

# The Representation of Arab Muslim Women in Jean Sasson' s: Princess, Sultana' s Daughters, Sultana' s Circle

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*Abstract : (not more than 10 Lines)*

In this paper, we proposed to analyze Jean Sasson' s trilogy: *Princess, Princess Sultana's Daughters*, and *Sultana' s Circle* as feminist works to test whether non-fiction enables us to have a deeper understanding of how the situation of Arab Muslim women is simultaneously determined by religion or culture? Drawing on a framework that positions the representation of Arab Muslim women at the center of both cultural and postcolonial feminist theories this study undertook an analytic method. The results revealed that these novels are filled with contradictions and stereotypes about Arab people and culture. Therefore, the trilogy gives a far more complicated image of Arab Muslim women's position to Western readers, who relate women's plight to Islam as a religion.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, the East has formed a mysterious place to the West with which stereotypes, adventures, and superstitions are associated. With their deliberate exploring journeys, early western travelers tried to dispel the dark image of the East in their books and letters. Since then, the attempt to picture the eastern culture by western writers, artists, filmmakers, and designers did not end. With the increasing political and economic interests in the Middle East, especially after the Gulf War, extensive reports were given by the western journalists, and American soldiers turned the media's attention to the area, particularly Saudi Arabia, as a new territory for orientalist investigation. The West sees Saudi Arabia as a birthplace of Islam, where Islam plays a significant role in everybody's life, especially women. The image of Saudi Arabian women as oppressed and subjugated in

a male-dominated society was introduced to western fiction in the 19th century after the Gulf War. Novels: *Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia* (1992), *Sultana's Daughters*, and *Sultana's Circle* about the reality of being a female in Saudi Arabia by Jean Sasson have made a significant impact on the western shaping of Saudi and all Arab women's image.

This study attempted to explore and analyze the image of Arab women in Jean Sasson's trilogy to test whether 20<sup>th</sup>-century non-fiction can enable us to have a deeper understanding of whether Arab Muslim women's situation is simultaneously determined by religion or culture. The study also analyzes the novel's main female character "Sultana" through the postcolonial feminist lens to see how a western writer views Arab Muslim women. It also aims to answer questions relating to the position of women in the Arab World. This attempt may allow the research ideas and knowledge to be shared to encourage readers to adjust their perceptions of Arab Muslim women.

The American novelist Jean Sasson writes about women in the Middle East and calls herself a voice for Middle Eastern women. She is the author of several novels about Arab women; among her books is her popular bestselling trilogy *Princess*, which narrates the story of women's oppression in Saudi Arabia. The story's main female character, Sultana, is a princess from the Saudi Arabian Royal family. Sultana reacts against the ages of discrimination between males and females in the kingdom of Arabia. The story setting is Riyadh (1950-1990). According to Sasson, the story is authentic of a woman born in a wealthy family who dares to defy customs and laws. Sultana is an example of women's emancipation in a close society for Sasson.

Much research has been carried out by both insiders and outsiders in Arab Muslim women studies. Among the earliest scholars on middle eastern women studies was Elizabeth Fernea, who published several books, essays, and films on women in the Middle East. After a visit to Saudi Arabia, Fernea, In *Search of Islamic Feminism*, refutes the western assumptions of Arab women in what she calls ghostwritten novels and media as passive and dominated. On the contrary, she praises Saudi women for their charitable projects and awareness of their social needs.

Similarly, Abu Lughod (2012), an Arab-American critic and author, in her article 'Do Muslim Women Really Need Savings? Argues that the calls to rally around the 'savings of Muslim women' are frequently an excuse for the U.S. military operations or occupations of countries such as Afghanistan. Through the analyses of her ethnographic study of women in Egypt, she stated that her research in the Arab World had remarked a common sense among all Arab Muslim women. Their identities as Muslims are significant to them, and their faith in God is integral to their sense of self and community.

Another Arab scholar, Ahmad (2009), in her *Muslim Women in American Popular Literature*, pointed out that Muslim woman is represented as 'veiled subjugated, indomitable in spirit, but still in need of rescue from an enlightened West.' She stated that popular narratives about Muslim women in American literature are different from the

colonial harem accounts. They allow Muslim women "to speak, at least purportedly only in legible and familiar ways within the language and experience; of American feminism." These narratives to Ahmad are emptied of any regional, political, or economic contexts; their packaging denies such specificity by wrapping them in an iconic image empty of any political context.

In explaining how the saving of women has been the tendency of the colonial power throughout history, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1999) has cynically put it: "white men saving brown women from brown men." (p. 287). This quotation explains the historical division between the civilized West and the barbaric east. It also shows western attitudes toward Oriental people, which justifies their moral imperative to invade eastern territories to save women. History is full of similar cases of savings, for instance, in British-ruled Egypt, Lord Cromer has attacked the Muslim Veiling, which he considered a symbol of oppression for Muslim women; however, he did not support women and girls' education. Leila Ahmad (2009), an Egyptian feminist, calls this action the revival of colonial interests, what she termed as 'colonial feminism.'

Furthermore, in his dynamic and enduring book: *The Wretched of Earth* (1965), Fanon has spoken in the colonial tongue to reflect the point of view and theory of French colonial power in Algeria. Fanon's writings have inspired the masses in Algeria to protect their identity, and veiled women had also participated in the liberation of Algeria.

Lawson (2004), in her study "*For the Believing Women: A Classification and Comparative Analysis of the Feminine Space in Islamic Scripture*," describes the inappropriateness of context for the literature written by some authors and many western journalists about Muslim women in the war turmoil based on their observations,

Many of these assignments were to cover conflicts such as the Gulf War or the Afghani resistance movement—such political and social turmoil is undoubtedly not the appropriate context from which to draw broad conclusions on the status of Muslim women.

Unlike Lawson, Mehta & Mahajan (2017), in their article *Intimate Partner Violence Against Women in Jean Sasson's Works*, consider Sasson's novels as actual events uncovered by the author to support the rights of women in the Middle East and uncover the reality that women are victims of both male and traditions and religion.

Arab critics like Suha Sabbagh consider *Princess Trilogy* as a form of attack on the Arab values under the guise of supporting women's rights. In her introduction to *Arab Women Between Defiance and Restraint* (1996), she points out that,

Just because there is a stringent patriarchal system in the Arab World does not mean that women are docile non-entities. Strong patriarchies often breed the opposite: strong women who work very hard to ensure the system's compliance with their needs. Such an attitude reflects the ignorance about cultural differences

on the part of western writers, cartoonists, and readers of the press. (Sabbagh, 1996)

Sabbagh states that such feminist work is a form of championing Arab women's rights to attack Arab culture and “contains preposterous lies about Arab values.” She adds that the book “gives the impression that honor killing occurs in the Arab world as often as afternoon teas and that families discuss together the premeditated killings of their daughters who get in the way of family honor.”

Other reviewers would not consider it a feminist text but rather a true story that states facts, and Sultana has some feminist traits that she uses to gain the little independence she can. For them, although Sultana was given all the luxuries, money, and family influence, no other ordinary person could threaten or harm her; however, the threat comes from inside the Family. Her father and brother were a threat. To some extent, her husband Kareem was engaged in alcoholism and prostitution.

Masturoch (2009) considers Sultana a victim raised in the luxurious palace of a cruel, domineering father, a kind of but an overly acquiescent mother, and a drunkard husband, Kareem, who was indulged in alcoholism and prostitution. Masturoch as a critic with a Muslim background establishes the difference between Islamic Sharia and Arabic culture. She harshly criticizes the Arabian culture as giving more power and rights to men to overrule and dominate women and that woman is a property that moves from father to husband.

Another reviewer, Sifana et al. (2018), in *Treating Arab women in Jean Sasson 's Princess Sultana ' s Daughters*, has also referred to customs that date back to the pre-Islamic era that is still performed in Saudi Arabia, for instance, female genital mutilation, temporary marriage (mut' ah) and thoughtless divorce by using the valid law of divorce in Islam. These practices are influenced by culture and not religion.

Stefana et al. distinguish between Arabic culture as unfair to Arab women and the Islamic teachings that Arab men misuse to justify their subjection of Arab women, “the Arabs often treat them that way by using Islamic teachings as the basis to support their deed.”

Thakur (2018) started her article: *Sharia Law: An Abominably Institutionalized Women Rights Breach in Jean Sasson ' s Princess* blaming Islam, mainly Sharia Law, for oppressing middle eastern women in general and explains how Islam equates women to silenced objects and made them as vessels for men pleasure.

In the same way, Digvijay Pandya & Aarti Mahajan (2018) argue in their article that Sasson ' s trilogy has portrayed the “real” situation of women in the Middle Eastern societies who suffer inhumane torture and pains under a ‘system’ that tries to suppress female identity in the Islamic societies.

Sasson ' s *Princess Trilogy* and other novels are written in the field of women's studies were not welcomed by most Arabic critics because the feminism that Arab Muslim

women are calling for is based on their religion and culture and is challenging to explain to western feminists because of a mutual incompatibility between these two. In fact, "no feminist movement can be related to western feminism because of the way feminists formed their group; an example of that is the diversity of feminist groups in the USA (Krolokke, Charlotte and Anne, and Anne Scott Sorensen, 2006).

In this study, postcolonial feminism is chosen as a fundamental theory because it makes it clear how crucial it is to pay attention to cultural, religious, social, and geographical differences among objectified women. In *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism* (2007), Gill Plain defines how postcolonial feminist critics are engaged in contesting the notion that privileges Western liberation and progress and portrays third-world women as victims of ignorance and religions (286-7).

In her essay "Under Western Eyes," Chandra Mohanty explains how western feminist writing about third world women colonizes these women's historical and cultural background. She states that third-world women tend to be depicted as victims of male domination and traditional cultural practices. In this depiction, little attention is paid to these women's cultural and historical backgrounds. Moreover, western feminism is taken as a norm against which the third World is to be the judge. Mohanty emphasizes that "Third World women's issues should be analyzed within the precise social relations in which they occur" (Mohanty, 1991, p. 289-290).

This study, therefore, will incorporate an analysis of the trilogy in an attempt to explore the image of Arab Muslim women. It also explains how the relationship between Islam and the plight of Arab Muslim women is established in these novels.

## **2. Results**

### **2.1 Dependent women**

Women's dependency has many contexts. There are two types of dependencies in the trilogy: dependency on men and dependency on the western saviors. In a country that still chanted patriarchy like Saudi Arabia, women are dependent on men; fathers, brothers, and husbands. Whatever women want to do in their lives, they need a male guardian's permission. Women cannot travel alone or make choices over their sexuality or other life choices; they are also financially dependent. The Arabic Muslim society places men as guardians for women, providers, protectors, and supporters. However, men use their power to control and harm women. The trilogy depicted how Arab women are considered properties who moved from their fathers' ownership to their husbands. For instance, 12

years of age is wed to a five times older man than her without her permission. Moreover, young virgin girls are transported from neighboring countries for marriages that last for a few horror nights. Thus, women are victims of men's physical oppression.

In a note for her second book of the trilogy, Sasson differentiates the treatment of women in some Arab countries like Algeria, Tunisia, Qatar, Yemen, Bahrain, and other Arab countries (Sasson, 1995, p. 12-25). For instance, the treatment of women in Yemen was, "Tragically, the women of Yemen face violence and discrimination in their lives. Women are not free to choose their husbands, and in many cases, girls as young as eight years old are married against their will."

For gaining her freedom and freedom for all women in her country, Sultana was happy about the changing of events upon the coming of the American troops to Saudi Arabia. In her opinion, the American presence in her country is a spark of life for the Saudi feminists' dreams (Sasson, 1992, p. 270).

## **2.2 *Chained women***

Sultana criticizes the family system in the Arab World that considers males as superior and that the head of the Family has given them the power to subjugate. Whereas the female is considered a shame, for she might bring dishonor to the Family. Family and kinship in Arabic society are crucial for Arab people, and loyalty and honor represent family reputation.

The preference for male over female children was a custom in Arabic culture before the coming of Islam. In the age of ignorance, females were buried alive for fear of shame they might bring to the Family. With the advent of Islam, this custom was banned, and women's position was elevated and protected against all the violent customs. Still, in some societies, some practices of *eljahiliya* (age of ignorance) are persisting. In the trilogy, Sultana, as a wealthy royal, has money and Family influence, and no other man could threaten or harm her; however, the threat comes from inside the Family. Her father and brother are a threat, and to a certain extent, her husband Kareem was engaged in alcoholism and prostitution.

## **2.3 *Rebellious women***

Sultana and her daughters in the trilogy are represented as rebels against all sources of oppression and patriarchy. Sultana opposes her family members, who subordinate women early, starting from her father, brother, and husband, Kareem. Sultana vows to challenge all men. Sultana and her sisters form a circle against any wicked man who takes advantage of women.

*Princess Sultana's* rebellion is against the corrupted implementation of Islamic rules in society that protect royals and close friends engaged in law-breaking. Sultana reports many incidents, including the story of her brother-in-law Muneer who was engaged

in transporting alcohol to the kingdom. Muneer went unpunished by the religious committee because Sultana's father and other princes downplayed the incident as a foolish behavior done by a young prince West influenced by the West. On the contrary, Muneer regained his business and was sent to a new city with a new business and granted considerable rewards from governments, and he wed a young girl, and his happiness increased.

In Princess Sultana Daughters, Sultana recalls other stories of law violations. Men in Saudi Arabia, such as Aicha's father, Maha's friend, engaged in the marriage of pleasure were not accused by government law because "no legal authority would deny a man the right to such an arrangement." Trafficking in sex was considered a man business. Moreover, Sultana's cousin Feddal was not accused of exploiting girls brought from many countries as a harem. The trilogy, in general, discusses many stories of foreign males and females whom Saudi people mistreated because the law in Saudi Arabia has no provision for protecting foreign rights. Furthermore, there are many contradictions about the Islamic faith in the trilogy. At the beginning of Princess, Sultana blames the customs and traditions of her country for women's plight, "it is wrong, however, to blame our Muslim faith for the lowly position of women in our society [...], our Prophet Muhammad taught only kindness and fairness toward those of my sex" (Sasson, 1992: 28). Those to be blamed are "the men who came behind the Prophet Muhammad have chosen to follow the customs and traditions of the dark ages rather than to follow Muhammad's words and example." Then, Sultana contradicts her words by stating that: "the Koran does state that women are secondary to men, much in the same way the bible authorizes men over women" (Sasson, 1992, p. 28). This quote indicates that both Islam and Christianity consider women inferior to men. Indeed, religion as a threat to women's liberty is the basic tenet of western feminism.

Therefore, the sharia law was interpreted as being cruel to Arab women. Sultana contradicts the punishment of Princess Mashaal, who was murdered for adultery. Moreover, the death of Mashaal had angered the World's public opinion, mainly after the British film Death of a Princess, which generated more hostility and cruelty toward Arab and Islamic Sharia Law. In Princess Sultana's circle, Sultana argues that her cousin Mashaal was killed for 'unsanctioned love.' The word unsanctioned love was used instead of adultery to polish the crime of adultery and accused Muslims of honor killings that were an aberration that rarely happened. Indeed, Islam does not tolerate adultery, and the punishment is stoning to death. However, many conditions regulate its application.

Furthermore, Sultana finds refuge from the failure to support deprived women in alcoholic drinks prohibited in Islam and Saudi Arabian society, mainly known for its strict sharia law enforcement. Thus, Sultana's consumption of alcohol leads her to violate the sanctity of the holy month of Ramadan. She reported that she could not abide by the fasting requirements since childhood.

Another transgression of religion is the misstatement about the veil, *hijab*, that cannot belong to a Muslim woman. To a Muslim woman, veiling is a symbol of heritage,

ethnic pride, identity, and a mean of protecting their modesty according to cultural requirements, yet for western women, the veil symbolizes repression and discrimination.

Sultana expressed her veiling experience as a threat and danger. Besides, she considered the veil a way to prevent her from seeing the blue sky. She asserts: "my heart plunged to my stomach when I realized that, from that moment, outside my own home, I would not experience life as it really is in all its colors. The world suddenly seemed a dull place" (Sasson, 1992, p.111).

Likewise, Sultana's daughter Maha, an admirer of western culture, develops hate for the veil upon the coming of Western journalists who undertook the plight of Arab women as an agenda for human rights. Sultana states,

When our veiled plight piqued the curiosity of numerous foreign journalists, many educated women of my land began to plan for the day when they could burn their veils, discard their heavy black abayas, and steer their wheels' automobiles. (p.570- 571)

The literature has differently interpreted the criticism of Islamic sharia in the Sasson trilogy. First, critics with Islamic backgrounds had differentiated between Islam as a religion and the Arabic culture. They differentiate between Islam which has elevated Muslim women's position and status in society, and the Arabic traditions and customs that oppress Arab Muslim women. For instance, Sifana (2018) describes how customs dated back to the pre-Islamic era still performed in Saudi Arabia, like; female genital mutilation, temporary marriage (mut' ah), and thoughtless divorce by using the valid law of divorce in Islam. These practices, according to Sifana, are influenced by culture and not by religion. She explains that,

Although the men use Islamic teachings as the basis of their treatment of women, [...] Arabian life describes that the concept of honor and shame gives different treatment to men and women. The women often get suffering and pain caused by men' s authority. On the contrary, the men often benefit from treating them arbitrarily. This culture becomes the main trigger for women to continuously struggle for their rights in life. Thus, the ways of treating Arab women described above are not directly implementing the rules based on Islamic teachings, but it has cultural influences. (p.24)

Second, critics with non-Islamic backgrounds blame Islam and Sharia Law for women's oppression. Thakur (2018) describes how the Sharia Law in Saudi Arabia has transformed women into tools in men's hands; he argues that since the Sharia Law is an unchallenged constitution run by Allah and Islam, women are deprived of their fundamental human rights and are considered as silenced sexual objects put under men's control. Therefore, Thakur's understanding of Sharia Law is based on his interpretation of the trilogy. However, Jean

Sasson keeps reminding readers in her Forward words that she is aware of the difference between Arabic 'primitive culture' and Islamic religion and that her aim is not to demean the Islamic religion. Nevertheless, the novels' incidents and interpretations read the opposite.

## 2.4 Third world difference

Mohanty argues that the western feminists writing about Other women use the term Third world woman as a monolithic subject for their analysis regardless of the differences and complexities between women of different countries. Through the production of the 'third world difference' that Mohanty defines as,

[...] a stable, ahistorical something that oppresses most if not all the women in these countries. Moreover, in the production of this "third World Difference," western feminism appropriate and 'colonize' the fundamental complexities and conflicts that characterize women's lives of different classes, religions, cultures, races, and castes in these countries.

In the texts, Sultana generalizes the physical assaults, male domination, and religious restrictions of women in other parts of the World like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kuwait, Yemen, and Egypt. This overgeneralization of women's suffrage shows women's universality regardless of their race, location, or culture.

Thus, the assumption that all women of the World are a homogeneous group with the same struggle regardless of their classes, histories, cultures, races, ideologies, or religions is false. Relating Saudi Arabian women to Yemeni, Palestinian, Afghani, and Pakistani women as if all these women formed a sizeable coherent group is refuted by most critics and feminists like Nawal Elssadawi, Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Mohanty, and others. As indicated earlier in the literature, there is a difference between first-world feminists and third-world feminists. More precisely, between white Western feminism and Islamic feminism. Western feminism is based on Western values, thoughts, and ideologies, and these values are different from those of Islam and Arab culture. For instance, Western feminists attacking religion in their movement is a sore subject among Arab Muslim feminists. Muslim women see Islam's teaching as their best friend and supporter rather than enemy as the western feminists do. The directive found in the Quran embodies the ideal which Muslim women want to encourage, not denounce.

The distinctions and comparisons are made based on the privileged western women and who are taken as a norm and referent for third-world women. In the texts, Sultana admires Western women's life and freedom compared to her miserable life as a royal. In her quest for women's rights and to break the chains of oppression and patriarchy, Sultana seeks to adopt Western norms that are different for Muslim women and refuted in the Islamic and Arabic cultures. The pleasure Sultana finds in the U.S. liberty and freedom of women revealing their bodies and not wearing veils and *abayas* serves the western ideology of "the veil is an oppression to Muslim women." This same discourse represents the western

feminist ideology that fighting for women's rights starts with opposing all forms of oppression.

Moreover, the author represented third-world women through Sultana Al Saud's character as family-oriented, sexually constrained, uneducated, ignorant, poor, and controlled by traditions, religions, and customs. Whereas implicitly self-represent herself and Western women as liberated, educated, modern women who gain control over their bodies and sexualities and are free to make decisions in their lives (Mohanty, 1984). Therefore, the dichotomy between liberated western women versus oppressed eastern women brings back the discourse of civilized West and uncivilized 'Other,' the core and the periphery, the West's superiority over the 'Other' detailed in the works of oriental writers.

## **2.5 Representation versus discursive-self representation**

Sasson, as a Western feminist, represents a third-world Arab Muslim woman from her positionality as the norm and reverent for Arab women. Taking the western values and liberated women in the West as an example compared to the so-called oppressed Arab Muslim women reflects the ideology of power unrevealed clearly but displayed in the difference between western civilized and eastern uncivilized and need western savings.

In the trilogy, Sasson declares that Sultana elects her as a representative of her voice and all Arab woman in her country; however, what might strike us about this trilogy is Sasson's way of renouncing any direct representation of her views. As the author, Sasson narrates the events using her words only but not her voice; she lets Sultana do all the talking. However, readers encounter an overlapping of two voices, defending Islam and attacking Sharia Law which is a parcel of Islamic teachings.

Thus, postcolonial feminist critics contested the notion that privileges western liberation and progress and portrays third-world women as victims of ignorance and religions. Plain (2007), as a postcolonial feminist" argues in "Under Western Eyes" how western feminists write about third-world women colonizing these women's historical and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, western feminists cannot avoid the challenge of situating themselves and examining their role in such a global economy and political framework. Moreover, Plain points out how many feminists ignored the complex interconnections between first and third-world economies and their effect on women's lives in third-world countries. The western feminists' scholarship on third-world women is to be considered in the context of the hegemony of western media, publications, novels, and books. The political effects and implications of western representations of Arab women go beyond the feminists and the targeted audience to a political agenda of articulating women's rights to prove the indirect intervention in third-world countries.

## **2.6 Eurocentrism**

Upon the coming of American troops and journalists to Saudi Arabia, Sultana considers their presence a hope for women feminists. "the American presence was going to alter our lives in a wonderful, wonderful way" (Sasson, 1992, p. 273). Considering Western troops and invaders by Sultana as saviors is one of the skeptical points in Sultana's identity

because no reasonable man/ woman would welcome his/ her colonizers the way Sultana did. Therefore, the notion of eurocentrism and saving oppressed others brings back the clash of civilizations western colonizers pretended to come to civilize the East and liberate Eastern women. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, American culture replaced the ancient French and British colonizers in their mission in the East. In explaining how the saving of women has been the tendency of the colonial power throughout history, Gayatri Spivak (1999) has cynically put it: "white men saving brown women from brown men." (p. 287). This quotation explains the historical division between the civilized West and the so-called barbaric East. It also shows western attitudes toward oriental people, which justify their moral imperative to invade eastern territories to save women.

## **2.7 Veil and women's oppression**

The veil has been the focus of 19<sup>th</sup>-century orientalist writers, travelers, and explorers who were obsessed with what might Arab women hide behind the veil. Thus, the veil in western literature is always associated with the harem, fantasy, and seduction. It is also a symbol of oppression. The European subject explains their obsession with veiled Muslim women as civilizing, modernizing, and then liberating veiled women and oriental people from their 'backwardness' and making them voiced. This political ideology of unveiling the Oriental other was the basis for the colonization of the orient.

The veil as a symbol of oppression is orchestrated in many campaigns to champion Arab women's rights and attack Islamic teachings. History is full of savings cases; for instance, in British-ruled Egypt, Lord Cromer has attacked the Muslim Veiling, which he considered a symbol of oppression for Muslim women; however, he did not support women and girls' education.

According to French colonial ideology in Algeria, the destruction of the Algerian society and its capacity for resistance relies on Algerian women's concurrence. This political ideology reflects how Algerian women are seen as essential resistance sources as a core of Algerian society. The only way to destroy a society is by unveiling its women (Fanon, 1965). Fanon's writings have inspired the masses in Algeria to protect their identity and women. Veiled women had also participated in the liberation of Algeria. Egypt Lord Cromer and the French interest in Algeria, as expressed by Fanon, are all backed by military troops for the sake of saving Arab women.

Western media had criticized the Iranian revolution for being reactionary in imposing the veil on women, which is considered an attempt to deprive women of their fundamental rights (Elsaadawi, 1980). In 1979, middle-class Iranian women veiled themselves in support of their sisters in the working-class due to the Westernization of Muslim women and the rule of the Shah (Mohanty, 1984).

## **2.8 Harem and eunuch**

The institution of the harem represented a mysterious world for both the East and the West for its privacy. The word harem, addressed to women, primarily to married ones, carries the meaning of 'forbidden, sacred, prohibited, in its origin in the Arabic Language.

The word harem associated with Arab culture and Islam has greatly interested orientalist writers. The harem's description in the trilogy of Sasson uncovered the stereotypes and imagined portrays of early western Christian explorers to the Middle East who could not see what was hidden in the walls of the harem. Harem power lies in the forbidden World of women's sexuality caged and inaccessible at least to western men, except by a leap of imagination" (Lewis and Mills, 2003, p.502). Based on this leap of imagination, western scholarship and literature relied on to reveal Muslim women's lives. In the trilogy, women are depicted as enslaved people who were purchased to be the playthings for men's sexuality. However, these constructed images cloud the understanding of Muslim women's social experiences and role in Middle Eastern societies.

As far as slavery is concerned, Sasson reported that in Islam, the castration of men was forbidden but owning those castrated, known as eunuch as enslaved people, is not prohibited in Islam, "Although the Islamic faith forbids Muslims to castrate young boys themselves, Muslims were not exempt from owning eunuchs as slaves." However, the eunuch and harem who lived during the Ottoman empire under Muslim rulers were treated differently. Brookes, in his book: *The Concubine, the Princess, and the Teacher: Voices from the Ottoman Harem*, reported that the word slave is not the correct word for addressing harem and eunuch in the Ottoman empire, who, although considered enslaved people, accumulated an immense fortune and many titles in Ottoman court.

### **3. Discussion**

The paper indicated that Sasson represents a third-world Arab Muslim women from her positionality as the norm and reverent for these women based on her 12 years of experience in Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries, where she befriended many Saudi women and royals, namely princess Sultana Al Saud whose story is told in the trilogy.

The Western values and liberated women in the West are taken by Sasson as an example and a norm compared to the so-called oppressed Arab Muslim women, which reflect the ideology of power unrevealed clearly but displayed in the difference between Western civilized and Eastern uncivilized and the need for Western savings. The representations of women should not be taken for granted by readers and feminists (Mohanty, 1984). The images should be interrogated for their ideological content, for no representation can be truly real or objective (Said, 1978). Therefore, these constructed images of Arab Muslim women and culture directed to western readers have created hatred and assumptions, stereotypes, and prejudices of Arab people and culture in the past and present and will do for the coming generations.

Sasson's positionality as a western feminist voicing Arab women is challenged and criticized by many Arab/ Arab Muslim feminists and scholars for the incompatibility of the two cultures and ideologies. In *Arab Women Between Defiance and Restraint* (1996), Sabbagh considers *Princess* trilogy an attack on the Arab values and culture to support

women's rights. She declares that Sasson's book *Princess* gives the impression that honor killing is happening as often as afternoon teas and that families discuss the murdering of their daughters who get in the way of family honor. She criticized Sasson for collecting assumptions and prosperous lies about Arab culture and values.

Besides, Ahmad (2009), in *Not Yet Beyond the Veil: Muslim Women in American Popular Literature*, reported that Arab women in western literature are depicted as "veiled, subjugated, indomitable in spirit, but still in need of rescue from an enlightened West." Ahmed pointed out that these kinds of writings referring to Sasson's trilogy and other famous memoirs in American literature attract American audiences and allow them "simultaneously to sympathize with, and also to distance themselves from, the political processes that bring anti-female regimes into being" (p,106).

However, novels and books about women's hardships do not read like entertaining sensational novels, they read like true stories of hardships faced by the women, and their covers and blurbs do not read fiction books. Through the cover and blurbs of *the Princess* trilogy, one can see the detailing abuses and suffering of Sultana and Arab women in general. Under an assumed identity of Sultana and a western mediator of her perspective, these fictional novels had drawn the curiosity of the international audience to the choking culture of not only Saudi Arabia but also the Arabs in general. Whether the story is authentic or an amalgamation of stories the author gathered during her stay in Saudi Arabia, this novel is full of contradictions and stereotypes about the Arabs and their culture. It is painfully evident that this novel is written to depict the rooted clash between the East and the West, which is known by the Palestinian author Edward Said as *Orientalism* (Said, 1994).

So far in history, the Arabs' land had formed a mysterious space for the West with which prejudices, stereotypes, and superstitions were associated. The westerners see their culture to be superior to the Arab culture. In her book *In Search of Islamic Feminism* (1998), Elizabeth Fernea, after a visit to Saudi Arabia, noticed that:

Saudi women, we found, are certainly not all the idle passive creatures portrayed in media accounts and ghostwritten novels and memoirs. Within the limited spaces available to them, many, if not most Saudi women were taking advantage of the opportunity for education, of control of their inherited wealth (rights granted by Islamic law). They were working to improve themselves and their families, and those who were able were giving generously to charitable projects (as mandated by Islam as well). They were also investing their capital in future development. (Fernea, 1998, p. 342)

Those ghostwritten novels like *Princess* are mainly done in the form of championing Arab women's rights as a means to attack the Arab culture. These novels contain preposterous lies about Arab values. It gives the impression that Arab women are docile, passive, and silenced. However, the majority of women in the Arab World do not see their

oppression as overwhelming as portrayed by western feminists, and they might indeed view women in other cultures as being less fortunate than themselves. Arab women do not regard their World as “disgusting” or “humiliating.” Why cannot we see articles or books from the real Arab writers who are stable in their countries and understand their religion and their issues instead of overnight experts who do not even understand the Arabic Language?

For a better understanding and detailed study of religion and culture in the Arab Muslim daily life, it is essential to be an “insider” who lives all his or her life in the Arab Muslim world and experiences norms, traditions, historical and colonization background, religion and culture of the Arab Muslims. As an insider, I preferred to study the misrepresentation of Arab women because of the western’ s interest in Arab Muslim studies and culture. Through the postcolonial lens, an effort was made to present the complexities and factors that might influence the status and position of Arab Muslim women to western feminists.

The colonization of third-world women that postcolonial feminists refer to in their works is new imperialism in the form of championing third World women's rights. This change in the form of colonialism aims to put the third World under the control of western powers. The Arab women are part of what the western feminists call the “Third World.” Western feminists have misrepresented Arab women in their works as being voiceless and passive. Therefore, a struggle is made to shatter these misrepresentations and correct their misunderstanding by declaring the actual status of Arab Muslim women in the Arab World.

#### **4. Conclusion:**

Arab people and culture have been callously represented by western historians and orientalists (Said, 1978). Since that far past, neither Arab people and culture nor Western representations have changed. Thus, Arab people and culture are misrepresented in media, film production, T.V., magazines, and orientalists' scholarship in literature, history, poetry, reports, and paintings. Western feminist discourses focus on Arab Muslim women and display a constructed image of Arab Muslim women as dominated, oppressed, and voiceless. In the trilogy, Sasson maneuvers herself into a unique position, a voice of Arab women and a defender of Islam, and at the same time attacks the veil and the Sharia law.

In the end, an Arab Muslim woman is understood through their religion and culture. The attempt of Arab-bashing is not a work of literature; it is instead a way to demean the culture and religion and raise hatred, misunderstanding, prejudices, and stereotypes of other people and nations. Here comes the severe need for bridging the gap between western feminists and third-world feminists. This bridging will assess the women of the World to reach a reconciliation that can bring women of the World, whether first, second, or third to a better status and enjoy the best of all World.

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