Tribhuvan University

Islamic Feminist Intervention into Jean Sasson's *American Chick in Saudi Arabia*

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Master of Arts

in English

By

Shusil Thapa

Roll No.: 563/068-069

Central Department of English

Kirtipur, Kathmandu

December 2016

Tribhuvan University

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Recommendation Letter

This is to certify that Shusil Thapa has prepared this dissertation entitled "Islamic Feminist Intervention into Jean Sasson's Novel *American Chick in Saudi Arabia"* under my guidance and supervision. I recommend this dissertation for examination and acceptance.

.....

JivaNath Lamsal

Supervisor

Date: _____

Tribhuvan University

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Central Department of English

Letter of Approval

This thesis submitted to the central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu by Shushil Thapa entitled, "Islamic Feminist Intervention into Jean Sasson's Novel *American Chick in Saudi Arabia*" has been approved by undersigned members of the thesis committee.

Members of the Research Committee:

_____ _____

Internal Examiner

_____

_____ _____

External Examiner

_____

_____ _____

Head

_____ Central Department of English

Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu

Date: _____

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude and deep appreciation to my respected supervisor JivaNath Lamsal for the full support, scholarly guidance, encouragement, criticism and suggestions, without which this work would never have been completed.

I also would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to Prof. Dr. Amma Raj Joshi, Head, Central Department of English and for his scholarly guidance and support. Besides, i take this opportunity to thank all my teachers from the CDE for their academic and morale guidance.

I owe the highest level of thankfulness to my parents, who always prompted me towards positivity of life and were ever present by men in all ups and downs of life.

I also take this moment to remember my loving parents for their never-ending support and endeavour.

Shusil Thapa

Abstract

This research paper deals with the issue of representation of Saudi Arabian women in Jean Sasson's novel American Chick in Saudi Arabia*from Islamic feminist perspective. It criqutes how Sasson belittles and demeans Saudi Arabian Women. The writer brings an orientalist, 'Sister Other' attitude when she approaches the Saudi women. She recounts the pitiable condition of Saudi Arabia as a teenage American girl staying in Riyadh to work for a hospital. She preaches the Western version of women's freedom and banks on the foreign influences and Western modernity to alter the discriminated condition of the Saudi women. Sasson criticizes the Islamic values time and again for being overtly patriarchal. However, she fails to understand that Islamic feminists do not want the Western, secular version of women's freedom rather they tend to locate gender equality in the spirit of Qur'an and bring about the gender equality remaining faithful to Islam religion at the same time. To justify the claim this research employs the theoretical insights of Islamic Feminists like Anbitta Kynsilehto, Asma Barlas, Liv Tonnerson and the theorist of orientalism Edward Said.*

Keywords: Western feminism, Islamic feminism, Gender equality, Orientalism, Sister Other, Qur'an, Saudi Law

Islamic Feminist Intervention into Jean Sasson's Novel *American Chick in Saudi Arabia*

This research paper studies Jean Sasson'sauto biographical novel *American Chick in Saudi Arabia* from Islamic feminist perspective. Jean Sasson recounts the narrative of the novel as she travels as an American citizen to the Islamic Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to serve in a hospital in Riyadh in the late 1970s. Sasson contrasts her American female selfhood to the truncated and veiled women in the rigid Islamic Kingdom and questions the submissive nature of Saudi women to their male partners.

The basic question raised in course of the study is centered on the position of the writer to speak about the Islamic women and their constrained social position in Saudi society. Does Sasson speak only on behalf of the socially oppressed women or does she bring the Western prejudices and criticizes Islamic culture in wholesale? The first act, speaking about the gender inequality on the behalf of Saudi womenis feminist but actually, it should not be imposed on Islamic women from Western measurement. Sasson is imposing the Western version of gender equality and freedom while Islamic feminists look for the gender equality from the interpretation of Qu'ran. Western feminists tend to dismiss religion as the obstacle to the gender equality but Islamic feminists seek gender equality with the feminist interpretation of Qu'ran inside the religion. It is up to Islamic women to decide and protest the gender inequality in their society remaining with the boundary of Islam at the same time.

In many of the places, the writer is seen criticizing Islamic culture in the name of being sympathetic to the feminist causes. She has been an orientalist imposing the Western prejudices upon the Islamic culture and even though she is a feminist in the text, she meets criticism and resistance from the Islamic feminists.

Islamic feminism is the latest discipline that came into prominence and is hotly debated since its origin in the 1990s. It is highly controversial as well as contested term as it is also one of the most embraced terms. The basic controversy centers on its name and the way it needs to be practiced. Many of the feminists tend to believe that this feminism is a result of the influence the Western feminism that tends to reject religion and generate the secular awareness of female domination by patriarchy and social practices. West, thus, tends to dismiss the cultural uniqueness of Islam and weaken it through the proliferation of the feminism that evolved in West. But the Islamic feminists dismiss this kind of influence of West in the discipline and they tend to regard Islamic as unalienable from the term feminism. It cannot be a copy of the secular Western feminist practices and fall into the abyss of colonial branding. Liv Tønnessen has pointed to the raging debate and controversy in the discipline of Islamic feminism in her public lecture on Islamic feminism:

> The term has been heatedly debated and both feminists and Muslims have rejected it as two fundamentally incompatible ideas. Secular feminists reject it because they argue religion generally and Islam in particular is oppressive to women and many Muslim women reject it because they feel 'feminism' is a secular invention imposed on them from outside, from the West. Islamic feminism is indeed highly contested, but it has also been widely embraced by both activists and scholars. (1)

There are two entities in the term Islamic feminism. The first is Islam and the second is feminism. Basically, the terms are regarded as incompatible by the feminists with Western feminist mindset as they tend to treat Islam as anti-feminist. Secular feminists reject not only the Islamic religion but all the religions at the very outset

because they observe that all the religions are oppressive to women. But many of the Muslim women reject this kind of religious dismissal and thus, doubt that the feminism is the politics of the West that intends to attack and weaken the Islam religion. It is imposed from outside, from West and it is dangerous to their Islamic cultural practices. Thus, these kinds of debates prompt the feminists embrace Islam at the same time when they become feminists. This position is exactly taken by prominent Islamic feminist Asma Barlas as, “I came to the realization that women and men are equal as a result not of reading feminist texts, but of reading the Quran.’ This position has come to be known as Islamic feminism” “Islamic Feminism: Public Lecture” (1). Liv Tønnessen has clarified the position taken by the Islamic feminists in her public lecture with reference to the position taken by Asma Barlas. She rejects the question of equality of women and feminism as the influence of the feminist tests of others rather it is the result of the Islamic women coming in terms of Quran and claiming they are equal to their male counterparts as Quran itself professes the equality of women in the society.

Islamic feminists employ various strategies in their writings and undertake their feminist goal coming the terms with their Islamic practices. The reinterpretation of the holy texts has become their first and primary strategy. They believe that women are facing various problems in Islam but those problems are not the result of actual religious norms but they are inflicted upon the Islamic women by misguided male interpretation of the holy texts and the Islamic principles. So, they believe that a woman-centred re-reading of Islam’s Holy Scripture can become a powerful source to bring gender justice to Islamic cultures.

In recent time, Islamic feminists have turned to the religious texts and traditions to read them critically. They reinterpret them from a woman-friendly

position and displace the traditional, rampant hisogynist understandings that have left imprint in the Islamic societies for a long time. The feminists have started from looking at the *asbab alnuzool*, literally meaning reasons for the revelation of a particular verse or chapter of the Quran, contextualizing *hadiths*, i.e. the collection of reported teachings, deeds and sayings of the Prophet and highlighting the woman-friendly aspects of the religion in order to challenge the patriarchal interpretations that the male religious authority tend to make. *Ijtehad*is central to the Islamic feminist project, as it allows for the intellectual reinterpretation of the holy sources so that their spirit is retained but the concrete manifestation can be transformed in accordance with the present needs.

Sasson is a feminist in her novel, but her looking into the Saudi society as an observer imposes the outsider's view the Saudi culture and law. She is critical of the Islamic law for the inequality between male and female:

> My attention moves to settle on a second Saudi family. A lone man is trailed bysix veiled women who are tasked with mothering nine or ten small children. SinceIslamic law limits Muslim men to four wives, I suppose that several of the women are hiswives while the remainder of the shrouded figures could be daughters who have reachedthe age where they must be fully covered. (11)

This instance shows that the Qur'an has been interpreted from patriarchal perspective and the law has incorporated the Qur'an's patriarchal version. So, there is the need of reading Qur'an from the perspective of gender equality. Otherwise, the Saudi women become only the laughing stock for a westerner like Sasson. Several of them have to chase a single husband and their husbands have complete authority over them.

An example of this exercise, neutral reading of the Qur'an, is Islamic thinker Abdul Karim Soroush's reading that distinguishes between the 'essential' and 'accidental' elements of Islam. The former are permanent and unchanging beliefs. They are the elements without which an Islam does not remain an Islam. The latter elements are socially and historically contingent and, therefore, subject to change. The present environment is very different from Arabia of the seventh century; therefore, many injunctions, especially with regard to relations between men and women, can be legitimately transformed.

For example, feminists argue that the verse in the Quran gives primacy to men. It does so explicitly by proclaiming that men are the maintainers of women. This was true in the earlier times. At that time, motherhood was a woman's inevitable role and that made her dependent to males. But today women do not only have greater control over their reproductive choices but they are also often self-dependent, this understanding can definitely change.

In their analyses, Islamic feminists have also employed the conceptual tools of post-modernism, particularly the view of language functioning as a mechanism of institutional control. This engagement with language is central to the reinterpretation of texts. The assumption that language is value-laden has led to the attempt to expand the domain of reinterpretation to a new linguistic construction of the Arabic language.

Another strategy pursued by renowned Arab women writers like Fatima Mernissiand AssiaDjebaramong others, is to recover a lost history where women are included. They have studied the lives of women in the formative years of Islamic history and argue that predominantly male narrative traditions have rendered women invisible, whereas during the Prophet's lifespan women were both visible and active members of the community. That they could walk into a mosque and address their

questions and concerns directly to the Prophet of Islam is indicative of their unmediated access to authority. In fact, Mernissi, in particular, states that the message of Islam was one of radical equality and, hence, quite unpalatable to the privileged male elite that was reluctantly willing to accept changes in the public domain but was fiercely insistent on the private domain remaining untouched by any change.

This was why the ideals fell apart after the Prophet's death. By drawing upon an 'authentic' Islam, feminists argue against women's marginalization from social, religious and community matters in the present. One important approach adopted towards securing greater gender justice has been to reject the imposed marginalization in largely male-defined and dominated religious spaces. Women have made attempts to create their own spaces, on their own terms. In India, in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, the Muslim Women's Jamaat set up an all-women's mosque in Pudukkottai despite a stiff opposition to the move.

The setting up of all-female spaces may appear to be entrenching segregation as argued by feminists in other contexts, but supporters believe that it provides the only context where religion can be debated by women without interference from the male religious elite.

Islamic feminists also focus their energies on recovering and enforcing the undisputed rights that women can lay claim to within the structure of Islam but that have become obscure because of cultural norms of honor and shame. For instance, *nikah*, or marriage, is a contract between two consenting parties with both sides entitled to lay down certain conditions which, after mutual agreement, would be binding upon them. The rights of women to lay down conditions regarding polygamy, custody of children in the event of divorce and other important matters, can give them a significant degree of control over their lives. Unfortunately, due to cultural norms, it

is often considered shameful, particularly in South Asia, for a prospective bride to talk openly about the issues that could impact her marital future.

Similarly, feminists state that women who stay in an abusive marriage – considering it a divine decree and an obligation to serve and obey the husband – can benefit from a better understanding and enforcement of existing rights in Islam, rendered insignificant by patriarchy. Of course, Islamic feminism is not an exercise in isolation. Therefore, conscious effort has been made to engage with the ideas of secular feminists, forge linkages with them, as well as initiate conversations with Muslim women across the globe. Acclaimed historian and gender theorist Afsaneh Najmabadi has documented how Islamic feminist magazines in Iran regularly feature translations of feminist writings by secular feminists on diverse issues of religion, culture, law and education. Translations of classic essays by authors, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Evelyn Reed, Nadine Gordimer and Alison Jaggar, along with other contemporary feminist writings, are included as well.

Sasson's novel, *American Chick in Saudi Arabia* is a chronicle of the writer who agrees to go to serve a Saudi hospital in her late teens and travels to Saudi Arabia from America. This is the reason she chooses the title of the novel as the *American Chick in Saudi Arabia*. By chick, she means an immature, kid-like girl referring to herself. She has provided the information in her novel about the institution she is ready to work in Saudi Arabia:

> The recruiting agency sought a qualified person to take charge of organizing medical meetings at King Faisal Specialist Hospital & Research Centre (KFSH) in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. My hospital experience in Alabama prepared me for the job. And, as a single

> woman without children, there was no reason I couldn't fly across the globe to assume the post. In fact, I quickly grew excited at the prospect of traveling thousands of miles so that I might experience a whole new country and an exotic new culture. (7-8)

The writer is a teenage girl who has got the sense of romance visiting to a kingdom that has given little access to the foreign tourists in the late '70s when she travels there. She is free spirited Western girl who believes that woman is equal to man and she can do anything a man can do. Since she is an unmarried woman without children and has got the experience working at a hospital in Alabama, she agrees to fly to Saudi Arabia and work for King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Centre in Saudi Arabia. She has got the Western experiences and the biases regarding the other parts of the world. She is somewhat orientalist imposing the Western criteria to judge everything she comes into touch in this desert Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.She tends to believe that Saudi Arabian rigid rules are changing due to the modernization of the kingdom:

> Since the kingdom was moving toward modernization, most Saudis and manyWesterners believed that Saudi women would soon benefit from a loosening of rigidrules. But such was not to come, for the Saudi government was so wary of the religious clerics that they wanted to do nothing to turn the powerful religious establishment against the regime. Little did I foresee that one day I would become involved with one of the few Saudi women willing to put herself at risk to bring change to Saudi females. (9)

The writer imposes her notion of Western feminism and Western modernization is presented as the influence for the kingdom to opt for the liberal rules replacing and

amending the harsh rules of the country. She is optimistic that Saudi women are willing to protest against the religiously informed rigid rules of the kingdom and she foreshadows that she would see some of such Saudi women who are willing to bring changes risking their lives.

Sasson is a feminist beyond doubt in her novel. She has experienced certain amount of injustice to the Saudi women and gender disparity between Saudi men and women. But she has brought her Western feminist approach to an Islamic country. Islamic feminists do not like this attitude of the Western feminist because in the sisterhood and sympathetic attitude of the Western women activists is a construction of 'Sister Other' as Islamic feminist AsmaBarlas points; "Anyone who has been silenced in the name of sisterhood can understand how strange and difficult that is and it wasn't until I read black feminists like bell hooks that I could give voice to my discomfort at being seen as the Sister Other" (17). There is the danger of silencing the Islamic women in the name of sisterhood according to Barlas. So, Islamic feminists tend to dismiss the Western feminist approach to the Islamic world. They criticize the writers like Sasson.

The novel centers on listing the sufferings of the Saudi women who are controlled by the patriarchal codes of the Saudi Arabia. She continually draws contrast between the male and female lives and points to the injustices the women have to face in Saudi Arabia. She lists the sufferings of the Saudi women because of the discriminatory social codes that are overtly patriarchal and the women are no more than the puppets in the hands of their fathers, brothers and husband.

From the very point of entry into the desert Kingdom, she starts to contrast between the male privileges and women's sufferings:

> Soon after landing, passengers are loaded into a crammed bus to be taken to the airport terminal. There is nowhere for us to sit on the bus because all available seats are already occupied by Saudi men. Even pregnant or elderly Arab women are standing. As the bus begins to move, we strap-clutching women and children sway and collide with the erratic movements of the vehicle, while only men sit in comfort, staring stoically out the bus windows. (10)

After the writer lands to the airport, they are taken to airport terminal by bus. The seats of the bus are occupied by the Saudi men and the women, even the pregnant and elderly women, have to stand. Nobody cares about their pathetic condition and they are not given the seats on bus. The women carrying the children have to move to and fro and collide on the bus. The men are the only ones who are privileged to take seats and comfort.

The writer points to the rigidity of Saudi law regarding the foreigners. Basically, foreigners are not allowed to enter the kingdom without some purpose to work in the hospitals, schools, constructions or some oil businesses. Only the foreigners with the purpose to work in such sites are welcomed but not without the strict checking up of their personal goods:

> Foreign visitors find obtaining permission to enter the closed society of SaudiArabia is enormously complicated. This is not a country that allows tourists. Only those foreigners needed to work in hospitals, schools, construction, or in the oil business are allowed entry. The rulers of the kingdom fairly recently resolved to leap across centuries of primitive life and bound into the modern world. Thus, they reluctantly opened the doors to welcome a host of foreign workers.

> Thankfully, everything about my visit was handled by Hospital Corporation of America (HCA), so no problems are expected. (10)

The strict rules have made quite loose in the late ‘70s when the writer is visiting the kingdom. The strict measures were basically taken in the recommendations of hardliner Muslim religious clerics. The Western perception to such regressive rules in the time of liberal and progressive modernization is termed as the primitive life by the writer. It is because of the slight loosening of the rules; the foreign workers are faring little better though the officials are still quite hesitant regarding them. The writer has, thus, provides the rigidity that is officially taken as normal in Saudi Arabia.

The writer, as a teenage girl, is very curious to the new customs she acquaints in Saudi Arabia. She has gathered some of the knowledge from her study and thus, knows the names of the dresses the Saudi people wear and curiously observes the Saudi men wearing them:

> Everything in this new world is so different from anything I have ever known. I steal looks at the Saudi men. Most are tall and slim, the same as the young man who stamped my passport. All are wearing the same type of dress, a long white shirt that reaches to the ankles. This, I know, is called a *thobe*. The men also are wearing similar head gear, a red-and-white–checkered cloth known as the *ghutrah*. This headdress is held in place by a black band called an *agal*. I can easily understand how their white dress and head covering is the best costume to wear in the desert. Considering the heat, I have a fleeting idea that I might wear one of those dresses myself. I wonder if there is a penalty for women wearing men’s clothing. (10)

The Saudi males are wearing similar long white shirts that reach their ankles. The only thing the writer appreciates in the novel is male dress. She finds the white robe reaching the ankles the best dress for a male who has to travel and work in the desert. The dress is called a *thobe*. She imagines that she would like to wear the dresses herself. They are also wearing a headgear. But she appreciates the men's dress so that she could compare it to the women's:

> The women's black cloaks and veils are another matter. I can only imagine how hot and uncomfortable such an outfit must be in the Saudi sun. Looking from the men to the women, I recall the warnings of well-meaning friends who advised me *not* to travel to a country where personal freedoms for women are so limited. Concerned friends also raised questions about living in a country ruled by a monarchy, a regime whose authority is built on the back of the warlike Wahhabi sect of Islam. But I dismissed their concerns. I was born with a bold spirit and harbor no fear of new horizons. (11)

There is so disparity in the codes of the male and female dress ups. In contrast to the male's white robe the women are made to wear black cloaks and veils. They might suffocate the Saudi women in scorching sun of Saudi Arabia. The women are limited everywhere in the kingdom. While thinking about the lack of women's freedom, she recalls how one of her friends had once suggested her not to travel Saudi Arabia where the freedom for women is constrained. The writer points to the fact that the rigidity of the Saudi Arabia is informed by the monarchy under the Wahhabi sect of Islam that is aggressive and war-like by nature.

The writer keeps eyes on the various areas in which the injustices upon the women are inflicted. In the airport check point, she comes to observe the plight of a Muslim mother and her submission to her husband:

> The screech of a child grabs my attention. I observe a black-cloaked woman who stands obediently behind her Saudi man, an infant crying in her arms while two toddlers clutch at her long black cloak. That woman's life is so unlike my own that we might as well be from different planets. I am a single female traveling around the world to live alone in a country where I do not know anyone. She is a woman who most likely married early to a man she met for the first time on her wedding day. Like most Saudi women, every decision that affects her life is made by a man.Perhaps Saudi men wish to keep their females forever children? (11)

The writer's notion of women's freedom is Western. She compares the Saudi woman with herself and feels that they might have been born in different planets. The writer is a bold woman who travels around the world alone while there is a young Saudi mother who is subservient to her husband and is shacked by the load of children. The husband makes each and every decision for her life and she is like a child herself who is unable to decide about herself.

Islamic feminists reject the Western feminist version of women's freedom. Anitta Kynsilehto points:

> The Qu'ran contains principles of gender equality and wider issues of social justice, thus laying grounds for challenging patriarchal traditions. Therefore, for some scholar-activists, referring to feminism in order to challenge patriarchy would not be necessary. For others,

> what has been called – for descriptive and analytical purposes – as 'Islamic feminism' explicitly focuses on the process of unmasking these principles from the confines of patriarchal traditions; as an *extension* of the faith position instead of a *rejection* of this position. (10)

Islamic feminism counters the Western feminist agendas like Sasson's. They are more inclined to locate the gender equality in Qu'ran and challenge the patriarchal interpretation of Qu'ran rather than deriving their activism as influenced by the Western feminist. The Western feminist version of the condition of Saudi women listed by Sasson in the novel is, thus, not much relevant rather than being an exaggeration of the Saudi women's condition with Western sense of superiority.

We cannot trust the voice of a Western writer without questioning as there is rampant prejudice over Arab nations in Americans. The Western eyes of the writer are prone to see minutest details of the unusual proceedings in other cultures and term them as inhuman practices. Sasson points to everything that comes to her way and shows quite crude reaction to the males of the Arab world as well as their customs in her novel and she lists the female dominations and violence everywhere in her novel. By doing so, she tends to justify the Western culture as the civilized. This is not her fault though. It is the fault of the Western education that promotes orientalist mentality in the students and most of the Western students are prone to develop negative, exotic associations to the third world countries and the Middle-Eastern Arab nations. This is observed by Edward said in his book *Orientalism*:

> I emphasize…that neither the term Orient nor the concept of the West has any ontological stability; each is made up of human effort, partly affirmation, partly identification of the other. That these supreme

> fictions lend themselves easily to manipulation and the organization of collective passion has never been more evident than in our time, when the mobilizations of fear, hatred, disgust, and resurgent self-pride and arrogance—much of it having to do with Islam and the Arabs on one side, "we" Westerners on the other—are very large-scale enterprises. (xvii)

The notion of Arab is the identification of Other for Sasson. So, she imposes her Western prejudices all over the incidents so far as the Arab women are concerned. The Saudi women wearing a veil are exotic for her. She is manipulated by the fiction the West invents about the developing countries. On the one side, there is West or 'we' and on the other side, there is 'Other', the Arabs. This tendency of declaring supremacy of the Western culture over the Saudi culture is seen in Sasson's novel to large extent.

Wearing a veil is exotic and romantic for a Western woman like Sasson. She feels she wants to experiment with a veil and see the world a Saudi woman would see from it. She wants to know the limits that are imposed upon the women in Muslim society through the codes of their dress ups:

> For a weird, brief moment, I feel an unexpected emotion. I would love to be on the other side of that restrictive veil, to know exactly what it feels like to be shrouded in black. Otherwise, I'll never understand the limits of their lives. I watch in fascination as the no-faced women begin to cheep and titter under their veils. Numerous children are shoving and shouting, harassing their mothers with the boundless energy of youth.The dominating husband is obviously exhausted by the work of attending to such a large group of women and children. (11)

The woman in veil has been termed as no faced woman by the writer. She is critical of the black and there is sense of fascination in the writer looking at the women behind the veil. The ordeal of the motherhood amounts to the larger sense of suffering in the writer. She satirizes the condition husband of numerous wives and father of numerous children with a mock pity on his exhaustive duty because she thinks he is the person to blame for the cumbersome burden he himself has chosen to lift.

The writer continually ponders upon the women condition behind the veil. She backs the women to come out of such a suffocating limited world behind it, possess a dream of freedom and equality. She wishes for the women to be able to throw their veil and propose their bossy husband to go to hike together. They have to be able to be pursuing their education and a career:

> My gaze returns to the women covered in black cloaks. What dreams do these women have? Do they dream of tossing those veils in the trash? Do they dream of telling their bossy husband to take a hike? Do they dream of education, or a career? Do they dream at all, or do they calmly accept that they live in a world in which men not only make all the rules, but also enforce them. (13)

The writer is vocal advocate of the gender equality in the society. She disapproves the way the men make the rules and impose them upon the women in the society. She wishes women should be able to come out to protest for such gender discrimination and patriarchal highhandedness.

The writer, a free and independent Western girl, wants to find out a Saudi woman face that is uncovered but she is unable to find any. Not even in the developed town like Riyadh. She is new to Saudi custom and she feels that a westerner accustomed to the Saudi custom should find the veiled Saudi woman addictive:

> There is only a smattering of veiled women present. I search, but I cannot find a single uncovered Arab female face.Some women are sitting on the sidewalks, staring at a passing world through the black gauze of their veils. For a Westerner unaccustomed to Saudi customs, the image of veiled Saudi women proves addictive. I really cannot stop staring at female forms covered in black gauze and long cloaks sweeping the streets. (17)

The writer is riveted by the permanent postures of the veiled Saudi women. The women sitting on the sideways have to look at the world from the black gauze of their veil. Even the sweeping women who sweep the streets are veiled and the writer helplessly stares at them. She works in a hospital and all of her patients that are admitted to the hospital are seen wearing the national dress of Saudi Arabia that proves the codes of dress up is rigidly followed by all the Saudi people:

> All patients were Saudi in national dress, only the occasional staff member clothed in hospital uniform or western dress broke the kaleidoscope of men in brilliant white starched *thobes*with red-and – white-checkered *thobes*; the women concealed head to foot in black *abaaya*s appeared like black specters moving respectfully behind their men, their masters. (19)

The men are privileged in the dress up is major emphasis of Sasson in the various instances in the novel. The patriarchal dress up codes is at the center of her criticism of gender disparity in the society. Men are not restricted but women are limited; they have to conceal their body parts and so, they are covered from head to foot. The dress to conceal the whole body is named as *abaaya* and it looks like black specter. The

men who are critically termed as the masters of the women points to the slave-like condition of the Saudi women.

The life of a Saudi life for a woman does not seem perfect to any woman of the world. Foreign women also face restrictions and limitations. There are many restrictions in the conduct of the expatriate women too:

> Female life in Saudi Arabia is not perfect for any woman, not even for foreignwomen. In fact, there are many restrictions in place for expatriate women at the hospital, and these rules cover a wide range of behaviors, including a ban against dating Saudis orany Arab. There is an order to dress modestly, a ban upon driving an automobile,pedaling a bicycle, drinking alcohol, or becoming involved in social topics such as theissue of women's rights or in political topics such as the ruling family. Women's issuesare the most taboo subject, and during orientation all employees were warned to stayaway from the dangerous topic of discrimination against women. (24-25)

There is restriction upon the expatriate women in dating with Saudi men or any Arab men. They are ordered to dress up modestly which means they are not allowed to expose their body much. They are banned in driving an automobile or riding a bicycle.

There is a ban upon drinking alcohol. They are not allowed to participate in the debates or interactions in social and political topics like women rights. The issues related to women rights are regarded as taboo and the foreign employee are strictly ordered to stay away from such topics. "Since I was a teenager, the right of all women to live in dignity and to escapediscrimination has been at the forefront of my personal goals. Even at an early age, Irecognized the most common human conflict in the

world: the power of men overwomen" (25). The writer possesses the strong sense of revolt whenever she sees men's domination of women since her childhood. She favors the women's dignity and always advocates fighting against the discriminations on the basis of gender.

The writer herself tries the veil later so as to feel how the world feels from inside the veil: "Although I can never be a Saudi woman, and will never live the life of a Muslimwoman in Saudi Arabia, the one thing I can do is don the face veil and walk the souks.Now I will know exactly how it feels to walk about without being seen, for the black faceveil makes women invisible" (25). Sasson can never become a Saudi woman and live a Muslim life but she can wear the veil and walk to marketplace. So, she decides to wear the veil herself, walk to the marketplace and feel the world being invisible. The term invisible is very powerful; the patriarchal society has rendered the women invisible with the variety of the patriarchal codes and discourses.

The writer has listed number of areas in which the women are restricted. Her attitude to the veil is essentially Western and there is no consideration and respect for it on the basis of the Muslim culture. "Saudi females are forbidden nearly everything natural to ordinary modern life.Most females are forced to veil.
Women are forbidden to drive" (25). The list of the discrimination and gender disparity is long in the novel. The writer is vocal critic of the codes that are forced upon the women in the Saudi society. She points to the lack of female choices as the women are not allowed to choose their husband:

> Girls are forbidden to date and are obligated to agree to arranged marriages. Mostworrisome, young girls can be given in marriage to men twice their age as the second,third, or fourth wife.A first wife

> cannot prevent her husband from taking a second or third and even afourth wife. Some women are unaware of their husband's additional marriage plans untilhe brings the new brides home.Women have no legal authority to block their husbands from acquiringconcubines or traveling to sex-for-hire establishments in Asia.Wives cannot stop their husbands from divorcing them, even if there is no goodcause.Women cannot protest if their fathers, husbands, brothers, or even sons confinethem to their homes. (26)

Women are forbidden to date a man and they are not allowed to choose their husband. They have got the only way to get married is to agree to arranged marriages. The women are given to the men who are much older than them and the husband is to free to marry any number of wives. Women have no legal power to challenge their husbands and stop them from marrying to other women. The women are also powerless in their control over secure marital life. They are unable to stop divorce if their husbands want to divorce them:

> Saudi men can divorce their wives without giving reason. The routine is one of speaking the words "I divorce you" three times, followed by notification to the religious and legal authorities.Women, on the other hand, are under obligation to prove that the man is either impotent, or that he is not financially capable of supporting a wife and family. Or, if the man has more than one wife, a woman can try to make the case that he is not providing equally for all wives. Even then, the religious authorities generally side with the man, telling the woman to go home, that God knows best what is good for her. (49)

The options are very few for the women but men enjoy supreme control over their powerful position in the society as well as in the family. They have to prove their husbands as impotent or unable to sustain his family if they want divorce. The authorities always back men in such the cases. The male members of the family have perfect power to control women.The authorities and the males term their decisions as the God's law and defend it. Whatever they do, they are doing for the sake of God and God knows what is best for the women's situation. Such cases of patriarchal interpretation of the God's law necessitates the emergence of Islamic feminism so that the women could come out of the domination without hurting their religious faith as Mir Hosseini points:

> The Islamists' defense of patriarchal rulings as 'God's Law' and as promoting an authentic and 'Islamic' way of life, brought the classical jurisprudential texts out of the closet. A growing number of women came to question whether there was an inherent link between Islamic ideals and patriarchy; they saw no contradiction between their faith and their aspiration for gender equality. Political Islam gave them the language to sustain a critique of the gender biases of Muslim family laws in ways that were previously impossible, which opened a space, an arena, for an internal critique of patriarchal readings of the Shari'a that was unprecedented in Muslim history. (6)

The necessity of the emergence of Islamic feminism is evident is the Hosseini's observation. The patriarchal interpretation to dominate woman even if the holy texts mean otherwise is the abuse of the God's will and the religious faith. So, going beyond the political Islam and turning to the re-reading of the holy text from neutral angle of interpretation, Islamic women were attracted to the new discipline of Islamic

feminism. In the name of God's will, the females are limited to certain professions. They are not allowed to work with ornear men who are not of their family.Women are prohibited from managing most businesses.Females are not permitted to eat in most restaurants, or even to enter many shops.Females are forbidden from traveling unless they have written permission from amale family member. The writer further observes:

> Females in Saudi Arabia have so little authority and power over their own fatethat it is wrenchingly painful to witness. From daughter, to sibling, to wife, to mother, thewomen of Arabia move through a lifelong loop of complete male domination.The imposition of the full veil gives men the ultimate control instrument. The fullface veil is not required by their God, so why should it be required by their families, their government, or religious clerics? (26)

The condition of the women in Saudi Arabia is pathetic. They lack power over their own fate because they have very little authority over the things. All the women are fallen in the lifelong loop of male domination. The veil here is charged by the writer as the ultimate instrument the male use to gain control over the females. The veil is not required by their God but it is required for their family, government and the religious zealots who all are patriarchal in their set up and want their firm control over the women.

It is because of such an injustice, discrimination and control over the female body, women are traumatized in the Muslim societies. They are assaulted if they do not observe a single rule set for them. Majida has been assaulted in Saudi Arabia and feels so insecure and traumatized as:

> Poor, poor women! They are as traumatized as the unfortunate Majida had been. Majida left the kingdom within days of the assault. When I

> pleaded with her to stay,knowing that she was returning to a life of certain poverty, she swore that, “I wouldrather starve in my poor village than live the life of a woman in Saudi Arabia.”Remembering the day she left, I am brushed by a great sorrow. (42)

The writer is sympathetic to the cause of such helpless women. She is emotional thinking about the women’s suffering in the Islamic Kingdom. Sasson garners a hope that this inhuman form of gender discrimination would come to an end in future. Majida has cursed the barbaric social conditions that prey upon the women and left the kingdom that makes the writer sympathetic to the cause of women.

The writer is not free of the Western bias that Western people are helping Saudi Arabia to modernize. In other words, she regards Westerners as the factor that helps the Saudi people to civilize. This colonial mentality that West is at the center of civilization and it is the guardian to the world is seen time and again in the novel though there is a gradual change in the Saudi mentality over the time:

> Westerners are new to the kingdom and helping to modernize Saudi Arabia.Native Saudis have not yet wearied of our presence. Hospitality is a trait deeply ingrainedin the Saudi tradition, and many in the educated Saudi population welcome bothAmericans and Europeans into their country and into their homes. And, thanks to Dr.Feteih and Peter, I have more opportunities to socialize with Saudis than do mostWesterners. (43)

Sasson has an air of importance in Saudi society and a sense that she is helping Saudi people socialize whenever she gets an opportunity. It is because of her higher social prestige being an important person in the hospital; she has got opportunity to get invited to the number of important programs. She shares her values there and does not

always get the positive result or change in the people. Her importance as a civilized Westerner is jeopardized many times but she keeps professing the need of certain changes in the certain codes in the Saudi society.

In one of the Royal marriage ceremonies, Sasson meets with a resistance of a higher class Saudi woman Asmawhile preaching her Western version of female freedom and authority and restrictions thet are imposed upon a Saudi woman:

> Her voice is firm. “Despite the troubles for women in my country, I wanted to livea Saudi life. I prefer my life to the life of a European woman.” She smiles. “Saudi life isbest for Saudi women.”
>
> I sigh deeply, thinking that my efforts have been futile once again. I sadly reflecton the lives of wealthy Saudi women. From my personal experiences, it is evident that somany wealthy females within the kingdom are devoted to little else but frivolity, withtheir thoughts focused mainly on their looks and their luxurious possessions. (59)

Asma clearly does not want to hear the Western judgment regarding the condition of a woman in Saudi Arabia. There is male domination the Saudi women have to bear but they love being a Saudi woman, they love being Islamic woman is equally strong fact. Asma’s position is the position of an Islamic feminist in which the Western perspective regarding their condition goes vain. Sasson feels that her attempt to persuade Asma about the female condition is futile.

Alessandra L. Gonzalez has taken the Islamic feminist point of view to look at the life of the Kuwaiti Muslim women in her book *Islamic Feminism in Kuwait* and observed how the injustices upon the women in the Islamic kingdoms are unnecessarily magnified by the media:

> One observation that may surprise many readers is that not all Arab Muslim women are jealous of Western freedoms. With depictions of physical abuse, acid throwing, and forced child marriages, these extreme cases portrayed by the media may seem like the norm for Arab Muslim women. But particularly in the oil-rich State of Kuwait, those cases of abuse are far from the norm. And among educated elites, particularly politically Islamist women, there is a disavowal of the belief that they are oppressed by their religion. (23)

Gonzalez's view is clearly similar to the view of the Sasson's character Asma. She agrees that the women of the Arab world are dominated by patriarchy but at the same time they do not feel that they are dominated by their religion or nationality. The cases of the violence upon the women that are presented as the representative of the female domination in Arab are some of the extreme cases and they are highlighted giving negative image of the Arab world that they are the norms there. But it is not the reality. The Western lens and media are responsible for making the hills out of the petty little moles; they tend to exaggerate them because the behaviors of the people of the Arab world do not meet their criteria. They have got different culture, different religion and different way of life; this fact seems to be missing in the Western people.

Though Sasson has pinned her hope that the condition of Arab will be on improvement in 1978 because of the influence of the Westerners and the Western project of modernity, it has remained same over the time. When she looks at the Saudi women in 2012, almost four decades later, she sees no improvement at all. It shatters her Western authority and the modernization project:

> In 2012, Saudi females still face severe punishment for any perceived instance ofmoral misconduct. This punishment is meted out by the men

> of her family, and no onewould dare question a man about the power he wields over his women. But, on a positivenote, many Saudi men are seeing the light when it comes to rights for women. Privatelythey complain about the restrictions still in force against their wives and daughters.Publicly they remain too leery of repercussions to take their complaints to authorities.This reluctance must change, for until men move forward, it is impossible for womenalone to gain ground. (68)

The power of men over the women remains same over past four decades since Sasson first visited Saudi Arabia. It shows how wrong was the teenage writer to believe that a culture can be changed by Western preaching or modernization. Actually, Saudi women have their own culture and they love their culture rather than being fed upon by the Western spoon. They are facing restriction and their patriarchal restrictions are being understood as forced on them not by the religion but by the males. They are protesting against such restrictions but their religion and culture are kept preserved because they are dear to them. Western eyes like the writer's are going to see the domination forever because they have different sense of freedom that does not necessarily matches the freedom the Arab women want.

To sum up, this research regarding Islamic feministic critique through the lens of western feminist insights brought to Saudi Arabia from America by Jean Sasson. She advocates for the western version of women's freedom and equality in Saudi Arabia and so, she is very critical of the values of the Islamic kingdom but only a e take her seriously. Her version of freedom is full of danger; it destroys the Saudi culture and family life ultimately disintegrating them. So, Sasson's Western perspective \meets with resistance. The women of Saudi Arabia never want the Westernversion of freedom and equality rather they want to gain equality within the Islamic tradition reading the mandate of Quran from neutral perspective challenging its patriarchal readings.

Works Cited

Barlas,Asma. “Engaging Islamic Feminism: Provincializing Feminism as a Master Narrative.”*Islamic Feminism: Current Perspectives*. Ed. AnittaKynsilehto. Tampere: Tampere Peace Research Institute, 2008. 15-24

Gonzalez, Alessandra L. *Islamic Feminism in Kuwait*. NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Kynsilehto, Anitta.“Introductory Notes.” *Islamic Feminism: Current Perspectives*. Ed. AnittaKynsilehto. Tampere: Tampere Peace Research Institute, 2008. 9-14.

Mir-Hosseini, Ziba. “Beyond ‘Islam’ Vs. ‘Feminism.’” *IDS Bulletin*. 42.1 (January 2011): 1-13.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. London:Vesrso, 2007.

Sasson, Jean. *American Chick in Saudi Arabia*. NY: The Sasson Corporation, 2012.

Tonnessen, Liv. “Islamic Feminism.” *CMISWP* 1, 2014: 1-14.