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Jean Sasson: A New Orientalist (Visions and Beliefs in Muslim Community)

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ABSTRACT

In the last phase of twentieth and beginning of twenty first century, Jean Sasson, the American writer, emerges as new orientalist on the international horizon through the publication of her books. Just as the Chinese travellers, Fa-Hien and Huen-Tsang gave an elaborate account of fifth and seventh century socio-cultural and religio-political Indian life; Jean Sasson's writings throw ample light on the religious, social, cultural and political life of the Middle Easterners in the twentieth century. The paper explores the visions and beliefs of Muslim community of the Middle East region as depicted by Jean Sasson in her books. The faith in religion is expressed as great strength of the Arabic people. This faith is the epicenter of their foundation of life-style even in the modern context.

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Introduction

Every community has its own beliefs and visions of life. This set of beliefs not only creates the very basis of its culture and civilization, but binds and restricts also the life-style of the whole community. 'Religion is the first sense of community. Your sense of community occurs by reason of mutual experience with others. Where the religious sense of community and with it real trust and integrity can be destroyed, then that society is like a sandcastle unable to defend itself against the inexorable sea.'⁽¹⁾ Jean Sasson, as a new-orientalist has portrayed the very belief and faith of the Arabs in her novels very realistically and graphically.

Faith of the Arabs in Religion

In *Daughters of Arabia*, Jean Sasson explains the faith of true Muslims in detail, as she writes, "A Muslim has five obligations, called the Five Pillars of Islam. These obligations are (1) Profession of faith: 'There is no god but God; Mohammed is the messenger of God.' (2) A Muslim should pray five times a day, facing the city of Makkah. (3) A Muslim must pay a fixed proportion of his income, called *zakat*, to the poor. (4) During the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, a Muslim must fast. During the time called Ramdan, Muslims must abstain from food and drink from dawn to sunset. (5) A Muslim performs the *Haj*, or pilgrimage, at least once during his lifetime (if he has economic means)."⁽²⁾

About profession of faith, one of the five pillars of Islam, a Muslim scholar, Reza Aslan, writes in his great book, *No God But God* beautifully, "Islam preaches the continual self-revelation of God from Adam down to all the prophets who have ever existed in all religions. These prophets are called *Nabis* in Arabic. Such an individual is more than a mere prophet; he is God's messenger- *a rasul*. Thus, Muhammad, the merchant from Mecca, who over the course of the next twenty three years will recite the entire text of the Quran (literally, 'the recitation') would henceforth be known as *Rasul Allah*: 'the Messenger of God'. "⁽³⁾

On the issue of revelations by the messengers, he further writes, "In 613, THREE years after the Revelation had begun, Muhammad's message underwent a dramatic transformation,

one that is summed in the two-fold profession of faith, that would henceforth define both the mission and the principles of the movement:

There is no God but God, and Muhammad is God's messenger.

From this point forward in Muhammad's ministry monotheism that had been implicit in the earliest recitations became the dominant theology behind what had thus been primarily a social message."⁽⁴⁾

For the purpose of prayer and purity of heart and soul, it is required that there should be some place to make offerings to God and for this purpose, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is very benevolent in providing the facility of mosques for its natives to pray at their convenience. In this context Sultana narrates in *Princess*:

"In Saudi Arabia, Mosques are built in every neighbourhood, for the Government has placed top priority on providing a mosque within walking distance of every Muslim male. With prayers to be offered five times a day, it is more convenient to complete all the prayers if a man is a short distance from the mosque. Even though prayers can be given at any location so long as the person faces Makkah, it is through that access to a mosque is preferable. Living in one of the wealthiest district, we were served by a huge mosque made of white opalescent marble."⁽⁵⁾

For the royal areas, the mosques were built lavishly, beautifully and luxuriously as is clear from the above quote. The King of the land was so religious and singularly and exclusively careful about the religious needs of the people. Accordingly the natives of the Middle East are also fully devoted to their religion as portrayed by Jean Sasson in her books.

Observance of Ramdan Fast

The Middle Easterners are very true to their religion and its observance of the rituals. In this context, Jean Sasson has given a beautiful and significant name, *Chaining the Devil* to the chapter dealing with the observance of Ramdan fasts by the true Muslims. As an Orientalist, the writer records the religious activity of the Middle Easterners in the following words:

"Ramdan is one of the five pillars of Islam and it is obligatory that every adult Muslim observes its customs. The

Koran says: 'O ye who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you that you may learn self-restraint and remain conscious of God-----'(2:183)" (6)

Jean Sasson herein records the belief and faith of Sultana in the below mentioned passage: "Although I breathe somewhat easier during this special month, knowing that the doors of heaven are open and the doors of hell are closed, with the devil chained and unable to create mischief, a strict dedication to Ramadan has never suited, my particular character." (P-73, Desert Royal)

Sultana gives her thought to Ramdan that she has always been possessed with a great longing to be as pious as her mother and sisters. But she admits that she has not been flawless in her devotion. Even as a child, when she first learnt of the rituals of Ramdan, She had known that her failure to conform was inevitable. As an observance of Ramdan fast, Sultana narrates her experience how she was told to observe:

"I was told to impose silence on my tongue and avoid lying, obscene language, laughing and back-biting. My ears were to be closed to anything offensive. My hands should not reach out for evil; as my feet should be curbed from pursuing wickedness. If I inadvertently allowed heavy dust or thick smoke to enter my throat, my fast would be considered invalid! Not only was I to not to eat or drink during the hours between dawn and sundown, but, even when rinsing my mouth, I was warned to guard against accidentally swallowing a single drop of water. Most important of all I was to fast from my heart, meaning that all worldly concerns should be discarded and only thoughts of Allah should enter my mind. Lastly, I must atone for my thought or action that might distract me from remembering Allah." (P-73-74, Desert Royal)

Sultana related in the following passage that as she began fasting at adolescence, she was often forced to atone for my failure to achieve full compliance. On the observance of fast by heart, Jean Sasson offers the text of the holy Koran:

"The Koran says that Allah will not take you to task for that which is unintentional in your oaths, but He will take you to task for the oaths which you swear in earnest. The expiation therefore is the feeding of ten of the needy with the average of that you feed your own, or the clothing of them, or the liberation of a slave.------(5:89)" (P-74, Desert Royal)

About the routines of the Ramdan month, there is an enthusiastic announcement from the neighbourhood mosque to inform the believers of holy faith that the holy month of Ramdan is upon them. The new moon has been seen by the devout people. And as such the time has come for all Muslim to strive to move towards a state of perfection in the complete devotion. On this issue of routines in the month of Ramdan, Jean Sasson, narrates through Sultana:

"During the month of Ramdan, every routine of our normal life is altered. We rise at least an hour before dawn. Ablutions are made, verses of the Koran recited and prayers performed. Then a predawn meal, called *Sahoor*-usually consisting of cheese, eggs, yogurt or milk, fresh fruit and bread- is placed before us. We have to take care to finish this meal before the white thread of dawn appears, distinct from the black of night. After eating, but before the actual rising of the sun, more dawn prayers are performed.

For the remainder of the day, we are required to abstain from food, drink, smoking and sexual intercourse. During the day, we pray at noon and again in the late afternoon.

As soon as the sun retreats from the sky, our fast is broken by drinking a small amount of water, juice or milk. At this time a

prayer is offered: 'O God I have fasted for your pleasure. O God! Accept my fast and reward me.' Only then we take nourishment. The usual food that breaks our fast is dates. After light snack, the time quickly arrives for the sunset prayer and the dinner meal." (P75-76, Desert Royal)

Not only the Ramdan routines and the observing the fast and prayers to purify rather chaining the devil inside every person, is elaborately recorded by the writer, the celebration of Islamic festival is *Eid ul-Fitr* is also narrated through Sultana in Desert Royal. On the celebration of *Eid ul-Fitr*, Jean Sasson specifically details the Orient festival of the Middle easterners in the following words:

"This celebratory atmosphere increases as the month of Ramdan draws to a close. Muslims begin to prepare for *Eid ul-Fitr*, the three day feast which marks the close of Ramdan. While many devout Muslims prefer the austere period of striving for perfection, I find the celebration of Eid the most pleasurable time." (P-76, Desert Royal)

Jean Sasson gives a very realistic picture of the royal Middle Easterners' way of purifying their souls through prayers, fasting and chaining the devil in the month of Ramdan. The month of Ramdan comes to an end with the celebration of great Muslim festival, *Eid ul-Fitr*.

Pilgrimage of 'the Haj' by the Royals

Jean Sasson, as an Orientalist, records another vulnerable event of Muslim religion, the pilgrimage of Haj, very elaborately and immaculately in *Daughters of Arabia*. Sultana, the narrator of *Princess* and trilogy, is happily involved to visit Haj with family and earn the title of *Hajji*. About the pious pilgrimage, the fifth pillar of Islam, the writer devoutly expresses:

"God, Great and Glorious is He, said: 'And proclaim Among men the pilgrimage, they will come to you on foot and on every lean camel, coming from every ravine' (Al-Haj, 22-27)." (P-85, Daughters of Arabia)

The Haj is a demonstration of the solidarity of the Muslim people, and their submission to God. The pilgrimage occurs from 8th to 12th day *Dhu al-Hijjah*, the 12th and the last month of the Islamic calendar. *Ihram* is the name given to the special spiritual state in which Muslims live while on the pilgrimage.

The Haj is associated with the life of Islamic prophet Muhammad from the 7th century, but the ritual of pilgrimage to *Makkah* is considered by Muslims to stretch back thousands of years to the time of Abraham. Pilgrims join processions of hundreds of thousands of people, who simultaneously converge on *Makkah* for the week of the *Haj* and perform a series of rituals: each person walks counter-clockwise seven times around the Kaaba; the cube shaped building which acts as the Muslim direction of prayer, runs back and forth between the hills of Al-Safa and Al-Marwah, drinks water from the Zamzam Well, goes to the plains of Mount Arafat to stand in vigil, throws stones in a ritual Stoning of the Devil. Pilgrims then shave their heads; perform a ritual of animal sacrifice, and celebrate the three day global festival of Eid-al-Adha.

Jean Sasson describes the pilgrimage of Haj performed by Sultana and her family. Sultana and her family is replete with great enthusiasm and fervour when her husband Kareem said with a smile, "Sultana, I will face a thousand dangers if it will give you peace of mind. Together, we will take our children and go on the pilgrimage." (P-92, Daughters of Arabia) Finally the trip to *Makkah* was planned. On the topic of *Ihram*, Sultana narrates,

“Prior to that time, each member of the family had to enter *Ihram*, which is marked by an all-consuming intention of the heart to fulfill all the rites of the pilgrimage.

During the time of *Ihram*, nothing involving normal life is accepted. Hair cannot be cut, nails cannot be trimmed, beards cannot be shaved, perfumes cannot be worn, garment with seams cannot be worn, animals cannot be killed, sexual relations must be postponed, and direct contact between men and women avoided, until the sacred time of *Ihram* has ended.

----- *It was important for each person to enter into a state of purity even before the long awaited journey began.*” (P-93, *Daughters of Arabia*)

After reaching the Holy Mosque Makkah, the whole family of Sultana was guided by the appointed guide to go through the rituals of Haj and to perform their prayers. Sultana narrates the holy environment in the mosque:

“All around us other pilgrims called out their prayers to God as we pushed through expensive marble steps of the Holy Mosque. Taking off our shoes at the entrance of the mosque, we continued to walk and to pray, ‘God, you are the peace, and from You, peace proceeds. O God of ours, greet us with peace.’” (P-114, *Daughters of Arabia*) After finishing the prayers, they all moved to *Kaaba* for the ritual of *Tawaf*. “In our next sacred rite of pilgrimage, the *tawaf* or the circumambulation, people began to walk around the *Kaaba*. Keeping the *Kaaba* on our left, we circle the *Kaaba*, while reciting. ‘God is most Great. O God, grant us good in this world and good in the hereafter, and protect us from the torment of the fires in the hell.’” (P-116, *Daughters of Arabia*)

After the *tawaf*, the royal family went to Zamzam Well for the next rituals, as Sultana narrates: “After seven trips, my daughters and I drank the waters of Zamzam and sprinkled drops

of the liquid on our clothing.” (P-117, *Daughters of Arabia*) In this way, the royal family completed the very holy pilgrimage by performing the rites as defined in the Islamic culture. Sultana heaved a sigh of relief when she said, “My children were now entitled to place the honoured title of Hajji before their first name. In spite of the fact that I knew they would not do so, this term of respect reminds all Muslims that a person has fulfilled the fifth pillar of Islam. I knew that we had pleased God by doing Haj.” (P-154, *Daughters of Arabia*)

The Muslims announce proudly that they are true to the five pillars of Islam and the royal families are also on the line find a sense of equality while performing various rituals of the religion. They assert full in their religious rituals irrespective of their status in the Arabian society. Jean Sasson has realistically recorded the faith of royals in religion in her early novels without any fail.

Notes & References:

1. L. Ron Hubbard, ‘*Religious Influence in Society*’ <editor@freedommag.org
2. Jean Sasson, *Daughters of Arabia*, (London: Bantam Books, 1994), p.309. Subsequent quotations from novel are from this edition and page numbers are given in parentheses.
3. Reza Aslan, *No God But God*. (London: Arrow Books, 2011), p. 35.
4. Ibid, p.43.
5. Jean Sasson, *Princess*, (London: Bantam Books, 1994), p.76-77.
6. Jean Sasson, *Desert Royal*, (London: Bantam Books, 1994), p.73. Subsequent quotations from novel are from this edition and page numbers are given in parentheses.