

UNCOVERING THE COMPLEXITIES OF ISLAMIC PATRIARCHY IN JEAN SASSON'S DESERT ROYAL: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

Ramesh Prasad Adhikary

***Abstract:** The objective of this research was to investigate how the Islamic practices of polygamy, early marriage, and the hegemony of Islamic doctrine subjugate and subordinate female characters in the novel *Desert Royal*. The paper analysed the plight of female characters from the perspective of Islamic feminism to identify the crucial factors that led to their extreme subjugation. The approach used is the perspective of Islamic feminism, which helps in understanding the impact of Islamic practices on women's lives. The study found that the female characters in the novel are subjected to various harrowing experiences, including forced marriage, unequal treatment by their husbands, and institutionalised discrimination. It also highlights the pervasive influence of Islamic doctrine in Saudi Arabia and its impact on women's empowerment and freedom. The study concludes that the female characters in *Desert Royal* are subordinated, excluded, and alienated, and their lives prove that they are subaltern people in an Arabic land that is under the grip of Islamic patriarchy. The total separation of daughters from decision-making sections hinders the growth of the women's movement.*

Key Words: Characters, Feminism, Islamic, Desert Royal, Women, Saudi Arabia, Jean Sasson.

Introduction

This study explores the representation of gender relations in Jean Sasson's *Desert Royal*, focusing on the impact of Islamic patriarchy on women.¹ Islamic patriarchy, in contrast to other forms of patriarchy, is particularly oppressive and severe. Though it is not supported by Qur'anic doctrine, it has received indirect validation from religious institutions through the practice of confining and subjugating women. Despite the advent of modernization, liberalization, and feminism, the

¹ J. Sasson, *Desert Royal* (London: Bantam Books, 2002).

strictures of Islamic patriarchy have persisted, setting it apart from other forms of patriarchy.

In *Desert Royal*, female characters such as Sultana, Reema, Munira, and Sara are portrayed as being crushed under the weight of Saudi Arabia's patriarchal ideology, regardless of their prosperity and social standing. These characters are depicted as being no better off than eunuchs, who are treated with greater value than women. The society of Saudi Arabia, under the dominance of Islamic patriarchy, views women as mere objects to be owned, controlled, and subjected to violence and confinement. Only a handful of women have dared to speak out against the atrocities they face, while the majority remain oppressed and subjugated.

This study adopts a subaltern perspective to examine the audacious and rebellious acts of these women, who live in exclusion and alienation. The subordinated lives of these women confirm their status as subaltern people living in an Arab land ruled by Islamic patriarchy. Furthermore, the research reveals that even husbands value eunuchs more than their wives, which underscores the deeply entrenched nature of Islamic patriarchy in Saudi Arabia.

In *Desert Royal*, female characters such as Sultana, Munira, Reema, and Sara, who are part of the upper class, challenge the restrictive measures imposed by Islamic patriarchy. The novel portrays the oppressive nature of polygamy and the lack of agency for women in their marital arrangements, resulting in forced marriages. The limited avenues available for women to address injustices, such as divorce, are also explored. Society's negative attitudes towards divorced women, and the denial of access to their children, exacerbate their already marginalised positions. Despite these challenges, women like Munira, who refuses to marry a man chosen by her father, and Sara, who threatens to commit suicide in order to obtain a divorce, demonstrate their willingness to resist and challenge the patriarchal system. Sultana also urges other women to speak out against the injustices committed against them. Ultimately, the analysis shows that Islamic patriarchy plays a significant role in the subjugation and exclusion of women in Saudi Arabia.

The author of *Desert Royal* gives voice to the experiences of the first-person narrator, Sultana, who shares the stories of the unspeakable violence and torture endured by her sisters, nieces, and female relatives at the hands of their own fathers, brothers, and husbands. The novel sheds light on the harsh living conditions of Islamic women in Saudi Arabia, who are still coerced into living in a hellish existence. Sasson's portrayal of these conditions has helped to bring the voices of oppressed Islamic women to the Western world and has contributed significantly to the campaign for reform in the position of women in Islamic countries.

Furthermore, the story provides detailed descriptions of the lavish lifestyles of the Saudi royalty, including exorbitant spending and royal comforts. In the harem of Sultana's cousin, where eunuchs are treated with more respect than women, there are inhumane conditions that are openly discussed in the book. It is a heartwarming tale of an Eunuch who changes his allegiance to Sultana's family.

Other issues addressed in the story include beheading, the death penalty, and the smouldering uprising against the Saudi kingdom. Sultana seems to be losing control of herself throughout the entire book and is constantly doubting her skills for a variety of reasons. When compared to the rather ambiguous conclusions of the previous two sections, the novel's conclusion is more upbeat.

Against this background, this research set out to analyse the representation of gender relations in Sasson's *Desert Royal*, examine how Islamic patriarchy affects the lives of women in Saudi Arabia and explore how oppressed Islamic women in Saudi Arabia resist patriarchal oppression.

Some Scholarly Appraisal of the Novel

To achieve our objectives, we reviewed several commentaries on the novel from literary critical perspectives and observed that commentators approached the novel differently. For example, Norman Khouri commends the author's portrayal of characters who accept their chaotic lives with calmness and grace. Khouri, on the other hand, notes that the novel is highly original, with a well-woven timeline and no

loose ends.² He emphasizes the characters' endurance amidst the effects of modernization and their dissatisfaction with their oppressive reality.

Mehta, instead, provides an evaluation of Sasson's writing, commending her as a prolific writer with a perceptive understanding of the socio-cultural issues prevalent in Islamic society.³ Mehta proceeds to express his thoughts on Sasson's work:

Jean Sasson has written three books on behalf of Sultana, the Saudi Arabian Princess. They are *Princess, Daughters of Arabia* and *Desert Royal*. The challenge according to her was to come out with books that were as true as possible to the real-life incidents but camouflaged enough to conceal the identity of Sultana, for if she were to be traced, she would end up in a suffering that would put to shame the cruelty the books were intended to expose.⁴

Mehta in the above quotation shows how Sasson is a versatile writer who often addresses the theme of the unfavourable atmosphere for the cultivation of feminine identity in Islamic society. Mehta observes that this theme is present throughout Sasson's trilogy, with *Desert Royal* explicitly advocating for the abolition of gender discrimination. However, he also notes that other minor issues are addressed in the novel.

Nelson examines how Sasson became close to Sultana, a member of the Saudi Arabian royal family, and discovered the harsh reality of the lives of Islamic women in Saudi Arabia.⁵ Despite the apparent glamour of Sultana's life, Sasson's friendship with her revealed many shocking truths. Nelson notes the increasing intimacy between Sasson and Sultana as they discuss the challenges faced by women in Saudi Arabia.

As the author's friendship developed with Sultana, Jean came to know that under all that beauty and surface charm, Sultana was a strong-willed woman. She found that Sultana was a caring, selfless and sensitive woman who was attuned to other women's suffering.

² N. Khouri, "Jean Sasson's Portrayal of Characters Accepting Chaotic Lives with Calmness and Grace: A Critique of *Desert Royal*," *Literary Criticism Today* 5, no. 2 (2015): 67-78.

³ V. Mehta, *Formalistic Aesthetics in Sasson's Works* (New York: Norton, 2006).

⁴ Mehta, *Formalistic Aesthetics*, 45.

⁵ C. Nelson, *Modernist Glimpse in Sasson's Fiction* (Edinburgh: Cannon Gate, 2009).

She always jumped to help other women regardless of the consequences.⁶

The extract states that Sultana helped Sasson gain insight into the difficult conditions faced by women in Saudi Arabia. Sultana wanted the world to know about the struggles of Saudi women but did not want to put her family in danger. Through Sultana's stories, Sasson was able to shed light on the harsh realities of life for women in Saudi Arabia and became her voice in publishing the three books.

Cooke has conducted a thorough survey of the chauvinistic society in Saudi Arabia based on her own experience visiting the country.⁷ She argues that women in Saudi Arabia are unaware of their rights and often play a role in their own discrimination. Cooke gives examples of discrimination in food, education, clothing, and marriage. Women are often resigned to their fate in a male-dominated society. She sees Sasson's novel, *Desert Royal*, as an important tool to educate and enlighten women in Saudi Arabia and turn the tide towards equality. The novel tells the story of Sultana's struggle to change the status of women in her country, including the right to hold property and obtain annulment.

Mahmood engages in a comparative analysis of Jean Sasson's major works.⁸ His examination of the themes present in Sasson's works leads to the following observation about *Desert Royal*:

At some places the descriptions of the exorbitant spending and royal comforts are never ending, that it almost assumes vulgar proportions. The book spares no effort in exposing the subhuman conditions that exist in the "Heavenly Harem" that's owned by none other than Sultana's cousin.⁹

In this, he argued that *Desert Royal* sheds light on the difficult experiences faced by royal women in Saudi Arabia. The novel explores the psychological and social restrictions imposed on these women, including issues such as beheading and capital punishment. However, according to Mahmood, the novel's focus on the royal family does not

⁶ Nelson, *Modernist Glimpse*, 27.

⁷ M. Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature* (New York – London: Routledge, 2010).

⁸ S. Mahmood, *Discourse on the Effects of Islamism* (London: Penguin, 2001).

⁹ Mahmood, *Discourse*, 43.

represent the general problems faced by women across Arabic society. Additionally, the novel hints at a simmering rebellion against the ruling dynasty of Saudi Arabia.

Ticktin explains that in *Desert Royal*, Sultana struggles with self-doubt, but ultimately emerges as a strong-willed and caring woman who is attuned to the suffering of other women.¹⁰ The novel ends on an optimistic note, reflecting the author's growing friendship with Sultana and her realization of Sultana's true character. Sultana had confided in the author her desire to raise awareness about the plight of Saudi women but was unable to do so due to the danger it would pose to her family. To protect her friend, Sasson wrote the trilogy of books.

Wood asserts that the position of Arabic women in society serves as an indicator of their level of exclusion from mainstream society.¹¹ He argues that women should have the right to own property and seek annulment, which are fundamental rights that are often denied to them. Thus, Marcus Wood argues:

The women sadly are unaware of their own rights, hence get deprived of many rightful things and the men gets benefitted. Many times, women are responsible for this discrimination, and they have their own reasons for doing so. Isn't a daughter deprived of necessary things so that a son can have useless things he demands? The discrimination right from food, education, clothes and finally when it comes to choosing a life partner.¹²

It describes the limitations and obstacles faced by royal women in Saudi Arabia, particularly Sultana, who comes from a privileged background but still faces restrictions on her freedom and property rights. These women are not allowed to move around freely without wearing a veil, and their success in overcoming these obstacles is uncertain.

Despite various interpretations and reviews of the novel *Desert Royal* by different critics, none of them acknowledged the theme of how the women who have suffered from long-term subordination and oppression under the rigid Arabian Islamic patriarchy, challenge it. This

¹⁰ M. Ticktin, *Fiction Studies: Pornography of the Oppressed* (Boston: Ginn, 1999).

¹¹ M. Wood, *Structure and Motif in Sasson's Novels* (London – New York: Macmillan, 2005).

¹² Wood, *Structure and Motif*, 165; cf. Khouri, "Jean Sasson's Portrayal," 67-78.

fresh and innovative concept of critiquing the Arabian Islamic patriarchy deserves significant scrutiny.

This research used a critical analysis approach to investigate how the Islamic practices of polygamy, early marriage, and the hegemony of Islamic doctrine subjugate and subordinate female characters in the novel *Desert Royal*. The focus was to analyse the degraded plight of female characters from the perspective of Islamic feminism and to identify the crucial factors that lead to their extreme subjugation.

The study is based on a qualitative analysis of the novel *Desert Royal*, which was chosen for its portrayal of the harrowing experiences of female characters who are subjected to institutionalised discrimination, forced marriage, and unequal treatment by their husbands. The approach used is the perspective of Islamic feminism, which helps in understanding the impact of Islamic practices on women's lives.

The researcher used Islamic feminism theory as his¹³ theoretical framework, drawing on the works of Islamic feminists such as Mahthir, Musawah, Ali Khan, and Segran.¹⁴ The theory is characterised by a commitment to gender equality and emphasises the importance of women's agency in achieving this goal. The theory originated with a feminist movement in the Middle East and Arabic-speaking countries and draws its methodology and epistemology on both post-colonial feminism and Islamic theology. In North American academia, there are primarily two perspectives on Islamic feminism: one accepts it as a significant movement that challenges both Western feminist assumptions about Islam and the male-hegemonic domain of Islamic hermeneutics, while the other rejects it as an oxymoron, contending that Islam and feminism are two different ideologies that cannot coexist. Critics of Islamic feminism aim to prove Islam as misogynistic, rather than engaging in a debate on feminism or women's movement.

¹³ According to Badran, Islamic feminism, which first appeared in the late 1990s in nations like Iran, Egypt, Yemen, and Tunisia with a reform agenda, transcends the distinction between secular and religious through its critique of Western secular feminism's presumptions about Muslim women. See M. Badran, "Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s: Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 1, no. 1 (2005): 6-28.

¹⁴ E. Segran, *Glimpse of Islamic Feminism* (New York: Norton, 2004).

The research is based on a close reading of the text, and an analysis of its themes, characters, and narrative structure. The study identified the various factors that led to the extreme subjugation of women, including polygamy, Islamic orthodoxy, and institutionalised discrimination. It also highlighted the pervasive influence of Islamic doctrine in Saudi Arabia and its impact on women's empowerment and freedom.

A Critical Analysis of Islamic Patriarchy Depicted in *Desert Royal*

Sasson's novel, *Desert Royal*, explores the issue of Islamic patriarchy and its effects on the freedom of women in Saudi Arabia. The novel depicts the life of Sultana, a rich Arabic woman who faces numerous challenges and harassment despite her wealth. Sasson reveals how Islamic customs and traditions have enslaved women in Saudi Arabia, resulting in their uninterrupted domination, subjugation, and exclusion. Sasson's horror at the sufferings of women in Islamic society led her to meet Sultana, who appeared happy and calm but was actually sad and depressed deep down. Through Sultana's narration, Sasson exposes the unspeakable torture and violence endured by women in Saudi Arabia from their own fathers, brothers, and husbands. Despite the freedom enjoyed by women in the West, Islamic women in Saudi Arabia continue to live in a hellish state of oppression. Sasson's depiction of the plight of Islamic women in Saudi Arabia has contributed significantly to raising awareness about the issue and promoting reform in the position of women in Islamic countries.

Desert Royal portrays the harrowing experiences of Munira, Sara, Tamnam, and other Saudi girls who are trapped in terrifying living conditions. Munira is a girl who is denied recognition and affection by her own father, Ali, despite her attempts to win his love. Disheartened and frustrated by her fruitless endeavours, she chooses to remain celibate but is subjected to excruciating pressure not to do so. Sara is another victim of oppressive patriarchal norms who is forced to marry a man much older than her. Her marriage ends in disaster, and she attempts suicide before her parents finally allow her to divorce. The book depicts the distressing situation of women in Saudi Arabia who are forced into marriages against their will, denied basic rights, and subject to brutal patriarchal control. The following lines from *Desert*

Royal exemplify how Sara is married against her will to a man of her father's age and how she arrived at a suicidal condition:

More than twenty years before, against her will, Sara had been wed to a much older man, a man who had sexually abused her from the first moment of their union. It was only after Sara's attempted suicide that our mother had managed to convince our father to allow her to divorce. Despite her return to our family home, my dear sister had been unable to shake off a chronic and debilitating depression.¹⁵

Sara's father arranges her marriage to an older man without her consent. Sara wants to pursue her own goals but is forced into marriage. The marriage ends disastrously, leading Sara to contemplate suicide. This represents the conditions of many women in Saudi Arabia who are treated as liabilities and have no freedom to choose their own partners.

Munira is the daughter of Ali, who does not show her any parental love, leaving her feeling depressed and restless. She decides to remain celibate, but her father forces her to marry a man with a terrible attitude towards women. The following lines describe Hadi's attitude towards women:

In Hadi's mind, women were on this earth for three purposes: to provide for a man's sexual pleasure, to serve a man, and to bear a man's children. Of course, Hadi thought that Sara and I were uncomfortable females, and often said so. If he had been the master of our destinies, Sara and I were convinced that we would have been stoned to death and that Hadi would have been there to throw the first stone.¹⁶

Hadi is a man with a condescending attitude towards women, seeing them as objects to be possessed and conquered. His view on femininity is representative of the collective view of men towards women. Munira is unfortunately bound to marry him, causing great sadness and shock among those who know Hadi's true nature.

Munira's father, Ali, arranges for Sara's marriage to Hadi, a man who holds condescending views towards women and is considered a monster by others. Despite Munira's clear reluctance to accept the

¹⁵ Sasson, *Desert Royal*, 26.

¹⁶ Sasson, *Desert Royal*, 28.

marriage, Ali interprets her silence as consent and arranges the marriage anyway. Ali treats his daughter as property and shows no regard for her thoughts or feelings. The following lines illustrate the lowest and dehumanizing position of women in the land of Saudi Arabia:

Ali continued, 'Munira, child, the man Hadi has asked that you become an adored wife. You are aware of his friendship with this family and of his ability to provide for you and any children you might have. I have sought permission from Almighty God to give you in wedlock to Hadi. Tell me now, Munira, if you approve. Ali spoke in an exhilarated tone, 'God is great! Munira's silence signifies her approval! He laughed heartily. Go, return to your room, child, and know that your modesty in this matter has made your father very happy.¹⁷

In the patriarchal Islamic society of Saudi Arabia, men like Ali and Hadi manipulate Islam and the Quran to justify their oppressive behaviour towards women. Munira's silence is taken as consent by her father, who sees her as his possession and arranges her marriage to Hadi, a man who holds condescending views towards women. The men in the story use religion to manipulate and control women, perpetuating the idea that girls are objects to be conquered and possessed.

The obsession of Islamic men in Saudi Arabia with the virginity of girls and their practice of polygamy has led to the exclusion and alienation of women in their society. The narrator's brother Ali married multiple women, including Tammam, who fell victim to his insatiable sexual appetite. Polygamy has marginalized women in Saudi Arabia. The following lines throw a spotlight on how Tammam is wounded psychically by her husband's polygamous adventure:

Three years after his marriage to Tammam, Ali took a second wife. Since Tammam was a most dutiful wife, Ali was questioned by our eldest sister, Nura, as to his need for a second spouse. She later revealed to us that Ali had declared that his displeasure was linked to Tammam's unhappiness. He was angry and baffled over the fact that his young bride had become a melancholy wife. With the greatest puzzlement, Ali claimed that Tammam had not once smiled since the day he had become her husband.¹⁸

¹⁷ Sasson, *Desert Royal*, 36.

¹⁸ Sasson, *Desert Royal*, 24.

Ali's indulgence in polygamy is not justified by blaming Tammam's alienation as the root cause. It is his sexual depravity that attracts him towards it, despite quoting Koranic doctrine to support it. Islamic patriarchy, Koranic orthodoxy, and moral depravity are responsible for the degradation and disintegration of women in Saudi Arabia. Some conscious women try to go against the restrictions of Islamic patriarchy, but they are intimidated by men and not supported by other women in similar situations.

Rhouni discusses the term 'Islamic' in Islamic feminism and argues that it excludes non-Muslims and secular scholars.¹⁹ She problematizes the use of the term but still embraces Islamic feminism as a faith-oriented theory and movement. Islamic feminism promotes gender equality via reinterpretations and integrates post-colonial feminist and traditional Islamic epistemologies.

The author gives an example of how Sara and Sultana witnessed Ali and Hadi running after an eight-year-old girl while travelling in Egypt. The following lines reflect this sort of reality about the deviant sexual hunger of Ali and Hadi:

Most disturbing of all, Ali had joined Hadi in his perverse behaviour! While in Cairo, Sara and I had inadvertently come upon Hadi and Ali sexually assaulting a girl who was no more than eight years old! The scene had been one of horror and violence, and neither Sara nor I had ever forgotten the haunting images of what we saw that day.²⁰

According to Tohidi, the secularization of Islamic governments must start with Islamic feminism.²¹ According to her, Islamic feminism is a recent and fluid movement that may be interpreted in three ways: as a reaction to modernity and globalization, as a reaction to modernity and patriarchy, and as a reaction to the recent rise of patriarchal Islamism. According to Tohidi, Muslim societies are still changing, reforming, and developing as they adapt to modernity. She thinks that Islamic feminists may work to secularise and modernise Islamic nations and cultures.²²

¹⁹ M. Rhouni, *Scope of Islamic Feminism* (London: Vintage Books, 2006).

²⁰ Rhouni, *Scope of Islamic Feminism*, 28.

²¹ N. Tohidi, *Reawakening of Islamic Women* (Tokyo: Maizi Publication, 2009).

²² Tohidi, *Reawakening of Islamic Women*, 75.

The novel *Desert Royal* highlights the inequality and injustice prevalent in Saudi Arabia, where laws are not applied fairly. Alcohol consumption is considered a sin, but men from higher social classes are allowed to drink while lower-class men are harshly punished. Women who are addicted to alcohol, even if they are from higher classes, are punished and ostracized by society. Divorced women have no rights and are stigmatised, and their children are taken away from them. The patriarchal society of Saudi Arabia is insensitive towards women, and their freedom is restricted in every sphere of life, making it challenging for them to experience modernity.

The novel reveals the brutal treatment of women in Islamic society, including Sultana's sister Reema, whose husband caused her physical harm. Despite this, Reema remains submissive, unlike Sultana who encourages her sisters to revolt against the oppressive system. However, Sultana's sisters discourage her and urge her to remain silent, as Islamic society considers women's silence a sign of virtue, and any challenge to the established norm is seen as a threat. The following lines mirror how the bodies of Saudi women become the site where aggression and exploitation occur:

I looked behind Tahani and saw that dear Reema, the fifth child of our mother, was discretely manipulating the medical device that captured her body's waste. The device was well hidden under her dress, but the anxious Reema had formed the habit of compulsively checking and rechecking the appliance. After her husband Saleem's brutal assault, Reema had needed a colostomy, and would never regain control over all her bodily functions.²³

The women of Saudi Arabia face physical torture and imprisonment, with Reema being a tragic example. Women like Reema are taught to endure such mistreatment and are discouraged from speaking out. The lack of empowerment for victimised women limits their freedom. The women who suffer abuse in Saudi Arabia are not just from the lower classes, but also from royal families and elites.

Sasson cites an example of how the Taliban regime oppressed Afghan women in the name of creating Islamic purity, reducing them to a subaltern status and causing them to suffer greatly:

²³ Sasson, *Desert Royal*, 51.

In the Taliban's drive to restore Islamic purity, they had launched a horrifying assault on their own women. Not only were Afghan women forced to cover their bodies and faces in the burqa, a thick, tent-like garment even more awkward and uncomfortable than the Saudi Arabiya and veil, but women were also forbidden to even talk loudly or to laugh in public. Even though women were totally hidden by the burqa, the men in power claimed that the sound of women's voices alone had the power to excite men.²⁴

The Taliban's regulations on public behaviour imposed significant limitations on women's freedom of movement, causing difficulties for those unable to afford a burqa or lacking a mahram. This forced confinement resulted in mental stress, isolation, and depression, severely disrupting family harmony. Women faced virtual house arrest, with their homes becoming akin to prisons or hospitals, and silence weighing heavily on them. Rural women were less affected, living and working in secure kin environments, but faced the same restrictions in nearby towns. In Saudi Arabia, women were required by law to remain at a distance from strange men and risked severe punishment if found near them by the Religious Council, while the topic of sex was a matter of national interest for the Arab population and government.

The Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, often known as the religious police in Saudi Arabia, is in charge of implementing Sharia law as set down by the state. They possess the authority to apprehend unrelated men and women found socializing, and individuals engaging in homosexual activities or prostitution to be prosecuted. The subsequent lines shed light on the issue of increasing subordination and subjugation of women. The following lines illuminate the issue of the growing subordination and subjugation of women.

They enforce Muslim dietary laws, which prohibit the consumption or sale of alcoholic beverages and pork and seize banned consumer products and media regarded as un-Islamic (such as CDs/DVDs of various Western musical groups, television shows and films). Additionally, they actively prevent the practice of other religions within Saudi Arabia, where they are banned.²⁵

²⁴ Sasson, *Desert Royal*, 160.

²⁵ Sasson, *Desert Royal*, 176

The Mutawas have a reputation for encouraging individuals to report illegal behaviour and offer monetary compensation for any information leading to the disclosure of such activities. Restaurant employees have been known to alert the Mutawas to couples suspected of dating without being married. These groups are made up of frightening males who suddenly surround and enter restaurants and demand identification from customers.

Men and women seated at a table together may be arrested and sent to a local jail if proof that they are connected as father and daughter, brother and sister, or husband and wife is not shown. Depending on the perpetrator's nationality, different legal sanctions may be applied, with Muslim offenders being subject to whipping for social misbehaviour. Similarly, the religious police of the Taliban in Afghanistan were continuously on the lookout for criminals to arrest and punish them right away, using a variety of punishments. Punishments were frequently meted out in public, either through organised performances conducted in stadiums for sporting events or town squares, or by impromptu beatings.

Even authorities with proper jurisdiction exhibit bias in their treatment of women in Saudi Arabia. The police are always prepared to conduct unfounded investigations that result in punishments previously unheard of in any society. Similarly, under the control of the Iraqi Secret Police, punishments were arbitrary and inhumane. The following lines illustrate the point:

The fundamental duties of the police are: to be constantly mindful of the welfare of the people, to enforce laws that protect people and property, to defend the weak against oppression or intimidation, and to safeguard the constitutional rights to equality and justice of all men and women. A police officer is expected to obey the laws of the land, remain non-partisan and honest in thought and deed, and never permit personal feelings, prejudices and animosities to influence his decisions. But do policemen in normal societies enforce the law courteously and appropriately without fear or favour, malice or ill-will?²⁶

Government officials do not utilise force or violence and do not accept bribes. They adhere to the ethical standards of the police service.

²⁶ Sasson, *Desert Royal*, 189.

However, the actions of the police are often discretionary. In Middle Eastern nations, these actions are frequently male-focused and generally discriminatory against women.

It is justifiable to assert that many female characters live in a state of torment resembling a curse. The patriarchal society of Saudi Arabia takes great pleasure in the subjugation and marginalization of women. The experiences of these women demonstrate that they are nothing less than subaltern figures. In Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Afghanistan, where fundamental human rights are still a pipe dream, Jean Sasson has documented the gruelling lives of women. Instead, via police investigations and municipal legislation, women are harassed, assaulted, and punished most severely. The laws of the Arabian Peninsula are male-oriented and discriminatory against women, who are prohibited from testifying in criminal proceedings. The text also describes the various forms of punishment that await them.

Conclusion

The study aimed to demonstrate how 'Islamic patriarchy' has led to the subordination of Arabic women as secondary beings. In Sasson's *Desert Royal*, female characters such as Sultana, Reema, Sara, and Munira are oppressed and dehumanised. Sultana's husband Kareem considers her his possession and regards eunuchs as more valuable than his wife. Women are forced to remain subordinate and experience alienation and loneliness. Despite feminist and human rights movements, Saudi women are still confined with limited access to material assets. Polygamy has caused emotional pain to women, and domestic violence is prevalent. Although there have been gradual changes, the author portrays Arabic men as harsh and belligerent towards women, and women as powerless to resist their oppression.

Most of the male Muslims in *Desert Royal* appear to be impulsive, and belligerent, and Sasson portrays Saudi Arabia as an exotic and impenetrable land that resists modernism, feminism, human rights, and other liberal thoughts. She depicts Islamic men and women as still living in the Dark Age and blames Islam for the degradation, dispossession, and denigration of women. However, the reality is that unspeakable violence and torture are inflicted upon Islamic women. While women in the West enjoy high degrees of freedom, women in Saudi Arabia are still coerced into living in oppressive conditions.

Ramesh Prasad Adhikary

Sasson's depiction of the living conditions of Islamic women in Saudi Arabia has brought to the attention of the Western world their oppression and contributed to the campaign for women's rights in Islamic countries. The portrayal of Arabia as a surreal and inscrutable land is controversial, as it reinforces the idea of the region being unaffected by advanced liberal thought. Islamic women are depicted as psychologically crippled, harassed, and bullied, living among impulsive, belligerent, and callous human beings. Male characters in *Desert Royal* are portrayed as dictatorial and callous, with figures such as Ali and Hadi depicted as sexual predators on the prowl to molest young girls.

Ramesh Prasad Adhikary

ramesh.adhikari@mahemc.tu.edu.np
Tribhuvan University
Kathmandu, Nepal