



VULNERABLE VEILED VOICES: VICTIMIZATION OF WOMEN ACROSS CLASSES IN ARAB SOCIETY AS DEPICTED IN JEAN SASSON'S PRINCESS

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Abstract

*Women have been subjected and victimised to social oppression across the world. Jean Sasson's biographical work *Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia*, gives a peep into the female world of Saudi Arabia. She presents us with multiple stories of women struggling and surviving trauma. Women from different classes face different forms of exploitation. This paper aims to study how gender and class play a dual factor role in victimizing women from various strata of Arab society. It analyses the way in which class and gender intersect creating a distinct framework showcasing the relationship in regard with exercising power and oppression.*

Keywords

Women in Arabia, Female Subjugation, Class-Gender Intersectionality, Migrant Workers, Sexual Exploitation, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Princess, the word evokes an image of beautiful damsels with their magnificent tiaras and fairytale lifestyles, with doting fathers, charming princes and a kingdom that cherishes them. We seldom bother to look beyond these glittering images and try to understand the intricacies of regal households that constitutes every aspect of their lives. It becomes more challenging when considering a kingdom that is shrouded in secrets. Jean Sasson with her book *Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia*, which is a biography of a Saudi princess, tries to give a sneak peek into the lives of these regal beauties and the women living in Saudi Arabia.

Jean Sasson is an American writer who has explored the middle east and brought to the world the untold realities of the women from the region. She had travelled to Saudi Arabia in the late 1970s and served at the King Faisal Specialist Hospital & Research Centre in Medical Affairs Administration. It was there she met several members of the royal family. A particular princess fell in an easy friendship with her. Over the years, she indulged Sasson in the details of her life and experiences and consequently asked her to write her story. The charming, independent spirited woman wanted the world to learn about the mistreatment of women in her country. Jean, being concerned for her safety was less enthusiastic but after permanently leaving the country, started working on the book.

While the book predominantly deals with the challenges these women face in day to day lives, the atrocities they must endure and their struggle to establish an identity of their own. It encompasses various aspects of women's lives in Saudi Arabia and captures the true essence of their spirit, faith, and quest. It opens with an introduction where the Princess states that she cannot disclose her identity as she would be harmed. This fear roots from the invisible chains that have been draped around the women in a land ruled by men, where their value is of no significance. A stern patriarchal society that relishes in its history and refuses to accept change when it comes to



treatment of women. Their birth, freedom, expression, sexuality, entire existence is veiled in fear and curbed by the authoritarian male figures.

However, it also sheds light on the fact that the oppression experienced by women is not always uniform in its execution, but, evolves with class disparities. The underprivileged women experience it at a different scale and lack the immunities offered to the royalty. The larger Arabian female population, working classes, and the foreign female workers have their own stories filled with torture and trauma. The aim of this paper is to study how socio-economic class factors invulnerability towards subjugation of women by studying about their experiences as narrated by Princess Sultana. It analyses the way in which class and gender intersect creating a distinct framework showcasing their relationship in regard with power and oppression.

The Gilded Cage of Royal Women:

“Although she was a Princess, yet she was not exempted from an inequality, injustice and ruling authority of males. Sultana thought nothing will penetrate the dark sea of egotistical matter which constitutes the mind of the Saudi menfolk” (Pandya, 65).

In the depths of riches and palaces, Saudi women from the elite classes live with absolutely zero freedom. They lack any kind of rights, especially in regard with their bodies. The tradition of veiling, restricted and monitored movement, along with alliance based forced marriages licensing sexual exploitation and marital rape, and honour killings have turned female bodies into a medium of exerting power and control. “A whole corpus of laws and customs make women heavily reliant on men for their basic day to day survival and in this way, many of their basic rights become probationary privileges contingent upon the presence of a male relative.” (Cyrill). This complete loss of autonomy has reduced them to commodities to be utilized by the men. Ultimately they become vessels of reproduction to ensure lineage, social status, and dynastic power. Sultana incorporates multiple stories of women undergoing these atrocities.

For marriage a girl's virginity is crucial, child brides are sought after, and marital rape is not even a concept. Sultana's 16-year-old sister, Sara, who was not only exceptionally bright but also cursed with great beauty. For personal and economic gain her father forced her to marry a 62-year-old man by drugging her with sedatives. This bitterly unjust union led to a failed suicide attempt by Sara to escape her sadistic husband who had subjected her to 'sickening sexual brutality'. This incidence marks two very important moments in Sultana's life. For one, her mother defied her husband's wishes for the first time, stood up to him and successfully procured a divorce for Sara. Secondly, it marks the transformation of Sultana's young world.

Soon after her mother's death adhering to the norm of having four wives, Sultana's father remarried within four months with complete disregard to her mother's life as well as death. Dr. Hanan Ahmad Khimish, in his research article “The Impact of Religion on Arab Women” states, that “the Quran allowed men four wives, on condition that they treat them with equity, but also stated that they could not do that, thus, stated that it is better to marry only one” (Khimish, 136). He further states that it is the interpretation that justifies polygamy and the resulting trauma for the women:

The liberal explanation of this verse is that it is not allowed to have more than one wife because it is impossible to achieve justice and equality. The conservative explanation is that polygamy is certainly allowed, and that by equality the meaning is the equality in treatment and the physical equality which is possible in many cases (Khimish, 134).



Sultana's father provided his wives with material wealth equally, however his undivided sexual attention to his new bride Randa, a fifteen-year-old girl, only a year older than Sultana herself, broke the religious dictate as well as the poor girl, "Randa returned from her honeymoon quiet, almost broken...Father seemed pleased with his new possession, for he spent many hours cloistered in his living quarters with his youthful bride...Ali cracked a joke about Father's sexual prowess" (Sasson, Ch.8) Randa dreaded her husband's sexual attention but obeyed his demands all the same.

While the men freely indulge in sexual practices, the women are supposed to repress their sexual needs until marriage, even then it's mostly exploitation, or face dire punishments dictated by the religious leaders. Virginity of a Saudi woman is a gift for her husband. "The righteous women are devoutly obedient (to Allah and to their husbands), and guard in the husband's absence what Allah orders them to guard (e.g. their chastity, their husband's property, etc.) (Qur'an 4:3)" (Sutradhar). The bloodied sheets of the marriage bed are a symbol of pride and purity. The absence of blood is a matter of disgrace, grounds for divorce and brutal punishment as dictated by the Quran. Sultana's rebellious friends Nadia and Wafa want their freedom and to explore their sexuality. For some harmless fun they meet random foreign men but are eventually caught and brutally punished. After being imprisoned for three months by the religious police, they are released based on their intact hymen. However, the real punishment follows this imprisonment. While Wafa is married off as an old man's third wife, Nadia suffers a much worse fate. She is tortured and drowned in a swimming pool by her father in the presence of her entire family. For associating with the girls, Randa is divorced, while Sultana gets the ultimatum of marriage.

Elaine Hatfield and Richard L. Raison in "Love and Passion" opine, "Cross-cultural researchers argue that romantic love and women's sexual pleasure are more valued in affluent, modern, egalitarian cultures than in traditional, patriarchal societies with strong, extended family ties" (Hatfield and Raison, 94). Marriages are the only sphere where female sexuality can be explored, however, for most even that is a traumatic experience as the men are seldom concerned with the women's pleasure. Additionally, marriages are determined by the men of the family and "it is a sin for any Muslim woman to bind herself to a non-Muslim" (Sasson, ch.17). The decreed punishment for it is a fate worse than cruellest death, the woman is locked in a windowless dark room with a trap door to push in food and a hole in the floor to dispose of bodily waste until the day she lives a mute black existence. In the later chapters we come across Sameera, a twenty two years old young, educated woman who while studying in London fell in love with an American catholic and as consequence is subjected to this imprisonment by her uncle. A helpless Sultana's anguish knew no bounds at the isolation of a woman so bright. One who could have inspired many to follow their dreams of learning and exploring.

The Saudi women are insistently confined to their roles as wives and mothers. Their own identity is non-existent, determined solely by the men who claim ownership on their body and soul. This results in a longing for the birth of male children that would earn them respect, followed by desire for grandsons. "Core emphasis of scholars on the reproductive role of women and their treatment as mere sex objects not only binds them within the four walls of home but also reduces their role in the decision making bodies." (Sutradhar, 8). On top of it all is the perpetual jealousy that seeps between the wives and later mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, where the superstitious natures lead them to practices of black magic in regard with their power struggle. Noorah, Sultana's mother-in-law is one of the women with beliefs set in history, which combined with Sultana's recalcitrant attitude is a volcano awaiting eruption. Their little arguments turn to violent fights and with Kareem's (Sultana's husband) intervention, the struggle shifts between himself and Sultana.



With education came hope of a better tomorrow for them, along with the efforts of King Faisal and Queen Iffat. Their beliefs to lead Saudi Arabia to a better and modern world however came crashing in the year 1975 with the King's murder by a rebellious prince. The kingdom was drowned in shadows of grief. Loss of a progressive leader becomes the foreboding of the gloom ahead. "We women knew that our one chance for freedom was buried with King Faisal." (Sasson, ch. 16).

Subaltern Realities: The Plight of Commoners and Foreign Maids:

The bleakness of the situation of common women far surpassed the royals. While the royalty had subtle relaxations, there was no light for the poor women of Saudi Arabia. Their vulnerability increases without the protection of afforded by the high society women. They lack education, free movement, and monetary access. The conditions are so dire that they are constantly under threat of sexual exploitation and physical violence, lack basic health facilities, along with multiple pregnancies taking toll on their bodies. The thought of opposing or even stating their opinions is a far-fetched notion, creating a ready acceptance for the constant exploitation. Fiona Tolan writes, "Women's oppression was achieved by a combination of physical violence and cultural pressure. All aspects of society and culture functioned according to a sexual politics that encouraged women to internalize their own inferiority until it became psychologically rooted" (Tolan, 326).

The societal rules that dictate their fates are meticulously implemented by the men, especially the religious police determining their appearance in public and social conduct. Hypocrisy of the men becomes incarnate in Ali's friend, Hadi, who aspires to become a mutawa, and is always sprouting about inappropriate behavior of women and need for men to control them. While, on a trip with her family, he makes crude remarks about the belly dancers and calls them whores, suggesting them to be stoned. Later, Sultana comes across Ali and Hadi raping an 8-year-old girl by paying her mother 15 Egyptian pounds, "Hadi was raping a young girl, no more than eight years old, and Ali was holding her. Blood was everywhere. Our brother and Hadi were laughing" (Sasson, ch. 6). Upon questioning it is made clear that the contact for such service was provided by Sultana's father as he himself indulged in such activities. This is a common practice in economically struggling societies where mothers sell their young daughters for a quick penny. "Later in the week, I saw the Egyptian mother knocking on doors in the building, with another young girl in tow. I wanted to question her, to discover how a mother could sell her young. She saw my determined look of inquiry and hurried away... Ahmed told her it was a way of life in much of the world" (Sasson, ch. 6). This trip is the first glimpse of the real world for Sultana, she is brought face to face with the ugly realities of the destitute who are ready to sell their children for food. That day she truly loses her innocence "I wanted to destroy my memory of that day and lapse once again into the innocence of the mists of my childhood... I came to dread what I might discover next in the cruel world of men" (Sasson, ch.6).

In Saudi Arabia, Sultana encounters the commoner women during her hospital stay during the birth of her first child. "If my childhood had been bleak, the lives of most Saudi women had been more bleak, I soon learned. My life was ruled by men, but there was protection of sorts because of my family name. The majority of women gathered around the nursery window had no voice in their destiny" (Sasson, ch.15). Girls as young as thirteen nurse their young, forced in early marriages to decades older men, subjected to sexual abuse and living in fear of scorn for bearing a girl child. A young girl from a small village presented a pitiful sight after being rushed to the hospital after five days of intensive labor. Her life had been a constant struggle with a childhood spent working hard in the household, and later marriage to a fifty three years old man at the age of twelve. The sexual oppression from her husband and the birth of a daughter creates great fear in



her mind, “Her black eyes were dulled with pain as she gazed at the mass of screaming infants” (Sasson, ch. 15).

Most desolate was the situation of a fourteen-year-old Amal who was raped by numerous of her brother's friends, wrongfully accused of seducing the boys and condemned to death by stone after the delivery of her child. This punishment was ordained by her father with full support of the mutawas while her rapists escaped unscathed. Moreover, this deeply disturbing punishment wasn't a onetime occurrence. Stoning to death was a horrific experience, described by Omar, Sultana's father's driver, as:

the group of people, mostly men, rushed toward the stones and began to hurl the rocks at the woman. The guilty one quickly slumped to the ground and her body jerked in all directions...the rocks continued to thud against her body for what seemed to be an interminable time. Every so often, the stones would quiet while a doctor would check the woman's pulse. After a period of nearly two hours, the doctor finally pronounced the woman dead and the stoning ceased (Sasson, ch. 15).

Women are often subjected to brutal stoning by the crowd as punishment for adultery. Like in many cultures, the Saudi women must bear the punishment of engaging in unsanctioned sex. Crimes as horrific as rape also demand male legal statements for conviction, even then they can escape by proving their innocence as being the one's enticed by the feminine seduction.

Living a nameless, tortured existence, these women showcase the true status of women in Saudi society; however, there are some who are a notch below the Saudi women. The foreign maids of the Saudi households suffer the cruellest fates. Sultana realized this from the stories told to her by her Filipino maid Marci about her friend Madeline, the Indian slave girl, Shakuntale and numerous others. A contract worker Madeline hired as domestic worker has to act as sex slave of the three men of the household, constantly raped and subjected to sexual brutality. This happens to numerous foreign maids as “Any woman who was not a Muslim was considered a prostitute. Knowing that some of the women of the Orient were for sale convinced the family that all women outside of the Muslim faith were for purchase...When a maid was hired, it was assumed she was to be used like an animal, at the whim of the men of the house” (Sasson, ch. 9). The contract-based maids at least have the liberty at the end of the contract; meanwhile there are some like the Indian maid Shakuntale, bought at the age of thirteen to serve the masters of the household. Her plight knew no end as she was the property of her owners, never to be returned. These acts of sexual attacks are consented and supported by the women of the household, believing that the women from the orient are sexually promiscuous and the men of their households need sexual release.

Romina Halabi in her research on female migrant domestic workers observes:

Domestic workers are often denied freedom of movement, and are either locked inside or forbidden to leave the home without permission. Violence against maids includes physical attacks ranging from rape to slapping; other forms of violence include overwork, including forcibly working in more than one household and the refusal of days off, non-payment of wages or a reduced salary. Maids also often experience poor living conditions, such as lack of food and privacy. Physical violence is usually perpetrated by the female employer, or madam of the household (Halabi, 44).



No one bothers with their plight -not the police, neither the embassies nor the religious leaders. Worst of all is that Saudi women of some households justify the men's actions, declare the foreign women dishonourable and laugh off the matter. These women are the invisible robots only present to serve the rich Saudis. It was with this realization that the dream of a free and equal world was lost to Sultana, forever. "We women are vassals, and the walls of our prisons are inescapable, 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" (Sasson, ch. 9).

Conclusion:

Through Sultan's narrative we can observe that the socio-economic factors play a prominent role in determining the susceptibility of women towards exploitation. The upper classes have their challenges with liberty and inferior roles in family households and society; they are guaranteed safety, education and healthcare. While the women from lower strata face violence on a larger scale. They are denied basic facilities, subjugated mercilessly, and harassed domestically. The true commodification takes place in form of domestic foreign workers who are subjected to sexual and physical violence, even by the women of the household, enforcing class and labour hierarchies. This unprotected physical vulnerability of the migrant workers reflects how class interests fracture women solidarity. The study under the lens of materialistic and intersectional reading proves that there exists dual marginalization faced by women from lower classes of society.

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Article Received: 15/09/2026

Article Accepted: 22/09/2026

Published Online: 30/09/2026



To Cite the Article: *Tak, Nishi. "Vulnerable Veiled Voices: Victimization of Women Acrossclassesin Arab Society as Depicted in Jean Sasson's Princess." Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed/Peer Reviewed e-Journal of English Language, Literature and Criticism, Vol.-VII, Issue-2, September, 2026, 245-251. www.literarycognizance.com*

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