Violence against Women in Jean Sasson’s Works

Vijay Kumar Mehta, Reader/HOD, Languages & Communication Skills, Arni University, Kangra-176401 (H.P.), India.

Abstract

The life of women in Middle-East Asia has now been the focus of modern female writers as the theme of their works. Sara Suleri, Tehmina Durrani, Latifa, and American Jean Sasson have boldly, faithfully and realistically presented women behind the veil in the region. Jean Sasson has truly presented the dark life of women of Arabian Peninsula where the basic human rights to women are a still a dream. The present paper explores the various types of violence perpetrated against women like domestic violence, societal violence and state custodial violence in Jean Sasson’s works. There is an attempt to highlight the various impacts of violence against women which shape their lives in more dismal colour as presented by Jean Sasson.

Key Words: batterer, pharaonic circumcision, therapeutic, male chauvinism, fundamentalists, burlap.

Introduction

Women in almost all societies have been victims of ill-treatment, humiliation, tortures and exploitations for as long written records of social organization and family are available. These records are replete within incidents of rape, abduction, murder and torture of women. There is no woman who has not suffered at one time or another harassment, humiliation, exploitation and violence that shadow her sex. A woman’s life lies between pleasure at one end and danger at the other end. In daily life, women are routinely defined by sex, and even if not all men are potential kidnappers, rapists, batterers, molesters and torturers of women, all women are potential victims.

Jean Sasson has truly portrayed the grim realities of women victims in her books - Princess, Daughters of Arabia, Desert Royal, For the love of A Son, Love in a Torn land, Mayada: Daughter of Iraq, Growing Up Bin Laden etc.

Violence against Woman in Jean Sasson’s literature encompasses the following:

1. Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children, marital rape, child rape, female genital mutilation / cutting and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation.

2. Physical, sexual, and psychological violence occurring within the general community, including rape, sexual abuse and sexual harassment and forced prostitution.

3. Physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated by the State wherever it occurs.

Domestic Violence in the world of Jean Sasson

Violence against women can occur from the very start of life, through childhood, marriage and into old age. We can see in Jean Sasson’s books the life cycle of violence against women starting from infancy / pre-birth. In pre-Islamic society, the birth of a daughter would make the Arabs sorrowful and sad. Domestic violence- It takes between intimate partners as well as between family members, for example: mother -in-law’s daughters in-law, brothers and sister, fathers and daughters. Domestic violence may include sexual physical and psychological abuse.
Female Infanticide

In *Princess*, Jean Sassoon has touched the issue of female infanticide, as Sultana, the protagonist in *Princess*, narrates:

“Our Prophet scorned the practice of infanticide, common custom in his day of ridding the family of unwanted females. Prophet Muhammad is very words ring with his concern at the possibility of abuse and indifference towards females; whoever hath a daughter and doth not bury her alive, or scold her, or prefer his male children, to her, may god bring him into paradise.”

Yet there is nothing men will not do, there is nothing they have not done, in this land to ensure the birth of male, not female. The men who ruled after Prophet Muhammad have chosen to follow the customs and tradition of the Dark Ages (Female infanticide) rather than to follow Muhammad’s words and example.

Violence in Childhood, Female Circumcision

Female circumcision is the procedure involving partial or total removal of external female genitalia for religious, culture or other non-therapeutic reasons. It leads to dire consequences ranging from painful lifetime deformity to an inability to ever enjoy sexual relations even with a spouse. It is practiced predominantly in the northern half of Africa and parts of the Middle East, although it has also been reported to occur in individual tribes in South America and Australia.

Jean Sasson brings forth the puzzling project of circumcision in *Princess* through the pre-marriage dialogue between Kareem & Sultana, when Kareem asked Sultana if she had been circumcised. In her innocence, Sultana asked the same questions of circumcision at the family dining table and for which her eldest sister, Nura, in the absence of her mother, was called open to throw light on the subject of circumcision (female genital cutting / Female genital mutilation). Sultana’s sister Nura told her “that she had been circumcised when she was about twelve years old.”(P-59, Princess) She told that the rite of circumcision was performed on the three sisters that followed her in age. The youngest six daughters of our their family had been spared the barbaric custom (Female Genital Cutting–circumcision) owing to the intervention of a Western physician who spoke for many hours against the ritual of circumcision and as a result Sultana was blessed not to have endowed such a trauma of female genital cutting.

Jean Sasson takes up the issue of female circumcision in *Daughters of Arabia*, when Sultana listened to Fatma, a maid servant in Cairo pleading with her daughter to cancel the planned evening ritual (circumcision) to spare her child greet pain and offering. Through the maid servant, Jean Sasson reveals the brutality of the female circumcision in *Daughters of Arabia*:

“------a woman who had learned from respected physicians that the mutilation of girls (circumcision) was nothing more than a custom that had no basis or meaning in modern life.”

Excessive Discipline for Women

Women / girls are kept barricaded in a strict discipline forced by the veil system. They are segregated from social, religious and cultural life in general in Jean Sasson’s books. They are permitted not to meet men other than their family members. About excessive discipline Sultana narrates, Jean Sasson exclaims an event of a quarrel between Sultana and her brother, her father looked at Sultana ‘with irritation at his seemingly ever-present unwanted daughter while holding out his arms in invitation to that treasured jewel, his eldest son.’ Sultana narrates the difference in the followed words:
“Ali (Sultana’s brother) was allowed to speak while I was forbidden to respond. ---------------- I shouted out the truth of the incident. My father and my brother were stunned into silence at my outburst, for females in my world are reconciled to a stern society that frowns upon the voicing of our opinions. All women learn at an early age to manipulate rather than to confront.”(P-34, Princess). Excessive discipline on girls is a part of domestic violence. This psychological violence made Sultana revolt against such a system of patriarchy where female voice is trampled under the heavy shoes of chauvinism.

Poisoning of Females

Jean Sasson presents the inhumane treatment of girls in family in For The Love Of A Son. This violence was perpetrated on the leading protagonist, Maryam’s aunties when they, were young. Maryam’s father had three sisters. Maryam relates three sisters of her father in the following words:

“In Afghanistan, beautiful girls were married young and to the highest dowry bidder, --. All the three sisters of Maryam’s father were exotically beautiful. Word of their beauty spread throughout land, stirring the Afghan king to inquire about her age and a possible engagement, but Shair Khan, their half brother lied, telling the king, “She is not yet of a marriageable age.” (4) Shair Khan did not want one of his hated half-sisters to marry into an influential family where she might be in a position to help her mother, Mayana and siblings against his brutality. So there was a dire consequence as Maryam relates: “My father’s three beautiful sisters had been of good health shortly before they died and the Afghan mountains buzzed with gossip that the three beautiful Khail sisters were poisoned before they could reach the age of inheritance.” (P-35, For The Love A Son).

Forced early Marriage

In the same novel, Jean Sasson relates the forced marriage of Mayana, Maryam’s grandmother. Maryam narrates that her grandmother, was a classic beauty: Mayana’s classic beauty struck Ahmed Khail Khan, the head of the Khail tribe. Accordingly, the following day, the Khan’s representative appears at Mayana’s home, bearing many expensive gifts. Mayana’s father refused Khan’s offer with the words, “Our home is most honored, but I cannot accept the gifts or the proposal of marriage. My daughter is soon to be married to my brother’s son. She was pledged to him at her birth.”(P-14, For The Love O A Son) As a result, Khan flew into uncontrollable anger. After two days, Mayana’s cousin, the would-be-husband was murdered. As usual, he had has way. This is how Mayana forcibly become the favourite wife of Ahmed Khail Khan. The beauty was won by annihilating and violent power in the end.

Spousal Violence

Slapping is the most common act of physical violence seen in spousal violence. It may be followed by being struck with a fist. Apart from slapping, pushing or shoving the spouse, there are severe acts like hitting with fist, kicking, threatening with a weapon, or dragging the female partner. Jean Sasson has portrayed physical violence in lurid colors in For The Love Of A Son, Princess, Daughters of Arabia, and Desert Royal. In Princess, there is a scene, how Noorah, Sultana’s mother-in-law provoked her son against his new bride. The mother-in-law hinted darkly that Sultana was an outfit wife, and on investigation Kareem would be prompted to divorce his wife. In black mood, Kareem rushed to meet violence with vengeance. Sultana further narrates the quarrel in the following words:

“Since no Arab will ever contradict his mother, Kareem slapped me three times across the face. They were slaps meant to insult, since they accomplished little more than to redden my jaw---- and to stop me; he punched me in the jaw. Inky darkness surrounded me. (P-182, Princess)
Psychological Violence

In the same context, Noorah, Sultana’s mother in law, looking with contempt, threatens her: “Kareem has promised me he will divorce you. He agrees that who grows up on a habit will die with it (Arab Proverb) and you have grown wild. There is no place for such a one as you in this family.” (P-183, Princess).

At another moment, Kareem declared, “Sultana, I am going to wed another. As the second wife, she will be there to provide children. I need nothing further from her, only children. My love is always with you.” (P-246, Princess) Sultana, on listening to the proposal, discovers herself in darkness as she said, “No sound could be heard because of the pounding in my head. I was trapped in a dark reality that I did not believe. Never, never, never had such a consideration entered the realm of my possibility.” (P-246, Princess).

Intimidation of Women in the Family

In Arabian Peninsula, unmarried women in the home are often victims of various psychological traumas. Mothers can also be abusive in enforcing obedience by their unmarried daughters. In this context, Jean Sasson presents an episode of Sultana in Princess. Herein mother compels to revere males. Sultana beautifully narrates the case of intimidation and violence by mother in the following words:

“My first, vivid memory is one of violence. When I was four years old, I was slapped across the face by my usually gentle mother. Why? I had imitated my father in his prayers. Instead of praying to Makkah, I prayed to my six year old brother, Ali. I thought he was a god. How was I to know he was not? Thirty two years later, I remember the sting of that slap and the beginning of questions in my mind: If my brother were not god, why was he treated like one?” (P-25, Princess) These words of Sultana minutely uncover the traumas of common women in patriarchal society of the Middle-East.

Tortures to Women – As per religion

Jean Sasson has shown wife - battering, tortures to women and necessity of beating wives by their husbands as per the dictates of Islamic religion. The following dialogue between Maryam and her son, Duran in For The Love Of A Son throws ample light on this issue of hitting wives by their husbands.

“One evening Duran demanded: ‘so what if he (husband) hit you? That was no reason to get divorce. He was your husband. And the husband has the right to his wife.’

I shuddered. What had Kaiss (husband) taught my son? ‘No, a good husband does not hit his wife, Duran.’ I replied carefully.

‘It’s written in the Koran that a husband can hit his wife, it’s allowed’ he said.”(P-260/6, For The Love Of A Son). This dialogue between Maryam and her son Duran aptly focuses on the beating of wives as per the dictates of Koran. The holy Koran is brought in the issue to support patriarchy.

Violence against Women in Society in Jean Sasson’s World

Violence against women is defined in accordance with the United Nations Declaration on the elimination of Violence Against Women of 1993(A / RES/ 48/ 104), adopted by the General Assembly as “any act of gender-based violence that results in or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.” The same definition was affirmed
in the Beijing Platform of Action of 1995 which adds community violence and state violence to the domestic violence against women. Apart from domestic violence, sexual violence is most commonly perpetrated in the society at large: this may include rape, attempt to rape & sexual exploitation.

**Female child Rape**

Jean Sasson has indentified sexual harassment and violence as the problems for women in the cultural and societal structures. There are cases of female child rape in abundance in her books. In *Princess*, Jean Sasson presents an episode of female child rape. Sultana narrates the shocking and nerve-breaking event of female child rape in the following words.

“When we entered the apartment we heard muffled screams. Sara and I followed the noise to Hadi & Ali’s (brother’s) room. The door was unlocked and we suddenly realized what was happening before our eyes. Hadi was raping a young girl, no more than eight years and Ali was holding her. Blood was everywhere. Our brother & Hadi were laughing.” (P-92, Princess) She further narrates the impact. “At the sight of this traumatic scene, Sara became hysterical and began to scream and run. Ali’s face became a mask of fury as he shoved me from the room, knocking me down on the floor. I ran after Sara. We huddled in the room.” (P-92, Princess).

**Sexual Abuse / Exploitation of Women**

Jean Sasson has presented sexual abuse in *Princess, Daughters of Arabia & Desert Royal*. Through Sultana’s or Sara’s narration, rich people of Arabia are presented as sadistic people who take sadistic pleasures in raping beautiful virgins. Growth et al have “identified three basic patterns of rape: (1) The Anger Rape, in which the sexuality becomes the hostile act, (2) The Power Rape, in which sexuality becomes an expression of conquest, and (3) The Sadistic Rape, in which anger & power become erotized.” (5) Sadists obtain carnal desires fulfilled only when it is accompanied by physical violence. In case of Madeline, a sex slave, Marci, Sultana’s maid servant informs in *Princess*:

“Through the mother, Madeline immediately learned that she had been employed to serve as a sexual release for the two teenage sons --- to the surprise of the sexy maid, the father decided that Madeline was to his taste and told his sons that they could sleep with the new maid as soon as he had had his pleasures.” (P –137, Princess). This clearly shows the sadistic pleasure which this brute wanted to have through raping the young maid.

While explaining the Harem of Sultana’s cousin Faddel in his Paradise Palace, Sultana narrates, “There were twenty-five young girls in that room.” (P -130, Desert Royal)These girls were victims of Faddel’s sadistic pleasures. They were crying for help to Sultana.

The chill penury at the girls’ native place & Saudi wealth conspired together to the events of brutal rape of minor girls. Sultana could look only & unable to do anything for the helpless victims of rape in the Harems of so many Faddels in their palaces. Unnumbered maids are exploited & sexually abused, but no one listens to their heart piercing cries.

**Assault on a woman in a Holidaying Camp**

Jean Sasson presents a very horrible assault on a maid in the holiday camp in her book, *Desert Royal*. During the Holidaying Camp one night, Sultana & her sisters heard screaming from one of the tents and their maid servant lead them to a heart rending scene – three men assaulting a woman. Sultana narrates the horrible scene in the following words, “Nura (Sultana’s elder sister) yanked open the partition (of the tent). I directed the flashlight into the area and was met by a shocking, terrible sight! Two men were assaulting a woman. Third man was watching --- one man was covering the poor victim’s mouth in an effort to silence her cries. Upon seeing us, he now sat like one paralyzed --- as if in a slow motion
scene, the second man who was on top of the naked woman gradually turned to face us.” (P- 292, Desert Royal) The assaulted woman was seriously injured. She was a maid servant. The assaulting men were all the nephews of Sultana.

**Assault on a woman in Hospital**

Jean Sasson has described another case of assault on an American woman, a patient in a hospital in *Daughters of Arabia*. Sultana’s daughter, Amani told a tale of evil blackness, how her cousin Majed, son of Ali committed rape of a Christian patient in hospital in the following words:

“While at this hospital, Majed became angrier, and in his drunken condition, he slipped from room to room searching for a blonde or foreign woman whom he could coax or pay to have sex-------------- Majed had sex with a woman in the hospital who was a patient, a woman who had been seriously injured, and was not conscious.”(P-176, Daughters of Arabia)

Jean Sasson has clearly given the events of rape in the hospital, holidaying camp and during family visit to Cairo. She convinces the reader that men are profusely rich, without any serious work and mostly they are looking for sex here and there. Not only they are looking for blonde girls, they are making poor girls the victims of their lust whenever and wherever they find them either in the periphery of their homes or in the society.

**Violence against Women in State Custodies in Jean Sasson’s Works**

Jean Sasson has elaborately & extensively narrated brutality & cruelty of Saddam Hussein’s regime against women in Iraq & Kurdistan in her works – *Love in a Torn Land & Mayada: Daughter of Iraq*. ‘Rape has also been a common problem in refugee setting and used as a weapon of war.’ – United Nations Office for Co-Ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Broken Bodies, Broken Dreams: VAW Exposed (Nairobi: UNON, 2005). (6) State agents may commit violence against women in custodial settings / prisons and state may also perpetrate violence against women through its inadequate laws & policies. Saddam Hussein and his comrades in his ruling party (Baathist Party) perpetrated heinous violence against women in Iraq. And Jean Sasson has included all these tortures & rapes in detail in her books – *Love in a Torn Land & Mayada: Daughter of Iraq*. Those who didn’t join Baath Socialist Party were sent to prison on false charges. The story of Mayada as presented by Jean Sasson is the heart-rending reality which she along with her nineteen cell mates suffered in Baladiyat Prison.

**Impacts of Violence against Women in Jean Sasson’s Works**

Violence against women has far reaching consequences. Women who experience violence suffer a range of health problems, & their inability to participate in normal routine. Physical violence is often accompanied by emotionally abusive behaviors such as belittling, intimidation, humiliation & prohibiting women from seeing friends & family.

**Physical Impacts of Violence against Women**

Violence against women results in major health problems. Impacts of Violence include physical injuries, such as bruises, cuts, broken bones, wounds, functional disorders, reduced physical function as well gynecological problems and mental health disorders. Jean Sasson, in *Daughters of Arabia*, has presented a grim picture of Sultana’s sister, Reema who suffered a lot as a result of beating and maltreatment (raping her in a region of her body not allowed to husband) by her husband. Nura, Sultana’s elder sister sorrowfully expresses her fears at the impact of violence against Reema in the following words:
“The physician at the private clinic informed Father that Saleem’s attack was so violent and brutal that emergency surgery was performed. For the remainder of her life, Reema will be forced to wear a colostomy bag.” (P-275, Daughters of Arabia)

**Psychological Impacts of Violence against Women**

Women, who are abused, tend to suffer from anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, phobias, and post-traumatic stress disorder and alcohol/drug abuse. Jean Sasson throws light on psychological effects of violence against women in *Princess and Trilogy (Daughters of Arabia and Desert Royal)* in detail. In *Princess*, Jean Sasson shows us the pent-up emotions of Sultana and Kareem relations in the following words:

“Six years ago, Sultana was stricken with venereal disease, after much distress, Kareem admitted that he participated in weekly adventures of sex with strangers ” (P-38, Daughters of Arabia)

All women in Jean Sasson’s works suffer anxiety, low-esteem and various phobias. Consequently, Sultana becomes alcoholic, as she explains the secret of life and confesses how she became alcoholic in the following words: “My vow of abstinence was easily dismissed. I tucked two bottles of Scotch whisky under my loose gown, and pledging that I will allow myself only a single drink----------once inside, I locked the door and lovingly caressed the bottles I had seized. Then I began to drink.”(P-60/61, Desert Royal)

**Suicidal Impact of Violence Impact of against Women**

Jean Sasson shows her women under the impact of violence in the family leading them to self-immolation, attempt to suicide and their emotional behavior in their families. In case of Sultana’s beautiful sister, Sara, it happened. She turned to self-immolation, since she was unhappy due to the brutal and violent behavior of her husband. Sultana declares about Sara’s suicidal attempt in the following words, “five weeks after her wedding, she attempted suicide.”(P-65, Princess)

Jean Sasson has portrayed females as shadows only. It seems that Jean Sasson’s women could only suffer, or lay down their lives in the end when there is no way left for the materialization of their aspirations.

**Notes & References:**