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## The Strength of the Arabian Life-Style Depicted in Jean Sasson's Later Novels

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### Abstract

The strength of any race originates from the culture of the community. Now there is a renaissance of interest in culture and value of the society as they are considered the concentric circles of any life-style. A strong culture coupled with right values express the strength of any race and related deviance from such norms decidedly indicate the weakness of the race. Primarily, culture is a set of characteristics that set one group of people. This paper explores and analyses how Jean Sasson has presented the strength of Arabic people in her representing protagonists. Jean Sasson, the new Orientalist, has observed the life in Arabian Peninsula from a very close angle and created life like characters struggling for their existence. The strife of the protagonists in her novels brings the moments which test the strength of their personalities.

**Keywords:** Orientalist, Arabian peninsula, peshmerga, traits, turbulent.

### Introduction

Jean Sasson in her later books, *Mayada, Daughter of Iraq* and *Love in a Torn Land* elaborately expresses the life of people in Iraq under Saddam's regime. In *For the Love Of A Son*, Jean Sasson throws ample light on the life of people in Afghanistan under the impact of Russia and the Taliban. Her *Growing Up Bin Laden* intimates the reader with turbulent life in Arabian Peninsula. Jean Sasson's *Ester's Child*, a historical novel, portrays the reality of life in war though the main focus remains on the Middle East theme. This American writer has portrayed the life of Middle East people faithfully, truly and graphically in her later novels- *Ester's Child, Mayada: Daughter of Iraq, Love in a Torn Land, Growing Up Bin Laden and For the Love Of A Son*.

According to Maritain, "the novelist is detached from his subject in the way the laboratory is detached from the animal whose stomach he is deliberately dissecting. I, however, hold that the operation of the novelist is utterly different from that of the experimentalist. As far as the novel is concerned, Jacques Maritain has stopped at the old naturalistic ideas. It is a condition of art that the novelist should connive at the subject of creation, in spite of the Maritain's warning, for the real novelist is not an observer, but a creator of fictitious life. It is not his function to observe life, but to create life. He brings living people into the world; he does not observe them from some lofty vantage point. He even confesses and, in a way, loses his own personality in the subject of his creation, and his identification with it pushed so far that he becomes his creation."<sup>(1)</sup>

Jean Sasson, the new Orientalist, has observed the life in Arabian Peninsula from a very close angle and created life like characters struggling for their existence. In the process of the creation of her novels, she herself deleted her personality, rather all the time she chose one or the other narrator to provide a realistic dress to her creation. She has depicted the life style of Arabian people as she observed and as an Orientalist she presented their life in her books – *Mayada, Daughter of Iraq, For The Love Of A Son, Love in a Torn Land, Growing Up Bin*

*Laden and Ester's Child*. These novels exhibit multifarious traits of Arabian life-style as the author has delved deep into their culture by living among them for about twelve years. She recorded familial, social and political life apart from throwing light on their strength and weakness as a whole.

### **The Strength of the Arabian Life-style in Jean Sasson's Later Novels**

The life-style of any race originates from the culture of the community. Now there is a renaissance of interest in culture and value of the society as they are considered the concentric circles of any life-style. A strong culture coupled with right values express the strength of any race and related deviance from such norms decidedly indicate the weakness of the race. Primarily, culture is a set of characteristics that set one group of people. Even if there are differences in culture, we spot out differences and agglomerate them under one umbrella. A culture defines how a set of abstract principles is translated into general human behaviour. Human behaviour emerges from three factors: *Human nature* (inherited and universally shared across all human cultures), *Culture* (collectively acquired principles) and *Personality* (a unique set of mental programmes, inherited and acquired). If a person is not exposed to other cultures, he finds it difficult to distinguish culture from human nature. We naturally assume that all these aspects are universal, but they are not. It is also important to distinguish those characteristics that are cultural as opposed to attributing such characteristics to individual personality quirks. Certain people, who don't surmount the cultural barrier, are subjected to be the victim of personal deviance, weaknesses of the personality.

The strength of a culture depends upon two factors. One is the degree to which the values of the culture are codified and effectively transmitted to all. The second is degree of pain people suffer for straying outside the cultural norms. The strongest cultures are those in which all members clearly know and understand the 'code' and also recognize the penalties for violation are harsh. Whereas strong cultures are successful at translating their abstract principles into general behaviour, weak cultures do this much less predictably and effectively. In general, the strength of the life style is associated with the adherence to virtues like courage, truth, perseverance, loyalty, self-discipline, hospitality, honour and self-reliance and related deviance to such virtues are the weaknesses of the community.

### **Self-discipline, Self-reliance and Courage of the Arabian People**

Self-discipline is the willingness to be hard on oneself first and then if needed help with the development with others, so that greater purposes may be achieved. We must put on ourselves the virtue of being hard and be a role model for others. Fidelity and self-discipline often work very closely together, with discipline providing the will-power needed to retain one's fidelity. This carries forth from our personal sphere to that of the tribe and folk overall. Self-reliance is the spirit of independence, which is achieved not only for an individual, but also for the family, clan, tribe and nation. It is not a concept of denying one's inter-connectedness with others, but of ensuring that one can take care of oneself first, then ones' family, tribe and nation. And courage is the bravery to do what is right at all times. Courage is more than just the martial courage, especially in modern times. It is the inner strength and conviction that allows us to face danger and do the needful on the spur of the moment. Jean Sasson has shown these fair attributes

in plenty in *For The Love Of A Son*, *Growing Up Bin Laden*, *Love in a Torn Land* and *Mayada, Daughter of Iraq*.

Jean Sasson has portrayed the character of Ajab Khail, the father of the narrator, Maryam Khail in *For The Love Of A Son* with all these basic traits. Ajab joined military school for the rigorous training of the self to develop his discipline and mental courage. In *For The Love Of A Son* Maryam relates an event how he travelled from adulthood to manhood. Ajab's step brother, Shair Khan Khail was inflicting tortures on Ajab's mother after the death of his father. Shair Khan wanted to remarry Ajab's mother and when she denied complying with his order, he had ordered her to be stoned to death. Everything was set and prepared for the stoning ceremony.

Ajab Khail rose to the occasion, as Maryam narrates:

"He (Ajab) could hear the wails of his sisters and, believing his mother must have already died under a barrage of stones, he jumped from his still-moving horse. When he caught a glimpse of the stones, piled high for stoning, he exhaled in relief, but when he saw his mother being led to the centre of the courtyard. She was staring trancelike at the hole in the ground that was awaiting her body and she did not notice her son.

Knowing that he did not have much time, my father rushed past the gathering crowd, ran inside the galah (castle, where the family was living) and shouted for his brother.

When he saw his brother, he fell to his knees, 'Brother! Do not kill my mother. I will take her and my sisters away from the galah. You will never see us again. I will never return here or to school. I will give you all inheritance, my brother. Only let my mother live. You cannot kill her. You have no right under Allah to kill her for such a thing.'

Without waiting for his brother's response, my father sprinted to the courtyard and wrapped his arm round his mother, shouting for his sisters. 'Come to me, sisters! We are taking our mother and leaving the galah for ever'." (2)

Ajab displayed his mental courage in the crisis when the lives of his mother and sisters were at the stake; he did not hesitate for a moment and jumped to the occasion with complete confidence and declared his sense of self-reliance that they will not return back and he has the very courage to start his life afresh. Maryam describes further how her father exhibited rare courage in the face of dangerous calamity to his family women:

"The servants and guards paused, stones in their hands. They had no desire to execute Mayana (grandmother of the narrator). All the hatred for Mayana and her children came from within the ruling family, not from servants' quarters. With his sisters gathered round his mother, Ajab moved quickly towards the gate. Suddenly his brother's head servant came rushing from Shair's quarters, shouting, 'Khan Sahib! Wait! The Khan said that you must stay. He will honour your demands for your mother's life. And he gives you his word that your mother will not be forced to marry another man'.

The only advantage Ajab had now was that Shair had given his word through the mouth of his trusted servant, who had loudly announced it for all to hear. Shair would be greatly ashamed if he did not keep his word.

Ajab waited for Shair and kissed his mother's cheek, comforting her, telling her, 'Do not worry.' When Shair Khan finally stepped outside to glare at his brother, Ajab moved towards him, kissing his hands. Thank you for your mercy, my brother'." (P-29/30, *For The Love Of A Son*)

To save face, all was forgiven and Shair Khan invited his brother, Ajab to his quarters. Later on Ajab was sent to his military school by his brother. He joined his school for his self-discipline and later career. Maryam narrated further what the event resulted in the following words:

“My father often said that despite his fear and his youth, he became a man that day, the day he saved his mother from a gruesome death by stoning.” (P. 30- *For The Love Of A Son*)

Ajab Khan was interested in making an independent career to support his family and make his identity felt by the tribe and his clan. The narrator very well explained the position and mindset of her father in the following words:

“My father was an unusually a solemn young man, his head filled with the responsibilities that faced him. His only aim was to finish his education, settle into a steady job and return to galah and protect his mother and sisters.

After graduating with honours from the Military school, Ajab was enrolled in a British military college in northern India.” (P-31, *For The Love Of A Son*)

Ajab continued progress on the line of enriching his personality with self-discipline, self-reliance and courage, as Maryam describes further,

“Meanwhile my father had graduated from the Military school in with grades so impressive that he was set to win a scholarship to the United States, but, much to his dismay, when a playboy prince at the school claimed the scholarship, my father’s credentials were overlooked. However, a second scholarship for a British Military school in London soon became available, and my father was presented with that award instead.” (P-33, *For The Love Of A Son*)

Continuing on the line of becoming gracefully self-reliant, Ajab Khan got the highest rank in the Afghan society. Maryam narrates how his qualities afforded him honour:

“His combination of language skills, high education and travel soon resulted in his appointment as a major in Intelligence in the Afghan military. (P-37, *For The Love Of A Son*)

Not only Ajab made himself self-reliant and courageous with the self-discipline, but he also brought up his daughters, Maryam and Nadia on the same line with the best education possible for them. Maryam narrates the readers that till the last moment her father was a perennial source of inspiration to daughters and colleagues in his office.

In *Growing Up Bin Laden*, Jean Sasson records the life of Bin Laden family how Osama bin Laden trained his sons into hard core of life to self-discipline and courage. He also knew the value of these virtues in life. In this context, Omar narrates how his father would go in for the rigorous training of his son to make them courageous, self-disciplined and self-reliant:

“From the time onward, we were toddlers; he demanded that we be given very little water. As we grow older, he reinforced the importance of drinking water only when absolutely necessary. He explained that his children should be ‘tough’ and ‘patient’, so we must set our minds to resist nourishment of any kind for long as long as possible.

Identical rules were set in place for his daughters, but he left our mother in charge of instilling discipline in them. My sisters were more fortunate because our mother found it impossible to resist the cries and pleas of her little girls for water and food.”<sup>(3)</sup>

About the rigorous training, Omar in Laden further narrates:“Even when we were very young our father would transport his sons into the dry desert outside the Jeddah farm, adamant that we accompany him on long walks, even though we were all prone to asthma attacks. His harshest ruling was that we could not drink water until we returned from our hike. We were told that we should not even think about water. Of course, anyone knows that walking in the desert dangerously deletes the body of liquids. In fact, the government tells visitors to the deserts in Saudi Arabia to consummate as much water as they can.”(P-61, *Growing Up Bin Laden*)

Further, Omar describes in the same tone about the training in the mountain climbing as he says in the following words:

“There were so many so many these sessions that most of them have merged in my memory, although I do recall one specific trip when my father announced, ‘Today we were going to add rigorous training to our program. We will include mountain climbing. I have selected an area where there are many steep hills.’ His soft voice dropped, ‘There will be no water until we descend the hills.’ Despite this, we knew that he often carried a small container of water in case anyone collapsed from the heat.”(P-61, Growing Up Bin Laden)

Omar Bin Laden appreciates his father that he often became role models for his sons in such hiking expeditions to train his sons and getting himself hard along with them on climbing mountains. He finds the great quality of leadership in his father to prepare his sons accordingly fit for any situation in life since our life is regularly offering challenges in life. About these excursions, Omar explains further, “----- obediently trailing in our father’s footsteps. Up we walked, the searing Saudi sun beaming down our heads, our legs soon becoming tight with the steep incline. No one could keep pace with my father. He had physically trained himself since youth. Although he was not a man of muscle, no one could hike with the relentless persistence of Osama Bin Laden. After observing him on many desert excursions, I had the childish thought that my father could circle the globe without a moment’s respite or a drop of water.” (P-61-62, Growing Up Bin Laden)

In the second part of self-discipline training by his father, Omar throws light on the desire of his father that his sons should exercise great qualities of communication skills and humble conduct to impress upon the listeners. He narrates in the following words:

“We were allowed to speak in his presence, but our voices must be kept low and our words carefully measured. In other words, we should not ‘over-talk’. We were told that we must not become excited at any situation. We should be serious about everything. We were not allowed to tell jokes. We were ordered not to express joy over anything. He did say that he would allow us to smile so long as we did not laugh. If we were to lose control of our emotions and bark a laugh, we must be careful not to expose our teeth. I actually counted the exposed teeth, reprimanding his sons on the number their merriment revealed.” (P-62, Growing Up Bin Laden)

This training of discipline results in patriotic and love for his clan when Afghanistan Muslims were passing through a crucial phase and started campaign for collecting charity for the suffering fellowmen. Osama’s sense of getting self-reliant resulted in the charity when the Afghan Muslims were under invasion. About Osama’s pain to see his tribe in danger, His wife Najwa narrates in the following words:

“Osama simply said that a great evil had taken over a land. He was more upset than I had ever seen him regarding stories of innocent Muslim women and children who were being imprisoned and tortured to death. ----- By this time Osama was an adult in every way, and his reactions were those of a man who knew what he must do. He was at the fore front of the Saudi campaign to offer assistance to our beleaguered brethren in Afghanistan. In the beginning, his busy campaigns emphasized the gathering of money to support the tribal leaders in Afghanistan who were fighting full-fledged war against the invader. There were successful money drives at the mosques, and within the Bin Laden family unit, for they were a very generous family. All wanted to contribute, but few worked harder than Osama to raise funds on behalf of the Afghan victims.” (P-27, Growing Up Bin Laden)

Further, Najwa Bin Laden narrates how he collected charity;

“While it was no surprise that he and his brothers in the large Bin Laden family gave much money to the cause, because it is well known that the devout are generous when it comes to

Muslim charities, everyone was astonished that a wealthy Bin Laden son actually risked death or injury on the front line.” (P-33, Growing Up Bin Laden)

In *Love in a Torn Land*, Jean Sasson has exhibited an amalgam of courage, self-reliance and perseverance in the portrayal of Kurdish people of Sulaimaniya. Despite the atrocities of the Iraqi government, the Kurds were fully self-reliant and courageous to play the heroic role in the liberation of Kurdistan. The *Peshmergas*, the patriotic fighters of Kurdistan, were fully courageous in the face of Iraqi campaign of destroying their community. Joanna, the narrator, made a clear choice for marrying a *Peshmerga*, Sarbast and led such a life of *Peshmerga*. Joanna was happy to make such a choice, as she narrates the life and portrait of Sarbast in the following words:

*“I had a sudden memory of handsome Peshmerga in love with the beautiful Kurdish girl. I felt a weird, but wonderful kind of foreboding.*

*I tried to remember everything I knew about Sarbast, which was not much. I had seen him infrequently during our summer holidays in Sulaimaniya. He was older than me by three or four years. He lived in Kurdistan.”* <sup>(4)</sup>

Joanna made a choice for a life which was full of thorns; her perseverance was tested at every step in her effort to realize her aim of life. Sarbast and fighters of Kurdistan displayed their utmost courage in the face of death prepared by the Iraqi attacks on these Kurds. They did not lose control over their self-discipline and courage; rather they exercised the great quality of perseverance in their fight. The Chemical Ali made chemical attacks on the hills of Kurdistan frequently and killed a large number of *Peshmerga*. But the Iraqi government could not break the courage of these freedom fighters and at last they got independence.

In *Mayada, Daughter of Iraq*, Jean Sasson brings in another strong character, Mayada who also exercised the strength of self-reliance and courage, but kept herself fully under discipline. Mayada is the descendent of royal family of Ottoman Empire. She always had the feeling of being self-reliant and courageous for making her independent career in Iraq the ruled by Saddam Hussein. Jean Sasson gives us a peep into Mayada’s family in the following words:

*“Mayada’s mother, Salwa Al-Husri was the daughter of Sati Al-Husri, while Mayada’s father, Nizar Al-Askari was the son of the famed warrior and government official Jafar Al-Askari. Mayada’s family home was a popular ‘political house’ and visits and telephone calls from politically connected world figures were common. Because she was the beloved daughter and granddaughter, her family helped guide her life down a path of learning and privilege; she was expected to pursue a career in medicine or art and to live a life of culture.”* <sup>(5)</sup>

She tried her hand journalism, printed books, and earned honours from the President of Iraq, Saddam Hussein three times. She started a business of her own to be self-reliant with great courage to bring up her two children in an honourable manner in disturbed Iraq. She narrates in the following word:

*“She had never been as joyous as on the day she slipped her dollars into her handbag and entered a store to purchase six computers and three printers. ----- With her dollars and determination, Mayada reentered the world of commercial printing.”* (P-41, *Mayada, Daughter of Iraq*)

Mayada made progress in this business and ad earned self-reliance with determination and courage. She had a good dedicated staff at work. ‘She had a committed group of employees, and not only because she paid higher salaries than most other printing offices. They were simply a well educated serious bunch.’ (P-36, *Mayada, Daughter of Iraq*) But the circle of imprisonment made Mayada sick of Iraq and accordingly planned to migrate into some other country for a better life.

George Eliot, in this reference, beautifully counts and comments on the inner strength of man, “It is the moment when our resolution seems about to become irrevocable--when the fatal iron gates are about to close upon us--that tests our strength. Then, after hours of clear reasoning and firm conviction, we snatch at any sophistry that will nullify our long struggles, and bring us the defeat that we love better than victory.”<sup>(6)</sup> In this respect, Jean Sasson has shown such levels of human strength in plenty in her characters in her later books which in larger extent show the Arabian life-style that they are self-discipline, courageous and self-reliant to make their life full of joy. They also exhibited the quality of perseverance as a hallmark of Arabian people.

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