



The Imperial Gaze: Unveiling Orientalist Narratives in Jean Sasson's "Princess" Series

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Abstract: The term "Orientalism" has traditionally been employed by scholars in fields such as art history, literature, and cultural studies to describe the imitation or portrayal of elements from Middle Eastern and East Asian cultures by European and American writers, artists, and designers. Jean Sasson's works, particularly those in collaboration with Middle Eastern women, often delve into the complexities of Muslim identities. While she has been praised for shedding light on the lives of women in the Middle East, her works have also faced criticism for potentially oversimplifying or sensationalizing the experiences of Muslim individuals. It's important to approach her writings with a critical perspective and consider various factors. Sasson's works often focus on individual stories, providing a glimpse into the lives of specific women. Some critics argue that Sasson's works may perpetuate Orientalist perspectives, stereotypes and misrepresentations of the East by the West. Readers should be aware of these dynamics and consider how the narratives might be influenced by broader cultural biases.

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From the past immemorial, the East is regarded as a mysterious place to the West. Early travellers tried to conquer the East but they projected the dark aspects of East through their memoirs and recollections. The concept of the oriental eye refers to a specific, biased way of seeing and interpreting the East, where the Western observer acts as the primary authority on Eastern reality. This perspective operates like a one-way mirror: the Western traveller or scholar observes, categorizes, and judges, while the people being watched are denied the opportunity to represent themselves. They are not given the opportunity to talk or give their ideas in the narration. Through the Oriental eye, the East is transformed into a spectacle or a museum of the past, designed specifically for the consumption of a Western audience. This gaze is deeply connected to the power of surveillance and documentation. The Oriental eye is an instrument of power that establishes a hierarchy between the observer and the observed. The West is positioned as the active, rational eye that interprets the world, while the East is relegated to the role of the passive, silent object being interpreted. This dynamic suggests that the East cannot represent itself and must, therefore, be represented by the West. This historical legacy remains influential today, shaping how modern media continues to frame the East through a lens of "otherness," where Western perspectives are still frequently treated as the objective standard for understanding Eastern cultures and conflicts.

Orientalism is a complex concept that describes the Western world's historical and cultural framing of the "Orient," which traditionally includes the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia. Broadly defined by scholar Edward Said in 1978, it is not merely the study of these regions but a systemic way of representing them as fundamentally different, exotic, and inferior to the West. This framework relies on a binary logic where the "Occident" (the West) is characterized as rational, progressive, and civilized, while the "Orient" is depicted as irrational, static, and backwards. By creating this "Other," Western powers were able to define their own identity through contrast, establishing a sense of cultural and intellectual superiority that persists in art, literature, and modern media. Said's Orientalism reveals a classic example of how Western saviours construct a narrative of the East to reinforce their own perceived moral superiority. The West creates a distorted, romanticised and dehumanised image of the East to justify their colonial attitude. Orientalism argues that colonialism was not only a system of political rule, but



also an all-round world view that simply believed the west was superior to the east. The academic world was closely connected to the system of political power in the West's dominion of the East. This colonial thinking did not go away when the colonial rule ended, but continued in different forms. According to Said, colonialism wasn't just the act of colonizing the particular place, it was an all-encompassing way of understanding the world.

Jean Sasson has consistently defended the authenticity of her work by positioning herself as a literal torch of the voiceless. She claimed that she was selected by the princess specifically because an outsider could easily tell the story that an insider could not. She framed her work as an activism rather than literature. Jean Sasson argues that her writing serves as a form of activism because it functions primarily as a tool for bearing witness to systemic injustices that are often hidden from the global community. By documenting the lived experiences of Sultana and other women within the Saudi royal family, Sasson moves beyond the traditional goals of literature, such as aesthetic beauty or entertainment, and instead focuses on the recording of human rights violations. She views her books as a strategic means to dismantle the culture of silence surrounding issues like forced marriage, restricted legal autonomy, and gender-based violence. In this sense, the narrative acts as a vehicle designed to spark international outrage and pressure for legal reforms.

Jean Sasson's narration is criticised for being a classic case study on how literature can reinforce orientalist frame works while appearing to advocate for human rights. In orientalist literature, the oriental person is often seen as unable to represent themselves. Even though Sultana is the one telling the story, Sasson is the one framing it. The question of whether the series belong to biography or autobiography is still a question of debate. From a strictly literary analysis, these works are biographies. Jean Sasson conducted interviews, organised Sultana's narrative and wrote it. Although the books are written in first person narrative, the words belong to Sasson. She acted as the medium through which the story was told. By using first person narrative, the book allows the reader to experience the emotional trauma directly from Sultana's perspective. She approached Sasson with her diaries and personal stories asking her to be the voice because she could not safely publish that work by herself. The narrative is in English, published by a western publishing house and well-structured for Western audience. Sultana's experiences are validated once they are processed through Sasson's western perspective. This reinforces the idea that Eastern voices need a western translator to be understood or taken seriously by the global community.

Jean Sasson's narration about women's rights in the Middle East is like a textbook example of how Western people view the region. She groups countries and ranks them based on how close they are to Western ideas about freedom and equality. By comparing countries and saying some are progressive and others are barbaric, Sasson uses a Western approach that simplifies complex societies. She measures them by how they treat women according to Western standards. She describes Algeria as a place where women are treated like children and Yemen as a place with a lot of violence against women. This approach makes the region seem like one suffering block with some countries being a little better because they've adopted Western-style reforms like letting women drive or vote. Countries like Kuwait, Bahrain and the UAE are seen as "progressive." Their advancements are framed as moving toward a Western-style goal. Sasson looks at things like how many women work and whether they can get passports without permission. This suggests that being modern is something given by Western-aligned governments not something that comes from within the culture.

When she talks about Lebanon's mix of cultures and religions, she uses visuals like bikinis and hijabs. This makes the region seem exotic and confusing like it can't figure out its values. She implies that not having one law is a failure of Eastern societies. This view reinforces the idea that the Middle East's hard to understand and needs to become more like the West to be civilized. Sasson's descriptions of Gaza, Iraq and Kurdistan rely on the idea of regression. She says that without a Western-backed government these places fall into barbarity. By talking about lost rights under Saddam Hussein or honor killings in Kurdistan, she makes the region seem like a place where violence against women's normal and can only be stopped by outside help. She mentions that Palestinian women need advocates, positioning observers as heroes who can save them. This narrative ignores activists and feminists



making the region seem like a place that always needs Western rescue. Sasson's views on Yemen and Jordan use statistics to make these cultures seem inhumane. She focuses on numbers like 4% property ownership or limited testimony in courts. She presents these statistics without context making them seem like proof of a "culture." Her tone is alarmist, for Yemen, where women can be sentenced to death. This approach makes the Middle East seem like a problem to be solved by intervention and human rights groups. Through this lens Sasson doesn't describe the Middle East; she constructs it as a place that needs help to become legitimate.

Throughout the Princess series, American women act as the guiding force for Sultana's internal rebellion. These characters are often portrayed as a proof Sultana needed to realise that their resistance is not universal. In these works, it is seen that an American or a European teacher is hired to educate her children Maha and Amani. Sultana often finds herself caught between her husband's desire for Western education for his daughters and the fear that these women may corrupt them with the ideas of freedom and independence. Because of these American and Western educators, Maha begins to challenge her father's authority explicitly citing the rights and freedoms she learnt from her teachers. Maha's exposure to western ideas through her teachers and trips abroad leads her in to a state of extreme rebellion. She begins to view her own culture as a prison, leading to psychological breakdown when she tries to imitate American women. She throughout the works, represent a girl caught between two irreconcilable worlds. Her sister Amani is also highly influenced by the books and Western education provided by her tutors. She represents a more moderated version of the Western influence, using her critical thinking skills, she learned from Western teachers to advocate for animal rights and women education.

In the first book Princess, there is a reference of war in which American troops arrive at Saudi Arabia. Sultana's optimism regarding the American military presence in Saudi Arabia highlights her dependency on Western influence for social change. She happily viewed the arrival of US troops as the fulfilment of local feminist goals. This perspective reinforces the stereotypical image of the dependent non-Western woman in need of rescue.

"With the arrival of the American troops, Saudi feminist's most ambitious dreams felt the speak of life. No Saudi had ever imagined seeing women in military uniforms., guarding the ultimate bastion of male dominance that is Saudi Arabia. It was unthinkable." (P-223)

Here also we can see the oriental eye of the author. We can feel the super woman trope created by her. By labelling American female soldiers as super woman, who controls her destinies, the author creates a hierarchy. The west is the source of agency and power, whereas Saudi Women are depicted as passive victims of their own culture. The astonishment the narrator feels when seeing the American woman who are both attractive and being mothers implies that the East lack the complexity of imagining a woman being multi-faceted. The author reinforces the idea that true freedom is a Western phenomenon. The narrative suggests that liberation is defined solely by adopting Western social norms. A common feature of colonial and orientalist literature is the depiction of the other, looking at the West with a mix of jealousy and self-loathing. Saudi women feel that they have done little to elevate their own lives, effectively erasing the resistance they have done before and making Western presence the only reason for change. This perspective aligns with Gayatri Spivak's critique regarding White men saving Brown women from Brown men. The text shows two kinds of dependencies. Women depending on men and women depending on Western saviours. Sultana at times compares Saudi men with White men. In her later books like Princess Sultana's circle and Desert Royal, the narrative moves from the idealised view of western freedom. Sasson introduces scenes where the collision between American values and Saudi reality creates issues. One of the most important scenes involves Sultana's interaction with Americans who are aware of the human rights issues in her country but choose to ignore them for economic and social reasons. During a visit to the West, Sultana often feels a sense of isolation even among American women. She realizes that while they represent liberty, many are disconnected from the life-or-death stakes of her existence. Sultana notes that American women often view her as an exotic curiosity rather than a peer. This shatters the illusion that "looking like" an American woman



(wearing Western clothes abroad) grants her the same respect or safety. As the series progresses, Sasson addresses how Western freedom can be weaponized against Saudi women.

In *Princess Sultana's Circle*, the narrative explores the darker intersections of the two worlds. Sultana encounters situations where Western women are brought into the Kingdom under false pretences or where Western technology and freedom of movement are used to facilitate the abuse of women. Sultana begins to express a more nuanced view: she admires the legal protections American women have, but she becomes critical of the materialism and perceived social coldness she sometimes encounters in the West. There are instances in the series where Saudi men marry American or Western women, and these relationships are used as a cautionary tale. When a male relative brings home a Western wife, the family often expects her to "convert" to their ways. The resulting clash, where the American woman refuses to be silenced and the Saudi family refuses to bend usually ends in a traumatic exit for the woman. These scenes show Sultana that adopting western ideals is not a shield. Once an American woman enters a Saudi household as a wife, the local laws of the male guardian often override her passport, highlighting the terrifying reach of patriarchal control.

The text also heavily utilizes the Harem trope, a staple of Orientalist literature that focuses on the hidden, sensual, and restricted lives of Eastern women to fascinate a Western audience. Sultana's descriptions of the palace often focus on the contrast between extreme material wealth and spiritual or physical confinement. This characterizes Saudi women as passive, decorative objects rather than political agents. This imagery serves to confirm Western stereotypes of the oppressed Oriental woman who is waiting to be liberated by Western ideals of freedom. By presenting Sultana as an exceptional figure who is enlightened primarily through her contact with Western books and ideas, the narrative implies that progress can only come from outside the Islamic world, further centering the Western gaze as the source of all liberation. The representation of Saudi men in the book often leans into the Oriental despot stereotype, where male characters are depicted as either hyper-sensual or irrationally cruel. Sultana's father and other male relatives are frequently described in terms of their absolute, unchecked power, which is framed as a cultural trait rather than an individual one. In *Daughters of Arabia*, the Orientalist framework shifts from the personal confinement of Sultana to the impending doom of the next generation, frequently utilizing the trope of the veiled, victimized woman to cater to Western sensibilities. Sasson reinforces the idea of the Middle East as a stagnant, dark . The narrative further employs Gendered Orientalism by portraying the religious and cultural environment as an inherently irrational force that corrupts the youth. When Sultana's daughter, Amani, begins to lean toward religious devotion, it is not depicted as a complex spiritual journey but as a descent into fanaticism, viewed through a lens of fear. Sultana laments,

"I watched my daughter disappear behind the black veil of religious zealotry, her bright mind clouded by the ancient, dusty dogmas of men who hate women." (P 151)

In *Desert Royal*, the third book of the series, the Orientalist perspective evolves into a narrative of civilizational rescue, where the West is positioned as the only legitimate sanctuary for the oppressed Eastern woman. The text frequently employs the trope of the barbaric Middle Eastern landscape versus the liberated Western world, particularly when Sultana attempts to help other women escape their circumstances. Sasson uses vivid, polarizing language to describe the Saudi environment, with Sultana remarking,

"We live in a land of glittering gold and dark secrets, where the sun shines bright but the hearts of men remain in the shadows of the Middle Ages." (P-10)

This quote reinforces the idea of the Orient as a place of fundamental contradiction, wealthy yet primitive maintaining the sadist notion that the East is a stagnant region incapable of modernizing its own moral or social values. The narrative also focuses heavily on the sensationalism of suffering, a common feature of Gendered Orientalism that isolates the most extreme cases of abuse to represent the totality of the culture. In *Desert Royal*, the focus often shifts to the plight of non-royal women and domestic workers, whose suffering is framed as an



inevitable byproduct of an Islamic or Arab essence. Sultana's reflections on these injustices often strip the characters of their individual agency, casting them as perpetual victims of a monolithic system.

"As we drove into the city, I watched with delight as women drivers sped past us. I never tire of such a sight when I visit other lands. Women are never allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia, and since this restriction is based on religion, it has always angered me. Now watching American women drive confidently through the city traffic lifted my spirits." (P 168)

Here we can see the positioning of the West as liberator. It encloses the automotive liberty trope, where the act of driving a car is elevated to a profound symbol of civilizational and spiritual freedom. By framing the American woman's presence behind the wheel as a source of delight and spirit-lifting, Sasson reinforces an Orientalist hierarchy that equates Western technology and movement with moral enlightenment. By stating she "never tires of such a sight when I visit other lands," Sultana positions the foreign land as the site of normalcy and her home as a site of slavery. This comparison relies on the Orientalist view that the West is the natural state of human progress, while the East is a restricted or unnatural deviation. The American woman driving confidently through traffic is used as a visual shorthand for the autonomy and agency that Sasson suggests is entirely absent from the Saudi female experience, ignoring the complexities of how power and influence are exercised by women within the Kingdom outside of Western paradigms.

By filtering the lived experiences of Saudi women through a Western lens, Sasson utilizes the "Oriental eye" to construct a binary narrative that positions the West as an active, rational site of liberation and the East as a passive, stagnant realm of oppression. Through tropes like the restricted harem, the barbaric landscape, and the "White saviour" complex—vividly illustrated by the idealization of American female soldiers and drivers—the text strips Eastern women of their domestic agency and historical resistance. Ultimately, by framing progress and modernity not as organic cultural evolutions but as gifts to be imported from the West, the narrative acts as a one-way mirror that validates Eastern experiences only when processed by a Western translator, thereby perpetuating a colonial hierarchy that treats Western values as the universal, objective standard for civilization.

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