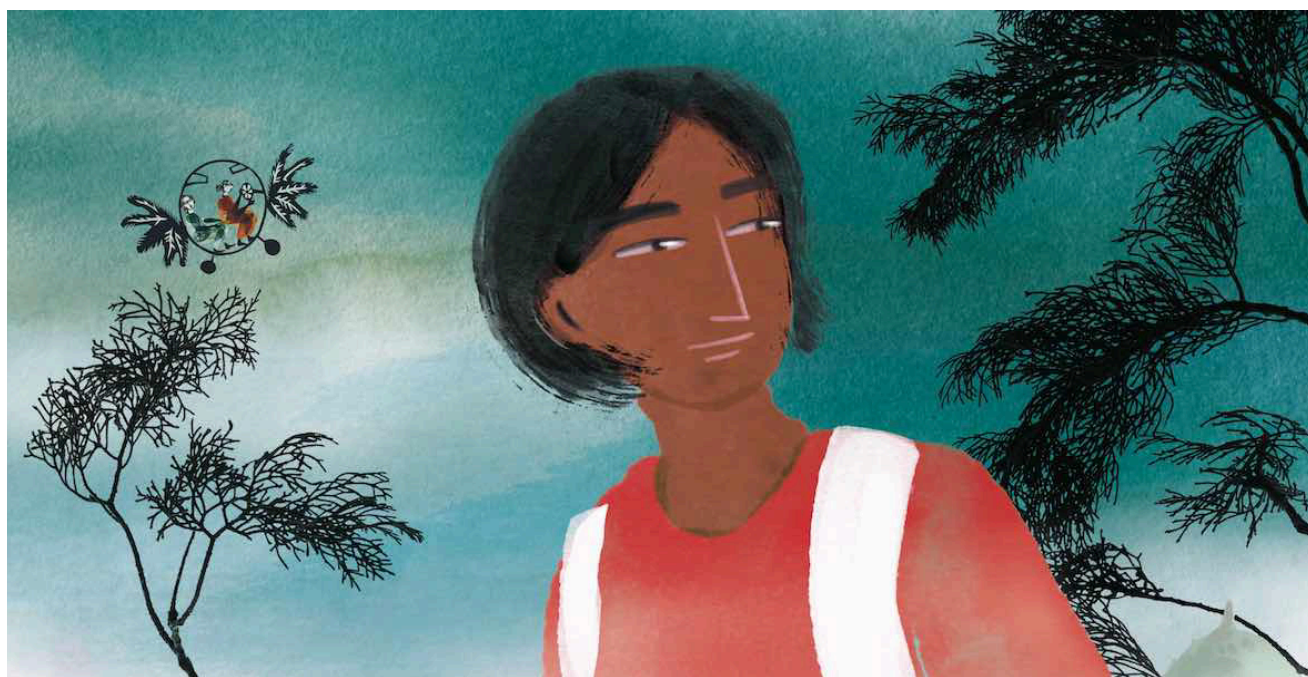


 **PRAGDA** | SPANISH FILM CLUB

DISCUSSION GUIDE



SULTANA'S DREAM

A film by Isabel Herguera

Spain, Germany / 2023 / 87 min

In Bengali, Spanish, Basque, Hindi, English, Italian, with English subtitles

BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM:

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Before watching a film, it is important to know the current events and history of the country that film comes from. Learning about the filmmaker is also a relevant way to gain insight on the context in which the film was produced. You can learn more about Isabel Herguera at <https://pragda.com/film/sultanas-dream/>

The book, *Sultana's Dream* is a 1905 Bengali feminist utopian story in English, written by Begum Rokeya, also known as Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a Muslim feminist writer and social reformer from Bengal. It depicts a science fiction feminist utopia called Ladyland, in which women run everything, and men are secluded, in a mirror-image of the traditional practice of purdah. The women are aided by technology which enables laborless farming and flying cars; the women scientists have discovered how to trap solar power and control the weather. This results in "a sort of gender-based *Planet of the Apes* where the roles are reversed and the men are locked away in a technologically advanced future."

INTRODUCING THE FILM

A **film synopsis** is a piece of text designed to summarize the film's narrative, genre, style, and key participants in a way that appeals to a wide audience. The synopsis is part of the film's marketing process and tends to follow a traditional format. Read this synopsis for *Sultana's Dream*:

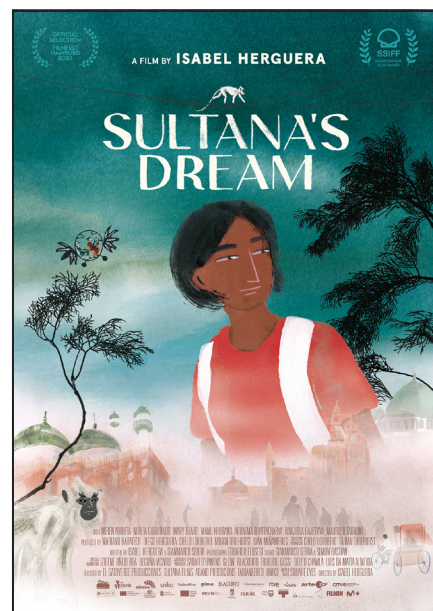
Inés is a 30-year-old Spanish animation director who travels to India, initially to end her relationship with her Indian lover, Amar. During her visit, Inés stumbles upon a bookstore where she discovers *Sultana's Dream*, a groundbreaking feminist science fiction story written in 1905 by Begum Rokeya Hossain, a Muslim feminist, writer, and political activist from Bengal.

Fascinated by Hossain's visionary tale of Ladyland, a utopian society where women scientists rule and men are confined to domestic roles, Inés becomes inspired to create a film that parallels her journey with that of Rokeya Hossain. As she embarks on a transformative voyage across India, Inés explores the life and legacy of Hossain while searching for traces of the fictional Ladyland.

The film employs different animation techniques to depict Inés's personal story, Rokeya Hossain's life, and the imaginary Ladyland, creating a visually rich and thought-provoking narrative that explores themes of feminism, cultural identity, and personal growth.

From the film synopsis, can you imagine the genre and tone of the film?
From this same text, try to identify the main events of the film's plot and the socio-political context of the film.

- > Do you think that the film will have a political message? Cite specific language from the synopsis to support your answer.
- > How do the trailer, poster, and still images encourage you to watch the film?
- > Viewing the marketing materials alone (i.e. trailer, poster, and still images available at <https://pragda.com/film/sultanas-dream/>) without the aid of the synopsis, can you make any assumptions regarding what the film is about?



AFTER WATCHING THE FILM:

NARRATIVE

- The film uses a “Russian doll” structure, where the stories intertwine and nest within one another. How does Inés’s trips to India help organize the story?
- The film moves between different places and times. Did that make the story more interesting or harder to follow? How did it affect the way you connected with the characters? Do you see a connection with Inés state of mind?
- In the first chapter, Inés, a young Spanish artist travelling in India, experiences a personal crisis after a romantic breakup. She then discovers the book *Sultana’s Dream*. How is *Sultana’s Dream* portrayed in the film, and what initial impact does it have on her?
- Ladyland is very different from the world Inés lives in. What does this contrast reveal about gender, power, and imagination? Inés meets Sudhanya, a young Indian teacher. How do they each perceive the situation of women in both India and Europe?
- In the second chapter, Inés embarks on a physical and philosophical journey across India to learn more about Rokeya Hossain, the author of the book, and to search for traces of Ladyland. The film alternates between Inés’s present and episodes from Hossain’s life. What do you learn about gender-based violence as experienced by both women?
- In the third chapter, the film delves into the representation of Ladyland, animated with mehndi (henna tattoo) motifs, this segment incorporates testimonies and real-life experiences of women, drawn from workshops conducted by the director. What did you think of these testimonies?
- As Inés becomes more interested in *Sultana’s Dream*, how does she change? What do you think her connection to the manuscript means?
- Dreams and imagination are important in the film. How are they shown on screen? How do they shape the story?
- In the fourth chapter, Inés travels to Spain and Italy, where she speaks with figures such as historian Mary Beard and philosopher Paul B. Preciado, who offer insights on gender, history, and feminism. How do you think the film delves into a dialogue between cultures and generations regarding the role of women and the relevance of Ladyland’s utopia in today’s world?
- The film talks about feminism in different cultures and times. Were there moments that reminded you of things happening today where you live?
- In the fifth and last chapter, Inés’s journey culminates in a personal transformation: her outward search becomes an inner reflection on the possibility of creating spaces of freedom and sisterhood in everyday life. How did you feel about the ending? Did it feel finished or open to interpretation?



CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES

- Deborah Young, film critic, wrote: “Herguera and co-screenwriter Gianmarco Serra tell their fantastic stories through the eyes of a young back-packing artist and filmmaker, Inés, whose trips between Spain and India form the backbone of the film. The fact that every face in the film is colored a warm, rich brown underlines the universality of this story and the connection between Europeans and Indians of different races and religions – it’s a story exploring men and women, after all.” What do you think of that statement?
- The film uses many animation styles, like shadow puppets, watercolor, and traced drawings. How do these different styles help tell the story or show emotions?
- How do colors help you understand when or where the story is taking place, and how the characters are feeling?
- How does Isabel Herguera use visual metaphor and symbolism to evoke a poetic atmosphere in *Sultana’s Dream*, and how do these elements enhance the utopian vision of Ladyland?

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CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES *continued*

- Think about the sounds in the film, like music, voices, and background noise. How do they help you understand what the main character is feeling inside?
- What do the background details and visual choices in the animation tell you about the world of Ladyland? How is it different from the main character's everyday world?
- Did you notice how fast or slow the film moved in certain scenes? How did this rhythm affect how you felt while watching—especially when the story changed between past and present?
- How can you tell when the film is showing a dream or an imaginary space? What looks or feels different about these parts compared to the 'real world'?
- Are there any repeated images or symbols in the film? What do you think they mean, especially in connection to ideas like gender, freedom, or imagination?



THEMES

- What do you think is the central meaning of *Sultana's Dream*?
- Deborah Young, film critic, wrote: *"It is striking that the theme of women's safety is so recurrent. Riding around in rickshaws, Inés often seems uneasy, and her fears are literalized when the vehicle is attacked without provocation by a band of furious monkeys. One Indian woman suggests hopefully that at least women are safe in Europe, but Inés replies they are safe nowhere in the world."* What do you think of that statement?
- What does the film say about the roles of women in society? How are these roles different in the real world and in Ladyland?
- Why do you think the filmmaker chose to focus on a utopian society led by women? What message does this send about gender equality?
- How does the main character's trip to India help her understand more about herself and her identity?
- In what ways does the film show women supporting or inspiring each other across time and place?
- How are personal memories and historical stories connected in the film? Why might this be important?
- What is the importance of telling forgotten or hidden stories, like that of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, in today's world?
- How does imagination play a role in the way the film explores serious topics like inequality or freedom?
- What are some of the challenges the characters face when trying to break free from traditional expectations?
- Do you think Ladyland could ever exist in real life? Why or why not? What would need to change?
- What did the film make you think or feel about the position of women in society today?

