

Education, A Defiance Against Oppression Represented in The Select Works of Jean Sasson

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Abstract: The world has progressed technologically, and we are now dreaming of a life on Mars. But is this progress being reflected in all spheres of life or in all strata of society? The answer would be negative. Especially when we speak about the condition of women. Education and good jobs have placed women in a safe position; still, in many parts of the world, she faces tremendous, shell-shocking calamities. Whether it's in a democratic republic like India, a military-ruled Pakistan or a religion-controlled Saudi Arabia. Writers throughout the globe have tried to voice the voiceless, to portray the deplorable condition of women in every aspect of life. The last two decades have witnessed the portrayal of the lives of women behind the veil by writers like Taslima Nasrin, Latifa, Jean Sasson, etc. Jean Sasson's work centres on the women in the Middle East. She focuses on the lives of Saudi Women and their sufferings living in a patriarchal society. Her Princess Trilogy narrates the pathetic conditions of women in a religion-centred, male-oriented society. The paper tries to analyse how far education helped women to question the patriarchal structures and narratives and how the women in Saudi Arabia used education as a tool against patriarchy.

Keywords: Oppression, Patriarchy, Gender Equity, Education, Resistance

Introduction

Literature is not only something you read, but is a powerful force that shows us the truth about our world and helps us make it better. When we talk about literature as resistance, we mean the clever way writers use stories, poems and other forms of writing to challenge the unfair systems and give a voice to people who are treated unfairly. This kind of literature does not just watch history happen; it takes part in shaping it. For centuries, writers have used their talents to expose the things that happen in our world, like slavery, the way colonialism erases cultures and the unfair treatment of certain groups. By speaking out against those in power, resistance literature shows us the realities that are often hidden behind a mask of politeness.

At its heart, resistance literature is about showing that everyone is human and deserves to be treated with dignity. When people are oppressed, those in power often try to take their individuality, reducing them to just numbers or stereotypes. Writing about these experiences helps to bring attention to the world and the dignity of these individuals. It turns people who are often seen as victims into the heroes of their stories with their own agency and complex lives. This is important for remembering our past. History is often written by the people who won. Literature gives us a different perspective. It records the acts of rebellion, the hard journey of survival, and the flame of resilience that standard history books might leave out. By writing about these things, literature fights against amnesia—the attempt by those in power to erase or distort the past to suit their own agenda. A poem or a novel becomes a record of existence that cannot be easily forgotten.

Literature Review

The study of books, politics and challenging authority is key to understanding literary criticism today. This analysis looks at Jean Sasson's Princess series and Mayada: Daughter of Iraq as examples of defiance. It uses the idea of resistance literature, a term created by theorist Barbara Harlow. Harlow says that literature is not just a reflection of the struggle but a way for people who are treated unfairly to fight back against those in power. In studies of the Middle East, feminist scholars like Deniz Kandiyoti talk about the bargain. This refers to how women try to negotiate, challenge or resist the control of men in conservative societies. Sasson's books show how women use literacy to navigate spaces.

Often popular literature portrays Middle Eastern women as passive victims—a bias that Chandra Talpade Mohanty criticises in *Under Western Eyes*. Sasson's stories try to change this by showing women as agents. By writing about education, Sasson's texts make these women subjects of their own lives. Education is an area of struggle for women's resistance. Theorist bell hooks says that education can be "the practice of freedom." Scholars like Mervat Hatem note that men have historically limited women's education to keep them from gaining power. Sasson's works add to this discussion by showing how reading and writing can lead to freedom and money. Some people debate Sasson's role as a mediator, but few discuss how teaching can be a way to defend oneself. This paper looks at education as an act of challenging the system. It examines

how education helps individuals, families and institutions. It shows how literacy is used as a tool for subversion. It highlights the importance of education in gaining agency.

Methodology

This paper utilises a qualitative, text-centred analytical methodology grounded in Feminist Literary Criticism and Close Reading textual analysis. Because Sasson's works operate on the border of biography, memoir, and collaborative journalism, the texts are approached as cultural narratives that reflect and challenge real-world socio-legal structures. The primary texts (*Princess* series and *Mayada*) will be systematically scanned for keywords and narrative events. The study categorises resistance across three distinct socio-spatial domains: the domestic sphere: Princess Sultana's covert self-education and her mother's quiet subversion of the patriarchy; the transnational/global Sphere: The foreign, secular education of Maha and Amani, evaluating how geographical displacement alters political consciousness; the institutional sphere: Mayada Al-Askari's transformation of an Iraqi prison cell into an improvised literacy classroom. The textual evidence is interpreted through the lens of feminist standpoint theory and bell hooks' concept of transgressive pedagogy. This step determines whether the text portrays education as an individual escape mechanism or a catalyst for wider institutional reform. By analysing the dialogue, interior monologues, and structural trajectories of these women, the methodology isolates how the acquisition of knowledge shifts the balance of power from the oppressor to the oppressed.

Jean Sasson is an American author known for her works that primarily focus on the lives of women in Middle Eastern countries, particularly Saudi Arabia. Her books are characterised by their exploration of various themes related to gender, patriarchy, culture, and human rights. Some of Jean Sasson's well-known works include *Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia*, *Daughters of Arabia: Princess 2*, *Mayada: Daughter of Iraq*, and *Ester's Child*. These books collectively shed light on the experiences of women in the Middle East and their quest for gender equality and human rights in the face of patriarchal systems and cultural traditions. This paper explores how education is portrayed as a form of resistance against patriarchy in select works by Jean Sasson. In many patriarchal societies, access to education has historically been limited or denied to women. This has perpetuated gender disparities and maintained power imbalances. Jean Sasson's works depict the transformational power of education as a means of resistance against patriarchal norms. Education is portrayed as a tool that enables women to challenge traditional roles and assert their agency.

Sasson's first book, *Princess*, tells the story of Princess Sultana, a Saudi Arabian princess who courageously exposes the oppressive conditions faced by women in her society. Sultana's narrative highlights the importance of education as a form of resistance. Despite the limited educational opportunities for women in Saudi Arabia, Sultana is determined to acquire knowledge. She secretly educates herself and her daughters, defying the strict gender norms and patriarchal expectations of her society. She says, "My wealth bought me knowledge and that knowledge showed me my cage and how it was made. This was both good and bad. I could see my oppression. I was still stuck in it." (*Princess* 156)

Sultana's mother somehow managed to educate her daughters amidst her father's resistance. Her determination and resilience proved successful later. Sultana remembers that her father neglected the idea of educating his daughters for many years, holding firmly to long-standing cultural norms that prioritised male education while limiting female advancement. Her five elder sisters were refused education other than memorising the Koran from a private tutor who came to their family. Their learning was confined strictly to religious instruction, with no exposure to other academic subjects or opportunities for intellectual growth. Sultana's journey underscores the idea that education is not just a means to gain knowledge but also a path to self-discovery and empowerment. By educating herself and her daughters, Sultana challenges the patriarchal systems that deny women access to education and seeks to break free from the confines of her gilded cage.

In *Daughters of Arabia*, the sequel to *Princess*, Sasson delves deeper into the lives of Sultana and her family. The book continues to emphasise the transformative power of education, portraying it as a tool for resistance and liberation. Sultana's daughters, Maha and Amani, receive educations in foreign countries. This experience broadens their horizons, enabling them to question and challenge the patriarchal values ingrained in their society. Maha and Amani's education allows them to gain a global perspective and empowers them to advocate for women's rights and gender equality in their home country. Sasson uses their stories to underscore that education can be a catalyst for social change, enabling women to break free from the constraints of patriarchy and make a positive impact on society.

While *Mayada: Daughter of Iraq* primarily focuses on the experiences of Mayada Al-Askari during the oppressive regime of Saddam Hussein, the book also highlights the role of education in resistance against patriarchal structures. Mayada, a well-educated Iraqi woman, is arrested and imprisoned by the regime due to her family's political affiliations. Despite the dire circumstances, she continues to educate herself and other women within the prison. Mayada's commitment to education serves as a form of resistance against the patriarchal oppression she faces. By providing literacy classes to her fellow inmates, she empowers them with knowledge and a sense of purpose. This act of defiance against the regime's oppression demonstrates how education can be a means of resistance, even in the most challenging circumstances.

In Jean Sasson's works, education is also portrayed as a means to attain financial independence for women. Access to education enables women to acquire skills and qualifications that can lead to gainful employment, reducing their economic dependency on male family members or partners. This financial independence is a form of resistance against patriarchy because it gives women the means to make choices about their lives, including decisions regarding marriage, family, and personal development. Sasson's portrayal of education as a form of resistance underscores the empowerment that knowledge brings. Education equips women with the tools to challenge traditional gender roles, question societal norms, and assert their rights. In the patriarchal societies depicted in her works, women are often marginalised and

silenced. However, education serves as a counterforce, enabling women to raise their voices and advocate for change.

In addition to education as a form of resistance on an individual level, Jean Sasson's works highlight how educated women can become activists for gender equality and women's rights. Princess Sultana, Sultana's daughters, and Mayada, all of whom have received education, use their knowledge and social influence to advocate for change in their respective societies. They become vocal proponents of women's rights, challenging the status quo and pushing for reforms. Sultana's advocacy includes fighting against child marriages, advocating for better healthcare for women, and supporting female education. Maha and Amani work to change societal perceptions of women in Saudi Arabia, using their education to speak out against injustice and inequality. Mayada, while imprisoned, educates her fellow inmates and stands as a symbol of resilience and resistance against tyranny. These women serve as inspirational examples of how education can empower individuals to become advocates for change, challenging patriarchal norms and advocating for gender equality.

Jean Sasson's works provide a compelling narrative about the power of education as a form of resistance against patriarchy in the Middle Eastern societies she portrays. Through the stories of Princess Sultana, her daughters Maha and Amani, and Mayada Al-Askari, Sasson illustrates how education serves as a tool for liberation, empowerment, and activism. These narratives emphasise that education not only equips women with knowledge but also with the courage to challenge traditional gender roles, advocate for women's rights, and effect positive change in their societies.

Education is a path to financial independence, individual empowerment, and collective activism. It challenges the patriarchal norms that restrict women's access to knowledge and opportunities, and it paves the way for gender equality and social progress. In a world where patriarchy remains a formidable force, Jean Sasson's works remind us of the transformative potential of education and the resilience of women who dare to resist. Jean Sasson's select works serve as a testament to the enduring importance of education as a form of resistance against patriarchy, offering hope and inspiration to women seeking to break free from the chains of tradition and inequality.

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