

A LOOK BEYOND THE VEIL: ANALYSING GENDER ISSUES IN SAUDI ARABIA THROUGH SELECT TEXTS FROM THE *PRINCESS* SERIES

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Abstract:

*The research aims to study gender issues in Saudi Arabia, through an analysis of the first two books of Jean Sasson's Princess series *Princess: A True Story of Life behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia* and *Daughters of Arabia*. These texts are a Saudi Arabian princess's account of her life, and the lives of her two daughters, written with the goal of exposing the realities of the inequality and oppression of women in the highly secretive Saudi society. The research shows that both the official policies of the government as well as the customs of traditional Bedouin society are together responsible for most Saudi women's problems. The research takes up various issues related to the status of Saudi women, as they are described in the primary texts, ranging from segregation to marriage and divorce to education. Additionally, the research addresses the role and position of the Al Sa'ud family, particularly in connection with women-related policies. It also takes into consideration the notion of being a 'Princess' in a society where women are oppressed.*

Keywords: *gender issues, official policy, royal women, Saudi Arabia, tradition.*

Introduction

During the 20th century, the oil-rich kingdom of Saudi Arabia was among the lowest-ranked countries in the world in terms of gender parity – women from the lowest classes to the most elite, suffered, and continue to suffer, inequality, oppression, and even violence, on account of their being women in a highly patriarchal, male-centric society. The same held true for the women of the ruling Al Sa'ud family despite their rank, privilege and lives of unimaginable luxury as royalty, and despite their close relation to the actual policy-makers of the country, they could claim no reprieve.

The perspective of one member of this family – a princess, yet a victim of and witness to gender-based oppression, captured by an American expat working closely with her, Jean Sasson's best-selling series *Princess* (1991-2000) attempts to give insight into life behind “the black veil of secrecy(1), specifically within this particular strata of society i.e. the elites. The princess and her story-teller attempt to expose the realities of life for women in Saudi Arabia, within what the former admits is her limited sphere of experience; nonetheless she is able to capture many of the injustices faced by women from the mid-twentieth century, and even in the present.

Through an analysis of the first two books of Sasson's series, *Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia* and *Daughters of Arabia*, this research will explore the issue of gender and the experiences of women in Saudi Arabia in the late 20th century, with specific focus on royal women i.e. the class represented in the texts. Some of the other concerns of this research, that shall be addressed through the analysis, include the picture of Saudi Arabia and the Al Sa'ud family created by Princess Sultana's account in relation to gender, the role of religion in gender issues, the specific gender issues seen in the selected texts, questioning the reality of being a Princess when the privilege of wealth and status are at odds with gender-based oppression, and the role of law and custom in Saudi gender issues.

This research seeks to prove that both the official policies and traditional social norms of Saudi

Arabia emphasise gender segregation and other restrictions on women, and together form the root cause of women's problems in the country, as seen through the personal experiences of the subjects of the *Princess* series.

The experience of Saudi women in general, which has been the focus of preceding research, is not the primary focus of this research, though it will be an important part of the analysis. Moreover, Sasson's series includes three more texts, however only the first two have been selected for study. The first two give insight into Princess Sultana's and her daughters' lives, thus they serve to establish the essential context from which the social position of royal women can be studied. The third takes up where the former left off, filling in the blanks, and is therefore not as important. While the first two books are set in the 20th century, which is the time zone the research will focus on, the fourth and fifth installments are set in the 21st century several social changes mark out a new time zone, and Sultana's narrative undergoes a drastic change as well. The period as a whole, and the two books, are worthy of independent research themselves. And finally, though Princess Sultana is being studied as a representative of her class, her and her family's experiences are individual; thus general ideas about the experience of the class can be inferred, but there will be individual variances.

The issue of gender in Saudi Arabia has been the subject of extensive research over the last half-century. Articles representing various areas of research have been considered in the effort to create a broad understanding of the context of the present research, and to introduce certain concepts which will be required for analysis. Much of the research focuses mainly on negative aspects that are in line with the grievances voiced by the subject of the texts, Princess Sultana. Some take a more positive stance regarding Saudi gender issues, and in certain ways, contradict the others.

Eleanor Doumato (1992) introduces the concept of a gender ideology underlying Saudi political and social structure, based on the image of the "Ideal Islamic Woman" (33). She also brings up another important question, one that is clearly demonstrated in the text why Islamic piety is measured by the behaviour of women rather than men (44). Some of the policies that can be considered as growing out of such an ideology include gender segregation, which is discussed at length by Le Renard and Tonnessen respectively. Gender segregation in turn creates a female private sphere at odds with the male public sphere (Altorki 282) which while restrictive also becomes a source of women's power. Segregation is also linked with education (Rawaf and Simmons 288-290), employment (Doumato 1992, 568), compulsory veiling (Le Renard 616), and the mahraam (guardian) system (Tonnessen 12). Each of these issues have been addressed in some degree in Princess Sultana's account. While Western readers of these texts may see the oppressed Saudi woman as too weak to fight back, Golley argues in favour of an 'Arab Feminism' that represents Saudi women's efforts to fight (Golley 521-522). While the literature thus reviewed takes up a number of issues that are intrinsic to understanding the position of Saudi Arabian women, this research will focus on the same issues specifically in connection with the royal women of the Al Sa'ud family, through the personalised account of one of its members Princess Sultana.

The American writer of the *Princess* series tells the story of Princess Sultana, based on the diaries Sultana kept throughout her life. In the first text *Princess: A True Story*... she interweaves her own story from childhood to adulthood including marriage and motherhood, with commentary on the history of her family, commentary on the various customs and beliefs, particularly those pertaining to women, and the stories of other women of her acquaintance from her royal mother, sisters and cousins, to non-royals she encountered throughout her life. The second text *Daughters of Arabia* looks at yet another generation of Saudi's women, Sultana's daughters Maha and Amani, who, like their mother, suffered the condition of being women in a society that valued them far less than their male counterparts; the impact of such a life produced widely contrasting yet equally extreme reactions in both young women, as each struggled to find her place within their oppressive society.

The Princess's name and those of all mentioned in the texts (except the names of high-ranking

members of her family) were changed, for if she were to be discovered in the writing of such a book, it would be considered treasonous, endangering her life and that of her family. As many of the events she describes were known only within her close family circle (who did quite quickly discover her bold actions), no one outside of it would have guessed who the writer was – it could have been any one of the thousand princesses of the Al Sa'ud family.

Introducing the Al Sa'uds

The Al Sa'uds were once one of many Bedouin clans of the Arabian deserts, who dreamed of conquering the land. The progenitor of the royal family of Al Sa'ud, Abdul Aziz, defeated his enemies, and in January 1902, became the King of the newly created country of Saudi Arabia (1). To forge alliances and strengthen his new kingdom he married three hundred women and had fifty sons and eighty daughters; by the time of the book's writing in 1991, the family numbered at 21,000, of which a thousand were direct descendants of the first King and held the seats of power, including the men of Sultana's immediate family (3).

Saudi Arabia is a country that was recently just desert lands occupied by warring tribes, who would recognise amongst themselves no leading tribe; the Al Sa'uds had to unite and create loyalty among their subjects in order to legitimize their regime. Doumato bases this on two “myths” perpetuated by the Al Sa'uds – first, that the Kingdom is a “cohesive national identity” united by loyalty to Islam, and that the Al Sa'uds are best qualified to defend Islamic interests; and second, that the Saudi Arabian state is an extension of the tribal family with the monarchy fulfilling the patriarchal obligations of the shaykh, with the right and duty to rule over the people. (4).

Role of Religious leaders

While the ruling family represents one power pole, the other is represented by the religious scholars of the country (Abir 152-155). While conquest is what forced the country into existence, mutual loyalty to and the desire to protect Islam is what keeps it together; thus the representatives of Islam, who enforce the highly rigid Wahhabi interpretation of it, hold high authority in the state and play a role in its policy-making, often criticising the policies of the King, particularly when they meant Westernization of Saudi Arabia. These include the *mutawwin* i.e. the moral police, the *ulema* who issue *fatwas* (religious dictums), the judges who judge according to *Sharia* law, and a number of government-instituted bodies including the now infamous Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (Doumato 1992, 36-40). These two poles of Saudi Arabian governance are the source of all the official policies of the land – including, most prominently, the restrictive policies regarding women.

Saudi Arabia: a Patriarchy

As is evident from its religious and political structures, Saudi Arabian society is a patriarchy, a concept that is central to several feminist theories – the term patriarchy can be defined as a society “consisting of a male-dominated power structure throughout organized society and in individual relationships” (Napikoski 2017). According to leading feminist thinker Simone de Beauvoir, the powerlessness of woman due to her lack of physical, financial and intellectual independence is institutionalised in patriarchal society through the “codes of law set up against her” (Beauvoir as cited in Winchester 2013), a phenomenon that is evident in Saudi Arabia. The traditional customs of the patriarchal Bedouin tribes and the Saudi policies that developed from them, combined with a highly rigid interpretation of Islam as well as a new culture born of the social structure created by oil wealth, all work together to keep women in their historically weak, inferior, oppressive, exploited position in Saudi society. It is ironic that the many grievances voiced by Sultana on behalf of the women of her family and society at large, stem from the policies of her own family.

The “Ideal Islamic Woman”

The term patriarchy has also been expanded by feminist theorists to describe a systematic bias against women (5). This bias is clearly manifested the “gender ideology” of the “Ideal Islamic woman” that

underlies all Saudi policy and social customs, as described by Doumato. The “Ideal Islamic Woman” is the partner of the Saudi state that is dedicated to guarding traditional values and Islamic morality, and her place is in the home as wife and mother (4). This is in line with the feminist view of the enforcement of the stereotypically “feminine roles” of sexual partner and child-bearer on women by patriarchal society (6). Furthermore, as this ideology is based on the same principle by which the Al Sa'uds legitimised their rule i.e. protection of Islam, it is perpetuated by the monarchy (4).

Segregation: the basis of Saudi's women-related policies

This ideology is most obviously manifested in the official policy, unique to Saudi Arabia, of gender segregation. Politically it was a response to the Islamic revival movement that challenged the monarchy and demanded conservatism; socially, the oil boom of the 70s no longer required women to work, thus their remaining at home became a symbol of wealth and moral distinction. Women are not allowed to appear unveiled in the company of men to whom they are not related, and are not allowed to study or work at close quarters with men. Thus in terms of this most basic of gender-related policies, that is the primary source of women's marginalisation, interplay between law and social custom is clearly manifested (7).

The Female Sphere

By this policy of segregation women were deliberately excluded from the public sphere which thereby became the male sphere; as per feminist theory, in any patriarchal society where women are excluded from public decision-making, all political power is automatically concentrated in the hands of men, leaving women to occupy the private sphere that is traditionally un-political (8). However, in Saudi Arabia, particularly in the mid-to-late 20th century, the segregation led to the creation of a wholly female sphere of activity and institutions unique to Saudi society (7) that was invested with its own freedom and power. Whereas out in the male public sphere, women were expected to “conceal” themselves, externally symbolised by the practice of veiling; in the female private sphere, a certain amount of “display” was possible (9). Sultana includes descriptions of the sensual belly dancing that characterises private female gatherings (1) and even the sexual tension that was palpable among women in spaces where men cannot gain access (10). The female sphere gave women a certain amount of influence over the decisions of the men, particularly when it came to marriage. As men could not gain access to the female space, it was left to the women to find potential brides for their young male relatives (11). However this power was limited as despite the closed nature of the female sphere, it is inevitably subject to male authority.

Saudi Women and Inequality

Though separated from men via the policy of segregation, women are not explicitly dubbed unequal to men, neither by religious law nor official policy; however the implementation of these policies, as well as prevailing attitudes in this patriarchal society, perpetuated Saudi women's inferior position. Leading feminist thinker Simone de Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex* introduced the concept of “Woman as Other” which implies that in a patriarchal society, woman is defined as everything that man is not; man is the primary sex, while woman is the 'second sex'. This concept at the very base of patriarchal structures thus propagates the idea that women cannot exist without men and are therefore inferior. Out of this perception of women's inferiority develops all the customs that reinforce this position and conspire to maintain it.

This is clearly seen in the customs related to several aspects of Saudi private life. The birth of girl children is seen as an occasion for sorrow rather than rejoicing, and boys are favoured by both fathers and mothers over their sisters. The customary bias against women becomes codified in law, wherein neither their births, nor their deaths are made official in public records; on paper they do not exist, and adult men may take and divorce as many wives as they please (though no more than four at a time) (1).

While Sultana did not really experience segregation until she “became a woman” i.e. when she began to menstruate, she did experience the inequality of her sex from early childhood. She was the youngest of ten daughters born to her father's head wife, who produced only one son as the oldest male

child, Ali was completely spoiled by his father, and was an unpleasant child who annoyed his sisters and a cruel adult who tormented his wives and daughters. Sultana hated him with a passion; but her hatred was reinforced more because she was a child who craved her father's love and respect, but was always brushed aside as she were only a girl. A particularly poignant childhood experience that stressed upon her young mind her inferiority to her brother, was jealously watching Ali accompanying their father to the mosque for prayer, while she was forbidden from entering women were expected to pray at home. This experience becomes a recurring theme in the texts later as a grown woman and a mother, she watched her young son Abdullah accompany her husband Kareem to the mosque with the same sense of wistfulness. (1) Like her, her daughter Maha would suffer the same distress at watching how closely Abdullah was involved in her father's life, while she, a daughter, was always left behind; that distress later created in her a rebellion that disrupted her family. (10)

Veiling

Once Sultana (and later, her daughters) did begin to menstruate, she had to enter the world of adult women and become subject to all the restrictions placed on her sex.

With so much importance attached to the change from girlhood to womanhood, every young girl awaits with a combination of dread and deep satisfaction the sight of her first blood (Sasson 1992, 83).

The most important symbol of this change was that the new child-turned-woman began to veil; she could no longer let any man, other than her close relatives, look upon her face. The practice of veiling, a traditional custom among the Bedouin tribes, has been translated into law, once again demonstrating the interplay of both in Saudi Arabia. This change was greatly resented by Sultana. As she had always been a rebellious child with a mind of her own, the cumbersome veil hindering her vision irritated her more than most. In a rather amusing incident, as soon as she bought her first veil and *abaaya* (long black gown), in order to see the road clearly, she lifted her veil and exposed her “forbidden face” to everyone on the street, undoubtedly exciting every man who saw her, for once a woman's face is veiled, she becomes exotic and mysterious. (1)

Marriage and related issues

Once veiled and menstruating, girls officially become of marriageable age; as most girls begin to menstruate at age twelve or so, they are almost always wed and become mothers in their teens. Sultana, like her mother and older sisters before her, was wed at age sixteen to Kareem, a royal cousin more than ten years older to her. Sultana was luckier than most in that her husband was a progressive man who wanted his wife to be educated and treated her as his equal (insofar as was possible in their society). However before the wedding, as she “felt the chains of tradition wrap around (her)”, Sultana felt nothing but dread at her future; which is understandable for many of the women in her life suffered terrible experiences in their marriages. (1)

Her mother was wed to her father, an “intense man filled with dark cruelties” at the age of twelve; as he was a “merciless man”, she became a “melancholy woman”, living for her daughters. As was the custom in Saudi Arabia, and permissible as per Saudi law, Saudi men could marry four wives, regardless of their first wife's feelings in the matter; it was not uncommon for a man to wed a second woman if his first could not produce living sons, which Sultana's father did. Later, when Sultana could no longer have children after an illness, her husband, despite having been a more progressive man than most, declared his intention to take a second wife who would give him more children. As a woman with great desire to be treated as her husband's equal, and not chattel as her mother was, Sultana was furious. Kareem threatened to take her son from her if she tried to divorce him, for as per Saudi divorce laws, men were compulsorily given custody of their sons, especially after they reached puberty (though daughters could remain with their mothers). This resulted in a six-month long separation between Kareem and Sultana, who took her children and ran away to Europe; they were reconciled once Kareem agreed never to wed another, though it would be many years

before their marriage could return to the bliss of their early years (1).

Unlike Sultana and other Saudi women for whom divorcing their husbands was an arduous process, and often not granted to them by the courts, Saudi men could divorce their wives with ease, simply by repeating the words “I divorce you” three times before two male witnesses. Women were cast aside in this way if they were unable to produce male heirs or if they were sick. Their children were taken away, and they were left financially destitute, especially if their fathers would not take them back home. Furthermore, Saudi men could divorce and remarry the same woman three times; thus they often used divorce as a weapon against wives who displeased them in some way, while still retaining the right to keep them on if they wished (1). Women therefore have to live in constant fear of being abandoned, leaving them with no semblance of freedom (10). In every aspect of marriage, they are placed at a clear disadvantage traditionally, and can seek little reprieve from the law both conspire towards their exploitation.

Besides polygamy and divorce, another major issue for married women was sex – women were expected to have sex with their husbands whenever they demanded it, because of which they often became victims of marital rape, as in the case of two of Sultana's sisters. Sara, Sultana's closest sister, was the most beautiful woman in her family, thus her father had decided to use her marriage as a means to forge business alliances. Besides beauty, Sara was also a brilliant girl who wished to pursue her education; however her father refused to abide by her wishes and married her off at the age of sixteen – as the head of the family he was allowed to “dispose” off his daughters as he pleased). As per Saudi patriarchal tradition, he believed that “Sara... was doing what women are born to do: serve and pleasure the male and produce his children”. However Sara's husband was sexually deviant and had raped her multiple times in ways forbidden by Islam; in despair she attempted suicide. Her father tried to make her return to her husband, however thanks to her mother's efforts she was granted a divorce (1). Many years later, Sultana's other sister Reema was similarly raped by her husband; horribly injured she was forced to wear a colostomy bag for the rest of her life. She however did not divorce her husband for the sake of her children, even though he declared that he was disgusted by her and took another wife (10).

In terms of understanding marital rape in Saudi society, the feminist theory of 'rape culture' can be applied. It exists in societies where rape and other forms of sexual violence are pervasive and normalised by authorities, the media, and the majority of society (12). It is an outcome of a patriarchal structure, where sex, particularly within marriage, is seen as a man's right. Based on Sultana's description of marital rape as suffered by women in her family, it is evident that this phenomenon is not uncommon among Saudi marriages. According to Tonnessen, the very concept of marital rape does not exist, as a woman is expected by duty to be obedient to her husband, including in terms of sex, failing which she can be forced. Thus, although rape is considered a *hudud* crime i.e. punishable by Islam, marital rape is seen as normal in Saudi society, and not a criminal act; therefore, it can be said that rape culture does exist in Saudi society, and is a major contributing factor to women's oppression (13).

The Law of Obedience

Sultana bitterly comments that “women in (her) land are ignored by their fathers, scorned by their brothers and abused by their husbands” (1). Men exercise complete authority over their women, and stress the “Law of Obedience”, that demands that women and children must be completely obedient to their husband/father. They saw it as helping to maintain “the calm structure of (their) conservative society”. (10) It was in reality a means for the subordination of women and a way for men to maintain the power status quo they enjoyed. It can be considered a (successful) attempt to institutionalise traditional male authority by making it law. Male authority and the law of obedience is best demonstrated by the *mahraam* system – a woman's *mahraam* is her male guardian, who could be either her father, husband, or any other close relative. He is fully responsible for her in terms of her marriage, education and employment, allowing her to travel, and even for medical procedures – women's only contact with the male sphere and the wider society was through their *mahraam* (13).

Saudi Women: a source of Islamic honour?

Sultana points out that “the pride of a man's honour evolves from his women, so he must enforce his authority and supervision over...his women” (1). Doumato brings up an important question why Islamic piety is measured by the behaviour of women rather than men. The answer to this is quite simply, “because they can be” they are subject to the authority of their social superiors and can be easily dominated; men on the other hand would refuse to bend to restrictions. Thus with very little to stop them, Saudi men, particularly the royal youth, were free to indulge in deviant, distinctly un-Islamic activities; their wealth and status protected them, and as they were brought up to believe they owned the world, their consciences did not curb them. From adolescence, Sultana was constantly disgusted by the hypocrisy displayed by the men of her family, including her father, brother, and on occasion, her husband. This hypocrisy came through most in terms of sexual behaviour. As Sultana puts it, “Arabs are by nature sensuous, yet live in a puritanical society” such sexual repression therefore produces sexual deviance (4).

Hypocritical men and Victimised women

Like most royal Saudi men, Sultana's father would travel to Egypt or South East Asia to engage with prostitutes, while Kareem, her husband, would sleep with prostitutes brought to Saudi Arabia specifically for the amusement of the princes. (1) Some Saudi men indulged in a forbidden practice called *mut'a* i.e. “marriage of pleasure” it involved marrying women solely for sexual pleasure, who were soon discarded without a proper divorce; with their virginity taken, these women could find no other husband and were left without protection (10).

Sultana herself was witness to the worst instance of her brother's sexual deviance, when she caught him and his friend Hadi raping an eight year old girl, sold to them by a desperate Egyptian mother. Hadi in particular is the best example of Saudi male hypocrisy. He was training to become a *mutawa*, and as was the opinion of several Saudi fanatics, saw women as exhibitionists and the source of all evil; yet he participated in such activities, using women for the very purpose he condemned them for and seeing nothing wrong in his own behaviour. (1) Years later, Ali's son Majed was involved in an even worse crime than his father's he raped a comatose woman in a hospital and left her pregnant; and like all other royal princes, was saved from punishment by his father's wealth (10).

Ironically, while Saudi royal princes walked away from heinous crimes, Saudi women, both royal and not, suffered horrible fates for similar and even lesser sins Sultana was witness to many such instances. Her friends Wafa, the daughter of a prominent *mutawa*, and Nadia, the daughter of a progressive-minded businessman, were both rebellious girls; resenting their inevitable fate as wives and mothers with no say in their own lives, and in an effort to make the most of their temporary freedom, they indulged in 'fornication' with foreign men, which was considered *hudud* i.e. a crime punishable by Islam. They were caught by the religious authorities and left to be punished by their fathers. While Wafa was made the third wife of an old man living in a far-off desert village, Nadia suffered a far worse fate she was drowned by her own father in the family swimming pool. As women's behaviour is considered part of a man's private affairs, he was well within his rights in committing the murder of his daughter. (1)

This double standard in the treatment of men and women for the same sins is visible in Saudi laws and social attitudes towards virginity and marriage to foreigners. In terms of the latter, women were expected by law and custom to be virgins at the time of marriage, failing which they could be divorced; the “blood-stained bedsheet” after the wedding night was seen as a mark of a new wife's honour, while for men there were no such markers, or even a necessity that they be virgins until marriage (though the Koran does not approve of fornication for both sexes). Marrying a foreigner, whether a Muslim or not, was forbidden to women, except in special cases where permission might be sought; by contrast, there were no such restrictions on men. (1) Sameera, a non-royal but upper class woman, was guilty of flouting both she fell in love with and escaped abroad with her American lover, and was then tricked into returning to Saudi Arabia by her uncle, who had become her guardian upon her father's death. Forced into marriage, she was quickly

abandoned by her husband upon his discovery that she was not a virgin. For this, she became subject to one of the cruellest punishments inflicted on women confinement to the 'Woman's Room', a windowless cell where she could have no human contact for the rest of her. She remained there for fifteen years, until she died (10).

Like fornication, adultery is also a *hudud* crime, and punishable by death. Princess Misha'il, a royal cousin, who was wed to an old man, indulged in an affair with the son of a Lebanese envoy, and attempted to flee Saudi, dressed as a man. She was caught and sentenced to death; despite the King's plea for mercy, her father endorsed her punishment, and she was shot by a firing squad. Her death in fact became the subject of a British documentary, *Death of a Princess*, which drew international attention to the cruel treatment of women in Saudi Arabia (10).

However the worst instance of such cruelty to women as well as of male hypocrisy, is an incident involving a non-royal, recounted in the chapter aptly titled 'Dark Secrets'. Amal, an unmarried pregnant girl was to be stoned to death for fornication she had been accused of seducing her brother's friends; yet those boys would receive no punishment, though their sin was the same. In actuality, it turned out that she had been raped by the boys who had lied in order to protect themselves. Her brother had said nothing for fear of harming his friends. The religious authorities placed the entire blame on the girl and upon delivering her baby, she was mercilessly executed. The horrifying incident left a deep mark on Sultana, who had just become a mother like Amal, and is demonstrative of the precarious position of women in a society. That rape victims can have very little hope for protection and justice in a world where a man's word would always be taken against hers, perpetuates the idea that rape culture is a debilitating part of Saudi society (1).

In every instance recounted, related to the various restrictions on or prejudices against women in Saudi Arabia, traditional attitudes toward sexuality, including those grounded in scripture, are codified in law and are used against women, rather than to protect them. The law favours men, which further reinforces their power over women.

Other major issues: Education and Circumcision

Some of the other issues raised by Sultana in her account include education and the inhuman practice of female circumcision, officially referred to as genital mutilation. In terms of the former, Sultana takes a more positive stance than is seen in most of the text she praises her uncle Faizal and his wife Iffat, who were King and Queen during her childhood, for their encouragement of education. During the 1960s-70s, the government had begun to support education for girls, despite considerable opposition from more conservative factions; this was commendable though the main focus of female education was preparation for inevitable marriage and motherhood. (14) Furthermore, the stance of Islamic scriptures with regard to women's education is positive. (15) However while official policy and even the Koran encouraged female education, conservative families that held to traditional notion that women belong in the home were reluctant to send their girls to school; while Sultana, Sara, and three other sisters were lucky enough to receive an education at the behest of their mother despite her father's resistance, their five older sisters had not been allowed the same privilege. (1)

The practice of female circumcision is described in great detail by Sultana. An age-old pre-Islamic Bedouin custom, it involved cutting off parts of a girl's genitalia, usually when she reached puberty, in an effort to "make women chaste" (1); the barbaric custom left women to suffer "a lifetime of trauma and physical pain". (16) The practice was not condoned by the Koran and it had been banned in Saudi Arabia, yet many families, driven by tradition and ignorance, continued to inflict it on their girl children. While Sultana had been spared, three of her older sisters had been circumcised at the insistence of their mother, as she herself had undergone the procedure and believed it to be right and necessary.

Both of the above issues are instances of Saudi social customs standing in the way of progress and emancipation of women, even as official policies tried to make headway in the same.

Astonishingly the land of my ancestors is little changed from that of a thousand years ago.

Yes, modern buildings spring up, the latest health care is available to all, but consideration for women and for the quality of their lives still receives a shrug of indifference (Sasson 1992, 20).

However, while she blames pre-Islamic customs carried forward by the traditional Islamic Saudi society for the oppression of Saudi women, Sultana makes it clear that she does not blame Islam. Similarly, Kandiyoti asserts that many of the restrictions and rules imposed on women are not grounded in scripture; but while the Koran doesn't propound inequality, extremist movements like Wahabbism growing out of Islam do. (1) The control of women becomes the easiest way to keep up appearances of protecting the faith, once again implying Doumato's aforementioned gender ideology which underlies Saudi policy.

Individual Impact: the case of Princesses Sultana, Maha, and Amani

Because Sultana's account is a personal one, besides addressing wider issues pervading society at large, the texts give insight into the possible personal impact the general restrictions on women could have on individual women. According to the theory of feminist psychology, a branch of psychology that grew out of feminism, the structures of society that oppress women can produce psychological distress (17). Sultana, and her daughters Maha and Amani are all subject to the oppression of Saudi male-dominated society, and it impacts each of their lives very differently.

Sultana spent her youth rebelling in minor ways, from attacking her brother, to misbehaving before her future husband and mother-in-law in a bid to scare them away. However, as an adult, the restrictions she faced produced positive results in her outlook as a young wife and mother, she used her strong character to ensure that Kareem treated her as she demanded to be treated, and to ensure that her children, particularly Abdullah, would grow up to make their society better for women. She willingly risked her own safety in order to give her sex a voice in a country that denied them on (1). And finally she used her wealth and position to assist women in her country, particularly among the poorer sections of society; her efforts to contribute to the emancipation of her sex are recounted in the later additions to the *Princess* series.

But in the case of her daughters, the restrictions they inherited from their society produced dangerous results. Both inherited Sultana's strong character, which manifested itself very differently in each girl. Like her mother, Maha spent her childhood rebelling; her hatred at being cut out from her father's world led to hatred of her brother, and encouraged by her paternal grandmother, she took to attempting "black magic" to harm him. As she grew older, she grew extremely close to Aisha, another rebellious girl; the two, inspired by the militant atmosphere of the Gulf War (1991), took to arming themselves, and upon discovery, were forced by their parents to separate. Maha however reacted violently and cursed everything from their society to God "if a girl... believes there is a God, she is an imbecile!" she said, a statement for which she could even be executed. It later turned out that Maha had developed a hatred for male figures, including God, and by extension had developed a preference for women she and Aisha were lovers, in a land where heterosexual love was a taboo subject, let alone homosexuality. (10) In the context of Maha's background and her family's adherence to Islam, her behaviour can be seen as a sign of the psychological damage created by women's oppression; although in other contexts, atheism and homosexuality would not be considered deviant.

While Maha took to what is considered by Islam to be sinful, Amani became a religious extremist. Like Maha, she too felt the effects of being considered inferior to her male counterparts. Thus, when her parents were dealing with her sister, she had entered a vulnerable and volatile state of mind, and had no hand to guide her. Thus when the family made the *Haj* and went to Mecca, she had a religious experience and adopted an extreme form of Islam she began to adhere to an extreme form of veiling, to condemn any display of wealth by her royal relatives, to find fault and blasphemy in everything her siblings did, and even joined an extremist group that condemned the royal family her family. Her behaviour was just as dangerous as her sister's for now, instead of trying to overcome the restrictions on her sex as her mother and sister tried to do, she became an enforcer of the same, believing that the role Saudi society had assigned

to women was indeed as decreed by God. (1) Hers was akin to the attitude prevalent among a large percentage of Saudi women oppressed as they were, their own attitudes, born of age-old adherence to tradition, further contributes to their oppression.

A Feminist Arabia?

While the issues discussed till this point involving the status of women have been analysed using feminist theory, many would argue that “feminism” itself, in the sense of a women's movement fighting for emancipation, is a Western import that finds no relevance in the Arab context. Golley however argues in favour of an 'Arab feminism' one that would grow out of women's need for liberation, with its own unique arguments and characteristics, such as the use of Islamic scripture. Tonnessen also argues in favour of a “Saudi Women's Movement”. (18)

Additionally Golley poses a counter-argument to Western feminists who would see Saudi women as wholly reclusive and oppressed, and incapable of a fight (521-522). The common perception of Saudi women in the West, even though the circulation of books such as the *Princess* series, is of the “submissive Arab woman.” What Golley suggests is that, contrary to this stereotypical view, Saudi women are motivated to fight for their cause; as can be seen from Princess Sultana's bold step in revealing the secrets of her society in this way, and addressing several taboo issues, hers is a powerful voice in that fight.

One of the best examples of Saudi women's drive to fight is the 1991 “driving demonstration.” As an offshoot of the gender segregation policy, Saudi women were forbidden from driving a policy that is as ridiculous as it is a hindrance to women, as stressed by Sultana on several occasions. (10) Several of the royal men, Sultana's father and brother included, viewed women driving as a gateway to immorality; in reality, women's immobility and their dependence of men for every small issue further reduces the amount of power they exercise over their own lives.

In protest of this, in 1991, inspired by the emancipated foreign women who were present in the country due to the Gulf War, several Saudi women took to the streets in cars; though Sultana did not participate, she was overjoyed that other women like her were finally taking a stand. (10) However, the Saudi government quickly repressed this bold move and the women demonstrators were severely punished (Doumato 1991, 34). The men of the monarchy, even the more open-minded ones like Sultana's husband Kareem, condemned the driving demonstration their concern was the protection of their rule, and they feared that this supposedly 'immoral' act would incite the wrath of the *mutawin*. (1) The presence of American soldiers in Saudi Arabia was seen by the *mutawin* as a dangerous trend towards Westernization, which was their primary grievance. Though the government was making very slow progress in the fight for women's equality, it came second to the need to maintain the stability of their regime (19).

The men in our family talked sympathetically about women's rights, but in reality they were little different from the extremists. All men liked a heavy hand on the heads of women. (Sasson 1994, 283)

It is therefore evident that while women were developing the strength to fight back, in their as-yet highly patriarchal society, they were powerless without the support of men, whether royal, religious or otherwise. Their social customs, which no society is ever able to relinquish, as well as the laws that bind them, contribute to keep them tightly bound to men and unable to seek emancipation on their own. There were few mechanisms that might have helped them achieve the same; Sultana found one of the very few available to them, i.e. writing.

Conclusion

In every instance and anecdote recounted by Princess Sultana, from her life and the lives of those she loved, the reader can see the hand of both the law and of tradition, working together to keep Saudi women in their traditional subjugated state. Segregation grew out of traditional notions of Islamic morality and was institutionalised in law. Women have few legal rights in terms of marriage and divorce, and where the law supports women's education and protection from circumcision, traditional customs stand in their

way. Thus in this way, in every issue from rape to women driving, women's inferior status in Saudi society is reinforced by the political power structures and traditional patriarchal norms that govern their society.

As Sultana is of the royal family, her exposure is mainly confined to the women of her royal circles, barring a few foreign servants whose plights she is also sensitive to. From just within these circles however, arise several horror stories involving various princesses or their close associates. From this it is clear that royal status in Saudi Arabia comes second to gender; princess or not, if one is woman, one's position in Saudi society is as vulnerable and precarious as any other's.

Jean Sasson's series effectively captures the voice of this firebrand Saudi woman, whose observations over a part of her life, would go on to inspire her service of her countrywomen; she in turn captures and gives to the reader a detailed picture of what went on inside the secretive Saudi society over a better part of the 20th century. The various factors that went into keeping women in their inferior position have been addressed through very personal examples that have the effect of drawing the reader in and giving them a more empathetic understanding of broad gender issues.

In the decades that have passed since these books' publication, there has been change in Saudi society, in terms of women's emancipation and otherwise; Sasson's last two additions to the series are situated within the 21st century and are able to capture the reality of the present time period. They may be a subject of further research, both in their own right, and in comparison with the texts analysed herein, to trace the changes that characterise Saudi society's evolution. However there remains much room for improvement of Saudi women's status; until that is achieved, Jean Sasson's work and Princess Sultana's voice remain as relevant as ever.

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