
Remobilizing Religion in Utopian Studies

A View from a Feminist Literary and Historical Scholar of Utopia

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■ **ABSTRACT:** This article explores how factors such as gender and cross-religious communication frame and yield utopian perspectives in Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's literature and practice as educator and feminist. The article makes the case that Hossain's body of work envisions utopia in complex, many-layered ways. Early in her creative career, as a member of the Muslim youth herself, Hossain created gender-just utopian visions that also embedded cross-religious dialogue and cooperation. She later became an educator, inspiring youth, particularly Muslim girls and young women, with utopian ideas and practices. The article concludes that analyzing Hossain's writing in utopian frames, as well as examining her writing and work through Ruth Levitas's approach to utopia as method, helps to explain Hossain's inclusion of religion and spirituality in her oeuvre.

■ **KEYWORDS:** education, feminist activist, religion, South Asia, utopia

This article focuses on the writing and educational and social activism of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932), who founded and led pioneering institutions such as a school for Muslim girls in eastern India, and who also wrote fiction and non-fiction. The article argues that Hossain's writing can be analyzed in utopian frames in many-layered ways. Hossain's crafting of literary narratives that conform to the utopian mode is an important layer, as is the representation in her writing of fellowship or sisterhood between women, including those belonging to different religions and races, to resist the oppression of women. This oppression, Hossain argues, cuts across religions and races. My article examines how factors such as gender and cross-religious dialogue frame and elicit utopian views in Hossain's oeuvre. The article draws on the fields of literature, history, education, gender/women's studies, and utopian studies.

Utopia as Method

For the multi-layered analysis undertaken in this article, it is valuable to see utopia as method, an approach articulated by the utopian social theorist Ruth Levitas. Levitas's (2013: xiii) definition of utopia is analytic rather than descriptive, generating a method that is primarily hermeneutic. Here, utopia is a matter of an experimental impulse, a way of imagining. Levitas argues that



utopia is the experimental or heuristic expression of the desire for a better way of being or of living, and as such is braided through human culture, analogous to a quest for grace that is both “existential and relational” (ibid.: xii–xiii). But the religious and spiritual registers in many non-Western, non-Eurocentric visions of utopia are not incorporated by Levitas in her writing on the role of grace in utopia. For her theoretical underpinnings on grace, Levitas discusses at some length the work of anti-Nazi Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, who sought to reconcile secular, existentially philosophical questions with Christian interpretations of grace (ibid.: 13–15).

The writings and practice of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain also show an unusual ability to work with religious-spiritual dimensions of social dreaming, or utopia, while engaging with great commitment in social change, especially in the field of gender, in an everyday world. Hossain shows a commitment to secular aspects of utopia—such as women’s education and empowerment, training girls and women in a gamut of disciplines, fellowship and sisterhood between women of different religious persuasions—and to critique of how patriarchy can appropriate all religions to oppress women. Such work as Hossain’s shows that we need to understand the intertwining of the religious, cross-religious, and secular in utopianism. Hossain’s work is salutary in showing how the analysis of utopian actors with a non-Eurocentric, non-colonial slant can valuably contribute to a more diversified, inclusive field of utopian studies.

Scholarly Work on Hossain and Other South Asian Utopian Women Writers

Recent work on Hossain, a believing and practicing Muslim and Bengali feminist writer, one of the boldest voices to use the utopian mode, has led to much interest in Hossain in utopian studies (Bagchi 2009; Bhattacharya and Hiradhar 2019; Chattopadhyay 2016, 2017; Hasanat 2013; Hossain 2005). The present article continues this trend, relating Hossain’s writing and work to other modern South Asian utopian women writers and activists who, like Hossain, rethink and deploy religion in ways that enable inclusion of marginal social groupings. Religion is highly important for understanding South Asian utopian writings, as can be seen in the oeuvre of canonical male and female writers such as Hossain, M. K. Gandhi, B. R. Ambedkar, and Muhammad Iqbal (Bagchi 2016). The article shows that early in her writing career, as a member of the Muslim youth, Hossain expressed gender-just utopian visions. In her late twenties she became well-known as a formal educator (particularly of Muslim girls) and as a social welfare worker and feminist activist who created utopian visions for a target audience encompassing Muslim and non-Muslim youth.

Hossain is one among many other women writers and activists from South Asia, from diverse religions, who can be analyzed in utopian terms (Bagchi 2016). Such figures include Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati Medhavi Dongre, Kashibai Kanitkar, and Savitribai Phule. Ramabai (1858–1922), an upper-caste widow who converted to Christianity, founded and led, in western India, multiple communities for child widows, destitute adult women, the disabled, sex workers, and other marginalized groupings, and she also wrote about her activities (see Ramabai 2000). These communities can be viewed as small female-led utopias, driven by a leader who broke the barriers of upper-caste Hindu widowhood. Ramabai established many institutions that worked for the education and welfare of women. She began by educating an upper-caste Hindu student group of Brahmin child widows at Sharada Sadan (Hall of Learning), the first widows’ home she founded, while her later work focused on a lower-caste, grossly impoverished group of men and women at Mukti Sadan (Freedom Hall). Here, blind students were taught Braille, and the inhabitants of the missions were taught trades such as farming, dairy farming, tailoring, nursing, teaching, embroidery, laundering, gardening, and running a printing press.

Ramabai's (2003) work was partly sustained by Christian women and men in the United States and Australia, and she made Sharada Sadan non-denominational, even though she was a converted Christian by that time. Hindu reformers, primarily Brahmin, supported and helped superintend this institution until a hiatus developed: the Hindu reformers charged Ramabai with proselytizing the widows, leading to a break and administrative restructuring. When famine and plague broke out in Gujarat and the Central Provinces in 1896, she moved to a plot of land she owned in the village of Kedgaon near Pune, where she started working with primarily lower-caste women, particularly famine victims. Mukti Sadan, a Christian institution, was opened here, along with Kripa Sadan (Hall of Mercy), which housed sexually victimized women, blind women, and aged women. Ramabai, I would argue, was a utopian writer and actor who showed through her writing and actions how women could be strongly religious, how they could break out of patriarchal socio-religious chains, and how they could build a cooperative world.

Kashibai Kanitkar (1861–1948), also from western India, wrote a feminist utopian novella in the Marathi language titled *Palkhicha gond* (The Palanquin Tassel) (1928). Published in the early twentieth century but written in the late 1890s, this work discusses matters around family, conjugality, parent-child relations, women's rights, education, and social reform. Its protagonists are three siblings, one brother and two sisters. Rewati, the older sister, is married off to a man of unsound mind who rules a princely state. Rewati's family is deceived into this marriage, which the groom's family desperately needs since the princely state can only be ruled by a married man. With a supportive mother-in-law and older brother behind her, Rewati makes something positive out of her life by instituting many social reforms in the state that she now de facto rules. This includes the founding of Shibika College, where women in non-functional marriages are educated. Offices, made hereditary, are passed on to both men and women. Women are given the right to have control over their *stridhan* (lit., women's wealth), which a woman carried to her marital family from the natal one. A plan is introduced to have a consultative committee that consists half of women and half of men on the *panchayat* model, a system for villages to govern themselves through a local council that Gandhi would later popularize. Brahmins are patronized and paid by the state, but discouraged from living off of the other subjects. Thus, the novel deploys Hinduism for its utopian vision. At the end of the story, Rewati, after a dream vision, leaves the princely state with her siblings and husband for a spiritual voyage around the world.

Hossain's Life and Oeuvre

Religion and spirituality play a prominent role in the life and oeuvre of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain as well. Hossain was born into a landholding Muslim family in Pairaband in the Rangpur district, which is today in Bangladesh. She had a conservative father but supportive siblings. An elder brother, Ibrahim Saber, and an elder sister, Karimunnessa, secretly taught the young Rokeya to read and write English and Bengali respectively. Hossain never had any formal, institutional education, and her auto-didacticism fueled the strength of her commitment to furthering girls' and women's education later in life. Hossain's brother Ibrahim arranged her marriage, when she was sixteen, to Khan Bahadur Syed Sakhawat Hossain. This gentleman, who was nearly forty at the time of the marriage, was a senior civil servant in the British Indian colonial administration. The marriage was happy. The couple lived for many years in Bhagalpur, in what is present-day West Bengal's neighboring province of Bihar. Hossain's husband championed his wife's writing and interest in education. When he died in his early fifties, he bequeathed 10,000 rupees to his wife to start a school for girls.

Hossain emerged into the public sphere as a daring young writer in the Indian periodicals of her time in the very first years of the twentieth century, writing principally in Bengali: much of her work appeared in Bengali periodicals such as *Nabanoor*, *Mahila*, and *Nabaprabha*. Hossain's short story "Sultana's Dream" appeared in English in 1905 in the *Indian Ladies' Magazine*, published in Madras (see Hossain 2005). A few months after her husband's death in 1909, she made her first attempt to run a girls' school. When she was forced to leave Bhagalpur, not least because of hostile step-relations, she moved to Calcutta where she began another school in 1911, in rented accommodations, with eight students. At the time, she lived in the house where the school was located. In 1912 and 1913, she lost her mother and father respectively. Between 1911 and 1932, the year she died, her school moved thrice, from one rented house to another. Nonetheless, the school continued to progress, and by 1927 it had become a high school. At the time of Hossain's death in 1932, 75 percent of the students passed the matriculation examination, and in 1935 the school began to receive government aid. Known as the Sakhawat Hossain Memorial Girls' School, it is today a well-functioning government school in Calcutta. It is also a living tribute to Hossain's competence as an educational manager and a visionary.

Hossain was a fearless polemical writer on women's emancipation. Her articles were read by respectable Muslims, Hindus, and Christians. She became well-known for her bite and courage in exposing how women were conditioned into accepting and sometimes even propagating their own subjugation. First published as a series of columns in 1928–1930, Hossain's "Abarodhbasini" (The Secluded Ones) denounced the then prevalent system of total purdah—and took Bengal by storm. Hossain succeeded in a nearly impossible and difficult double role as a proper, respectable school leader and educator, and as a writer and activist. Hossain was herself for the early part of her career a member of the Muslim youth, creating gender-just utopian visions. After her late twenties, as educator, writer, and activist, she arguably created utopian visions for a target audience including Muslim youth.

Hossain lived in purdah. As her novella *Padmarag* makes clear, through the semi-autobiographical persona of Dina-Tarini Sen (a widowed Brahmo educationist and leader of the philanthropic institution Tarini Bhavan), even after leading such a life, she was often socially vilified (Bagchi 2005: xvii). In 1916, Hossain founded the Bengal branch of the Anjuman-i-Khawatin-i-Islam, where Muslim women undertook a whole range of social welfare activities. These included the organization of vocational educational centers for poor women, aiding widows in distress, helping impoverished girls get married, and encouraging educated women to instruct and train poverty-stricken inhabitants of urban slums. She continued the gamut of her activities until her death on 9 December 1932. There were many areas of pain in her life. Having lost two children in early infancy, she raised her sister's daughter Nuri, who also died young, at the age of twelve, while studying at the school Hossain founded. One of the ways in which Hossain found joy was by traveling to various places in India, whether the Himalayan regions or Ghatsila, a town set in a forested area on the Subarnarekha river, to which she returned again and again, and where she was having a house built for her life after retirement.

Hossain wrote for the rights of women, championing gender equity and justice, and created many allegorical, parable-like tales with folk and fairy tale structures, sketches that play with mythology, and fiction that mixes romance, melodrama, and utopia, in addition to her polemical essays. Hossain ranged across cultures. She became well-known for combining educational and social welfare work with writing that straddled religions, while maintaining a strong identity as a Muslim writer, activist, and woman. She raised public awareness about girls' and women's rights and education continuously through her writing, combining her articulate feminist writings in the literary public sphere with candid published reports, essays, and letters outlining the problems and prospects of the school she ran. In one sense, Hossain worked within her community: her

school enrolled Muslim girls, and the organization of which she founded a branch in Bengal, the Anjuman-i-Khawatin-i-Islam, targeted Muslim girls and women. Yet she also worked with other female reformers and educators from all communities and denominations, such as the Brahmo educator Sarala Ray. In her writings, she took pains to address and discuss issues pertaining to the maltreatment of women carried out by all religious communities, including her own.

Hossain's Essay "The Worship of Women"

In an early essay by Hossain, "The Worship of Women," published in 1905, the condition of women is discussed from the perspective of multiple religions. Hossain published the essay in the periodical *Mahila*, edited by Bhai Girish Chandra Sen (1835–1910), a leader of the monotheistic Brahmo Samaj, affiliated to Hinduism, who translated the Koran into Bengali in 1886. In this essay, two Hindu women, Kusum and Prabha, and two Muslim women, Amena and Jamila, have an animated conversation about the status of women in pre-partition India. The women engage in a feminist critique of actually existing religious practices, all of which show women's inequality and oppression in relation to men. Jamila says that "in this country women are a kind of personal property belonging to men" (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003: 106). Amena discusses the brilliant, learned woman Khana from medieval Bengal, whose proverbs or adages are well-known even today, and who was, Amena mentions, proficient in astronomy. Yet Prabha and Amena agree that although Khana was not killed, the fact that her tongue was cut out is a symbol of the fate society metes out to exceptionally articulate and learned women. The women also bring up an anecdote from the life of P. C. Mozoomdar, a Brahmo Samaj leader (1840–1905), about the death of his widowed mother from cholera when he was nineteen: others in the household did not bother to get her medical treatment, and even a doctor refused to come out at night to treat a widow. Yet another harrowing anecdote is about a household where a "little girl was not receiving medical treatment because girls were considered a curse" (ibid.: 111). "Do girls ever die?" asks the father, denying his wife's umpteenth request that their daughter should receive medical care. When one of the women asks whether the family in question is Hindu or Muslim, the answer is, "It is enough to say that they are Bengalis" (ibid.). This is the real-life dystopia to which Hossain's writing and educational and activist work posited alternative utopian visions, in which gender justice and spiritual and religious approaches would work in cooperation.

In an earlier essay titled "The Burqa" (1904), Hossain wrote: "We believe that there is no real conflict between the purdah system and progress" (Akhtar and Bhowmik 2008: 20). She remained committed to modest dress and veiling, and also denounced a system of total purdah that was later taken to extremes in "Abarodhbasini," her series of satirical sketches. In "The Burqa," women had to keep themselves fully covered in veils and outer thick garments when they were outside of the house, and even at home they were not allowed to show their faces to visitors from the outside. The women in "The Worship of Women" argue that there is no way of knowing whether Hindus or Muslims invented purdah. Through this and her other writings, Hossain is educating readers and persuading them that patriarchy cuts across all religions. In "The Worship of Women," the women take the stance that to fight "wooden, orthodox mullahs" (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003: 113), one needs to prepare sufficiently well: the fundamentalists are compared to bees that would sting angrily if their hive, the social organization in which they function, is disturbed (ibid.). Fellowship between women of different religions—those who are critical of patriarchal machinations of religion to keep women subjugated—is very important in Hossain's writing and work. We see this also in her 1924 utopian novella *Padmarag*. Such fellowship is at the heart of Hossain's utopian visions.

Hossain's Bold Feminist Utopian Fictions

Recent scholarship has elucidated the innovative and bold character of Hossain's utopian fictions (Bagchi 2005, 2009). The word 'utopia,' a neologism coined by Thomas More in 1516 from the Greek, involves a pun: 'eu-topos' is a good place, while 'ou-topos' is no place. Female-centered and -authored utopias often imagine a world where women improve the existing, unjust world through solidarity, community building, and wise governance. 'Sultana's Dream,' Hossain's utopian prose fiction in English, is also a major example of South Asian science fiction or *kalpavigyan* (Chattopadhyay 2016, 2017). The present article, which argues that Hossain's utopian visions should be analyzed in many-layered ways, views Hossain's crafting of literary narratives that conform to the utopian mode as an important layer. In both 'Sultana's Dream' and *Padmarag*, a visitor (Sultana in "Sultana's Dream" and Padmarag/Jainab/Siddika in *Padmarag*) enters the country or community led by women, whether in a dream ("Sultana's Dream") or in reality (*Padmarag*). Note that although *Padmarag* has an additional male visitor, Latif, who enters the female utopia, both narratives have *women* witnessing and coming to understand how female-led utopian communities work. Neither work is mono-religious.

Ladyland in "Sultana's Dream" is the dream vision of Sultana, a recognizably non-Western woman. Hossain's use of the word 'sultana,' referring to a female Islamic ruler, implies her ambitious vision of female leadership. All-women universities drive education, science, technology, and governance in Hossain's imagined country of Ladyland. Women are in leadership roles, while men, in a satirical inversion, remain confined to minor work in the *mardana* or men's sphere. Hossain imagined women's education as the foundation of men's and women's political freedom in her allegorical narratives "Gyanphala" (The Fruit of Knowledge) (Hossain 2008: 175–181) and "Muktiphala" (The Fruit of Freedom) (ibid.: 117–135). Generically, these works can be read as allegories, parables, fairy tales, or fables. In both of them, human beings—both men and women—can be seen as types of the colonized who seek to gain freedom and knowledge by defying the oppression and cunning of the colonizers. In both works, we receive the message that female empowerment, education, and agency must be asserted, if such wresting of freedom and gaining of knowledge are to be successful.

"Sultana's Dream," which is well-known today and was written in English, is an astonishing achievement for someone who had never been to school, and whose studies of English had been conducted secretly, in the face of paternal opposition. "Sultana's Dream" is a short dream vision—a virtuosic, biting, and elegant work. The utopian country Ladyland in "Sultana's Dream" is garden-like and pastoral, but also advanced in the development of science and technology. A queen who decrees universal female education governs Ladyland, and she founds separate universities for women. Here, the professors and students develop technologies, such as a device to store, concentrate, and use solar heat. This is used by the women during a war that threatens Ladyland. The women, until then in seclusion in the *zenana*, or female part of the house, ask that the men be put into seclusion in the male counterpart, the *mardana*, as a condition for helping the male army. The women continue to govern the country wisely and well after the war. The country has policies of peace, knowledge cultivation, and scientific progress.

Tarannum (2021) has recently argued that the narrator's journey to Ladyland is influenced by Prophet Muhammad's journey to heaven, and that Ladyland can be seen to have the function of a Jannah or Islamic sanctuary. Both "Sultana's Dream" and *Padmarag* also think and imagine across religions. "Sultana's Dream," indeed, names no explicit, actually existing religion in the female-led country of Ladyland, and this element plays a major role in creating utopian visions that are not confined to the imaginaries of only one religion in Hossain's oeuvre. The dreamer in the story, whom we infer is called Sultana, asks her guide in Ladyland, who may or may not

be her friend Sister Sara, what the religion of the land is. The following is the answer (Hossain 2005: 12–13):

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 with death?

No, 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 to come to it again.

Is an offender never forgiven?

Yes, if that person repents sincerely.

Religion in “Sultana’s Dream” thus centrally concerns itself with ethics, norms, peace, and openness to repentance on the part of criminals. In the preface (Nivedana) to *Padmarag*, Hossain affirms unity between different religions, with Hinduism and Islam specifically mentioned (Hossain 2005: 19–20):

A man thirsting for religion went to a certain dervish to learn yoga. At that, the dervish said, ‘Let us go to my guru.’ That guru was a Hindu. Said the Hindu ascetic, ‘What can I teach you? Let us go to my guru.’ His guru was a Muslim dervish. When the student asked the dervish the reason for this intermingling of Hindus and Muslims, he replied:

‘Religion is like a three-storeyed mansion. On the ground floor are many rooms—for Hindus and their many castes, like Brahmins and Shudras; for Muslims and their various sects like Shias, Sunnis, Hanafis, Sufis, and others; so also for Christians—Roman Catholics, Protestants and so on. On the first floor, you will see Muslims—all Muslims—or Hindus—all Hindus and so on. Then go up to the second floor and you will see just one room with no divisions. That is, there are no Muslims or Hindus or anything else of the kind. Just human beings. And the object of their devotion is one God. If one starts a detailed analysis, nothing remains: everything becomes null and void; only God remains.’

Padmarag (The Ruby) is a novella that gives an account of an institution, Tarini Bhavan (Saviour Hall). Founded and led by a Brahmo widow, Dina-Tarini Sen, the story tells how she works with a community of adult women from different religions who administer, teach, and reside in the educational and social welfare wings of Tarini Bhavan. The Brahmo Samaj is a reformist and monotheist branch of Hinduism founded in 1828 by Rammohan Roy (1772–1833). Rabin-dranath Tagore (1861–1941) also belonged to this group, which did much to further girls’ and women’s education. In her own educational career, Hossain worked closely with the Brahmo educator Sarala Ray (1861–1946), who in 1920 founded a school for girls—the still flourishing Gokhale Memorial School, named after nationalist leader Gopal Krishna Gokhale. (Gokhale campaigned for women’s education and, in 1911, proposed in the Imperial Legislative Council a bill, thrown out by the British government, to make elementary education free and compulsory throughout India.) Ray’s school became known for its rigorous teaching (Bagchi 2009: 752), and after Hossain’s death, Ray wrote a moving obituary in which she noted: “One of her [Hossain’s] books, *Padmarag*, gives us some idea of her own ideals of life” (Hossain 2008: 598).

In *Padmarag*, the women in Tarini Bhavan come from many religions, including Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, and the community includes white as well as non-white women. Regional and religious diversity is prized, cutting across classes: “Just as there were women in Tarini Bhavan who belonged to different races, religions and classes, so too, were there maids from various regions. There were Bhutiyas, Nepalis, Biharis, Santhals, Kols, South Indians and so on” (Hossain 2005: 127). This is how Tarini Bhavan is presented (ibid.: 30):

Usually, when people referred to Tarini Bhavan, they not only meant the house that was so named, but also the school, the workshop and the Home for the Ailing and the Needy next to it. The school section, naturally, had Brahmo, Hindu and Christian teachers. When the number of Muslim students increased, a couple of teachers were appointed to impart religious instruction to them. What commendable egalitarianism! Muslims, Christians, Brahmos, Hindus—all working in harmony, as though born from the same womb.

A school, a training establishment for adult women, a home for widows, and a home for the destitute—all these are part of Tarini Bhavan. The school has both day scholars and boarders. The Society for the Alleviation of Female Suffering is a core association of the Tarini Bhavan project. Sisterhood is both informal and formal in *Padmarag* (ibid.: 32):

The women's attire was nearly identical: white garments, easily soiled, were avoided. Everyone wore saris and dresses in blue or saffron. Shoes and socks, the badges of 'civilization', were conspicuous by their absence. No one wore any jewellery; at the very most, some wore *shankhas* or bangles. None bore any signs of extravagance. All they seemed to be garbed in was simplicity and generosity. It was as if the daughters of sages and ascetics had renounced their ashrams in the wilderness for the material world. Such beauty lay in their austerity! The 'sisterhood' seemed to be compassion personified.

There is thus a sense of monastic community about Tarini Bhavan, with the community however seen as cross-religious; readers will note the reference to ashrams, part of Hinduism. And in this institution, which also has a very practical charge, women from different classes and marital statuses learn trades such as bookbinding, spinning, sewing, and sweet making. Teacher training is given, and nursing and typing are taught. Some trainees help run the institution's home for handicapped people and the homeless poor.

In the formal school of Tarini Bhavan, which does not take grants from the colonial government, nor from princely states loyal to the British government, the students are taught standard subjects, such as mathematics, geography, and physical and life sciences. Bringing together accounts of girls of normal school-going age and adult women engaged in vocational and life-long learning is one of Hossain's achievements in this novella. *Padmarag* also offers the life stories of the women inhabitants of Tarini Bhavan, which are narratives of familial and patriarchal oppression. With many tales of familial, marital, and patriarchal practices that often lead women to madness or to the brink of suicide, and with the women belonging to different faith communities, Hossain's utopian visions are not just for Muslim youth, but include a wide range of religions. If we have in *Padmarag* the tale of Saudamini, a virtuous Hindu wife driven to madness after being falsely constructed as a terrible stepmother, we also have the story of a white Englishwoman, Helen Horace, who cannot be divorced from a criminally lunatic man, according to the British divorce laws of the time.

Padmarag is named after a mysterious young woman who seeks refuge in Tarini Bhavan, a woman whose real names are Siddika and Jainab and who is nicknamed Padmarag (Ruby) by the Tarini Bhavan sisters. Padmarag's past is shrouded in secret, but we come to know more about it as the story unfolds. At the end of the novella, this young Muslim woman refuses to marry Latif, the man she loves and to whom she had been betrothed before family machinations had separated them. Siddika's brother Muhammad Suleiman is described as being "an upholder of justice, virtue and religion" (Hossain 2005: 62). Equally, Latif's paternal uncle Haji Habib Alam, who is responsible for not allowing Latif and Siddika's marriage to take place, is the kind of man who writes to Suleiman asking that Siddika's share of her family inheritance should be written over in her name even before she marries. To this, Siddika's brother replies that his sister will get full charge of her

share of the family inheritance as soon as she turns eighteen; the marriage should take place in any case. In such stories, Hossain shows her appreciation of those like Suleiman, who seek to safeguard adult Muslim women's right to inheritance, and her critique of corrupt figures like Alam. At the end of the narrative, Siddika chooses to administer a landed estate, work for the welfare of people, and bring up her nephew. Thus, in this novella the typical courtship plot and form are subverted, and we see that Hossain makes careful distinctions between ethical Muslims and non-ethical, corrupt Muslims. In fact, this is true for people from the other religions portrayed, such as Dina-Tarini Sen, the leader of Tarini Bhavan, who exercises her own ethicality and autonomy in widowhood by choosing to continue the work she does in the face of much opposition: her relatives, including her older and younger brothers-in-law, remain irritated, "lamenting over the lakhs of rupees she was apparently squandering for this purpose" (Hossain 2005: 28).

Padmarag offers us, as a counterpoint to harsh corruption, many lyrical, affective registers brought forth by singing and music. The novella offers us the story of a very sick little boy, Sarat, whom the Tarini Bhavan sisters nurse. Before dying, he sings with great emotion *ragas* of north Indian classical music, such as Bhairavi and Behaag, while Siddika accompanies him beautifully (Hossain 2005: 60):

On the day of his departure, Latif arose at dawn. As soon as he was awake, the sound of music reached him from afar. Since he was a great lover of music, he identified the raga and the beat—it was the melodious raga Bhairavi. Powerfully drawn to the music being played on a harmonium, he could no longer remain in his room. He would be leaving that day.

Was that why the gods in the city of heaven were singing a song of farewell mournfully? He stepped out of his room and was informed by a maid he spoke to that Siddika was playing the harmonium. He listened attentively, hoping that he would also hear her sing, but his luck was out. Gradually, the music died away. Was this music an expression of the deep anguish buried in the singer's heart, abandoned to the winds and poured into the infinite expanse of the sky?

Such registers of affect and beauty are resonant with the highest registers of the spiritual and religious in Hossain's work, and they brought inspiration to the very difficult and active role she played as an urban educator of Muslim girls and as a social welfare actor. Such musical registers are also utopian, as analyzed by Levitas (2013: 40–60). Music is a prefigurative and performative practice expressing emotions such as love, loss, redemption, longing, and fulfillment, and it "may also be construed as utopian" (ibid.: 55). Levitas writes that "there is something in the nature of music itself and our making of it which reforms us as subjects and agents, and thus both conjures the possibility of a new world and moves towards it" (ibid.: 61).

Hossain's Efforts to Support Her School and the Paradoxes of Colonial Womanhood

Many people protested when Hossain arranged for buses to transport the girls who were students in her school to and from their homes. There were charges that the girls were losing purdah. Yet many people, men and women, also stood by Hossain and supported her. From 1911 to 1926 and beyond, Hossain wrote a series of letters to the *Mussalman*, a daily newspaper, in which she spoke up for her school and for Muslim girls' education (Hossain 2008: 525–545). She requested donations from those who could afford it, and even canvassed for sale books written by her and books from her personal collection to raise money for the school. This brings us to another of the many layers needed to analyze Hossain's utopian visions, that is, the work she did to make her educational dream of schooling Muslim girls a stronger and better reality by

discussing the school's achievements and problems in the print and public sphere. These steps undertaken by Hossain to advance her work as an educator of Muslim youth, specifically girls, should be seen as part of utopianism.

In her letters to the *Mussalman*, Hossain discussed key teaching-related issues faced in her school, notably the issue of the language of instruction. Hossain was a great advocate of Bengali being taught and used as a medium of instruction, but she found that most parents preferred English or Urdu. This issue of Bengali as the preferred language of Bengali Muslims would eventually lead to a great political movement that resulted in the birth of the modern country of Bangladesh, which liberated itself from Urdu-majority Pakistan in 1971. Hossain's project of teaching Muslim girls in Bengali thus also had a utopian charge: while she envisioned something that was not easily realized in her own time, it became far more of a reality after the birth of Bangladesh.

Padmarag has its teachers engaging in community mapping in the city. The teachers in the school of Tarini Bhavan walk through localities, campaigning for Muslim girls to be sent to school. They also check to see whether the school buses (actually horse-drawn carriages) can reach the narrow lanes in which some students live. In real life, through the Anjuman-i-Khawatin-i-Islam, the Bengal branch of which Hossain founded and led, she and other Bengali Hindu and Muslim women went to various slums of Calcutta to impart literacy and sewing and handicrafts skills. The vocational training schemes for young women in *Padmarag* thus chime with Hossain's real-life experience. The constant sense of real-life constructive work gives Hossain's utopian fiction grounding, even though dream, plangency, and elusiveness are also present, conveyed in a variety of literary modes—from science fiction and pastoral (in "Sultana's Dream") to evocations of music and lyrical verse interludes (in *Padmarag*).

Hossain's life and work show that to be a woman in a modernizing and colonial society has paradoxical consequences, particularly for gentlewomen. Although they had access to education and were members of an emergent civic-minded bourgeoisie, women like Hossain reveal through their writings the deprivations and inequities that had become embedded in their society. Hossain pushes for cautious modernization and writes intensively about ways to secure women's education. But she also reveals the ambiguities of progress and attempts to bring into her work values and associations connected with the domestic sphere, such as compassion, trust, affective bonds, inwardness, and conversational networks. Her vision can be analyzed in very transcultural and cross-religious terms, as my readings of *Padmarag* and "The Worship of Women" bear out. She sees the world as interwoven with religions and cultures, and in her utopian visions for her readership, including Muslim youth whom she had taught, she retained this emphasis.

Hossain's Impact on Women Writers, Educators, and Activists

Through her variety of associational and educative activities, Hossain also mentored Muslim women leaders who did not study in her school. Thus, in yet another layer necessary to understand Hossain's utopian visions for youth, she transmitted her ideas and ideals to talented young girls and women, who then took up Hossain's baton and emerged as key writers and leaders. One of the remarkable women Hossain mentored was Sufia Kamal (1911–1999), a young poet who worked with Hossain in the Anjuman-i-Khawatin-i-Islam, doing social welfare work in Calcutta slums; *Padmarag* was a great favorite of Kamal. Also an auto-didact like Hossain, Kamal became a legendary activist in the Bhasha Andolan (Language Movement) that led to the struggle for independence and war with Pakistan, from which independent Bangladesh emerged in 1971. Another remarkable Bengali Muslim educator, writer, and activist Hossain mentored was

Shamsunnahar Mahmud (1908–1964), who wrote a biography of Hossain. Mahmud was highly educated, obtaining a BA in 1932 (when the Sakhawat Hossain Memorial High School gave her a reception), and an MA in Bengali in 1942. She edited the magazine *Bulbul* with her brother Habibullah Bahar. Mahmud, who was secretary to the Nikhil Banga Muslim Mahila Samity (All Bengal Muslim Women’s Society), visited Turkey and West Asia as a representative of East Pakistan in 1952. She led a delegation to the International Council of Women in Colombo and joined the International Friendship Organisation as regional director for the whole of Asia. She visited countries such as the United States, England, France, and Italy. She helped establish the Centre for the Rehabilitation of Disabled Children in 1961 and was elected member of the East Pakistan National Assembly in 1962.

In her biography of Hossain, Mahmud ([1937] 1996) takes pride in how the Anjuman-i-Khawatin-i-Islam continued to spearhead the movement for Muslim women’s emancipation and education even after Hossain’s death, culminating in a conference of the International Council for Women held in Calcutta in February 1936, where women from all over the world gathered (Bagchi 2010: 59). Although education is a constitutive aspect of youth, for Hossain education was held to take place processually, formally as well as informally, engaged in by youth as well as adults, with a sense of education as lifelong learning. Thus, as reflected in Hossain’s life as a writer and social actor, as well as in her written works, education plays a pivotal role in her many-layered utopia. Educational facilities in Ladyland and in Tarini Bhavan serve as crucial places for utopian imagination and practice.

Hossain’s Mobile, Transcultural, and Cross-Religious Utopian Visions

The transculturation, innovation, and adventurous mobilities across cultures and history found in Hossain’s work can function as analytical drivers when we mobilize utopia as method to understand better how religion and utopia intertwine. Hope, faith, cross-religious dialogue, dreams of a better world, and experiments in writing and practice intersect in Hossain’s work. Such non-Western, non-Eurocentric, and non-colonial utopian visions, when taken seriously, can also play a major role in shaping a more radical and diverse field of utopian studies.

Hossain is a passionate and skillful literary craftswoman: she thinks and imagines in her writing both through and within Islam, as well as across other religions. Religion is mobilized in her writing in terms that are very different from commonsense representations of the relation between religion and utopia. The possibility of religiously inspired utopias is often discarded by scholars because religion is deemed to reproduce fixed patterns and to elicit forms of exclusion, whereas in Hossain’s case it is rather the opposite. Hossain shows an affective investment, especially evident in “Sultana’s Dream” and *Padmarag*, in fellowship and sisterhood between women in utopian micro-communities, which should be analyzed in feminist terms, while also having an affective charge similar to the religious and spiritual. In such heuristics in Hossain’s writing and work, religion is rethought and seen as both disempowering and empowering. Religion, cross-religious dialogue, and more gender-just visions of utopian futures in which religion plays a prominent role remain indispensable to understand the work of Hossain, as indeed that of many other South Asian writers.

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