



Sultana's Dream for Educators: Envisaging Utopia



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Written Text

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Images

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Introduction

This booklet is a guide for teachers in how *Sultanas' Dream*[1] can inspire new ways of thinking about peace and education. By exploring concepts like peace and utopia it sets out a case for teachers to encourage students to redefine peace as an evolving, hopeful process.

Advocating for a curriculum of hope – as both content and method – educators can create spaces for reflection, dialogue, and imagination. In this booklet we draw on concepts around utopia, critical pedagogy and speculative thinking to help understand how studying *Sultana's Dream* can explore societal structures and reimagine alternatives, aligning with Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy.

The 2024 inscription of *Sultana's Dream* as Memory of the World by UNESCO in their Asia-Pacific Register, submitted by the Liberation War Museum, has triggered the writing of this booklet.

[1] Begum Rokeya Sakhawa Hossain (2015). *Sultanas dream* - pb. Tara Books.



PEPU

In the idea of Peace as an Event, Peace as Utopia (PEPU) [1] we are invited to rethink what we mean by peace. Instead of seeing peace as something we achieve once there's no more conflict PEPU considers peace as something more open, more hopeful—and always to come.

Drawing on ideas from thinkers like Derrida [2] and Bloch [3], PEPU describes peace as something that isn't fixed. It's not a box we can tick or a goal we can fully reach. Instead, it's like a promise—something we're always working toward, something that's always unfolding in unexpected ways. This working towards Horner describes as the work of translating peace[4].

For education and development work, this means we need to let go of trying to deliver peace in a set formula. Peace education informed by PEPU is about creating spaces where people can reflect, question, and imagine together. It's about encouraging dialogue and openness—not just following rules or models.

Utopia is a helpful idea to facilitate this. One of the most prominent philosophers on Utopia, Ernst Bloch, sees hope as more than just a feeling—it's a way of thinking that helps us act. For him, history isn't finished; it's still being written and we can shape it. That's where “concrete utopia” comes in. It's not about wishful thinking—just dreaming—but about wilful thinking: choosing to act, to create real change[5]. Rokeya's life is a good example of this – she did not simply wishfully dream in Ladyland, it was a wilful dream because she went on to try and change the situation for girls in real life through her work in schools.

Thinking about concrete utopia helps us resist settling for what currently exists or feels inevitable. Instead, it keeps us open to imagining peace differently—beyond war or institutions. Utopia allows for dreaming, for longing, for believing that something better is possible.

It is also important to note that because Bloch sees Utopia as unfinished we must resist seeing it as a blueprint or perfect model we aim to impose on others, utopia in his reading becomes a kind of guiding light—something that pulls us forward together in the same direction, but not necessarily on the same path.

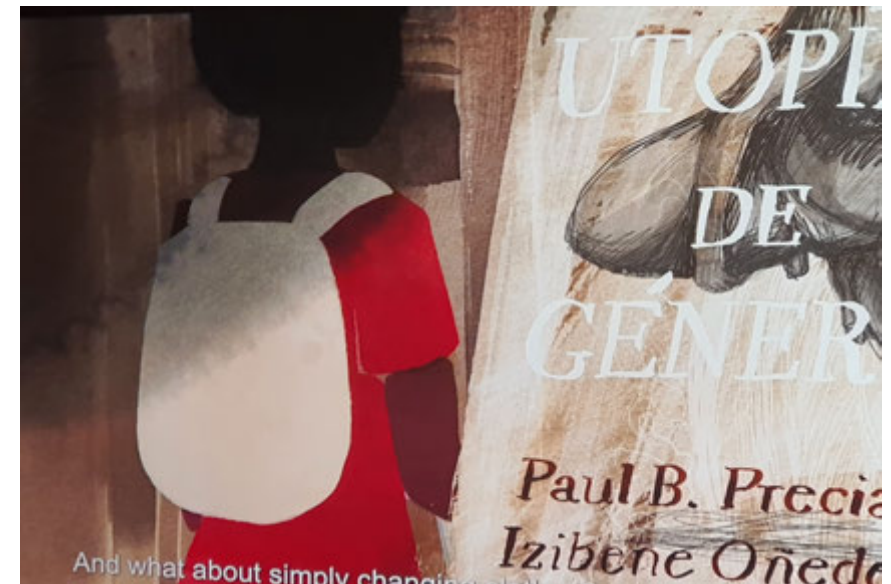
[1] Horner, L. K. (2013). *Peace as an event, peace as utopia : a re-imagining of peace and its implications for peace education and development*. *Discourse*, 34(3), 366–379.

[2] Derrida, J. (1992) 'Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority' in Cornell, D., Rosenfeld, M. and Carlson, D. G. (Eds.) *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*. London: Routledge.

[3] Bloch, E. (1986). *The principle of hope (Vol. 1)*. (N. Plaice, S. Plaice, & P. Knight, Trans.). Oxford: Blackwell.

[4] Horner, L. K. (2013). *Peace as an event, peace as utopia : a re-imagining of peace and its implications for peace education and development*. *Discourse*, 34(3), 366–379.

[5] Bloch, E. (1986). *The principle of hope (Vol. 1)*. (N. Plaice, S. Plaice, & P. Knight, Trans.). Oxford: Blackwell.



Utopia and Speculative fiction

In the recent film, *Sultana's Dream* (2023, dir. Isabel Herguera) which is based on Rokeya's book by the same name, the director tells us the story of Inés, a Spanish artist who discovers the book *Sultana's Dream* while traveling in India. The film explores how Inés' encounter with the story takes her on a journey of discovery about the life of Rokeya, friendship and feminism and how this helps Inés learn to dream. Early in the film after discovering the book Inés returns to Spain where she visits her friend's exhibition on Utopia. The two discuss the book *Sultana's Dream* and her friend encourages her to explore further, to learn how to dream. The film is not alone in assigning *Sultana's Dream* to the genre of utopian fiction and just as in the film Inés learns to dream, studying *Sultana's Dream* can also help school students learn how to dream.

The stories we tell matter because they shape how we see the world, ourselves, and each other. They're not just entertainment—they're ideological scapes, emotional anchors, and cultural memory. Stories construct reality because what we see as possible or impossible, normal or deviant, just or unjust—is influenced by the stories we repeat. Stories shape identity and the stories we grow up with tell us what kind of person is lovable or not and what gender and race look like. A shift in the dominant narrative is often the first step toward social change, and utopian and speculative fiction are important in this.

Speculative fiction is an umbrella term which covers a range of genres such as science fiction, fantasy, horror, dystopian fiction, magic realism and utopian fiction. There is a strong tradition of this kind of writing in the Bengali language stretching back to the end of the nineteenth century and the colonial period. Because it is fantastical, it is sometimes put into the category of 'pulp' or popular fiction, but its purpose can be deadly serious, and its potential for/in education is rich. Because speculative fiction 'speculates' about what is, or might be possible - or impossible - it is an excellent vehicle for exploring the limits and possibilities of our individual and collective humanity and inhumanity (for example, through depictions of aliens, robots and technologies in science fiction; or through exploring boundaries between good and evil as in horror etc). It is also used to explore societal structures, power relationships, inequalities and injustice through reimagining (as in *Sultana's Dream*) a world in reverse, or configured differently. In offering

its readers an alternative to the world in which they currently live, speculative fiction opens up pathways for critical reflection and interrogation.

Below are some ideas for activities and tasks you could undertake in a classroom to teach.

Read

Emotional Responses to Text. Ask students to draw a stick figure in their books. As they read the text (in sections, for example) pause, and ask them to write their emotions near the correct body part of the stick figure e.g. head/brain - confusion, interest, illumination; heart - excitement, love, sadness, anxiety; stomach - tension, nausea, anger etc. [Can be adapted for different ages]. These stick figures can be shared in pairs/groups to highlight differences and similarities.



Reflect

Think about the title of the story: Sultana's Dream. Why do you think Royeka Hossain chose to call the story by this name? What other titles would work, and why? In groups, come up with your own title for the book and 'pitch' it to the rest of the class, using evidence from the book to support your argument for the title you have chosen.

What are the key messages of Sultana's Dream? Groups of 4 to think of as many as they can and write each one on a post it note (these might include: gender, equality, sustainability, education and invention, nature and the environment etc). They then compile a 'Diamond Nine'. The most important message should go at the top, the next two below and so forth.

As a class, ask each group to share its top three messages, explaining reasons for their choices. Discuss:

Is there consensus? Why/why not?

Can the class agree on the 3 most important messages from the story?

Can they think of examples of ways in which these messages are relevant to them in their lives today?

Respond/Write

Think about an injustice that exists in your society/the world. Write your own 'Dream' story about a future in which this injustice is reversed.

Think about:

- who is dreaming this and why?
- what does this new world look like, feel like?
- what new ideas and inventions exist?
- what is the result of this reversal?

Critical Pedagogy

Utopian ideas not only shape theories of peace or describe themes in books, but also pedagogy and classroom practice. A utopian vision for education invites us to reimagine both what we teach and how we teach it. Rather than centring on technical content we can emphasize open-ended and aspirational ideas instead. Through engaging in the future by thinking critically, creatively, and collectively, education can help students not only interpret the world but also change it.

This draws heavily on the work of Freire, the Brazilian educator famous for his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* [1]. Freire's concept of education as a practice of freedom—rather than oppression—is helpful in considering what utopian education might look like. He critiques what he calls the "banking model", where teachers are assigned to deposit knowledge in students, who are seen as empty and passive vessels. In its place, Freire proposes a dialogical, problem-posing model of education in which students and teachers engage in mutual learning and reflection.



Education becomes an act of co-creation, grounded in the lived experiences of learners and aimed at transformative social action. To this end, utopian pedagogical approaches can be characterised as critical, participatory, and reflexive. Freire's pedagogy insists that students are treated as agents of change, capable of transforming both themselves and their communities.

Rabindranath Tagore left a rich legacy of critical pedagogy both in his writings and in practice. His story "The Parrot's Tale" is an example of speculative fiction based on the past to critically evaluate the present educational practice. His educational ideals are deeply related with the praxis of education, from early childhood development to the establishment of Viswabharati university as a catalyst of global knowledge.

Rokeya's pedagogical practice, her school, non-formal educational work among slum-dwellers etc. had a transformative impact which calls for deeper study. Rokeya empowered the girls through education and the alumni of her school in later life greatly contributed to transforming the society, specially in the then East Pakistan of 1950's.

So what does this mean in practice? Foundational to a utopian educational paradigm, we start with a curriculum for hope—a curriculum that challenges the inevitability of the status quo and reveals histories and futures of liberation. This might involve teaching texts like Sultana's Dream, which imagines a feminist utopia, as well as movements for decolonization and environmental justice. Curricula content that centres stories of resistance, alternative governance, and transformative possibility can help students to understand that other worlds have always been imagined and often enacted. However, curriculum is more than just content, and just as hope can inform content it can also be a method. For Freire, hope is a necessity for action—it is what sustains the struggle against oppression. The method of hope for Bloch was the imagination, and particularly the arts [2] (which would include the graphic arts and literature and music). Thus, a method of hope would be to cultivate the imagination, helping students explore what needs to be changed, what this change might look like and involve and to believe this is possible.

Imagination requires a participatory pedagogy – it can't be pre-assembled and deposited as knowledge into empty vessels, it comes from the students themselves. Here Freire's dialogical method is insightful. Freire advocates for the dismantling of hierarchical divides between educators and students, instead describing a collaborative and student-led learning space. In this articulation is embedded in the learning experience—students help shape the direction, content, and purpose of their education. This does not mean students don't need teachers - Freire did not advocate to get rid of teachers – instead teachers are important, not as arbiters of knowledge, but as facilitators of learning. To help imagination it is also important to resist normalization. Freire warned against the domestication of education—the tendency of institutions to reproduce dominant ideologies and constrain imagination.

[1] Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (; M. B. Ramos, Trans.). Herder and Herder.

[2] Bloch, Ernst (1988) *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*; translated by Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg. Cambridge, Mass.; London : MIT Press.



Gender

Gender does not simply define differences between men and women, but describes a social process through which ideas and expectations of being a man and being a woman are communicated and learned. Likewise, historically and now, understandings of gender are not limited to binary oppositions of men and women but can be more fluid and dynamic. As these are social processes, this means that these ideas vary across different places and different times. Colonialism also reinforced certain oppositions in the expected roles and behaviour of men and women, including in family relationships, which did not always reflect existing pre-colonial social dynamics.

Through her life and her work Rokeya was a prominent advocate for gender equality, for women's rights, and for girls' education. We may think that the time that Rokeya lived in the late 19th century and early 20th century was more restrictive than our own, but we can still see parallels with our own contemporary society in the context that is described in her writing. This may be part of why *Sultana's Dream* remains engaging to readers, as it presents an alternative world of gender relations and expectations which continues to feel relevant.

In *Ladyland*, Sultana finds an inverted world where women are no longer confined to domestic duties in the home but are leading society including governance, administration, science, and education. Men, by contrast, are confined to *murdana* (the male equivalent of *purdah*) restricted to the home and no longer allowed to take up public office. Men are presented as wild, impulsive, destructive, disordered, and wasteful. Not only is the society more peaceful through the leadership of women, it is also more efficient, with greater scientific innovation, and more ecologically harmonious, with balance between people and nature.

Ladyland presents a striking and humorous alternative vision of society premised on inverting gender relations. The idea of men's forced confinement in *murdana* seems absurd, and thereby effectively exposes the injustice of women's oppression in patriarchal societies. However, as a modern audience, we may also feel uncomfortable with the perpetuation of oppression through the restriction of others, rather than seeking to eliminate oppressive structures and practices and to transform gender relations entirely. This leads to a number of discussion points that may be raised in reading *Sultana's Dream*, to stimulate critical reflection and engagement with varied views and interpretations.

Thematic Discussions

Gender oppression

In *Ladyland*, gender restrictions are reversed so that men are subjected to the oppressions that women ordinarily face in patriarchal societies, and subsequently society flourishes under women's leadership.

This is an effective creative device to expose injustice – how does it make you feel as a reader?



Education as Liberation

Through their education women in the story were able to see the power structures which oppressed them and led to a world they did not like living in. Their knowledge and learning have given them ability to invert these power structures. Women govern this world through knowledge and accumulated wisdom, and not through brute force.

In what ways does, or might, this critical pedagogical approach (Friere) inform your own practice as a teacher?

Sustainability and Eco-feminism

In Ladyland women have used their education wisely; unlike the men, they are productive with their time in ways that secure a future. They innovate in order to live sustainably with their environment. Their inventions – prototypes of solar panelling and microwaves – harness the power of nature without using it up or destroying it. ‘We enjoy nature’s gifts as much as we can.’

Thinking of the natural world as a ‘gift’ rather than a resource is attributed to both education and gender. What are your thoughts on these ideas?

Compassionate leadership

In Ladyland the Queen does not rule by force and there is no need of police to enforce laws and moral behaviour. They are not hostile to neighbours, they do not seek expansion and material possessions; instead, they aim for harmony and peace.

What different kinds of models of leadership are there, and how does this example speak to those that you see elsewhere in the world?

Speculation, Utopia and the Dream

The society depicted in Sultana’s Dream is one built on imagination, not submission. It begins with the freedom, not just to think critically, but creatively. To be able to dream an alternative world can lead to freedom and change. The book imagines a world reversed as a starting point or pivot for a discussion about social transformation.

How effective is speculative fiction as a device for imagining different futures?



Conclusion

Sultana's Dream by Rokeya Hussain provides a rich resource for educators wishing to explore themes such as gender oppression, political leadership, sustainability and science and technologies. It works across a number of different curriculum areas and can be easily adapted to appeal to different age and ability levels. Asking students to engage with the text can also build literacy skills such as critical reading, debate and argument, as well as writing.





Rokeya's ancestral home at Pairaband, Bangladesh

Image from Sultana's Dream 2023 dir. Isabel Herguera