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**Unsung Grievance and Unyielding Subjugation:  
Exploring the Trajectory of Resilience and  
Subalternation in Jean Sasson's *Princess: A True  
Story of Life behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia***

**A.M. Muhammad Saleem  
Dr. P.M. Abdul Sakir**

This paper examines Jean P. Sasson's *Princess: A True Story of Life behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia* (1992) as a pivotal narrative that exposes the deeply entrenched structures of patriarchy and the systemic subalternation of women in Saudi society. Written through the testimony of Princess Sultana, the text dismantles the illusion of wealth and religiosity as sources of freedom, revealing instead the contradictions of privilege and oppression that define women's lives under authoritarian and gender-segregated configurations. By employing a testimonial discourse, the narrative not only embodies individual suffering but also articulates collective experiences of obscurity, erasure, and denial of agency. The methodological approach of this study is grounded in feminist literary analysis, with particular attention to how voice, silence, and representation operate as sites of resistance against dominant narratives. The paper argues that *Princess* functions simultaneously as testimony and critique, challenging the manipulation of cultural and religious discourses that

strategically sustain women's subordination. In doing so, it contributes to an expanded understanding of feminist interventions in contexts often shielded from external scrutiny. The significance of this inquiry lies in situating *Princess* as both a literary and political testimonial—one that illuminates the intersections of gender, power, and religion, while foregrounding the urgency of recognizing women's lived realities as pivotal to the discourse of rights and justice in Islamic societies.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Subalternation, Subjugation, Islamic Feminism, Misinterpretation

### **Introduction**

The publication of Jean P. Sasson's *Princess: A True Story of Life behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia* (1992) extends beyond sensationalized accounts of royal life to embody as a canonical site for feminist and post-Islamist interrogation of gender, power, and representation in Muslim societies. Drawing upon her thirteen-year tenure (1978–1991) as Medical Affairs Administrator at the King Faisal Specialist Hospital in Riyadh, Sasson's narrative is informed by sustained proximity to the gendered realities of Saudi patriarchy, a perspective further mediated through her broader literary engagement with women's lived conditions of war, displacement, and systemic oppression in the Middle East. As the formative narrative of the Middle East Trilogy, *Princess* occupies a distinctive position by foregrounding the testimony of Princess Sultana, an insider whose elite status paradoxically exposes the pervasive structures of confinement, sexual segregation, and denial of rights that regulate women's lives.

This study articulates a dual problematic: first, the disciplinary apparatuses of patriarchal domination that circumscribe women's autonomy through spatial confinement, moral regulation, and sexual governance; and second, the representational dilemma through which women's experiences are mediated, silenced, or rendered intelligible only within discourses claiming religious or cultural legitimacy. While *Princess* is frequently consumed in Western contexts as a revelatory expositional narrative, such a reductive hermeneutic approach neutralizes its critical force. A nuanced feminist analysis instead reveals the paradox of women's public invisibility alongside their hyper-visibility

as bearers of familial honor within patriarchal domesticity. Positioned as both testimony and critique, Sasson's narrative functions as a feminist intervention that interrogates the instrumentalization of religious discourse in sustaining gendered subalternity while exposing the contradictions of privilege and oppression embedded within Saudi social structures.

Situating *Princess* within broader feminist and post-Islamist debates allows the text to be interpreted as a discursive locus for theorizing women's agency and the politics of representation in Muslim societies. To examine these dynamics, the study adopts an interdisciplinary feminist framework integrating feminist theory, Islamic and post-Islamist feminism, disciplinary power, subaltern studies, and intersectionality. Simone de Beauvoir's formulation of woman as the socially constructed "Other" establishes women's subordination as a structural condition rather than an individual failure. Islamic feminist scholars Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas, alongside Margot Badran's articulation of post-Islamist feminism, enable a distinction between the egalitarian ethical principles of Islam and patriarchal reinterpretations that legitimize gender hierarchy through selective exegesis.

Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power elucidates how women's bodies are regulated through surveillance, punishment, and normalization within domestic and social spatialities function as extra-judicial carceral terrains beyond juridical accountability. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of subalternity further illuminates the epistemic silencing of women whose lives are narrated through male authority and institutional mediation. Finally, Kimberlé Crenshaw's framework of intersectional feminism reveals how gendered oppression converges with religion, class, race, nationality, and labor status, producing exacerbated vulnerability for non-Muslim and economically marginalized women. Together, these theoretical lenses enable *Princess* to be read as a feminist testimony that exposes convergent regimes of patriarchy, religious authority, disciplinary control, and intersectional marginalization.

Existing feminist, postcolonial, and intersectional scholarship has examined women's subordination through structures of patriarchy, disciplinary power, epistemic silencing, and intersecting axes of marginalization, as theorized by Beauvoir, Foucault, Spivak, and Crenshaw, while Middle Eastern and Islamic feminist perspectives, represented by Wadud, Barlas, and Badran, interrogate how religious reinterpretation constrains Muslim women's agency. Yet, these frameworks remain inadequately attentive to autobiographical testimony such as Jean P. Sasson's *Princess*, which copiously illustrates how gendered oppression in contemporary Saudi Arabia is coextensively material, epistemic, and representational. Sasson's work necessitates a hermeneutic reappraisal that registers the text at the intersection of feminist intervention and post-Islamist critique, particularly within a socio-legal order defined by gender segregation, male guardianship, and the strategic deployment of religious authority, which continues to regulate women's visibility, mobility, and enunciative agency.

Although feminist discursive articulations have regularly been appropriated as gendered repositories crafted by women for women, contemporary perspectives acknowledge these intersectional enunciations as surrogate voices of all subalternised and marionetted subjectivities. The entrenched propensity of parochialising women's writings as mediocre vocalisations has sacked; irreversibly, they have traversed variegated unassailable trajectories, outnumbering rivalling contemporaries both in literary competence and critical acceptance. The onus of women's writing has evolved into a dialectical sphere of articulation that copiously curate diverse array of women's experiences that have historically been ostracised and dehumanised by the chauvinist societal structure. Simon De Beauvoir contends in *The Second Sex* (1989) that it is the patriarchal civilization that circumscribes women objectively to lumps of desirable flesh, subservient and appurtenant creatures, foreclosing them synergistic emotions and autonomous aspirations. She observes:

On this account the little girl will be led to identify her whole person and to regard this as an inert given object. While the boy seeks himself in the penis as an autonomous subject, the little girl cuddles her doll and dresses her up as she dreams of being cuddled and dressed up herself; inversely, she thinks of herself as a marvellous doll. By means of compliments and scoldings, through images and words, she learns the meaning of the terms pretty and plain; she soon learns that in order to be pleasing she must be 'pretty as a picture'; she tries to make herself look like a picture, she puts on fancy clothes, she studies herself in a mirror, she compares herself with princesses and fairies (p.283).

The feminist movements' assertion is that women have been globally subjected to strategic oppression and marginalization within domestic, economic, political and cultural spheres by patriarchal structures in the draped veneers of religious devotion, ceremonious rituals and entrenched customs. With the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792), a pioneering philosophical feminist discourse articulating how the preceding centuries purportedly denied women's access to education, employment opportunities and broader social participation. Feminist writers and activists mobilized to strike back worldwide with the avowal that instead of being relegated to docile wives, benign daughters, and compliant mothers, women are autonomous human beings endowed with equal privileges, unconditional freedom, and equitable justice. In contemporary society, feminist thought manifests through a spectrum of divergent critical traditions and discursive interventions aimed at reclaiming women's freedom and autonomy, encompassing Liberal and Libertarian Feminism, Multiracial and Black Feminism, Postcolonial and Post-structural Feminism, Lesbian Feminism, Sex-Positive Feminism, Ecofeminism, Radical Feminism, and Islamic Feminism.

The sociopolitical roots of modern Islamic Feminism have burgeoned in tandem with global feminist movements in the latter half of the nineteenth and the early decades of twentieth centuries. Post-Islamic Feminism strives to be a corollary symbiosis of myriad modern feminist movements, focusing on the agency of women in Islam, advocating equal rights, non-discriminatory access to opportunities, and even-handed justice within the interpretative periphery of Islam. Prominent campaigners of Post-Islamic Feminism include Omaima Abou-Bakar, Amina Wadud, Leila Ahmed, Fatema Mernissi, Azizah al-Hibri, Riffat Hassan, and Asma Barlas. Through an epistemological Islamic narrative, Omaima Abou-Bakar has conceptualised the Post-Islamic Feminism as a transformative discourse in contemporary times. Contemporary interpretations of the Islamic Feminism defy the customary exegesis of the Quran and Hadith by applying modern exegetical doctrines of Islam.

In her article *Engaging Islamic feminism* (2008), Middle East historian and feminist activist Margot Badran observes that feminist critiques sought to compare how identity politics configured and circumscribed women, while also interrogating the ways in which women themselves were complicit in sustaining its patriarchal agenda. When feminists—particularly Islamic feminists—were discursively delegitimized as ‘man-haters,’ they mobilized counter-resistance against patriarchalist adversaries who deployed varied strategies of denigration to undermine feminism and its proponents. Badran (2008) observes:

It was in this context that some of us reported that Muslim women were subverting the patriarchal Islamist project through what appeared to be a new form of feminism-in-the-making which Muslim women in different parts of the world would soon call Islamic feminism. (p. 26)

In the contemporary world, Islam is often stigmatized as a religion that curtails women’s liberation against the backdrop of discriminatory gender and ethnic profiling, thereby obscuring the egalitarian tenets of steadfast personhood and profound wisdom embedded in its teachings. For instance, the verse from Surah An-Nisa— “Men are the managers of the affairs of women because

Allah has made the one superior to the other”—has been contorted by male scholars into a hegemonic ploy to legitimize the subjugation of women under patriarchal authority. Amina Wadud (1999) renegotiates this verse, arguing that it has been manipulatively recontextualized to mean that men are the designated maintainers of women. Instead, she contends, the verse affirms that women are not to be burdened with extraneous societal responsibilities exceeding their natural capacities.

Similarly, Asma Barlas (2002), in *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, asserts that the Qur'an unequivocally acknowledges the egalitarian paradigm between men and women, explicitly revoking any gender-based hegemonic dominance of one sex over the other. As Barlas (2002) explains:

Humans, though biologically different, are ontologically and ethically-morally the same/similar in as much as both women and men originated in a single Self, have been endowed with the same natures, and make up two halves of a single pair. (p.133)

In light of the Qur'anic verse that describes spouses as “raiment to one another,” marital relationships are framed as reinforcing reciprocal intimacy and interdependence, thereby affirming that both men and women possess equal dignity and social value. During the Prophet's era, as Mernissi (1991) observes, women were indispensable participants in both social and political spheres, with the Prophet's wives asserting their agency and autonomy through direct hands-on involvement in warfare and other geopolitical affairs. However, this transformative ethos diminished during the Abbasid period, when patriarchal structures became entrenched in Arabian socio-cultural life, reconfiguring women as threatening and submissive figures. Building on this trajectory, Barlas (2002) asks:

When I ask whether we can read the Qur'an for liberation, I am asking whether its teachings about God as well as about human creation, ontology, sexuality, and marital relationships challenge sexual inequality and patriarchy. Alternatively, do the teachings of

the Qur'an allow us to theorize the equality, sameness, similarity, or equivalence, as the context demands, of women and men? (p.1)

Despite Saudi Arabia emerged as the largest and affluent Arab nation in Western Asia in the twenty-first century, owing to its territorial expanse, larger oil and natural gas reserve, Sasson underscores the paradox that the status of women has remained repellently despicable and obnoxious. Throughout her exhilarating tenure as the Administrative Coordinator of Medical Affairs at the King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Sasson afforded privy access to the lived experiences of Saudi women's disgraceful and disempowering existence in the patriarchal societal structure. In the course of rendezvous, Sasson afforded extraordinary occasions to cultivate a genuine camaraderie with Sultana, a reticent inconspicuous member of the Saudi royal family.

Sasson's *Princess Trilogy* emerges as an evocative testimonial to their longstanding rendezvous and resonant liaison, fervently dismantling all the vicious canvas of religion and region. Blurring the parallels of individual and collective, protagonist's name is deliberately veiled until the conclusion of the narrative to embody the collective suffering of every Saudi woman. It is a perplexing irony that the gravest of the atrocities are perpetrated by the patriarchally ordained protectors, who are supposed to be their husbands, fathers, or brothers. Sasson (1992) conjures up: "The authority of a Saudi male is unlimited; his wife and children survive only if he desires. In our homes, he is the state" (p.29). Wadud (1999) observes that Islamic teachings assign both men and women equitable rights and responsibilities:

In families where both husband and wife are providing for the material maintenance of the family, it is an unfair burden for the woman to be solely charged with all housework. If she has managed to increase her good deeds, then there are similar opportunities for the man to increase his by participating more in the housework and child care. In addition, this demonstrates to the children the ultimate Quranic system of Evaluation which does not specify the deed: 'Whoever does good, whether male or female

and is a believer, all such will enter Paradise' (4:124). Such a flexible, integrated, and dynamic system of co-operation benefits a multiplicity of societies and family types. (p.90)

As R.W. Connell (1987) argues in *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics*, social structures are profoundly shaped by hegemonic masculinity, a form of male dominance that legitimizes men's authority while subordinating women and marginalized masculinities. This framework underscores how gendered power mechanisms are not merely individual or cultural phenomena but are embedded within institutions, social norms, and everyday practices, creating a pervasive system of inequality. Building on this analysis, Sultana illuminates the systemic subjugation of Saudi women, demonstrating how deeply entrenched patriarchal structures regulate their mobility, limit their decision-making, and enforce social hierarchies. By linking Connell's theoretical insights with the lived experiences documented by Sultana, it becomes evident how structural power and personal experience intersect, producing enduring patterns of women's marginalization and shaping both the psychological and social landscapes of gendered life. Sasson (1992) provides a firsthand account that illustrates these dynamics of Sultana's gendered oppression:

I cannot reveal my true name for fear harm will come to me and my family for what I'm about to tell you. I'm a Saudi princess, a member of the royal family of the House of Al Sa'ud, the current rulers of Saudi Arabia. As a woman in the land ruled by men, I cannot speak directly to you. I have requested an American friend and writer Jean Sasson, to listen to me and then to tell my story. I was born free, yet today I'm in chains (p.23).

This testimony vividly exemplifies how structural patriarchy, as theorized by Connell and documented by Sasson, is lived and experienced at the individual level, underscoring the tangible consequences of hegemonic masculinity on women's agency and autonomy.

In the resistance tapestry of the novel, Sasson (1992) assumes the role of an amanuensis, recounting the myriad tribulations endured by Sultana across diverse epochs of her existence. Sasson postulates that Saudi women inhabit a conscientiously ensconced society with minimal privileges, restricted autonomy, and limited avenues for resistance or transformation. Although Sultana appears to revel in profligate opulence—with access to private jets, dazzling ornaments, and sartorial abundance—she remains metaphorically ensnared in a gilded prison, burdened with emotional inertia and catatonia. While her father sired twenty-two daughters from his four wives, he seldom expressed any discernible trace of paternal affection toward them, frequently muttering that “women are man’s curse” (Sasson, 1992, p. 74). By contrast, he lavishes affection on her brother Ali and readily acquiesces to his demands, whereas he approaches his daughters with reluctance, rarely acknowledging their wishes or aspirations. As Sultana reflects, “I calculated that if my father looked at me enough times he would recognize my special traits and come to love his daughter, even as he loved Ali” (Sasson, 1992, p. 50).

The novel reflects how successive generations of Saudi women have not been privileged to raise their concerns before their fathers, husbands, or even before their sons. Sultana’s grievance lays bare the stark predicament of women: “I told her that I could not help the one condemned; women are not allowed a voice in my land, not even the women of [the] royal family” (Sasson, 1992, p. 213). They are ingrained with the belief that their life mission is limited to gratifying the sexual pleasures of their husbands and raising their children, thereby embodying covetous notions of devout and pious women, that of a “dutiful wife and good mother” (p. 56). As Sasson (1992) describes, “So there was little to do but wait to be married, wait to give birth, wait for grandchildren and wait to grow old” (p.174).

In the 1982 article, *A study of Islamic herstory: Or how did we ever get into this mess?* Azizah Y. al-Hibri highlights the systemic ways in which patriarchal structures curtailed women’s autonomy in pre-modern Arab societies. Excluded from inheritance and deprived of control over their limited economic resources, women were rendered dependent on male authority at every turn. This

structural disenfranchisement reduced them to commodified beings, treated interchangeably as property within familial and social arrangements, as she observes.

Women were not allowed to inherit. They accumulated their scanty property from trading such items as chickens, milk and eggs. Still, that scanty property was subject to the husband's control. Finally, as Arab men discovered the value of live daughters, some of them forced them into prostitution...The wives and daughters were referred to interchangeably as slaves...This fact makes the sell his wives or children, kill them or incarcerate them. (al-Hibri, 1982, pp.210–212)

In the stratified social structure of Saudi Arabia, Sultana reflects on the restrictions imposed upon her as a woman, particularly during significant life events. She recalls being denied the opportunity to attend her mother's funeral services at the graveyard, a sharp contrast to the freedom afforded to her brother. Similarly, she was excluded from congregational prayers, as women are seldom permitted to enter mosques in Saudi society. The narrative concludes with a poignant articulation of her marginalization: "My eyes followed the movements of my beloved flesh, and my most precious blood; my husband and son entered the mosque hand-in-hand, without me" (Sasson, 1992, p.368).

Sasson (2001) highlights the restrictive structures governing women's lives in Saudi Arabia, where men are required to provide formal authorization letters for female family members to travel outside the home. Sultana and her sisters evince indignation when, during a visit to Kuwait, they observe women driving freely without hijabs and enjoying liberties unafforded to Saudi women, who continue to exist as "forbidden faces" (Sasson, 1992, p.60). Even basic activities, such as shopping, necessitate the presence of a male chaperone. This control is reinforced by traditionalist views within the royal family, which hold that permitting girls to attend school would bring dishonour in the eyes of the *Mutawas* (religious police). Mernissi (1992) further underscores the historical and political roots of such restrictions:

Banning mixing of the sexes and advocating the separation of men and women as the measure to alleviate all political crises is far from being a novelty in Muslim political history. It is a tradition, even a state tradition. Opposition forces claim past practice as the basis for treating women with contempt. (pp.153-154)

Although the sisters, Sara and Sultana demonstrate diligence and cognitive competence, they are systematically denied access to formal education. Their learning is confined to the rudimentary local *Kutab*, where they study alongside sixteen other children near their palace. When their instructor, Sakeena, recognizes Sara's exceptional aptitude and suggests she pursue advanced studies at prestigious schools in London, the proposal is summarily dismissed by their father, who scornfully questions the propriety of a daughter aspiring to such learning. Reflecting on these experiences, Sultana observes that the privileges of their upbringing, rather than fostering ambition, have fostered complacency and diminished the pursuit of genuine fulfilment. Barlas observes:

In such a milieu, rereading the Quran in egalitarian modes is an exercise that has the potential to impinge on the hegemony of the state itself, and to the extent that states can threaten people's lives, it can become an exercise in personal risk taking. The coercive abuse of Islam to oppress people, especially women, is one of the greatest impediments to rereading the Quran today. In such a context, liberatory readings are not just about redefining personal freedoms; they are about challenging entrenched structures of political, patriarchal, state, and sexual power (p.89).

Within the periphery of Saudi societal structures, fathers have historically exerted formidable authority over the choice of spouses for their daughters. When a woman's autonomy to select her spouse is curtailed, men are simultaneously permitted to wed up to four wives. Prior to marriage, many Saudi women undergo circumcision performed by elder women in their community, a ceremony marked with elaborate celebration intended to honor the occasion while perpetuating cultural norms. Princess Nura told her that "she had been circumcised when she was twelve years old. She said the rite had also been performed

on the three sisters that followed her in age” (Sasson, 1992, p.159). Sultana’s mother and sister were subjected to this custom before their marriages, conforming to the tradition enforced by the elders of their family. Upon reaching puberty, daughters are often married primarily based on the material prospects of prospective husbands, who may be three or four times their age. For instance, Sultana’s father weds Randa, a fifteen-year-old girl and playmate, as his fourth wife immediately following her mother’s precarious demise, in accordance with religious allowances for polygyny and considerations of economic security and equitable treatment of wives. She ruminates: “Randa, a girl with whom I had played childhood games...Father’s new bride was fifteen, only one year older than I, his youngest child of my” (p.102).

Sultana observes that Randa, like many Saudi women, becomes defenseless and vulnerable beneath the imposing authority of her father and husband. Similarly, Sara is married to a prosperous older man who has previously entered into polygynous marriages. Despite her beauty, intelligence, and aspirations, she sacrifices her dignity and personal fulfilment under the weight of patriarchal marital expectations, becoming a biological and social pawn in her father’s schemes for wealth and security. Even Sultana’s brother, having lived a life of indulgence, currently maintains four wives, exemplifying the entrenched gendered hierarchy and privileges granted to men within the family structure.

Amina Wadud (1999) observes that Islam never entertains polygamy as *carte blanche* to men to marry as he prospects, but it authentically restricts men from marrying more than one woman if he cannot administer fair and even-handed justice among all his wives. Referring to the Quranic verse, Wadud contends in the *Quran and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective* that Islam unequivocally prioritises monogamy over polygamy:

Justice is the focus of most modern commentaries concerned with polygamy. In the light of verse 4:129—“You are never able to be just and fair as between women ...”—many commentators assert that monogamy is the preferred marital arrangement of the Qur’an. Surely, it is impossible to attain the Quranic ideal with regard to mutuality (“They [feminine plural] are raiment for you [masculine plural] and you are raiment for them” [2:187]), and with regard to building between them “love and mercy” (30:21), when the husband-father is split between more than one family. (p.83)

Sasson leaves no stone unturned in letting the readers relativize the magnitude of the callousness that happens on the grounds of gender and ethnicity. Her disputation is that Saudi citizens rarely exhibit commiseration and generosity towards women domestic workers; individuals hailing from third world countries are often othered and are asked to cater to the demands of the well-heeled Saudis with increased compliance and subservience. A significant number of domestic workers arriving from the exotic countries are subjected to abuse and brutal treatment involving both physical and mental assaults. Marci, a housemaid, recollects a distressing incident of how a Pakistani housemaid suffered a fatal cerebral haemorrhage after being forcefully knocked down from a staircase by her Saudi mistress, who “punched the maid in the stomach, sending her tumbling down the stairs. As the girl lay moaning, the older woman ran down the stairs to kick and scream at the girl to finish her chores” (Sasson, 1992, p.126). Following the incident, denying her past two months’ reimbursement, she was transported back to her parents with a meagre sum of 50 Saudi riyals, exacerbating the irreconcilable apartheid that she has endured.

Sasson foregrounds the extreme vulnerability of non-Muslim women within a hierarchically stratified Saudi social order structured by religion, class, and gender. Positioned outside the moral protections accorded to Muslim women, non-Muslim domestic workers are systematically stripped of personhood and recast as sexually available commodities, a perception crystallized in the belief that “any woman who was not a Muslim was considered a prostitute” (Sasson, 1992, p.137). Such ideological reduction facilitates the collapse of ethical

boundaries, allowing patriarchal authority to exercise control over female bodies without accountability. Through an intersectional feminist paradigm, this marginalization reveals how religious otherness intensifies gendered oppression, producing a category of women whose labor and sexuality are rendered exploitable within both private and social hierarchies.

This logic of dispossession is materialized within the domestic sphere, which functions as a site of unchecked masculine sovereignty rather than familial protection. Madeline’s sexual exploitation by multiple male members of her employer’s household exemplifies how consent becomes irrelevant in a patriarchal economy that conflates female labour with sexual availability; the patriarch’s declaration of entitlement prior to granting access to his sons exposes the normalization of sexual violence as an extension of ownership (Sasson, 1992, p.137). Racialized and economic hierarchies further exacerbate this condition, as women from the “Third World” are perceived merely as instruments of service for wealthy Saudis (p.127). The case of Shakuntala, a thirteen-year-old girl sold into domestic servitude and described explicitly as “property,” starkly demonstrates how poverty compounds gendered and religious vulnerability, reducing young non-Muslim girls to transferable bodies subjected to abuse with impunity (p.140). Together, these narratives expose how intersecting systems of patriarchy, religious exclusion, and economic domination institutionalize sexual violence while foreclosing autonomy, visibility, and legal protection for non-Muslim women.

Building on these systemic inequities, Sasson (1992) further illustrates how patriarchal authority and socio-economic hierarchies can compromise the safety of vulnerable individuals. For instance, during a visit to Egypt, Sultana and her sister observed an incident in which Ali and his friend Hadi exploited a minor after coordinating access through the child’s caregiver. Sasson reports Ali’s justification: “Father always did the same sort of thing when he came to Cairo” (Sasson, 1992 p.93). In another instance, Sasson recounts how a Lebanese girl was forcibly removed from her residence and subjected to a medical procedure for the benefit of others. These examples

underscore the intersections of gender, age, and social marginalisation, highlighting how structural inequalities can severely limit the autonomy and well-being of those lacking social power.

Sasson exposes the paradox of Saudi society, where men often pursue carefree indulgence while women are denied even basic freedoms. Despite prohibitions, intoxicants and hallucinogens are readily supplied through clandestine networks, and even princes embrace Westernized pleasures. King Faisal (“once a carefree youth;” Sasson, 1992, p.178) himself is rumoured to have participated in such practices prior to his reign. Young men, however, still complain that their lives are marked by monotony and lack of stimulation, pointing to the absence of cinemas, clubs, and mixed-dining spaces. These frustrations reflect rigid norms that restrict social interaction between men and women to sanctioned relationships such as spouses, siblings, or parents and children. Yet the disparity lies in men’s ability to transgress or circumvent restrictions, while women like Sultana remain excluded from education, public life, and spaces of leisure. The contrast highlights the gendered inequity in which male dissatisfaction still coexists with privilege, while women endure unrelenting subjugation.

The narrative of the novel explores the widespread practice of divorce exercised predominantly by men in Middle Eastern societies. In many of these contexts, a man unilaterally retains the freedom to divorce any of his wives without the endorsement of higher appellate authorities. With the simple utterance of three words, *thalak*, he possesses the legitimacy to dissolve the marital bond. Sasson (1992) observes that Islamic law asymmetrically prioritizes men by granting them the relative ease of initiating *thalak* (divorce). In contrast, it is considerably more difficult for a wife to obtain separation or divorce (*faskh*), since such petitions require the sanction of the authoritative *Mutawas*. The doctrine, “you must dislike a thing which Allah has meant for your own good” (Sasson, 1992, p.70), is disproportionately applied to women, further constraining their autonomy.

Sara’s desperate suicide attempt, undertaken to escape spousal abuse, is regarded as an unpardonable sin by her husband, mother-in-law, and the *Mutawas*. None of them makes any effort to

interrogate the underlying causes of her act, keeping her suffering outside their consciousness. At one point, Sara's husband declares the triple pronouncement of divorce in the presence of three male witnesses, disregarding her grievances. Sasson (1992) also recounts a similar incident in which Sultana's father divorces the young Randa merely for accompanying his daughters to a shopping mall without prior permission. His anger toward Randa is reflected in his words: "On this day I have divorced you. Your father will send a driver within the hour to take you to your family. You are forbidden to contact my children" (Sasson, 1992, p. 118). Wadud (1999) observes:

This verse has been taken to mean that a darajah exists between all men and all women, in every context. However, the context of the discussion is clearly with regard to divorce: men have an advantage over women. In the Qur'an the advantage men have is that of being individually able to pronounce divorce against their wives without arbitration or assistance. Divorce is granted to a woman, on the other hand, only after intervention of an authority (for example, a judge). (p.68)

The public punishment of women for adultery in *Princess* manifests as a disciplinary spectacle through which patriarchal and theocratic authority asserts control over the female body. Sasson records how the accused woman is rendered voiceless and objectified, with her "hands... bound" and her mouth forcibly silenced, signalling the systematic erasure of female agency within juridico-religious governance (Sasson, 1992, p.211). The execution unfolds as a communal ritual in which spectators "rushed toward the stones," transforming punishment into collective participation and normalizing gendered violence as moral duty (p.211). Read through a feminist-Foucauldian perspective, this scene exemplifies how women's bodies are turned into sites of moral inscription, where exemplary violence disciplines not only the condemned but also the observing society. The prolonged execution—continuing until authority confirms that "the doctor finally pronounced the woman dead"—reveals how institutional power legitimizes cruelty through procedural sanction (p.211). Sasson's narrative thus exposes how religiously framed justice operates as a

biopolitical mechanism that sustains patriarchal dominance by conflating morality, legality, and gendered subjugation.

The spatial politics of confinement in *Princess* illustrate how disciplinary power is exercised through domestic carceral spaces that function beyond the reach of female agency and legal adjudication (Foucault, 1977). Sameera's plight underscores this vividly: "Sameera had been sentenced by the men of her family and of her religion to be confined to a room of darkness until she was claimed by death" (Sasson, 1992, p.227). Confined to an unlit and unventilated "woman's room" (p.227), her body is transformed into a site of prolonged discipline, rendered invisible while remaining subject to constant patriarchal surveillance. The accusation of incestuous pregnancy operates less as a legal concern than as a moral pretext through which female sexuality is regulated and familial honor is preserved. Viewed through Spivak's framework of subalternity, Sameera's condition illustrates the systematic silencing of the female subject, whose alleged transgression is articulated entirely through male authority and kinship power; she is condemned without speech, defense, or agency.

The episode further reveals how domestic and familial structures assume sovereign power over women's lives, converting private space into a site of gendered incarceration. This pervasive regime of control produces not only physical punishment but also an affective climate of fear and desperation, driving young women toward perilous acts born of their absolute lack of autonomy, as the narrative itself acknowledges. Sultana ruminates: "I felt a hatred for the customs of my land creep into my throat like a foul taste. The absolute lack of control, of freedom for our sex, drove young girls like Wafa and Nadia to desperate acts. These were deeds that were sure to cost them their lives if they were discovered" (Sasson, 1992, p.116).

Similarly, Sasson's narrative casts a pall of somber gravity over other events, including the public stoning of a twenty-five-year-old woman. She was forced to endure the punishment with a rag tightly gagged in her mouth and a hood shrouding her face, while a truck laden with stones facilitated the relentless public execution, which continued for twenty hours until her death was pronounced by a doctor.

Another incident involved a young, vulnerable pregnant girl, Amal, who was shackled in leg-irons and handcuffs and escorted by mutawas and armed guards to the maternity ward. The Shari'a court convicted her of fornication, and although flogging was initially considered, her father insisted that she be stoned to death immediately after delivery. Amal had been raped by her brother's friends, who attempted to mask their crime by claiming she had enticed them: "They [the drug-impaired perpetrator boys] declared that she was insatiable and had begged them all to participate" (Sasson, 1992, p.210). The collusion of religious authority in legitimizing patriarchal violence is further evident as "the mutawas offered the father moral support in his strong stance and showered him with accolades for his religious conviction" (p.210).

Confronted with the harrowing predicaments of Sameera, Amal, and numerous other girls, Sultana experiences a chilling sense of relief that her own child was not born female. Burdened by the bleak realities of women's lives in her country, she prays somberly that female infants might avoid the grim fate that so many women endure. Sasson (1992) emphasizes that optimism should not be abandoned when glimpses of potential positive transformation appear in the Middle Eastern context. By envisioning an era of empowerment and emancipation, women are encouraged to move beyond the constraints of their familial and societal limitations. Ahmed (1984) similarly highlights the significance of such change, observing:

Unveiling would become ever more clearly the emblem of an era of new hopes and desires, and of aspirations for modernity: of the possibility of education and the right to work for both women and men, and of equal opportunity and advancement based on effort and merit instead of inherited privileges be it of class or race (p.39).

Sultana resolutely rejects the socially prescribed role of a docile, veiled woman and instead strives to assert a defiant, autonomous identity, challenging the patriarchal norms that seek to constrain her. From childhood, she has exemplified a revolutionary spirit, co-founding a club called "Lively Lips" with two determined peers to contest the tacit acceptance of restrictive societal laws,

explaining that it was “for we had as our goal to talk ourselves into bravery to battle the silent acceptance of the role of women in our society” (Sasson, 1992, p. 106). The club advocates for women’s aspirations and personal integrity and actively resists the entrenched practice of marrying young girls to significantly older men. Through these endeavours, Sultana pursues self-reliance and empowerment, asserting control over her own life and rejecting any attempts to dictate her existence.

Sultana’s determination is evident when she declares: “I made a vow to myself that I would be the master of my life, no matter what actions I would have to take or pain I would have to endure” (Sasson, 1992, p.67). When her husband, Kareem, proposes a second marriage to have more children, she reacts with resolute defiance, recognizing that his intent is driven not by family legacy but by personal desire, as is characteristic of many Saudi men. She reflects critically on his character, noting, “Yet, sadly, at the core of his being, he was all, as the rest” (p.248). Following this breach of marital fidelity, she resolves to dissolve their conjugal bond and secure custody of their children, candidly assessing his nature: “His façade was wisdom and kindness; his very bowels were cunning and selfishness” (p.247).

The radical fervor intrinsic to Sultana’s character underscores her refusal to conform unquestioningly to the restrictive and oppressive social environment surrounding her. She maintains that her life’s mission extends beyond merely challenging domineering norms to actively striving for social reform and transformation. She reflects, “I had no doubt my life as a woman would be perpetual struggle against the social order of my land, which sacrifices those of my sex” (Sasson, 1992, p. 95). Although she aspires to distinguish herself from the countless women characterized by “complaisant qualities” (p.73) and “forbidden faces” (p.60), she recognizes that, like all Saudi women, her experiences are shaped and constrained by enduring cultural circumstances. The narrative culminates in a powerful depiction of her marginalization when Sultana observes her son and husband entering a mosque hand-in-hand without her, prompting her poignant reflection: “I felt quite the loneliest figure ever to have lived” (p.280).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Jean P. Sasson's *Princess: A True Story of Life behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia* (1992) emerges as more than a narrative of personal testimony; it is a powerful critique of the entrenched structures of patriarchy that continue to subjugate women under the guise of cultural traditions and religious authority. Sasson vividly asserts, "We women are forbidden! It is insane! This law—and its interpretation—is made by men, for men!" (p 227), highlighting the gendered construction of legal and social norms that sustain women's subordination. By documenting the life of Princess Sultana, the text not only unveils the realities of gender oppression in one of the most restrictive societies in the world but also exposes the contradictions of privilege and subordination faced by women even within elite circles. The narrative underscores the urgency of situating women's lived experiences at the center of critical inquiry, challenging hegemonic interpretations that normalize their silence. Ultimately, *Princess* serves as both testimony and intervention, offering a space for theorizing post-Islamist feminism and affirming the necessity of reimagining justice, dignity, and equality for women in Muslim societies.

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