



illustration: **DURGA BAI**

text: **BEGUM ROKHEYA SAKHAWAT HOSSAIN**

*Sultana's Dream* is an utopian novella written by Begum Rokheya Sakhawat Hossain, a pioneer of Muslim feminist thought and writing, championing women's right to education and freedom. This first appeared in 1905, when the purdah system of female seclusion was very prevalent.

Begum Rokheya in her life, brought certain parts of Ladyland to life. She founded a girl's school called Sakhawat Memorial Girl's School in Calcutta, which flourishes there till date. Her belief in a universalist society, where women are determined to better their lot by concrete social action and organising, remains an inspiration even today.

This edition of a feminist classic is a conversation across time; Durga Bai, a brilliant woman artist from the Gond tribe of Central India, brings her own vision to take on a Muslim woman's radical tale. The Gonds are one of the largest indigenous groups in India, with a culture that dates back a thousand years. It is a community art form, created and enjoyed by the entire village. It is traditionally painted on the mud walls of their houses. The dream city of Ladyland where peace-loving women overpower aggressive men through the power of their brains captured Durga Bai's imagination and she has given a fresh layer of meaning to a story written more than a hundred years ago.

**Here are some ideas, questions and activities to explore the book with students and discover how the book remains relevant and important today.**

### Talk about the story

- An utopia is an imagined place or state of things in which everything is perfect. In this book, Ladyland is such an utopia where there is no war and there are gardens everywhere. Women work only two hours a day and spend the rest of the time in creative pursuits, while men are locked up in murdanas. What does this say about the person who imagined this utopia?
- Why are the men locked up? Would you call such a place utopia?
- In *Sultana's Dream*, Rokheya Hossain attacks the institution of female seclusion. This is still practised in places around the world. Women are secluded from public observation by wearing concealing clothing from head to toe and by the use of high walls, curtains, and screens erected within the home. In many other places, gender segregation is prevalent. Gender segregation is when men and women have separate access to public spaces. Some of these work to the practical advantage of the gender concerned, such as ladies' compartments on trains. But there are other instances of segregation that can inhibit mobility and foreclose options—are such instances more to do with men or women? Why do you think this is so? Are things better for today's women than for say someone in your grandparents' generation?
- *Sultana's Dream* is Begum Rokheya's reaction to the unequal status of women in society. What methods are the women in the book using to beat the injustice?
- Durga Bai is an artist separated from Rokheya Hossain by both time and space. Yet this story resonated with her strongly. Do you think this was so easy because she is a woman? Why does this story remain relevant to us in our present day?

### Talk about the art

- Look up more Gond artists and their work. Refer to books such as *The Night Life of Trees*, *Signature: Patterns in Gond Art*, *Alone in the Forest*, for more examples.
- Gond patterning involves decorative fillers that have been handed down from the ancient tradition of body tattooing in the tribal societies. These designs are varied and unique to the artist, like a signature. Look at how the artist has used patterns to fill in the figures, the clothes, the hair, etc. Identify a set of 5 different patterns that are used repetitively in the book. Based on this, discuss if there is a logic to the use of patterns.
- Look carefully at how men and women are drawn here. They are very similar and yet you can tell a woman from a man. Their differences are not exaggerated. This is usually not the case for other representations of men and women. Keeping this in mind, discuss how men and women are shown in advertising and other media.

## Activities

- Write down your own utopia. Make a list of all the things that you dislike about the present world. Then, write a description of a world where the exact opposite exists. Give this world a name. Write about what a day in the life in this world is like.
- Before the next activity, here is a fun riddle. Can you figure it out?
- A father and son are in a horrible car crash that kills the dad. The son is rushed to the hospital; just as he's about to go under the knife, the surgeon says, "I can't operate—that boy is my son!" How? Answer: at the end.
- A gender stereotype is a set of codes dictating what types of behaviours are generally expected or desirable for a person based on the gender. For example, girls are supposed to like pink things and boys are supposed to like blue things. This, and any version of "girls are like this and boys are like that" refers to gender stereotypes. These stereotypes are used to put diverse people and their different personalities into only two boxes. This becomes a problem especially when people do not fit in to these roles

defined for them. Keeping this in mind, create two columns with the headings 'Girls' and 'Boys'. Under these headings, write down 5 things each that are commonly held ideas of stereotypes. Discuss if you fit in to the stereotypes that both you and your classmates have written down. What happens if you don't?

- Durga Bai is an artist who delights in showing women do things that break down gender stereotypes. This is what drew her to the fantastical elements of Ladyland in *Sultana's Dream*. Taking inspiration from this spirit, imagine and draw a picture of a girl doing an unconventional thing.

(Answer: The surgeon was his mother. This is a riddle from a Boston University study and only 15 % of the people surveyed got the answer. Gender stereotypes are all pervasive and often very harmful when they refer beyond what girls and boys may like, but talk about how they are, innately.)