



PROBLEMATIZING THE SELF AND THE SOCIAL: A STUDY OF THE PLIGHT OF WOMEN IN JEAN SASSON'S NOVEL *PRINCESS : A TRUE STORY OF LIFE BEHIND THE VEIL IN SAUDI ARABIA*

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ABSTRACT “Anyone with the slightest interest in human rights will find this book heart-wrenching.”

(Betty Mahmoody)

“*Princess*” is the excruciating story of a Saudi Arabian Princess Sultana, a royal woman who lives in the most privileged of material lives yet held back in a gilded cage. She has no freedom, no control over her own life, no value but as a bearer of sons. Hidden behind her black floor-length veil, she is a prisoner, ignored by her father, abused by her husband, scorned by her brother and her country. Hailing from culture facing untold oppression of women, Sultana brings light to many aspects of her life and pulls back the veil of female oppression. This work opens our eyes to action, not simply to be closed and put down with a sigh at the end but to drive us to take action for those who cannot. This paper expounds to analyse the aspects of oppression faced by the Saudi Arabian women in the novel *Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia* by Jean Sasson. (Here after referred to as *Princess*). The focus of the study, from a feminist –cultural perspective is on the experience of discrimination and oppression, as precipitated in Saudi Arabian society, under the aegis of a rigid and rigorous socio-cultural and religious system, dogmatized by patriarchy.

KEYWORDS : Saudi Arabian society, Culture, Religion, Discriminations, Veil, Oppression, Man-woman relationship, Sexuality, Patriarchy.

INTRODUCTION

The paper aims to analyze the problems and dilemmas faced by the Saudi Arabian women under the inviolable rules and regulations in a rigid social structure, as portrayed in the Classic International Bestseller *Princess: A True story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia* by Jean Sasson. Sasson (born 1950) is an American writer whose works generally highlight the life of women in the Middle East. She was born in a small town in Alabama and found a great respite in the pages of the book. Her solid aspiration to deracinate from her bucolic ambience led her to jump the opportunity to work and travel abroad. Sasson accepted a position at the King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center in Riyadh and lived in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for twelve years. She employed at the hospital for four years and then got married to Peter Sasson. During their time in Middle East, Sasson made many friends including the royal Al-Saud family, who visited the hospital. In 1983, she met an astonishing Saudi Princess Sultana Al Saud, Sasson came to know more about the Saudi culture and social mores.

The novel is born out of her understanding of the complex life experience of Saudi women in a closed kind of social structure. *Princess* conveys the account of a Princess in the royal house in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It is a valid anecdote experienced by Saudi Arabian women. The second book *Princess Sultana's Daughters* depicts the stifling and unbearable preventive means imposed on women. However it also talks about complicated subjects like sexuality, homosexuality, and extra-marital affairs. The third book, *Princess Sultana's Circle* the series also elaborates the lives of the women of Saudi Arabia where Sultana and her sister vow to shape a circle of support that will bound and protect molested women and girls. The fourth book, *Princess, More Tears to Cry* focuses on Sultana, her family and ten Saudi women who are forming change in Saudi Arabia.

Princess in its plot also pays attention to the life of other women surrounding Sultana: her mother, sister, aunts, girlfriends, women servants, as well as the lives of other important women who seeks out or meets by fate. As there was personal hazard in disclosing the covert experiences of women in Saudi Arabia, and for protection of the Princess, Jean Sasson described her as “Sultana”. While recording the lives of Saudi women, the novel also records the lives of Saudi men as agents of negativity within a closed and dogmatic social system. Under the stern Saudi interpretation of the laws of the Koran and patriarchal culture, Muslim women, irrespective of their social position, are subject to chastisement and castigation for every supposed desecration of a man's family honour. Parallel actions by Muslim men, however is disregarded. What is most stirring about this novel is that, though

Sultana exhibits herself as a fiery spirit, from early days on to the time she herself becomes the mother of a veiled daughter, we are distressed along with her to see that her personal endeavours to bring about a change for better meets with failure, as the society continues to be suppressive. In fact it is the panic writhing of a soul in a virtually soulless society.

The oppression of women

Saudi Arabia has several rules concerned with the conduct of and the ways of treating women in society in respect their education, marriage, sexuality, mobility, and fashions and choices. The history of women in the country is buried behind the black veil of secrecy. Neither birth nor death is made official in any public record. The births of male children are documented in family or tribal records. The common emotion expressed at the birth of a female is either sorrow or shame. Although hospital births and government record-keeping are increasing, the majority take place at home. “I have often asked myself: Does this mean that we women of the desert do not exist, if our coming and our passing go unrecorded? If no-one knows of my existence, does that mean I do not exist?” (*Princess*, 30).

The novel, *Princess* depicts the man-woman relationship within the matrix of an entrenched patriarchy with its ubiquitous power structures. The ‘father’ is considered to be the highest power centre of the family. He has the responsibility and authority on his family members, particularly on his wife and daughters. He has the right in controlling any actions including his daughter's education, marriage and mobility. In *Princess*, Sultana struggle for her aspiration to get a higher education even though her father did not approve of it, because in his opinion women need education only to read Quran and Hadiths.

“For many years, my father is refusing even to consider the possibility. My five older sisters received no schooling other than to memorize the Koran from a private tutor who comes to our home. For two hours, six afternoons a week, they would repeat word after Egyptian teacher, Fatima, a stern woman of about forty-five years of age. She one asked my parents' permission to expand my sisters' education to include science, history and math. Father responded with a firm no; and the recital of the Prophet's words, and his words alone continued to ring throughout our villa” (*Princess*, 44).

Sultana's education depends on her father's decision. The discrimination gives Sultana much oppression. Sultana thinks that education is very important to women, for that will help them to be successful housewives. Sultana's attitude indicates the feminist perspective. She seeks social change in women's status by changing

the way in which society views them. Sultana wants people in society to change its idea of patriarchy and to accept women as being a valuable part within society. Sultana states that education is the right of everybody who lives in the world. *Princess* also betrays that the Saudi Arabian women is obligated to wear Abaya and veil and not to wear any other colour other than black. Saudi Arabian society insists that women cannot reveal their body. Women should not display their body except to their husband, their father, their son and their brother. Saudi Arabian women must wear Abaya and veil from their first menstruation. "The coming of women's menses is a source of easy conversation in the Muslim world. Suddenly, at that moment, a child is transformed into an adult. There is no going back to that warm cocoon of childhood innocence" (*Princess*, 87). Thereafter the practice becomes extremely stringent:

"Randa squealed and slapped my hand when I raised my veil so that I could see the traffic. Too late, I realized that I had exposed my face to every man in the street! The men appeared stunned by their luck, for they had seen a woman's face in a public place! I instantly realized it was far better for me to be run down by a speeding car than to commit such an act of revelation" (*Princess*, 112).

Sultana braves to speak out her wishes and desires as an expression of freedom. As she makes it out wearing abaya and veil are not wrap women's aspirations. She tells that women have the right to wear what they want and to be fashionable. Everybody has human right that must be respected. Women have the same chance to pursue their happiness. "For women with the need to express their individuality and fashion sense, there are ways to avoid that endless sea of conformity in dress through creative design" (*Princess*, 88).

Restriction on mobility is another social control portrayed in *Princess*. Saudi Arabian women are not allowed to enjoy free mobility. They cannot travel without being accompanied by their guardians. Women were also banned to drive a car in the street and are not allowed in the same car with man unless they are relatives.

"Omar drove us to Father's office since he had forgotten to collect our travel papers. In Saudi Arabia, a man must write a letter granting permission for female in his family to travel. Without the papers, we might be stop at the Customs Office and prevented from boarding the plane" (*Princess*, 66).

Sultana sees much trouble in her society. Saudi Arabian women are enjoined to be passive and to be submissive under the strict control of man. They cannot do anything without the permission of the male members of the family:

Sara and I were thrilled to hear that Kuwaiti women, who are allowed to drive and go unveiled, were even driving down our roads and into the streets of our capital. No Western women could ever imagine our mixed emotions. We were crashing into a storm, and while our glee was mixed with wonder, at the same moment we were frothing with jealousy that our Arab sister were driving cars and exposing their naked faces in our land! (*Princess*, 270).

Sultana thinks that women must have opportunities to travel without being interfered by the elders. Sultana sees the example if women have to be free like men is affected by feminism movement. Feminism believes in human's equality. Men and women have the same chance to go and work to get a better life.

The fourth issue dealt with in the novel is the system of marriage. Marriage is one of the traditional institutions reflected in the novel. When Sultana was about to enter into her adolescence, her sister Sara, only three years elder to her, was compelled into marriage. Sara was in fact dreaming of learning art. Conversely these dreams expired the day she was forced to marry a man of sixty-two year old, and who already had several other wives.

"My thoughts drifted to Sara and the shocking realization that birds and beasts were freer than my sister. I made a vow of myself that I would be the master of my life, no matter what actions I would have to take or pain I would have to endure" (*Princess*, 67).

Sultana, however, insisted to see her bridegroom before she will be married off. She thinks that arranged marriages are nightmares. Woman cannot exercise her own choice in matters of marriage. She is,

as a rule, expected not to express her wishes and leave the father/elders to decide on the groom:" I was going to meet the man I would marry before I married him! My sisters and I were electrified, for it was just not done in our society; we were prisoners who felt that ever-present chains of tradition lighten." (*Princess*, 151). It shows the difference between Sultana and her sister Sara. Sara could not do anything against the dictates of patriarchy. She submits her life to her father, but in Sultana's opinion her father has no right to her desire, shows her attitude towards patriarchy.

Another tradition addressed in the novel is the custom of polygamy, which allows Muslim men to have four wives. Sultana's marriage was happy until she had been diagnosed as having breast cancer and became incapable to have any more children. Kareem decided to marry a second wife. Sultana does not want Kareem to conduct polygamy but Kareem wants to have lots of children:

"I understood his implications of his taking a second wife. The desire for children was not his real reason. The issue was primitive. We had been wed for eight years; sexual license was his aim. Obviously, my husband was weary of eating the same dish and sought a new exotic fare for his plate" (*Princess*, 247).

Sultana could not admit this, so she ran away with three children. Eventually Kareem agreed to sign a paper promising to never marry another woman as long as Sultana lived. Sultana's bravery indicates that human beings have the right to be independent from anybody. She voices out her disagreement in order to make Kareem think over his decision.

The problem of divorce figures as another topic in the novel. A husband can divorce his wife by verbal regulation and does not require a reason. He needs to say "I divorce you" three times to his wife, customarily known as 'triple talaq'. It means that men can divorce at that moment and but it is impossible for a wife to divorce her husband:

"I told Kareem that I wanted a divorce, I would never submit to the humiliation of his taking another wife. Kareem replied that divorce would be out of the question unless I chose to give up my children for his second wife to raise." (*Princess*, 247)

Kareem's statement above shows the man's domination. Women who have an initiative to divorce are not given right to raise their children. Sultana does not want to lose her children. She is afraid that she will be separated from her children, but she also does not want her husband to take another wife. Sultana sees that divorce is gender discrimination. Sultana's bravery indicates an expression of her right. She also has right to be independent.

Characterization of Sultana

The main character in this novel Sultana is a woman who survived to herself and women who feel the same fate as herself; she is a motivation for every woman around her. Sultana was born to a royal family with uncountable wealth yet held back in a gilded cage. Through the character of Sultana Al Saud, Jean Sasson has shown how a woman, even though being domestic, still can be brave person to abandon the house chores rather than to do something that she does not like. Although Sultana's life is domesticated, Sasson has portrayed how she rakes up the challenge against the patriarchy. When sultana opposes her husband, father, brother, the representation of patriarchy, Sultana becomes the symbol of women's rebellion against patriarchy. Sultana can prove that women can be equal as men. She is able to achieve a higher education and she does not want to be defeated by male in expressing her ideas and making her ideas come true. Sultana was not only described as educated and independent women but also as courageous, optimistic and decisive woman.

CONCLUSION

"As a writer, and as a friend, I am proud to be the voice for Princess Sultana." (Jean Sasson)

'Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia' is a well-known book giving a voice to oppressed. Sasson does a commendable work of telling Sultana's story without picking a political side or criticizing her country. Sultana remains greatly proud of her country and her heritage, she desires better conditions for her people. She is also keenly aware that she experienced freedom as compared with the poor women of the country. She shares the stories of

the less fortunate and the foreign workers to give a well-formed look at Saudi Arabian life for the normal woman. The books influential words may be enough to move readers to tears and to action.

The above analysis reveals that Saudi society is a traditional rule-bound one, operating within the confines of socio-religious norms and attendant cultural rigidity, institutionalized centrally in patriarchal system. Rhetoric of its social cohesion apart, it is professedly inhumane, unjust, oppressive and so obsolete. Sultana's sense of desperation and disparagement at the machinations of the social system which is reinforced by religion and its power politics amply attest the victimization process inbuilt within such a system, wherein women are quite naturally the easy preys to the web of complexities, a condition which under traditional rhetoric is passed for as destiny per se. Sultana, however, thinks and feels that things should invariably change for the better.

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