

Empowerment within Limits: A Study of Jean Sasson's *Princess*

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Abstract

Jean Sasson's *Princess* explores the life story of a Saudi princess who experiences and witnesses harsh treatment in royal household in Saudi Arabia. By depicting her life story through this book, Princess Sultana reveals widespread exploitation and blatant discrimination against women in Saudi Arabia. Almost every aspect of Saudi women's lives is highly controlled through the gender based patriarchal norms. Thus, in such a restricted society, women are oppressed through gender stereotypes and relegated to socially marginalized. The present paper is an attempt to understand the root cause systematic oppression of women. It will also observe their struggle to raise consciousness to get equal human rights and dignity.

Keywords: Patriarchal, raise-consciousness, human rights, socially marginalized, Systematic oppression.

It is a well-known fact that literary discourses are always an effective apparatus to create a dialogue and discussion on socially relevant and pertinent issues such as gender, class and race. Many literary writers have come forward to provide voice to the conspicuous silence of the marginalized. In this respect, Jean Sasson is one such writer who exposes the miserably marginalized position of women in Saudi Arabia. Sasson is an American writer, born in 1950, at Troy, Alabama. She has great love for humanity. Besides, she has deep-rooted curiosity in foreign cultures and wishes to understand the very basis of these cultures. In this context, Sasson travelled to Saudi Arabia to explore its culture. She worked in Medical Affairs Administration at King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Centre from 1978 to 1982. During her work, she travelled a lot and met many Saudi natives. Sasson shares the experience of first meeting with Princess Sultana in an interview with Lucy Moore

To meet Sultana was quite the surprise, for she had important things on her mind. Almost instantly she had begun talking about the undesirable social issues affecting her country that had been plaguing my own mind since last seven years since I first arrived the kingdom. (Web)

Thus, Princess Sultana shared her life's experiences with Sasson. In fact she wanted to convey her experiences to the whole world that is, what exactly was the real condition of

women in the royal household of Saudi Arabia. Besides, Princess Sultana seemed to be a rebellious and free spirited girl, unlike other Saudi women. Sultana wanted to raise her voice against the injustices done to women in Saudi Arabia. In order to foreground her story, which is full of gender inequality and discriminations typifying the life and experiences of millions of Saudi women, she asked Sasson to write her story. Through her book *Princess*, Sasson explores the life story of a Saudi princess who experiences and witnesses harsh treatment in royal household in Saudi Arabia. Some incidents and places have been deliberately changed in this trilogy so as not to reveal the true identity of the princess. Thus, this trilogy is a narrativised autobiography of Princess Sultana. Through her depiction, she sheds light on the crucial issues of gender in Saudi Arabia.

Sultana is a princess of the current ruling family of Al Sa'ud. Still, she finds herself trapped in the web of chains which are as she feels, “. . . invisible, they were loosely draped and passed unnoticed until the age of understanding reduced my life to a narrow segment of fear (23)”. In a highly patriarchal society, Sultana has witnessed many injustices based on gender norms. However, she has a deep rooted desire to empower women in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. At the same time, she is unable to look beyond her élite class. By being a princess of the royal family, Sultana has no real and first-hand knowledge or experiences of ordinary women living in Saudi Arabia. She does not know how ordinary, underprivileged Saudi women lead their lives and what problems they face. Thus, at times, it appears that Sultana is just concerned about the women who surround her in the royal household. Indeed, she wants reforms in women's condition but within the ambit of the existing system. She does not want to discard the advantages she enjoys and her loyalty to the existing political establishment. Thus, due to her politico-social and economic status, Sultana wants women's empowerment with only partial understanding of the root cause of women's exploitation and victimisation.

In *Princess*, Sultana unveils the real picture of Saudi women who lead their lives silently under male dominance and exploitation. She experienced it personally during her childhood. Sultana's father loves and prefers to have only sons. Naturally, he had obvious contempt for his wife for giving birth to many girls. As a result, Sultana always longed for fatherly love but somehow was in variably scorned by her father. On the other hand, her brother Ali, reckless and extravagant in every way, was adored by her father and every wish of his was fulfilled. Clearly, these biases brought about Sultana's hatred towards her brother Ali. Since her childhood, therefore, she observes the gender stereotypes which facilitate male dominance.

Indeed, in every socio-cultural set up, women are marginalized on the basis of gender stereotypes with varying degree of difference. However, in monarchy their situation is much more pathetic. Naturally, as radical feminist thinker Kate Millett observes, “If one takes the patriarchal government to be the institution whereby that half of the populace which is female is controlled by that half which is male (25)”. In *Princess*, it appears clearly that Saudi Arabian women are relegated to the secondary position with women's consent, through the ideology supported by religion, myth, cultural traditions and rituals. Besides, many institutions work together to support the dominant section of society as

Relations of ruling can operate without the consent of the ruled, through the use of violence, force and coercion, through the monopolization of wealth and information, through the confining of goods and opportunities to small, elite segment of population, through the policies and practices which benefit some at the expense of others. But the social conditions of male supremacy function most efficiently to the extent that women (and men) accept the reality of their position, embrace it as natural and unalterable, desire its continuation and fear

of its destruction, and believe it is their own meaningful existence. (Thompson 22)

The ideological value system and patriarchal mindset have the worst effect on women's psychology and distort it completely. In a strictly patriarchal society such as Saudi Arabia, women are victimized and the continuous oppression through stone-age cultural practices and beliefs. Consequently, psychologically speaking, women accept the systemic injustice towards them as natural.

In Saudi culture, on the basis of biological sex, women are considered as 'the other.' It is reflected through Sultana's father whose opinion is, "Women are a men's curse (74)". So much so that the data related to women's birth or death are not recorded in any official public record. Sultana testifies to this fact which questions her existence, "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? (30)". Such kind of discriminations compel women to regard themselves as inferior and non-existent creatures and accept it as a fact that they do not have any individual existence at all. The girl children are deliberately ignored by their fathers and no attention is paid to their emotional and other needs. On the other hand, male children are glorified and misogynistic attitude is indirectly installed in their minds through countless cultural practices

From the early age, the male child is taught that the women are of little value: they exist only for his comfort and convenience. The child witnesses the disdain shown for his mother and sisters by his father, this open contempt leads to his scorn of all females and makes it impossible for him to enjoy friendship with anyone of the opposite sex. (29)

Sultana's brother Ali is a product of this kind of orientation and value system. He has learnt only contempt for women since his childhood. Thus, he is incapable of developing any kind of compassion and love towards women. In this way, women are ideologically confined to secondary positions as Millett points out, "Male supremacy, like all other political creeds, does not finally reside in physical strength but in acceptance of a value system which is not biological (27)".

In Saudi Arabia, religion plays a very crucial role in determining the lives of people. Their everyday lives are governed via the guidance of Qur'anic verses preached by the religious instructors. Speaking from the point of view of dogmas, religion always prefers the old traditions and customs and it is nearly impossible to challenge them. Most of the decadent practices are sanctioned by religion in even the modern times. As a result, the patriarchal ideology keeps prevailing, foregrounding a host of medieval traditions and practices. In the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, religion and politics are closely and inseparably interconnected. Not surprisingly, religious teachings are appropriated, redefined and misused for political motives. Thus, the prevailing patriarchal norms get further entrenched with the deliberate misinterpretation of Qur'anic verses.

Besides, family honour is given immense importance in Saudi society. Family is a unit of the larger society which follows the dominant ideology of the state. For this purpose, family codes are constructed and sustained so as to facilitate male dominance over women as Kate Millett points out

As the fundamental instrument and the foundation unit of patriarchal society the family and its roles are prototypical. Serving as an agent of the larger society, the family not only encourages its own members to adjust and conform, but acts as a unit in the government of the patriarchal state which rules its citizens through the family head. (33)

The individuality of women is suppressed through the role of the mother who performs the primary duty of shaping and constructing her daughters' character as 'good and decent' strictly in accordance with the conventional norms related to family honour. As a result, the first menstruation cycle of a girl holds great significance in Saudi culture, "... the appearance of the first menses to select the first veil and *abaaya* – with the greatest of care (87)". In this regard, the holy Qur'an advocates the modesty of dress but its implications are misused to control and oppress female sexuality. Saudi culture places too much importance upon suppressing female sexuality since women are regarded as a dangerous force. It is believed that they can create chaos in a society and distract men's attention from religious practices. Consequently, religious instructors often have a misogynistic approach towards women. It is clearly reflected in *Princess*, when Hadi, who is aspiring to be *mutawa* (religious police), believes, "... women were the cause of all evil on earth (85)". Through these kinds of distorted religious beliefs, women are regarded as evil. Thus, there are certain codes and rules strictly imposed upon women in order to maintain their 'ideal conduct.' Obviously, rebellious women are automatically suppressed with the help of prevalent cultural norms. On similar lines, because of Sultana's rebellious spirit, Ali believes that Sultana has a devil inside her.

The institution of marriage also ordains women to be completely under the control of males and their big egos. Sultana validates this when she says, "... the absolute control over female has nothing to do with love, only the fear of the male's tarnished honor (29)". Every decision regarding daughters' lives is taken by their fathers, especially decision pertaining to their marriage. Obviously, father fixes the marriage of his daughters wherever he notoriously seeks his economic or political benefits by completely ignoring the girl's choice. Sultana tells Sasson about her sister Sara who is exceptionally brilliant, has artistic tastes and wished to visit Florence, Venice and Milan. However, her dreams are dashed to the ground when she comes to know that her father had already fixed her marriage with "... a man of great prominence of wealth" and who was "sixty-two years old; and Sara would be his third wife (54-55)". Sara's refusal to accept the arrangement gives rise to her father's anger towards his wife. As a result, he reluctantly ordered his wife "... to cure her daughter of her feverish resentments and to guide her peacefully to her destiny, which in his words was that of a 'dutiful wife' and 'good mother' (56)". Sara eventually does not have any option but to accept this arrangement.

After marriage, the authority over a woman shifts from her father to her husband. Accordingly, the characteristics of a good wife are glorified as Sara's father says at her wedding, "Sara was doing what women are born to do: and pleasure the male and produce his children (64)". Moreover, the institution of marriage authorizes a man to exercise his right to treat his wife as he wishes. It is expected of a good wife that she must be available physically as well as mentally to her husband all the time. Most of the times, marriage leads men to resort to physical brutality against women because nobody can interfere in the life of a husband and wife. The wife cannot raise her voice. Not surprisingly, Sara also becomes victim to sexual brutality in her marriage; the unbearable experience at the hands of her husband forced Sara to ultimately commit suicide. So, this kind of indifference and cruelty towards women proves that they are considered non-human or merely as objects in the institution of marriage.

Women are browbeaten emotionally also with the concept of polygamy which allows men to have more than one wife legally, without any apparent reason. Even the Qur'anic verse is used to justify polygamy in which it is said that, on certain grounds, when a wife is unable to produce children, a man can marry another woman. Historically, it was permitted, as Asghar Ali Engineer observes, "In abnormal circumstances like war when large numbers of men

were decimated and balance between the sexes was seriously shaken, on such an instance polygamy was permitted to overcome the social problems (131)". Still, there are strict guidelines as "Qur'an stipulates justice and equal treatment to all wives" (Engineer 132). However, the purpose of this Qur'anic instruction is used for sexual licentiousness. Currently, Saudi Arabia is one of the richest nations in the world and there is, obviously, no war like situation prevails. However, polygamy is still practised. Sultana narrates a horrible incident, that is, after the death of her mother, her father prepares to marry a young virgin who was just fifteen years old. The Qur'anic teaching of equal love is manipulated and twisted to sheer absurdity under this pretence, Sultana's father started spending more time with his new young wife Randa in comparison with the other wives. In this context, Fatima Mernissi speaks out against polygamy, "Polygamy is a way for men to humiliate the woman as sexual being; it expresses her inability to satisfy him (16)".

Besides, the state has the authority to maintain the status quo through strict laws. Moreover, in an absolute monarchy such as Saudi Arabia, which is a rigidly theocratic state, it is extremely difficult to change the prevailing conditions. Thus, in the matter of divorce, the *sharia* is enforced which is grossly misconstrued by religious clerics and it is used as a tool to subjugate women emotionally as well as economically. A husband can easily divorce his wife by simply pronouncing "I divorce you" consecutively three times in the presence of two male witnesses without any sound reason. Consequently, a woman always lives in a perceptible fear of divorce. Not surprisingly, she forces herself to obey every wish of her husband.

The social stigma of divorce is severe, and the financial and emotional trauma overwhelming for women. If the children of a divorced woman are not suckling, they too can be taken from her. If divorced women are fortunate, they will have loving parents to welcome them home, or an elder son who will give them shelter. Without a supportive family, they are doomed, for no single or divorced woman can live alone in my land. (229)

On the other hand, it is extremely hard for a woman to get divorce from a man. If a woman files for divorce, she needs court's intervention. Moreover, religious institutions force a woman to continue with her husband on the grounds "You might dislike a thing which Allah has meant for your own good (70)". It is only in one situation, that is, if a woman can testify that her husband is impotent, that she could be granted divorce.

In order to secure certain privileges for patriarchy, religion is used as a shield. As Millett points out, ". . . most patriarchies have institutionalized force through their legal systems (43)". Similarly, the *sharia* prohibits a Saudi girl from marrying a non-Muslim person. On the other hand, a Saudi man can marry any woman. As Sultana angrily asserts, "These men of ours have determined it is permissible for them to mate with a foreign woman, a woman of another religion, but no, we women are forbidden! It is insane! This law – and its interpretation – is made by men for men! (227)". A Saudi man's marriage with a non-Muslim woman is defended as ". . . the union of Muslim men with women of other faiths is permissible, for the children are raised in the superior Muslim faith of their father (228)". On the other hand, Saudi women are not allowed to marry non-Muslim men at all. In this context, Sultana says, "We Saudi women are taught that it is a sin for any Muslim woman to bind herself to a non-Muslim: the religion of her children cannot be guaranteed if her husband is Christian or Jewish (228)".

Although it appears as if such provisions are meant to defend religion yet the underlying implications are heavily political. The patriarchal society always restricts women from any kind of liberty to lead their lives autonomously. In the context of Saudi Arabia, if a woman

violates the status quo by marrying a non-Muslim, she is punished severely in 'the woman's room' (a special small room at home in which women are imprisoned). Sultana narrates the tragedy which befell Sameera (Sultana's elder sister Tahani's dearest friend), whose father was a man of progressive thinking. Sameera wanted to be an engineer although it was considered a ridiculous idea as Sultana comments, "No woman in Saudi Arabia had such a degree, for we are directed to careers considered appropriate for females: pediatricians, teachers, or social workers for women and children (230)".

However, Sameera's father had hired a tutor from London, and by the virtue of her efforts, she had been accepted in a technical school in London. At London, in the school, Sameera fell in love with Larry, a Christian, despite knowing the fact that Larry was a Catholic and would never change his faith. Naturally, if Sameera were to marry to Larry, the consequences for her would be perilous. In this context, Sultana says, ". . . she would be forced to forfeit her Saudi nationality. We would never see her again in our country, for she understood that she could not return to our land after such a scandalous event as marriage to a non-believer (231-32)". Unfortunately, Sameera's parents died in an accident. Eventually, her uncle became her guardian, "A man of deepest faith, he had often expressed his profound displeasure at the independence of his brother's daughter" (232). He was angry at his brother for being so very liberal towards Sameera's education. Thus, he was ". . . scornful of the education of the girls, he thought it best that females be married at a tender age to a man of years and wisdom (232)". He ordered Sameera to return at home immediately but she was very well aware the brutal realities of her country. Eventually, she committed a blunder by fleeing with Larry to California. This incident enraged Sameera's uncle and he came to Sultana's sister Tahani to know the whereabouts of his ". . . ungodly niece and her infidel lover (233)". To add to Sameera's misfortune, Larry too, was also uncertain of marrying her. So, she had no choice but to return home. Within a month, her marriage was arranged to a man in his mid-fifties and Sameera was to be his third wife. Sameera was terrified at the thought ". . . for her relationship with Larry had been one of deep love; she was no longer a virgin (236)". She remembered her American lover which aroused her husband's ire who, in turn blamed her uncle, ". . . the family had no honour and had knowingly wed him the one who was no longer pure (237)". Eventually, her uncle sought the guidance of the Qur'an and Sameera was punished in 'the women's room.' In this way, gender biases are sanctioned by male dominated society in order to validate and maintain complete authoritative control over women.

The *sharia* law is very severe against many of the crime of *hudud* (crime against Allah) such as, theft, drinking alcohol, defamation of Islam, fornication and adultery. These crimes are investigated by the religious police called *mutawa*, who often exhibit misogynistic attitudes against women. As a result, it is extremely difficult for a girl to prove rape. Sultana says in this context, "In the world of Arabs, blame for unsanctioned sex is placed wholly on the shoulders of the female (207)". Sultana narrates an incident about a shopkeeper's daughter named Amal. When her parents were away to the Emirates, her brother got an opportunity to gather his friends at home for party. Amal, dressed only in a nightgown, unintentionally entered in the room when her brother did not respond to her calls since was drugged and slept in the bathroom. Under the strong influence of drugs, the mob comprising her brother's friends dragged Amal inside the room and eventually raped her. Later, when she was admitted to the hospital, *mutwas* obviously got involved and started investigating the case. The boys' version was, ". . . she had behaved in such a bold manner – sitting on their laps, kissing them and fingering her body – that they could not hold back any longer (210)". It was primarily the patriarchal mindset of Amal's father that made him believe the story invented

by the boys since he felt, “. . . the boys had done only what the male would do under the circumstances (210)”. A woman is, thus, held responsible for the heinous crime of rape which carries a severe penalty of death by stoning. In this context, Eleanor Doumato observes

Women have no legal protections against gender-based violence outside the home. Women who report sexual abuse or rape are unlikely to find sympathetic judicial authorities and instead of receiving protection, they are often accused of having illicit sex. In rape cases, the burden of the proof lies with the victim, and the offence may only be proven through the perpetrator’s confession or the testimony of four witnesses. (436-37)

Naturally, fearing the dreadful consequences, lots of rape cases against women go untold and unheard because it is too difficult for women to get justice. The apparent fear of severe punishment forbids them from lodging any complaint.

On the other hand, if an affluent man commits a crime of *hudud*, he is defended hypocritically by *mutawas*. Sultana testifies to the hypocritical stand of the *mutawas* when she cleverly plays a trick against Ali in which he is found guilty of keeping alcohol and prohibited material but, eventually, he is exonerated through active help from his father who pays a large sum of money to the mosque. Moreover, during the family trip in Egypt, Sultana witnesses the evil nature of her brother Ali and his friend Hadi. She had found out that they had raped a young girl of barely eight years. They gave money to an Egyptian woman who had been supplying girls for them. When Sultana threatened them that she would disclose their shameful acts to her father, she felt stunned on learning from Ali, “Father had given him the name of a man to contact for the same type of service”. Furthermore he adds, “. . . young girls were more fun and besides, father always did the same sort of thing when he came to Cairo (93)”.

In an autocratic monarchy such as Saudi Arabia, the king holds all the powers. Obviously, the ruling class maintains its supremacy by maintaining the patriarchal set up shielded well through religious injunctions. Obviously, this kind of a society ensures women’s marginalized position. Thus, in every class women are subjugated, even “. . . women in ruling class are also subordinated to the men of their class because of their role in childbirth, or breeding, and this is involved with property and heirs (Richards and Saba Web)”. This gets reflected Sultana’s life as Sasson describes, “Although, she had been born into extremely wealthy family, owning four mansions on three continents, enjoying private jets and jewellery worth millions, when it came to personal freedoms, Sultana had few (14)”. Sultana had learned this fact from her childhood since her brother Ali always used to rule over her and she hated him “. . . as only the oppressed can hate (26)”.

The ruling class controls all kinds of organizations which can possibly lead to women’s empowerment. For this purpose, women’s education is restricted only to read the Qur’an. Secular education for women is regarded as a threat which would defile their moral character. However, King Faisal did have a progressive approach towards the modernization of Saudi Arabia and his wife Iffat advocated education of girls. As a result, “Iffat became the driving force behind education for young girls. Without her efforts, the women in Arabia today would not be allowed in classroom (47)”. However, King Faisal’s royal cousins did not want any progressive change at all. Hence, King Faisal was murdered by his own cousins. As a result, women’s education stayed limited only to religious education. Moreover, the academic curriculum for women is strictly guarded by religious instructors and secular subjects such as History, Mathematics or Science are strictly prohibited. The reasons behind such restrictions are quite obvious, namely women are not supposed to grow aware of things or think rationally. Secondly, education enables women to enter the economic field which would

eventually lead to their empowerment. Sultana refers to Fatima, her instructor, who was educated in England. In spite of having a deformed foot, “. . . she earned a salary and made her decisions about life without outside influence (46)”. So, education remains severely limited among Saudi women since it is considered to be a big threat against patriarchy as well as Islam.

The wearing of veil also serves the purpose of male guardianship of women. It has political implications too; as Sultana says in this context, “Of course, at the time of each female’s menses and subsequent veiling, the cut-off from any males other than father and brothers was sudden and complete (38)”. In this way, the male guardian becomes the absolute master of women of his family, “As such women’s rights within the private domain (marriage, divorce, custody) as well as within the public domain (education, work) are restricted by her male guardian (Tonnessen 9)”.

In a Saudi family, a male is the decision maker for women and he often uses them as a production unit. For instance, women are supposed to produce male children in order to inherit the property of the family. If a women fails to give birth to sons, her husband can marry another woman to secure his property. Moreover, the father also uses his daughters to derive economic benefits. It is shown in *Princess*; Sara is forced to marry a man who is chosen by her father in order to get financial and political benefits from this alliance. Secondly, in social sphere too, Saudi women are unable to visit anywhere without the permission of their male guardians, “In Saudi Arabia, a man must write a letter granting permission for the females in his family to travel (66)”. Moreover, it is rather controversial issue that in Saudi Arabia women are not allowed to drive. Thus, due to lack of mobility, space and freedom thereof, women are completely deprived of public as well as private life. In this way, Saudi women are absolutely deprived of their basic democratic rights resulting in their exploitation and marginalization.

Feminist thinkers observe that women’s liberation is possible if there is some attempt at consciousness-raising among all women, enabling them to share their experiences with one another. As bell hooks observes

Revolutionary feminist consciousness-raising emphasized the importance of learning about patriarchy as system of domination, how it became institutionalized and how it perpetuated and maintained. Understanding the way male domination and sexism was expressed in everyday life created awareness in women of the ways we were victimized, exploited, and, in worse case scenarios oppressed. (7)

In the context of *Princess*, Sultana also tries to share her life’s experiences with the world so that women can develop a bond together in order to subvert their own oppression as an exploited class. Sultana witnesses the widespread exploitation of women in her society. In order to raise her voice against various injustices, Sultana gets involved in a club named ‘Lively Lips’ with her two friends, Wafa and Nadia as well as her step mother Randa. The goals of this club are as:

(1)At every opportunity, let the spirit of women’s rights move our lips and guide our tongues. (2) Each member should strive to bring in one new member per month. (3) Our first goal would be to stop marriages of young women to old men. (106)

The aspired goals of the club do not get fulfilled because Wafa and Nadia get involved in desperate acts which are strictly prohibited as per the *sharia* law. In this way, it is difficult to support such groups or clubs in a closed society such as Saudi Arabia because of the unchallengeable religious discourse. As per *sharia*, women are expected to be modest and

pure. Saudi women take this injunction very seriously because “. . . the mere suspicion of sexual misconduct, such as kissing, can bring death to a young girl (74)”.

Thus, in an autocratic monarchy, it is extremely difficult to raise consciousness among women. There are a host of rigid socio-cultural rituals and practices as well as strict laws to maintain the male centric ideology. Thus, the ideology manipulates to obstruct and stop the consciousness-raising among women. The general impression about foreign women preached by Saudi men is, “. . . any woman who was not a Muslim was considered a prostitute (137)”. An ordinary Saudi woman can easily believe such misconceptions because they are never allowed to visit abroad. As a result, most of Saudi women believe, “. . . most of Western women are promiscuous (221)”. These misconceptions are very effectively used in order to block the process of consciousness-raising among women. During the Gulf war, the infiltration of foreign women from Kuwait and America surprised Sultana and many other Saudi women. Sultana expresses this experience as “. . . the Kuwaiti women warmed our hearts with the show of defiance of our centuries old tradition of male supremacy (271)”. Obviously, if Kuwaiti women could liberate themselves of male dominance to a considerable extent, Surely, Saudi women too could get some liberation. However, the strong religious narratives always waylay them as Sultana says

After all, our country is the home of Islam; we Saudis are ‘keepers of the faith’. To cover our shame at our forced repressions, we spoke proudly to our Kuwaiti sisters of our unique heritage: we Saudi women hold high the symbols of Muslim belief the world over. (272)

Thus, in order to quell the quest for liberation among Saudi women, foreign women’s images are sought to be denigrated. It is claimed, on the basis of many misconceptions, that Saudi women’s moral character will stand defiled if they mix up with foreign women. However, the hidden motive behind such claims is to alienate Saudi women from western women so that they do not develop any kind of sisterhood with them or among themselves.

The role of a mother-in-law serves as an effective tool to substantiate the patriarchal set up and fragment women’s identity or their integration with fellow sufferers. There is always a close link between mother and son, especially in Muslim households. It is the mother who has the sole right to choose a suitable bride for her son.

There are obvious reasons for the proximity of a mother with her son since, in Saudi society, a woman has value only if she gives birth to a son. Sultana learns, “. . . male children are so treasured that a fierce bond develops between mother and son. Nothing, other than the love of another woman, can separate the two (175)”. After the marriage of her son, a mother experiences a sense of rivalry, instead of feeling or building companionship with her daughter-in-law. Naturally, she finds her daughter-in-law to be some sort of a threat. Clearly, a characteristic and value system of patriarchy as Millet observes, “. . . is to set one woman against another (38)”. Millett further elaborates

The large quantity of guilt attached to sexuality in patriarchy is overwhelmingly placed upon the female, who is, culturally speaking, held to be the culpable or the more culpable party in nearly any sexual liaison, whatever the extenuating circumstances. A tendency toward the reification of the female makes her more often a sexual object than a person. This is particularly so when she is denied human rights through chattel status. (Millett 54)

In *Princess*, this is shown through Sultana’s mother who always remained a good and dutiful wife as well as a mother, “. . . she could imagine no other path for her daughters than the one she herself had trod (162)”. However, Sultana tries to overcome this submissive mentality.

She attempts to speak out against the oppressive system, particularly in her letter to her readers, “We Saudi woman need your help. May you live in countries where you can insist that your governments demand change from one of their economic and political partners, Saudi Arabia (20)”.

Unlike other Saudi girls, Sultana wishes to have equal rights and she wants that injustice against women must end in her country. In consonance with this, she tries to assert herself on some occasions such as when she demanded to meet her fiancé before her marriage, which was considered a radical step. Also, she strictly opposed her husband when he decided to marry another woman. She shows immense courage and forbids him from putting his signature on legal documents. In this regard, Sultana states, “So long as he and I were wed he would not take another wife. If he were to break his word, I was to be given a divorce, custody of our children, and half of his fortune (263)”. Sultana empathizes that reforms must be brought in so as to change the social scenario and uplift the status of women. Sultana reveals the dark secrets of the royal household where women are terribly discriminated against and she testifies to the fact that even women belonging to the élite class are also badly oppressed. However, the degree of oppression is different in comparison to working class women. Sultana, by virtue of being born in the royal family, exhibits the ever present class consciousness which restricts her from building a bond with women who belong to the middle and the lower classes.

This stance of Sultana is indeed questionable keeping in mind the vast number of privileges which accrue to her class. She does want some reforms which can be brought in strictly within the existing system. However, the acclaimed Feminist bell hooks challenges this kind of liberal approach and points out

The mainstream patriarchy reinforced the idea that the concerns of women from privileged class groups were the only ones worthy of receiving attention. Feminist reform aimed to gain social equality for women within the existing structure. Privileged women wanted equality with men of their class. (40)

Thus, Sultana fails to work for the all important consciousness-raising among women. Cutting across class and class-related affiliations, she just does not advocate reforms overruling the existing system or beyond it even. She is unable to critically analyse or challenge the very system which has been put together by the ruling class to subjugate women. Sultana fails to realize that women’s liberation is almost impossible to achieve within the system which is wholly geared to perpetuate the interests of the ruling class.

The social life of Saudi women is also severely restricted. Moreover, it continues to be a controversial issue in Saudi Arabia whether women should be allowed to drive or not. Obviously, this is meant to take away women’s self-esteem so that they remain dependent on men. However, some of the middle class Saudi women try to free themselves of these shackles and assert, as Sultana describes

The Forty-seven young women who demonstrated against the informal ban on driving became the scapegoats at every grievance the *mutawas* considered. They were women of middle class, women who were teachers of other women or students – our thinkers and doers. As a result of their bravery, their lives were devastated by their actions: passports taken, jobs lost and families harassed. (275)

This incident clearly reflects the class angle in Saudi Arabian society in which only the middle class asserts against the ossified system. This struggle, put up by forty seven middle class women which was obviously an agitation to attain the right to drive for women which meant to be benefit every woman in the country. On the other hand, Sultana does not take any

concrete step to confront the established set up despite being a princess belonging to the current ruling family. If middle class women could demonstrate against a ban on women's driving, why could Sultana not assert herself openly against this injustice meted out to women in her own family as well as the society at large?

There are, however, a few instances whereby Sultana to a certain extent tries to learn about the lives of ordinary women in the kingdom. Sultana learns from her maid Marci, a native of the Philippines, about the exploitation of domestic workers from third world countries. Regarding the painful incident which happened to Marci's friend Madeline, Sultana feels that there is a common bond among all the women who worked in Saudi Arabia. She laments

We women are vassals, and the walls of our prisons are un-scalable for this grotesque disease of pre-eminence lives in the sperm of all men and is passed along, generation to generation – a deadly incurable disease whose host is male and victim is female. (141)

Furthermore, Sultana meets a tribal girl in the hospital and tries to enquire about her miserable life sans any education or medical facilities. Still, Sultana observes the life of lower class women rather curiously, without bothering to look beneath the surface. She has never had any experience of the kind of life led by ordinary Saudi women. She never tries to analyse or question the privileges such as education she received because her father had hired an instructor for her. However, how can poor ordinary women afford such opportunities? By virtue of being associated with the immense advantages of the royal household, Sultana does not pay any attention towards millions of underprivileged women who had very limited access to the fewer job opportunities which were available. Perhaps, it is because she has no need whatsoever to enter the workforce. In addition to this, she is very well aware of the restrictions against mixing up with the lower classes. Nevertheless, she does not make any attempt to break those barriers in order to raise consciousness among the ordinary underprivileged women and do something substantial to better their lot. Indeed, she is concerned about the injustice done to women all over the world as she says in her letter, "I have made the surprising discovery that women the world over are ill treated by men (20)". And yet, instead of making more efforts on her own, Sultana seeks help from the men of her family to improve the condition of women. It is obvious that Sultana does not wish to discard the privileges associated with her élite class.

Historically, it is a well proven fact that no radical change can arrive without the concerted efforts made by all the women to put aside their respective class privileges. Thus, women need to join hands and put their heads together to raise consciousness and eliminate the established gender biases from their lives. This is possible only by rationally questioning the social set up, customs, law and religious codes while building up a strong organization. In this regard, Sultana remains deliberately silent because of her class privileges.

Indeed, gender equality is an essential component in any progressive society. It is highly beneficial not only for women, but for the society at large. Thus, it is the collective responsibility of both men and women from every class to develop more progressive and liberated view so as to put an end to the existing gender inequalities. Indeed, this is possible only when women would be economically independent. Moreover, to eliminate gender stereotypes, education is an essential component for the progress of the society. In this regard, the privileged people must come forward to contribute to the well being of the lower stratum of the society. The government should also take a liberal and firm stand and limit the interference of religious authorities in people's everyday lives.

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