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Sharia Law: An Abominably Institutionalized Women Rights Breach in Jean Sasson's *Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia*

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The biggest danger for any organism is to not identify that it's being threatened. I want to hope that people realize that the source of danger and risk in the Middle East is not the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but the deep radical Islamic vision of forming a global caliphate

-Naftali Bennett (n. Page.)

Abstract: The paper endeavours to remonstrate the scandalously appalling Sharia Law; the religious law of land, through Jean Sasson's *Princess* (1992). It accentuates on Saudi Arabia's centralized Sharia Law that dehumanizes and devours women; for Saudi Arabia regards uncoded Sharia Law in its entirety as the law of the land with no interference. Subsequently, the present paper meticulously displays the obliterated lifestyle of royal women in cage, who despite being affluently opulent, live at the mercy of royal men. Thus, Sharia Law being the unchallenged constitution, presumed to be run by Allah and Islam therefore, plays mayhem with the lives of women predominantly, equating them to a silenced object of men's pleasure and expunging them from exercising basic human rights. The paper, thus, urges the readers to disenchant oneself from fanatic religious dogmas, that corroborate retarded lopsided approach to advancement and dehumanizes women.

Keywords: Sharia Law, Islam, women, persecution, remonstrate, fundamentalism, extremism.

Introduction to Sharia Law

The Arabic word Sharia refers to 'path', which when collated with law corresponds to the law of path revealed by God, Allah. Sharia Law, marked with predefined set of protocols derived from the



religious precepts of Islam; the Quran and the Hadith, therefore, acts as a way of life to be adhered by all Muslims without question and intervention. Quran being the divine book of guidance revealed from Allah to Prophet Muhammad to serve humanity, is the central philosophy of Islam. Apparently, Sharia Law; an “Islamic law based on the Koran” (n. Page) as defined by Merriam Webster Dictionary, occupies the constitutional tenet in Saudi Arabia.

“Islamic law is therefore the expression of Allah’s command for Muslim society and, in application, constitutes a system of duties that are incumbent upon a Muslim by virtue of [its] religious belief.” (Coulson 1) Religion being one of the predominant structures leading ones way of life, here becomes a powerful tool for the reigning government i.e. absolute monarchy, to exercise its appalling creed. Religion fixed around its fanatic static philosophy tends to play havoc with the lives of people primarily women. Subsequently, Saudi Arabia being Muslim majority country, is turbulently dictated by its monarch who based on the misinterpretation of Quran and Hadith written in seventh century, monopolizes the lives of women by enacting Sharia law. An article entitled “Sharia Law in Saudi Arabia”, states “Sharia is the de facto Constitution of Saudi Arabia” (n. Page), that circumscribes women within the four walls, reduces their testimony to half, reduces them to a tilth of land to be cultivated by men, legitimates them as passive humans by controlling their sexuality, scandalizes them as subservient to men by forcing male-guardianship, denies them basic human rights: driving, voting, studying, independent outing, recreation, dancing etc. The devastating Sharia law in Saudi Arabia, strictly incorporated by the system of absolute monarchy creates ruckus in the lives of women, spitefully condoning its incorporation as religious.

Thematic Analysis

Princess, is seamlessly an ardent testimony to women of indomitable spirit, for princess Sultana’s brazenness to reveal the scandalous implementation of Sharia Law, from behind the veil, unwillingly invites the fanatic wrath of the Saudi establishment. Nevertheless, Sultana valiantly swims against the tide of Islamic Fanaticism and gingerly brings to the light the appalling nature of Sharia Law. This novel predominantly centralizes the looming spectre of repressive Islamic



fundamentalism, with Sultana's invariable struggle for women's rights. By this time Sultana's concern for the edification of women had started toppling for the threat of world terrorism, and the escalating religious fanaticism. Whereby, the Islamic religious police (also mutaween) corroborated in force and conventions for the enforcement of sharia in Saudi Arabia. In addition to having the power to arrest anyone engaged in homosexual acts, prostitution, fornication, or proselytizing of non-Muslim religions, they can also arrest unrelated males and females caught socializing, enforce Islamic dress-codes, Muslim dietary laws (such as the prohibition from eating pork) and store closures during the prayer time. They prohibit the consumption or sale of alcoholic beverages and seize banned consumer products and media regarded contrary to Islamic morals. The book contains quotes from Koran, which are misinterpreted by religious fundamentalists to perpetuate their deeds of women persecution, in which women have no right to map out their own futures, but instead are married off as young girls to men twice their age and are treated with the utmost brutality. The book is severe indictment on the male chauvinistic Islamic society.

Princess, is the mouthpiece of Sultana's buildingroman from turbulent childhood to torturous adulthood on grounds of the then functional fanatic regime in power. Sultana born as an unwanted tenth girl child, who despite cocooned in the web of immense opulence, lives in a gilded cage effaced in thick black veil, for her biggest mistake of "owing to the absence of a male organ" (Sasson 23). This results in Sultana's utmost abjection by her misogynist father and despotic brother (Ali), where at tender age she was made to realise her existence as burdensome. She vividly narrates a violent memory as a four years old, " I was slapped across the face by my gentle mother... . 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 god... [for] If my brother were not god, why was he treated like one?" (Sasson 25). This represents the squeamishly appalling Saudi interpretation of laws of the Quran, that criminalizes Muslim women's violation of a man's honour, similar behaviour by Muslim men is however circumvented. This aptly describes "*Princess* [as galvanizing] human rights activity all over the world, striking a chord with women of every age and nationality" (The New York Times), where the very basic human right of speaking is forbidden to women, as in one



of the incidents Sara recounts, “Ali was allowed to speak, while I was forbidden to respond... .To teach me that men were my masters, my father decreed that Ali would have the exclusive right” (34). Furthermore, Sultana’s description of her elderly scholarly dearest sister Sara, who was forced to marry a sixty-two-year old stranger, as his third wife, by injecting Sara with tranquilizers on her wedding day is condoned in the name of predominant Islamic law stating, “that if a girl passes puberty, she is allowed to be married – regardless of whether she is 9,11,15” (Munajiid n.page.). This not only pester Sara physically but also mentally, who post-wedding becomes the victim of “sickening sexual brutality until she felt her only escape was death” (Sasson 69), thus making a severe attempt to commit suicide by putting her mouth in microwave, which she fortunately survives. Sara's husband is a sexual sadist who tortures Sara, leaving her desperate to leave the marriage any way she could. Alas! Women in Islam have no authority to pronounce divorce, indeed it is the husband who enjoys the supremacy of doing so on any pretext. Setu Gupta, a student of Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia National Law University, Lucknow, formidably describes the lopsided Islamic concept of divorce where:

A husband may divorce his wife by repudiating the marriage without giving any reason. Pronouncement of such words which signify his intention to disown the wife is sufficientThe absolute power of a Muslim husband of divorcing his wife unilaterally, without assigning any reason, literally at his whim, even in a jest or in a state of intoxication, and without recourse to the court, and even in the absence of the wife, is recognized. All that is necessary is that the husband should pronounce talaq; how he does it, when he does it, or in what he does it is not very essential (n. Page)

After divorce, Sara, despondently stays with her biological family, where she is unwelcomed by her patriarchal father, who believed that “Sara had obviously provoked her husband into criminal behaviour. It is never the fault of the man in the Middle East” (Sasson 73), where every action conducted by man against woman is condoned in the name of Sharia law which rather than condemning is further termed “ ‘notable’ act of upholding the commands of the Prophet” (Sasson 74).



Further, Sultana plans a trip to Italy and Egypt to reverberate Sara of her traumatic failure of marriage. Ali managed to convince Nura (another sister) that his friend Hadi and he would come along, because “in Saudi Arabia, a man must write a letter granting permission for the females in his family to travel” (Sasson 66) or would accompany them . Enraged by Ali’s intervention in the trip, Sultana makes several efforts to excise him out of the trip: she flushes his headdress down the toilet, causing him to break his toe in an attempt to impede her; Sultana took Ali's hidden collection of pornography to the local mosque in order to get him in trouble with the mutawas(Islamic religious police), but to no avail. Despite several robust attempts Ali and Hadi cling on to the trip, for Islamic law vehements on male guardianship. Well substantiated by one of the blogs by Deeba Abedi, an Indian-American writer who staggeringly states that through Islamic Sharia Law “Their [Women’s] basic, fundamental rights are denied, such as the right to drive a car, the right to make decisions, the right to stand on a street alone and the right to travel alone. The country's male guardianship system requires a woman to gain permission from a male guardian — who could be her father, husband or even a teenage son — for any number of life decisions and freedoms, from basic to critical” (n. Page). The trip is further marked by despondency because Ali and Hadi are seen foreclosing Sultana’s and Sara’s move, they admonish them on their idea of visiting a pub and unveiling themselves. However, Ali and Hadi expose their double standards by furtively visiting night bars at wee hours and then corroding the club dancers to mere piece of debauched creatures. They copulate with various women during the trip, on the contrary, profess women to maintain their chastity, and to be virtuous by obeying to their masters ‘men’. The two on being caught red-handed by Sultana and Sara raping a small child, “acted as though nothing had happened” (Sasson 93) and on being warned, exculpate the same by stating that, she was a sex slave and “young girls were more fun and, besides, Father always did the same sort of thing when he came to Cairo” (Sasson 93). Quran is spiteful of adultery and clearly mentions, “Do not commit adultery, for it is an indecent thing and an evil course” (Khan 17:32), nonetheless reinforces sex slavery, thus Sharia Law glorifies “The only unmarried sex explicitly allowed in Islam is between a Muslim man and his slaves.” (“Islam: Adultery and Stoning” n. Page). Sara was acutely dismayed noticing:



Hadi and Ali spent their time buying women, for the streets of Italy were filled , by day or by night, with beautiful young women available to those who could pay. I saw Ali as I always had, a selfish young man, concerned only with his pleasures. But Hadi, I knew, was far more evil, for he bought the women yet condemned them for their role in the act. He desired them, yet hated them and the system that left them free to do as they would. His hypocrisy was to me the essence of the evil nature of men. (Sasson 94)

“Saudi Arabia has probably the highest number of child marriages in the Middle East and yet there has been almost no internal outrage or objection directed at the practice.” (Ali al-Ahmed n. Page). Which is further referential when on their arrival back home, Sara’s mother dies of searing cancer, nevertheless, their father marries his young fifteen-year old royal cousin, Randa (Sultana’s childhood friend). Sultana is determined to dislike her new stepmother but discovers she is a scared young woman just like her. Sultana includes Randa in a woman's group she had organized with two friends, Nada and Wafa. Who on account of their rebellious nature towards Islamic religious fundamentalism, violate the fanatically leashed patriarchal norms, and unfortunately prostrate to fanatics’ orders. “. . . Nadia’s death or Wafa’s premature marriage. Such cruel actions were the worst of all commentaries on the wisdom of the men who consume and destroy the lives and dreams of their women with emotionless indifference” (Sasson 120). This prompts Sultana’s father to divorce gullible Randa exonerates. The temporary marriage is exculpated through “a verse in the Koran which says, ‘you are permitted to seek out wives with your wealth, indecorous conduct, but not in fornication, but give them a reward for what you have enjoyed of them in keeping with your promise’ “ While this is waggled in Sharia Law as endorsement of temporary unions, in embracing the freedom to wed young women for the sole pleasure of sex. (Sasson 48-49).

This further foments Sultana’s father to urgently marry Sultana, to which Sultana agrees on the condition to meet the chosen stranger pre-wedding. Which according to Islamic law is haram, as “Prophet Muhammad said ‘whenever a man is alone with a woman, Satan is the third among them’ ” (Huda n. Page). Sultana on forcibly meeting Kareem discovers that her father has made a good



match and Kareem is a good man. Sultana's marriage is happy, surviving with two daughters and one son, until she suffers with breast cancer and could not bear more children. Kareem decides to marry a second wife for the purpose of having more children, and persuades her by stating "Sultana, I am a man that can afford many children. I desire ten, twenty, as many as God sees fit to give me" (Sasson 246). The Quran absolves polygamy so as to atone the women victims of war, dowry, poverty etc. "If you fear that you cannot deal fairly with orphan girls then you marry women of your choice, two or three or four; but if you fear that you might not be able to treat them with equal fairness, then only one" (Khan 4:3), Sharia Law twines it in a way that it renders dictating autonomy to patriarchal men to exercise polygamy as per their whims and fancy. Furthermore, Sultana fails to accept this, and furtively runs away to London with her three children, eventually on tracing Sultana, Kareem agrees to sign a paper promising to never marry another woman as long as Sultana lived. On her arrival back in Riyadh, in August 1990, Saddam Hussein invades Kuwait, apparently refugees flood Saudi Arabia. As a result there is a great deal of chaos, and to Sultana's amazement several women took advantage of this chaos and drive through the city streets. Driving is stringently proscribed in Saudi Arabia, for women's biologically emotional trait reduces their testimony to half that of the men. This is aptly laid bare as we encounter the following:

Women are much more emotional than men and will, as a result of their emotions, distort their testimony. Women do not participate in public life, so they will not be capable of understanding what they observe. Women are dominated completely by men, who by the grace of God are deemed superior; therefore, women will give testimony according to what the last man told them. Women are forgetful, and their testimony cannot be considered reliable. (Sasson 284-285)

Sultana on seeing women driving hopes for a change amid the upcoming generation and feels all the more victorious, for having lived her life on her terms. Religious fundamentalism refers to a belief system that envelopes around affirm conviction on conventional values and behaviour. This belief system prioritizes religion over all other institutions governing human life, by centralizing the holy texts and its teachings. Thus its century old pervasiveness makes it credibly



totalitarian and uncontested, for its inherently tyrannical trait of thrusting its core teachings to the universe with/without force. This furthermore defines religious fundamentalists as ‘traditional protestors’, who in the name of religion, stand as the tyrants of the society. Apparently, religious fundamentalism aims at dictating its absolute authority over humans in all spheres of life. The novel thus, culminates on a rejoicing note, marking the first step of women towards assertion, confidence, rationality, and emancipation in the religiously fundamentalist Islamic world of Saudi Arabia.

Conclusion

Princess, apparently depicts the appalling situation of women in Saudi Arabia, condoned in the name of Islamic Law, cocooned in unquestionable Quran. The feudal setup of Saudi Arabia incorporates sharia law and legalizes its turbulent practices in the name of Allah. The paper successfully projects the tyrannical Islamic practices encumbered with central law of the land to breach women’s basic rights. It enlightens the devilish practices like negation of girl child, forced marriage, triple talaq, forced hijab, male-guardianship, sex slavery, child marriage, temporary sex-union, polygamous marriage, prejudiced inheritance rights and women’s half testimony. This paper thus, successfully endeavours to disenchant humanity from religious dogmas and urges the modernised world to shield itself from the appalling impact of fanaticism. It subsequently spotlights the dire need to enthusiastically combat the totalitarian regime of religious fundamentalism, by reminding readers of the spiteful situation of Sultana, Sara, Randa and other ancillary characters. Who despite being royal are corroded to the mercy of men, thereafter breaching their basic civil rights. Plausibly, the paper explores the detrimental impact of religious fundamentalists in the lives of people, which in an attempt to perpetuate its devastating reign plays ferociously petrifying its victims. Hence, there arise an urgency to remonstrate the traditionally hostile structure of religion which dictates the lives of innocents through its illogically uncontested discourse. The scandalous Sharia Law is meticulously projected as appalling to modern sensibilities, marked with despotic control on women’s sexuality. Thus, this paper urges its readers to comprehend the very basic nuance of separating fundamentalism in religion from other domains of life, thereby, toppling the extremist Islamic structure in Saudi Arabia.



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