



Subjugation and Survival: Examining Patriarchy and Marriage in Jean Sasson's Princess Series.

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Abstract: While the glittering facade of a Saudi palace evokes visions of unimaginable luxury and royal splendour, the lived reality for women within this deeply conservative, male-dominated society tells a far darker story. Behind gilded doors, female autonomy is systematically constrained by rigid patriarchal structures and religion-centric governance. Over the past two decades, courageous writers such as Taslima Nasrin, Latifa, and Jean Sasson have brought national and international visibility to these suppressed lives behind the veil, exposing the systemic human rights issues hidden beneath cultural traditions.

Sasson's literary output occupies a pivotal space in this discourse, specifically highlighting the quiet suffering and quiet resilience of Saudi women navigating extreme subjugation. The foundation of her most influential work was laid in 1983 through a rare, intimate friendship with a Saudi royal, Princess Sultana. This unique bond granted Sasson unprecedented access to the heavily guarded private sphere of the Saudi elite, eventually culminating in her groundbreaking *Princess* trilogy.

By critically examining the narrative arc across *Princess*, *Daughters of Arabia*, and *Desert Royal*, this paper explores how institutionalized patriarchy and religious fundamentalism function not as separate entities, but as interconnected forces acting as two sides of the same coin. Through this lens, the paper demonstrates how moral, legal, and social codes are weaponized to enforce female submission, while simultaneously celebrating the covert acts of resistance through which these women reclaim their humanity and voice.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Subversion, Subjugation, Oppression, Gender Equity

While rapid technological advancements have brought humanity to the brink of space exploration, this progress has not unfolded uniformly across all social strata—particularly regarding the status of women. Despite gains in education and employment that offer financial independence, women across the globe continue to endure systemic oppression and profound hardship. This reality persists regardless of political structure, whether in democratic republics like India, military-influenced regimes like Pakistan, or the religion-centered state of Saudi Arabia. Today, critiques of female subjugation in male-dominated societies are increasingly vocal, positioning female victimization as one of the most pressing socio-cultural crises of the contemporary world.

In 1970 Kate Millet's influential feminist work, *Sexual Politics*, she introduced the word Patriarchy that denotes the rule of the father. Millet fully recognized the ability of patriarchy to reinvent itself from one generation to the next. As Kate Millet puts it,

Society like other historical civilizations is a patriarchy. The fact is evident at once if one recalls that the military, industry, technology, universities, Science, politics, office, finance and in short, every avenue of power within society including the coercive force of the police is in male hands. Patriarchy's greatest psychological weapon is ... its universality and longevity. (109)



Adrienne Rich, a North American feminist poet and critic formulates it in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*,

Patriarchy is the power of the father, a familial, political system in which men by force, direct pressure or through ritual tradition, law and language customs, education etc determine what part women shall or shall not play and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male (192)

Feminism emerged in the Western world as a critical movement to challenge entrenched patriarchal paradigms. Rooted in the demand for equity, it advocates for women's recognition across social, economic, legal, and political spheres equal to that of men. Feminism encompasses both an acute awareness of gender-based inequality and an active commitment to dismantling these systemic disadvantages. It critiques long-standing patriarchal assumptions that center male authority while marginalizing women as secondary or inferior. However, marginalized groups do not remain passive under discrimination; over time, women cultivate the agency to resist and transform oppressive societal structures. Central to this struggle is the understanding that while sex is biologically determined, gender—the behaviors, roles, and identities assigned to masculinity and femininity—is a social construct shaped by pervasive patriarchal bias.

De Beauvoir's belief that one is not born a woman but one becomes a woman is a famous dictum: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature" (*The Second Sex*, 295). By this cultural process, women have internalized the norms and values of patriarchy, which privilege men by promoting traditional gender role. Traditional gender roles cast the masculine as rational, strong, active, decisive, adventurous, protective, creative and dominating. The feminine, by systematic opposition to such traits, has come to be identified as emotional, irrational, weak, passive, timid, conventional, nurturing, acquiescent, subservient, and submissive. These gender roles have successfully been used to exclude women from equal access to leadership and decision-making positions in the family as well as in politics, academia, and corporate world.

Writers throughout the globe have tried to voice the voiceless, to portray the deplorable condition of women in every aspect of life. When one is asked to close his/ her eyes and imagine a Saudi Palace filled with women and children, we will surely think about the splendor, grandeur and majesty of Saudi Arabia. But the condition of women, especially in a male dominated, religion centered country is different. The last two decades have witnessed the portrayal of the life of the women behind the veil by writers like Taslima Nasrin, Latifa, Jean Sasson etc. Jean Sasson, a popular American writer has unveiled the life of women behind the veil in the Arabian Peninsula through her works. Her Princess Trilogy narrates the pathetic conditions of women in a religion centered male oriented society, i.e. Saudi Arabia. As the voice of the Middle East women, Jean Sasson has graphically, vividly and realistically portrayed the odyssey of women aspiring for self image and self esteem leading them to an independent life as a woman in other regions of the world is leading. In 1983, a close friendship between Jean and a Royal, Princess Sultana, was forged and years later, based on that friendship, Jean was able to write her widely acclaimed *Princess* trilogy.

Saudi Arabia is the largest political unit in the Arabian Peninsula. Religion, of course plays an important part in the Muslim world and Saudi Arabia is a completely Muslim Country. Islam is a way of life. The basis of Islam is Koran, which to the orthodox Muslim is the word of god and the final authority in many matters of daily activity. The Middle Eastern family has long been described as a patriarchal unit, and it has been noted that Muslim family laws have served to reinforce patriarchal gender relations and women's subordinate position within the family. In Muslim culture marriage is a solemn covenant, a legal contract unlike a sacramental affair. In her book *Princess*, Jean Sasson conveys through the Princess Sultana's story of the many abuses of women in Saudi Arabia. For thousands of years, women in Saudi Arabia have earned no respect, given no identity (as if invisible), and were treated like sexual objects. Their only use is to produce male offspring, and to service their husbands sexually. This goes for all women. Although women of royalty are born free, they are just as insignificant as the lower class



women. Through the eyes of Princess Sultana, Jean Sasson tells the cruel and unjust ways of the male society in Saudi Arabia.

In her *Princess* trilogy, Sasson narrates the life of a Saudi Princess, Princess Sultana Al Saud from Al Saud family. At the onset itself, she portrays the deplorable state of women in Saudi Arabia. As a woman in a land ruled by men, she cannot speak directly to the readers and hence she sought the help of the author. She feels that she is born free, yet everywhere she is in chains. She never blames Muslim faith for the lowly position of women in the country. Koran never stated that women are subordinate to men. According to Prophet Mohammed, “Whoever hath a daughter, and doth not bury her alive, scold her or prefer his male children to her, may god bring him to Paradise” (Sassoon, 28)

Yet there is nothing men will not do, there is nothing they have not done in herland to ensure the birth of male, not female offspring. The worth of a child born in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia is measured by the absence or presence of male organ. The pride of a man’s honor evolves from his women, so he must enforce his authority and supervision over the sexuality of his women or face public disgrace. The authority of a Saudi male is unlimited; his wife and children survive only if he desires. The complex situation begins with the rearing of young boys. From an early age, the male child is taught that women are of little value. They exist only for his comfort and convenience. The child witnesses the disdain shown to his mother and sisters by his father and this open contempt leads to his scorn for all females and makes it impossible for him to enjoy friendship with anyone of his opposite sex. Taught only the role of master to slave, by the time he is old enough to take a mate, he considers her his chattel, not his partner. Thus the Princess laments that, in her country women are ignored by their fathers, scorned by her brothers and abused by their husbands.

The history of women is buried behind the black veil of secrecy. Neither their births nor deaths are made official in any public record. The common emotion expressed at the birth of any female is either sorrow or shame. The question that often perplexed Sultana is whether the women of the desert land do not exist, if their coming and passing go unnoticed. If no one knows of her existence, does it mean she does not exist? These injustices of her life prompted her to take the risk of telling her own story. She feels that though the women in her country are hidden by the veil and firmly controlled by the patriarchal society, change must come because they are weary of the restraints of their customs.

From her childhood itself Sultana understood the drudgery faced by a female child in her own family. Her father showered all his love and attention to his son Ali and she and her sisters were devoid of attention. Whenever there is a fight among the kids, her father always supported Ali. Ali was allowed to talk whereas she was forbidden from responding. Females in her country are not permitted to voice their opinions. All women learn at an early age itself to manipulate rather than to confront. Sultana as a child understood that she was a female who was shackled by males unburdened with consciences. She saw the broken spirits of her mother and sisters but she was faithful to optimism and never doubted that one day she would triumph and her pain would be compensated by true justice.

Fortunately Sultana’s mother managed to educate her daughters despite her father’s resistance. Sara, her sister was a bright student. Through her sister Sara, Sultana unveils how a girl is succumbed to the hands of fate. She was forcefully married to a man of sixty two when she was just sixteen. She narrates the pathetic state of her sister during the marriage. She had no choice but to accept her fate. But later she suffered sexual brutality and tried to commit suicide. At that point, her mother showed unbelievable courage and stood like a tigress saving her child from her husband’s hands. He had no other choice but to grant divorce. Sultana speaks about marriage and divorce in Saudi Arabia in her narrative.

In the first novel, *Princess*, she speaks about the system of marriage. There were many primitive traditions surrounding marriage. Numerous factors determine the marriageability of a girl in Saudi Arabia: her family name,



her family fortune, her lack of deformities and her beauty. Even after the promise of marriage is made and the date is set, a girl rarely meets her husband prior to her wedding. If a girl is of a good family and without deformity, she will enjoy a number of proposals. If she is a beauty, many men will send their mothers or fathers to beg for marriage, for beauty are the main commodities for women in Saudi Arabia. No scandal can mar the reputation of beauty. Such a girl will find herself married as the third or fourth wife to an old man in a faraway village. Most marriages are guided by the hands of elder women in a family but there are men, like her father who base their decision of their daughter's marriages upon possible personal or economic gain through the union. Sultana believes that women should have a voice in the final decision on issues that would alter their lives forever. As in the case of divorce also freedom lies in the hands of men. Islam gives right of divorce to men without any questioning or motive. Yet it is difficult for a girl to divorce her husband. She has to face many legal and financial obstacles.

As Sultana says,

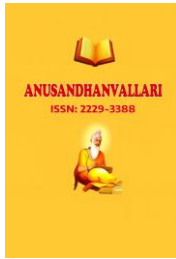
We women are vassals and the walls of our prison are inescapable, for this grotesque disease of preeminence lives in the sperm of all men and are passed along, generation to generation- a deadly incurable disease whose host is male and victim is female. Ownership of my body and soul would soon pass from father to a stranger I would call my husband (*Princess* 105)

In *Daughters of Arabia*, the second novel in the trilogy Sasson bewails the similar object of marriage as Sultana says, "I knew that most women in my land were still used as nothing more than political or economic prizes." (183) Muslims believed that a girl should be married as soon as she attains puberty. Within a month after the death of her mother, Sultana's father married a girl of just fifteen years old. In *Daughters of Arabia*, she speaks about Nikah alMutah or temporary marriage. Here a man can carry a woman for an agreed amount of time and money (Mahr). Such a marriage can last from hour to ninety nine years. Many men who never wanted to support their wives financially forever preferred such a marriage.

In Saudi Arabia the subject of sex is considered a taboo. Women are not allowed to talk about it publicly. But discussions regarding sex, men and children dominate female gatherings. When Sultana's marriage with Kareem was fixed, her sister Nura tried to convince her implications of married life. She disclosed that it is the duty of a wife to be available to her husband at all times, no matter what her feelings are. Sultana proclaimed that she would do as she wishes. But Nura stated that no man would accept refusal. Sultana announced in her rage that women are like uninspired mules, we trod the same weary track as the mule before us even if it led us to plunge off a cliff. Only when women evolved as spirited stallions, with a strong will of our own, would we progress and leave the era of those primitive behind us.

The desire for male children is common in many parts of the world, but no place can be compared with Arab lands, where every woman must endure boiling tension throughout her childbearing years, waiting for the birth of a son. Sons are the sole reason for marriage, the key to satisfaction of husbands. 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. Male children are given twice what female children are given. The moment a girl is born in Saudi Arabia; the parents immediately begin to think of an appropriate marriage disregarding her education or well being.

Sultana was unlike any other royal, Sasson had met. She was a woman with an independent mind to bring change to the lives of women in Saudi Arabia. Although she had been raised with the privileges of an enormously wealthy ruling family of Saudi Arabia, she made no effort to conceal that where issues regarding women were involved she was in rebellion against the traditions and customs of her own country. She was selfless caring and sensitive when it comes to other women. When she discovers any injustices against other women, she springs into action, regardless of personal danger to herself. She had many plans to make the tragic stories of Saudi women known to the world, but had never been free to do because of the danger it would attract to her immediate family and herself.



Hence protecting her anonymity, Jean Sasson voiced her concerns. Through the *Princess* trilogy Jean Sasson made a sincere effort to achieve their sense of freedom and equality.

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