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UNVEILING SAUDI ARABIAN SECRETS THROUGH THE VOICE OF PRINCESS SULTANA

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ABSTRACT

The Archaic Guardianship Laws of the land, rather than guarding the women in the Arabian Peninsula, keep them in a gilded cage. The paper attempts to bring out the cruelties meted to women by men in Arabia and how women are extremely subdued by the male members in the family. The male child is always favoured over the female. It discusses the story of Sultana who unlike other women hiding behind the veil, builds her courage to stand up for her rights to equality.

Key words: Archaic guardianship laws, Subjugation, Veiling

The Gender Gap report by the World Economic Forum records Saudi Arabia's place as 129th out of 134. Saudi Arabia is a country where almost everything is restricted, especially for women. Saudi women are bound to follow the strict religious laws. Just because they lack the male organ they undergo suffering and face differences in the patriarchal society. The archaic guardianship laws of the land does not actually guard women, rather subjugates them. Saudi Arabian women must follow strict dress codes (black abayas and hijabs) and are prone to deadly punishments for disobeying the laws. They have no identity of their own and their names are excluded in the birth and death records.

'Sex' and 'Gender' are extremely different. Sex distinguishes human beings as male and female and gender is a social construction which separates and assigns distinctive roles for men and women. Social construction of gender is a concept in feminism that discusses gender roles and differences in the society. It is the society which creates gender roles and these roles are applicable for a person of that particular sex. The roles assigned to women and men are merely social constructions and there is no masculinity or femininity involved in it. A family celebrating the birth of a boy child and on contrast becoming unhappy at the birth of the girl child, is the basic gender difference that the society has constructed.

Jean Sasson, an avid reader grew up in Troy, Alabama. Sir. Winston Churchill and Napoleon Bonaparte were her favourites. She worked at King Faisal specialist hospital in Riyadh. The nature of her work got Sasson the privilege to get first-hand information about the Saudi royal family, from one of her friends Princess Sultana of the Al Saud family. Based on the true stories of women, the bestselling book *Princess Trilogy* was written. The trilogy includes *Princess: The True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia*, *Daughters of Arabia* and *Desert Royal*. Her other works include *The Rape of Kuwait*, *Mayada Daughter of Iraq*, *Ester's child*, *For the Love of a Son*, *Love in a Torn Land*. Princess was selected as one of the best "500 Great Books by Women" and was a Bestseller in over 25 countries around the world.

"I was born free, yet today I am in chains" (Sasson 23). *Princess: The True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia* is a witness to women of resolute spirit. Sultana holds up courage and reveals the true story of

the royal household, about the women and how they are subjugated by men in the family. Being born in the land of riches in royal household, Sultana enjoys all the luxuries but does not receive attention as her brother Ali "owing to the absence of a male organ" (Sasson 23). In a conflict between Ali and Sultana over an apple, Ali wins the support of their father just because he is a male. Sultana is an "ever present unwanted daughter" (Sasoon 34) and Ali is a "treasured jewel" (Sasoon 34), according to their father. The gender discrimination instigates from her own home.

Sultana also recounts about her dearest sister Sara, who was extremely beautiful. Every woman in Saudi must veil as they attain puberty which is a religious code, so did Sara. "The veil stamped her as a non-person" (Sasson 53). The laws of the land are archaic and does not guard women but suppress them. Forcible wedlock to a stranger is another religious code found in the novel. Sara's marriage was fixed by their father with a sixty two year old man, and it was a marriage of convenience, as he was a leading merchant in Jeddah. Sara tries to show her disapproval for the marriage but her attempts fail. She was injected with tranquilizers on her wedding day and thus Sara becomes a prey to the "sickening sexual brutality until she felt her only escape was death" (Sasson 69). She attempts suicide by putting her mouth inside the oven, but she fortunately survives. Married to a sadistic husband, Sara becomes a veiled victim of domestic violence. According to Islamic laws, divorce is easy for a man but for a woman it is impossible. The husband himself agreed to free Sara from the marital bond, thus making it easy for her. After divorce she stays with her family, where she is unwelcomed by her patriarchal father, who believes that "Sara had obviously provoked her husband into criminal behaviour. It is never the fault of the man in the Middle East" (Sasson 73). Nura and Sultana organise a trip to Italy to bring back Sara from the trauma of her marriage. Infuriated by Ali's accompaniment, Sultana attempts to expurgate him out of the trip, but she fails. Saudi Arabian laws impose a threat for woman travelling alone. She needs a written consent from a male allowing her to travel alone. Ali and Hadi judge the women when they plan to unveil and visit night clubs, but eventually, they are caught in the act of raping a young girl and mocking about it. Sultana is enraged by this act and she hates Ali more.

On returning from the trip, Sultana's mother is on the verge of dying. "Our custom forbids females at the burial site, but my sisters and I showed unyielding front to our father" (Sasson 100). Mother's death is a great loss to Sultana, but before she could come out of the grief, her father plans to marry a young woman and also a relative Randa. Sultana forms a women's group called 'Lively Lips' with Randa and her friends Nadia and Wafa as members. This group understands that women must force change and as long as women subjugate themselves no transformation will come to them.

Nadia's death or Wafa's premature marriage. Such cruel actions were the worst of all commentaries on the wisdom of the men who consume and destroy the lives and dreams of their women with emotionless indifference (Sasson 120).

This further provokes Sultana's father to give away 'the troublesome daughter' in hand of marriage to Kareem. Sultana is still revolting against the archaic laws. She demands to meet the chosen stranger before marriage and to her surprise her father agrees. "I was going to meet the man I would marry before I married him!" (Sasson 151). This is the first change that Sultana sees in her family. More to her surprise she finds Kareem as a good choice. Sultana comes to know from her sister Nura that her three elder sisters were circumcised and even here Sultana escapes the barbaric tradition by the intervention of a western physician, who talks against this tradition. Sultana is eagerly asks what happens in the ceremony and Nura replies thus,

The oldest woman gathered around the frightened child. Nura, nude from waist down, was held by four women on a bedsheet that had been spread on the ground. The oldest women raised her hand in the air; with horror Nura saw that she had a razor-like instrument in her hand. Nura screamed. She felt a sharp pain in her genital region. (Sasson 160).

And the women congratulated Nura on her coming of age. Sultana felt that the change was in the hands of the modern educated women and she was determined to change the lives of her children. Sultana's marriage was happy with two daughters and a son. Kareem's true self comes to the front, when Sultana suffers from breast cancer and he gets to know that she can bear no child for him. Kareem decides to marry when he

says, "Sultana, I am a man that can afford many children. I desire ten, twenty, as many as God sees fit to give me" (Sasson 246). Sultana decides to leave the house with her children to London. Unlike other Saudi men, Kareem keeps the passports in reach of his wife and Sultana forges signature to travel. She never informs anybody, except that she calls Sara once a month. After five months, Sultana agrees to speak with Kareem. She discovers that Kareem has changed and is resolute to see them. "I would return to Riyadh only if Kareem signed a legal document stating that so long as he and I were wed he would not take another wife" (Sasson 263). Kareem confesses that Sultana and their children are his only strength. Sultana believes in him and decides to go to Riyadh with him. But, their union is now weakened by Kareem with the intervention of another woman. Sultana and Kareem attempt to reconstruct their nest for the sake of their children.

'The Great White Hope' began during Saddam Hussein's invasion in Kuwait. Women started driving on the streets. Sultana sees the change she expected in the society for some time. 'Women had broken the first of the unyielding barriers' (Sasson 273). But, this does not last long. "As a result of their bravery, their lives were devastated by their actions: passports taken, jobs lost and families harassed" (Sasson 275).

In the end, the events of the war aborted the plans of revolutionary change for women in Saudi Arabia. Raewyn Connell's theory of "Hegemonic Masculinity" functions as a tool to identify the attitudes and practices among men that perpetuate gender bias, involving men's power over women. Patriarchy is inherited from the ancestors and it also a psychological problem. Men strongly believe women to be a weaker sex, and thus exert their power over them. The novel taken for study has strong traces of "Hegemonic Masculinity". Sultana is under the dominance of her father and her husband. She is also the witness of the sufferings women undergo at the hands of the patriarchal society, but she is resolute and hopes for a better future.

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