

Insider vs. Outsider narratives: Comparative analysis of middle eastern women's agency in the works of Jean Sasson and Fatima Mernissi

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Abstract:

This paper examines the representation of Middle Eastern women's experiences in the works of Jean Sasson and Fatima Mernissi, focusing on the dynamics of agency, religious contexts, and cultural resistance. Through comparative analysis of Sasson's *Princess trilogy* and Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass* and *The Veil and the Male Elite*, this study investigates how authorial positionality shapes narrative construction and reception. Sasson, an American writer presenting accounts of Saudi women, embodies an outsider perspective that has garnered both commercial success and scholarly criticism. In contrast, Mernissi, a Moroccan sociologist and feminist, offers an insider's viewpoint grounded in lived experience and academic rigour. This research analyses how these contrasting positions affect the representation of women's agency, the interpretation of Islamic practices, and the portrayal of resistance strategies. The study contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations about voice, authenticity, and representation in transnational feminist literature, arguing that the interplay between insider and outsider narratives creates a more nuanced understanding of Middle Eastern women's complex realities.

Keywords: Middle-Eastern, women, agency, Jean Sasson, Fatima Mernissi, feminist literature, insider-outsider perspectives

I. Introduction

The representation of Middle Eastern women in Western literature has long been dominated by Orientalist tropes and stereotypes that often reduce complex cultural, religious, and social realities to simplified narratives of oppression and victimhood. Within this context, Jean Sasson's works, particularly her bestselling *Princess trilogy* (1992-2000), have significantly shaped Western perceptions of Saudi women's experiences. As an American writer who presents herself as the

confidante and ghostwriter for a Saudi princess, Sasson occupies a unique position as a cultural mediator, claiming to reveal the hidden realities of women's lives in Saudi Arabia to Western audiences.

In contrast, Fatima Mernissi (1940-2015), a Moroccan sociologist and feminist writer, approaches similar themes from an insider's perspective. Her memoir *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* (1994) and her scholarly work *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (1991) offer alternative frameworks for understanding Middle Eastern women's experiences, grounded in both lived experience and academic analysis.

This paper examines how the different positionalities of these authors, Sasson as an outsider looking in and Mernissi as an insider looking both inward and outward, shape their representations of Middle Eastern women's agency, religious contexts, and strategies of resistance. By comparing these distinctive approaches, this study contributes to scholarly conversations about voice, authenticity, and representation in transnational feminist literature and responds to Elizabeth Spelman's critical question: "Who can speak for whom, and under what circumstances?" (Spelman 78).

The significance of this comparative analysis extends beyond literary criticism to interrogate broader questions about how knowledge about Middle Eastern women is produced, circulated, and received in global contexts. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues in her seminal work "Under Western Eyes," the construction of the "Third World Woman" as a singular, monolithic subject in Western feminist discourse often reinforces rather than challenges patterns of domination (Mohanty 333). By examining how Sasson and Mernissi navigate these complex waters of representation, this paper seeks to illuminate the ethical and epistemological implications of different authorial positions in narrating Middle Eastern women's experiences.

II. Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with Jean Sasson's work has been marked by contrasting perspectives. Commercial success and popular reception have positioned Sasson's Princess trilogy as influential in shaping Western perceptions of Saudi women. As Al-Rasheed notes, these books "became the lens through which many Westerners viewed Saudi society and women in particular" (Al-Rasheed 123). However, critical literary analysis has often questioned the authenticity and ethical implications of Sasson's approach.

Amireh's critical examination of Sasson's work highlights concerns about "ventriloquism and appropriation of voice," questioning whether Western authors can ethically represent Middle Eastern women's experiences (Amireh 215). Similarly, Kahf argues that Sasson's narratives often reinforce rather than challenge Orientalist tropes, presenting "stories that Western readers already expect to hear about Muslim women" (Kahf 172).

In contrast, scholarly reception of Fatima Mernissi's work has generally emphasized her contribution to Islamic feminist discourse and her nuanced approach to women's issues in Muslim societies. Ahmed praises Mernissi's ability to balance "critique and cultural insider knowledge"

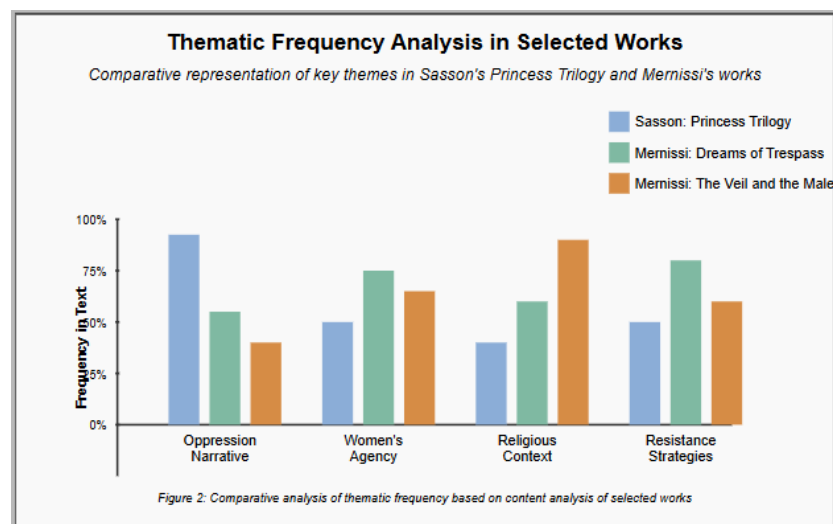
(Ahmed 167), while Badran highlights Mernissi's "groundbreaking methodology of returning to Islamic sources to challenge patriarchal interpretations" (Badran 244).

The intersection of gender, religion, and cultural representation in Middle Eastern women's writing constitutes a rich field of scholarly inquiry. Cooke's work on "Islamic feminism" provides a framework for understanding how women writers navigate religious traditions while advocating for gender justice (Cooke 92). Majid's analysis of "postcolonial feminist critique" offers important insights into how power dynamics shape transnational feminist discourse (Majid 323).

Recent scholarly trends have moved toward more nuanced considerations of agency and resistance in Middle Eastern women's narratives. Abu-Lughod's influential concept of "resistance as a diagnostic of power" has been particularly useful in moving beyond simplistic oppression/liberation binaries (Abu-Lughod 42). Similarly, Mahmood's exploration of agency within religious frameworks challenges Western feminist assumptions about what constitutes resistance (Mahmood 15).

This paper builds upon these scholarly conversations while addressing a gap in comparative analysis between outsider and insider narratives of Middle Eastern women's experiences. By examining Sasson and Mernissi side by side, this study contributes to ongoing theoretical debates about voice, authenticity, and the ethics of representation in transnational feminist literature.

II. Theoretical Framework



This study employs a multifaceted theoretical framework that draws from postcolonial feminist theory, narrative ethics, and critical concepts of agency to analyse the works of Sasson and Mernissi. Spivak's foundational question, "*Can the subaltern speak?*", informs this paper's examination of who speaks for Middle Eastern women and how these voices are mediated (Spivak 283). Her concept of "epistemic violence" provides a critical lens for analysing how Western

knowledge production about non-Western subjects can perpetuate colonial power dynamics, even when ostensibly advocating for women's rights.

Building on Spivak's work, this paper employs Said's concept of "Orientalism" to examine how Western representations of Middle Eastern women often construct them as exotic, oppressed Others in need of Western intervention (Said 40). This framework allows for critical analysis of how Sasson's narrative choices may reinforce or challenge these representational patterns.

For analysing narrative strategies and ethics, this paper draws on Booth's concept of the "implied author" and Butler's theory of "performativity" to examine how authorial identity shapes narrative construction and reception (Booth 71; Butler 25). These concepts help illuminate how Sasson's position as an American mediating a Saudi princess's story differs fundamentally from Mernissi's direct narration of her own experiences and scholarly analyses.

Finally, to move beyond binary understandings of oppression and resistance, this study employs Mahmood's reconceptualisation of agency as "a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable" (Mahmood 18). This allows for a more nuanced analysis of how women in both authors' works exercise agency within, rather than simply against, religious and cultural frameworks.

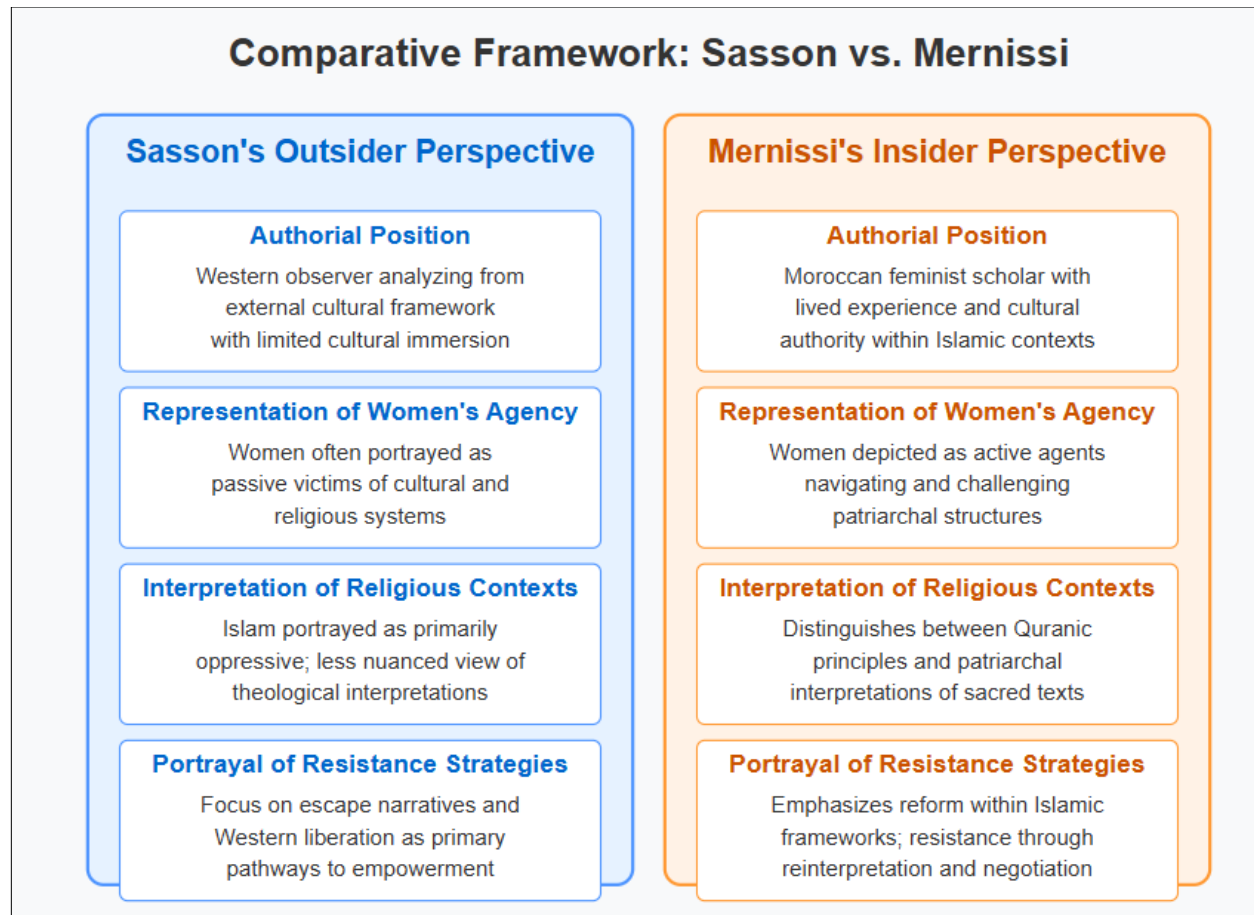
III. Methodology

This research employs close textual analysis of primary texts by both authors, including Sasson's *Princess* (1992), *Princess Sultana's Daughters* (1994), and *Princess Sultana's Circle* (2000), alongside Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* (1994) and *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (1991). The analysis focuses on three key dimensions: (1) representation of women's agency, (2) interpretation of religious contexts, and (3) portrayal of resistance strategies.

For each dimension, the study identifies and analyses significant passages, recurring motifs, and narrative techniques, examining how the authors' different positionalities shape their approaches to similar themes. This comparative analysis is contextually informed by historical and cultural factors specific to Saudi Arabia and Morocco, the primary settings of the works under examination.

To maintain analytical rigour, this study acknowledges the internal diversity within each author's body of work while identifying patterns that reflect their broader approaches to representing Middle Eastern women's experiences. The analysis also considers paratextual elements such as author introductions, publication contexts, and marketing frameworks that position these texts for specific audiences.

IV. Analysis and Discussion



A. Authorial Positionality and Narrative Authority

"I am only the tool through which Sultana speaks to the world. To tell her story is my duty, for she cannot speak for herself." (Sasson, *Princess*, viii)

Jean Sasson's *Princess* trilogy presents a complex authorial position that merits careful examination. Sasson positions herself as a confidante and ghostwriter who has been entrusted with sharing Princess Sultana's story with Western audiences. In the introduction to *Princess*, Sasson writes: "I have been selected to record the life of a Saudi princess... I am the instrument through which Sultana speaks to the world" (Sasson, *Princess* vii). This framing simultaneously claims authenticity through direct access to an insider's experience while maintaining Sasson's mediating role as translator and interpreter of that experience for Western readers.

The narrative strategy raises important questions about voice and authority. As Amireh argues, "Sasson's insertion of herself into the narrative as both witness and guarantor of authenticity obscures the power dynamics involved in representing the 'other'" (Amireh 217). The mediated

nature of Princess Sultana's story is further complicated by the princess's anonymity, which precludes independent verification of the account. Critics like Al-Rasheed have questioned whether Princess Sultana exists at all or is instead a composite character created to embody Western perceptions of Saudi women's experiences (Al-Rasheed 125).

"To write is to become nakedly vulnerable in a way that few women of my generation would ever choose to be." (Mernissi, Dreams of Trespass, 3)

In contrast, Fatima Mernissi's authorial position is more transparent in both her memoir and scholarly work. In *Dreams of Trespass*, Mernissi narrates her own childhood experiences in a Moroccan household, offering an unmediated first-person account: "I was born in a harem in 1940 in Fez, a ninth-century Moroccan city... To be born in a harem does not necessarily mean you have a harem mentality" (Mernissi, *Dreams* 1). This direct narration establishes Mernissi's authority as one grounded in personal experience rather than privileged access to another's story.

In her scholarly work, Mernissi further establishes her authority through rigorous academic research and her unique position as both insider to Islamic tradition and critical feminist scholar. In *The Veil and the Male Elite*, she writes: "As a Muslim woman, I am all too aware that those who manipulate the sacred texts are also those who hold the keys to our future" (Mernissi, *Veil* 9). This positioning allows Mernissi to critique patriarchal interpretations of Islam while maintaining her connection to Muslim identity and community.

B. Representing Women's Agency

The representation of women's agency differs significantly between Sasson and Mernissi's works. *"I vowed then and there that I would never accept the casual brutality shown to women in my land." (Sasson, Princess, 93)*

In Sasson's Princess trilogy, women's agency is often portrayed through dramatic acts of rebellion against overwhelming oppression. Princess Sultana's character embodies this approach, as she engages in risky acts of defiance such as driving illegally, confronting male relatives, and using her wealth to help other women escape abusive situations. While these portrayals highlight women's resistance, they sometimes reinforce binary oppositions between "traditional" (oppressive) and "modern" (liberating) practices.

As Kahf notes, "Sasson's narratives often present agency primarily as resistance against Islam and Arab culture rather than as negotiation within these frameworks" (Kahf 175). This framing can unintentionally reinforce the notion that meaningful agency is only possible through rejecting cultural and religious traditions, a perspective that aligns with certain Western feminist assumptions.

"The women in our courtyard manipulated words, silence, and space as weapons. Silence was rebellion, as was the strategic occupation of space." (Mernissi, Dreams of Trespass, 152)

In contrast, Mernissi presents a more nuanced view of agency that acknowledges women's navigation of complex social, religious, and cultural systems. In *Dreams of Trespass*, she describes how women in her household created spaces of autonomy within seemingly restrictive structures:

"The women in our courtyard did not accept frontiers as a given. Women like my mother and Aunt Habiba were constantly pushing back frontiers with their stories and their rebellious behavior" (Mernissi, *Dreams* 64).

Furthermore, Mernissi's scholarly work emphasizes how women claim agency through reinterpreting religious texts rather than rejecting them altogether. In *The Veil and the Male Elite*, she demonstrates how early Muslim women like Aisha (the Prophet Muhammad's wife) exercised intellectual and political authority through their knowledge of religious traditions: "Far from being passive victims, many women of early Islam... used religious arguments to defend their rights and gain new ones" (Mernissi, *Veil* 114).

C. Interpreting Religious Contexts

The authors' approaches to Islam and religious contexts reveal significant differences.

"In my land, religion is used as a reason for many harsh traditions, but I believe many are simply cultural ways that have nothing to do with the words of Allah." (Sasson, Princess Sultana's Daughters, 42)

Sasson's *Princess* trilogy often portrays Islam primarily as a restrictive force in women's lives. Religious practices and beliefs are frequently presented as tools of oppression wielded by male authorities. In *Princess Sultana's Daughters*, for example, religious police are depicted enforcing gender segregation and dress codes with arbitrary cruelty, and religious justifications are offered for practices like forced marriage and male guardianship.

While these portrayals reflect real concerns about how religious authority can be misused, critics like Amireh argue that "Sasson's representation of Islam lacks the historical and theological context necessary for understanding the diversity of Islamic interpretations and practices" (Amireh 220). The narrative rarely distinguishes between cultural practices, political policies, and religious requirements, potentially reinforcing monolithic views of Islam among Western readers.

"The elite have confined Islam to a fictional past where inequality was the natural order... But in seeking justice for women, we are not importing foreign values. We are reclaiming our own tradition." (Mernissi, The Veil and the Male Elite, 76)

Mernissi, by contrast, approaches Islam as a multifaceted tradition open to feminist reinterpretation. In *The Veil and the Male Elite*, she conducts a detailed historical and textual analysis to distinguish between Quranic principles and later patriarchal interpretations: "If women's rights are a problem for some modern Muslim men, it is neither because of the Quran nor the Prophet, nor the Islamic tradition, but simply because those rights conflict with the interests of a male elite" (Mernissi, *Veil* 9).

This approach allows Mernissi to critique specific interpretations of Islam while affirming the potential for gender justice within the tradition. As Ahmed notes, "Mernissi's work demonstrates how women can claim religious authority for themselves rather than ceding it entirely to male interpreters" (Ahmed 170). This strategy of working within religious frameworks rather than

against them represents a significant difference in how these authors conceptualise the relationship between religion and women's empowerment.

D. Portraying Resistance Strategies

The authors diverge notably in their portrayal of women's resistance strategies. In Sasson's works, resistance often takes dramatic forms, secret defiance, escape attempts, and direct confrontation with male authorities. In *Princess Sultana's Circle*, Sultana establishes a network to help abused women escape their situations, an approach that emphasises breaking free from existing structures rather than transforming them from within.

While these narratives highlight women's courage and determination, they sometimes reinforce what Abu-Lughod calls the "salvation narrative," which positions Middle Eastern women primarily as victims in need of rescue (Abu-Lughod 47). This framing can overshadow the everyday forms of resistance and negotiation that many women employ.

"Every story Aunt Habiba told us was a quiet resistance. When she told tales of women who ventured beyond traditional boundaries, she was giving us tools for our own future battles." (Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass*, 114)

Mernissi portrays a broader spectrum of resistance strategies. In *Dreams of Trespass*, she describes how women in her household used storytelling, music, and communal solidarity as forms of resistance: "The women... used words as weapons... Every time my mother told a story about a woman who had manipulated her way through a situation, she was giving us a lesson in self-defense techniques" (Mernissi, *Dreams* 112).

In her scholarly work, Mernissi emphasizes intellectual resistance through reinterpretation of religious texts. By reclaiming female figures in Islamic history and challenging patriarchal readings of sacred texts, she demonstrates how women can exercise agency through engaging with rather than escaping from religious tradition. This approach aligns with what Mahmood describes as "agency within rather than against structures of subordination" (Mahmood 15).

E. Reception and Impact

The reception of these authors' works reflects broader dynamics in how Western audiences engage with narratives about Middle Eastern women. Sasson's *Princess* trilogy achieved bestseller status in the United States and Europe, with millions of copies sold worldwide. As Kahf notes, "The commercial success of Sasson's books indicates their resonance with Western readers' expectations about Muslim women's experiences" (Kahf 180).

Critical reception, however, has been more divided. While many general readers praise Sasson for "exposing" the realities of Saudi women's lives, academic critics have questioned both the authenticity of the accounts and their potentially Orientalist framing. As Al-Rasheed argues, "The *Princess* books confirm rather than challenge Western readers' preconceptions about Saudi society" (Al-Rasheed 130).

Mernissi's work has received more consistent scholarly recognition, particularly for its contribution to Islamic feminist discourse. Her simultaneous engagement with Western feminist theory and Islamic textual analysis has been praised for creating new intellectual spaces for discussing gender in Muslim contexts. As Badran notes, "Mernissi's work demonstrates the possibility of an indigenous Islamic feminism that challenges both Western imperialism and local patriarchy" (Badran 250).

Both authors have influenced subsequent representations of Middle Eastern women, though in different ways. Sasson's approach has spawned numerous similar memoirs marketed to Western audiences as "revealing the truth" about women's lives in Islamic societies. Meanwhile, Mernissi's scholarly approach has informed academic discussions of gender and Islam and inspired Muslim feminist scholars to continue the project of reinterpreting religious texts from feminist perspectives.

V. Conclusion

This comparative analysis of Jean Sasson and Fatima Mernissi's works reveals how authorial positionality fundamentally shapes representations of Middle Eastern women's experiences. As an American writing about Saudi women, Sasson inevitably filters her accounts through Western frameworks of understanding, despite her claims to authentic representation. Her outsider perspective tends toward binary oppositions between tradition and modernity, oppression and liberation. While her narratives highlight important concerns about women's rights in Saudi Arabia, they sometimes reinforce rather than challenge Orientalist tropes about Middle Eastern women.

Mernissi, writing as both a Moroccan woman and a sociologist, offers a more nuanced insider perspective that recognises the complexity of women's experiences within religious and cultural contexts. Her approach acknowledges both constraints and possibilities for agency within these frameworks, avoiding simplistic narratives of victimhood or salvation. By reclaiming religious texts as resources for women's empowerment rather than merely sources of oppression, Mernissi demonstrates the potential for transformation from within cultural traditions.

The contrast between these approaches highlights broader questions about who can speak for whom in transnational feminist discourse. Neither the outsider perspective (represented by Sasson) nor the insider perspective (represented by Mernissi) can claim complete objectivity or comprehensive representation. Each position offers particular insights while being limited by its blind spots and assumptions.

This analysis suggests that understanding Middle Eastern women's complex realities requires attention to multiple voices and perspectives, including both outsider and insider accounts. Rather than privileging either position, scholars and readers should engage critically with both, recognising how each is shaped by its author's location in global power dynamics and discursive traditions.

Future research might explore how these dynamics play out in more recent works by Middle Eastern women writers, particularly those writing in diaspora who occupy hybrid positions between insider and outsider. Additionally, comparative analysis of reception patterns in Western and Middle Eastern contexts could further illuminate how these narratives function in different cultural and political environments.

By critically examining the politics of representation in transnational feminist literature, this study contributes to ongoing efforts to develop more ethical and nuanced approaches to cross-cultural feminist solidarity, approaches that respect difference while maintaining a commitment to gender justice across diverse contexts.

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