Deferred, but Still Desired: *Sultana's Dream*, 1905 and 2018

When I first wrote about Chitra Ganesh's work, I was looking at the self-published zine version of her *Tales of Amnesia* (2002). These low-budget booklets mimicked the look and feel of the popular comic-book series Amar Chitra Katha (ACK), which appeared in the late 1960s to promote a nationalist, Hindu identity to English-speaking children in India and throughout the diaspora. Manipulating individual cells sourced from across ACK's decades of production, Ganesh constructed a new, elliptical narrative, fashioned from surreally altered images and poetically reimagined texts. Her contemporary, feminist, and queer *détournement* of the conformist comics, I argued, also reclaimed a pre-colonial South Asian sensibility — embedded in the region's mythic and literary traditions — that understood women as mysterious, powerful, shape-shifting goddess-queen-lovers.

Ganesh's suite of prints *Sultana's Dream* (2018) is a fascinating counterpart to that earlier project. Once again created with sequenced storytelling in mind, these compositions far more faithfully track along with their historic source, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's visionary parable of the same title. Instead of deconstructing and rerouting, Ganesh here imaginatively, lovingly, lushly expands upon the Bengali writer's 1905 afternoon reverie. The prints give Hossain's words a visual and cultural presence at a moment when they could not be more needed, poignantly illustrating the continuity between the author's hundred-year-old science-fiction fantasy and what today still feels like distant utopian desires for gender equity, individual virtue, social justice, international peace, and planetary survival. At the same time, Ganesh's turn to this South Asian source effects a similar destabilization of colonialist, Western-centric trajectories of where radical political potentiality lies. By introducing "Sultana's Dream" to international art audiences, Ganesh posits an education and women's rights activist who was multilingual, Muslim, and operating under colonial rule as a foremother for speculative feminist fiction—as a precursor to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's remarkably comparable separatist novel *Herland* (1915) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and its 2017 televisual interpretation. At the same time, Ganesh's conscious determination, in this and other recent projects, to "disaggregate an interest in mythology from the iconography of Hinduism," whether by drawing from Bengali literature or Himalayan Buddhist art, again refutes a Hindutva nationalism bent on violently erasing the multicultural realities of the subcontinent.

Also interesting are the aesthetic shifts seen in *Sultana's Dream*, in contrast not only to *Tales of Amnesia* but also to Ganesh's many other prints and paintings that use ACK imagery as a springboard. Most obviously, instead of using the psychedelic colors of the comic series, these linocuts rely on black, tan, and the subtle gradations between them to convey their powerful visions. Rather than just existing as a stage for action, then, the environmental and architectural elaborations of Ladyland become a prominent character in the compositions, as they are in Hossain's story. This assertion of the relational, not the individual, as the foundation, the fabric, of a different social order is in this way embedded in the formal structure of Ganesh's project. . . as we know it must be for any movement toward a more just, sustainable, and Ladyland-like future.

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