

**A Spark in the Dark: A Feministic Peep into the Works of**

**Jean Sasson**

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**Abstract:**

Feminism is a belief in the rights of women to have equality in political, social and economic terms. It has a long political history developing as an essential force. Jean Sasson is the most powerful (potential) women feminist voice in America. Her works reflect the docile and submissive status endured by the women in the conservative environment of the Arab society. Inspired by a true story revealed to her by her friend Princess Sultana Al Saud, the novels disclose the blatant gender discrimination experienced by the women sects in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Sultana speaks from an epoch where freedom of speech is strictly forbidden. Nevertheless, Princess Sultana is very obstinate in her decision right from her childhood days to break the fetters of the traditional norms. Although Arab society currently embraces the process of modernizing, the men are not ready to change the status of women in tune with their lives. This paper attempts to analyze the character of Sultana within the feministic ideology. Sultana is aware of her plight that she can never be a queen in her soil because of the prominent status of men but instead of accepting her status she willfully creates her own identity through her collective

efforts.

**Key Words:** Feminism, Gender, Literature, Patriarchy, Tradition

### **A Spark in the Dark: A Feministic Peep into the Works of Jean Sasson**

Feminism Springs up with a belief in the rights of women to have gender equality in terms of politics, society and economic growth. Feminists believe the traditional concepts and cultural values become the primary cause for the submissive rank of women. UNICEF defines gender equality as a , “means that women and men, and girls and boys, enjoy the same rights, resources, opportunities and protections. It does not require that girls and boys, or women and men, be the same, or that they be treated exactly alike” (Web). Achieving gender equality on a global scale is the only way to uplift the grade of women.

Saudi Arabia was one a fertile land known for its oil resources. As they progress, the land has been exploited by some of the external forces like war and revolution. Whereas the rest of exploitation takes place through the patriarchal institution. Men who think about discriminating women and women who believe their fate in the hands of men have equal role in establishing discrimination. In the process of recording the life of Princess, the works of Sasson recounts the lives of other women around her: mother, sisters, aunts, girlfriends and other servants, as well as the lives of other significant women who seek out or meet by chance.

Feminist theory argues that gender is produced psychologically and socially rather than physiologically. Gender is culturally and socially created behavior attributed to the particular category of human beings who gives birth. Patriarchal norms state the male has to imbibe a set of traits like ambition, bravery, courage, intelligence, force and determination. The female is expected to be passive, ignorant, shy, obedient and docile. Simone De Beauvoir says “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (1).

Feminism in Islam emerged as a new field in literature. Margot Badron says Islamic Feminism, “derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur’an,

seeks rights and justice for women, and for men in the totality of their existence” (Web). Feministic nonfiction played a pivotal role in voicing concerns about women’s lived experiences. Jean Sasson is a reputed voice of feministic approach and renounced writer with peculiar interest. The works of Gertrude Bell, Freya Stark and Sir Richard Burton influenced her to the mysteries of middle eastern countries especially Saudi Arabia . Her stay for twelve years in Saudi Arabia developed a deep affection for the people of the kingdom especially women. The paper aims to characterize Sultana in a feministic perspective. Sultana speaks to the readers from an era where freedom of speech is strictly forbidden. Although Sultana lives in a repressed and constricted environment her boldness paves a chance to have a glimpse into the muted condition of women in Arabia society.

*Princess: A True Story of Life behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia* portrays Sultana as a self-acting woman. In the childhood, she was unloved by her father and tortured by her cruel brother, Ali. She waits hopefully for an opportunity to reveal her grievances to the world. The other characters include her sisters, friends and maids from various countries. All these victims including royal women experienced patriarchal oppression and are crowded by anger, frustration and sadness. Sultana recollects, “The turbulent memories of my childhood come back to me, and I was a young girl again, shut out from the love exclusive to my father and his treasured son, Ali. Nearly thirty years had passed yet nothing had changed” (P 231).

During her motherhood, She suffers womb cancer right after her delivery. It causes her not to bear more children and that becomes an advantage for her husband to opt for a new marriage. Kareem speaks, “Sultana , I am going to wed another. As the second wife, she will be there to provide me children” (P 201). She replies instantly, “I wanted a divorce” (P 202) which makes Kareem stunned with shame. Her self-assertive nature makes her husband to stay away from marrying for the second time. Sultana’s attempts to save her dignity, self-esteem and self-respect enhance changes in the mindset of her royal husband. Her desires are in sequence with feministic ideas which suggests women not to surrender at any circumstance.

Her act of rebelling against the male-dominant culture is similar to the vision of Mary Wollstonecraft, “It is time to effect a revolution in female manners” (92).

In *Daughters of Arabia* the whole world became aware of the condition of women in Arab nation. Sultana throws light into other evil practices like adultery, circumcision, polygamy, infanticide, triple talaq and so on. She urges the need of education for girls to demolish these customs. Sultana’s desire for female education is in line with Mary Wollstonecraft’s views on education, “men and women must be educated, in a great degree, by the opinions and manners of the society they live in” (36). Sultana’s optimism shows that though she lives in a patriarchal nation where her daughters suffer to cope up, she tries her best to raise out her voice for women empowerment. Sultana opines, “only we modern, educated women could change the course of women’s lives. It was in our power. Within our wombs” (DA 24). She challenges the patriarchal norms by educating her daughters, Maha and Amani to become good citizens.

Sultana is exemplified as a caring and courageous woman in *Desert Royal*. She reflects the psychological trauma experienced by women and her children. Maha resembles her mother in caring human community whereas, Amani takes a fanatic stand. Their upbringing in a chaotic environment is reflected in their attitudes. Sultana is perplexed when she learns about the conditions of maids in her family. She arranges a better rehabilitation for them and boldly takes care of a Pakistani maid who was molested by royal youth. She takes the charge and settles her back to her native land by providing ample funds. Sultan says, “I took courage from the knowledge that there was still a purpose for me in this ongoing struggle, a new role that I was meant to fulfill ” (DR 19). Her choice becomes a social transformation. Existentialist De Beauvoir also argued that women are responsible for themselves. They should involve in socializing with other women. The key idea offered by De Beauvoir is:

- The necessity for women to take responsibility and choose for themselves. When women choose for themselves they choose for the whole society.

In *Princess: More Tears to cry* she sets out her actions as a women right activist. Although she cannot help abused women directly, she joins with Dr Meena in extending help. Dr Meena is the young woman who helps abused women as well a WORTHY MAN who speaks for the rights of women. Dr Meena's impartial nature is obvious when she seeks the help of princess to help Raif Badawi, a man who spoke his mind on a blogging website FREE SAUDI LIBERALS got nabbed and ended up in prison. Princess urges, " A great movement should sweep the world, from Saudi Arabia to every country and society in existence, to ensure that every innocent child will live free of cruelty and abuse against its little body and mind" (PM 271). Princess sets out her mission to help the abandoned mother of twin daughters who now lives and works in peace and safety with her family. Thus Sultana emerges as a contemplative woman to fight against the predicament of women.

*Princess: Secrets to Share* magnifies the depth of her courage and determination in fighting for the gender equality. Mary Wollstonecraft says, "she was created to be the toy of man, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he choose to be amused" (66) when speaking about gender bias. Through the stories of joy and sorrow the revolution initiated by single princess has now reached the understanding of whole world as princess believes that, 'pen is mightier than sword'. Although Islamic religion insists that men and women are equal before law, the laws are always upheld that women have been denied many of their rights. Hanisch in her essay says, "Traditionally, knowledge, truth and reality have been constructed as if men's experiences were normative as if being human meant being male" (3).

In *Princess: Stepping out of the Shadows*, Sultana is presented as a successful woman. She is aware of the plight that she can never be a queen in her soil because of the prominent status of men but instead of accepting her status she instills the thought of becoming the best queen into the minds of her granddaughters through her collective efforts. She feels the significance of being a woman in such land by fulfilling her voluntary desires. Sultana remains:

'Remember this after your grandmother is no longer able

to sit and talk with you: I would want my granddaughters to help Saudi Arabia to be known as a brilliant desert Kingdom that did not end in tragedy because the men of the country discovered a world view too late.’ (PO 220)

Sultana says though the kingdom is on the peak of revolutionary changes headed by young Saudi Princess in modernizing country however thoughts of equal rights and independent remain little more than dreams for most Saudi women.

Sultana’s boldness creates an agitation in her family because Saudi males never encourage powerful woman. African writer Adichie rightly speaks the universal truth, “But here is a sad truth: our world is full of men and women who do not like powerful women”. She also says that, “we have been so conditioned to think of power as male that a powerful woman is an aberration” (23). She is truly a spark in the dark. Her indomitable courage, spirit and vigorous tendency make her to achieve a sense of emancipation and self complacency. Her bitter experiences never make her to yield up like other women instead she galvanized into action. She lifted the veil on the shocking world of forced marriages, sex trafficking, child abuse honour killings and other outrages against women both royal and common. Sultana Concludes, “I know this is what we must do/ We must all work together to bring change to this earth.../ We must support all women in their endeavors to help others/ When you harm a woman, you harm a whole world” (Princess xi).

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