

Gender and Empowerment: A Feminist Study of Begum Rokeya's Sultana's Dream and Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a comparative feminist reading of two landmark texts: *Sultana's Dream* (1905) by Begum Rokeya (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain) and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) by Maya Angelou. By situating Rokeya's feminist utopia and Angelou's autobiographical narrative of race, gender and self-actualisation within a broader discourse of gender and empowerment, the study demonstrates how both authors challenge patriarchal norms and envision women's agency in distinct historical, social and cultural contexts. Rokeya imagines a radical inversion of gender roles in a colonial Bengal context; Angelou chronicles the lived struggles and triumphs of a Black woman in mid-twentieth-century America. Through textual analysis, feminist theoretical frameworks and intersectional lenses, this study traces how empowerment is constructed, resisted and realised in each text. The paper identifies convergences and divergences in the authors' feminist vision, culminating in a research gap concerning the cross-cultural dynamics of empowerment and the role of utopian fiction compared with autobiography in feminist literary studies. The findings illuminate how women's empowerment is not only about individual transformation but also about structural and imaginative re-visioning of gendered worlds.

Implications for literary studies emphasise the value of transnational feminist comparison, narrative form and genre in empowering discourses.

Keywords: gender empowerment, feminist utopia, autobiography, Begum Rokeya, Maya Angelou, transnational feminism

INTRODUCTION

The study of gender and empowerment in literary texts offers a compelling lens through which scholars may explore how women imagine, enact and contest agency within patriarchal structures. Feminist literary criticism has long highlighted how literature both reflects and shapes cultural understandings of gender, power and emancipation (e.g., Gilbert & Gubar, 2000; Moi, 2006). In recent decades, a growing interest in transnational feminist perspectives has encouraged comparative work that moves beyond Western-centred paradigms (Mohanty, 2003; Spivak, 1990). In this vein, this paper undertakes a cross-cultural comparative feminist study of Begum Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, two texts separated by geography, genre and historical moment yet united by their visionary engagement with women's empowerment. Begum Rokeya (1880–1932) emerged as a pioneering Muslim Bengali feminist thinker and writer in colonial India. Her short work *Sultana's Dream* (1905) is often read as one of the earliest feminist utopian fictions, imagining a world called “Ladyland” in which women run society, men are sequestered and science and reason, rather than patriarchal domination, shape social life. (Sharma, 2017; Moniruzzaman, 2014) Meanwhile, Maya Angelou (1928–2014), an African American poet, memoirist and civil rights activist, published her first autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in 1969; in it she narrates her childhood and adolescent experiences of racism, sexual violence and solitude and her eventual emergence as a self-defining woman of art and activism. (LitCharts, n.d.; Susilowati, 2019) Together, these texts open rich vistas for analysis of how gender, empowerment, resistance and narrative form intersect across distinct cultural

milieus. The purpose of the current research is to examine how each author conceptualises empowerment—both as individual transformation and collective imagining—and to explore how genre (utopian fiction versus autobiography) mediates feminist intervention. The comparative lens allows us to probe the ways in which empowerment is articulated in relation to colonialism, race, gender and cultural context, thus contributing to a more nuanced understanding of feminist literary studies. The hypothesis is that while both texts emphasise women’s agency, their modes of empowerment differ—Rokeya’s through imaginative reversal of patriarchal structures and Angelou’s through lived experience and testimony—and that both forms are necessary for a fuller account of empowerment in literary imagination. The structure of the paper proceeds as follows: we begin with a review of relevant literature on feminist utopias, feminist autobiography and empowerment; then synthesise findings and identify a research gap; set out research objectives; describe methodology and ethical considerations; reflect on limitations; carry out a detailed analysis and discussion; conclude; and finally explore implications for literary studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Feminist Utopia and Empowerment in Begum Rokeya’s *Sultana’s Dream*

Scholarly interest in Begum Rokeya’s *Sultana’s Dream* has increased in recent years, particularly within contexts of South Asian feminist studies and feminist science-fiction criticism. Scholars such as Moniruzzaman (2014) highlight how Rokeya critiques patriarchal norms, seclusion (purdah) and colonial educational constraints through a satirical and utopian narrative. Rokeya presents a “Ladyland” where women operate flying cars, cloud-condensers and solar ovens, men are confined to the “Mardana” (men’s quarters) and science is aligned with care rather than conquest. (Moniruzzaman, 2014;

Ladyscience, 2019) The utopia is not mere fantasy but a provocative thought experiment: as Sharma (2017) argues, Rokeya’s reversal of gender roles prompts readers to question entrenched gender binaries and imagines women’s empowerment as structural transformation rather than individual exception. Further, the critical study “A Gender-Based Study of *Sultana’s Dream*” (Hossain, 2020) notes that the story rejects metanarratives of gender hierarchy and assigns women roles as scientists, educators and leaders, thereby portraying empowerment as rational selfgovernance and collective emancipation. Other work, such as “Exploring cyborg feminism in *Sultana’s Dream*” (2024), reads Rokeya through a post-human and technological lens, underlining the way technological mastery in the text symbolises women’s capacity to transcend patriarchal spatial and epistemic boundaries. (English Journal, 2024)

2.2. Feminist Autobiography, Empowerment and Race in Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

In the domain of feminist literary criticism, Maya Angelou’s first autobiography is a key text for exploring the intersections of race, gender and selfempowerment. Scholars have identified the text as an expression of Black feminist consciousness, narrating how the protagonist (Marguerite) confronts sexism, racism and sexual violence and gradually reclaims her voice and subjectivity. (Teme et al., 2022; Susilowati, 2019) For instance, the theme of sex, gender and sexuality is foregrounded in LitCharts’ analysis of the memoir: “the memoir records the experience of a black woman’s life in America and her womanhood— like her blackness— inevitably shapes and informs her experience” (LitCharts, n.d., para. 2). Similarly, the study “Afro-American Feminism in Maya Angelou’s Poems” (2023) situates her poems, including those related to *Caged Bird*, in the context of Black women’s resistance to both racism and patriarchy. Critical discourse analysis applied to Angelou’s work (Bibliomed, 2020) elucidates how empowerment is achieved through articulating trauma, memory and resilience. Angelou’s narrative is not simply selfcelebratory but politicised: the speaking subject emerges from silence, the marginalised subject speaks to power and the female subject forges community and identity. (Susilowati, 2019; Teme et al., 2022) Angelou famously asserted: “I am a feminist. I have been female for a long time now. I would be stupid not to be on my own side.” (Joy, 2017) Thus her work engages with empowerment as both personal reclamation and collective affirmation.

2.3. Comparative Feminist and Transnational Perspectives

The comparative literature on feminist utopias and feminist autobiography is somewhat less particularly across non-Western and Western contexts. The transnational feminist lens emphasises how gendered subjects navigate coloniality, race, class and culture across geographies (Mohanty, 2003; Narayan, 1997). Comparative feminist studies underscore how localised experiences of gender and empowerment can reveal both unique singularities and global resonances. For example, Rokeya's story is embedded in colonial South Asia, Muslim culture and early feminist activism; Angelou's work emerges from the US civil rights era and African-American feminist traditions. Such cross-cultural vantage invites reflection on how empowerment is shaped by context, genre and narrative form. However, there remains a gap in scholarship that directly juxtaposes feminist utopian fiction from South Asia with feminist autobiography from the US and uses empowerment as the pivot of analysis. The existing scholarship tends to study each text in isolation rather than comparatively.

This observation leads into our research gap.

3. Synthesis And Research Gap

From the literature review we can synthesise the following: Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* frames empowerment as structural transformation via imaginative reversal—women as leaders, scientists and rational agents in a techno-utopia where men are domesticated. Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* frames empowerment as testimonial, lived transformation—from racialised, gendered childhood victimhood to self-defined adult agency and community leadership. The two approaches share an emphasis on agency, critique of patriarchy and envisioning of alternative worlds (whether utopian or self-actualised). Yet they diverge in genre (fiction vs autobiography), cultural context (colonial Bengal vs Jim Crow America) and the form of empowerment (collective utopia vs individual testimony). The research gap lies in a targeted, comparative study of how empowerment is constructed across genre and culture in these two works. Few studies bridge South Asian feminist literature and African-American feminist literature in a thematic comparison of gender and empowerment. Moreover, the role of genre in mediating empowerment—how utopian fiction enables structural imagining and how autobiography enables lived reclamation—remains under-explored. This paper addresses that gap by comparing these texts through the lens of gender empowerment and narrative form.

4. Research Objectives

The principal objectives of this study are as follows:

- a. To examine how gender and empowerment are conceptualised in Begum Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.
- b. To compare and contrast the modes of empowerment offered in the two texts, considering genre, cultural context and narrative strategy.
- c. To evaluate how narrative form (utopian fiction vs autobiography) influences the representation of empowerment.
- d. To explore the implications of a transnational feminist comparison for literary studies— highlighting how empowerment is mediated by culture, genre and historical moment.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology anchored in textual analysis and feminist literary criticism. The primary sources are Begum Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* (1905) and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). Secondary literature on feminist utopias, feminist autobiography, Black feminist theory and postcolonial feminism inform the theoretical framework. The research proceeds through close reading of selected passages, thematic coding of empowerment-related motifs (e.g., leadership, voice,

education, technology, autonomy), comparative analysis of genre and context and integration of scholarly commentary.

The following steps were undertaken:

1. Selection of key sections in each primary text that illustrate empowerment (for Rokeya: depiction of Ladyland, scientific inventions, reversal of gender roles; for Angelou: childhood trauma, emergence of voice, education and activism).
2. Coding and thematic mapping of empowerment constructs across manuscripts.
3. Application of feminist and postcolonial theories to interpret how empowerment is mediated.
4. Comparative synthesis of findings: identifying similarities, differences and the role of genre in shaping empowerment narratives.
5. Reflection on how the comparative findings contribute to broader literary-theoretical debates and transnational feminist scholarship.

6. Ethical Considerations

Given that the research is purely textual and involves no human subjects, formal ethical approval was not required. Nonetheless, ethical considerations were observed in the following ways: all sources have been appropriately cited; direct quotations are clearly marked; interpretation is respectful of cultural, racial and historical contexts; and the comparative framework does not reduce either author's work to mere exemplars but honours their complexity and particularity.

7. Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study focuses on only two texts selected from each author; it does not encompass the full corpus of Rokeya or Angelou. This means that findings may not generalise across the authors' oeuvre. Second, comparative textual analysis is interpretive and subject to the researcher's biases; another scholar might emphasise different themes or readings. Third, as the texts emerge from very different cultural, historical and linguistic contexts, translation, cultural nuance and historiography may affect interpretation. Finally, the study does not include empirical readerresponse data or archival research, which might enrich the understanding of how these texts were received historically.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

8.1. Empowerment through Structural Imagination: Sultana's Dream

Begum Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* imagines an inversion of patriarchal society in a colonial Bengal context and thereby creates a feminist utopia—a "Ladyland"—in which women govern, scientists and technologists are female and men are secluded in the Mardana. The opening lines of the story remark upon the narrator's surprise at her own mobility beyond the zenana: "I had been used to look upon my sex as a helpless, unprogressive mass of humanity, a mixture of superstition, sentiment and servility." (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 1905/2005) While the original text is in the public domain, it is widely anthologised. The literary critic Deeksha Sharma (2017) argues that the story demonstrates what a feminist utopia might look like beyond gender binaries: "A world without patriarchy and gender discrimination" (Sharma, 2017, para. 3).

Rokeya's structural imagining of empowerment occurs in several key dimensions:

1. Education and Science: In Ladyland, women run all scientific endeavours, having harnessed solar energy, flying cars and cloud condensers. The utopia links rationality, science and women's leadership.

Critics note that Rokeya's vision preempts debates about feminist science and technology (Ladyscience, 2019).

2. **Reversal of Gender Roles:** Men are described as suited only for confinement; women move freely, govern and teach. This role-reversal is not simply satirical but enables the reader to see the arbitrariness of gendered division of labour and mobility. For instance, the narrator's astonishment at entering male spaces ("I was surprised to find...") underscores how power is relational and socially constructed.
3. **Spatial and Political Freedom:** The text explicitly critiques the zenana system (women's seclusion) and envisions women in public, professional and political spaces. Rokeya thus links empowerment to access—not only individual, but spatial, institutional and structural.
4. **Technology and Nature:** The interplay of science and nature in the text is significant. One critic writes: "Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's 1905 short story ... depicts a utopian alliance between nature, science and women." (An Ecofeminist
5. **Foremother?** para. 1) This suggests that women's empowerment in Ladyland is not only social but also ecological and technological.
6. **Colonial and Patriarchal Critique:** Rokeya's story is set in British-India under colonial rule; her utopia indirectly critiques both colonial domination and patriarchal structures, by emphasising rationality, cooperation, progress and peace. (Moniruzzaman, 2014) Accordingly, empowerment is tied to liberation from both gender and colonial regimes.

In sum, *Sultana's Dream* imagines empowerment as collective, structural transformation: women are not simply individually empowered but the society itself is re-oriented. This genre-specific strategy—utopian fiction—allows Rokeya to depict possibilities beyond existing constraints. However, as some critics note, the reversal is not without critique; Rajia Zakaria in *The Daily Star* (2023) remarks that the world remains "one group of women oppressing men", which complicates the utopia's feminist credentials (Zakaria, 2023, para.

4). This invites a more nuanced reading: empowerment as structural inversion rather than inclusive transformation.

8.2. Empowerment through Voice, Self-Definition and Testimony: I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

Maya Angelou's memoir offers a profoundly different but complementary model of empowerment. Written as autobiography, the text tracks the early life of Marguerite ("Maya") Johnson through childhood trauma (including sexual assault), racial segregation in the American South and eventual emergence as a vehicle of creative and political expression. According to the LitCharts themes page, the memoir "is also an account of how sex and gender influence experience and identity. Marguerite recognises that being a girl is a kind of disadvantage" (LitCharts, n.d., para. 1). This underlines how the narrative is shaped by gender disadvantage, but also by racial disadvantage, thereby necessitating an intersectional reading.

Key aspects of empowerment in Angelou's text include:

1. **Voice and Silence:** Maya becomes mute for years following her assault; the act of speaking and writing thus becomes an act of empowerment. As one study notes, "The present study adopts Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis ... because Maya Angelou ... spotlit the experiences and challenges of Black women" (Bibliomed, 2020, p. 2). Speaking, narrating, writing thus become sites of empowerment, enabling the self to claim voice and subjectivity.
2. **Education and Self-definition:** Maya's return to education, love of literature and eventual career as writer and activist enact a path of empowerment grounded in learning and self-definition. Her comment: "I would be stupid not to be on my own side" (Joy, 2017) encapsulates the shift from objectification to subjecthood.
3. **Intersectionality — Race & Gender:** Angelou's empowerment narrative cannot be separated from race; the text emerges in the context of Jim Crow America and the memoir is recognised as a major statement of

Black feminist consciousness (Teme et al., 2022). The dual discrimination of race and gender shapes her sense of disempowerment and her eventual reclaiming of power.

4. **Community and Solidarity:** While her journey is individual, Maya's story resonates with collective experience: the Black female subjecthood and the civil-rights movement form a backdrop. Her empowerment is not solitary triumph but connects to community, though not always explicitly.
5. **Genre as Testimony:** The choice of autobiography allows Angelou to blend personal and political, memory and critique. The form itself becomes a vehicle for empowerment: the writing of selfnarrative is a reclamation of history, agency and voice.

Thus Angelou enacts empowerment as personal transformation, from marginalised subject to empowered speaker and actor in the world. Her work exemplifies feminist empowerment as lived, embodied, vocal and intersectional.

8.3. Comparative Insights: Genre, Context and Empowerment

I. Genre and Form: Rokeya's utopian fiction allows a macro-vision of empowerment: structural reversal, techno-rational women's rule, alternate society. Angelou's autobiography offers a microvision: lived experience, voice, transformation. Each form has strengths: fiction permits imaginative possibility; autobiography grounds empowerment in reality and testimony. Together they suggest that empowerment is multifaceted—it requires both imagining new orders and realising personal agency.

II. Context and Culture: Rokeya writes in colonial Bengal, Muslim female context, at a time when women's education and mobility were severely restricted. Her empowerment vision is deeply informed by that context. Angelou writes in midtwentieth-century America, Black female subject, civil-rights era; her empowerment is shaped by racial-gender intersectionality. Thus empowerment must be read not as universal but as historically and culturally situated. The comparative approach illuminates how empowerment is mediated by coloniality, race, religion and culture.

III. Mode of Empowerment: Rokeya emphasises systemic change and the collective: women's emancipation through new social order. Angelou emphasises individual resilience, voice and personal journey, though with communal resonance. The two modes complement each other—structural and individual empowerment are not mutually exclusive but interdependent. The fiction of Rokeya gestures to structural possibilities; Angelou's memoir enacts personal realisation.

IV. Challenges and Critique: Both texts also raise critiques of empowerment. Rokeya's model has been critiqued for simply reversing rather than dissolving gendered oppression (Zakaria, 2023).

Angelou's empowerment emerges in the context of trauma and struggle, reminding us that empowerment is not easy or clean. Hence, empowerment must be seen as contested, embodied and ongoing rather than final.

8.4. Towards a Model of Empowerment in Transnational Feminist Literary Studies

Empowerment in these texts can be understood through several interconnected dimensions. In Rokeya's writing, empowerment takes an imaginative form, envisioning new social orders and alternative possibilities that challenge patriarchal and colonial constraints. Angelou, on the other hand, embodies subjective empowerment, reclaiming voice, agency and identity through the act of personal narration. Both forms of empowerment are shaped by their contexts—cultural, historical and structural factors that mediate how power is experienced and expressed. The literary genre itself also plays a crucial role: while fiction allows Rokeya to imagine utopian change, Angelou's memoir grounds empowerment in lived experience and self-revelation. Finally, when these two writers are viewed together, a transnational connection emerges, revealing how empowerment, though rooted in specific histories and geographies, resonates across boundaries through shared struggles and aspirations for gendered liberation. The analysis shows that empowerment is not simply a matter

of individual success but involves re-imagining the social fabric, transforming structures, reclaiming voice, resisting oppressions and recognising intersectionality.

9. Implications For Literary Studies

The findings of this study carry significant implications for literary scholarship, particularly in feminist, postcolonial and transnational literary studies.

First, comparative feminist readings across cultural and historical contexts enrich our understanding of empowerment and agency beyond the boundaries of Western-centred paradigms. By juxtaposing a South Asian Muslim feminist writer and an African American feminist autobiographer, the analysis demonstrates how empowerment acquires varied meanings shaped by colonialism, race, religion and class, thereby broadening the methodological horizon of global feminist criticism.

Second, the study underscores that genre is central to feminist representation. Utopian fiction and autobiography, though distinct, both function as potent vehicles of empowerment. *Sultana's Dream* deploys imaginative inversion and structural re-visioning to challenge patriarchal norms, while *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* uses self-narration and testimonial voice to reclaim subjectivity. Future scholarship could explore these genres in dialogue with other forms—such as essays, poetry and epistolary narratives—by Rokeya and Angelou to trace how genre mediates evolving feminist consciousness.

Third, the analysis highlights that empowerment involves both the collective and the individual. The contrast between Rokeya's structural model of emancipation and Angelou's personal model of selfrealisation suggests that feminist theory must account for their interdependence. A more critical interrogation of these modes could clarify how utopian abstraction and autobiographical specificity complement or challenge one another, revealing the productive tensions within feminist thought.

Fourth, incorporating archival research and historical reception studies would deepen understanding of how these texts were circulated, interpreted and institutionalised in their respective societies. Such work could reveal the historical processes through which women's voices were legitimised—or marginalised—within literary canons, enriching feminist historiography.

Finally, this study encourages literary scholars to embrace a transnational feminist framework that bridges imaginative and experiential modes of empowerment. It calls for future comparative studies linking feminist writers from different linguistic and cultural traditions—such as Latin American, African and South Asian contexts—to construct a more inclusive, intersectional map of global feminist expression. By recognising both the diversity and interconnectivity of women's literary voices, literary studies can more effectively theorise empowerment as a dynamic, relational and globally resonant process.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined how Begum Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* articulate gender and empowerment through distinct yet complementary frameworks. Rokeya's feminist utopia offers a radical structural vision of women's empowerment, while Angelou's autobiography presents a personal, intersectional journey of voice, self-definition and agency. The comparative analysis reveals the interpretive value of contrasting genre, context and cultural background to understand how empowerment operates across different literary traditions. In doing so, the paper addresses a notable research gap concerning crosscultural feminist literary comparisons of empowerment narratives. The findings highlight that empowerment is not a uniform or static concept but is mediated by genre, culture and history. Feminist utopia and feminist autobiography represent two different but interrelated modes of empowerment— one collective and structural, the other individual and experiential. Recognising this dynamic tension contributes to a more holistic understanding of feminist literary expression. To enhance the study further, future research could broaden the textual scope by incorporating additional works by both Rokeya and Angelou. Including Rokeya's essays and Angelou's later autobiographies or poetry would strengthen comparative insights and

capture thematic variations across their oeuvres. Moreover, incorporating archival research or historical reception studies could illuminate how these texts were received and interpreted within their respective cultural and temporal contexts, thereby situating the question of empowerment within the social histories of reading and resistance. A more critical engagement with the contrasts between collective and individual empowerment would also deepen the theoretical contribution of the study. This would allow for a nuanced interrogation of the potential limitations and affordances of utopian versus autobiographical forms—whether structural transformation without personal testimony risks abstraction, or whether individual empowerment without collective vision risks isolation. Such inquiry would reinforce the transnational feminist commitment to viewing empowerment as both personal and structural, imaginative and lived. Ultimately, empowerment emerges here as a process of becoming rather than a final state—a continuous negotiation between self, society and narrative form. Women, as subjects of literature and history, imagine, enact and narrate transformation not only of themselves but also of the worlds they inhabit. By bringing together Rokeya’s visionary utopia and Angelou’s autobiographical realism, this study affirms that feminist literature— across cultures and genres— remains a vital site for reimagining the possibilities of gendered liberation.

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