resistance-through-survival in contexts distinct from Western archetypes. By the chapter’s conclusion, a comparative synthesis will connect *Before She Sleeps* and *Escape*, considering how their depictions of constrained agency and temporary sanctuary resonate with earlier feminist imaginaries, such as Hossain’s utopian havens, and with contemporary South Asian gender debates. The central question guiding this conclusion is whether survival, in the absence of structural autonomy, constitutes a meaningful form of feminist agency or merely delays collapse under patriarchy. As these novels suggest, the answer lies in the fragile hope that even in dystopia, survival can plant the seeds for new feminist futures.

3.1 Intimacy as Resistance in Before She Sleeps: Biopower and the Panah

Bina Shah’s *Before She Sleeps* (2018) unfolds in Green City, a post-apocalyptic society in Southwest Asia where women are vastly outnumbered by men following a cataclysmic “Gender Emergency” and subsequent war (35). In this world, the state’s highest priority is replenishing the female population and ensuring continuous reproduction. A quote from the Official Green City Handbook for Female Citizens captures the ethos of this regime in chilling terms:

We must focus completely on the task of survival, which means we must focus on the present and the future. Trying to salvage the past is an act of self-indulgence . . . Only when each individual girl exchanges selfishness for selflessness, and sacrifices self-involvement for the care of others, can Green City achieve its destiny as a place of . . . prosperity. You will be its foot soldiers, working hard to fulfill your role as the mothers of the new nation. (Shah 9)

In one stroke, this state memo enshrines reproductive duty as the core of female citizenship. It explicitly commands women to relinquish personal autonomy (“selfishness”) and even personal history (keeping diaries is banned) in favour of their biological function: bearing and raising children for the nation. Women are reduced to “foot soldiers” in service of population growth, and motherhood is conflated with patriotic service (9). This is biopolitics in its raw form, the administration of life turned into a civic religion. The state’s power operates not by threatening death, but by enforcing life: mandating that women live only to conceive and nurture future citizens. Green City’s policies embody this principle, purporting to ensure and multiply life at all costs. The great irony, of course, is that this obsessive focus on survival (of the population) annihilates any meaningful life for the individual women, a paradox captured in the Handbook’s disavowal of memory and personal desire through even the seemingly most minuscule of means, keeping a personal journal or diary (9).

The different narrative tools within the novel strengthens its dystopian nature. Through the structural tension between the clinical authoritarianism of the state and the illicit personal archives of the resistance, Shah utilises genre blurring. This tool is anchored by the presence of two conflicting textual forms: the Official Green City Handbook for Female Citizens and the Voice Notes of Ilona Serfati. As Baccolini and Moylan argue, critical dystopias often resist “genre purity [in favour of an] impure or hybrid text” that makes the work “formally and politically oppositional” (7-8). In Shah’s novel, the Handbook represents the hegemonic narrative, a tool of discursive power designed to “erase historical memory” and interpellate women as

“foot soldiers” and “mothers of the new nation” (Shah 9; Moylan qtd. in Baccolini and Moylan 118). The Handbook explicitly forbids the act of personal recording, stating that “no citizen is permitted to write or maintain a personal journal or diary” because “salvaging the past is an act of self-indulgence” (Shah 9). By mandating that citizens focus “completely on the task of survival,” the state attempts to eliminate the “mind’s life” (that is memory), ensuring that the “Gender Emergency” remains the only legitimate reality (9, 126).

However, this hegemonic enclosure is systematically breached by the Voice Notes of Ilona Serfati, which function as a forbidden counter-narrative. These accounts (despite appearing sparsely at only four intervals throughout the novel) provide a “partial and situated knowledge” that contradicts the state’s sanitised history (Baccolini and Moylan 8). While the Handbook promises that “pain will not have been in vain” and frames reproductive coercion as a dream, Ilona’s voice notes reveal the visceral reality of a police state born from “chaos and uncertainty” (Shah 97, 40). Her recordings provide the “recovery of history” that is essential for resistance, documenting the “black carbon rain” and the “Final War” that the regime has sought to obscure (39, 129). This “intensification of the practice of genre blurring” allows the novel to move beyond the “fixity and singularity” of official propaganda, instead presenting a multiplicity of voices that record “choice, autonomy, and freedom” (Baccolini and Moylan 7, 40).

The ultimate irony of this genre blurring lies in the revelation that Ilona Serfati is the “original author of the Handbook for Female Citizens” (Shah 132). This creates a “permeable border” between the architect of the state’s control and the founder of its most significant sanctuary, *Panah* (Baccolini and Moylan 7). Ilona used her status as a scientist and her position in the government to misappropriate state resources, finding the ideal location for the resistance within a bunker originally meant for geoscientific research (Shah 132). By writing the rules of the state while simultaneously recording her own history and stories in the voice notes, Ilona embodies the “impure” nature of the critical dystopian subject. She represents a form of agency that “negotiates the necessary pessimism” of the regime by creating a “utopian enclave” deep underground (Baccolini and Moylan 7). Through this hy-

bridisation of bureaucratic mandates and secret audio-diaries, Shah demonstrates that the most effective resistance often involves the “reappropriation of language” by the very individuals tasked with enforcing the hegemonic order (6).

Alongside language and censorship, the mechanics of Green City’s patriarchal control are elaborated through the novel’s details of the Wives system and reproductive mandates.³ Because women are scarce, the government decrees polyandrous marriages: each woman is expected to marry multiple men (often three, four, or five husbands) and bear children at an accelerated rate. Sabine, the narrator, recalls that before she escaped, her fate was to be “fast-tracked” into the Perpetuation Scheme as a teen bride for a group of husbands (Shah 29). The regime even maintains Girls’ *Markaz*, or indoctrination centres “outside Green City: a weird mix of finishing school, indoctrination camp, and fairy castle... painted pink” where girls are trained to be obedient wives and prolific mothers (30). The veneer of girlish fantasy (“painted pink”) cannot hide the reality, which should be perceived as a mockery of girlhood; this is reproductive conscription. Women’s higher education is foregone; instead of university, “girls go to the *Markaz* to learn how to become good Wives... given classes in Household Technology, Health, and Reproductive Sciences”, while the prospect of their “impending first marriages” is dangled as a distraction (31). Shah pointedly notes that some girls enthusiastically embrace this process, seeing marriage as an elevation in status, whereas “Others, like me, pretend enthusiasm while secretly feeling nothing but a sense of impending doom.” (31). This contrast underscores that not all women internalise the state’s maternal propaganda; a few, like Sabine, harbour silent terror and dissent even as they perform docility.

Green City’s treatment of Wives illustrates what Kandiyoti would call the “rules of the game” in a classic patriarchal bargain (274). Women who comply, by marrying multiple men and bearing many children, are rewarded materially and socially, up to a point. Sabine observes that “No matter whether a woman was rich or poor, when she became a Wife, her status rose, and the Green City government doubled the

³These elements do resemble the Handmaids in Atwood’s novel and it should be noted that Shah does take inspiration from her work (see: Shah, par 5).

family allowance each time she gave birth. Her womb was the ticket from poverty straight into the comfort of the middle class for her as well as all her Husbands.” (28). In other words, the state literally incentivises women’s reproductive labour with financial rewards and elevated standing; a poor girl can climb into relative prosperity by maximising her fertility. This echoes historical patriarchal bargains where women secure protection and economic security by conforming to gendered expectations (marriage, motherhood). The womb becomes currency, “a ticket from poverty”, linking female fertility to family income (28). Yet, Shah makes it abundantly clear that this bargain is soul-crushing for the women themselves. The same passage continues: “And yet, those Wives I saw were bowed down, shrunken and meek, unmoved by the generosity of their Husbands and the state” (28). Despite fine clothes and attentive husbands laden with gifts, these wives appear physically and spiritually depleted. Their posture, “bowed down, shrunken,” and the steely, hollow look Sabine catches in their eyes, suggest lives of exhaustion and lost autonomy. They carry the weight of continuous pregnancies and the knowledge that their value is conditional on unending compliance. One pregnant wife’s silent glance at free young Sabine all but says, “Treasure these days, girl, they don’t last” (29).

Indeed, the novel emphasises the extreme toll of enforced fertility on women’s bodies. Due to state-mandated fertility drugs, women commonly give birth to “triplets and quadruplets”, and such “high-risk pregnancies wore them out quickly” (28). Wives are discouraged from even going outdoors or exerting themselves; they effectively live in gilded cages, with domestic servants doing all chores so the wives can conserve energy for childbearing (28). Physical freedom, mobility, work, and leisure are all sacrificed on the altar of reproduction. In Shah’s dystopia, patriarchal authority hides behind a facade of paternalistic care, husbands pampering wives, the government lavishing allowances, but this “care” is entirely instrumental. It is what one character bitterly calls “the largesse of its Leaders” (27): a top-down benevolence that rewards only those women who submit to being perpetual wombs. The state’s Perpetuation Bureau even micro-manages intimacy in marriage. In an older character’s Voice Notes, we learn of “new rules the Bureau just released... Regulating the minutes a Wife spends with her Husband: How will they measure

that? Will they have a man from the Agency in the bedroom, stopwatch in hand?” (38). The dark satire in that remark points to total surveillance over private life. Nothing, not even the marital bed, is beyond the bureaucracy’s reach in Green City’s quest to optimise reproduction.

Against this backdrop of biopolitical terror, *Before She Sleeps* introduces an unexpected form of resistance: a secret collective of women who refuse the role of broodmare and instead offer men something else entirely. This group, called the *Panah* (Urdu for “sanctuary” or “asylum”), lives literally underground and off-grid. By day, the *Panah* women hide in a bunker beneath the city, and by night, they emerge to service a clandestine clientele of elite men. But crucially, they do not sell sex; they sell emotional intimacy. As Sabine describes it, under Lin’s tutelage, the *Panah* devised “the reason we were able to play the game we did, and survive. Unlike Wives, whose presence in their lives is little more than a bureaucratic arrangement, women of the *Panah* remind the men of the mothers... sisters... girlfriends... Men’s physical appetites are huge, but their emotional appetites are without end. No regime can change that.” (34-5). This passage unveils the “market of care” that *Panah* exploits. In a society where female companionship has been obliterated by authoritarian social engineering, powerful men secretly crave the tenderness and “human warmth” that no state-sanctioned Wife (drugged, exhausted, fearful) or soulless prostitute-bot can provide (35-6). The *Panah* women thus perform a radical kind of patriarchal bargain: they trade on men’s emotional dependence even as they withhold sex and fertility. “So instead of selling our bodies, we spend the night with certain men... We give them an experience they themselves destroyed long ago: we let them soothe themselves to sleep in our presence.” (35). In other words, they commodify the presence and comfort of a woman, offering an echo of the pre-dystopian normalcy that the men in power themselves eradicated.

This intimacy economy is both subversive and precarious. On one hand, it undercuts the official ideology that women are mere reproductive vessels by demonstrating a domain of male need that the state cannot abolish: the need for affection, care, and a sense of “possessing one woman, just for a short while” (35). As Lin, the head of *Panah*, tells Sabine, “No matter what they say, or how strongly they claim

to control us... they still need us. Not our bodies, or our sex, but our love and care, our human warmth, our physical presence" (36). In this lies a kernel of feminine power, albeit one forged from patriarchal nostalgia. The *Panah*'s existence is a quiet rebuttal to Green City's boastful slogans of self-sufficiency; it reveals that the regime's most privileged men secretly 'rebel against' the system too, by seeking out comfort they've deemed illicit. As Lin astutely notes, "When they let us in their lives just once, they realise how they've been lied to as well... Calling us to them is their rebellion. Going to them is ours" (36). Here we see a nuanced dynamic: the Clients (government officials, military officers, etc.) [hypocritically] get a taste of genuine female company and, in doing so, they "rebel" against the sterile, mechanical order they enforce publicly. Meanwhile, for the *Panah* women, offering this illicit companionship is a form of rebellion; it allows them to survive outside the Wife system and to retain control (however limited) over their bodies and time. This arrangement exemplifies Kandiyoti's argument that women "strategise within a set of concrete constraints", using whatever leverage they can find in a given patriarchal context (275). The *Panah* has identified an emotional lever and built a survival strategy around it.

On the other hand, *Panah*'s bargain is fraught with danger and no small amount of tragedy. The novel does not romanticise the women's role as secret comfort-givers; it depicts it as gruelling and dehumanising work, albeit preferable to enforced breeding. Sabine suffers from chronic insomnia, anxiety, and the constant terror of being caught. In her very first assignment, she is so frightened of rape or betrayal that she spends the night with "one foot on the floor, in case I needed to flee", and never closes her eyes (36). Even after a thousand nights, she describes her life as full of "fault lines" and herself as "seized by sorrow at the position we're all in, how fragile our inner safeguards [are]" (37).

The language of fragility recurs: the *Panah* offers a tenuous, easily shattered halfway freedom. Sabine reflects that the "rules of the *Panah* provide a halfway house between the strictures of Green City and the complete freedom that exists in places I can't even imagine." (22). The *Panah*'s rules, such as no sex, leaving before dawn, anonymity with clients, are their thin line of defence, the only reason

“we survive” at all (36). Breaking them could mean death. As one member bluntly states, “Because if the authorities knew about me, or the *Panah*, we would die” (19). The spectre of the Agency’s violence looms constantly: patrols roam the streets, high-tech surveillance tracks DNA and movement, and illegals like Sabine are hunted like criminals (13). Shah heightens this sense of surveillance with details such as Sabine coating herself in gold-silicon powder to avoid leaving a detectable DNA trace for security scanners (12). Every rendezvous is a race against the sunrise and the patrol schedules (12). In short, the *Panah* lives on borrowed time and stolen privacy.

Moreover, the emotional toll on the women is severe. To provide comfort to men who are often complicit in their oppression requires extraordinary emotional labour and self-effacement. Sabine has perfected a fake, reassuring smile that “doesn’t come naturally” (11), and she must quell her own revulsion or fear to placate clients like Joseph, who test the limits (asking her to stay longer, implicitly threatening to break the rules) (10-12). The *Panah*’s motto might as well be “companionship, not sex” (35), but even companionship under coercion can feel like “being a human sacrifice” (36). Here Shah’s work dovetails with Saba Mahmood’s insight about agency under domination: these women’s agency doesn’t look like overt rebellion; it looks like patience, prudence, and careful rule-following, which Mahmood would recognise as a kind of docility that is also a wilful choice. Sabine’s personal decision to run away to the *Panah* in the first place exemplified this; outwardly, she “kept [her] silence” and pretended enthusiasm about becoming a Wife, biding her time until she could “rescue [herself]” by escaping (31). That act of self-preservation, quiet and internal, is as heroic as any open revolt. The novel consistently validates such subdued forms of resistance. When Sabine’s father effectively sells her into the marriage scheme, she refrains from open protest, “something told me to go deep inside myself, to squeeze out every last bit of patience and cleverness... and to rescue myself if my father was not going to help me” (30). The emphasis on patience and cleverness speaks to a specifically female mode of resistance in patriarchal societies, one that aligns with Kandiyoti’s observations about women’s subtle manipulations of oppressive structures. Shah suggests that sometimes survival is resistance enough, and that

the mere continued existence of the *Panah*'s women, living, remembering the past, asserting ownership of their nights, is an act of rebellion against a system that wants to turn them into faceless wombs or kill them.

The *Panah* could (rightfully) be critiqued as a mere fawn response, but that is too crass and too easy. It is much more difficult to dare to see this as a structure that refuses to relent, that will give an inch to prevent the consumption of its entirety. The entire premise of companionship, of the role of women as the comforters, of men and their needs, need for a mother, a nurse, a wife, a friend, for it all to fall onto the woman, is a loathsome concept, but one that is necessary to face. The Green City is a mirror of the author's society, of our reality. The society prioritises the needs of the man, commodifies and socialises the woman to meet those needs, the female body becomes a tool for pleasure and procreation, she is bred for comfort, her companionship is what she is farmed for, until nothing is left in her. She is hollowed out. *Panah* prevents her from being completely consumed, and, in a twisted yet necessary way, it offers a service that allows the men to walk a tightrope of power. The misogyny has little room then, the values of the green city suddenly become secondary. This is agency and autonomy for these women; it may seem tainted, but that is the consequence of having to claw out of such a society.

Through *Before She Sleeps*, Shah thus constructs a layered critique of what we might call pseudo-feminist state rhetoric and the reality of women's resistance. Green City's regime justifies its biopolitical tyranny with claims of protecting women and the greater good, echoing the Handbook's sanctimonious declaration that girls are the "mothers of the new nation" (9). This echoes real-world regimes that couch anti-woman policies in terms of honouring women's special role, a facade of "feminist" concern that Mohanty, amongst others, has critiqued as masking control with chivalric language. In Shah's narrative, this sham is exposed by the necessity of *Panah*: if the system were truly utopian for women, an underground like *Panah* wouldn't flourish. The *Panah*'s very presence reveals that the so-called care offered by the state (financial incentives, protection) is hollow; true care and solace have been driven underground and can only be safely witnessed inside the *Panah*. It is poignant that the *Panah* women effectively provide motherly or wifely comfort,

telling stories, stroking hair, offering a gentle presence to men, who otherwise know only the self-imposed utilitarian versions of those roles. By doing so on their own terms, these women turn the tables on custodial patriarchy. They expose a vulnerability in patriarchal power: even the oppressors cannot fully live within the strictures they created. In this sense, *Panah*'s survival business is quietly revolutionary. It creates a small space in which women are not breeders or subordinates, but providers of a service that grants them leverage. To use Adrienne Rich's terms, they "reclaim" the night, turning the time when they should be most vulnerable (after curfew, outside male protection) into the time they take control.

Still, the *Panah* is not a utopia; it is a desperate improvisation. The fragility of their autonomy is underscored late in the novel when external events instantaneously threaten their secrecy. Their sanctuary immediately unravels, and their clients become the cause of their implosion. The *Panah* has existed for decades, first founded by the aunt of Lin, Ilona Serfati and her best friend, Fairuza Dastani. They have scrupulously vetted their clientele to ensure they could be relied upon; only "men [that] placed highly enough to protect us and keep our activities hidden from the Agency or the Bureau . . . Only the ones who expressed doubts in the new order, who wrote of missing the old days, suited our needs and passed our test" (67-68). When Ilona passed away, the responsibility for ensuring safety fell to Lin. Lin spent the next several decades strengthening *Panah*. She paid off agents, kept tabs on the financial records and all that happened in the lives of the clients, invested large capital to ensure their measures were up to par against the technology of the Green City: silica gold dust to ward off scanners, smart cars equipped with privacy shields and sensors to detect and escape Agency guards, "uncontrollable, unsurveilable Deep Web" used to connect with women who want to escape the city (12-13, 132, 170). Most of the clientele were older men who had enough power to rule the city but could not find wives because their chances of producing healthy offspring were reduced, which also ensured their loyalty to and need for *Panah* (62). Despite every precaution, what Lin couldn't account for was one of the client's manic fixation with Sabine, whose fate could not have been prevented. Her client, Joseph, convinced her to drink, and the alcohol reacted with the sleeping medication Lin

had been mixing with Sabine's tea to aid her insomnia, unknowingly inducing a coma-like state, in which Joseph rapes her. Unbeknownst to Sabine, she becomes pregnant, and after one of her nights with a client, she passes out before she reaches the car back to *Panah*. Considered missing, Lin uses her most powerful client and secret beau, Reuben Faro, to try to track her down, but what follows is a domino effect that ends with Lin self-immolating as she sacrifices herself (and *Panah*) to buy time for Sabine to escape. The system that took decades to build collapses in a matter of days. The only solace after the loss is that Sabina survives and eventually crosses the border into a neighbouring state that promises a different world (248).

Yes, *Panah* was never meant to be a permanent solution; it was always to be a tourniquet until a substantial revolt could take place. Even Lin, in the end, calls it a "temporary resting place" (218). Its existence hinges on the unmet need of powerful men, but the women's endurance that sustains it is nurtured only by the sisterhood's sanctuary. *Panah*, though underground, was able to harness sunlight through panels above-ground, there was a garden, a kitchen, rooms decorated with whatever the girls brought with them; the women cooked, played, fought, laughed, all of this together and only with each other; the possibility of mundane days, those full of "boredom" and "quibbles," granted only through the physical and emotional haven they've constructed with each other. This sisterhood fuels their resistance and their desire to live, despite the uncertainty of what lies ahead. This bonding is perhaps the novel's most feminist element: the idea that even in a dystopia that atomises and polices women, a temporary community of women can provide the strength to resist. In that regard, *Panah* bears a spiritual resemblance to Begum Rokeya's *Tarini Bhavan* in *Padmarag*, except, of course, Shah's version is much darker and more precarious. *Panah* is *Tarini Bhavan* under dystopian duress: a sanctuary not for empowerment or education, but for survival at the most basic level.

3.2 Custodial Patriarchy in *Escape*: The Last Girl and Her Guardians

Before She Sleeps imagines an authoritarian, draconian society trying to maximise women's reproductive presence. Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* (2008) depicts an even more distressing alternate reality: a society that has methodically eradicated women altogether. Set in an unnamed future nation strongly implied to be South Asia and ruled by an unknown number of cloned male dictators known as the Generals, *Escape* posits a literal gender apartheid. Women have been hunted to extinction, and any girl born is immediately killed. In this nightmare scenario, patriarchal control has reached its absolute endgame, a world of men, where even the idea of womanhood is a state-controlled secret. Yet, improbably, one female child has survived. This girl, Meiji, has been raised in hiding by three male relatives. The novel centres on Meiji's sheltered life and the plan to smuggle her to safety. Through this narrative, Padmanabhan delves into custodial patriarchy, a system where, under the guise of protection, every facet of the girl's existence is controlled. Unlike Green City's overt biopolitics, the patriarchy in *Escape* operates through total sequestration: the female body is so threatening that it must be either destroyed or completely secluded and controlled. Meiji's very survival thus hinges on her guardians' ability to maintain a facade and on her own enforced ignorance. The text invites us to question whether her uncles' caregiving is benevolent or simply another face of patriarchy, a pseudo-feminist gesture of protection that nonetheless denies Meiji freedom and knowledge.

From the first chapters, Padmanabhan establishes the climate of terror that makes Meiji's situation necessary. In the novel's opening scene, a would-be suitor arrives at Meiji's household, somehow having heard rumours of a hidden girl. This young man is swiftly executed by the uncles' security drones, his neck broken without ceremony (Padmanabhan 13). The brutality of this response indicates how high the stakes are: even a hint of Meiji's existence must be silenced with lethal force. The dead man's body is disposed of, and Meiji, swathed in concealing veils, is chided and sent away by her Middle Uncle for witnessing the violence (13). The Generals' regime has bred a culture of fear where men themselves enforce the no-women rule

through vigilantism and technology. The presence of “escort-drones” (deaf-mute human weapons) in this scene hints at how thoroughly militarised and dehumanised society is (13). There is no trial or mercy; the law is clear: a girl must not exist, and anyone attempting to engage with one must die.

Meiji’s life thus far has unfolded entirely underground and indoors, not unlike Sabine’s *Panah* but with even less agency. At sixteen years old, Meiji has “rarely been out of doors” (66). She lives in a camouflaged multi-level bunker that, from the outside, appears to be just an old warehouse. Her world until adolescence consists of three windowless levels she names Morning, Afternoon, and Night, descending into the earth (18). This claustrophobic upbringing is meant to keep her safe, but it also means Meiji’s entire reality is constructed by her uncles. She has never seen the sky or walked freely in an open space. When she is finally taken outside pre-dawn as part of her uncle’s emergency plan, her reaction is profound disorientation: “Meiji could not remember ever having seen an open field . . . the grassy plain stretching away to infinity looked like a mirage . . . Except for the sky. It was hard to rationalise the upturned indigo bowl of the sky” (66). This beautiful description underscores the tragedy of her childhood, that the natural world looks unreal to her. The stars and horizon overwhelm her precisely because she’s been denied them. Immediately, she feels unsafe and pleads to go back inside, trying to suppress her fear (67). In Meiji’s lived experience, indoors equals safety, outdoors equals dread, a reversal of the typical coming-of-age, speaking volumes about how her guardians have conditioned her.

Padmanabhan’s portrayal of Meiji’s psychological state strongly evokes the pathos of a life lived in captivity. Meiji is not physically abused; in fact, her uncles are indulgent in many ways. She has games, books of all sort, and it is evident they care for her. Yet the effect of their “care” has been to render her naive and utterly dependent. A particularly striking element is that Meiji has been raised alongside drones—a servant class of mute, neutered humans—and led to believe she is like them. The novel reveals that the uncles deliberately allowed her to see only drones during her childhood, possibly to normalise her situation. Youngest Uncle remarks that Meiji “sees the drones and knows that they do not grow taller or broader. . . . She

thinks she is similar to them. Or at least, that is the impression she gives me” (27) . This is a harrowing detail: Meiji, the only girl, has noticed she isn’t growing or maturing like her three adult uncles and assumes she must belong to the non-maturing drone caste. Indeed, the uncles have kept her on hormone suppressants to arrest puberty, maintaining her androgynous, childlike physique (“her unnatural innocence”) as long as possible to avoid detection (57, 152). Thus, Meiji’s very sense of self has been manipulated. She plays intricate games with the house drones, perhaps identifying more with them than with the abstract idea of “people” (18).

The novel uses Meiji’s ignorance as both a source of tension and a lens to critique patriarchal secrecy. For instance, at one point, Meiji stumbles upon a contraband pornographic magazine that one of the uncles had hidden. She is utterly puzzled by the images of men and women together and has no context for sexual relations. The scene is grotesquely absurd: “What does a child who does not know the word ‘women’ make of pictures... of men and women (and one Great Dane) pumping away?” (259). It underscores how the knowledge of sex and gender has been completely withheld from her. Even the word “woman” is taboo: Meiji cannot say it aloud without fear. When her uncles finally try to explain the truth, that she is a girl and girls are forbidden, Meiji initially can barely speak the word “wee-min” and equates women with “monsters” due to propaganda she’s half-heard (278). In one poignant exchange, Youngest gently urges her, “You can say the word... Say women.” Meiji looks down and murmurs, “Where other wee-min live... You said we could go to such places, that it was possible” (363). This moment signals the spark of hope and identity: Meiji tentatively aligns herself with others like her, the very category she was taught did not exist. It’s a subtle turning point; after a lifetime of believing she is alone in her kind, she now dares to imagine a community of women and a refuge where she would “not be a monster at all.” (279). Here, Padmanabhan invokes a theme of feminist solidarity in absence: Meiji’s longing for a mythical elsewhere echoes the reader’s own knowledge of feminist utopias. It also alludes to real-world underground networks of abused women or persecuted minorities that carry the promise of safety beyond a border.

The dynamic between Meiji and her uncles is the crux of *Escape*’s interrogation

of patriarchy. The three men, referred to mainly as Eldest, Middle, and Youngest, have distinct approaches to their roles as Meiji's guardians. They have kept her alive at great personal risk, so on one level, they are saviours who defied the misogynist state. Yet Padmanabhan refuses to portray them as unambiguous heroes. They are products of the same patriarchal world, and their treatment of Meiji, while loving, is deeply controlling and secretive. Middle Uncle, for example, is pragmatic and coldly logical. He views Meiji almost as a problem to be managed. In a tense family conference, after the suitor incident, Middle berates Youngest for not adequately preparing to answer Meiji's questions once she matures: "How will you prepare her for what she needs to know, in the extremely compressed time you'll have? ... You are the one charged with the task of raising a girl who will pass through four years of adolescence in less than three months" (57). This astonishing timeline reveals that they plan to induce or allow Meiji to undergo puberty now that escape is imminent, effectively forcing her to grow up almost overnight. Middle's language, "task of raising a girl", "prepare her", "control her understanding" (57), is clinical and authoritarian. He even recommends that Youngest "anticipate her every question" and "tailor your responses in order to control her understanding" (57). In other words, Middle advocates total intellectual control, effectively brainwashing Meiji with a narrative that will keep her compliant and calm. When Youngest accuses him of wanting to "manipulate her" and protests "Haven't we done enough of that already?", Middle retorts that Youngest is being "emotional. Irrational ... You won't have that luxury once you're on the road" (57). Middle's perspective is stark: the girl's own thoughts and feelings are secondary to the goal of survival; her mind must be managed like any other logistical concern.

Youngest Uncle, by contrast, represents a residual humaneness and even a kind of repressed feminism within this all-male world. He is the one who is most emotionally attached to Meiji and acts as almost a father figure. He still cherishes the memory of the time before the world was turned inside out and reminisces about their family's women: "I remember our... sisters ... their scent, their plaited hair ... I have not forgotten one curl, one fingernail, one heartbeat of what they meant to me ... when they, along with all the rest of their kind, were snatched away..." (58). His voice

“shakes” as he vows that when the moment comes, he “will know intuitively how to lead our little girl into that lost universe of womanhood... Whatever I do, it will be... with love” (58). This heartfelt declaration is extraordinary given the context: to speak of “gentleness and beauty” and “lost ... womanhood” in a society that demonises women is practically treasonous. His reliance on memory functions as a strategic act of resistance within the critical dystopian framework. As Baccolini argues, the “recovery of history ... and individual and collective memory become instrumental tools of resistance [particularly as they challenge the] authoritarian, hegemonic discourse” that seeks to erase the past (Baccolini and Moylan 129-130). By refusing to forget his sisters, Youngest Uncle combats the “historical amnesia” imposed by the Generals’ regime, which relies on the erasure of memory to ensure that the “master narratives” of the present remain unchallenged (Moylan qtd. in 118). His private recollections are not merely the “regressive nostalgia” often found in classical dystopias, but a “utopian or progressive” use of memory that brings the “past into a living relationship with [the] present” (127, 117, 125). Youngest’s approach to Meiji’s impending maturation is to trust his “heart and tears” over “cold reason” (58). His stories serve as the primary means for the “survival of the culture and its people” in a world that has otherwise “irretrievably” silenced the history of the marginalised and the dispossessed (126, 119). His profound “dissatisfaction and longing” for what was lost epitomises the “utopian pessimism”, which portrays the surrounding evil not to surrender to it, but to “leave history open for discussion” and future emancipatory possibilities (Baggesen qtd. in 41, 60).

However, Padmanabhan complicates Youngest’s position even further. Despite his good intentions, he too has lied to and coddled Meiji for years. At one point, wracked with guilt, Youngest confesses to Meiji something to the effect of, “You are not what you are supposed to be ... your presence here, your existence, is a danger to you and to us” (81-82). He asks her how she would feel if she never grew any taller, hinting that they deliberately stunted her growth (82). Meiji realises her uncles have been drugging her to keep her small and genderless. The revelation is shattering for her, akin to “that moment in a game of Reversi... when you can see the board is about to change completely” (83). All her black tiles will flip to

white, an apt metaphor for paradigmatic change. After this family confrontation, Eldest Uncle formally announces that Meiji must leave for her own safety; they can no longer “afford any further” delay (85). Meiji’s fate is thus sealed by a patriarchal decision, albeit one made in her interest. She is not consulted; she is informed. This underscores how, even in trying to save her, the uncles deny Meiji agency. They plan her escape and decide that Youngest will accompany her and coach her on survival tactics.

In an unsettling training scene, Middle Uncle forces Meiji to practice urinating standing up with a prosthetic funnel so she can masquerade as a boy on the road (71). The humiliation of this drill, Meiji wetting herself, confused and mortified, drives home the point that her body is not her own. Even the most basic bodily functions are subject to modification to survive in a male world. Meiji submits, telling herself there “must be a very sound reason . . . nothing that happened to her was without purpose” (71). This line, echoing her years of conditioning, shows how deeply she has internalised her uncles’ narrative: everything they do, even hurting or deceiving her, is for her good. This is docile obedience in the extreme, a testament to both her uncles’ careful tutelage and her own survival instincts. Meiji has learned that questioning them is futile or dangerous; her best hope is to trust that their plans will keep her alive.

Padmanabhan’s critique of patriarchy in *Escape* thus operates on two levels. First, at the societal level, the novel depicts the ultimate horror of patriarchy: gynocide, or gender-cide. The historical backstory, which emerges through dialogue and a later dramatic monologue, reveals that the Generals used a combination of technology and terror to wipe out women. There were “bombs” and a “cement-rot bacterium”, and likely a gender-targeted virus as the text mentions “the sickness that signalled the end of women” (229, 286). The Generals cast themselves as saviours from chaos, using propaganda to justify extreme measures. In one scene, the General, a clone of the original pair, boasts at a dinner party about their achievements: “The past sculpts the future . . . We are the result of a particular historical process . . . free to develop within our own genius, glorious in our isolation . . . We continue to meet resistance in hidden corners of the land, and we continue to crush it.” (59).

He explicitly references the “outer world” that condemns them but “cannot touch us”, revelling in the country’s isolation (59). This echoes real regimes that reject international norms under the guise of sovereignty.

The General’s tirade climaxes with a recounting of how he personally found and eliminated a hidden girl: an “ugly little wretch ... eight years of age ... her clan protected her as if she contained the combined wealth of all the worlds within her stinking crack” (60). The crude, violent language, referring to the child’s genitals with such contempt, lays bare the misogyny fuelling his actions. He even describes the girl’s grandfather grovelling and offering to have the child “neutered ... if only she was allowed to live!” (60). The grandfather’s plea is a grotesque mirror of Meiji’s uncles’ strategy; both are ready, or forced rather, to “un-woman” a girl chemically or surgically in order to keep her alive. The General, however, takes pride in refusing this mercy. He calls the old man a “shameless ... pimp”, accusing him of intending to breed the girl “litter after litter” had she grown (60). In the General’s twisted view, he is kinder for killing the girl swiftly than the family would be by using her as a reproductive vessel. This is patriarchy warping itself into an ouroboros: the regime justifies mass femicide by ostensibly preventing the exploitation of women as breeders. It’s a stark example of pseudo-feminist logic; the General frames his butchery as a form of protecting women from patriarchal abuse by eliminating them entirely. Padmanabhan invites us to reflect on this bitter logic and recognise it as the ultimate perversion of “protection”. It is no accident that the General’s tale positions the patriarchal clan and himself as two sides of the same coin; in both cases, the girl’s life and body have no intrinsic value, only instrumental use in either reproduction or political dominance.

The second level of critique is the intimate, familial one, focused on Meiji’s guardians. Through them, *Escape* asks whether a benevolent patriarchy is possible or whether even the kindest patriarchal rule inevitably inflicts harm. The uncles truly love Meiji, but they also infantilise and deceive her; they risk their lives for her, but also make unilateral choices about her life. This ambivalence is perhaps best encapsulated by the character of Eldest Uncle. He is the most distant and traditional. He educates Meiji in philosophy and music, and when it’s time to send

her away, he carries out the duty with stoic resolve. In a final lesson, Eldest tells her that they have concluded she must leave and that they cannot delay further. There are no tears, no effusive goodbyes; their farewell is marked by a scripted formality. Meiji touches the feet of her older uncles in respect, they give blessings, and then she departs quietly. This lack of ceremony is noted: “There were no ceremonies to mark the departure and no display of sentiment.” (91). The only small crack in Eldest’s armour is when he admits, haltingly, that they’ve talked a great deal and this is their only option (91). Otherwise, he embodies the ideal of the just patriarch who does what is necessary, no matter how heartbreaking. It is an echo of the broader patriarchal narrative: father knows best. Padmanabhan makes us empathetic to the uncles by revealing their genuine intentions and care for Meiji; yet, the writer also remains critical of the power imbalance.

This care, no matter how genuine, also invokes nausea when Youngest Uncle’s incestuous attraction to Meiji is hinted at (20, 42). There are a lot of grotesque sexual instances in the novel, the homoerotic exchange between Youngest and a driver, in order to barter their stay, for instance. However, the most sinister is Youngest’s desire for Meiji, not only because it is incestuous and pedophilic, but because, as the novel reveals, he is her biological father. There is self-loathing, there is an understanding of how wrong it is, but it does not negate how perverse each relation becomes when it comes to the girl. There seems to be no tie to this girl, or mention of any other, where the man has not used, abused or controlled her in some form, any kind of relation, father, uncle, general or stranger.

Comparatively, *Escape*’s vision of feminist survival is even starker than *Before She Sleeps*. There is no collective of women here, no network of sympathetic dissenters within the society, but only rumours of “networks and associations” beyond the border (364). Meiji’s survival depends entirely on the individual conscience of a few men and her own cultivated obedience. Feminist resistance, in this scenario, takes the form of memory and empathy, preserved in the hearts of people like Meiji’s uncles who overlook their dual existence as both her protectors and perpetrators of misogyny. A minuscule yet worth-mentioning contribution of these men is the presence of women in cultural memory. Youngest’s recollection of his sisters and his

willingness to defy the Generals indicate a latent counter-patriarchal sentiment: the recognition that “there’s something terribly wrong with our world... there are no women or girls here anymore” (278). In a chilling flashback, we learn that early in the purge, many people were wilfully blind or complicit: “at each turn of events, there were those who turned a deaf ear... and blind eyes” (286). The implication is that patriarchy on this scale requires mass complicity, illustrating how “women” as a group are not simply victims but are constructed as such by very specific political processes. In *Escape*, that process culminated in genocide, but Padmanabhan carefully shows that it was not inevitable. It was orchestrated by identifiable actors such as the Generals and their followers, and could be resisted through acts of conscience carried out by people like Meiji’s uncles. This nuance aligns with the critique of seeing Third World women as passive; here, even an almost powerless girl like Meiji holds symbolic power as a living rebuke to the regime. Her existence, however constrained, is a beacon that draws out resistance: first in her uncles, later in others who help her. In a subtle way, Meiji exercises agency by simply being willing to live. After she learns the truth of her identity, she chooses to continue, to go on the risky journey rather than demand a quick death or refuse to leave her known world. That choice, made by a character who has never been allowed to choose anything, is monumental. It speaks to a theme of survival as resistance: staying alive in a world that wants you dead is itself a form of defiance.

3.3 Survival Agency vs. Structural Autonomy in South Asian Dystopias

Before She Sleeps and *Escape* offer two bleak portraits of patriarchal domination, yet within them glimmer forms of feminist agency that are rooted in survival, not autonomy. These novels compel us to reconsider what resistance looks like when outright revolution or systemic change is unthinkable. In both cases, the heroines do not, and realistically cannot, overthrow the regimes that oppress them. Instead, their victory, if it can be called that, lies in enduring, in carving out spaces of physical or emotional refuge, where their womanhood can persist on its own terms. Sabine survives by transforming intimacy into a weapon of subterfuge; Meiji survives by remaining

invisible until she can escape to a tentative haven. This emphasis on survival aligns with the lived strategies of many women in repressive contexts, who often accommodate and bargain with patriarchy in the short term while quietly undermining it in the long term. The *Panah*'s existence or Meiji's escape does not topple the patriarchal order of their worlds; Green City and the Generals remain in power as the stories end, but they do represent seeds of an alternate future. The *Panah* hints at a different social contract, one based on mutual need rather than coercion. Meiji's survival raises the hope that one day women might re-inhabit her land. In a sense, these narratives shift the feminist focus from achieving utopia to avoiding oblivion, reflecting the sobering reality of many postcolonial and postmodern struggles.

Comparatively, Shah and Padmanabhan both root their dystopias in specifically South Asian socio-political anxieties, creating a dialogue with earlier feminist literature rather than simply imitating Western dystopias like *The Handmaid's Tale*. Shah's Green City, for example, extrapolates from the traumas of war and authoritarianism in Pakistan's history. In fact, one can hear the echoes of both the Zia era's gender policing and the contemporary security state. Recall, for instance, Zia's "Chador aur char diwari" slogan which translated to women veiled and within the confines of home, an edict that sought to confine women within the domestic sphere (Chambers and Lowden 187). The Gender Emergency she imagines, a demographic crisis after a nuclear conflict, and the subsequent coercive pronatalist policies comment on real debates about the commodification of women's bodies and the institutionalised objectification of reproductive autonomy in South Asia (Kullu 567). There are shades of China's one-child policy and its gendered repercussions, but filtered through a Pakistani lens of post-war reconstruction and surveillance (569). Padmanabhan's scenario of female infanticide taken to genocidal extremes clearly dialogues with India's struggle with sex-selective abortion and violence against women. *Escape* magnifies the logic of patriarchy to a grotesque degree to make a point: if one treats daughters as a burden or threat, the logical endpoint is a world purged of daughters. Both novels thus transform local patriarchal practices into speculative nightmares, staying true to Mohanty's insistence on contextualising women's oppression rather than universalising it. Neither Sabine nor Meiji is a generic Everywoman; they are

shaped by the specific conditions of the societies in which they try to survive. Sabine resists the interplay of technological control and conservative norms in the Green City, and Meiji counters the feudal and militaristic forces dominating her world.

By tying the personal struggles of these characters to broader societal frameworks, the authors also invite commentary on feminist resistance across different regimes. In Chapter 2 of this thesis, Hossain Sakhawat Hossain's utopias offered structural autonomy: communities of women running the world outright or living independently of men. Those early 20th-century imaginaries were full of optimism that patriarchy could not only be resisted but reversed or escaped through visionary social reordering. Shah and Padmanabhan, writing nearly a century later, present a more pessimistic, or some might say, realistic view. In their late-20th/21st-century visions, patriarchy has become more insidious and technologically empowered, such that grand revolutions seem implausible. Instead, these authors posit resilience, the stubborn will of women to survive in the cracks of the system, as the primary mode of resistance. This shift from utopia to dystopia mirrors global trends in feminist speculative fiction, in which many contemporary writers interrogate the costs of resistance and the compromises it entails. South Asian feminist writing in particular, has grown more attuned to the layers of religious, state, and familial powers that constrain women. One might say that Sabine's and Meiji's stories reflect the concept of "patriarchal bargain" in its most extreme context: the former bargains by obeying certain gendered expectations (nurturance) to avoid others (reproduction), while the latter's guardians bargain with their conscience and the state's laws to keep her alive, albeit unfree.

The question might linger: do these bargains challenge the patriarchy, or ultimately reinforce it by adhering to its "rules of the game"? There is no simple answer in the texts, which is to their credit (274). *Before She Sleeps* hints that the *Panah*'s covert rebellion could gradually erode the system, after all, if enough powerful men bond with the *Panah* women and recognise the lie of the state's propaganda, change might come. It is a kind of underground networking not unlike real feminist movements under dictatorships, such as the quiet subversions in Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* or in the oral histories of women surviving under occupied Kashmir and Pales-

time. Yet the novel also acknowledges the immediate reality that *Panah*'s women are not free and could be crushed at any moment. Similarly, *Escape* leaves us with hope tempered by uncertainty. Meiji reaches a sanctuary beyond the Generals' reach, a place analogous to Hossain's Ladyland or *Padmarag*'s *Tarini Bhavan*, a community of survivors, but she carries trauma and has to learn autonomy from scratch.

This transition from survival to self-possession is further complicated in the sequel, *The Island of Lost Girls* (2015), marking a cementing and continuation of the critical dystopia phenomenon. However, the sequel does not present the outside world as a simplistic resolution. Instead, Padmanabhan extends the critical dystopia by framing the Island as a site where the "utopian impulse" is constantly weighed against the necessity of surveillance. For Meiji, this transition is particularly fraught; she remains alienated within the supposed sanctuary of the Island, struggling with the "feelings and sensibility of masculinity" that were internalised during her years of hiding as a boy (Kumar 383). Kumar highlights the inherent contradictions of this environment:

Only the Island [...] is a place of refuge [...] But it is far from a perfect place. [...] Padmanabhan does not depict the Island as an ideal place. It is a place where girls are protected by the Mentor [...] [Meiji] finds that this new Island is a more dreadful and mysterious place. The Mentor of the Island was conditioning the minds and physical structures of females' bodies. In this female zone, women are able to discard the social code and patriarchal rules from the mind [...] [yet] the Island is scientifically so advanced that it has capability to make female bodies stronger both physically and mentally. (383-4)

The systemic regulation of female bodies within this sanctuary indicates that personal autonomy is often redirected into new forms of control rather than being entirely restored. Padmanabhan explains that the technological framework of the Island is fundamentally biological, utilising living entities to serve as manufactured instruments that allow for an investigation into the moral complexities of human interaction (Mittal 297, 301) This form of biological engineering operates as a system

of total observation, where the constant threat of being watched forces the residents to internalise certain behaviours to remain compliant (Babu and Pius 1-3). Such a portrayal aligns with the female dystopia which, according to Tara Van Den Neste, warns against social patterns where patriarchal authority can strip women of their humanity even within environments ostensibly designed for their protection (7, 15). Consequently, Meiji's journey suggests that true liberation must move beyond these subtly coercive systems, shifting the site of resistance from the physical environment to the internal self.

Both, Shah and Padmanabhan's work assert that agency can exist even when autonomy is curtailed. This agency may be subtle: to say "no" to victimhood, to carve out a small zone of influence, to remember and love in a world that forbids it. Shah's characters find agency in enforcing their own rules (*Panah's* protocols) in defiance of state rules, effectively creating a mini-matriarchy under the noses of the Green City men. Padmanabhan's Meiji gains agency the moment she internalises that she is not a monster but a girl with a right to live, a cognitive rebellion against the ideology that sought to erase her. Saba Mahmood's concept of docile resistance is exemplified here: these characters work within the moral and physical constraints imposed on them, yet slowly bend or push against them in small ways. Sabine never publicly denounces Green City; she feigns compliance even as she secretly undermines it. Meiji never raises a weapon; her weapon is her continued breath and the hope she carries. To an outside observer in their worlds, these women might not appear "rebellious" at all, just as women in many oppressive societies who resist quietly are often overlooked by those expecting overt protest. But as this analysis has shown, resistance wears many faces. Sometimes it looks like a veiled woman sitting silently by a man's bedside, secretly determining the terms of that encounter. Sometimes it looks like a timid girl pretending not to exist, while absorbing forbidden knowledge in glances and whispers.

This sometimes silent defiance aligns the work of Shah and Padmanabhan with the genre of critical dystopia. Unlike the classical dystopias of Orwell or Huxley, which often end in the crushing of the individual to serve as a bleak warning, "the ambiguous, open endings of these [critical dystopian] novels (...) maintain the

utopian impulse within the work” (Baccolini 18). In the feminist context, it is the “expression of women’s hopes and fears” (Cavalcanti 47). In the words of the Green City and the Generals, the regime is only aspiring towards an omnipotent dictatorship, the cracks in the system are visible. Due to the fact that the protagonists survive rather than succumb, the authors transform the genre from a closed loop of despair into an open-ended question about the future.

In the broader South Asian feminist context, these novels contribute to an ongoing conversation about how to oppose patriarchy that is backed by state power, militarism, or religious extremism. They grapple with the disappointment that reality often falls short of the utopian dreams of pioneers like Hossain. Yet, they also insist that even in dystopia, women find ways to practice care, solidarity, and memory, and these practices are political. The notion of “markets of care” and “custodial patriarchy” encapsulates the dark interplay of oppression and resistance: care itself becomes a commodity or a clandestine exchange, and custody becomes both prison and protection. Feminist resistance here is not about idealised liberation but about the situated agency of women, agency defined and limited by context but agency nonetheless. The chapter’s title, “Survival, Not Autonomy,” is thus not a defeatist verdict but a reality check and a tribute. It acknowledges that for many women worldwide (especially in conflict zones, authoritarian states, or deeply patriarchal settings), surviving with dignity is a heroic achievement in itself, laying the groundwork for future emancipatory possibilities. Sabine and Meiji survive, and in doing so, they ensure that patriarchy’s victory is not absolute. They carry the torch of resistance, dim, flickering, but alive, from the ruins of one generation to the threshold of another.

In synthesising the lessons of *Before She Sleeps* and *Escape*, we see a continuum from historical to contemporary feminist imaginaries in South Asia. Early utopian writers dreamed of complete autonomy and female-led societies; later writers, witnessing the harsh turns of history, often imagined survival scenarios where the victory is smaller in scale but no less significant morally. Both kinds of narratives are essential. The utopias provide vision and aspirational direction, while the dystopias provide warning and ground-level strategy. In Shah’s and Padmanabhan’s

works, one can even find continuity with real feminist activism: they echo the ethos of movements like the Aurat (Women's) March in Pakistan or the Gulabi Gang in India, which know that fighting patriarchy involves both everyday endurance and open protest. *Before She Sleeps* and *Escape* are cautionary tales, but they are also testaments to the resilience of the human (and specifically female) spirit. They suggest that autonomy, the ability to fully determine one's life, may be the ultimate goal, but until it is attainable, survival with one's identity and community intact is itself a form of resistance that should not be underestimated.

Thus, while Survival is not Autonomy, it is not passivity either. The women of Green City and the Last Girl of the Generals' land demonstrate that survival can be an act of courage, one that undermines the totalising ambitions of biopower and patriarchal tyranny. Their stories enrich South Asian feminist literature by refusing to sentimentalise resistance; instead, they anchor it in the imperfect, painful, and poignant reality of living through oppression. And in doing so, they keep alive the hope that one day survival will give way to freedom.

Chapter 4

Conclusion: The Architecture of Resistance in South Asian Speculative Fiction

This thesis has wandered through the gardens of Ladyland, descended into the bunkers of Green City, and crossed the desolate expanses imagined by Manjula Padmanabhan. In mapping these interconnected realms, this paper uncovers South Asian Speculative Fiction as a force of feminist defiance rather than mere escapism. These narratives confront the weighty legacies of colonialism, religious orthodoxy, and patriarchal nationalism, peeling back the layers of the region's complex realities. Within these pages, we followed a literary tradition that refuses to accept the present as destiny, instead spinning a continuous thread of resistance from the early twentieth century into the unknown future.

As explored in the second chapter, Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag* serve as the foundational bedrock of this tradition. Writing under the dual constraints of the colonial gaze and the domestic *zenana*, Hossain utilised the utopian imagination to dismantle the logic of male supremacy. Her work was not simply fanciful satire but a blueprint for a realist utopia. In *Padmarag*, specifically through the institution of *Tarini Bhavan*, Hossain offered a pragmatic manual for female solidarity, positing that the interfaith sisterhood of Hindu, Muslim, and Christian women was the only viable antidote to the divide-and-rule policies of the British Empire and the rising tide of communalism. Hossain's heroines did not wait for liberation to be granted; they constructed it through education, labour, and the rejection of the romantic plot in favour of collective agency. This was a feminism deeply rooted in its indigenous context yet boldly transnational in its outlook, anticipating the intersectional frameworks that would later define the global movement.

However, as this thesis moves into contemporary narratives, the mood transforms

from the bright blueprints of early reformers to the blaring sirens of critical dystopia. In the imagined worlds of Bina Shah and Manjula Padmanabhan, the skies darken and hope is tested. The passage from Ladyland to the reproductive servitude of *Before She Sleeps* or the gynocide of *Escape* should not be seen as a retreat from feminist ideals, but a confrontation with the tightening grip of patriarchy. These stories expose the inner workings of oppression, and reveal how faith is turned into a weapon, and tradition is contorted to erase women from the public sphere.

This critique strikes with particular force in our present era. The imagined terrors of *Escape*'s unnamed nation, where women are erased to serve a cold, male logic, or the forced polygamy of Green City, eerily mirror global trends. We glimpse these dystopias in the spread of 'Red Pill' ideologies and the online radicalisation of men, where women are reduced to mere resources or objects. These works also confront the surge of religious extremism and neo-fascism in South Asia, where the female body becomes the frontline for battles over national purity. By projecting today's fears onto tomorrow's nightmares, Shah and Padmanabhan peel back the mask of 'cultural preservation' to expose the raw struggle for power. They show how the colonial urge to control bodies has been inherited and perfected by post-colonial nationalists, forging an unbroken chain of oppression that women must resist.

Yet it is vital to see that these dystopias are not a break from Hossain's utopias, but their necessary transformation for a more sceptical era. They carry forward the utopian spark by what they leave behind in the readers. As stated by Baccolini, in *The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction*: "Utopia is maintained in dystopia, traditionally a bleak, depressing genre with no space for hope in the story, only *outside* the story: only by considering dystopia as a warning can we as readers hope to escape such a dark future" (520). In these stories, hope does not hinge on the regime's collapse, but on the endurance of resistance that stretches beyond the final page. The heroines in Shah and Padmanabhan's works never claim to offer a flawless world. Rather, by guiding women to freedom or safeguarding memories, they nurture the seeds of possibility. Their unwavering defiance sparks courage in others, reminding us that even when the vision of a brighter future seems endangered, it can survive in readers who refuse to let darkness have the last word.

Ultimately, South Asian feminist speculative fiction's greatest gift is its power to nurture hope without falling into naïve optimism. Where Hossain once wondered, "how can women build their own world," today's writers ask, "how do women endure the world's end?" Across a hundred years, the answer echoes: by forging bonds and refusing to let memory fade. The Green City or that of *Escape* may try to erase emotion, and the 'Agency' may seek to turn women into vessels, but these stories always find their way back to defiance.

In closing, the path from Ladyland's dream to the defiance of critical dystopia shows that utopian imagination is not a relic, but a living set of tools. It marks the edges of what is possible and gives us the courage to cross them. As we confront a world splintered by authoritarianism and the commodification of life, the legacy of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, carried forward by Shah and Padmanabhan, reminds us that the future is not shaped solely by victors. It is also crafted by those who, even in the face of destruction, dare to dream differently. The work of feminist resistance is ongoing, but as long as these stories endure, the vision of a just world remains within reach, ready to rise from the ashes of the old, demanding from us the simple understanding of collective suffering and liberty.

Chapter 5

Avenues for Further Research

While this thesis has attempted to map the cartography of resistance within specific utopian and dystopian frameworks, I view it as a jumping-off point for a much broader conversation. Due to the inherent constraints of time and scope, several vital intermedial afterlives and texts remain to be fully integrated into this discourse. Future extensions of this project would seek to incorporate a wider array of visual and contemporary retellings. These include Project Dastaan's short film (2022) and the animated adaptation of *Sultana's Dream* (2023), alongside modern literary interventions like Sadia Khatri's short story *City of Mitr* (2019). I believe these works offer a vital contemporary pulse to the historical lineages of feminist dissent, providing a fertile ground for exploring urban sexuality and queer identity within the South Asian dystopian landscape.

Furthermore, I hope to pursue a deeper engagement with the roots of the genre, specifically Begum Rokeya's satirical piece *Boligarto*. This would allow for a more robust historical grounding of the satirical impulse in female-led dystopias. Beyond the expansion of the primary syllabus, the theoretical lens of this work could be evolved through a feminist post-humanist perspective. Such a framework would be particularly illuminating when applied to the creature-based technologies and sentient drones in Padmanabhan's *Escape* and sequel, *The Island of Lost Girls*. By viewing these technological entities not merely as tools of surveillance but as post-human subjects, we can better understand how gender and sexuality are reconfigured when the boundaries between the biological and the mechanical begin to blur.

Ultimately, my goal for this ongoing research would be to deepen the analysis of how non-normative sexualities and identities navigate the iron cages of control. By weaving together these disparate threads, from early 20th-century satire to 21st-century post-humanism, the discourse can move toward a more intersectional un-

derstanding of autonomy. This thesis is thus a provocation for a continued, more expansive exploration of the many faces of resistance in the face of curtailed freedom.



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