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A comparative reading of Jules Verne's *The Begum's Fortune* (1879) and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* (1905)

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Abstract: This paper is a comparative study of Jules Verne's *The Begum's Fortune* (1879) and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* (1905) from the points of view of utopia, gender, modern warfare, racial conflict, and ecocriticism. I have chosen these two novels to make a comparison between their approaches which are often similar. While the former novel incorporates both a utopia and a dystopia, the latter novel portrays a feminist utopia. Both the novels when read together strike chords which are relevant to our postmodern world.

Key Words: Utopia, gender, modern warfare, racial conflict, and ecocriticism.

I have taken Jules Verne's *The Begum's Fortune* (1879) and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* (1905) as my area of discussion in this paper. I want to discuss and compare the portrayal of utopia, gender, modern warfare, racial conflict, ecocritical elements in the two novels which are separated by country and language.

Jules Verne's *The Begum's Fortune* (1879)

Jules Verne's *The Begum's Fortune* (1879) shows how the wealth of an Indian begum who was the widow of an Indian prince is handed down to a French and a German heir. The wealth is so much that they can even plan to build cities contending with each other and harbouring destructive modern weapons.

Jules Verne (1828-1905) is a French novelist mainly known for his novels like *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864), *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870), and *Around the*



World in Eighty Days (1873). His novels are extremely popular among all ages and have been translated into many languages. He is also known as the father of science fiction as his novels contain scientific experiments, mathematical knowledge and futuristic elements. In connection with the intermingling of science and literature in the nineteenth century, Timothy Unwin states “The novelist and the scientist now join forces in a common quest. It is small wonder that so many of Verne’s heroes are engineers and scientists endowed with the imagination and talent of creative artists. Often, indeed, they take over from the novelist or narrator himself and ‘retell’ the story of progress, underlining that new symbiosis of art and technology” (Unwin 13).

Few events from his life helped to shape his imagination. The ‘Encyclopaedia of World Biography’ notes that at the age of eleven he wanted to escape on a ship as a cabin boy but was caught at the right time by his father who made him promise that he will travel only in his imagination. (Encyclopaedia of World Biography) Arthur B.Evans situates Verne’s love of literature – “Verne’s father, intending that Jules follow in his footsteps as an attorney, sent him to Paris to study law. But the young Verne fell in love with literature, especially theatre” (Evans). Though he completed his course in law he chose the literary profession over his father’s sprawling law business. Timothy Unwin notes the common link between the novelist and the futurist – “But as any committed reader of Verne knows, there is often an uncritical blurring of the boundaries between the actual texts of the *Voyages extraordinaires* and Jules Verne the iconic figure who in the modern cultural consciousness, has come to symbolise travel, technology, invention and ‘the future’ (Unwin 2).

At that time he met a geographer Jacques Arago who toured the globe extensively in spite of being blind. The exchange of ideas between these two men led to Verne’s passion in travel writing. Unwin notes that – “Although there are obvious gaps in Jules Verne’s charting of the oceans and continents, there is a credible attempt at systematic geographical coverage. As the geographical kaleidoscope turns, story after story is situated in a different region until a substantial part of the globe is accounted for. Geography, rather than history or even science, was in fact the discipline



that seems to have most interested Verne, the one that underpins his quest for total coverage” (Unwin 27). Verne also researched in science and recent discoveries. But towards the end of his life he became a little pessimistic and his novels also reflect this change.

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s *Sultana’s Dream* (1905)

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s *Sultana’s Dream* (1905) is cast in the dream mode where Sultana views everything in her dream. Rokeya (1880-1932) finds an ideal town where there is no sorrow and only happiness for women. Women have overcome gender oppression and derision and deliverance from any kind of crime for which only men are held responsible. It is a feminist utopia where women do all the work and they have eliminated all their problems for a better life. Barnita Bagchi notes how the author was personally involved in women’s issues – “In 1916, Rokeya founded the Bengal branch of the Anjuman-i-Khawatin-i-Islam, under whose aegis Muslim women would take up a whole range of activities geared towards social welfare. Prominent among these were the setting of vocational training centres for women from financially deprived backgrounds, providing aid for widows in distress, helping young girls from underprivileged backgrounds to settle down by getting them married off and persuading educated women to teach in slums and train their residents for different kinds of income-generating work” (Hossain x). She is an Indian writer and activist of the early twenty first century and her writings contain feminist overtones. She is a Bengali writer but she wrote *Sultana’s Dream* in English.

Utopia

Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516 in Latin and later translated into English) is a socio-political satire. It gives a picture of a fictional island society with its own version of social, political and religious organisations. There are commonly two interpretations of the term utopia. The first one is that it has been taken from Greek ‘-ou’ meaning ‘not’ and ‘topos’ meaning place. Therefore the first interpretation is that it means ‘no place’ or ‘nowhere’. The second interpretation is that it is derived from ‘-eu’ meaning ‘good’ and ‘topos’ meaning ‘place’. Thus it may also imply ‘good place’. The



concept of a good place can be compared to ecocriticism as Cheryl Glotfelty defines – “What then is ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies” (Gerrard 3).

In Book 1 which is named ‘Dialogue of Counsel’ More meets a traveller who is more of a counsellor named Raphael Hythlodæus who expresses his opinion regarding the current political system in Europe which he thinks is not favourable to maintaining peace. He counsels that the kings in Europe quarrel among themselves and war among themselves which leads to lot of expenditure. He also comments that the physical punishment meted to robbers are so severe that it might induce them to murder the people they have robbed to eliminate witnesses. He thinks that some modifications should be made in political outlook to eliminate the wars and be humane towards the criminals. Above all the king should be more of a philosopher. Raphael’s voyages reflect Amerigo Vespucci’s real adventures around the world (More).

He describes in Book 2 about the position and location of Utopia and how it consists of cities ruled by elected prince. There are also provisions for the impeachment of the prince if he is found to be a tyrant or a traitor. They also have a solution for overpopulation or underpopulation. People from the mainland can visit them and stay if the population is low but they will have to leave if the area is overpopulated. This problem is a major topic of the twentieth century and Raphael offers solution for the same (More).

There is an even distribution of employment among the people. All the people inclusive of any gender is given training in every kind of art – whether masonry, education, weaving, cooking etcetera. People proficient in studies are chosen from their childhood days and engaged in studies while the others are allowed to study in their spare time. There is no concept of private property in utopia but the common property is stored in a warehouse from where people are to take only what



they need. Both the gender has to equally work and their work time is only six hours as all work together. Another thing of mention is that there is no fine dressmaker as everyone wears simple clothes. People do not live in the same house but rotate the houses amongst themselves. Each household has to take turn in feeding the entire community. Even though the food is equal for everyone, the children and the old are given the best food (More).

The concept of slavery is very much present in this society. Every household has two slaves who are actually the prisoners bound with heavy gold chains and use golden chamber pots. This is arranged to make them develop distaste for this metal which people also cannot steal because of their easy visibility. The gold chains are common property of the land which is used for foreign trade and for the welfare of the land (More).

The welfare state has free hospitals, permits divorce and euthanasia, priests do not have to practise celibacy, pre-marital consummation is punished by lifelong celibacy and adultery is punished by slavery (More).

The land practises religious tolerance. Various types of religions exist in the commonwealth ranging from moon-worship, sun-worship, planet-worship, ancestor worship and even atheists. But the atheists are under suspicion and gradually they are made over into the religious fold through convincing them. More shows that slowly Christianity is being accepted into the utopian society. Female priests are the widows. A mild satire is directed at Catholic religion and More hints at other reforms (More).

Regarding gender equality the utopian society is comparatively liberal than the contemporary times. Here both the husband and wife are subjected to each other but every month the wife has to confess her sin to her husband. Even though the land emphasizes on equal work, the wives are primarily put to maintain the household. The professions which are most despised here are gambling, art of makeup, hunting and astrology. The people do not like any kind of war as they



hate to shed blood. But they maintain an army and render help to other country in their need (More).

The utopian society has a high standard of morality as wine-houses and taverns or any kind of private gatherings are completely prohibited (More).

Utopic elements in *The Begum's Fortune* (1879)

In this novel Verne portrays the ills of development and progress.

French physician, Dr. Sarrasin and German scientist Prof. Schultze are the two inheritors of fortune belonging to the begum of the title. The begum Gokool had derived her fortune from her previous husband who was a prince (Rajah Luckmissur) in India and after she becomes a widow, she remarries a French soldier Jean Jacques Langevol in 1819 (Verne 10). The French husband's heirs are these two main characters who are complete opposite to each other.

The French physician, Dr. Sarrasin is very gentle and of benevolent nature. He is described as follows – “He was a man of fifty, or thereabouts; his features were refined; clear lively eyes shone through his steel spectacles, and the expression of his countenance, although grave, was genial. He was one of those people, looking at whom one says at the first glance, ‘There is an honest man!’” (Verne 1) He suddenly succeeds to the title of ‘Rajah Bryah Jowahir Mothooranath’ (Verne 27).

He dedicates his wealth to the progress of science and humanity – “I consider myself simply as a steward, entrusted with this wealth for the use and benefit of science ...This treasure belongs, not to me but to humanity to progress!” (Verne 37-38) He points out to the assembly of fellow scientists that “...among the many causes of the sickness, misery and death which surround us, is one to which I think it reasonable to attach great importance ; and that is the deplorable sanitary conditions under which the greater part of mankind exists” (Verne 39). He is concerned about the insanitary condition of Europe and plans to construct a utopian city eliminating this problem. He



proposes to call it Frankville instead of Sarrasina as suggested by others. He presents his plan – "Why should we not, by uniting the powers of our minds, produce the plan of a model city, based upon strictly scientific principles? Why should we not afterwards devote our capital to the erection of such a city, and then present it to the world as a practical illustration of what all cities ought to be?" (Verne 40) He suggests that "...this city of health and happiness we will call universal attention by descriptions, translated into all the languages of the earth; we will invite visitors from every nation; we will offer it as a home and refuge for honest families forced to emigrate from over-populated countries" (Verne 40). Marcel or Max later comments "The happy city Frankville was prospering, its beneficent institutions favouring each and all, and giving a new horizon of hope to a disheartened people" (Verne 103-104). The French town is built by the migrant Chinese soldiers who are not allowed inside the city once it is built. The chief features of the utopian town are as follows –

1. There is an environment friendly plan for each house built with its chimney directed outside the city to emit the smoke.
2. "Each house to stand alone in a plot of ground planted with trees, grass, and flowers, and to be inhabited by a single family." (Verne 148)
3. "The plan of the rooms is left to individual taste. But two dangerous elements of illness, regular nests of miasma and laboratories of poison, are to be strictly excluded carpets and painted papers." (Verne 149)
4. "Each bedroom is distinct from the dressing-room. It cannot be too much recommended that the former apartment, where a third of a man's life is passed, should be the largest, the most airy, and at the same time the most simple." (Verne 150) Quilts, curtains or draperies should be washable.
5. "Public gardens are numerous, and ornamented with fine copies of the masterpieces of sculpture, until the artists of Frankville shall have produced original pieces worthy to replace them." (Verne 151) This is an ecocritical concern.
6. "Every industry and trade is free." (Verne 151)



7. “Anyone wishing to have the right of living in Frankville must give good references, be fit to follow a useful or liberal profession in industry, science, or the arts, and must engage to keep the laws of the town. An idle life would not be tolerated there.” (Verne 151)
8. “There are already a large number of public edifices. The most important are the Cathedral, chapels, museums, libraries, schools, and gymnasiums, fitted up with the luxury and hygienic skill worthy of a great city.” (Verne 151)
9. “It is needless to say that from the age of four years all children are obliged to follow physical and intellectual exercises, calculated to develop the brain and muscles. They are also accustomed to such strict cleanliness, that they consider a spot on their simple clothes quite a disgrace.... Individual and collective cleanliness is the great idea of the founders of Frankville.” (Verne 152)
10. “Hospitals are few in number, for the system of house nursing is general, and they are reserved for homeless strangers and exceptional cases. The idea of making the hospital larger than any other building, and of putting seven or eight hundred patients under one roof, so as to make a centre of infection, would not enter the head of the founders of this model city.” (Verne 153)
11. “Another ingenious institution is that of a body of experienced nurses, specially trained for the purpose, and always at the disposal of the public. These women, being carefully chosen, are most valuable and devoted aids to the doctors.” (Verne 153)
12. “There being no taxes, the political independence of this isolated little territory, its novelty, and the pleasant climate, all contributed to induce emigration.” (Verne 155)
13. “...all the deaths actually registered were due to specific and hereditary affections. Accidental illnesses have been at once infinitely rarer, and less dangerous, than in any other great centre. As to epidemics, properly so called, nothing has been seen or heard of them.” (Verne 155)

The German scientist Prof. Schultze is reminiscent of Hitler (refer to his autobiography *Mein Kampf*) who is completely malevolent as suggested from his features – “Professor Schultz had



a large mouth, garnished with a double row of formidable teeth which would never drop their prey”(Verne 44). He plans destruction of other races (especially French) through his dystopian city – “...works in which it was proved that the German race was to absorb all others it was quite clear that he was particularly designed by the great creative and destructive force of nature to annihilate the pigmies who were struggling against it”(Verne 60). He wants “...destruction of all nations who refused to blend themselves with the German people and be united with the Vaterland.”(Verne 60) He receives the wealth through his French grandmother but he has an innate hatred towards the French race. He believes that the French race will be inevitably overpowered by the German race. He is writing a paper titled "Why do all French people suffer, to one degree or another, from hereditary degeneration?" which he is going to published in the German journal ‘Physiological Annals’ although his main area is chemistry. He plans to build his own utopian city which will produce destructive weapons in order to destroy the other utopia –“He casts guns of all shapes and of all calibres, smooth and rifled bores, for Russia, Turkey, Roumania, Japan, for Italy and for China, but particularly for Germany”(Verne 65-66). Through modern warfare he wants to initiate a racial conflict.

The French city is more populated than the German one but is more environment friendly while the German city is less populated but more polluted with no concern for the environment. Overpopulation as a cause for apocalypse is voiced by Greg Gerrard who notes – “This is because each generation of humans can beget a still larger next generation, whereas increases in agricultural production by cultivation of new ground can be achieved only incrementally: a contrast between a geometric, or exponential progression, and an arithmetic one” (Gerrard 94). The German city or steel city mines steel which is used to produce deadlier weapons. There is a detailed description of the steel city or Stahlstadt which is built in concentric circles – “Dreary roads, black with cinders and coke, wind round the sides of the mountains. Heaps of variegated scoria, which the scanty herbage fails to cover, glance and glare like the eyes of a basilisk. Here and there yawns the shaft of a deserted mine, a dark gulf, the mouth grown over with briers. The air is heavy with smoke, and hangs like a pall over the ground. Not a bird nor an insect is to be found, and a butterfly has not



been seen within the memory of man”(Verne 64). Death predominates here where a thirteen year boy named Carl Bauer dies due to carbonic acid gas poisoning inside the mine. His death inspires Schultz to make a missile emitting carbonic gas which will cause immediate death of a whole city reminiscent of modern weapons. At the core or middle of the city is Prof. Schultze’s chamber where he punishes or promotes the labourers according to his wish.

The antagonist of Prof. Schultze is a young man from Alsace named Marcel Bruckmann (takes pseudonym Johann Schwartz). His family name is German but at heart he is French. His German dialect wins the favour of Prof. Schultze who makes him his confidant and reveals his plan of destroying the French town. Marcel describes how the professor overlooks everything – “He knew that the centre of the spider's web, figurative of Stahlstadt, was the Bull Tower, a kind of cyclopean structure, overlooking all the neighbouring buildings”(Verne 102). Inside that tower the German scientist was working to destroy the other civilizations – “The general opinion was that Professor Schultz was working at the completion of a terrible engine of war of unprecedented power, and destined to assure universal dominion to Germany” (Verne 103). Marcel now could manipulate the Herr –“The truth was that Max had, at the first glance, see through the character of his formidable patron, and perceiving that blind and insatiable vanity was its leading feature, he regulated his conduct by humouring the egotism which he despised” (Verne 109). The patron divulges his secret. He justifies his mission like a Machiavellian prince – “Right Good Evil are purely relative, and quite conventional words. Nothing is positive but the grand laws of nature. The law of competition has the same claim as that of gravitation” (Verne 124). But the professor will not allow him to live with this secret – “You will die; but suffering will be spared you. You will not wake up some morning” (Verne 126-127). Marcel escapes and saves others.

Utopic elements in *Sultana’s Dream* (1905)

Like Jules Verne, Rokeya Hossain dreams of a utopia but which is feminist. The utopic elements in this novel are projected through Sultana’s dream. Sultana views the Ladyland (which is completely favourable to women) in a dream and she begins – “One evening I was lounging in an



easy chair in my bedroom and thinking lazily of the condition of Indian womanhood”(Hossain 3). She thinks that it is night but actually it turns out to be day (Hossain 3) She is surprised when she cannot understand the language of the people and is tensed when she hears that she is shy and timid like men. She confesses that “as being a purdahnishin woman I am not accustomed to walking about unveiled” (Hossain 4). But she is assured that this land symbolises epitome of morality – “You need not be afraid of coming across a man here. This is Ladyland, free from sin and harm. Virtue herself reigns here” (Hossain 4).

This is very environment friendly as she mistakes the green grass as green cushion. Her friend whom she calls Sister Sara tells – “Your Calcutta could become a nicer garden than this if only your countrymen wanted to make it so” (Hossain 4). Sultana replies “They would think it useless to give so much attention to horticulture, while they have so many other things to do” (Hossain 4). The description of sister Sara’s house is also environment friendly – “It was situated in a beautiful heart-shaped garden. It was a bungalow with a corrugated iron roof and nicer than any of our rich buildings” (Hossain 6). This is an ecocritical concern.

It is a society where men are kept indoors and they do the cooking and all the allied works while the women work outside. The Sister points out the problem relating to men – “Yes, it is not safe so long as there are men about the streets, nor is it so when a wild animal enters a marketplace.” And “Suppose, some lunatics escape from the asylum and begin to do all sorts of mischief to men, horses and other creatures; in that case what will your countrymen do?” (Hossain 5) Sultana laments “We have no hand or voice in the management of our social affairs. In India man is lord and master. He has taken to himself all powers and privileges and shut up the women in the zenana” (Hossain 5). This concerns the gender issue where a lot of discrimination takes place.

Sister Sara argues that women have long neglected their capacity to deliver for betterment of their gender – “A lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race. You have neglected the duty you owe to yourselves and you have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interests” (Hossain 5).



Though the men are assigned the duty of the kitchen, the women do not trust them with needle work as according to them men do not have as much patience as women. Sister Sara is a keen enthusiast in science but she is so systematic in her work that she does not spend more than two hours in the laboratory. She relates how men waste their time of work in smoking – “They dawdle away their time in smoking. Some smoke two or three choroots during the office time. They talk much about their work, but do little. Suppose one choroot takes half an hour to burn off, and a man smokes twelve choroots daily; then you see, he wastes six hours every day in sheer smoking” (Hossain 7).

The kitchen is totally environment friendly – “The kitchen was situated in a beautiful vegetable garden. Every creeper, every tomato plant was itself an ornament. I found no smoke, nor any chimney either in the kitchen – it was clean and bright; the windows were decorated with flower gardens. There was no sign of coal or fire” (Hossain 7). Solar heat is used for cooking which is a modern scientific innovation. This pertains to the ecocritical consciousness.

They are also very conscious about public health like Dr. Sarrasine – “We talked on various subjects, and I learned that they were not subject to any kind of epidemic disease, nor did they suffer from mosquito bites as we do. I was very much astonished to hear that in Ladyland no one died in youth except by rare accident” (Hossain 7).

They are ruled by a queen who has inherited the throne but their land is in reality ruled by the Prime Minister. A description of the progressive minded Queen is given who favours scientific education among girls. She has stopped early marriage and opened girls’ school (Hossain 7). There is a water balloon which controls rain water and it is described below – “In the capital, where our Queen lives, there are two universities. One of these invented a wonderful balloon, to which they managed to keep afloat above the cloud and, they could draw as much water from the atmosphere as they pleased. As the water was incessantly being drawn by the university people no cloud gathered and the ingenious Lady Principal stopped rain and storms thereby” (Hossain 8). The water balloon also helps in agriculture and gardening. They use water to keep cool in summer and use the



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heat in winter –“They invented an instrument by which they could collect as much sun-heat as they wanted. And they kept the heat stored up to be distributed among others as required” (Hossain 8).

They have controlled men and overpowered them by brain. Once their country was attacked by enemy soldiers. Their men were defeated in the first round. Then the queen ordered the injured men to go indoors and ordered the women of the university to direct the stored sunlight at the enemy who were burnt down along with their weapons. In this way the women protected the country and also took over the control of their country. Their mode of transport is air-car (Hossain 13).

Ecocriticism directs the people of the world to preserve their world through a utopic representation of an ideal world. This consciousness is explored by both the writers under study. Greg Gerrard situates this as follows – “For at least 3,000 years, a fluctuating proportion of the world’s population has believed that the end of the world is imminent. Scholars dispute its origins, but it seems likely that the distinctive construction of apocalyptic narratives that inflects much environmentalism today began around 1200 BCE, in the thought of the Iranian prophet Zoroaster, or Zarathustra. Notions of the world’s gradual decline were widespread in ancient civilisations, but Zoroaster bequeathed to Jewish, Christian and later secular models of history a sense of urgency about the demise of the world” (Gerrard 85). Both Jules Verne and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain propagate progressive ideas through their utopias. I have exhaustively pointed out references from the concerned texts to establish my point. Their social concerns with an ideal society make them futuristic in their approach.

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