

Tribhuvan University

Critique of Islamic Patriarchy in *Desert Royal* by Jean Sasson

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Letter of Recommendation

Bishnu Prasad Gnawali has completed his thesis, entitled “Critique of Islamic Patriarchy in *Desert Royal* by Jean Sasson” under my guidance. I recommend this thesis to be submitted to the Research Committee for final examination of viva voce.

Jib Lal Sapkota,
April, 2016

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Letter of Approval

This thesis, entitled “Critique of Islamic Patriarchy in *Desert Royal* by Jean Sasson ” submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, by Narendra Karki has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

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Abstract

This research casts light on how the rigid Islamic practices like polygamy, early marriage, and hegemony of Islamic doctrine subjugate and subordinate female characters in *Desert Royal*. Sara's husband treats her as a being that is much lower than a eunuch. The probe into the degraded plight of the female characters, the perspective of Islamic feminism is wholly apt and appropriate. Female characters in the novel are subjected to various harrowing experiences: Daughter is forced to marry a man double their ages; husbands treat their wives as though they are less important than eunuchs. Polygamy Islamic orthodoxy, high level of gender biases and institutionalized discrimination of women are some of the crucial factors that lead to the extreme subjugations of women. The pervasive influence of Islamic doctrine in each and every compartment of life has weakened and harassed female characters unbelievably. Sultana mobilizes those tortured and tormented female characters to resist injustice and atrocity leveled against them by their respective husbands. Their subordinated, excluded and alienated lives prove that they are subaltern people in an Arabic land that is under the grip of Islamic patriarchy. Total separation of daughters from most of decision making sections brings to a halt the chance of growth in women's movement. The connection between Islamic doctrine and patriarchal society of Saudi Arabia has foreclosed all the avenue of opportunities of freedom and empowerment of women.

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I. Representation of Gender Relation in Sasson's *Desert Royal*

This research examines how Islamic patriarchy puts Islamic women in hellhole. Unlike other models of patriarchy, Islamic patriarchy is unbelievably harsh and horrendous. On the one hand, patriarchal ideology of Islamic world is supported by Koranic doctrine. The practice of confining women and then subjugating them has got indirect acknowledgement from religious institution. On the other hand, the lights of modernization, liberalization and feminism have not penetrated the darker zones of rigid Islamic world. That is why Islamic patriarchy is drastically different from the patriarchy of other civilization. In Sasson's *Desert Royal*, almost all the female characters, no matter how prosperous and well to do their lives might be, are crushed under the grinding mill of rigorous patriarchal ideology of Saudi Arab. In this novel, female characters like Sultana, Reema, Munira, Sara and many others have no better position than eunuch beings. Rather eunuchs are treated as more valuable beings than women. In the society of Saudi Arab where Islamic patriarchy has reigned sovereign, women are treated as the objects to be possessed, assets to be owned and creatures to be subjected to the vicious practices like assault and confinement. Out of hundreds of thousands of oppressed and subordinated women, only one or two dare to speak about the atrocity they have been facing.

Even husbands treat eunuch in a more valuable way than their wives. The researcher has probed those audacious and rebellious acts of these women from the perspective of subaltern studies. Their subordinated, excluded and alienated lives prove that they are subaltern people in an Arab land that is under the grip of Islamic patriarchy.

In the novel, most of the female characters are forced to marry against their desire. For example in this novel, character like Polygamy has become a great

stumbling block on Arab's march towards modernization and social change. Gender relation has remained in the same condition. If any woman raises voice against atrocity and injustice leveled against her, she is ostracized and excluded. The cases of divorcees are horrible to describe. Divorcees are not allowed to meet their children after divorce. Society abhors those women who live separately after divorce. They are stigmatized, alienated and ignored in every sphere of life. Sara had to go to the extent of trying to commit suicide for the sake of her right to divorce her husband.

This study is concerned with examining how oppressed Islamic women of Saudi Arab give jolt to the stronghold of patriarchy. In Jean Sasson's *Desert Royal*, oppressed women like Sultana, Munira, Reema, Sara and many other upper class Islamic women defy various restrictive measures imposed by Islamic patriarchy. Munira declines to "marry a man chosen by her father. Rather she vows to remain celibate. Sara finally threatens to commit suicide unless she gets a chance to divorce her brutal and ruthless husband, Hadi" (71). Even Sultana urges her other sisters not to remain silent in the wake of atrocities and injustices committed against them. Islamic patriarchy is largely responsible for the uninterrupted domination, subjugation and exclusion.

In *Desert Royal*, Sasson vocalizes the pathetic and pensive voices of the first person narrator, Sultana. Sultana narrates how her sisters, nieces and other female relatives had to endure unspeakable torture not from outsiders but from their own fathers, brothers and husbands. Unspeakable violence and tortures are poured upon Islamic women. Women in Saudi Arabia are still coerced into living in a hell. Sasson's depiction of the hellish living conditions of Islamic women in Saudi Arabia has done a lot in taking the voices of the oppressed Islamic women to the western

world. By so doing, she has dubbed significant contribution to the campaign of bringing reform in the position of women in Islamic country.

Desert Royal too details the lavish lifestyles of the Saudi royalty. At some places the descriptions of the exorbitant spending and royal comforts are never ending. It almost assumes vulgar proportions. It spares no effort in exposing the sub human conditions that exist in the heavenly harem that's owned by none other than Sultana's cousin. The story of the Eunuch, who was the guard of the harem before he shifted his loyalties to Sultana's family, is a touching one. The novel also deals with in passing issues like beheading in particular and capital punishment in general, the simmering revolt against the ruling dynasty of Saudi Arabia. Throughout the novel, Sultana appears to be losing control of herself, always doubting her abilities for various reasons. The novel ends on a rather optimistic note as compared to the relatively uncertain endings of the first two parts.

The lives of Muslim Women in Sasson's *Desert Royal* are hellish as they are subjected to unspeakable violence. Sara's father arranges for her marriage with a man whose age doubles her age. She is forced to marry against her will. Reema is so beaten by her husband that she has to undergo colostomy. Though those elite women are living prosperous and luxurious lives, they are inwardly crippled and subjugated beyond limit.

The researcher makes use of the theory of Islamic feminism. Many Islamic feminists are increasingly aware of their difficult situation. If they ask for and fight for gender equality, they are likely to be dubbed as betrayer of Islam. If they do not take this sort of decision, they are sure to be oppressed by men in the name of Islamic doctrine. The popular Islamic feminist, Marina Mahthir points out this sort of problematic situation. Musawah, Hirsi Ali Khan and Elizabeth Segran are some of

the popular feminists of the Islamic world. They have entailed strongly the necessity to raise voice against the trend to subjugate women. The text, *The Rise of Islamic Feminism*, by Elizabeth Segrant, “furnishes essential theoretical notions and insights. In addition, certain ideas of Hirsi Ali Khan from *Nomad* are also cited to constitute the theoretical framework of this research” (650). Most importantly, the present researcher holds the belief the deep –rooted Islamic belief is largely responsible for the subjugation and oppression of women in the entire Islamic zone.

Islamic patriarchy, rigid value system in Islam and doctrinal inflexibility are pungently and straightforwardly called into question by Hirsi Ali in *Nomad*. In this autobiographical work, Khan makes a call to all oppressed women of Islamic land to fight against their bondage and enslavement. She holds Koran responsible for the increasing degradation and oppression of women. Hirsi Ali Khan is hailed as the most powerful Islamic feminist. She advises “all the victimized women of Arabic land to become rather nomads than a religious devotee. Her assimilation into the metropolitan culture of the west opens her eyes. It is in the west that she comes to realize the importance of individual freedom” (43). She becomes awake to the superiority of western Christian civilization, secularization and modernity.

The more Hirsi Ali immerses in the western cultural life, the more iconoclastic she becomes. She condemns “the Koranic treatment of women and the innate violence embedded in the doctrine of Islam” (87). She asserts the superiority of the western American culture since it offers wider scope for women so that they can cultivate individual liberty and freedom massively. Though she struggles in the multicultural context of the west, she attacks western notion of relativism. She is dismissive of the notion of relativism. Hirsi Ali continues to assert that “The notion that all cultures and religions are equal and important in their own context is challenged by Hirsi Ali”

(84). She argues that the Islamic religion and culture is wrong out and out. She appeals to the western authority to keep Muslim immigrants under surveillance.

Halberstam proposes the new concept of femininity needs to be cultivated by every Arabic woman who falls victims to Islamic patriarchy. She maintains that “the examination of the contemporary notion of Arabic masculinity can’t be understood without paying equivalent attention to the sort of masculinity inherent in women” (62). Halberstam’s *Identity of Arabic Women* further illustrates the key point: “Identity of Arabic woman is not merely a perverse supplement to dominant configurations of gender, but masculinity itself cannot be fully understood unless female masculinity is taken into account” (65). Arabic masculinity has played a crucial but unrecognized role in the emergence of contemporary formations of the masculine.

Empowering models of female masculinity have been neglected or misunderstood because of a cultural intolerance towards the gender ambiguity that the masculine woman represents. Islamic men live in a culture that, for several hundred years, has been unable to acknowledge gender indeterminacy as a functional mode of identification, instead explaining figures like the stone butch, the tomboy, and the androgyny in terms of pathology and deviance.

Halberstam assumes that society has a trend to ridicule women’s masculine side as pathological deviation. So the concept of alternative masculinity has not arisen promisingly in the contemporary discourse. But Halberstam argues that the notion of gender is always indeterminate. Gender identity is fluid. It changes in parallel to the change in the social determination of gender category. Even the formation of male masculinity is not free from the formation of the female gender category. According to Halberstam, the understanding of male’s masculinity is incomplete if the concept of alternative masculinity is not brought into application.

Their defiant acts give jolt to the stronghold of Islamic patriarchy. The challenge according to her was to come out with books that were as true as possible to the real life incidents but camouflaged enough to conceal the identity of Sultana. If she were to be traced, she would end up in a suffering that would put to shame the cruelty the books were intended to expose.

Jean Sasson is an exceptional American novelist who writes about the sufferings and subjugations of Islamic women. Her novels are filled with plenty of social issues and modernist norms. As a novelist she has carried distinct Islamic voice to the English speaking world. Atrocities and injustices that are frequently committed in the patriarchal society of Arabic countries are the main focus of Sasson. Apart from feminist subject-matter and socio-cultural issues, the novelist has managed to introduce fresh issue of gender and shifting currents of modernization of Arab.

A large number of critics examined *Desert Royal* from different angles. Of all these critics, Norman Khouri is that sort of critic who charges female complacency for the subordination of women too. Khouri praises the novelist's power to portray all the characters' virtue of accepting life calmly in the midst of chaos and uncertainty.

Norma makes the following observation with respect to this aspect of the novel:

Desert Royal is a highly original work from a seriously talented author. Sasson weaves her timelines with ease, never confusing the reader or leaving loose ends. She more than earns her place as a writer to watch. They make the most of the time they spend together and suffer miserably when Sultana's condition forces them apart. With Sultana's urging, Reema seeks medical help and is eventually addicted to alcoholism as a result, she meets disaster in her marriage. (76)

According to Khouri, the important aspect of this novel is the level of endurance developed by the characters. Characters are not lost in the free-floating world of fancy and fantasy generated by creeping effects of modernization. On the contrary, they are integrated to the ground reality of the present. Inwardly all the characters are dissatisfied with the growing distance between their hellish condition and promise of freedom.

Vijay Mehta describes Sasson as the prolific writer who writes with a keen sense of penetrating insight into the various socio-cultural issues commonly found in Islamic society. Mehta delivers the following remarks regarding Sasson:

Jean Sasson has written three books on behalf of Sultana, the Saudi Arabian Princess. They are *Princess*, *Daughters of Arabia* and *Desert Royal*. The challenge according to her was to come out with books that were as true as possible to the real life incidents but camouflaged enough to conceal the identity of Sultana, for if she were to be traced, she would end up in a suffering that would put to shame the cruelty the books were intended to expose. (45)

Sassoon, for Mehta, is known for her literary versatility. The lack of the favorable atmosphere for the cultivation of feminine identity is the major theme found in almost all the works of Sasson. That is why her available works belong to trilogy. Sasson's plea for the abolition of gender discrimination is presented explicitly in *Desert Royal*. But other minor issues are also equally addressed in this novel.

Cary Nelson probes into how Sasson happens to enter into the personal life of a heroine named Sultana. Sultana belongs to the royal family of Saudi Arabia. Outwardly Sultana's life seems gorgeous and alluring. But as Sasson befriends her, she comes to know many horrifying facts about the position of Islamic women in

Saudi Arabia. Nelson briefly makes the following observation with respect to the increasing intimacy between Sasson and Sultana:

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

(27)

The extract remarks that Sultana helps Sasson to penetrate the darker sides of Islamic country, Saudi Arabia. Sultana assures the author that she wanted the world to know the plight of Saudi women but never did tell anyone as her immediate family would be in danger. From Sultana's narrative account, author succeeds in exploring culture of callousness in Saudi Arabia. So to protect her friend Sultana, Jean Sasson became her voice and the three books came into the existence.

Miriam Cooke conducted an extensive survey of most of the chauvinistic society of Saudi Arabia. Her own practical experience of visiting Saudi Arabia and witnessing perversions in chauvinistic society helped her to analyze Sasson's *Desert Royal*. She takes the following stand as to the core convictions manifested in the doctrine of Kuran:

The women sadly are unaware of their own rights, hence get deprived of many rightful things and the men get benefitted. Many times women are responsible for this discrimination and they have their own reasons for doing so. Isn't a daughter deprived of necessary things so that a son can have useless things he demands? The discrimination right from

food, education, clothes and finally when it comes to choosing a life partner. (14)

Women are prone to endure what befalls them in the male dominated society. *Desert Royal* is written with purpose of educating and enlightening docile women of Saudi Arabia. To some extent, this novel turns out to be a mile stone in this direction.

Though Sultana had a privileged background she was not free to do all the things that the men in her family could do. This story is about her fight to change the status of woman in her country. The women have a right to hold property and also a right to go in for annulment.

Written in as much as nineteen chapters, the last chapter of *Desert Royal* details the flow of life of Sultana in her middle ages. Core finding of Appiah's analysis is that women's lives flow amidst hindrances despite deep-rooted prejudices. Anthony Appiah makes the following observation:

The book starts off with a dream that Sultana has about her late mother, who urges her to make her life more meaningful. From there on in, the book describes the plight of women in Sultana's country. It brings to fore the fact that the status of women and her position in the society is not very different, no matter what their origins are. (16)

Whether it is Munira (a Saudi princess herself and Sultana's niece) or women bought from the markets of Bangkok, Africa, India or Pakistan, they are merely objects to be possessed by the whimsical men folk. The problem faced by the women of Islamic countries are almost the same or slightly different from the problems faced by other women of Asian countries.

Saba Mahmood makes comparative studies amidst all the major works of Jean Sasson. Regarding to the presence of profound theme in the available works of Sasson, Mahmood makes the following disclosure about *Desert Royal*:

Like the first two books, *Desert Royal* too details the lavish lifestyles of the Saudi royalty. At some places the descriptions of the exorbitant spending and royal comforts are never ending, that it almost assumes vulgar proportions. The book spares no effort in exposing the sub human conditions that exist in the “Heavenly Harem” that’s owned by none other than Sultana’s cousin. The story of the Eunuch, who was the guard of the harem before he shifted his loyalties to Sultana’s family, is a touching one. (43)

As claimed by Mahmood, harrowing experiences of royal life are exposed to nothingness in this novel. Psychological problems and social restrictions faced by the royal women of Saudi Arabia are clearly represented in *Desert Royal*. As claimed by Mahmood, *Desert Royal* deals with in passing issues like beheading in particular. The problem raised by Sasson in *Desert Royal* does not represent the general problems of women belonging to every spheres of Arabic society. It also handles and addresses issues like capital punishment in general. The simmering revolt against the ruling dynasty of Saudi Arabia is hinted.

Throughout the *Desert Royal*, Sultana appears to be losing control of herself, always doubting her abilities for various reasons. The final chapters of the book are dedicated to the narration of a family camping in the middle of the desert. It is in this chapter where strange set of incidents reposes in Sultana. Miriam Ticktin discloses the optimistic tone manifested in this novel:

Desert Royal ends on a rather optimistic note as compared to the relatively uncertain endings of the first two parts. As the author's friendship developed with Sultana, Jean came to know that under all that beauty and surface charm, Sultana was a strong willed woman. She found that Sultana was a caring, selfless and sensitive woman who was attuned to other women's suffering. She always jumped to help other women regardless of the consequences. (79)

Once, Sultana confided to the author that she wanted the world to know the plight of Saudi women. But she never did tell anyone as her immediate family would be in danger. So to protect her friend Sultana, Jean Sasson became her voice and the three books came into the existence.

The position held of Arabic women appears to be an indicator of how much they are excluded from the mainstream society. The women have a right to hold property and also a right to go in for annulment. Thus, Marcus Wood argues:

The women sadly are unaware of their own rights, hence get deprived of many rightful things and the men gets benefitted. Many times women are responsible for this discrimination and they have their own reasons for doing so. Isn't a daughter deprived of necessary things so that a son can have useless things he demands? The discrimination right from food, education, clothes and finally when it comes to choosing a life partner. (165)

Sultana had a privileged background. She was not free to do all the things that the men in her family could do. She overcomes the hurdles. Whether she succeeds or not is difficult to surmise. In every sphere of lives, royal women of Saudi Arabia are

deprived of opportunity. They do not have access to basic property rights. They do not have freedom to walk freely without covering their faces with veil.

Although different critics interpreted and reviewed the novel, *Desert Royal* from different angles and arrived at several conclusive findings, none of them noticed the issue of how rigid and rigorous Islamic patriarchy is challenged by those women who have decade long history of suffering and subordination. Thus, the notion of critiquing Islamic patriarchy is, thus, fresh and innovative in the sense that it deserves serious scrutiny. In the novel, *Desert Royal*, many women from the royal families and elite background are subjected to serious brutalizing and ruthless practices. Women are subjected to the heinous practices, and unspeakable violence. But women like Sultana, Reema and Munira are typical examples of those women who are reduced to the miserable position in the society of Saudi Arab. The efforts of these disgruntled and defiant women have not generated massive waves of reform in gender rights and freedom. Yet their position remains in the deplorable level. Women are still living in the hellish conditions. They are utterly subjugated. Their conditions show that they are subaltern figures in the society where Islamic patriarchy reigns sovereign.

The researcher makes use of the theory of Islamic feminism. Many Islamic feminists are increasingly aware of their difficult situation. If they ask for and fight for gender equality, they are likely to be dubbed as betrayer of Islam. If they do not take this sort of decision, they are sure to be oppressed by men in the name of Islamic doctrine.

Islamic Feminism first appeared in Islamic patriarchal countries where educated and professional middle class women live. Earlier, it appeared as secular feminisms, Islamic modernism, and humanitarian discourse. Later, all of them combined and became Islamic Feminism. After its arrival, it began to circulate

globally with great speed via internet and satellite. It was greatly presented in cyberspace. Margon Badran says: “Word of the new Islamic Feminism and its compelling texts spread rapidly through cyberspace” (31). First, when it had been rooted as Islamic Feminism, it became a debatable issue among critics concerning its area, label etc. Later, it became widely discussed phenomenon among the critics.

Anitta Kynsileh states:

Islamic Feminism has been widely discussing phenomenon since the emergence of the term in 1990. Oftentimes subject to be a heated debate. One the one hand this debate is due to the ways in which it is embedded in the wider discourses concerning women’s rights and Islam, and the position of women in Muslim majorities’ societies as well as of Muslim women in societies where Muslim populations constitute a minority. On the other hand, the debate entangles to the controversies between the labeling practices and the positionalities of those who seek to resist the given labels. (1)

In the emergence of the term, it was widely discussed by different writers concerning its issues; form, label etc. How to shape it among other discourses was the major purpose of that discussion. It has been made from two distinct broad terms. So, the writers of its emergence time debate about it deeply and formulate it as an Islamic Feminism.

Islamic Feminism is related with the role of women in Islamic community. The women in Islamic community are not admirable or equal to men. Therefore, it aims for the full equality of all Muslim women in their daily life. Islamic feminist longs to ground the social justice, women’s right and gender equality in Islamic community. Before appearing Islamic Feminism, there are other feminism and

movements concerned with the issue of Muslim women. After that, all of the discourses integrated and formed Islamic Feminism. Advocates of the movement begin to discourage the patriarchal teaching of religion, traditionally rooted patriarchal dead concept of people, and encourage re-reading, and re-interpret the Quran and demands to establish the notion of equality according to the Quran itself.

It is one of the latest perspectives emerged in the world by different Muslim and non-Muslim writers. First, some Muslim women demanding gender equality and social justice in their community basing on religious rules began it. Margot Badran states:

Engaging with Islamic Feminism as a historian, I would like to do what historians do: look at what has come before and at how, in complicated ways, past and present intersect. In early 1990 when Muslim secular feminists-scholars, journalists, and writers-from various countries in Africa and Asia observed the process begun by some Muslim women to explicate gender equality and social justice grounded in re-readings of the Quran and other religious texts, they immediately recognized this as a new form of feminism and called it “Islamic Feminism.” (28)

The formulation of this new feminism emerges through not debate but Muslim women for explication gender equality and social justice basing on re-reading of Quran that was inspected by Muslim secular feminist scholars, journalist, and writers from various countries in world in early 1990. Thus, they recognized it as a new form of feminism and labeled it as Islamic Feminism. Therefore, the Islamic Feminism is germinated with the view of gender equality, especially in Islamic community. It

offers the re-reading of Quran and other religious texts. The social norms are considered to be based on the religious texts.

The term Islamic Feminism is born from Feminism. Both of the terms advocate women's right, liberation, and equality. Islamic Feminism, especially engages with the issues of Muslim women's right, liberation, and gender equality among Islamic community. It deals with the problems of Muslim women. The existing rules and values of Islamic community are thought to be formed by Islam religion. The holy book Quran is first studied and analyzed by men and formed different biased rules against women.

Women did not acquire profound knowledge of Islam especially of the classical sciences of Islam in past and they obediently followed the norms and values formed by men. The social rules of Muslim in patriarchal ways dominate women from different sides. Now, in late 20th century and beginning of 21st century, Muslim women have become conscious to their rights. They are aware of domination of men and patriarchal norms and values. They have started to study the Islamic values, norms in Quran and other holy books. They have started to analyze the rules in women ways. They found vast difference between norms, values and grass-root works or its implementation. They have unified to establish their rights in society. They neither get chance to study the Quran nor they thought about their rights in past.

Now the global environment is also supportive for them. Women's participation in Islamic rework has increased. Their combined efforts in studying Islamic sciences and analyzing it in female ways are admirable. All sorts of motives of Muslim women for establishment of their rights engendered the seeds of Islamic Feminism. Moazami states:

In principle, it is obvious that acquiring profound religious knowledge, especially of the classical Islamic sciences, might enable women to produce and disseminate especially feminized Islamic thought. We witness today that in different countries around the globe, in Muslim majority countries as much as in the Muslim Diaspora, where women's participation in Islamic networks, their combined efforts in studying Islamic sciences and conducting grass-roots work with other women, has engendered a trend that has been called "Islamic Feminism." (76)

Mostly Muslims are orthodox to their religion. After acquiring profound knowledge of classical Islamic sciences, they become conscious to their right. It enables them to be united and take part in Islamic networks. All sorts of right seeking motives of Muslim women in their community germinate the seeds of a new trend "Islamic Feminism."

Islamic Feminism is an inter-Islamic global phenomenon created by Muslims from different places of world. It is not a single product of east or west. Where is Muslim community, we can find Islamic Feminism there whether it is minority communities or majorities. Even the non-Muslim women and men speak their support on Islamic Feminism. But, especially it relates with Muslim women and their status in Islamic community. Muslim has been living in different parts or countries of world. Renata Peppiceli states "Islamic Feminism is a global phenomenon" (98).

Hisham tried to unmask the patriarchy and condition of gender equality. Matar presents the clear vision of sexual inequality in Libya during civil war. He shows the slight struggle of women against patriarchy. At the end of the novel, it is seen that Nazwa has freedom from social rules and regulation. But, at the beginning of novel, there is inequality, suppression, oppression, exploitation on female which creates

dreadful or animalistic condition of female. The major character of that exploitation is so called religious rules and regulation of Quran defined by male, patriarchy, and tyrannical government. All sources of exploitation are torching women physically, psychologically, socially, politically and culturally. Margot Bardon's view is cited below:

Feminism as a phenomenon engaging with issues of women's rights, women liberation and gender equality as part and parcel of the rights, liberation and equality of all was constructed and shaped concurrently by Muslims and others in the east (I use this term in contradiction to the west, referring to countries of Africa and Asia) and by westerners in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. (25)

Feminism advocates women's right, liberation, gender equality etc. All sorts of theme of feminism is followed by Islamic Feminism. But it especially deals with Muslim women issues. It is a global current trend.

When women became conscious to their right they started to search their status in their community. It is thought that the Muslim community's norms and values are founded basing on Quran. They themselves began to read the holy book Quran. They should have better knowledge of Quran to find out whether the existing social biased norms are based on Quran or not. They have to find out distinction between tradition and religion because there is difference between tradition and religion. The existing rules are traditions. The religious rules are not biased like tradition. Mozami states:

. . . it is through their capacity to distinguish between "tradition" and "religion" that the women claimed Islam as a source for reinterpreting certain elements within the family tradition, which they perceived and

experience as being too strict. The defense of Islam is then situated on a critique of custom or as the women put it, of tradition. (70)

To analyze anything, the better knowledge of the subject matter is needed. Muslim women also should have the proper knowledge of Islamic sciences to analyze whether the established custom is from the Quran or male made tradition. The better knowledge of Quran is able enough to interpret it for Muslim women.

Islam is not same to all interpreters and feminism is not same to all those who advocate it. There is a wide range of understandings in both fields of meanings.

Within such variation of meanings between two terms to seek a room for Islamic Feminism is difficult but we can find out a possible meeting place for people who want to argue for women's rights within an Islamic framework of thought as well as people who are prepared to view religion from a gender sensitive point of view which can be taken as Islamic Feminism.

In spite of many interpretation and definition by many critics of Islamic Feminism, it explicates the idea of gender equality for men and women as part of Quranic notion of equality of all human beings. It is one of the feminist discourse and practice. It brings its understanding, standard, agenda and mandate from the holy book Quran searching and demanding their rights and justice within the framework of gender equality in the totality of existence. It is a call for implementation of gender equality in the country, society, and everyday life. It is not simply a feminism which is born from Muslim culture but it engages with Islamic theology too. The women's issues i.e. wearing veils, shaking hands with men outside their family, domestic violence, marriage and marriage age, education, equal opportunity in each national major organs, employment etc. are taken excessively by women as their rights.

From the above mentioned reviews, Islamic Feminism is one of the forms of feminism born in Islamic community concerning with female role in Islam. It wants to establish full equality of all Muslims, not basing on gender, public and private life. Islamic feminists are advocating women's rights, gender equality and social justice under the Islamic community. They are working to replace the pre-established biased rules of society in the name of religion and establish the social rules of equality with the liberation of women.

The terms Islam and feminism are different. It is shown to have new meaning combining two broad terms by Islamic feminists. The term Islam is related to religion and feminism is related to women issues. By combining the two terms, we can understand dealing with women issues in Islamic community as the meaning of Islamic Feminism. But Islamic feminists claim that Islamic Feminism is not simply a feminism born in Muslim cultures but it is one that engages Islamic theology through the text and canonical tradition. Islamic feminist or movement advocates take the Quranic concept of equality of all human being and demand strongly the application of this theology to everyday life. Different interpretation, movements, projects, meetings and seminars create the different faces of Islamic Feminism but all the faces of Islamic Feminism are dealing with women issues such as marriage divorce, inheritance, wearing veil, domestic violence and so on.

This thesis is divided in three chapters. In the first chapter, the researcher introduces the topic, elaborates the hypothesis, and quotes different critics' views regarding to the novel. In the same chapter, the researcher shows the departure too. In the second chapter, the researcher makes a thorough analysis of the text by applying the theory of Islamic feminism. The last chapter contains the conclusive ending of the research.

II. Critique of Islamic Patriarchy in *Desert Royal* by Jean Sasson

This research aims at examining and exploring how Islamic patriarchy restricts the progressive and freedom-oriented initiatives of Muslim women. In the *Royal Desert*. Characters like Sultana Munira Sara and Reema recounts how they have to face several hardships and horrible hurdles on their way to the getting so many activities and freedom. These characters, tells many things about how instable politics and deep rooted Islamic patriarchy confine and cripple women. They challenges Islamic women had to encounter and how they asserts their rights to get freedom.

Jean Sasson reflects on the conditions of Islamic women in Saudi Arabia. She dwells upon the issue of Islamic women's freedom, particularly the Islamic women of Saudi Arabia. *Desert Royal* highlights miserable plight of rich Arabic lady named Sultana who is beset with plenty of hurdles and harassment despite the luxury and prosperity. Amidst massive luxury and prosperity, Sultana lives like a caged bird that has no option other than sighing for freedom. Islamic customs and traditions have enslaved women.

Islamic patriarchy is taken as the oppressive social system where man made hegemonic power structure is approved by Islamic doctrine. It is largely responsible for the uninterrupted domination, subjugation and exclusion. Jean Sasson is horror-struck when she happens to hear about the sufferings and subjugations of women. Sasson meets an Islamic lady named Sultana in Saudi Arabia. Within a short period of time, their friendship increases. Outwardly, Sultana seemed to be happy and calm. As Sasson continues to explore her inner self, she is at pains to know that Sultana is not happy.

Deep down at her heart, Sultana is sad, melancholic, depressed and alienated from what she seems to have possessed. In the course of befriending Sultana, Jean

Sasson comes to know many dreadful and hazardous truths about the conditions of women in Islamic society of Saudi Arabia. In *Desert Royal*, Sasson depicts the pathetic and pensive voices of the first person narrator, Sultana.

Sultana narrates how her sisters, nieces and other female relatives had to endure unspeakable torture not from outsiders but from their own fathers, brothers and husbands. Unspeakable violence and tortures are poured upon Islamic women. Though women in the west are enjoying huge and high degree of freedom, women in Saudi Arabia are still coerced into living in a hell. Sasson's depiction of the hellish living conditions of Islamic women in Saudi Arabia has done a lot in taking the voices of the oppressed Islamic women to the western world. By so doing, she has dubbed significant contribution to the campaign of bringing reform in the position of women in Islamic country.

Munira, Sara, Tamman and several other Saudi girls are subjected to the terrifying living conditions. Munira is a girl who is deprived of a sense of recognition by her own father. Her father, Ali, does not give her parental love. She tries her best to win a dose of fatherly love. But she is left in the lurch. Disillusioned and agitated at her vain endeavor to win fatherly love, she decides to take a different course of life. She decides to remain celibate. But she is pressurized torturously not to do so. Sara is a girl who is forced to marry a man of her father's age. Her marriage crashed disastrously. Only after Sara tries to commit suicide, only then her parents allow her to divorce her husband. The following lines from *Desert Royal* exemplify how Sara is married against her will with a man of her father's age and how she arrived at a suicidal condition:

More than twenty years before, against her will, Sara had been wed to a much older man, a man who had sexually abused her from the first

moment of their union. It was only after Sara's attempted suicide that our mother had managed to convince our father to allow her to divorce. Despite her return to our family home, my dear sister had been unable to shake off a chronic and debilitating depression. (26)

Sara is not asked for her consent and view on her forthcoming marriage with a man who is the friend of her father. She does not have any idea of marriage. She wants to cultivate her individual sense of freedom and career. But her father compels her to marry a man against her will. It would have been acceptable if the man was of her age. By knowing that the marriage of Sara with a man of her father's age would be disastrous, Sara's father compels her to marry him. At last, the consequence turns out to be exactly as it was anticipated in the very beginning. The condition of Sara represents the conditions of many Islamic women in Arabic land. Women are treated as though they were the liabilities and chattels of males. Girls do not have any freedom to decide whom they can marry and whom they can reject.

The researcher makes use of the theory of Islamic feminism. Islamic feminism refers to that adjunct of feminism that developed in the entire Islamic zone of the Middle East and Arabic territories. Islamic feminism can be described as a feminist movement which bases its methodology and epistemology on both post-colonial feminism and Islamic theology. It was described as a reform movement that opens up a dialogue between religious and secular feminists by Nafsanah Najmabadi. Islamic feminism has been a focus of dynamic academic and feminist debates especially in North America. Najmabadi makes the following observation regarding to the evolution of Islamic feminism in the different corner of the world:

It is possible to claim that there are two main approaches to Islamic feminism in North American academia and that both approaches are

interrelated. The first approach embraces Islamic feminism as an important and relevant movement to feminism as it is argued that it critically approaches both western feminist assumptions about Islam and especially Muslim women as non-western others and male hegemonic domain of Islamic hermeneutics and presents a middle ground between these two discourses. The second approach rejects Islamic feminism as an oxymoron. (71)

It argues that Islam and feminism are two distinct ideologies that cannot co-exist with each other since Islam is considered to be essentially misogynistic, while feminism means being against misogyny. What are at stake in the discourse of critics of Islamic feminism are not Muslim women but women under Islam. The discourse against Islamic feminism does not aim at a debate on feminism or women's movement per se, but allegedly proving Islam as misogynist.

Munira is the daughter of Ali, the brother of the narrator, Sultana. Ali does not love her daughter affectionately. She hankers after her father's love and affection. But Ali is too niggardly of giving fatherly love to her. As a result, Munira is depressed and psychologically restless. She turns away from the optimistic side of her life. In a sober and serious mood, she takes a bold decision to remain celibate. The idea of marriage is alien to her. But her father interferes into her personal decision. Ali, her father, compels her to marry a man who has the worst and dehumanized attitude towards woman. The following lines describe Hadi's attitude towards woman:

Hadi hated women with a purposeful vengeance, and often expressed his opinion that all young girls should be wed at the first sign of their menses. In Hadi's mind, women were on this earth for three purposes: to provide for a man's sexual pleasure, to serve a man, and to bear a

man's children. Of course, Hadi thought that Sara and I were uncomfortable females, and often said so. If he had been the master of our destinies, Sara and I were convinced that we would have been stoned to death, and that Hadi would have been there to throw the first stone. (28)

Hadi is the fierce and formidable man who has the worst and condescending attitude to women. He does not treat women as decent human beings who like to be treated as a human being. He takes women as puppets. He maintains that women are the objects to be possessed. They are the creatures to be conquered. His view on femininity represents the collective view of men in regard to women. They conclude that Hadi is a monster in the form of man. They are painfully and sadly awe-struck when they come to know that Munira is bound to marry this monster, Hadi.

For the critiques of Islamic feminism, Islam is configured as highly conflicting with women's liberation. This part of the debate implies Islam's character as despotic and barbaric, especially for women and yet the debate does not focus on women and concerns itself with its opposition to Islam as a religious and political and moral order. Margot Badran's view sounds immensely pertinent in this context:

In the late 1990s, Islamic feminism gained prominence and was carried out with a social and religious reform agenda, particularly in Iran, Egypt, Yemen and Tunisia. The debate on Islamic feminism in academia delivered at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London in 1994 when she described Islamic feminism as a reform movement that opens up a dialogue between religious and secular feminists. (39)

Badran argues that Islamic feminism transcends the binary of the ‘secular’ and religious through its critiques of unquestioned presuppositions of western secular feminism regarding Muslim women. This important speech has come to mark and define how Islamic feminism is understood in academic circles and will form a starting point for my discussion of the complicated relationship between Islamic feminism and the North American academy.

Munira’s father arranges for the marriage of Sara with such a monstrous man who holds the worst and condescending view regarding women. Hadi is taken as the monster in human form. On the contrary, the narrator’s brother Ali, who is also Munira’s father, takes Hadi as the most deserving and worthwhile groom. Ali is deceptively tricky. He invites all his relatives, including Hadi and tells Sara to give her consent for her marriage with Hadi. Munira does not speak. Obviously, it is clear that she does not like to accept Hadi. But Ali interprets her silence as a kind of consent. He takes the support of Kuran to interpret her silence as a kind of marriage approval. Ali treats his daughter as his chattel. He does not have any care and concern for what she thinks, feels and expects. The following lines illustrate the lowest and dehumanizing position of women in land of Saudi Arabia:

Ali continued, ‘Munira, child, the man Hadi has asked that you become an adored wife. You are aware of his friendship with this family and of his ability to provide for you and any children you might have. I have sought permission from Almighty God to give you in wedlock to Hadi. Tell me now, Munira, if you approve. Ali spoke in an exhilarated tone, ‘God is great! Munira’s silence signifies her approval! He laughed heartily. Go, return to your room, child, and know that your modesty in this matter has made your father very happy. (36)

For men like Ali and Hadi, Kuran, Allah and Islam are terms to manipulate women. They quote Kuranic view in support of their choices and decision. Munira remains silent when her father interrogates her. Her silence is a clear indicator of her castigation of marriage. But Ali quotes Kuran and manipulates the atmosphere by interpreting Munira's silence as a mark of approval. Father oppresses daughter; husband abuses wife and brother connives at the degradation and dehumanization of sister. In the Islamic society of Saudi Arabia, girls are treated as the objects to be conquered and possessed.

It is even possible to say that she uses the terms Islamic feminists and Iranian feminists interchangeably. This is particularly clear in her two paragraph long explanation of how secular feminists of Iran falls short where she does not provide any further information about what and how she describes as secularism and who she refers to as secularists. Additional view of Badran is cited for the sake of better illustration:

Secular feminists, as their name suggests, are proponents of separation of the state from religious institutions. They see such separation as the ideal condition for women to achieve gender equality. Given the current situation and the historical relations between the state and the clergy in Iran, many secular feminists have come to realize that even if Iran is secularized, the clergy will always cling to some power.

Therefore, some secular feminists support dynamic *Jihad*. (12)

Linking dynamic Jihad to secular feminists of Iran remains inadequate if not inaccurate because Secular feminism, in essence, does not embrace reforming religion or building a feminist consciousness from within religion as it considers religion to belong to a private sphere and individual conscience. It also views religion as static,

dogmatic and ontologically misogynist. In fact, that is the reason why secular feminists condemn Islamic feminism as an oxymoron.

Islamic men's obsession with virginity of girls and practice of polygamy are the root cause of the exclusion and alienation of women in the society of Saudi Arabia. Ali married Tammam and she begot a few children for him. But dissatisfaction crept into the head of Ali. Ali married another woman. Then he again married other girls continuously, till his hunger for sexual gratification was quenched. Tammam fell prey to the voracious sexual hunger of her husband. The practice of polygamy has pushed women to the corner. The following lines throw spotlight on how Tammam is wounded psychically by her husband's polygamous adventure:

Three years after his marriage to Tammam, Ali took a second wife. Since Tammam was a most dutiful wife, Ali was questioned by our eldest sister, Nura, as to his need for a second spouse. She later revealed to us that Ali had declared that his displeasure was linked to Tammam's unhappiness. He was angry and baffled over the fact that his young bride had become a melancholy wife. With the greatest puzzlement, Ali claimed that Tammam had not once smiled since the day he had become her husband. (24)

There is no reason at all behind Ali's immersion in the polygamous adventure. He traces Tammam's alienation and melancholy as the root cause of his temptation towards polygamy. This explanation is not justifiable. It is his sexual depravity and debauchery that attract him to the path of polygamy. He goes to the extent of quoting Kuranic doctrine that God has permitted man to collect as many wives as he likes. The moral depravity, Kuranic orthodoxy and Islamic patriarchy are entirely responsible for the degradation and disintegration of women. A few conscious women

struggle to set the trend of going against the rigors and restrictions imposed by Islamic patriarchy. But they are intimidated by males and they are not assisted by other women who face similar plight and dilemma.

Raja Rhouni discusses Islamic as a term and determinant in Islamic feminism in her work titled *Secular and Islamic Feminist Critiques in the Work of Fatima Mernissi*. Rhouni embraces the movement or theoretization of Islamic feminism yet she problematizes the adjective Islamic. She argues, “It excludes both non-Muslims and secular scholars of Muslim background, who strive to contribute to the revitalization of Islamic thought through an approach that does not stigmatize Islam and recognizes its egalitarian scope” (15). In the case of Rhouni, Islamic feminism is a faith-oriented theory and movement. This claim seems “reasonable and it is one of the most common arguments among North American feminist scholars who see Islamic feminism as an oxymoron as I will discuss below. For this claim, two points need clarification” (Raja Rhouni 121). Rhouni does not give an alternative for naming those feminists who interpret Islam through a more egalitarian lens but she problematizes the adjective Islamic just to show its dangers and traps.

Islamic feminism derives its source of knowledge from both post-colonial feminist and classical Islamic epistemologies. While Islamic feminism calls for gender equality in the social, political and economic spheres, its methodology stems from reinterpretations. Independent Islamic feminism derives its source of knowledge from both post-colonial feminist and classical Islamic epistemologies. While Islamic feminism calls for gender equality in the social, political and economic spheres, its methodology stems from reinterpretations.

In addition to practicing polygamy, males like Ali and Hadi take part in the game of chasing girls. They run after girls in a most ignominious way. While

traveling in Egypt, Sara and Sultana happened to see Ali and Hadi running sexually after an eight year old girl. They can go to any extent of molesting even a girl of eight. The following lines reflect this sort of reality pertaining to the deviant sexual hunger of Ali and Hadi:

Despite his expressed hatred of the female gender, Hadi was keen to have sex with as many different women as possible. And on that trip to Cairo and Italy, he had done just that. Most disturbing of all, Ali had joined Hadi in his perverse behavior! While in Cairo, Sara and I had inadvertently come upon Hadi and Ali sexually assaulting a girl who was no more than eight years old! The scene had been one of horror and violence, and neither Sara nor I had ever forgotten the haunting images of what we saw that day. (28)

Ali, who prefers to partake of perverse extramarital affair, does not hesitate to restrict the individual freedom of his own daughter. Both Ali and Hadi are lecherous and morally bankrupt. Ali does not feel ashamed of giving his daughter's hand to Hadi who was involved in the perverse game of chasing a girl of eight. Moral ignominy, deviant passions and chauvinistic arrogance of men like Ali and Hadi have become stumbling block on Islamic women's quest for freedom, dignity and self-esteem.

Islamic men's obsession with virginity of girls is one of the substantial causes of the subordination of women. When a girl is born, her parents begin to think about her marriage. Rather than thinking about the education and sound upbringing of girls, their parents only think about their daughters' marriage. The following lines reveal the truth regarding this facet of issue:

The moment a girl is born in Arab lands, the parents immediately begin to think of an appropriate marriage. With the idea of future

allegiance, suitable families with eligible sons are studied keenly.

While a Saudi girl remains unmarried, she must stay a virgin. On the other hand, virginity prolonged is deemed a family disgrace. Now that Munira had turned twenty one years old, her unmarried state was causing her father grave discomfort. (25)

Islam's attitude towards women becomes manifested in many things like father's attitude towards daughters, brother's attitude towards their sisters and the harsh treatment of wives by their husbands. Within cocoon of comforts and luxury, women are living like caged birds. Family, religion, system of governance and other so-called graces of life exclude confine and enervate women of spirit and energy. Even the dominant social institutions like marriage, family and cultural centers have contributed to the subordination and subjugation of women. Within material comforts and luxury, women are doomed to languish emotionally and psychologically. Their position is no less than the position of a subaltern victim.

Desert Royal shows that laws, rules and regulations are not exercised in a consistently and fairly. In Kuran it is mentioned that those who touch alcohol, both men and women, go to hell. Allah gives harsh punishment to those who are tilted towards alcohol and addiction. In Saudi Arab, addicted men belonging to the lower rung of social ladder are punished harshly and then compelled to pay huge fine. But the men belonging to the upper strata of society enjoy the privilege of drinking alcohol. In the case of women, this law is imposed harshly.

Even the high class women, if found addicted and alcoholic, are punished and brutalized by their husbands. If higher class Islamic men find their wives living addicted lives, they divorce their wives. The divorced women in Saudi Arabia have almost no right at all. They do not have any right to rear their children. Divorcees are

treated as ostracized and stigmatized in the society of Saudi Arab. The plight of divorcees in Saudi Arab shows that the tragic lot of shipwrecked and sidetracked lives of women is more ruinous than the lives of subaltern people. The following extract cited from the shows how deplorable and miserable the lives of Islamic women is:

The addicted princess is looked upon with great pity by her female cousins, but her husband will usually reject, possibly taking a second wife or even seeking divorce. As every Saudi woman knows, divorce brings the loss of everything—status and children. A divorced woman soon becomes socially isolated and ostracized. Recently, Hazrat Al Saud, another royal cousin afflicted with alcoholism, had been divorced by her husband. Her young children, who now lived with their father and his other two wives, had been forbidden all contact with Harzat. (44)

The living conditions of divorcees in Saudi Arab are deplorable. At least, the divorced mother should have the right to meet her children. But the patriarchal society of Islamic society in Saudi Arab is so callous and insensitive that women have no chance to live freely with dignity. When the society acts so callously, how can women hope to come out of the narrow boundary of traditional life? It is utterly an act of injustice and atrocity to restrict women in every sphere of life. Males in the society of Saudi Arab enjoy every mode of freedom. But they do not think about loosening the tight rules so that women, who are their wives, daughters, and mothers can live happily as themselves. In this condition, women hardly hope to taste the modernist glimpse of life.

Nayereh Tohidi regards Islamic feminism as an inevitable and necessary step toward secularization of the Islamic states. First of all, she claims that, just like Jewish

and Christian feminisms, “Islamic feminism as a name is more appropriate when used and conceived of as an analytical concept in feminist research and feminist theology. Islamic feminism is a relatively new, still fluid, undefined, more contested and more politicized trend” (86). Feminisms could serve more flexibility in terms of building a discourse and a movement. Although it is new, its theoretical and political grounds can be explained in three points according to Tohidi:

Islamic feminism can be seen as responding to traditional patriarchy sanctioned by religious authorities, or as responding to modernity, modernization, and globalization, or as responding to the recent surge of patriarchal Islamism. It is possible to argue that modernity essentially is inseparable from patriarchy especially in the realm of the religion since patriarchal sex and gender binaries are the constructs of western modernity which is also utilized by the patriarchal readings of Islam and in fact of any religion. Islamic feminism is an inevitable and positive component of the ongoing change, reform, and development of Muslim societies as they face modernity. (117)

As contended by Tohidi, Islamic feminism may serve the Islamization of feminism. Islamic feminists can serve as agents of the modernization and secularization of Islamic societies and states. In that sense, Islamic feminism is a part of the reform driven movement which challenges patriarchal gender notions fuelled by the Islamic state.

Islamic feminism’s originality as a feminist movement and theory stems from its double-agency as feminist and religious and from its task of bringing religion into the framework of feminism. In this regard, Ziba Mir-Hosseini discloses the following remark:

Muslim traditionalists and Islamic fundamentalists silence other internal voices and abuse the authority of the text for authoritarian purposes. Secular fundamentalists follow the same pattern, but in the name of enlightenment, progress, and science — and as a means of showing the misogyny of Islam— while ignoring the contexts in which the texts were produced, as well as the existence of alternative texts. In doing so, they end up essentializing and perpetuating difference and reproducing a crude version of the orientalist narrative of Islam. (43)

Mir Hosseini raises the question of ‘double exploitation’ of feminist women in the Muslim world. She claims that women in Iran, as in other Muslim communities have always been subjects of argument in terms of different parts of their identities. Their identity is often questioned by secular fundamentalist and the feminism is viewed as suspicious by Muslim traditionalists and Islamic fundamentalists.

Sometimes disobeying daughters are beaten black and blue by their fathers. Those daughters’ dare to reject grooms selected by their fathers are intimidated, bullied and threatened with physical punishment. For instance, Munira “said that Ali had threatened to beat both her mother and herself if she dared to open her mouth in protest about her engagement to Hadi” (45). This sort of evidence regarding male domination exemplifies the fact that Islamic women are living in purgatory.

In the novel, there are plenty of evidences to expose how women are brutalized and incarcerated. Sultana narrates the personal story about her sister, Reema’s miserable married life. Reema married a man who chastised her so harshly that she was constantly in need of colostomy for the functioning of her body. Her husband ruined her body. Yet she endures it meekly.

Unlike Sultana, Reema tends to bear anything that happens to her full stop. When Sultana told all of her eight sisters to revolt against the oppressive systems, Sultana was discouraged by her docile sisters. They told her to remain taciturn and laconic. The Islamic society takes women's silence as the manifestation of deserving feminine virtue. Any show of audacity and departure from the established norm is taken as the violent sense of threat to the integrity of society. The following lines mirror how the bodies of Saudi women become the site where aggression and exploitation occur:

I looked behind Tahani and saw that dear Reema, the fifth child of our mother, was discretely manipulating the medical device that captured her body's waste. The device was well-hidden under her dress, but the anxious Reema had formed the habit of compulsively checking and rechecking the appliance. After her husband Saleem's brutal assault, Reema had needed a colostomy, and would never regain control over all her bodily functions. (51)

Physical torture and incarceration are frequently given setbacks to the women of Saudi Arab. Reema is the pathetic victim who endured everything because she is trained to endure from her upbringing. Women like Reema do not have the power to raise their voice against injustice and atrocity. The women who are victimized and who want to raise their voices are not enabled, encouraged and empowered. That is why the scope of freedom for the women of Saudi Arab is limited. The Islamic ladies who suffered at the hands of their husbands are from the royal families or elites.

Amaney locates the long struggle for reform of family law in the context of the perennial lack of democracy in the region. She points in particular to the low participation of women in parliamentary life as explaining the lack of serious

headway in the reform of family laws. She reveals the following hard-hitting remarks with respect to this issue:

Contests between reactionary forces of both secular and religious stripes and liberals keep reform of family laws held hostage. Jamal, like others, reiterates the necessity to demonstrate the compatibility of gender equality with Islam in order to achieve a fundamental overhaul of existing family laws. This is precisely the task that feminists, starting in the Arab world early in the twentieth century, have taken upon themselves and persist to this day with intensified efforts. (67)

Activist women have been re-enforced in their struggles by the compelling arguments of Islamic feminism. Traditional interpretive communities continue to exert their influence to the detriment of reform efforts. The overall lack of democracy in the Arab world and absence of political will reinforces a patriarchal interpretation of Islam in the service of secular and religious political elites.

Loneliness, seclusion and alienation are the part and parcel of lives of the women married to wealthy elite men. Their husbands were often outside on business. Their sons and daughters are away from their houses for study. So mothers are always alone and solitary. There are neither husbands nor children at home. That is why women often turn to alcoholism. In the chapter entitled 'My Secret', Sultana narrates a secret story about herself. She narrates that when her sons and daughters and husband left her at home for a long time, she felt terribly lonely. The painful sense of loneliness weakened her immensely.

Frightened by increasing sense of loneliness and alienation, she could not help taking alcohol. Though Islamic doctrine forbids women to drink and though marriage can crash due to the addiction and alcoholism of women, Sultana failed to resist her

desire. She turned to alcoholism to ward off the killing sense of loneliness. The situations and circumstances which drove Sultana to addiction and alcoholism are created by the selfishness and self-centrism of males. The following lines depict graphically how Sultana happens to fall into the bad habit of alcoholism due to the mounting sense of loneliness:

There was nothing to do but to wait. To my dismay, I began to crave an alcoholic drink, although I fought my sinful desire. A few hours later, a distraught Tammam called to report that Munira had surreptitiously telephoned while Hadi was out of their hotel room, to tell her mother that she detested and feared her new husband even more than she had ever believed possible. Upon hanging up the telephone, sick with despair, I lay across the bed. Numbness spread over my body. How powerless I felt! There was nothing that I, or anyone else, could do to help Munira. She was legally wed to Hadi now. (59)

Seclusion, solitariness, silence and subjugation jointly compelled women like Sultana to turn to addiction and alcoholism. If those women were allowed to come out of their houses and if they are motivated to take part in outer activities, they might not have fallen victims to terrifying seclusion and loneliness. It is due to their total detachment from the outer activities that they are always lonely and solitary. That is why they have become pathetic victims of alcoholism and drug addiction. Like Sultana, there are various other Islamic women who have passed through terrible conditions like being confined at home and then turning to addiction to avoid the pain and agony of isolation.

Islamic feminism is now at a crossroad. Nesrin Turin says that “One path leads to the communalization of Islamic feminism as an exclusivist project that divides

societies and families that are religiously complex” (83). The time has come to go beyond Islamic feminism. Tendencies to communalize Islamic feminism are on the rise. Going beyond Islamic feminism does not mean that Islamic feminism will not remain an important discourse. The new secular feminism reaffirms inclusivity as it brings with it a new vitality.

The majority of feminist scholars have focused their energy on the field of Koranic interpretation. They have successfully uncovered the Koran’s egalitarian message. The genesis of gender inequality in Islamic legal tradition lies in the cultural norms of early Muslim societies. Chilla Bulbeck puts forward the following remarks:

While the ideals of Islam call for freedom, justice, and equality, Muslim norms and social structures in the formative years of Islamic law impeded their realization. Instead, these norms were assimilated into Islamic jurisprudence through a set of theological, legal, and social theories based on certain underlying assumptions. Women are created of men and for men; women are inferior to men. Women need to be protected; men are guardians and protectors of women. (61)

These assumptions and theories are nowhere more evident than in the rules that define the formation and termination of marriage. Gender inequalities are sustained in present-day Muslim societies. Women have persisted in pressing for their rights in both secular and religiously-led states. Some of the complexities of the enmeshment of the secular and the religious constructions must be unveiled fairly for the sake of public awareness.

In the conservative society of Saudi Arab, the position of woman is less than that of a eunuch. Eunuch rather seems to be more valuable than woman. Omar is a eunuch who works in the house of Sultana and her husband, Kareem. Kareem

sometimes doubts about the marital loyalty of Sultana. He lowers himself to the lowest level of meanness. He considers his decent wife lower than a eunuch. How can Islamic women of Saudi Arabia expect from their own lives, if their own husbands consider their wives lower than eunuchs. Such a treatment renders women as subaltern people. The following lines throw light on this sort of extreme subordination of women.

I knew Kareem's intention. He did not want me in the room when Omar detailed the graphic tale of his castration. In our conservative Saudi society, my presence would be improper. This, even though Omar was not really considered a man, Poor Omar lived a sad and uncertain fate. He was neither man nor woman, although his status was slightly lower than a man's but higher than a woman's. I did not object to Kareem's suggestion, although I had already braced myself to hear the lurid details of Omar's castration. (147)

The above cited extract shows that women do have subaltern position in the society of Saudi Arab. Husbands treat their wives lower than eunuch. It is really deplorable that men do not treat their wives as equal partners. The idea of reciprocity in man-woman relation is alien to aggressive and belligerent males of Saudi Arab. This kind of extreme subordination and subjugation of women prove that the plight women in Islamic society of Saudi Arab are that of subjugated people.

Feminism as a phenomenon engages with issues of women's rights, women's liberation, and gender equality as part and parcel of the rights, liberation, and equality. Bulbeck adds that "History attests that feminism is the creation of both easterners and westerners, of Muslims and those of other religions, of the colonized and colonizers, and of women of different races and ethnicities" (151). Those who claim that

feminism is western and white do not know their history and perpetuate the circulation of myths. It is worthwhile to quote Bulbeck for the sake of lucid illustration:

Muslims' foundational secular feminism which argued for full gender equality in the public sphere, excepting the religious part of the public sphere, while acquiescing in the notion of gender complementarity or gender equity in the private sphere and in so doing accepted a patriarchal model of the family. Early secular feminists, like Muslims in general, had been led to believe that the patriarchal family was Islamic and strove to make the regime of complimentary gender roles function optimally. (112)

Muslim secular feminists later questioned the notion of the patriarchal family. Islamic feminists not only connected the public and private as the indivisible terrain of gender equality but also elucidated the necessary linkage of gender equality and social justice. Gender equality is integral to the Islamic feminist notion of equality of all. Polygamy is made virtually impossible. Women are able to initiate divorce. While the moment must be politically ripe for such a change to occur, the ideological framework must also be in place.

Sasson mentions another case of how women are reduced to the deplorable condition. Taliban regime sought to create Islamic purity. In the name of creating Islamic purity, Taliban regime cut the freedom of Afghan women substantially. Such oppressive pressures that are put in Afghan women assign the status of subaltern to those women. The extract which is cited below exposes how Afghan women languished miserably:

In the Taliban's drive to restore Islamic purity, they had launched a horrifying assault on their own women. Not only were Afghan women forced to cover their bodies and faces in the burqa, a thick, tent like garment even more awkward and uncomfortable than the Saudi abaaya and veil, but women were also forbidden to even talk loudly or to laugh in public. Even though women were totally hidden by the burqa, the men in power claimed that the sound of women's voices alone had the power to excite men. (160)

The Taliban rulings regarding public conduct placed severe restrictions on a woman's freedom of movement and created difficulties for those who could not afford burqa or did not have mahram. Family harmony was totally affected by mental stress, isolation and depression that often accompanied the forced confinement of women. These women faced virtual house arrest and their house resembled prisons or hospitals. Silence weighed heavily on all of them.

Incapable of sharing their emotions, they enclosed themselves in their own fears and distress. The lives of rural women were less dramatically impacted as they generally lived and worked within secure kin environments. If these women travelled to a nearby town, the same urban restrictions would have applied to them. No doubt, women as per the edict of Saudi law were to remain at a distance from strange men.

If they were found near to the strange men, they were liable to be dealt very severely by the Religious Council. Arabs are by nature sensuous, yet live in a puritanical society. The topic of sex is of national interest to everyone, including that of the Saudi Government. Mutawwa is the casual synonym for the religious police of Saudi Arabia. In the Muslim Arab world, mutawwa is the shortened version of "the

Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vices” which serves as the infrastructure of proselytization and enforcement of Islamic tenets.

In Saudi Arabia, they are tasked with enforcing Sharia as defined by the government, specifically by the commission for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. They have the power to arrest unrelated males and females caught socializing in public. Anyone engaged in homosexual behavior or prostitution is persecuted. The following lines illuminate the issue about the growing subordination and subjugation of women.

They enforce Muslim dietary laws, which prohibit the consumption or sale of alcoholic beverages and pork, and seize banned consumer products and media regarded as un-Islamic (such as CDs/DVDs of various Western musical groups, television shows and film).

Additionally, they actively prevent the practice of other religions within Saudi Arabia, where they are banned. (176)

The Mutawas are also known to welcome tip-offs from individuals, paying money for information leading to the disclosure of behavior regarded as illegal. Restaurant staffs have been known to inform Mutawas about visiting couples suspected to be on a date and not be married. Such committees are composed of menacing men who unexpectedly surround and enter eating establishments, demanding identification of the restaurant patrons.

If proof is not forthcoming that the men and women sharing a table are not husband and wife, brother or sister, or father and daughter, these frightened people will be arrested and escorted to a city prison. The legal penalties vary according to the nationality of the criminal. Muslim offenders can be flogged for their social misconduct. Similarly, the members of the Taliban’s religious police were always on

their toes to catch hold of offenders in Afghanistan and accordingly punish them on the spot. There would be various punishments for the offenders. Punishments were often carried out publicly, either as formal spectacles held in sports stadiums or town squares or spontaneous beatings.

Even the organizations with proper authority are biased in their dealing with women of Saudi Arab. Police are always ready for arbitrary investigation leading to punishments ever unheard in any society. The punishment would be arbitrary and inhumane at the hands of Iraqi Secret Police. The following lines illustrate the point:

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

(189)

The agents of government never employ force or violence and never accept gratuities. They remain true to the ethics of the police service. There is mostly a discretionary action by the police. In Middle East countries, the action is male-oriented and anti-women generally.

Thus it is fair to say that most of the female characters are living in hell like accursed figures. The patriarchal society of Saudi Arab takes great delight in the subjugation and exclusion. The lot of these women shows that they are no less than

subaltern figures. Jean Sasson has truly presented the dark life of women of Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Afghanistan where the basic human rights to women are still a dream. Rather women are treated, molested and given harshest punishment through police investigation and law of the region. The law of Arabian Peninsula is male oriented and anti-women as the latter are forbidden to testify in criminal proceeding. It also elaborately expresses the different types of punishments that are in store for them.

Islamic feminism refers to that adjunct of feminism that developed in the entire Islamic zone of the Middle East and Arabic territories. Islamic feminism can be described as a feminist movement which bases its methodology and epistemology on both post-colonial feminism and Islamic theology.

III. Vision of Gender Equality in *Desert Royal*

The major thrust of this research is to show how the Islamic patriarchy has reduced Arabic women to the position of subaltern beings. In Jean Sasson's *Desert Royal*, female characters like Sultana, Reema, Sara and Munira are oppressed and dehumanized in a shocking way. Sultana's husband, Kareem takes her as an object of possession. He assumes that eunuchs are more important and valuable than his wife. Kareem is frequently on trip to promote his business. His children are also far away from home on study. So, Sultana feels increasingly alienated and lonely. The sense of loneliness troubles her.

In the list of Kareem's priorities, his wife, Sultana hardly comes. To ward off her increasing sense of loneliness, she has turned to alcohol. Sultana's addiction resembles the plights and malaises of various other Islamic women. Reema, Sara, Munira and other women are also compelled to touch alcohol and addiction in order that it could help them to handle their sense of solitariness and seclusion. In the Kuran, it is instructed that if married women touch alcohol, their husbands would have the right to divorce them.

Due to the self-centrism and arrogance of males, many females of Saudi Arab are suffering from loneliness and domestic isolation. Though they have no scarcity of material comforts and luxury, they are seriously and psychologically handicapped. Behind the outer gorgeous lives of these royal women of Saudi women lies agony, isolation, mistreatment, dehumanization, confinement. These women sometimes protest but their protests seldom produce effect.

Majority of Islamic women are forced to remain in the lower condition. In the era of modernization, feminism and human rights, Saudi women are still living

confined and subjugated lives. They hardly have access to owning material assets. They themselves assume that they are their men's objects of possession.

Polygamy has ruined the existence of women. A man marries more than five or six women. Tammam feels utterly grief-stricken by her husband's decision to marry women far younger than him. Ali does not feel ashamed to get his daughter marry a man who doubles her age. Reema's husband breaks her leg when he is driven by whimsical and pointless anger. Islamic women in Saudi Arab are thereby subordinated and excluded from the mainstream society.

In the mainstream society, they are no less than subaltern figures. Though the position of Muslim women in Saudi Arabia is still deplorably miserable, changes and reforms have been occurring gradually. Certain degree of change is felt in the gender relation and social exposure of women. But the author, Jean Sasson portrays Islamic women as though they are so oppressed, exploited and excluded that they have no power to resist. Similarly, there are men like Kareem who never imposes their whim and decision on their wives. But Sasson portrays Arabic males as tough they are totally harsh and belligerent in their relation with women. Sasson describes two Muslim men named Ali and Hadi who chase a girl of eight for the purpose of sexual molestation.

Most of the male Muslims in *Desert Royal* appear to be impulsive, belligerent and irrational. Sasson portrays Saudi Arab as though it is an exotic and inscrutable land which will hardly be penetrated by the light of modernism, feminism, human rights and other liberal thoughts. Sasson portrays Islamic men and women as though they are still living in the Dark Age. Sasson holds Islam responsible for the degradation, dispossession and denigration of women. But the real fact is above her reach. Unspeakable violence and tortures are poured upon Islamic women.

Though women in the west are enjoying huge and high degree of freedom, women in Saudi Arabia are still coerced into living in a hell. Sasson's depiction of the hellish living conditions of Islamic women in Saudi Arabia has done a lot in taking the voices of the oppressed Islamic women to the western world. By so doing, she has dubbed significant contribution to the campaign of bringing reform in the position of women in Islamic country.

The projection of Arab is incredibly contentious since it looms as an inscrutable and bizarre land. This geographical territory is unaffected by the light of advanced liberal thought of the West. Islamic women feel psychologically crippled, harassed and horrified since they are bullied, intimidated and confined. Entire zone of Arab looms as a surreal, exotic and inscrutable land where impulsive, belligerent and callous human beings dwell. Male characters in *Desert Royal* are represented as belligerent. They are dictatorial and callous. Males like Ali and Hadi are depicted as sexual-riddled phantoms that are on the prowl to molest a girl of eight.

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