

# **Princess Sultana's Daughters Study Guide**

**Princess Sultana's Daughters by Jean Sasson**

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# Plot Summary

Princess Sultana's Daughters, by Jean Sasson, is a biography written in the voice of "Princess Sultana," a supposedly real-life royal princess of Saudi Arabia under an assumed name. Sultana relates several events in her life to demonstrate the oppression of women in Saudi Arabia and to urge change. This is the second book in what's called the Princess trilogy.

Sultana begins by describing her family's furious reaction to discovering her authorship of the first book in the Princess trilogy. The family decides they must spare any humiliation by keeping Sultana's authorship a secret. Kareem, Sultana's long-suffering husband, reads passages about his own fictionalized persona and is mad that he is described as being weak-willed and having other unflattering characteristics.

Sultana next deals with her daughters, Maha and Amani. Maha has always been strong-willed and combative, while Amani grew up sweet and loving. Maha falls in with a young rebellious girl named Aisha and spends much time with her during the upheaval caused by the first Iraq War. It is revealed that Maha has fallen in love with Aisha. Maha becomes hysterical when told she and Aisha must be separated. Before Maha's budding lesbianism can be fully realized, the family flies Maha off to London and institutionalizes her. After medication and a several months-long stay at the institute, Maha is apparently "cured" of her lesbian tendencies.

The family soon after decides to attend the largest Muslim pilgrimage of the year, during Haj. There, Amani undergoes a spiritual conversion, and soon after she becomes militant and fundamental in her beliefs of Islam, a turn of events which dispirits and worries Sultana. Amani soon becomes intolerable, railing against her own family's wealth and getting on everyone's case for perceived sins. In prayer meetings, Amani learns from a relative that Majed, Sultana's nephew, raped a woman in a hospital who was unconscious from head injuries. The crime is covered up after Majed's father, Ali, pays off a potential witness.

The next family crisis occurs when Sultana's son, Abdullah, flees the country in order to reunite two lovers, Fayza and Jafer, who were forbidden to wed in Saudi Arabia's draconian marriage system. Sultana is proud of her son and does not alert the involved families of Abdullah's deed. Fayza and Jafer are finally allowed to wed with a ceremony in Cairo.

In Cairo, Sultana tries unsuccessfully to convince the relative of her housekeeper to stop the female circumcision of her teenage daughter. Traveling then to Monaco to visit family, Sultana learns that her sister Reema has been raped by her husband Saleem, putting her in the hospital. Reema wishes not to divorce, because in Saudi culture that would mean giving up custody of her beloved children.

The book ends with Sultana and her nine sisters getting together to celebrate the memory of their mother. Sultana renews her vow to tirelessly fight for Saudi women and to continue to make injustices known.



# Prologue and Chapter 1

## Prologue and Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

Prologue: The narrator (Princess Sultana) is looking at an old photograph of her uncle and present king of Saudi Arabia, Fahd ibn Abdul Aziz. The older man in the photograph is stern, regal, imposing, which is in contrast to how Sultana remembers him in his youth, as a handsome warrior. She believes being a king has weighed heavily on him. Being the king of Saudi Arabia means trying to rule over four distinct groups of citizens: religious fundamentalists; the progressive middle-class; Bedouin tribes; and wealthy royal families.

Sultana recalls the forgotten group of people, the women of Saudi Arabia, who have little rights in the country and are treated as second-class citizens. She does not blame the king for this, because in her country the king alone could not make women equal. The king is in fact a kind man.

She regrets that her previous book, *Princess*, was a slap in the face to King Fahd, and she wonders if she helped write the book out of wisdom or emotion. Still, Saudi men deserved to be called out for the daily injustices they commit upon women.

In chapter one, it is October 1992, a month after the release of *Princess*, the tell-all book by Princess Sultana (as written by Jean Sasson), a member of the Saudi royal family, in which Sultana exposes the injustices imposed on women in Saudi Arabia. Though "Sultana" is a fictional name and there are hundreds of "princesses" like her, Sultana is fraught with worry that her true identity has somehow been discovered. Her husband, Kareem, enters their home in an angry rush and Sultana thinks she is discovered. However, Kareem is only mad because they've been summoned to her father's palace and Kareem has to cancel some important business meetings.

They arrive at the palace. Of her family, only Sultana and her sister Sara know Sultana's secret of being an author. However, Sultana is greeted coldly by her brother Ali as well as her father, and she dreads the worst. Her father reveals a German copy of *Princess*. Ali has had it translated and hands Arabic copies out to all the family members. Ali recognizes himself in the book.

Sultana's father has read the book, and he knows Sultana has written it. He confronts her in a rage, and then Kareem starts shaking her, also in a rage. Sultana wishes she could die now that her secret is out, and she considers herself foolish for ever hoping she would not be discovered. Sultana's father and Ali become mocking, reading passages from the book. Of her family, only Sara gives her support. Sultana claims that God willed the book into being, and her fear turns more and more to anger.

Sultana wants to confess her "crime"—telling her story to author Jean Sasson—to the king and to a foreign newspaper, so the world will not forget her. The men do not want



this, and cooler heads prevail. The family talks and decides to keep their identity a secret; they figure no one outside the family will know the book is about the Sa'ud family.

Kareem and Sultana return home. He reads unflattering passages about himself from the book *Princess*, including that he is weak-willed, has a venereal disease, and slept with other women during his marriage. Sultana considers him a clown who could not be capable of violence. Strangely, Kareem and Sultana end the fierce argument loving each other more than ever, though with Sultana the feeling is more love-hate.

That night, Sultana vows to continue her fight, despite her promise to her family never to reveal herself or publish more books. She promises that at the next opportunity she will contact author Jean Sasson and provide material for another book. She will not rest until the women of the world are free.



## Chapter 2

### Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

This chapter centers on Maha, Sultana's firstborn daughter and middle child. Her other children are firstborn son Abdullah and youngest daughter Amani. At ten, Maha sets fire to Abdullah's robe. Though Abdullah's robe is quickly put out, this disturbs Sultana and Kareem greatly. At age eleven, Maha, jealous of attention being given to Abdullah, issues a string of swear words and curses to her grandfather (Sultana's father). From that point on, Sultana's father denies the existence of either granddaughter, Maha or Amani.

Maha is beautiful and smart, and also keenly aware of her low place in Saudi Arabian society. When the Gulf War comes, Maha is fifteen, and very much a rebellious teen. She falls in with a rebellious teen, Aisha, who comes from a dysfunctional family. Aisha's depraved father exercises a Muslim custom called the mut'a, in which he is able to buy temporary brides as young as eleven and twelve for sex before "unmarrying" them and discarding them. Beautiful Reema is one of these brides, and Sultana recounts her story.

Reema is from a poor Yemeni family, and her father is forced to sell her for marriage money to feed the family. With shock, the family learns that the marriage is not a permanent one but a mut'a. Yet with the bargain in place, Reema is as good as married and is considered less than virginal, so they must agree. Reema is taken to Aisha's father, who uses her for sex for several days until he gets bored of her. She is married off as a second wife to a poor Yemeni tea boy in order to cook him meals.

Back to the Gulf War and Sultana's family, the wartime climate has resulted in an easing of restrictions against women, and progressive Maha and her friend Aisha have taken advantage of this to get part-time work at a hospital. Sultana eventually discovers that Maha is taking a pistol with her to work. Maha admits she and Aisha took pistols from Aisha's father and that they armed themselves in order to protect themselves from police, who are prejudiced against women.

Kareem takes the pistol, and the family travels to Aisha's home, where Kareem gives the pistol back to her father. The families agree that Maha and Aisha should not see each other any longer. Maha flies into a hysterical rage at this, claiming she will leave her horrid country and that there is no God. This blasphemy shocks everyone. Maha is forced back into the car, fighting all the way. The family is convinced that Maha needs psychiatric help, and they seek out a London psychiatrist for this purpose.

Packing up Maha's things, Sultana discovers books on the occult and magic spellcasting among Maha's possessions. This drives Sultana even deeper in despair, and Sultana figures Maha got these occult items from Sultana's mother-in-law, Noorah, who has always hated Sultana.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

Sultana, Kareem, and Maha travel to London. They arrive late, then admit Maha into a mental institution. Kareem and Sultana then retire to their London home. Their permanent servants are surprised to see them, seeing as the Gulf War had prevented them coming for a couple of years.

Sultana recalls the sad story of a distant cousin of hers, Princess Misha'il. Misha'il is married to an older man she does not like, and she takes a lover, the nephew of a diplomat. She tries to fake her death by pretending to drown in the ocean, thereafter dressing as a man and attempting to flee the country with her lover. Unfortunately, the king outsmarts her and she is caught at the airport. After much gossip as to her fate, it is learned that Misha'il and her lover will be executed for adultery according to Muslim law. She is shot before a firing squad. Later, Princess Misha'il is immortalized in the Western documentary *Death of a Princess*.

The family spends a couple of months in London tending to Maha. Maha is still quite angry toward them, but she opens up to her understanding British psychiatrist, who somewhat understands the horrors of being a woman in Saudi Arabian society. Maha writes a story about a harem girl having sex with a strong man who becomes a woman before her eyes. With pleasure overwhelming her, the harem girl consents to continuing sex with another woman. Sultana realizes this is Maha's way of saying she is a lesbian and that Aisha and her have become lovers. Kareem doesn't get it, and must be informed of Maha's lesbianism by the psychiatrist. He is so angry he must be restrained from hurting his daughter.

On the other hand, Sultana in some way understands, given her own hatred of Saudi men. Plus, she has seen how the strict segregation in Saudi society (men with men, women with women) creates homosexuality that is never spoken of. With much sobbing and carrying on, Maha finds comfort in her mother, telling her of how she discovered woman-to-woman pleasure with Aisha. The two discovered some lesbian porn magazines owned by Aisha's father. They also spied on Aisha's father's sexual escapades through a peephole, and saw how pained and frightened the girls were. From that point, Maha decided never to have sex with a man.

Maha has calmed down, and so the family prepares to return to Saudi Arabia. The British psychiatrist is offered a great sum of money by Kareem to become the family's personal psychiatrist, but he refuses, stating that money holds no great sway over him. Sultana admires this about the man, and thinks that perhaps there is hope for the male species yet.



It is also revealed that Maha did indeed learn about the occult from Sultana's mother-in-law Noorah. Kareem confronts his mother and yells at her, making her depressed and wretched. Sultana can't help but take pleasure in Noorah's despair.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

Sultana explains the importance in the Muslim faith of a pilgrimage to Makkah (Mecca) during the time of Haj. She performed the pilgrimage many times in her youth. However, Kareem has always expressed an unwillingness to attend, which has exasperated Sultana. One time, Sultana decides to confront Kareem, and they get in a shoving and shouting match. Kareem finally reveals that the reason for his hesitation to make a pilgrimage involves a dream he had. In the dream, he is trampled to death during a pilgrimage to Makkah. He cannot overcome the fear of this dream.

However, after the two take care of Maha in London, Kareem has a change of heart, and even despite the threat of Iranian radicals interrupting the pilgrimage, he agrees to go.

They prepare for the pilgrimage, which involves a purity time called the Ihram, which involves a lot of prayer to ensure tranquility of the soul, and not wearing perfumes, jewels, makeup, or trimming one's hair, among other things. Sultana details her trouble with Ihram, given her fiery nature. She has a man-hating outburst and must re-purge herself in embarrassment.

On the plane trip to Haj, she tells her daughters stories about her poor ancestors and how proud she is of how far the Saudi people have come. They are uninterested in hearing about the past, and this saddens and angers Sultana to the point she has to be reminded about the tranquility required by Ihram.

Finally they arrive near Makkah at a huge and impressive tent city called the Pilgrim's Terminal.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

Sultana flashes back to her youngest daughter Amani's birth. She and her sister Sara delivered around the same time. Sara's daughter, Nashwa, is loud and obnoxious, while Amani is quiet and loving, and so Sultana has often wondered whether the babies were switched in the hospital, because Nashwa is so much closer to Sultana in personality.

Unlike Maha, Amani is quiet and unassuming. She is smart and reads a lot. However, Amani develops a love for animals, something she does not share with most Saudis. She protests when family members go out on hunts, dismantling firearms and throwing ammunition away. She also takes stray cats and other animals in, testing the limits of her family's patience. The family eventually builds a small zoo and hires a couple of zookeepers to satisfy Amani's love of animals. Amani becomes fanatic about animals, offering money to servants who bring in strays and feeding animals the finest human food. Kareem and Sultana eventually confront Amani, telling her she must find passion for humans and not just animals. She calms down and loses some of her fanaticism.

In retrospect, Sultana regrets taking Amani to the pilgrimage at such an impressionable age (fourteen). She hints at Amani's future religious fanaticism.

Sultana describes her pilgrimage. She is ushered in to the central courtyard of Makkah, where the most holy object in the Muslim faith sits, the Kaaba. This is the shrine that is built on the site of a building that Abraham dedicated to God, presumably the first building dedicated to a single god. Because of Sultana's royal status, she is allowed to pray inside of Kaaba with her family. Inside, Amani cries and has a kind of religious revelation. Outside, Sultana learns that two men were just trampled to death, and she tears the sheets off the dead men in a panic, thinking one is Kareem. Kareem is safe, and in her relief Sultana laughs, an action that is met with disgust from those around (who believe she is laughing at the dead men). Sultana is taken away and her family must explain her actions in relation to Kareem's dream of being trampled.

After day one of the pilgrimage, Sultana prepares to enter Amani's room, but stays outside to hear her daughter loudly and fervently praise God with a frightening intensity. Sultana fears Amani will turn out like her cousin Lawand. Lawand was given a European vacation, and in her freedom she slept around and became addicted to cocaine. For these offenses, her family locked her in a room for nearly three months. Lawand became insane from this seclusion, speaking to God and becoming a religious fanatic.

Sultana then relates one time she is dining with Lawand, and Lawand suddenly lashes out at Sara and Sultana for their necklaces, believing luxury is an affront to God. Sultana, who had armed herself with Mace because of her fear of Lawand, sprays Lawand and, accidentally, Lawand's mother and sister, who require medical attention.



This incident forces the family to send Lawand away for professional psychiatric attention, and Sultana reports that Lawand fully recovered in one year.

Back to Amani, Sultana informs Kareem of her fears, but Kareem feels Sultana is overreacting due to her experience with Lawand, and that she must let Amani find God in her own way. Sultana agrees to drop the matter, but nevertheless she has a dream that Amani joins an extremist terrorist cult.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

The next day of the pilgrimage, Amani appears to be her old self and Sultana is relieved. The family moves from Makkah to the Valley of Mina. There, Kareem bumps into an old school friend, Yousif. Sultana sees hatred in Yousif's eyes, and indeed he expresses fundamentalist contempt for women, sympathizing with a man who poured scalding water down the throat of his baby daughter to kill her. Kareem is disgusted with his former friend's new beliefs. One year later, the family learns Yousif was arrested as the leader of a terrorist organization plotting the overthrow of the Egyptian government. To Sultana, Yousif represents the worst of Muslim culture and an inherent hatred of women.

Kareem and Sultana take the opportunity to speak to their children about women and how Islam is changing. Abdullah bears a little male chauvinism, while Maha expresses Sultana-like contempt for the old ways of Islam. Amani seems almost apologetic about Islamic attitudes toward women, trying to defend the old ways, which greatly worries Sultana. To dispel any notion of the worth of a woman, Kareem tells stories of how the Prophet Muhammad wept when he heard tales of people burying their daughters alive or throwing them down wells. Sultana points out that the Koran itself says nothing about restrictions on women; in fact, women and men are equal in the eyes of the Prophet and in the eyes of God. Only tradition has placed restrictions on women in Muslim countries.

The next day, the family travels to the sacred hill of Mount Arafat, where the Prophet gave his last sermon. From there, they next travel to the Plain of Mina, where hundreds of goats and other animals are butchered to remind pilgrims of the value of sacrifice. Animal lover Amani cries out and must be taken away to the tent to spare her from the horror of butchery. Later that night, Amani has calmed down but refrains from eating meat.

The pilgrimage ends, and Sultana prays fervently that Amani be spared from the life of an extremist. Sultana again hints that her prayers were not answered in this regard.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

The Haj season is over, and the family wishes to return to Riyadh. However, news of a sandstorm grounds them, and they decide to spend some time in their vacation home in nearby Jeddah. Jeddah is much less strict about women in public and similar issues, and it is a resort-type town full of shopping. Sultana is thrilled about spending some time in Jeddah. However, Amani is withdrawn and obsessing over reading the Koran.

As the weeks go by, Amani retreats even further into herself, and she begins to wear dark, thick clothing in the manner of a fundamentalist. She also starts to have prayer meetings in the house with other women in the extended family. Sultana overhears Amani speak of the wickedness of her own family, comparing them to ostentatious sinners. Amani begins to mock the family's fine clothes and palace living, and promises to give all her jewels to the poor. To prevent this, Sultana locks all the jewels in a safe.

Sultana works on convincing Kareem that their daughter is in trouble and is in need of an intervention. Sultana is convinced that Amani will one day work to bring about the downfall of the royal family. But Kareem is not convinced.

Sultana agonizes over whether she is to blame for Amani's conversion. Instead, she believes that Amani's rich upbringing is the root of the problem. Sultana's generation grew up in a time of great poverty before the Saudis profited so greatly from their oil. Amani's generation grew up in wealth, and so don't know the value of what they have. Instead, they look at wealth with disdain and yearn for a life different than their parents, more meaningful.

Amani becomes the leader of a women's group with a very strict interpretation of Muslim law, endorsing all the restrictions on women that such an interpretation entails. Sultana is crushed.

In her meetings with extended family, Amani comes to know a horrible family secret that she feels compelled to share with Sultana. It involves Majed, the son of Ali, Sultana's brother who has a very disdainful opinion of women. Majed is much like his father, and Amani learns from Majed's sister Faten that Majed once had sex with a woman in a coma in the hospital. The woman, suffering from serious head injuries, was now three months' pregnant, and Majed feared his secret would be exposed.

Sultana is horrified, and she and Amani bring this secret to Kareem. Kareem is also shocked, and he feels the need to tell Ali. Ali takes the news extremely angrily and he beats Majed. However, Ali is more angry because Majed got in trouble than he is concerned about the woman in the coma. Ali pays off a witness to the terrible deed so the witness will never speak, covering up the crime. He then sends Majed away to school in the West. Nothing else is done, and Sultana is dispirited.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary and Analysis

Sultana begins the chapter separating her angry daughters during an argument. Amani has become increasingly intolerant of her brother and sister. Abdullah is more willing to capitulate to Amani's demands, while Maha is fierce and combative. The argument is over the newspaper. Amani has decided that, since the newspaper contains the word "God," it is sacred, and cannot be thrown away as garbage. Maha mocks her belief by shoving the newspaper in Amani's face. Sultana largely agrees with Maha: Amani has become much too extremist in her beliefs.

Sultana must then deal with another family crisis. Abdullah drives home very upset and nearly causes a car accident. He has learned that his best friend, Jafer, has eloped and fled Saudi Arabia with a beautiful young woman named Fayza. Fayza is the daughter of a business partner of Kareem's named Fouad. By contrast, Jafer is low-born and was an orphan before being adopted by his uncle, who works as a manager in Kareem's law firm. The class difference alone is scandalous.

Sultana is horrified, because Jafer has become like a member of the family. He is very handsome and blessed with gifts of intelligence and morals (or so Sultana thought). Still, Sultana thought a young man of such obvious worth could not be celibate for long. Jafer met Fayza in a chance meeting with Fayza's mother at the law firm signing papers, and there was an instant attraction. Fayza initiated the affair, speaking in secret telephone conversations for a time and finally meeting in a public market. They soon decide to elope. Sultana blames their restrictive society for such an impulsive decision: if men and women were allowed to congregate at normal social occasions and not kept separate, these wild feelings would be tempered.

Unfortunately, Fayza has been betrothed to the son of a wealthy family—an ideal arrangement in male-dominated Saudi society. Fayza cannot stand the idea, and she flees to America with Jafer. They are tracked down in a Nevada hotel by Fayza's family. Fayza's male family members attack and knock out Jafer and forcibly take Fayza back to Saudi Arabia. Nothing can be done to reunite the lovers. Now homeless, Jafer reluctantly travels to Lebanon to try to make a new life for himself. Abdullah badly wants to visit his friend, and Sultana finds she cannot stop her son from doing so.



# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary and Analysis

Sultana cannot dissuade Abdullah from preparing to leave for Lebanon, and their relationship becomes strained. Abdullah cannot leave because Kareem has locked all his children's passports in a safe. Meanwhile, Amani has made it her duty to try to convert their Hindu and Christian staff into proper Muslims.

Sultana herself becomes withdrawn, and develops the nervous habit of twisting and pulling her hair. Kareem believes Sultana is being overly dramatic in her concern for her children, and so the two bicker constantly. Sultana hears of a disease in which women go bald pulling at their hair and, valuing her beauty, she summons the willpower to stop damaging her hair in this manner. Sister Sara is very sensitive to Sultana's anxiety during this time, and helps to calm her. Sara's own daughter, Nashwa, is sexually suggestive to their drivers and other servants, and man-crazy, and Sara states that it is better to have a daughter like Amani than one like Nashwa.

One day, Sultana receives a worried phone call from Kareem. Kareem instructs her to go into their safe and fetch the passports of their children. Sultana discovers that passports for both Abdullah and Maha are gone. The parents fear the worst: that Abdullah has left for Lebanon to visit Jafer. Maha's own involvement seems less clear.

In a panic, Sultana and Sara race to Maha's high school. They find Maha, who doesn't know why her passport would be missing. Then Sultana realizes the truth: Abdullah has left with Maha's passport in order to get Fayza out of the country, to reunite her with Jafer.

Sultana now has a decision to make: will she alert Fayza's family and put a stop to Abdullah's plan, or will she let true love rule the day. She decides to not alert Fayza's family, as passionate as Sultana is about the rights of women and the oppression of Saudi Arabian society.

Kareem is furious: such meddling with families and marriages is simply not done. He is angry at Sultana, and convinced that she aided Abdullah in his quest to reunite the lovers by giving him the combination to the safe. Sultana did not, but Kareem does not believe her.

Five days later, Abdullah calls from the Greek island of Cyprus, confirming what he had done. The event ends on a happy note: Fayza's father, Fouad, agrees to the marriage of Fayza and Jafer, seeing how grief-stricken his daughter was before Abdullah smuggled her out of the country. Fayza and Jafer get married in Greece, and then have a second larger ceremony with all the family in Egypt. Sultana is very pleased that love has emerged triumphant, and not the ways of the past.



Afterwards, Kareem apologizes to Sultana for not believing her about Abdullah. Sultana expresses her ambivalent attitude toward Kareem. Sometimes she believes he is hardheaded and a dinosaur of the past, other times she is struck by his progressive nature and tenderness. She decides she is lucky to have Kareem in her life after all.



# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary and Analysis

Sultana and her family are resting after the wedding at their villa in Cairo. It is revealed that, in addition to taking passports from his father's safe, Abdullah also took close to a million dollars. Affected by the plight of war wounded in Lebanon, Abdullah donated nearly this entire sum to a Lebanese hospital. Kareem is angry, but at the same time somewhat proud of his son for this charity. Abdullah is optimistic about war-torn Lebanon and its ability to recover from war, while Kareem is pessimistic about the country's prospects.

Sultana comments on her permanent housekeeper Fatma, a woman who was pretty and thin in her youth but who has let herself become enormous in her late middle age. Unexpectedly, Fatma begins wailing and praying to God while preparing the family's supper. After much prodding, Fatma reveals the source of her distress: Fatma's granddaughter, Alhaan, is to undergo female circumcision that night at her father's urging.

Sultana relates her own experience with female circumcision, an operation which involves cutting off the clitoris of a female around the time of puberty. This operation is extremely painful, and results in a hampering of the ability for the female to feel pleasure during sex. Sultana explains her strong feelings about the subject: female circumcision is barbarous and has no place in civilized society, and yet it is a not infrequent operation in some parts of the Arab world. Fatma begs Sultana to go with her to try to convince the family against going ahead with the circumcision. Fatma believes they will listen to a princess. Sultana, though she is reluctant to meddle in another family's affairs, agrees, and Abdullah drives them to a poor section of Cairo where Fatma's family lives.

Sultana and Fatma visit with Elham, Fatma's daughter and Alhaan's mother. She is polite but stubborn, arguing that, while female circumcision is not explicitly mentioned in the Koran, it is still a well-known hadith (tradition), and she agrees with her husband that it is an appropriate course of action. Sultana fails to convince the woman, and leaves in failure, sobbing all the way home. She gets into another fight with Kareem, who had become slightly drunk while gambling, but decides to stop short of a physical tussle. Kareem goes to bed, and Sultana ends the night vowing never to simply accept the practice of female circumcision, but to keep fighting it.



# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary and Analysis

Unnerved by her experience, in Cairo, Sultana decides to pack up the family and head to Monaco. The next day, Fatma arrives trying to be calm but still possessive of great anger. She states that Alhaan was circumcised as intended. She thanks Sultana for her efforts, and also warns Sultana about a dream she had. Fatma warns Sultana to cool her great anger over women's issue, for one woman cannot cure the world, and her attitude will only lead to unhappiness. Sultana interprets this dream vision as communication from her dead mother.

The family travels to Monaco to share a rented mansion villa with several of her sisters and related family members. Bickering between her daughters as to what road to take exasperates Sultana. When the family does arrive, Sultana's sisters greet her at the door with great sadness and anxiety. They state that Reema has been hurt. Reema is a middle sister of Sultana. Sultana states that, unlike all the other daughters, Reema was born without a single attractive feature, and she is heavysset besides. She has made up for her lack of natural beauty by being a caring and cheerful person.

After Sultana presses her worried sisters with details, they reveal the story that led up to Reema's injury. Saleem is Reema's husband. Lately, Reema reported that Saleem has been acting strangely, being short and angry with the family and not taking an interest in work. Reema is convinced that such a personality change might be the result of a brain tumor or chemical imbalance, but Saleem refuses any medical treatment. Saleem retreats into himself and takes many trips to Asia to have sex with prostitutes. Reema eventually discovers Saleem in bed with their maid. Saleem attacks her and warns her not to tell anyone of his indiscretions.

Saleem's behavior only worsens. One night, after watching pornographic videos, he wakes Reema in order to have sex with her. She replies that she is having her period. It is against Muslim faith to have sex during menstruation. Nevertheless, Saleem anally rapes Reema, to the point she is hospitalized and must use a colostomy bag for the rest of her life. Sultana is, of course, overcome with shock and murderous rage at Saleem.

But, as is often the case in Saudi society, the wife has little in the way of options. No one would take the side of a wife accusing her husband. Besides, any attempt by Reema to divorce Saleem would result in Saleem taking full custody of the children, and Reema lives for her children. The horrible event must remain as yet another unspoken-about family secret. Sultana ends the chapter downcast and disillusioned.



# Chapter 12 and Epilogue

## Chapter 12 and Epilogue Summary and Analysis

In chapter twelve, Sultana and the sisters decide they must go to Riyadh to visit her sister in the clinic. Brother Ali drives them to the hospital, blaming Reema for her part in her own rape and lamenting that the timing of the rape is inconvenient, for he has his own problem. In a rage, Ali had divorced his wife Nada for the third time. Divorce (or the threat of divorce) is explained by Sultana as yet another way to oppress women in Saudi Arabia. According to Muslim law, a woman who is divorced three times must marry and be divorced by another man before the first husband can re-marry her. Ali urges his sisters to talk to Nada and talk her out of leaving him, after they have visited Reema.

The sisters are ushered to Reema's bedside, and the sight of Reema looking sickly and scared and covered in feeding tubes and the like horrifies and angers Sultana once more. Reema states that Saleem repented and promised no more violence. She will not attempt to divorce him because of her relationship with her children. Saleem proves an even more dastardly character by visiting Reema in the hospital, reacting with disgust at Reema's colostomy bag, and stating that he will never have sex or sleep in the same bed with her again out of disgust.

Afterwards, Sultana and two of her sisters visit Ali's palace compound to talk to Nada. Ali's compound is richly ornamented and indicative of his vain, overindulgent character. While Sultana's two sisters speak with Nada, Sultana wanders the compound and happens across a discovery in Ali's study: a "Wonder Garment," a special underwear with temperature control to maximize sexual performance. Sultana regards the underwear with girlish glee, knowing that Ali would be humiliated at the knowledge he had to use such methods for sex. She takes the Wonder Garment.

The sisters leave the compound having failed to convince Nada to stay with Ali. She is happy to divorce him for good, and confident Ali has no objection to her taking custody of their three daughters.

In the epilogue, Sultana and all her nine sisters gather to commemorate the memory of their mother, as they have done every year since her passing. Reema shares a story about their mother confiding in Reema that Sultana is a thief, and that Reema should pray for her soul every day. In hysterical laughter, all the other sisters reveal their mother shared this same secret with them. In a joking manner, they ask if Sultana is still a petty thief, and Sultana goes into another room and emerges wearing Ali's Wonder Garment, aping her brother's mannerisms. The laughter is hearty, but becomes muted when Reema reveals Saleem has taken a second wife. It is also revealed that in the end Nada has taken Ali back as her husband, after being promised even more wealth and jewelry. On a last sad note, sister Tahani reveals that her best friend Sameera, who had been imprisoned under house arrest by her cruel uncle for over fifteen years for

trying to elope, had died. Sultana ends the book by renewing her promise to fight the cruel injustices committed against Saudi Arabian women.



# Characters

## Princess Sultana Al Sa'ud

Sultana is the "speaker" in the book, and it is through her eyes that the events of the narrative are revealed. Sultana is a fictionalized name for a supposedly real-life royal princess of the Sa'ud royal family of Saudi Arabia.

From her youngest years, Sultana has been known as a fierce and combative person who refuses to compromise on her principles. To the more conservative men in her family, she is known as a trouble maker and rabble rouser. Her husband, Kareem, refers to her as a child trapped in a woman's body.

Sultana is full of passion and at times can barely contain her emotions. She is impetuous, melodramatic, and sometimes vindictive and petty. She may lash out with physical violence, but more often she uses her tongue as her weapon of choice, criticizing Saudi Arabian men and their existing system of oppression against women. Sultana sees herself as a principled defender and champion of women's rights, and she is writing in the hopes that shedding further light on injustices committed against women will change the situation for the better.

Sultana loves her children very much, and she is overwhelmed with worry about them, especially Amani, whom she hopes will not succumb to Islamic fundamentalism, a movement which Sultana feels reverses any gains her generation has made in regards to women's issues.

## Kareem

Kareem is Sultana's husband, a wealthy prince of Saudi Arabia. He runs a law firm. Kareem could be considered a moderate in Saudi culture, both religiously and culturally. He holds some conservative beliefs, such as a refusal to meddle in other family's affairs even when there are terrible injustices or crimes being committed. His hesitancy to fully embrace Sultana's progressive ideas gives both husband and wife no end to annoyance and frustration. However, Sultana also realizes that Kareem is quite progressive in some ways. He treats her kindly and with love, not abusing his position as husband. He also dearly loves his daughters, unlike some people like Ali who treat all women, even daughters, with disdain and contempt.

Kareem spends much of the book in exasperation from what Sultana has said or done. His is the voice of caution, restraint, and common sense. This is in contrast to Sultana, who consistently displays the opposite of those qualities. His philosophy in regards to changing how women are treated in Saudi Arabia is ultimately pragmatic. He feels the most he can do is look out for the women in his household. Women beyond that are outside of his control and influence.



While Kareem can become extremely angry with Sultana or his children, he has a kind heart and Sultana believes he could never lash out with physical violence.

## Maha

Maha is Sultana's eldest daughter and middle child. Like her mother, Maha has been very spirited from birth and is always ready for an argument. In an early episode of the book, Maha has sexual feelings for another woman, Aisha, and her family whisks her off to a London psychiatric institute in order to cure her hysteria. Maha returns to the family fold successfully, though she never loses her fierceness. Like Sultana, Maha has progressive views about women and is outspoken.

## Amani

Amani is Sultana's youngest child. She is sweet and meek during her childhood, making Sultana believe she may have been switched at birth. However, after a Haj pilgrimage, Amani shows her mother's fierceness by having a spiritual awakening and becoming an Islamic fundamentalist. She dresses in thick clothing and always wears her veil, among other habits. She begins to resent her family's wealth as a sin, and she unnerves her family by constantly criticizing them. Amani becomes the leader of a women's group that preaches the strictest adherence to Islamic law.

## Abdullah

Abdullah is Sultana's oldest child and only son. Abdullah bears his mother's progressive nature and believes that women and men should be equal. He bravely smuggles a woman, Fayza, out of the country in order to reunite her with her true love, Jafer, rather than be forced to marry a man she did not love. Sultana applauds Abdullah's choice. Abdullah visits Lebanon and believes that the rich should donate money to aid that country. He gives a million dollars he steals from Kareem's safe to a Lebanese hospital.

## Ali

Sultana is Ali's brother, a man who displays a genuine contempt for women. As such, Ali is intensely disliked by most of the female members of the extended family.

## Sara

Sara is one of Sultana's many sisters, and is probably the sister she is closest to. Sara administers encouragement and support to Sultana in some of her more despairing moments.



## Aisha

Aisha is a friend of Maha, turned would-be lover. Sultana believes she is a rebellious teen and a bad influence on Maha. The families separate Maha and Aisha for their own good after they become too intimate.

## Fatma

Fatma is Sultana's Egyptian housekeeper. Fatma convinces Sultana to try to persuade her daughter not to circumcise her teenage granddaughter.

## Fayza

Fayza is the daughter of Fouad, a business partner of Kareem's. She flees the country to America in order to elope with Jafer. She is found and taken back, whereupon she is consumed with grief. The families eventually agree to allow the lovers' wedding after Abdullah smuggles Fayza out of the country for a reunification with Jafer.

## Jafer

Jafer is the son of Kareem's law office manager who falls in love with Fayza. Jafer is low born and thus not suitable for Fayza, yet the two fall in love and attempt to elope to America. Jafer later settles in Lebanon until reunited and married with Fayza.

## Reema

Reema is a sister of Sultana's. She is raped and brutalized by her husband, Saleem. She cannot divorce her wicked husband because it would mean giving up custody of her children.





# Objects/Places

## Saudi Arabia

Sultana's family rules this Arab nation. The Saudi Arabia Sultana depicts has developed a system of oppression against women based upon tradition and misinterpretations of religious doctrine. The bulk of Sultana's family resides in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia.

## Mut'a

Mut'a is depicted in the book as an Islamic form of marriage in which a man is able to quickly marry girls (as young as eleven or twelve) in order to satisfy his sexual desires with them. Then, just as quickly, the man can "unmarry" them and discard them.

## London

Sultana has a permanent home in London. When Maha becomes hysterical with Aisha, Sultana and the family fly to London in order to get Maha professional care with a British psychiatrist.

## Makkah

Makkah is the holiest of cities according to the Muslim faith. During the holy time of Haj, Sultana and her family make a pilgrimage to Makkah. There, Sultana struggles through an unfounded fear that Kareem will be trampled to death, as he saw in a dream vision. During their pilgrimage, daughter Amani becomes much more religious and dogmatic.

## Cairo

Sultana and the extended royal family travel to Cairo for the wedding of Fayza and Jafer. There, Sultana tries to help her housekeeper Fatma convince Fatma's daughter not to circumcise Fatma's granddaughter. The appeal is unsuccessful.

## Monaco

Depressed from being unable to stop the female circumcision of Alhaan, Sultana takes her family to a villa in Monaco. There, she learns from her sisters that Reema has been raped and brutalized by her husband Saleem. While the men stay in Monaco for a couple more weeks, the women race to Riyadh to be with Reema.



## Jeddah

Jeddah is a city in Saudi Arabia where Sultana has a residence. In contrast to more conservative Riyadh, Jeddah features a more cosmopolitan, freer environment, with luxury shopping and other resort opportunities, and Sultana regards their stay there as a sort of vacation.

## Kaaba

This is the shrine that is built on the site of a building that Abraham dedicated to God, presumably the first building dedicated to a single god. It is the holiest of sites, and it is toward this building that Muslims all around the world pray. Inside the Kaaba, Amani experiences the initial part of her spiritual awakening.

## Hadith

Hadith means oral tradition. These are oral traditions handed down from the Prophet Muhammad that have become Islamic law. Hadiths are a source of much of the oppression women suffer in the Islamic world.

## Female Circumcision

Fatma's granddaughter Alhaan undergoes a female circumcision procedure, much to Fatma's dismay. This involves surgically cutting off the clitoris of a girl around the time of puberty. This kills much of the sexual pleasure the woman would otherwise experience during sex.

## Ali's Wonder Garment

While wandering Ali's palace compound, Sultana discovers the "Wonder Garment", a temperature-controlled underwear intended to maximize male sexual performance. Sultana is full of glee at the thought of proud, haughty Ali needing such help. Later, Sultana parades around in the underwear to mock her brother, much to the delight of her sisters.



# Themes

## Lifestyles of the Rich and Caged

Part of the appeal of the book lies in a central irony: Sultana is fabulously wealthy and enjoys unlimited purchasing power and all the privileges of wealth, yet she suffers in an oppressive system of societal and religious oppression.

Examples of Sultana's wealth abound, all derived from the royal family's oil fortune. Sultana and her family have palace compounds in Riyadh and Jeddah in Saudi Arabia. They also have a permanent residence in London and a villa in Cairo, where they keep many servants. Sultana wears millions of dollars worth of jewelry. Abdullah steals a million dollars from his father Kareem's safe, and Kareem only expresses minor annoyance when he is told Abdullah donated it all to a hospital.

And yet, with all the jetsetting, servants, and huge palaces, Sultana and the women of Saudi Arabia enjoy alarmingly little freedom. Yes, they can travel all over the world, but they must wear veil outdoors and can only travel if in the company of a male family member. Sultana has many servants to tend to her every desire, and yet it is within every Saudi man's right to treat his wife with extreme cruelty and abuse. In poor Sameera's case, for the crime of eloping with her lover she is locked up in her home for fifteen years by her uncle.

For these reasons of simultaneous wealth and oppression, Sultana feels both incredibly blessed and cruelly cursed. She hopes the reader will look beyond her wealth and realize the problems of Saudi women, even royal princesses, are very real and are in need of immediate resolution.

## Overview of Oppression

Much of the stated reason why Jean Sasson and Princess Sultana chose to write Sultana's biographical account is to shed light on the injustices being committed against women in Saudi Arabia. The authors spare few details in describing various alleged injustices inflicted on people Sultana knows or is familiar with.

With daughter Amani and her conversion starting with a Haj pilgrimage to Makkah, Sultana shows how young people can become ensnared in some version of fundamental Islam, and in doing so perpetuate the oppression of women in Saudi culture. Sultana uses the story of Princess Misha'il and the story of Sameera to show how the pursuit of true love can end in state-sponsored execution. Sultana tells the story of Majed and of Reema and Saleem to show how arrogant and misogynistic Saudi men can be, and how any sex crimes can be easily covered up when such a misogynistic culture is perpetuated. Later in the book, Sultana's journey with Fatma provides an opportunity to explain the practice of female circumcision.



Given the sensational nature of some of the events in the book, and the perpetuation of certain negative stereotypes about Arab men, a charge of heavily-fictionalized propaganda might be leveled at this book and the other books in the Princess trilogy. The reader must ask questions of artistic license: to what extent does Sultana's biography draw upon real events, and to what extent have events been fabricated or exaggerated for the benefits of a "good read" and to further a women's rights agenda, no matter how well-intentioned that agenda may be.

## Muslim Faith and Women's Issues

There is no doubt that Sultana feels that Islam is a great and true religion and that it should be preserved and perpetuated. At the same time, in the book she must grapple with the fact that many customs that result in the oppression of women in the Arab world are the result of interpretations—right or wrong—of the Koran and the Prophet Muhammad's teachings. These customs, including female circumcision and the wearing of veils, are called hadiths, and have been passed down generation to generation in the Muslim faith.

Sultana feels that full rights for women and adherence to Islam are not mutually exclusive concepts. She points out that the Koran teaches that men should not look down upon women, but rather treat them as equals. She also points out that nothing in the Koran provides for such things as the necessity for men to accompany women in travel, or for the wearing of veils. However, other portions of the Koran are more problematic for women's rights, such as the man's right to divorce at his pleasure. Sultana would further argue that a right such as this has been perverted by society, to the point that the threat of divorce can be used as a tactic to intimidate and frighten wives. Sultana believes one must look to the Prophet's original intentions, and not subsequent interpretations and cultural practices, to find approaches and justifications for women to become equal in Islam.

Ironically, many fundamentalists (like Sultana's daughter Amani) believe that a return to the Prophet's "original intentions" means an even stricter adherence to practices that oppress women.



# Style

## Perspective

Sultana's perspective is quite clear and often re-emphasized through the course of the book. Relying on her first-hand experiences as a Saudi Arabian woman, the member of a large conservative Muslim family, and a royal princess, she believes the women of Saudi Arabia (and to a larger extent, the Arab world) are oppressed, and she is using the opportunity of the autobiography to inform people about this oppression and inspire them to action. Sultana's enlightened stance often gets her into trouble with the more conservative members of her family, especially her sisters and her fundamentalist daughter Amani.

Sultana betrays ambivalence about many aspects of her life. She holds the Muslim religion in high esteem and maintains that no part of the Koran advocates any oppression against women. At the same time, there are many oppressive hadiths, or traditions, that have long been closely associated with her faith. She loves her daughter Amani, but dislikes the fundamentalist she has become. She appreciates her great wealth, but laments the price of oppression it comes with. These conflicting feelings are often talked about in between the relation of events in Sultana's life.

Sultana is progressive in the context of her own culture and family; however, a Western reader will detect several conservative tendencies. She is very concerned with physical beauty, and there is a sense that Sultana feels lack of physical beauty is nothing short of a tragedy. Sultana does not see that obsession with female beauty is just one more tool of female oppression. Sultana also quickly shuts the door on her daughter Maha's blossoming lesbianism. Maha's lesbianism is treated like a mental illness that is medicated and recovered from.

## Tone

Sultana is known in her family for her fiery attitude and uncompromising stance against the oppression of women. The book, appropriately, clearly takes a progressive stance in regards to women's issues. Sultana's (and the author's) tone is very passionate, using emotionally persuasive language to convince the reader of the plight of the oppressed women Sultana talks about. Similarly, men like Sultana's brother Ali, Yousif, Majed, and Saleem—who all possess a dismissive, hateful attitude towards women—are described as plainly evil. In the middle of these two extremes are men like Kareem, a man who clings to some of the old ways but who nevertheless has a good heart and an ability to realize how women are sometimes mistreated. Sultana betrays an ambivalence about Kareem her husband, expressing venomous hate at certain times and tender love at other times.



Sultana's tone is also pleading in a way. She is writing in order to expose Saudi Arabian society to the world at large. She feels the women of Saudi Arabia are in a desperate circumstance. She is begging the world to realize the full extent of the oppression in her country. Sultana hopes she can add to the public outcry of women's oppression and effect change. Though Sultana and the author are sometimes optimistic about the opportunity for change, at times Sultana demonstrates defeat and pessimism.

## Structure

Princess Sultana's Daughters is broken up into twelve chapters, along with a Prologue and Epilogue. Events are presented in chronological order, though Sultana frequently recounts stories from her childhood or other family members' stories. The book begins with Sultana's life around the time of the first Iraq War in the early 1990s, and extends to perhaps a few years after that.

The Prologue and Epilogue provide Sultana with an opportunity to emphasize her commitment to women's rights. While the book is autobiographical, it is clear Sultana is simultaneously choosing moments from her life that best exemplify the treatment of Saudi Arabian women, providing Sultana an ability to frequently step back from the immediate problem to make a larger comment on society and women's rights issues.

Roughly speaking, each chapter deals with a specific crisis, problem, or event. For example, chapter three, "London", details Maha's recovery in a psychiatric institution in London, while chapter ten, "Fatma", centers on the housekeeper Fatma and her crisis with female circumcision. While each chapter tells its own story, lingering issues from one story may continue into other chapters. A final resolution as to a certain person's fate may not be revealed until a future chapter, for one example.



## Quotes

"Now, ironically, my brother, a man who scorns the mention of women's rights, had read the book that focused attention on the abuse of women in my land. My demon of a brother, Ali, had foiled my precious anonymity."

Chap. 1, p. 9

"I saw plainly that my daughter had awakened Father's contempt for me. His eyes were penetrating, and his lips were curled in scorn as he looked from his daughter to his granddaughter. I overheard him mutter to no one in particular, 'A mouse can only give birth to a mouse.'"

Chap. 2, p. 22

"Muslims are taught that love and sex between two of the same is wrong, and the Koran forbids experimenting: 'Do not follow what you do not know.' In Saudi Arabia, love and sex are considered distasteful, even between those of opposite sexes, and our society pretends that relationships based on sexual love do not exist."

Chap. 3, p. 44

"Recalling the face of my loving mother and her poignant stories of the wonderful grandparents I had never known, my palms itched with the desire to slap the unresponsive faces of the descendants of those tender souls who had been dead for so very long."

Chap. 4, p. 61

"While others might harbor doubt, I know my own character. Undeniably, I have been endowed with an overabundance of spontaneity, and it is from this exuberance that I gain my power to do battle against those in command of females in my land."

Chap. 5, p. 82

"Few people know the facts that the Koran does not call for veiling, nor the restrictions women endure in the Muslim world. It is the traditions passed down that so hinder us from moving forward."

Chap. 6, p. 96

"Many people, Muslims and Christians alike, despise Saudis for their unearned wealth. Yet, few bother to understand the wretched poverty endured by all Saudi Arabians until the mid 1970s. I highly resent this hasty analysis of our current situation."

Chap. 7, p. 110

"When life is filled with social restrictions, when young men and women rarely have the opportunity to enjoy one another's company on ordinary social occasions, spontaneous emotions are quick to rise to the surface, often ending in terrible personal tragedies."

Chap. 8, p. 134



"Now that my children were nearing adulthood, I came to the frightful conclusion that the only prerequisite to contented motherhood seemed to be a precarious dependence upon chance, for nothing I said or did altered my children's unpredictable behavior."  
Chap. 9, p. 146

"With my mind in conflict between my own rebellious thoughts and Elham's traditional beliefs, I considered what Kareem had said, that I was a woman at odds with my fate. Yet, in spite of my second-class status, I knew that I could never yield to meek acceptance of female circumcision."  
Chap. 10, p. 180

"In a family of ten daughters, Reema was the unattractive sister who failed to excel in school or in games. Her one outstanding accomplishment was her ability to duplicate our mother's cooking skills [...] Living in a country where nothing is more admired than female beauty, Reema was not esteemed."  
Chap. 11, p. 186

"Under Muslim law, a man's freedom to divorce his wife is justified in the Koran. This system of the threat of divorce constantly looming over her security is most unsettling to women in my land."  
Chap. 12, p. 194

"The men of my land will grow to mourn my existence, for I will never cease to challenge the evil precedents they have allowed to prevail against the women of Saudi Arabia."  
Epilogue, p. 212



## Topics for Discussion

What are three specific ways in which Saudi Arabian women are oppressed, according to Sultana?

Why does Sultana worry over her daughter Amani?

Describe the relationship Sultana has with her husband Kareem. Is Kareem a progressive man, or a man who is stuck in the past?

What do Majed's story and Saleem's story show about Saudi Arabian society and difficulties women like Sultana have in introducing change?

What bold action does Abdullah take in regards to the love between Jafer and Fayza? How does Sultana feel about what her son has done? How does Kareem feel?

How does Sultana's family react to the discovery of her authorship of the book Princess? What is decided about what do do?

What does Sultana do with the knowledge that Fayza was taken out of the country with Maha's passport?