

Sultana Dreams of Infrastructure

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AT the beginning of Rokeya Hossain's (1880–1932) short story “Sultana’s Dream” (1905), the protagonist Sultana, a Muslim woman living in India, falls asleep in her easy chair and wakes up in Ladyland, a radiant utopian society. Here there are no wars, no crime, no poverty, nor disease; instead, Ladyland’s citizens live in a prosperous garden city, served by “aerial conveyances” and other scientific wonders.¹ Contemporary gender roles are also reversed: women can move about freely, and pursue careers in education and politics, while men stay indoors and do domestic work. Key to Ladyland’s flourishing, Sultana learns, are two forms of light: the first, the “enlightenment” that women have achieved through their public and intellectual endeavors, and the second, the literal light and heat of the sun, which the citizens have harnessed via technological innovation. Soaring through the sky in a solar-powered air-car, Sultana suddenly falls and is startled out of her dream—returning by the narrative’s end to her place in the easy chair. In keeping with the utopian tradition, Hossain’s story does not offer a blueprint for change but leaves its reader with a critique of contemporary society and a glimmering vision of a world otherwise, just over the horizon. All that’s required to get there is a (cultural, political, and technical) movement into light.

“Sultana’s Dream” in many ways prefigures the energy dreams of the twenty-first century. In the shadows of global warming, solar power appears to offer a viable way not just out of entrenched ecological, but also social, predicaments. “Solar reignites progress and offers it to the

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people and places left behind by fossil-fueled modernity,” write Imre Szeman and Darin Barney, generating the prospect of “a world awash in energy, justice, and life.”² At the crux of Szeman and Barney’s argument is the ideological power and malleability of solar dreams. Commentators from across the political spectrum mobilize solar as a vehicle for complex, sometimes competing, worldviews and desires. These visions typically emphasize solar’s exuberance and endless flow, yet sunbeams nevertheless need materials and infrastructure to convert them into energy. Solar imaginaries, past and present, cannot therefore be untethered from materiality, dinting their utopian promise, but also raising renewed means to read solar narratives via the irreducible political qualities of infrastructures themselves. Texts like “Sultana’s Dream” make such configurations visible and open to interrogation, and demonstrate the ways that solar, as infrastructure, energizes new social and political forms—even those yet undreamed.

This article examines “Sultana’s Dream” as a key site for thinking through the entanglements of sovereignty, gender, colonization, and environmental relations as they are articulated through infrastructure. To read infrastructurally in this way, we attend to socio-historical context and the more modular aesthetics and meaning-making affordances of solar energy. Such a mode of reading makes infrastructure legible as an essential political ground for the maintenance or transformation of socio-ecological relations.

Solar engines were first patented and used in the 1860s, emerging alongside solar heat-pumps and solar ovens. These technologies, from their inception, were accompanied by dreams of free energy, liberation from the oppressive governance of fossil capital, and an improvement of the lives of global citizens. Yet the utopian aspirations of early solar inventors were inexorably tangled up with the colonial motivations of the states that patronized them.³ Tropical climates, short on coal and thus harder to control, had plenty of sunshine. The inventor of the first solar-powered steam engine, Augustin Mouchot, tested several of his early designs in Algeria, which the French state hoped would make life more tolerable to attract European settlers. The American solar pioneer Frank Shuman was hired by the British to build a solar-powered irrigation system to rationalize the Nile for cotton-growing. These environments now held potential to be transformed through new technology into sun-drenched sites of production. This transition would not redistribute, but only buttress, imperial power.

Written by a Muslim woman in English in a society defined by British colonialism and “multiple patriarchies,” “Sultana’s Dream” emerges from distinct literary and socio-political contexts, distinguishing it from Anglo-American utopias and other solar discourses of the period.⁴ At times, the text is notably anti-imperial. “We do not covet other people’s land,” the Queen of Ladyland tells Sultana, nor “fight for a piece of diamond” like “the Koh-I-Noor” (14). Despite rejections of British paternalism, Hossain’s narrative nevertheless shares sentiments with colonialist solar dreams. Most forcefully, the text places faith in the sun’s abundance and in the human ingenuity needed to exploit its supply, bringing inhospitable environments to a state of liveliness. Ladyland’s women have invented two technologies to control environmental conditions: a solar battery by which they collect unlimited “sun-heat,” and a “wonderful balloon”

to which they attached a number of pipes. By means of this captive balloon, which they managed to keep afloat above the cloud-land, they could draw as much water from the atmosphere as they pleased . . . [and] stopped rain and storms thereby. (8)

The “water balloon” is a total infrastructural system, where the distance between human desire and natural rhythms is dissolved by means of conditioning the latter to the needs of the former, apparently without consequence. Here the narrative prefigures geoen지니어ing; a deliberate technological management of Ladyland’s climate. In the tradition of garden utopias, real contradictions are dissolved through aesthetic and symbolic resolution. There is no “inside” nor “outside” in Ladyland: grass is mistaken for a “soft carpet” and “velvet cushion(s)”; pathways are covered with “moss and flowers”; and houses are open to and “situated within beautiful heart-shaped garden(s)” (4–6). Integral to these visions of cultivation are the aesthetic qualities of solar itself: its nurturing warmth and stimulating light.

Atanu Bhattacharya and Preet Hiradhar connect the text’s techno-utopianism to the ideals of the Bengal Renaissance, a nineteenth-century artistic and intellectual movement to which Hossain belonged. “Sultana’s Dream” contends with contemporary discursive formations that “obsessed” the Bengali *bhadralok*: the “women’s question”; Enlightenment science; religious divisions; and British colonialism.⁵ What draws these discrete struggles together in the text is infrastructure, as a dialectical image and medium for contesting social and political forces. Hossain’s narrative thus surfaces dominant and emergent ideologies simultaneously.

It never fully breaks free from hegemonic structures, yet it still generates transformation or opportunities for what Deborah Cowen terms “infrastructure otherwise”: the mediation and contestation of new intimacies and revolutions.⁶

Spatial, social, and imperial relations were in flux at the time Hossain wrote her narrative. In 1905, the same year that “Sultana’s Dream” was published, the British Raj implemented the partition of Bengal, a territorial restructuring that attempted to strengthen colonial power via a “divide and rule” policy between local Hindu and Muslim communities. In answer, Indian nationalists also sought to reorganize boundaries and the distribution of resources. The Swadeshi Movement, for example, advocated for village communities to boycott foreign goods and invest instead in the household production of handwoven cloth, known as khadi, a localized form of nonviolent political action, which they believed would facilitate self-rule.

Resonances of contemporary political tension, religious division, and the redesignation of space and labor find their way into “Sultana’s Dream”; yet in this other world, these fractures have largely been sutured by the installation of solar infrastructures and the “enlightened” endeavors of citizens. Ladyland’s women deploy solar inventions to optimize heating, agriculture, industry, gardening, and transportation, liberating themselves from “hard manual work.” Signaling their detachment from territorial and material concerns, citizens travel freely across open ground and sky, and practice a universal form of spirituality based on “Love and Truth” (11–14). Post-carbon energy systems, as Elizabeth Miller argues, are imagined to be community-oriented and maintain marked feminist and anticolonial potential. The text’s centerpiece, for example, is a verdant kitchen without “coal” or “smoke” that is run entirely on solar heat, freeing up leisure time (7). A powerful emblem of female emancipation and of a self-sufficient national home, the solar kitchen is also, Miller notes, a rejection of “the infrastructures of fuel transport.”⁷ Furthermore, without dependence upon imperial coal, Ladyland is free to trade with select nations that share its “enlightened” values.

“Sultana’s Dream” thus attempts to unify its diverse readership and quell colonial, political, and religious clamor via the harmonizing force of solar, which melts all forms of dissent into air. The text operates as a knot of contradictory energies that are rerouted, examined, and given material form, surfaced in the narrative by the twin forms of illumination: women’s enlightenment and solar energy. Hossain’s story is not radical because it represents “green” alternatives to fossil fuels but

because it foregrounds an infrastructural disposition that recognizes (historically feminized and racialized) practices which Darin Barney argues might otherwise be excluded from the realm of political action—“maintenance, provisioning, care, kin-making, and planning”—and imbues them with political force.⁸

This infrastructural politics is clearly expressed through the text’s examination of “purdah,” the seclusion of women from public life and men, practiced in Muslim and some Hindu communities. Through purdah, a social infrastructure that includes both custom, law, and materiality in the form of the domestic space, the text explores material conditions resonant with the aesthetics of solar, such as shelter, exposure, darkness, and light. Miller, for example, connects the text’s representation of purdah to energy transition, arguing it offers a fictional escape from an “extraction-based modernity,” evidenced by Sultana’s movement from her “mine-like” bedroom into Ladyland’s “sun-lit open world.”⁹ The fundamental precursor to Ladyland’s energy transition, however, is the “enlightenment” of women through education, which is itself infrastructural, facilitating social and intellectual movement. Ladyland’s women then maintain these more favorable conditions via solar technologies, freed up from the demands of fossil-fueled capital, but also by weaponizing the sun’s power. Invading enemies are repelled by instruments that can direct “scorching heat,” and Ladyland’s men, without knowledge of or access to solar (having originally dismissed solar experiments as “a sentimental nightmare”), are shut away for protection and punishment (10–11).

Each of these layers of infrastructural mediation of literal and metaphorical light—education, environmental management, and violent force—come together to produce a nation of sovereign women. Purdah, as infrastructure, becomes the staging ground to mediate and reimagine the text’s central social and political disagreement. The sex-segregated shelter that it articulates is hardly revolutionary: domination is merely inverted. Similarly, the large-scale infrastructure can’t quite escape its colonial ground, controlling and making invisible the vulnerable entanglements of human and nonhuman worlds (there may be aestheticized gardens in Ladyland, but where are the bugs, bees, bears, and amoebas?).

And yet an “infrastructure otherwise” still glimmers in the text. The utopian promise of infrastructure is not that it will *in itself* bring about new modes of being: infrastructures concretize and extend the social relations they emerge from, but they hold the possibility of generating

a different politics nonetheless. Exposed via the social and technological infrastructures of light, Sultana forms unexpected bonds with her utopian guide to Ladyland, Sister Sara, whom she initially mistakes for a “dear old friend,” only to realize that the woman beside her is a “stranger” (4). Sultana’s early awkwardness at this mistake passes, and the pair walk “hand in hand” in “broad daylight” and relate to each other as equals and relations—something like Lauren Berlant’s notion of “stranger intimacy.”¹⁰ This form of sociality acknowledges our entangled and dependent nature but maintains a “being with” without collapsing into exclusive and possessive notions of “belonging.” Similarly, Sister Sara shares with Sultana her passion for “embroidery work,” a leisure pursuit made possible through the liberating power of solar (6). Sara’s embroidered cloth, on one hand, recalls the Swadeshi Movement and its modes of nonviolent, creative, household protest—a domestic practice made into a political activity. Weaving together colorful threads in intricate design, Sara’s embroidery, on the other hand, also seems to materialize the potential of infrastructures themselves: as a series of interwoven relations that together may make vibrant new forms.

NOTES

1. Hossain, “Sultana’s Dream,” 12. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
2. Szeman and Barney, “Solarity,” 1.
3. Chatterjee, “Poor Woman’s Energy,” 6.
4. Chaudhuri, “Ecology and Virtue,” 113.
5. Bhattacharya and Hiradhar, “The Sentimental Nightmare,” 616.
6. Cowen, “Following,” 480.
7. Miller, *Extraction Ecologies*, 169.
8. See Barney, “Infrastructure.”
9. Barney, “Infrastructure,” 163.
10. Berlant, “The Commons,” 398.

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