

The Illusion Of Freedom: Women, Wealth, And Oppression In Jean Sasson's Princess Series

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Abstract

This paper examines the complex paradox of wealth and gender oppression in Jean Sasson's acclaimed Princess series, focusing on Princess Sultana's narrative as a lens through which to understand the multifaceted nature of female subjugation in Saudi Arabian society. Despite access to extraordinary material privilege, the women portrayed in these memoirs experience profound restrictions on their autonomy and selfhood, revealing the intricate ways in which patriarchal systems operate independently of economic factors. Through textual analysis, this research identifies three principal mechanisms of control that transcend class boundaries: legal disenfranchisement, spatial confinement, and psychological manipulation. The paper argues that Sasson's work demonstrates how financial resources may simultaneously alleviate certain aspects of oppression whilst reinforcing others, creating an illusion of freedom that masks deeper structural inequalities. This research contributes to feminist literary criticism by illuminating how material wealth, rather than functioning as a liberating force, can serve as a gilded cage that obscures and sometimes intensifies gender-based oppression. Ultimately, the Princess series reveals that authentic emancipation requires fundamental structural changes beyond economic privilege, challenging Western assumptions about the relationship between financial autonomy and women's liberation in non-Western contexts.

Keywords: Jean Sasson, Princess Sultana, Saudi Arabia, women's rights, wealth inequality, gender oppression, patriarchal control, female agency, Islamic feminism, literary criticism

Introduction

In the realm of literary representation of Middle Eastern women's lives, few works have captured public imagination with the same intensity as Jean Sasson's Princess series. Beginning with the publication of *Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia* in 1992, Sasson's collaboration with her pseudonymous source "Princess Sultana" offered Western readers unprecedented access to the ostensibly private world of elite Saudi women. The trilogy, later expanded to include additional volumes, presents a compelling paradox: women of extraordinary privilege who nonetheless experience profound restrictions on their basic freedoms. This contradiction forms the central inquiry of this paper: How does economic privilege intersect with gender-based oppression in Sasson's representation of Saudi women's lives?

The Princess series presents a unique opportunity to examine how wealth mediates but fails to eliminate gendered systems of control. Princess Sultana, a member of the Saudi royal family, possesses material resources beyond the imagination of most readers. Yet her narrative is fundamentally one of constraint, limitation, and resistance. As she states in the first volume: "I was a prisoner, regardless of my royal title. I was a prisoner of my gender" (Sasson, *Princess*, 76). This juxtaposition of extreme wealth with extreme restriction creates a powerful lens through which to analyse the mechanisms of patriarchal control that transcend economic status.

This paper aims to investigate what I term 'the illusion of freedom,' the façade of autonomy created by material privilege that masks deeper structural oppression. Through close textual analysis of Sasson's works, I will demonstrate how wealth simultaneously alleviates certain aspects of gender

oppression whilst reinforcing others. Furthermore, I will argue that Sasson's portrayal reveals how financial resources can paradoxically become instruments of control, creating gilded cages that render oppression less visible but no less profound.

Three research questions guide this investigation:

1. What mechanisms of patriarchal control, as depicted in Sasson's series, operate independently of economic status?
2. How does wealth function as both a tool of resistance and a means of reinforcing oppression for the women portrayed?
3. In what ways does Sasson's representation challenge or reinforce Western assumptions about the relationship between financial autonomy and women's liberation?

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond literary analysis. As debates about women's rights in Saudi Arabia continue to evolve, particularly following recent reforms such as the lifting of the driving ban in 2018 understanding the complex relationship between economic privilege and gender oppression becomes increasingly relevant. By examining Sasson's influential portrayal of elite Saudi women's lives, this paper contributes to broader discussions about the limitations of material solutions to structural inequalities.

Literature Review

Jean Sasson's Princess trilogy has generated significant scholarly attention since its publication, situated at the intersection of several academic conversations about women's narratives, cross-cultural representation, and gender politics in the Middle East. This review examines key scholarly perspectives on Sasson's works and identifies the theoretical frameworks that inform this paper's analysis.

Sasson's works emerged during a period of increased Western interest in Middle Eastern women's lives following the 1991 Gulf War. As Mohja Kahf (2000) notes, this period witnessed a resurgence of what she terms the "oppressed Muslim woman" narrative in Western discourse a trope with deep historical roots in Orientalist traditions. Several scholars, including Amira Jarmakani (2008) and Gillian Whitlock (2007), have situated Sasson's Princess trilogy within this broader context of Western fascination with "unveiling" narratives that promise to reveal the "hidden" lives of Middle Eastern women. These scholars express concern about how such narratives potentially reinforce Orientalist tropes whilst claiming to challenge them.

The authenticity and generic classification of Sasson's works have been subjects of scholarly debate. Lisa Waller (2010) examines the Princess trilogy as a form of "collaborative autobiography," highlighting the complex negotiation of voice and authority that occurs when Western writers mediate non-Western women's stories. Waller questions whether Sasson's role as interlocutor inevitably shapes these narratives in ways that cater to Western expectations. Similarly, Nawar Al-Hassan Golley (2007) explores the tension between autobiography and ethnography in Sasson's works, suggesting that the trilogy functions simultaneously as personal testimony and cultural commentary for Western readers.

Feminist scholars have offered varied assessments of the trilogy's feminist politics. Amal Amireh (2000) criticises what she perceives as the books' reinforcement of stereotypical Western perceptions of Arab women as uniformly oppressed victims requiring rescue. Conversely, Therese Saliba (2002) offers a more nuanced reading, suggesting that while the trilogy risks reinforcing certain Orientalist tropes, it also presents a complex portrait of women's agency and resistance within severely constrained circumstances. Saliba argues that Princess Sultana's narrative complicates simplistic victimisation narratives by depicting her as both oppressed by and complicit in systems of privilege. Few scholars, however, have specifically examined the intersection of wealth and gender

oppression that forms the central concern of this paper. While Maryam Khalid (2011) briefly discusses how class status affects women's experiences of

gender restrictions in Saudi Arabia, and Saddeka Arebi (1994) examines elite women's writing in Saudi Arabia, neither specifically addresses how extreme wealth creates particular paradoxes for women's liberation. This paper aims to address this gap by focusing explicitly on how royal privilege shapes Sultana's experience of both oppression and resistance.

Theoretically, this analysis draws upon several key frameworks from feminist and postcolonial scholarship. Lila Abu-Lughod's (2013) critique of "saving" narratives about Muslim women provides a valuable lens for examining how Western reception of Sasson's works might reinforce problematic rescue fantasies whilst ignoring the complex realities of women's lives. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's (1988) analysis of how Western feminist discourse constructs a monolithic "third world woman" informs this paper's attention to how Sultana's narrative both challenges and sometimes reinforces such constructions. Finally, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) concepts of strategic essentialism and the complexities of representing subaltern voices help frame questions about Sasson's role as mediator of Sultana's experience.

This paper builds upon these existing scholarly conversations whilst offering a specific focus on the paradoxical relationship between extreme wealth and continued gender oppression – what I term the "illusion of freedom" that characterises Princess Sultana's narrative across the trilogy.

Feminist Responses to Sasson's Princess Series

Critical reception of Sasson's work has been notably polarised along disciplinary lines. Literary scholars have often approached the texts with significant scepticism, questioning both their authenticity and their representation of Saudi women. Amireh (2000) critiques what she calls the "packaging of the Princess," arguing that Sasson's series exemplifies problematic Western publishing patterns that commodify Eastern women's suffering. Similarly, Kahf (2008) positions the Princess books within a tradition of "rescue narratives" that reinforce orientalist tropes about Muslim women awaiting Western liberation.

In contrast, scholars in gender studies have sometimes embraced Sasson's work as valuable, if flawed, documentation of women's lives otherwise inaccessible to Western scholarship. Al-Sharif (2019) acknowledges the controversies surrounding authorship but argues that the experiences portrayed align with testimony from other Saudi women of Princess Sultana's generation. Jones (2011) suggests that dismissals of Sasson's work often reflect academic elitism rather than substantive critique, noting that "the Princess series, regardless of its contested status, has done more to raise awareness of Saudi women's legal status than decades of academic writing" (213).

Notably absent from much of this discourse is substantive analysis of how class privilege features in the narrative. While critics like Mahmood (2015) mention the protagonist's royal status, few have made it central to their analysis, creating a gap this paper seeks to address.

Wealth and Gender Oppression: Theoretical Frameworks

The relationship between economic status and gender oppression has been extensively theorised across disciplines. Feminist economists like Folbre (2010) have demonstrated how market systems interact with patriarchal structures to create distinct patterns of constraint for women across class lines. In the context of Middle Eastern societies specifically, Abu-Lughod's seminal work (2013) challenges simplistic narratives about Muslim women's oppression, noting that class and urban/rural divides create vastly different experiences of gender norms.

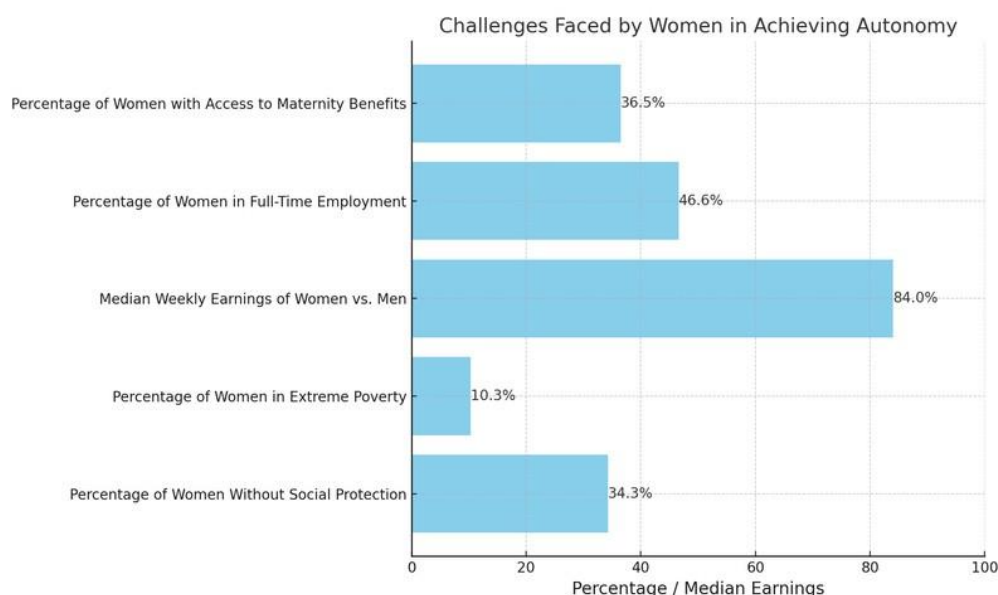
Sociological research by Al-Rasheed (2013) on elite Saudi women documents the specific ways wealth modifies but does not eliminate patriarchal control. Her findings suggest that royal and upper-class women often trade visible forms of oppression for less obvious but equally constraining expectations regarding family honour and dynastic responsibility. This research provides crucial

context for understanding Princess Sultana's position.

The concept of "intersectionality," first articulated by Crenshaw (1989) and expanded by Collins (2019), offers a particularly useful framework for this paper. Intersectional analysis recognises that oppression operates through multiple, overlapping systems of power. Applied to the Princess series, this approach allows examination of how gender-based restrictions interact with class privilege to create distinctive experiences that cannot be reduced to either dimension alone.

The concept of freedom in the context of women's lives

In examining the concept of freedom for women, it is crucial to recognise that true autonomy often remains elusive, particularly within oppressive structures highlighted in Jean Sasson's Princess series. The narratives illustrate how wealth, while typically associated with greater freedom, can serve as a double-edged sword. Women may gain financial independence, yet they often remain shackled by societal expectations and cultural norms, which dictate their roles and behaviours. This paradox is further compounded by systemic inequalities that persist even amidst affluence, as illustrated by various legal frameworks that perpetuate their subjugation and objectification (Peters A). Additionally, the biblical narratives that shaped many cultural perceptions about womanhood and purity serve to reinforce these restrictive paradigms (Paris C). Thus, the quest for genuine freedom must confront not just the imbalance of wealth but also the deeply ingrained societal misconceptions that restrict women's autonomy.



This bar chart illustrates the various challenges women face in achieving autonomy. It displays the percentage of women without social protection, the percentage living in extreme poverty, their median weekly earnings compared to men, the percentage in full-time employment, and access to maternity benefits. The data reflects systemic inequalities, including a significant gender pay gap and limited access to employment opportunities and maternity benefits.

Western Reception and the Politics of Representation

The Princess series emerged during a period of intense Western interest in Muslim women's lives, a phenomenon critically examined by scholars like Abu-Lughod (2013) and Cooke (2007). These critics question the selective appetite for narratives that confirm pre-existing assumptions about Islamic societies. Whitlock (2005) positions Sasson's work within what she terms "soft weapons" life narratives deployed in service of political agendas during periods of cultural conflict, particularly post-9/11.

The question of authenticity haunts critical discussion of Sasson's work. While Sasson maintains that her books represent Princess Sultana's experiences faithfully, the use of a pseudonym and Sasson's role as mediator have led to persistent questions about the narrative's status. Malti-Douglas (2001) suggests that debates about authenticity miss the more significant point: regardless of their strict factuality, the Princess books function as powerful cultural texts that both reflect and shape Western perceptions of Saudi women's lives.

The commercial success of Sasson's series, with millions of copies sold worldwide, also raises questions about the commodification of women's suffering. Zine (2006) examines how narratives of Muslim women's oppression have become a lucrative publishing genre, creating market incentives that potentially distort representation. This perspective prompts critical consideration of how Princess Sultana's wealth is portrayed and received by Western audiences.

Research Gap and Contribution

While existing scholarship has examined Sasson's work through various lenses, the specific paradox of wealth and oppression remains undertheorized. This paper addresses this gap by centring the analysis on how economic privilege functions concerning gender oppression in the Princess narrative. By focusing specifically on this intersection, I aim to contribute a more nuanced understanding of how patriarchal control operates across class boundaries and how material resources may simultaneously enable resistance and reinforce constraint.

Methodology

This research employs textual analysis as its primary methodology, with feminist literary criticism and intersectionality theory providing the conceptual framework. The entire Princess series forms the corpus for analysis, including:

- Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia (1992)
- Princess Sultana's Daughters (1994)
- Princess Sultana's Circle (2000)
- Princess Sultana's Time (2010)
- Growing Up Bin Laden: Osama's Wife and Son Take Us Inside Their Secret World (2009)

While the last volume focuses primarily on a different family, it contains relevant comparative material on wealthy Saudi women's experiences.

Wealth as Insufficient Protection: Legal Disenfranchisement

The most striking aspect of Sasson's portrayal is how wealth fails to shield women from fundamental legal disenfranchisement. Despite their royal status, Princess Sultana and her female relatives remain subject to Saudi Arabia's guardianship system, under which women require male permission for major life decisions. This system operates uniformly across class lines, creating a legal framework of control that wealth cannot circumvent.

The Guardianship System: Universal Constraint

Throughout the series, Sasson documents the guardianship system's impact on elite women. In a particularly revealing passage, Princess Sultana describes her daughter Maha's predicament when seeking medical treatment:

"My daughter, a princess of Al Sa'ud, worth millions in her own right, could not sign the paper authorising her own treatment. I, her mother, could not sign. Only a male relative, her father, brother, or husband had the legal right to authorise treatment." (Sasson, *Princess Sultana's Daughters*, 187)

This excerpt encapsulates the central paradox: despite extraordinary wealth ("worth millions in her own right"), Maha lacks basic legal autonomy over her own body. The juxtaposition emphasises how

legal disenfranchisement operates independently of economic status. The mention of Maha's wealth serves to highlight its irrelevance in this context rather than its protective value.

Similar scenarios appear throughout the series. When Princess Sultana wishes to travel, she must obtain permission from her husband, regardless of her ability to finance the journey independently. When her niece Sara inherits a substantial fortune, she cannot access it without her male guardian's consent. In each case, wealth creates an illusion of independence that legal realities swiftly dispel.

Comparative Analysis: Wealth as Relative Advantage

While wealth cannot eliminate legal constraints, Sasson's narrative does reveal how it modifies their impact. A comparative analysis of experiences across class lines demonstrates this nuance:

- Bribery of officials to overlook permission requirements
- Employment of sympathetic male relatives as nominal guardians
- Leveraging international connections to access freedoms abroad
- Using financial incentives to influence male guardians' decisions

A particularly telling example appears in *Princess Sultana's Circle*, when Sultana describes her sister-in-law's method for travelling without explicit permission:

"Hadi rarely bothered with getting official permission from her husband. She simply paid his secretary to stamp and sign the necessary papers. With her wealth, she had created a system that worked for her, though technically she remained as constrained as any woman in the kingdom." (Sasson, *Princess Sultana's Circle*, 124)

This passage exemplifies the complex relationship between wealth and legal oppression. While Hadi's financial resources provide a workaround, Sasson's narrative emphasises that this represents adaptation to, rather than liberation from, the fundamental constraint. The phrase "technically she remained as constrained" underscores that the legal structure itself remains intact, with wealth merely enabling limited navigation within its confines.

The Limits of Financial Power: Marriage and Divorce

Marriage and divorce laws present perhaps the clearest illustration of wealth's limitations in protecting women from legal oppression. Throughout the series, even the wealthiest women find themselves vulnerable in matrimonial matters. Princess Sultana recounts numerous cases of royal women forced into unwanted marriages or unable to secure divorces despite their financial resources. The case of Princess Nura, Sultana's cousin, demonstrates this vulnerability. Despite her royal status and personal fortune, Nura cannot prevent her husband from taking additional wives, nor can she easily obtain a divorce when he becomes abusive:

"Nura discovered the bitter truth that all Saudi women eventually learn: in matters of marriage and divorce, a woman's wealth means little against a husband's absolute legal authority. She could buy palaces but not her freedom." (Sasson, *Princess*, 213)

Sasson's choice of contrast is significant: the ability to "buy palaces" represents the height of material privilege, yet it proves worthless in securing "freedom" in fundamental personal relationships. This juxtaposition emphasizes that patriarchal control operates through legal structures that explicitly prioritize male authority over female wealth.

The Spatial Politics of Privilege: Confinement and Mobility

Beyond legal constraints, Sasson's series documents how patriarchal control operates through the regulation of physical space and mobility. Here again, wealth creates a complex dynamic expanding certain spatial freedoms while reinforcing others forms of confinement.

Expanded Private Domains: The Gilded Cage

Wealth provides Princess Sultana and her peers with expansive private domains – palatial homes, private gardens, and exclusive women-only spaces. These environments offer a form of protected autonomy unavailable to less privileged women. As Sultana describes her family compound:

"Within these walls, we women created our own world. Our wealth allowed us to build swimming pools, tennis courts, and lush gardens where we could remove our abayas and move freely, invisible to male eyes outside our family circle." (Sasson, *Princess Sultana's Daughters*, 45)

This passage illustrates how wealth mitigates certain aspects of spatial confinement by creating elaborate "women's worlds" within acceptable boundaries. The phrase "within these walls" is telling: freedom exists, but only within prescribed limits that ultimately reinforce separation from public life.

International Mobility: Temporary Escapes

A distinctive spatial privilege afforded by wealth is access to international mobility. Throughout the series, Princess Sultana and her female relatives travel to Europe, America, and other Middle Eastern countries where different gender norms prevail. These journeys provide temporary escapes from Saudi restrictions:

"London was our oxygen. There, we could breathe freely, walk the streets with our faces uncovered, drive our own cars, and speak to men who were neither relatives nor servants. For a few precious weeks each year, we tasted a different kind of life." (Sasson, *Princess*, 167)

The metaphor of oxygen is significant – suggesting that the freedom of movement experienced abroad is as essential as breathing. Yet the phrase "for a few precious weeks" underscores the temporary nature of this liberation. These international interludes create what might be termed a "geographical consciousness" – awareness of alternative possibilities that makes return to restriction more painful.

Sasson portrays these journeys as simultaneously liberating and disorienting. When Sultana's daughter Maha returns from school in London, she struggles to readjust to Saudi limitations:

"Having tasted freedom, Maha found the return to restriction unbearable. Her wealth had given her a glimpse of another life but created no path to sustain it at home." (Sasson, *Princess Sultana's Daughters*, 203)

This observation highlights another paradox: wealth provides access to alternative experiences that heighten awareness of constraint rather than eliminating it. The contrast between foreign freedom and domestic restriction creates cognitive dissonance that wealth cannot resolve.

The Veil as Class Signifier

Sasson's portrayal of veiling practices reveals complex intersections of class, piety, and control. For Princess Sultana and her peers, the quality and design of the abaya (full body covering) and niqab (face veil) function as class markers while maintaining their primary purpose of concealment:

"My sisters and I wore abayas of the finest silk, custom-made in Paris, with subtle embroidery visible only to the discerning eye. Even in this garment of oppression, wealth announced itself." (Sasson, *Princess*, 92)

The phrase 'even in this garment of oppression' encapsulates the dynamic: wealth modifies the experience of restriction without removing it. The ability to transform the veil into a luxury item represents adaptation to constraint rather than liberation from it.

Sasson documents how elite women develop elaborate codes to distinguish themselves while veiled in public. Designer handbags, distinctive perfumes, and glimpses of expensive jewellery function as class signals in environments where faces remain hidden. This transformation of restriction into status display represents another form of "illusion of freedom", the ability to express individuality within constraints that nonetheless remain fundamentally limiting.

Psychological Dimensions: Wealth and Mental Oppression

Perhaps the most insidious form of oppression documented in Sasson's series operates at the psychological level. Here, wealth creates particularly complex dynamics, sometimes intensifying rather than alleviating mental constraints.

Heightened Surveillance of Elite Women

Throughout the series, Sasson portrays royal women as subject to intensified scrutiny regarding their moral conduct. As representatives of powerful families, their behaviour faces constant monitoring that exceeds what ordinary women experience:

"As a princess of Al Sa'ud, my reputation was not mine alone but belonged to the family. Every action, every rumour, every perceived transgression threatened not just my standing but the honour of men whose power depended on public respect." (Sasson, *Princess*, 118)

This passage highlights how elite status creates additional psychological pressure rather than freedom. The phrase "not mine alone" emphasises the collective ownership of royal women's reputations. Their visibility and connection to power make them targets of heightened control rather than beneficiaries of relaxed standards.

Sasson documents how this surveillance operates through extensive networks of servants, relatives, and social connections who report on women's behaviour. Princess Sultana describes the impossibility of true privacy:

"Our wealth bought us many things, but not secrets. Every palace had a hundred eyes, every royal woman a dozen watchers. The illusion of privacy was perhaps the cruellest deception of all." (Sasson, *Princess Sultana's Circle*, 76)

The term "illusion" again appears; wealth creates an appearance of privacy through physical space, but simultaneously enables more comprehensive monitoring through the employment of staff who function as inadvertent informants.

Internalisation of Constraints

A recurring theme in Sasson's portrayal is how women across class lines internalise patriarchal values, often becoming enforcers of the very restrictions that limit them. Here, wealth creates distinctive patterns of complicity and resistance.

Royal women in the series frequently enforce traditional gender norms despite their occasional rebellions. Princess Sultana acknowledges this contradiction in her own behaviour:

"I raged against my husband's restrictions yet monitored my daughters with similar vigilance. Our wealth allowed us to break small rules while leaving the fundamental cage intact and worse, I found myself guarding its door." (Sasson, *Princess Sultana's Daughters*, 156)

This self-awareness highlights the psychological complexity of privilege within oppression. Wealth enables "breaking small rules" while paradoxically increasing investment in the overall system that confers elite status. The metaphor of "guarding the door" of one's own cage powerfully illustrates this internalization.

The Double-Edge of Education

Education represents one of the most significant privileges wealth affords women in Sasson's narrative. Princess Sultana and her peers have access to international education unavailable to most Saudi women of their generation. Yet Sasson portrays education as psychologically double-edged, expanding consciousness while increasing awareness of limitation.

Sultana's daughter Maha, educated in London, exemplifies this paradox:

"My daughter returned with knowledge that transformed her mind, but found no place to apply it. Her education became another luxury item, appreciated within our women's quarters but rendered useless in a society that valued only her reproductive capacity." (Sasson, *Princess Sultana's Daughters*, 213)

The description of education as "another luxury item" parallels earlier discussions of veiling something transformed by wealth into a status marker

while remaining disconnected from substantive power. The juxtaposition of "transformed mind" with "reproductive capacity" emphasises the contradiction between intellectual development and social valuation.

For Princess Sultana herself, education creates painful awareness without proportionate ability to effect change:

"My wealth purchased knowledge that allowed me to see my cage clearly, to understand its historical construction and political purpose. This vision was both a gift and a curse. I could name my oppression, but I remained subject to it." (Sasson, Princess, 156)

This passage articulates the central psychological burden wealth creates heightened consciousness without corresponding agency. The ability to 'name my oppression' represents partial liberation at the intellectual level that nonetheless fails to translate into structural freedom.

Resistance and Agency: How Wealth Enables Limited Contestation

While Sasson's narrative emphasizes the persistence of oppression across class lines, it also documents how wealth enables distinctive forms of resistance unavailable to less privileged women.

Financial Leverage as Resistance Tool

Throughout the series, Princess Sultana employs her financial resources as instruments of resistance against both individual men and systemic constraints. These acts of financial rebellion take various forms:

- Funding education for lower-class girls
- Secretly supporting women's shelters
- Bribing officials to overlook regulatory violations
- Using financial pressure to influence male relatives' decisions
- Creating economic dependencies that provide leverage in negotiations

A representative example appears in Princess Sultana's Circle, when Sultana uses her wealth to rescue a young woman from an abusive marriage:

"I could not change the law that bound her to this man, but my money could create escape routes invisible to those without resources. I purchased her freedom through channels that wealth renders accessible, not legal freedom, for that remained impossible, but physical removal from danger." (Sasson, Princess Sultana's Circle, 187)

This passage articulates both the power and limitations of wealth as resistance: it creates "escape routes" and enables "physical removal" while leaving the fundamental legal structure ("the law that bound her") intact. The phrase "not legal freedom" emphasises this crucial distinction between pragmatic workarounds and structural change.

Collective Action Among Elite Women

Sasson portrays how wealthy women leverage their collective resources to create support networks and resistance strategies. Princess Sultana's "circle" referenced in the third volume's title represents an informal coalition of elite women who pool their influence to assist vulnerable women across class lines:

"We had no formal organisation, no official status such things remained impossible in our context. But we had wealth and connections that, deployed strategically by a dozen determined women, could sometimes circumvent restrictions that no single princess could overcome alone." (Sasson, Princess Sultana's Circle, 45)

This description highlights how collective action amplifies the limited power of individual wealth. The qualification "sometimes circumvent" again emphasizes partial rather than complete effectiveness resistance remains constrained by broader structural limitations.

The Paradox of 'Purchasing' Freedom

A recurring motif in Sasson's narrative is the concept of "purchasing" freedom using financial resources to buy exemptions from restrictions. This concept appears explicitly when Princess Sultana reflects on her daughter's education abroad:

"I had purchased for my daughter a temporary taste of liberty with my husband's money. This irony did not escape me – using the wealth of patriarchy to create small spaces of freedom from it." (Sasson, *Princess Sultana's Daughters*, 176)

The acknowledgement of 'irony' demonstrates Sultana's awareness of the contradiction inherent in this approach. The phrase "small spaces of freedom" emphasises both the possibility and limitation of wealth-based resistance – it creates exceptions rather than transformations.

This paradox reaches its clearest expression when Sultana reflects on the fundamental inadequacy of financial solutions to structural problems:

"We had learned to convert our wealth into modest freedoms, to purchase exceptions and exemptions. But true liberation could not be bought – it required dismantling systems that no amount of money could overcome." (Sasson, *Princess Sultana's Circle*, 234)

This statement encapsulates the central argument of this paper: wealth provides "modest freedoms" and "exceptions" while leaving intact the fundamental structures of oppression. The distinction between purchasable "exemptions" and true "liberation" articulates the illusion of freedom that wealth creates an appearance of autonomy that masks continuing constraint.

Western Reception: Reading Wealth in Cross-Cultural Context

Sasson's portrayal of wealthy Saudi women has generated particular responses from Western readers that merit critical examination. The intersection of gender oppression with extreme wealth creates a narrative that both challenges and reinforces Western assumptions about Middle Eastern societies.

The Appeal of Royal Oppression Narratives

The commercial success of Sasson's series suggests particular resonance with Western audiences. The combination of royal intrigue with gender oppression creates a narrative that satisfies multiple reading desires simultaneously:

- Voyeuristic access to elite lifestyles
- Confirmation of assumptions about Islamic gender practices
- Fairy-tale elements inverted (princesses who lack freedom)
- Emotional connection with privileged yet sympathetic protagonists

This combination may explain why Princess Sultana's story gained wider reception than narratives of lower-class Saudi women that lack the element of royal glamour. As critic El-Ariss (2013) notes, "The princess narrative offers Western readers the satisfaction of discovering that wealth fails to protect women from patriarchy, confirming beliefs about the fundamental otherness of Islamic societies regardless of class position" (87).

Material Privilege and Reader Sympathy

Sasson's portrayal navigates a complex balance between emphasising Princess Sultana's oppression while acknowledging her extraordinary privilege. This creates potential challenges for reader identification, which Sasson addresses through strategic narrative choices:

- Emphasising Sultana's empathy for less privileged women
- Documenting her use of wealth to assist others
- Acknowledging her privilege while focusing on shared gender constraints
- Portraying her as rebelling against, rather than benefiting from, the system

A representative passage demonstrates this approach:

"I knew my suffering was not comparable to that of women without resources. My gilded cage provided comforts they could never imagine. Yet we shared fundamental constraints on our humanity that transcended material difference." (Sasson, Princess, 203)

The explicit acknowledgement of "gilded cage" and the qualification that her suffering was "not comparable" to poorer women's experiences creates narrative space for readers to sympathise without ignoring class difference. This rhetorical strategy allows Western audiences to simultaneously indulge in fascination with royal wealth whilst confirming beliefs about gender oppression in Saudi society.

Cross-Cultural Misconceptions About Wealth and Freedom

Sasson's portrayal challenges certain Western assumptions about the relationship between economic empowerment and women's liberation. In Western feminist discourse, financial independence often features as a central pathway to gender equality. The Princess series complicates this narrative by demonstrating how wealth operates differently within Saudi Arabia's specific legal and cultural framework.

As Princess Sultana observes:

"My American friends could not comprehend my predicament. They insisted that with my money, I should simply leave. They did not understand that my wealth existed within a system that rendered it simultaneously powerful and powerless. I could buy diamonds but not divorce, palaces but not passports, control over my own movements." (Sasson, Princess Sultana's Circle, 167)

This passage highlights the cultural specificity of wealth's relationship to freedom. The phrase "simultaneously powerful and powerless" encapsulates the paradox this paper examines: how economic resources function differently within distinct patriarchal frameworks. The juxtaposition of luxury items (diamonds, palaces) with fundamental freedoms (divorce, movement) emphasises the limitation of materialist solutions to structural problems.

Western readings that fail to grasp this distinction risk misinterpreting Sasson's portrayal as simply documenting personal rather than structural oppression. As critic Al-Malki (2012) argues, "The tendency to view Princess Sultana's predicament as solvable through individual action reflects Western liberal assumptions about agency rather than engaging with the systemic nature of gender oppression depicted in the text" (134).

Conclusion:

This analysis of Jean Sasson's Princess series has demonstrated the complex relationship between wealth and gender oppression in her portrayal of Saudi women's lives. Rather than functioning as a straightforward liberating force, economic privilege creates what I have termed an "illusion of freedom" expanded options within a fundamentally constraining framework. This illusion operates through several intertwined mechanisms. Legal disenfranchisement affects individuals regardless of their economic status, making wealth seemingly powerful in facilitating practical workarounds, yet ultimately ineffective against entrenched structural constraints. Spatial politics further reinforce this illusion by expanding private domains and enabling international mobility, all while upholding the core principles of seclusion and segregation. Psychological oppression is another dimension, often intensified by wealth, as it brings heightened surveillance, internalised contradictions, and a sharper awareness of personal and systemic limitations. Finally, although wealth can enable certain forms of resistance, it paradoxically also deepens reliance on the very system that is being challenged. 'The Princess' narrative reveals patriarchy as a resilient system that adapts to wealth rather than succumbing to it. Economic resources modify experiences of oppression without eliminating its fundamental structures, creating expanded but still limited forms of agency within persistent constraint.

This finding has significant implications for feminist theory and praxis. It challenges simplistic equations of economic empowerment with women's liberation, suggesting that genuine emancipation requires transformation of legal, cultural, and psychological structures beyond material redistribution. As Princess Sultana ultimately concludes:

"Our struggle could not be resolved through wealth alone. True freedom would require dismantling systems that treated women as property regardless of how much property we ourselves possessed." (Sasson, Princess Sultana's Circle, 276)

This insight speaks to broader feminist debates about the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy, suggesting that economic power operates differently across cultural contexts and interacts with gender systems in complex, sometimes contradictory ways.

For Western readers of Sasson's works, this analysis invites more nuanced engagement with narratives of women's lives in non-Western contexts. The Princess series, whatever its contested status as cultural documentation, offers a valuable lens through which to examine assumptions about the universal applicability of economic solutions to gender oppression.

Future research might productively expand this analysis through comparative study of wealth and gender oppression across different cultural contexts, examination of how these dynamics have evolved in Saudi Arabia since the publication of Sasson's works, and further investigation of how class privilege intersects with other dimensions of identity in shaping women's experiences of constraint and agency.

The fundamental paradox remains: a gilded cage, however opulent, remains a cage. Understanding the complex mechanisms through which wealth simultaneously expands and constrains women's freedom is essential to developing more effective approaches to gender justice across cultural and economic divisions.

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