

# Cross- Cultural Examination of Gender and Power: A Reading of Jean Sasson's *For the Love of My Son*

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## ABSTRACT

Jean Sasson's *For the Love of My Son* is a memoir that tells the story of a mother's struggle to protect her son from the oppressive cultural norms of Afghanistan. Sasson narrates the personal experience, of Maryam Khail who grew up in Afghanistan that exposes the dark side of Afghan culture and sheds light on issues such as gender inequality, religious extremism, and corruption. The research article analyzes the cultural themes present in *For the Love of My Son* and their impact on the society.

**Keywords:** Cultural dominance, Patriarchy, Religious extremism, Tradition, Motherhood, Cultural Materialism

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## INTRODUCTION

Jean Sasson is an American author and women's rights activist, best known for her books that shed light on the experiences of women in the Middle East. *For the Love of My Son* is one such book, in which Sasson narrates the story of Maryam Khail, a beautiful Afghan woman born into one of the most influential families in Afghanistan- a family of wealth and power, and other women characters fighting against the oppressive cultural norms that threaten the safety and freedom of women and children. The research article examines the cultural themes presented in *For the Love of My Son* and their implications for the wider society through the theory of 'Cultural Materialism' coined by the British cultural theorist Raymond Williams.

Raymond Williams was a British cultural theorist who made significant contributions to the study of culture and society in the 20th century. His cultural theory emphasizes the ways in which culture is a dynamic, social process that is constantly changing and shaped by power relations. Williams believed that culture was not just the domain of high art and literature, but also included everyday practices, traditions, and values that people use to make sense of the world around them. He coined the term 'Cultural Materialism' to describe his approach to understanding culture as a material and historical phenomenon.

According to Williams, culture is not a fixed set of values and practices that are handed down from generation to generation. Instead, culture is constantly evolving and is shaped by social and historical contexts. He argued that culture is not something that can be separated from the material conditions of society, but is intimately connected to them. He argued that cultural producers have a significant role in shaping culture and that cultural products can challenge or reinforce dominant power relations.

Overall, Williams' Cultural theory emphasizes the importance of understanding culture as a dynamic and complex process that is shaped by social and historical contexts. His approach to cultural materialism highlights the interconnections between culture and society and the role of power relations in shaping cultural practices and values. The select work, *For the Love of a Son* by Jean Sasson, portrays the cultural theory that emphasizes the role of cultural production in shaping culture. The novel is a cultural product that challenges dominant power relations in Afghanistan. By telling the story of a mother's struggle to protect her son from an abusive father and a patriarchal culture, the novel sheds light on the oppressive nature of Afghanistan's gender norms and the ways in which women are marginalized in Afghan society.

Using Raymond Williams' cultural theory to analyse *For the Love of a Son*, reveals how culture is a dynamic, intricate process that is influenced by power dynamics. We can better comprehend the social and historical factors that contribute to the marginalization of women in Afghan society by looking at the cultural context of Afghanistan and how culture is portrayed in the book.

### **Gender Inequality:**

Gender inequality is one of the main themes that permeate throughout *For the Love of My Son*. Sasson describes how women in Afghanistan are treated as second-class citizens, with limited rights and freedoms. The work discusses the theme of gender discrimination and proliferate the theme with substantial practical evidences. The central character in the novel, Maryam Khail pretended to be a boy (Yousef Agha Khail) at the initial days of her kindergarten. The strongest desire to be a boy led that four year old girl to appear before the class as a boy. “During those first months of kindergarten I remember playing, assuming my position as the boldest of the boys and working hard on my lessons, for much is expected of male children” (Sasson 13). Even a young child in Afghanistan who is unaware of the advantages of being a man longs to be a boy for nothing more than acceptance. “Boys could wear any combination of shorts or long trousers with any clean shirt, but all the girls in the school were required to wear the uniform dress. It is impossible for us to play with abandon, to pedal a bike or roller-skate, for it would be a scandal if a girl fell and exposed her limbs or her panties” (17). The nation doesn't expect anything beneficial from its women citizens. There can be engineers, doctors, sportswomen or even authors but never they are given a chance to explore their talents.

Interesting courses of study would be offered to male classmates while I would be shuttled off with the girls taught to stitch in a straight line or prepare large meals for the men of the family. Before long the blood would come and I would be staring into the mirror... then I would leave my family to marry into a strange household, becoming a house servant to the mother of my new husband. (18)

The women are compelled to choose their groom despite their will. Simply said, marriage has a negative impact on Mayana, Maryam's grandma, both before and after the marriage. The marriage proposal to Mayana was an initiation as well as a demand from Ahmed Khail Khan, the powerful leader of the Khail tribe, a Pashtun Sunni Muslim, and husband of three wives. “And so it came to pass that my grandmother Mayana became a ‘prize bride’ like so many other beautiful Afghan women who are given to the man with the most influence and wealth” (33). And even after marriage, the immorality persisted among Afghan women because the society is even more repulsive to women who don't have male offspring. “Those wives who did not bear sons were scorned and ridiculed... Mayana alone was known as the ‘mother of daughters’, a terrible slur in a culture that only values male children” (39). In Simone de Beauvoir's theory of ‘gender as a social construct’ argues that gender roles and expectations are created by society and are not inherent to individuals. “One is not born but rather becomes a woman” (Beauvoir 283). In *For the love of a son*, the male domination and patriarchal society can be seen as a social construct that reinforces gender roles and expectations for men and women, respectively.

The male characters in the work can be seen as having more cultural capital than the female characters due to their societal privilege, which is reinforced by their ability to control and dominate women. “My fiancé's behaviour led me to believe that I would be worshipped by my husband after we were married. Somehow I had forgotten that Pashtun wives are treated as goddesses before marriage and as servants after” (Sasson 262). The main character of the story, Maryam, is a sufferer just like her grandmother, Mayana. Maryam's father forbids her from going to school because he doesn't respect her education. Instead, he makes her remain at home and pick up household chores so that she can please the family to which she will soon get married. Maryam again is forced to marry a person who is much older than her against her will. She is obliged to her dominating husband where she is often treated as a property with her body and life controlled by her husband. Her husband was physically and emotionally abusive towards her. This shows how men use their physical strength to subjugate women leaving them vulnerable to abuse and violence. Last but not least, Maryam's spouse also kidnaps her son, who she adores and cares for dearly. He does this to punish Maryam for disobeying him and to further exert control over her by using the kid as leverage. This demonstrates how men can further their control and dominance over women in patriarchal cultures by using children as weapons against them. This theme highlights the urgent need for gender equality in Afghanistan and other patriarchal societies.

### **Religion and Tradition**

Like many countries in the region, Afghanistan has a strong Islamic culture and the book delves into the ways in which religion and tradition shape daily life. The novel explores the way in which religion and tradition impact Maryam's life and the lives of those around her. For example, Mayana's husband, who is a devout Muslim, believes that it is his duty to provide for his family and protect them from harm. He also believes that women should be subservient to men and that it is shameful for a woman to be barren. Mayana struggles to conform to these beliefs, particularly when she is unable

to bear a son. However, Mayana received royal treatment when she gave birth to her husband's long-awaited boy. Religious men are required by cultural legislation to submit to society. Women who practice the religion are not given a platform or a place to express their opinions. When Mayana's spouse died, it was her ruthless stepson who was in charge of the household. To prevent her from having any control over her husband's wealth, he even selected an elderly man to be her groom. "cultural law demanded that her children remain under the control of Shair Khan if she remarried so she would disappear from the galahand never be allowed to see her daughters and son again" (Sasson47).

Afghanistan is a country with a deeply traditional and conservative society, where religion, culture, and family values play a central role in people's lives. Women in Afghanistan are never educated. However, Maryam's father was an educated, modern thinker who did not adhere to the strict traditions of his faith or custom. He fought to pursue an education while living under his brother's dictatorship. In contrast to the custom of his clan, he also provided education for his children. He didn't get married until he was 39. However, his wife could only have girls, which enraged Shair Khan. To avoid this social humiliation, she even insisted that her husband wed another lady. But he has consistently disagreed with the idea of a Muslim spouse having more than one wife. "With my heart in my throat I listened as he told my mother that not only was she his first wife but that she was his last wife. He declared that he could never love another woman as he loved her. For him the subject was closed" (101). Furthermore, Afghan society places a great deal of emphasis on honor and shame, and individuals are expected to behave in a way that upholds their family's reputation and honor. This can lead to a great deal of pressure on individuals, especially women, to conform to strict social norms and expectations.

In conclusion, religious and traditional constraints in Afghan society are deeply ingrained and have a significant impact on people's behavior and relationships, especially within the context of family life. These constraints can be a source of strength and stability for some individuals and communities, but they can also be a source of oppression and hardship, particularly for women and other marginalized groups.

### **The Condition of Mothers in Afghanistan**

Motherhood is a significant theme in *For the Love of My Son* as the book details the unwavering determination to protect the children from the dangers and oppression of Afghan culture, particularly during the Taliban regime. Mothers in Afghanistan are portrayed as deeply devoted to their children, willing to sacrifice their own lives to protect and care for them. However, they face significant challenges in doing so, including limited access to healthcare, education, and basic resources. Cultural Materialism is a theoretical approach that examines the ways in which cultural practices and material conditions are interconnected. In the context of motherhood in Afghanistan, Cultural Materialism can help us understand how cultural beliefs and practices surrounding gender roles and patriarchy contribute to the material conditions that affect mothers' lives. For example, in Afghanistan, traditional gender roles assign women the primary responsibility for caring for children, while men are responsible for providing for the family. This division of labor limits women's access to education and employment opportunities, which in turn limits their economic power and ability to provide for their children's basic needs. Moreover, patriarchal attitudes often limit women's access to healthcare and other resources necessary for the well-being of themselves and their children. This can result in higher rates of maternal and child mortality, as well as chronic health problems for mothers.

My mother and these two lived but sustained such grievous injuries to their backs during childbirth that they could never again walk upright. I was haunted by the fate of those women. But there was nothing any of us could do. Our culture demands that men rule our culture demands that cruel men not be punished. Our culture demands that women are faulted for every bad thing that occurs in their lives. (Sasson 116)

In addition, the book's larger cultural themes are intertwined with the motherhood subject. Mariyam's love for her son is evident throughout the book, as she is willing to risk her own safety and reputation to ensure his well-being. She spends years fighting against corrupt officials, navigating the complexities of Afghan society, and enduring personal hardships, all to keep her son safe. This theme highlights the powerful bond between a mother and child and the lengths to which a mother will go to protect her child. In many respects, Maryam's fight to keep her son safe is a fight against Afghanistan's patriarchal and oppressive social norms. She is in a unique position as a mother to question these standards and defend her son's freedom and rights. In this way, the subject of motherhood is also one of empowerment and resistance. "That was Afghanistan; I thought one monster raring a second monster. Would that happen to my baby too? Would his father's cruelty destroy my baby's sweet nature? Would the most loving child in the world grow into an unfeeling tyrant the same as his father?" (Sasson 313). Maryam's Afghan husband Kaiss was responsible for many tragedies, including rape, and she never wanted her kid to grow up with him and end up like him. And that was the major reason she fled the country—to save her son from the mistreatment Kaiss, his father, and his culture had inflicted on him.



By analyzing the cultural and material factors that shape the experiences of mothers in Afghanistan, we can better understand the challenges they face and work to address them through policy and practice. For example, policies that promote gender equality expand access to education and healthcare, and support women's economic empowerment can help to improve the material conditions that affect mothers' lives.

### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, *For the Love of My Son* is a powerful memoir that highlights the cultural issues present in Afghanistan and their impact on the wider society. Through the characters of Mayana and Maryam the author tries to expose the dark side of Afghan culture and sheds light on issues such as gender inequality, religious extremism, and condition of mothers. The research article has tried to analyze the cultural themes present in *For the Love of My Son* and their implications for the wider society. It is clear that there is a need for greater awareness and action to promote gender equality, religious tolerance not only in Afghanistan but also in other cultures where these issues are prevalent.

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