

TREATING ARAB WOMEN IN JEAN SASSON'S *PRINCESS SULTANA'S DAUGHTERS*

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Abstract- *Arabian life is depicted through the novel of Jean Sasson's Princess Sultana's Daughters. There are some different treatments accepted by Arab men and women, for example, the culture which more honor towards men than women. This case causes violence and injustice faced by the women. The Arabs often treat them that way by making use of Islamic teachings as the basis to support their deeds. This article focuses on analyzing the background of Arabian culture in treating women. This article basically uses Cultural Studies perspective and concept on patriarchy which mainly focuses on Arabian culture making women subordinated. The result shows that the treatment of the Arab women is based on the cultural tradition.*

Keywords: *Cultural Studies, Arabic culture, Arab Women*

1. INTRODUCTION

Patriarchy is a social system where men inherently dominate everything, especially females (Walby, 1991). Women are biologically considered weaker. Sometimes, the ways in treating women through patriarchal system become the culture reputed as Islamic teachings. In this case, Saudi Arabia is one of countries applying the system. Men have used *Al-qur'an* to create rule called a patriarchal class system in which males dominate females. It is also caused by historical practices before Islam comes. Most pre-Islamic religions in the Middle East; Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity supported male-dominant attitudes and practices (Keddie, 2006). Then, women were regarded as the disaster. They would be buried alive in the dirt since their birth in this world. It can be said that those treatments are the ways in dishonoring women.

Although the practice of burying baby girl alive does not exist anymore nowadays, but there are other ways to dishonor women. The case can be deeply seen through violence towards women happened in the Middle East countries. Spencer and Chesler said in their book *The Violent Oppression of Women in Islam* that daughter and wife beating are routine done by Pakistani men (2007). It becomes one of the cases of dishonoring women nowadays.

Jean Sasson is one of American writer whose work mainly centers on women in the Middle East. One of her most popular work is *The Princess Trilogy; Princess Sultana,*

Princess Sultana's Daughters, and Princess Sultana's Circle. All of them are biography novels which are famous in America at the time. Thus, the writer prefers to choose the second book of the trilogy to analyze because in the book, Sultana is described of having problems dealing with her children and violence towards women.

The second book of the trilogy; *Princess Sultana's Daughters* was written in 2001. It tells about the way Sultana takes care of her children; two daughters (Maha and Amani) and one son (Abdullah). It is caused by the influences of women violence happened in Arab. On the other hand, Sultana always tries to defend women who get physical violence or internal oppression. There are many stories about injustices of women told by her. One of them is women circumcision who attain the age of puberty. Its practice is regarded as Islamic teachings, whereas it tortures women. If it is truly one of Islamic teachings, the writer believes that they will not face the violence.

In this case, the writer is interested in finding out whether the ways in treating Arab women are based on cultural influences as told by Sultana through her stories. Then, the writer uses some suitable theories to make good analysis. They are cultural studies to find the background of Arabian culture in treating women and concept of patriarchy to find some factors making Arab women disagree with their culture and their struggle to get the justice. Based on the literary background stated above, the writer is really interested to analyze the treatment of the Arab women in Jean Sasson's *Princess Sultana's Daughters*.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Cultural Studies

Generally, cultural studies talks about culture among society. Guerin, Labor, Morgan, Reesman, and Willingham said that cultural studies is composed of elements of marxism, post-structuralism and postmodernism, feminism, gender studies, anthropology, sociology, race and ethnic studies, film theory, urban studies, public policy, popular culture studies, and postcolonial studies (2005).

One of cultural system applied by society is patriarchy. It is a system in which women's life is ruled by men. They will experience discrimination, subordination, violence, exploitation and oppression by men (Wood, n.d.). In the patriarchal society, women are treated as inferior in all aspects of their lives. Men control women's reproductive power, their sexuality, their mobility and even their economic resources. Patriarchy is defined as the 'rule of the father' as patriarchs to be intrinsically superior to women.

Patriarchy is characterized by male domination and power. Patriarchal rulers still govern most of the world's religious, school systems, and family systems (Hooks, n.d.). Then, it shapes the values of our culture. We are also socialized into this system. Most of us learned patriarchal attitudes in our family as the origin system. Thus, those values are reinforced in schools and religious institutions.

Patriarchy will not be a problem if it is practiced based on humanity values. Although the basic rules of life are held by men, they can deeply see and understand what women faced in their life. It will give them the appropriate rights such as work and education, protection, and affection.

3. DISCUSSION OF THE MAIN THEMES

Jean Sasson's *Princess Sultana's Daughters* describes the depiction of Arabian culture in treating women. Arabian culture is seen from the life of royal family and common people. Meanwhile, the description of treating Arab women focuses on the Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), temporary (*mut'ah*) marriage, and thoughtless divorce.

3.1 Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

Generally, operation towards genitalia organ is called as circumcision. Circumcision is practiced towards both men and women. In its implementation, the practice of circumcision for women is more harmful than for men, so in Western countries, it is common called as *Female Genital Mutilation* (FGM) or *Female Genital Cutting* (FGC). It is the practice when parts or all of the external female genitalia are removed or injured for no medical reason. There are four types of FGM. Firstly, the clitoris or the clitoral hood is cut off. Secondly, the clitoris and inner lips are cut off. Thirdly, the clitoris, inner lips and outer lips are cut and sewn together or sealed, leaving only a small opening. Fourthly, all other harmful practices which could include pricking, piercing, cutting, scraping and burning of female genitalia (Lane, 2012).

In this novel, Sultana told us that her three sisters have faced the practice of FGM. One of them is Nura who "had been made into a woman" through "female circumcision" although it means that she had to "endured the horrific rite" resulted in "pain and suffering" (Sasson, 2001).

Basically, the practice of FGM is nothing more than a pagan tradition. It is related to female puberty when they are regarded as women who are more mature than being girls. However, this practice is actually must be stopped. It is because related to mutilation towards sexual organ and the female's future. This pagan culture is caused by social culture influence.

FGM is practiced to remove the source of female's sexual desire. Based on survey done by *Population Reference Bureau* in the Middle East countries in 2014 showed that the percentage of female circumcision is 96% for age 45 to 49 years old and 81% for age 15 to 19 years old (3). The survey also asked mothers about all daughters under 18 years old. 74 percent of daughter ages 15 to 17 have already been cut, while only 45 percent of daughter ages 0-3 years old are intended to cut by their mothers (6). Uncircumcised female is claimed as cruel person and disaster for society. It is also for determining in having husband for the woman in the future. Thus, the females need to circumcise (Sauki, 2010).

One of the indications being girl to woman is by practicing female circumcision. In the novel, Sultana explains that there are three ways in doing female circumcision done by many tribes in Arab. The first method is to cut the clitoris or the clitoral hood. It is the same as male circumcision. This method becomes the least common circumcision done towards women. The second method is faced by poor women belonged to one of tribes in Arab. It is when the clitoris and inner lips (*labia minora*) are cut off. It is the same as cutting of the head of a man's penis. This is the most common method for female circumcision. The third method is called as pharaonic circumcision. It is the most extreme method causing pain and suffering. It is when the clitoris, inner lips (*labia minora*) and outer lips (*labia mayora*) are cut off. It is the same as amputation of man's penis and scrotum around the testicles. The last treatment is the most dangerous female circumcision (Sasson, 2001).

The first type of female circumcision is the least common method that is permissible to do. It is because females do not get much violence. This way is called as female circumcision. However, if the circumcision is done more harmful, it is called as FGM. It is the same as torturing women because of the extreme ways. The harmful treatments in doing FGM can be influenced by some factors. One of them is caused by myth. Females are regarded as tempter or the source of sexual desire towards males. Society believes that if female's clitoris is circumcised, it will reduce female's libido. Then, female will not have big sexual desire to tempt male because their obligation towards male is only giving sexual services (Sauki, 2010). Thus, this type of female circumcision is to cut the source of female's sexual desire.

3.2 Temporary (*mut'ah*) Marriage

Oftentimes, people can do everything to keep maintaining their own highest honor. One of the cases can be deeply seen from the story about the practice of temporary marriage. It is called as *mut'ah* marriage. The word *mut'ah* is derived from Arabic language which means enjoyment, delight, or gratification (Shomad, 2012). The beginning and end of this marriage

are specified. A man pays her woman small dowry (*mahr*). Then, after the specified time is over, the marriage will end automatically. It is usually practiced by Syi'ah sect. Temporary marriage is practiced by common people.

In this novel, there is still a man taking the benefit from this marriage. This case is practiced by Aisha's father. He is one of men who practices temporary marriage or called *mut'ah*.

[Aisha's father] took advantage of a little-used Arab custom called *mut'a*, which is a "marriage of pleasure," or a "temporary marriage." Such a marriage can last from one hour to ninety-nine years. When the man indicates to the woman that the temporary arrangement is over, the two part company without a divorce ceremony. The Sunni sect of Islam, which dominates Saudi Arabia, considers such a practice immoral, condemning the arrangement as nothing more than legalized prostitution. Still, no legal authority would deny a man the right to such an arrangement (Sasson, 2001)."

Moreover, men practicing this temporary marriage often ask their assistant to find many young women to wed a night. Aisha tells Sultana that her father often asks his assistant to find "virginal daughters" whose families are "impoverished" that it is easier "to negotiate... for the right of temporary marriages...". It is to satisfy his sexual desire (Sasson, 2001).

Oftentimes, this practice is agreed by poor families that have four wives, many children, and little money. Thus, the deal between the assistants and the families can be agreed easily. It is because both of them get advantage each other. The assistants will get appreciation and salary from their works, while the families also will get the money even though they must sell their daughters. It is done in order to survive their life, so they must sacrifice their own daughters.

Young women who used to be the object of sexual desire through *mut'ah* are those who never get enough education and born from the poor families. They "were no more than eleven or twelve years old" and "were transported into Riyadh for a few nights of horror". After the contract ended, "the young brides were sent away, returned to their families wearing gifts of gold and carrying small bags filled with cash" (Sasson, 2001).

What Aisha's father practices are the influences of Arabian culture. He shows his over authority towards his family; Aisha and his wife. He can easily treat them based on his wants. He does not maintain his family well. He does not fulfill his duties in giving affection, money, rights, and other forms of good treatments that should be got by them. He also shows his over honor. It can be seen when he gives payment to poor families having daughters. It automatically shows his wealth as the indication of his honor being men. Thus, the way Aisha's father practicing temporary marriage cannot be separated from culture influence.

3.3 Thoughtless Divorce

In the royal family, Al-Sa'ud, the men can thoughtlessly divorce his wives. It is because they are able to divorce any of their wives simply by saying "I divorce you" or "You are divorced". Sometimes they have second thoughts and want to re-marry with other women. In addition, thoughtless divorce is also caused by bad services of the wives. This case is kind of men's authority towards women. They can obtain divorces easily and often divorce capriciously. Hence, the men feel that they are more powerful than the women.

The case of thoughtless divorce can be seen from Ali's marriage relationship. He is Sultana's brother who is high-tempered. Sultana knew that each of Ali's wives is divorced at least once, and Nada, his most beautiful wife is divorced twice. Oftentimes, when Ali is getting anger, he will divorce his wives. On the contrary, when his anger is getting down, he will repent it and ask her wives he has divorced to keep staying for a day. Ali takes the benefit that the men can divorce and resume the marriage as there are no problems happened in the household. In Islam, the men can do such matter twice. Then, if it is done in the third time, the men cannot resume the marriage anymore because there are other requirements must be fulfilled (Sasson, 2001).

As human being, we have ever been tired because of some problems. In this case, what Nada faced in her marriage life is painful. She shows her disappointment by refusing intercourse. She feels that the better way for her is divorced by Ali. Nada feels better if she is divorced and she is not worried about the custody of her children. It is because the three children are females. They are less worthy for Ali, so he allows Nada to take them (Sasson, 2001).

As Arabian culture practiced by many Arabs, after divorce, the mother gets legal guardianship of children if they are still suckling. Then, the father gets legal guardianship if the daughters are in the age of puberty and sons are in the age of seven. In many cases, if the children are sons, the father will not allow their mother to take them even though they are still child (Sasson, 2001). However, the case is different when the fact shows that Nada's children are females. Ali allows them to live together with their mother even though they are in the age of puberty. It is also caused by the culture which more honors the existence of sons than daughters.

Ali is one of Arab men who are influenced by culture in treating women. He shows his honor by having many wives, concubines, and children. It describes that he wants to show his authority to others as a man by doing thoughtless divorce. Then, he can cancel it again based on his desire. In addition, he shows his hate towards females by allowing his divorced wife,

Nada, to take her daughters living with her. What Ali practiced is fully the influence of culture. It causes sufferings towards women; his wives and daughters. They cannot get good treatments from Ali as the husband and father. Hence, Arabian royal family culture really influences the ways of treating the royal women.

Meanwhile, common people also practice thoughtless divorce. This case is caused by men's thoughts to show off their authority towards women. They can obtain divorces thoughtlessly without discussing first with the wives. Hence, the men feel that they are more powerful than the women.

The case of easy divorce can be seen from Yousif's marriage relationship. "Yousif proudly told Kareem that since they last met he had married and divorced one woman, who had given him two sons, and had married a second woman, fathering five sons in that union." (Sasson 62)

Yousif is Kareem's friend when they were studying together in London. Since their last meet, Yousif has divorced one woman who has given him two sons. Then, he has married again with another woman who has given him five sons. In this case, he is one of Arabs who put high pride towards sons. It is because he can easily divorce his first wife because of having two sons. He does not care about his divorced wife's feeling. It means he divorces her thoughtlessly without any sympathy and thankful. In fact, he has two sons is also from her uterus. He thinks that divorce is more important than just having two sons from that woman. Hence, he can practice divorce easily because of his high authority and pride to have many sons.

4. CONCLUSION

The result shows that the depiction of treating Arab women in Jean Sasson's *Princess Sultana's Daughters* comes in the form of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) Secondly, the practice of temporary (*mut'ah*) that makes women the object of sexual desire. Thirdly, the men in the royal family and common people often do thoughtless divorce by using valid law of divorce pronouncement ruled in Islam. They use it to take the benefit for themselves; marry other women who can bear many sons.

Although the men use Islamic teachings as the basis of their treatments towards women, but those three ways above are influenced by the culture. Arabian life describes that the concept of honor and shame gives different treatment towards men and women. The women often get sufferings and pain caused by men's authority. On the contrary, the men often get the benefits from treating them arbitrarily. This culture becomes the main trigger for women to continuously struggle their rights in life. Thus, the ways of treating Arab women described

above are the not implementation of the rules based on Islamic teachings, but it is influences of the culture.

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