

Resistance And Resilience Of Women: A Feministic Insight Into The Select Works Of Jean Sasson

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ABSTRACT:

This paper will have its base on the Saudi women who have been eternally suppressed by the so called patriarchy. This paper will deal how much sufferings and pains have been inflicted upon them through the ages. They never opened themselves, even if they had expressed their agony, the society never bothered about it. In the recent past there emerged number of movements that enlightened them and taught them the need to resist against the patriarchy. The objective of this paper is to explore and to go to the roots of their present status. A discussion will also be made to see the threats that they encounter and their strategy of resistance to oppression, the hurdles they face while trying to come to the forefront like men in the society and to have a dignified life with equality. The women begin to shatter their chains and bondages. Sasson is one among the prolific writers of this who beautifully exemplified the condition of suppressed women. Sultana, the central character has experienced the bitterness of being a woman and her first hand experience will shed more lights in the narrations.

KEY WORDS: Feminism, Gender, Oppression, Patriarchy, Resistance.

Feministic approach is used in Literature to study the image of women in the literary works. Feminists tried to set women free from poor standard of knowledge. They struggled by making women as a field of concern. As a result gender studies and women studies have emerged into Literature. The study aims to enrich knowledge about experiences, needs and lives of women. According to the feminists, the traditional values become the basic cause of the inferiority or the subordinate position of women.

In social fields, feminists demand was to get the same opportunity in education as men. Traditional people wanted women to be good home makers who can effectively manage household and family. As a result, they could only spend their life in isolated domestic circle. Women were not given their due chance to get higher education. The demand to declare women's aspiration is getting stronger because feminists feel that their demands are not fulfilled yet. Feminists tried to liberate women from inferiority of understanding. They undertook their struggle by making the position of women as a field of study. Jean Sasson is one such author who works tirelessly for the uplifting of women.

Literature indeed reflects the society, its good values and its ills. In its corrective function, literature mirrors the ills of the society with the view in making the society realize

its mistakes and make amends. It also projects the virtues or good values in the society for people to emulate. Literary works are a reflection of a particular society. It comprises of the characteristics feature of a particular group of people, language, religion, social habits, music and arts. American Literature comprises works produced in the United States of America. American Literary tradition is old and is a part of broader tradition of English Literature. The first American novels were published in the late 18th and early 19th centuries as a result of an increasing desire to produce unique American culture and Literature. A number of key figures emerged as an outcome and a vast number of the American writers deviate from the normal track of writing the novels to explore something new. Such writers love travelling beyond the country to explore and to gain experiences about other nation. Among them the contribution of women writers are of high impact and significance.

Contemporary women writers have enriched the bulk of Literature with commendable contributions. Some of the famous women writers who added their works to the Contemporary Literature focusing the issues of Middle-Eastern countries are Souad, Betty Mahmoody, Latifa, Leila Abouzeid, Mukhtar Mai, Soheir Khashoggi, Noorma Khouri, Zana Muhsen, Latifa and the list continues. These writers and their works clearly revolve around the plight of women in the Middle-East Asian countries like Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Gaza Strip, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Yemen etc. The life of women in Middle-East Asia has now been the focus of the modern women writers.

Sasson is a well received American writer. She has fourteen books including the internationally acclaimed *Princess* series, *Growing up Bin laden* and *The Rape of Kuwait* to her credit. Jean Sasson is rightly called, “the sharp-eyed and compassionate chronicler of women’s lives in the Muslim world” (“Jean Sasson,” *Wikipedia*). Her core area of interest remains the lives of Middle-Eastern women and their troubled day-to-day experiences. Sasson has been rightly described as award-winning author of great calibre who has dealt with the suppression of women. Her years of travel, research and writing made her a spokesperson for Human Rights in the Middle-East. She also worked as a freelance writer, travelling to Lebanon, Cairo, Kuwait and Egypt documenting the effects of war and its impact on women’s lives and women’s fight for equality. Her works had been displayed in publications like *The New York Times*, *Vanity Fair* and *Time Magazine*. She often appeared on national and international television programs such as *BBC*, *CNN*, *C-SPAN*, *The Today Show* and *Oprah*.

In Saudi Arabia, Sasson worked as co-ordinator of medical affairs at King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Centre. A large number of reports of her patients crossed her desk; she was privy to the details of many human tragedies. The reports that haunted her the most were the stories of women who had been brutally mistreated by men. Sasson perceived sadness almost every day she worked at the hospital. In the later years, she met Saudi women who desperately plotted for change. One such was a Saudi Princess, a woman by the name of Sultana Al Saud. Sasson met princess in 1983 when she disclosed her hardships and pessimism about her nation. The princess was fierce that the story of Saudi women has to be told. She wanted her own life experiences to be the story that would inflame the world. She added that she knew nothing would crack Saudi men’s determination to maintain the status and indignation of Arab women.

The New York Times Reviews comment the novel *Princess* as “one of the best 500 books written by women since the year 1300” (“Princess,” *Wikipedia*). The books got great reviews from leading newspapers and eminent personalities. A comment by Marlene Mizzi, member of the European parliament on *Princess: Stepping out of the Shadows* is noteworthy, “Impressive... Jean Sasson’s series deals with the huge challenges faced by Middle-Eastern women, their fight against discrimination, lack of respect, as well as legalized violence all true events seen from the eyes of a rebel Saudi Princess” (“Princess,” *Wikipedia*).

A comment about *The Princess* by Sunday Express says, “The startling truth behind the veiled lives of Saudi Arabia’s Women... frank and vivid revelations” (“Princess,” *Wikipedia*). Daily Mail states, “if it didn’t come from within palace walls, no one would believe it... gripping” (“Princess,” *Wikipedia*). Betty Mahmoody, an international best-selling author states, “Anyone with the slightest interest in human rights will find this book heart-wrenching. It is a well-written, personal story” (“Princess,” *Wikipedia*). *Publisher’s Weekly* comments *Desert Royal* thus, “her tale of decadent opulence becomes a political rallying cry that she hopes will spread the word and inspire many ‘Sultana’s circles’ to alleviate the plight of women, everywhere, one woman at a time” (“Desert Royal,” *Wikipedia*).

Resistance is natural response to oppression. There are individual acts of resistance-formal and informal, public and private and so on. Resistance gives voice to the silent, space to the expelled and attention to the broken. Sasson, the feminist writer, employs the act of resistance into her writing. Being a woman she never wanted to compromise with any act that oppress or suppress the self of Arabian women. When she was young, she was mistreated by her father. She longed to get the affection of her father but it ended up in a failure. Sultana, the main character is able to run her life independently. Even though she lives with her royal family as a dependent young little girl, she could prove herself strong and determined enough to do her wish. The struggles began when she was a little girl; Sultana always felt that she was underestimated by her father and her brother. In her family, Sultana is the tenth daughter of eleven children. There was only one son in the family and fear ruled her home.

The condition of Sultana is quite different from the other oppressed Arabian women because she belongs to the royal family. She was provided with many things such as ample food, better education, beautiful gowns and jewels but even then once after getting married she realized that her life is not restricted to the common fate of every woman. Sultana wanted to be loved by her father, but nothing she did or said made the slightest indifference of her father towards her. Sultana faces many unfair situations in life right from her childhood. She was unloved by her father and tortured by her own cruel brother; she longed to disclose the opportunity to tell the whole world how so many young girls live lives crowded by sadness or anger. Their brothers are generally loved while as females they are merely endured. Sultana also suffers womb cancer after her delivery. It caused that she could not have many children more and that reason becomes an advantage for her husband to marry again which made her to resist. But Sultana never feels weak instead, she faces her illness and fights for it and she tries hard to reach her desire come true.

In *Princess*, Sasson focuses on the vulnerable condition of Arabian women and how they are victims of circumstances due their gender. Though Sultana is rich, she remains powerless. Sasson throws light on the issues such as Child Marriage, Polygamy and Triple

Talaq. In such scenario it is very much important to fight for resistance. Middle-East women life narrative of Sultana destabilizes patriarchal governmentality. The distinctive character of Sultana is in opposing to the doctrine of patriarchal power. The women characters in the select works of Sasson investigate how subjugated beings take action-oriented strategies to encourage other repressed individuals to enable resistance that is crucial in human right struggle. In a revelatory note at the end of the book, Sasson appreciates Sultana's bravery and activism, and shares with the readers how, "Sultana's passion for life and her amazing mental capacity" (Sasson *A True Story* 209) altered Sasson's western centred perceptions of the veiled women.

It is important to understand the oppression placed on women in Islamic countries which have been observed greater, more extreme, barbaric and devastating. These women are oppressed not only physically but mentally too. The Islamic women in Saudi Arabia refused the right of expression of what they undergo in their caged condition. Barbara Berg aptly speaks about the need of resistance while defining feminism as, "a broad movement embracing numerous phases of women's emancipation. It is freedom from a sex-determined role, freedom from society's oppressive restrictions, freedom to express her thought fully and to convert them freely into actions" (hooks).

Women will not get their freedom if they insist on waiting. The effort of a single woman can make a giant leap which is evident in the works of Sasson. Many such women are there in the works of Jean Sasson. Dr. Meena is one such character who strives hard to make the women emancipate in to a liberal being. Dr. Meena was born in an impoverished family. She was the fourth and last daughter in the family. Following her birth, her mother had a hasty divorce because her husband kept on accusing her of ruining her life by giving birth to one daughter after the other. Dr. Meena opines:

'A man – my own father – was threatening to murder me and my sisters in a most cruel manner. For sure, I must have been screaming in agony at being painfully thrown about. Then a miracle straight from Allah occurred, the first of many in my life. My sisters and I were menaced by one man, but before the murder could take place two men protected our young lives... My uncle had found some value in his own two daughters, although it is thought he was more kindly about females because his wife had presented him with five sons before giving birth to his two daughters. (Sasson *More Tears* 101)

Dr. Meena when speaks about the condition of women, she rightly opines that the religion did not call upon for the mental darkness for girls. But those feelings are embraced by men. Her strong decision to help women is presented as she strongly points that a change in their laws and in cultural traditions that tether them to medieval practices is desperately needed and are welcomed even if such changes are ineffective. Dr. Amina Wadud says, "Unfortunately, an inordinate number of Muslim men, and also women, fail to recognize the many ways that patriarchy is an offense against morality and Islam" (Wadud xi). They believe that if they keep their females ignorant, women will have no alternative but to live a life of slave to the man. But women protagonists in Jean Sasson's novels are vigorous who tried to achieve a sense of sufficiency, self-complacency, emancipation, equitability, dignity and self-expectation.

The only way to curtail these issues is to provide proper education to all women because the greatest of all riches is education. While great wealth can be lost, education

cannot be withdrawn or cancelled or recollected. Education multiplies like no other investment because it encourages a hunger that is never satisfied. According to feminist Wollstonecraft, “In order to open their faculties they should be excited to think for themselves” (Wollstonecraft 361). Effective thinking can only be an outcome of good education. In the realm of education, Arabia had notable victory in the recent decades. The first school in Saudi Arabia was established in 1956 and only in two generations education has become available for nearly all Saudi female. Sasson presents the experiences of Dr. Meena, “When I was a child, education was mainly limited to the elite. My sisters and I were taught by a private foreign tutor, a woman who was specifically employed to teach the daughters of the royal family – of course, only the true wealthy could employ such a teacher” (Sasson *More Tears* 90).

The women have started asserting themselves through the process of resistance. They demand their voice to be heard. They roar, in no way lesser than any human being in the society. They have begun to move from the side to the centre. They are rewriting their hidden history and deconstructed the myths which subjugated them. They speak through their purposive, revolutionary, liberator and transformational gender literature. James Scott, in his celebrated work, *Weapons of the Weak*, discusses the concept of resistance whose essence drives one “to exert oneself so as to withstand or counteract the force”(289). There are individual acts of resistance-formal and informal, public and private and so on. Resistance gives voice to the voiceless, space to the excluded and attention to the exploited.

As a result of their struggles, Saudi Arabia has made a series of limited changes over the last ten years to ease restrictions on women. Notable examples include allowing women to participate in the country’s limited political space, actively encouraging women to enter the labor market and taking steps to better respond to domestic violence. Women were allowed to participate in municipal council elections with women voting and running as candidates for the first time in country’s history.

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