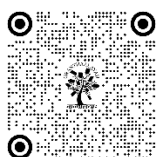


# EXPLORING GENDER INTERSECTIONALITY IN BEGUM ROKEYA'S WORKS AND VANDANA SINGH'S WORKS

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## ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the theme of gender intersectionality in Begum Rokeya's 'Sultana's Dream' (1905) and Vandana Singh's 'The Woman Who Thought She was a Planet' (2008). These two important works are rooted in different cultural and historical backgrounds. Both the stories defy the patriarchal norms and bring forth alternative perceptions of gender, space, and power. Rokeya's Sultana's Dream is a utopian vision of a society ruled by women, where female intellect and freedom are the central themes, overturning the traditional gender roles. On the other hand, Singh's story revolves around alienation and transformation in a dystopian world, using metaphor to speak about identity and societal constraints on women.

Using an intersectional framework, this paper analyses the way these authors approach the intersecting issues of gender, class, and culture. It looks into how Rokeya critiques colonial patriarchy through the construction of a progressive society led by women, while Singh explores the challenges women face within and beyond patriarchal structures. The article suggests that both narratives do not only depict alternative realities but also challenge the constraints on female identities. This analysis demonstrates how speculative fiction continues to be relevant in exposing and confronting gender inequalities and emphasizes the role of imagination in challenging societal norms

**Keywords:** Gender Intersectionality, Multiple Identities, Discrimination, Oppression

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Gender intersectionality in literature speaks to the investigation of how a gender intersects at other social loci, especially race, class, sexuality and ability, including how such crossroads shapes individual characters' perceptions, experiences and identities. Gender intersectionality can thus be used as a basis by authors to really dig deeper into the complexities of human experience, and characters and narratives that can be developed and reflected in the real-life social structures and systems of oppression. This framework would thus help to understand how various aspects of identity come together to influence roles in society and personal struggles.

In literary analysis, gender intersectionality may be particularly effective to open up the depth and complexity of oppression. For instance, a woman belonging to a particular ethnic, racial, or socio-economic group may be discriminated

against based on her gender in specific ways. Through this understanding of where gender intersects with race, class, and cultural context, literature becomes more encompassing and valid as a response of marginalized voices.

## 2. EXPLORING GENDER INTERSECTIONALITY IN BEGUM ROKEYA'S AND VANDANA SINGH'S WORKS

Begum Rokeya and Vandana Singh are established writers who critique issues in relation to gender, identity, and social justice in their writing. Through them, the dimensions of gender, relating to the various other factors that constitute human identity, were provided with readers as nuanced perspectives in understanding the experience of women within their given socio-cultural background.

**Begum Rokeya (1880–1932):** She is a key figure in early feminist literature from Bengal, India. She is most recognized for feminist writings and social change. She actually spends her writings critiquing patriarchal structures that show the oppression women are under, especially as regards colonialism and societal pressures women come under in early 20th-century Indian society. Her most famous work, *Sultana's Dream*, illustrates themes of gender and social justice through the idea of a utopian society in which women assume higher-level positions and the traditional roles between men and women are reversed. In her work, Rokeya looks at where all three intersect with gender, showing how oppression based on these factors varies for women with different classes and castes.

Begum Rokeya, in *Sultana's Dream*, gives a most radical critique of the construct of gender roles while taking into consideration the cultural, historical, and social force behind it. It is a bright novella analysing how gender is socially constructed, imposed, and upheld among the people. Such novella cultivates a utopian world when traditional patriarchy posits itself vainly as passive. The reversal of roles leads to a much deeper understanding of intersectionality and how the crossing of gender, cultural practices, and historical injustices can inform the experiences of women in *Sultana's* world and that of the fictional utopia known as *Ladyland*.

*Sultana's Dream* is concerned centrally with the strictly defined gendered roles that prevent women from access to public domains and power while keeping them limited to the confines of the domestic sphere. This gendered exclusion is represented in the practice of *purdah*, where veiled women live secluded lives within the *zenana*. Such practices are deeply rooted in patriarchal cultural and religious principles because they constrict the autonomy of women and curtail their freedom of movement and actions in both private and public spheres. *Sultana's* experiences, her socialization as a *pardanashin* (veiled) woman, reflect some intersections between gender with cultural norms and the expectation of religion that strait jackets women into submissive, domestic roles.

However, for *Ladyland*, this reversal of gender roles becomes the backbone of this feminist vision. The men are there in private, while the women hold public and governmental positions, thus reversing societal structures that traditionally place women at subordinates' positions. Not only do the roles of the genders flip, but so does the power dynamic in these roles, yielding evidence of how deep-seated societal expectations can be in people's lives, shaped by intersectional forces of gender, culture, and history.

The conceptions of the *zenana* as a space where a woman was kept secluded from the public sphere represent a significant intersection in *Sultana's Dream*. Over time, the *zenana* emerged as an institutionalized form of gender segregation in South Asian societies, activated by colonial and religious ideologies tending toward control and regimentation over women's mobility and accountability. The *Zenana* did not allow women to access the outside world; however, it made room for them to exercise their power in household affairs, such as controlling finances. The *zenana*, an idea that has been around since time immemorial, is inverted; men are sequestered in Rokeya's *Ladyland*, and the whole power structure shifts to disprove a patriarchal assumption surrounding gender role. The idea that has been with time immemorial is upside down; here, men are secluded in the *Ladyland* of Rokeya, and all the power plays are reversed just to disprove a patriarchal assumption surrounding the gender role.

In reverse, this further elucidates gender norms tied by cultural, religious, and historical forces that appear fluid and adjustable in reshaping the same as needed for change in society. Here, for example, this change transforms *Ladyland's* *zenana* into the masculine space or *mardana* but puts more power into feminine hands. The act of changing gendered space thus emphasizes and develops the very critical critique portrayed by the novel against how those cultural and historic practices—the removal of women—are used toward maintaining patriarchal control. This kind of idea seems to have gone away in part through showing both the possibility that women could really wield power from within the open and closed settings once their socially determined roles start getting knocked about.

In *Sultana's Dream*, gender intersects the historical and cultural impositions of patriarchal systems. Rokeya's argument does not strictly revolve within the confines of gender but speaks of the other forces that connect women through the chains of religion and culture. The secular basis of *Ladyland*, founded on "love and truth," is thus in stark contrast to the religious rationales for gender inequality in *Sultana's world*, both in the colonial Christian influence and the Islamic patriarchal structures. Sister Sara's debates over men's physical strength vis-à-vis women's leadership serve to highlight a more general attack on the social assumptions regarding gender and power. While Sister Sara is cognizant of men having a physiologic upper hand, she asserts that men and women could lead equally just because of having physical strength, since the social definition of physicality does not equate solely with masculinity but with a type of power wherein a man does not have monopoly over. It is not mere feminism on Rokeya's part that dreams of achieving equality through merely superficial means. It's also a vision toward redressing deeper, historical injustices of gender-based oppression to establish a new social order, which should be fair and equitable. *Ladyland* in *Sultana's Dream* is a powerful reimagining of gender roles, offering a critique of the intersecting forces of gender, culture, religion, and history that shape women's lives. In this sense, Begum Rokeya uses a society where gender roles are reversed to show how arbitrary and constructed gender norms are and how there needs to be a shift in the societal structures. The novella criticizes the various social, cultural, and historical forces that contribute to sustaining patriarchy through its use of gender intersectionality as a means for envisioning and creating a future society that upholds justice, equality, and freedom for all women.

**Vandana Singh** is an Indian American writer known for her blend of speculative fiction with social commentary. For example, *The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet* is just one of many stories that challenges traditional gender roles and looks at how issues of gender intersect with other cultural and political factors. Her work is often an articulation of identity complexities in a post-colonial, globalized world, exploring tensions between personal autonomy and societal expectations, especially for women of colour. In examining the social and environmental conditions that frame women's lives, Singh speaks to both gender and other intersecting identities: race, class, and colonial legacy.

The stories in 'The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet' (2008) by Vandana Singh illustrate gender intersectionality through speculative fiction, interlacing gender with class, cultural identity, and individual self-perception. Most of the characters in the collection are women and are alienated and have an identity crisis. Through these stories, Singh discusses the intersections of gender with other socio-cultural and existential concerns. The "alien" that the characters meet is both metaphorical and literal, reflecting how people, especially women, deal with the oppressive structures of society, gender, and historical expectations etc.

Singh's protagonists frequently live in isolation within their own lives—disconnected, usually because of gendered expectations and standards from the world at large. In "Hunger", the female protagonist Divya goes through a highly intense feeling of alienation in her life as well as her social life, which sees a rising estrangement from her family and more largely from the world. Even in the rather mundane setting of a house party, Divya continues to feel increasingly estranged and self-apart, her inner conflict, based on gendered roles and expectations created by her marriage and motherhood. It reflects the internal junction of gender and identity as Divya navigates the role of a woman within the confines of familial duty and societal expectation, all the while discovering the uncharted, alienated experiences of the self.

The story of the titular collection, *The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet*, describes the journey of the protagonist who undergoes an intense struggle in trying to comprehend herself as a woman and an individual with an unfulfilled sense of self. The fact that she thinks she is a planet metaphorically speaks to her feeling of disconnection from her identity. The role of gender in this disconnection is immense, since societal expectations have bound her to certain desires and ambitions. She is compelled by the gender roles thrust upon her, making her question her worth and purpose in life beyond just being a wife and mother. Her journey becomes symbolic of the larger issues that women face when their identities are dictated by patriarchal constructs rather than personal desire and self-exploration.

Singh's stories frequently bring in class, caste, and gender as overlapping layers of identity, complicating the women's struggles. In "Delhi", it is the experiences of the male protagonist with the temporal coincidences that reveal the layered identities of those living on the socio-economic margins. These identities are defined by class and gender, and Singh uses speculative fiction in order to criticise how time and space intersect and intersect with these identities. Here, the 'other' is not merely a gendered individual, but a class and socially excluded subject - which progresses to show the intersectional oppression of women and lower-class men, especially in post-colonial societies.

Through speculative fiction, Singh allows herself to leave the conventional confinements of realism and construct a space outside the bounds where gender could take its true shapes beyond the realms of the tangible world. She is free in this genre to metaphorically unravel the female experience where women, beyond the constraints of domestication, are living beings who outlive the narrow, earthbound, gender-defined expectations. He explores this speculative world to talk to the idea of gender as an inconstant and performative thing, which connects with feminist writings like Hélène Cixous's 'écriture féminine', which has been used as a way of challenging the limitations placed on female writing and speaking. Singh restages a different world where one's gender doesn't exist strictly as a determinant, fixed unit, but it is as elusive and changeable as the stars or the other worlds in the stories.

Alienation in Singh's writing is not just about the gender of her protagonists but a relationship with the universe at large. The sense of 'otherness' moves beyond personal identity to a more general alienation from the greater cosmos. The protagonist in "Hunger" shows a much broader emotional and existential sensitivity when she responds with empathy to the death of an old man and has a particular affinity for science fiction. This sensitivity is overtly connected with gender since it compels us to imagine the female subject as being emotionally attuned and caregiving; this kind of role can alienate someone as he or she fights for personal desires and ambitions in a seemingly non-connected universe. The speculative element in the story leads to a very deep penetration into the protagonist's internal world and, thus, reveals how empathy, gender roles, and the search for meaning are all interlinked.

The speculative works of Singh keep raising questions and imagining the roles women participate in, both in their immediate surroundings and out in the world. Alienation, identity crises, and speculative worlds reflect on the gendered and intersectional expectations placed upon women. Whether domestic or fantastical, women in Singh's stories, as is true for characters such as Lina in "Hunger," look for more to life than is assigned them. These are the women, never satisfied to take their positions as assigned in a world, not even one at the level of the universe, who subvert traditional roles by redefining woman.

In 'The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet', Vandana Singh uses speculative fiction as a medium to explore the intersectionality of gender. From the stories provided, one derives a nuanced sense of how class, culture, and personal identity intersect with gender. Through alienation and the struggles of finding identity, Singh critiques the hardening of strict gender norms and expectations that organize women's lives, encouraging a rethinking of gender as something performative, fluid, and in constant creation. In engaging with speculative fiction, Singh expands the possibilities of gendered narratives but also disputes the ordinary boundaries of gendered existence, inviting the reader to see the difficulty and invisibility of intersections that make up our identities.

In Vandana Singh's *The Woman Who Thought she was a Planet*, Intersectionality of gender is examined through different stories and the intricacies and inequalities that exist in the lives of women. Singh's stories are mainly about the conflict between personal experience and the social structure, with a strong emphasis on the intersections of gender, class, and other identities.

Most of the stories in the collection revolve around domestic spaces and relationships between men and women. The title story, 'The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet,' deals heavily with gender roles and expectations. Kamala, the protagonist, undergoes a form of alienation, but it is not from her point of view. Her husband, Ramnath, fails to understand the transformation and her statement that she is a planet, representing that he cannot grasp the concept of her independence. This narrative focuses on how the experiences of women are often trivialized or misconstrued, especially by male figures in their lives. The transformation of Kamala into a planet is a metaphor for the objectification and marginalization of women, but she is happy with this change, indicating a subversion of traditional gender roles.

In stories such as "Thirst," the character Susheela is explored in terms of gender intersectionality. Her longing for self-awareness and love with another woman contrasts with societal expectations that dictate she should not stray from those traditional, patriarchal expectations. Susheela's journey into self-realization involves not just the longing for something greater but also the forces from her gendered position in society. This is the story reflects on how gender intersects with societal expectations and personal desire. Conflicts in this regard occur when women try to negotiate their own identity within patriarchal constraints.

Moreover, while exploring class and societal roles, Singh also addresses gender. For example, in "The Tetrahedron," Maya is a student coming to terms with societal expectations of gender and class. She gets an arranged marriage and is therefore transformed in relation to a mysterious artifact that lands up on this earth. Her escape from those societal shackles, although projected as a private liberation, further reveals the trials that women often face in poor or middle-



class environments, as choices over their lives and self-identity can be shaped and determined by those external gender expectations.

'Delhi' stories are a convergence of gender and cultural and historical layers. It evokes alienation, and the narrative tries to bring this sense of alienation that marginal people, specifically women, suffer in the Indian socio-political landscape. Delhi becomes a metonym for those spaces where the lives of women are shaped through forces beyond their control—political, familial, or cultural. Singh's study on urban alienation is a very relevant work, where he raises questions on how women's struggle is further complicated by class, caste, and gender.

In Singh's work, one does not find gender separated from other strands of identity. Instead, it is interwoven very deep with alienation, societal expectations, and the self-will to be. Through speculative fiction, Singh challenges the established roles and spaces allocated to women and highlights the tension between self-assertion and a society's expectations. The stories in the collection illuminate how women navigate the complexities of their identities, making gender a central point of intersection with other factors such as class, culture, and societal structures.

### 3. GENDER INTERSECTIONALITY IN THEIR WORKS

Both authors address the concept of gender intersectionality, and through their works, they provide ample analysis on the fact that gender cannot be viewed in isolation but is interwoven with other forms of identity. Begum Rokeya's stories deconstruct the existing social norms against women's potential, while Vandana Singh, through her speculative fiction, unfolds alternative realities for women to fight against and overcome gendered expectations. In both cases, gender functions as a crucial facet in how the careers of the characters are woven together and configured with race, class, and colonialism.

Through Rokeya's feminist utopias and Singh's speculative narratives, gender is here portrayed not as a singular, fixed identity, but as an ambiguous, and therefore complex force that is made to evolve according to multiple structures. Their work, therefore, opens up an invitation to revisit how gendered experiences are embedded within broader structures of power and inequality, how they question certain assumptions that the traditional literary portraits of women generally tend to have.

Begum Rokeya and Vandana Singh's works represent the power of gender intersectionality in enhancing literature through a wide variety of explorations about the way women's lives are impacted by gender, race, class, and culture. The stories, beyond social justice understanding, provoke the reader to introspect the intricacies of identity both in history and the present.

Gender intersectionality in the works of Begum Rokeya and Vandana Singh delineates how gender oppression is interconnected with other social factors such as class, caste, and colonialism.

Begum Rokeya was one of the early feminist thinkers from Bengal who spoke about how patriarchal traditions and lack of education, particularly among Muslim women, were a source of subjugation for women. In her work, *Sultana's Dream*, she envisions a utopian society where the roles of gender are reversed to challenge the current status quo. She also fought for women's education as a tool for empowerment and recognized that socio-economic conditions only compound gender inequality.

Vandana Singh, a contemporary author, explores themes of gendered intersectionality with speculative fiction where she often examines issues of environmental justice, caste, and science fiction. In her works, she shows the interaction of technology, climate change, and modern power structures against gender oppression in society.

Both the writers, notwithstanding the different times and periods they belong to, show that gender is not a single axis of oppression but is deeply entangled with other social injustices. Their works are enormously significant criticisms of the structures of inequality and an appeal for inclusivity in the societal sector.

### 4. CONCLUSION

In that regard, Begum Rokeya and Vandana Singh collectively contribute insightful examinations of gender intersectionality, a complex portrayal of women's experiences toward the shaping influences of gender, class, culture, and history. Begum Rokeya's '*Sultana's Dream*' critically portrays the patriarchal structures that limit women to domestic roles, with an alternative of inverting gender roles wherein women come into positions of power. Rokeya,

through her utopian vision, not only questions the rigidities of gender norms but also challenges the colonial and cultural forces that perpetuate them.

Vandana Singh, on the other hand, utilizes speculative fiction to explore the alienation and transformation experienced by women navigating societal and gender expectations. In stories like 'The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet', Singh portrays women as alienated from their own lives and identities, critiquing how societal and gendered norms restrict their autonomy. Through the genre of speculative fiction, Singh challenges the fixed and rigid nature of gender, presenting alternative realities where gender is fluid and performative.

Both authors depict subtle struggles of women against multiple, often intersecting systems of oppression based either on colonial or patriarchal expectations or in meeting the depositions of society. They incite readers to address the complexities of identity in a critically analytical manner and reflect upon the constraints set by gender roles in society. Finally, the discussion of gender intersectionality in their works reveals how these authors push the boundaries of literature to reflect the layered realities of women's lives, challenging readers to question the conventional understandings of gender and identity.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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