

TRAUMA OF AN UNLEASHED VANDALISM: JEAN SASSON'S WALK THROUGH THE DARK DAYS OF SADDAM HUSSEIN

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“Distant places have always called me. So, when I received an opportunity to travel to one of the most erotic and dangerous parts of the world, I accepted the challenge.” (Jean Sasson’s Mayada p 9)

These are the first lines of Jean Sasson’s *Mayada* which drew the picture of a fierce Iraq during the rule of Saddam Hussein. She reacts in a bold female way to those atrocious days through her work, *Mayada*. Feminism is the ideology of sexual politics that offers an oppositional practice to the patriarchal ideology of male dominance and the phallogocentric organization of society. It functions on the simple assumption that the personal is the political: there is an element of politics or ideology even in the most intimate and subjective matters of life especially of the marginalized. Feminism has dealt with the suffrage of women, equality of women in society, women’s identity, and the idea of gender and a critique of sexist power structures at different phases of its development. But this American writer, Jean Sasson, rather than from a feminist perspective views the autocratic rule of a despot from a female angle and thoughts.

Jean Sasson’s *Mayada* shows an altogether different aspect of one of the world’s most notoriously famous autocrat, Saddam Hussein. Through the novel, Sasson gives us a native Iraqi citizen’s view of the ruler of Iraq. Written within the framework of raw reality, a passionate Iraqi woman named Mayada, forms part and parcel of Iraqi’s political history and native citizenship; and narrates life under the tyrannical oppression of Saddam and his Baath Party.

The men behind the construction of Iraq as a free and independent nation were Jafar al-Askari, Nouri Al-Said, King Faisal I and Sati Al-Husri. After Iraqi’s freedom from British Rule, Jafar Al-Askari and Nouri Al-said served as the Minister of Defence and Prime Minister respectively helping King Faisal I and his son King Ghazi I to run the government. Two years later, in October 1936, General Bakir Sidqi, Commander of the Second Division of the Army, decided to stage a military coup, the first ever in modern Iraq. Sidqi appointed one of his associates captain Jameel to assassinate Jafar Al-Askari. Jafar’s death had a tumultuous result and the country descended into chaos. Sidqi took over Baghdad and forced King Ghazi to name a new government. In 1958, the royal family including the very young King Faisal II were massacred by a regiment lead by General Abdul-Karim Qassim. Thus, the military in Iraq overthrew the country’s monarchy. The coup leader, Abdul-Karim Qassem, moved to reduce disparities between Iraq’s rich and poor thus planning to form alliances with the communist countries. The Eisenhower Administration was alarmed. So were the Iraqis who belonged to the

Baath political party-pan-Arab, Islamic party. Baaths and the U.S agents met. The Baaths tried to assassinate Qassem. One of their participants was Saddam Hussien, a 19-year old Iraqi who had been studying at Cairo University. He was short in the leg and fled to Syria and then back to Egypt. In March 1963, the Baaths overthrew and killed Qassem.

In November, a counter-coup, led by General Abdul Salam Arif, drove the Baaths from power, and in 1964, a new constitution was proclaimed. In April 1966, Arif died in a helicopter crash, and his brother, another general, replaced him as Iraq's president. In July 1968, another coup by the Baath Party brought to power Ahmed Hassan Bakr. Thirty one year old Saddam Hussein was one of Bakr's distant relatives, and he took charge of Bakr's secret police. His job was to enforce Bakr's authoritarian rule, and in November 1969 he became Bakr's vice president. In the early 1970's Saddam became the power behind the presidency. He supervised modernization of Iraq's countryside, where most Iraqis lived. He mechanized agriculture and distributed land to farmers. Farm cooperatives were established, with profits distributed according to individual work. Expenditures for agriculture doubled between 1974 and 1975. With increase in production and Saddam's reforms, the living standard of rural people increased. Oil profits were invested in industrialization. Saddam was associated with his Baath party's economic and welfare programs, and his appeal among Iraqis increased. In 1976, Hussein acquired the rank of General. Although hardly a communist, Hussein's favourite reading had been about Josef Stalin- who had acquired power and adulation early in the twentieth century. Through intimidation, Hussien moved closer to power. Hussien followed this method throughout his rise to power and subsequent presidentship. Bakr's fear of his vice president Hussien grew, and he tried to get rid of him. Instead in 1979, Hussien pushed his relative, Bakr aside and took power.

In taking control, Hussien called a meeting attended by government and party officials. To secure his rule and as a warning, Hussien called out the names of dozens of individuals he wanted to get rid of. They were obliged to leave the hall and were escorted to their executions. Saddam took no chances in securing leadership. Iraq was bound under military barbarianism. Saddam even went to the extent of cutting the tongues of all those who opposed him. He suppressed several movements particularly of Shiites seeking to overthrow the government or gain independence. He maintained power during Iraq war of 1980 through 1988. Iraq deplored greatly due to this war but it continued on account of Saddam's personal vengeance against Khoemeni and his distrust of and dislike for the Shiite sect of Islam. However, the Iraq-Iran war ceased fire in 1998 when the two nations agreed to accept the U.N Security Council Resolution No.598. Again in 1990, Hussein ordered the invasion of Kuwait which further infuriated the Allied Western Nations who deluged Iraq in another subsequent war. Iraq descended into starvation, poverty and all this crippled the Iraqi society. Saddam's unpopularity grew day by day. But all opposition was brushed aside ruthlessly. There was no option of revolt or rebellion for Saddam. With his cruel punishments he eliminated all pinpoints of opposition with bloodshed and torture. While Iraq was engaged on the warfront with the world outside, Saddam waged a war with his own countrymen, arresting and eliminating them if ever he felt the risk of rebellion.

Jean Sasson's *Mayada* speaks of this internal anarchy within Iraq. Saddam created security forces through which he tightly controlled conflict between the government and armed forces. This helped him to maintain power devoid of any risk and chances of mutiny. In the early 1970s, Saddam nationalized oil and other industries. The state owned banks were put under his control, leaving the system eventually insolvent mostly due to the Iraq-Iran war, the Persian Gulf

war and the UN sanctions. Throughout the 1970s, Saddam cemented his authority over the apparatuses of government. As oil money helped Iraq's economy to grow at a rapid pace, positions of power in the country were mostly filled with Sunnis, a minority that made up only a fifth of the population. Saddam had revamped the intelligence organizations to bring the highly educated Iraqis to prominent positions. The desire for stable rule in a country rife with factionalism led Saddam to pursue both massive repression and the improvement of living standards. Saddam actively fostered the modernization of the Iraqi economy along with the creation of strong security apparatus to prevent coups within the power structure and insurrections apart from it. He implemented a large number of state welfare and development programs in order to mobilize mass support among the diverse elements of Iraqi society. However, Saddam's welfare programs were part of a combination of food and stick tactics to enhance support.

Iraqi society was divided along the lines of language, religion and ethnicity. Saddam's government rested on the support of the 20% minority of Sunnis. As can be seen in Sasson's *Mayada*, Saddam took every possible measure to prevent the uprising of the majority Shiite population. To maintain power, Saddam tended either to provide the Kurds of northern Iraq (who are Sunni, but not Arabs) with benefits so as to co-opt them into the regime, or to take repressive measures against them. The major instruments for accomplishing this control were the paramilitary and police organizations. As the Baath party's paramilitary, the people's Army acted as a counterweight against any coup attempts by the regular armed forces. In addition to the people's Army, the Department of General Intelligence (Mukhabarat) was the most notorious army of the state security system, feared for its use of torture and assassination. It was commanded by Barzan Ibrahim al-Tikriti, Saddam's younger half-brother. Since 1982, foreign observers believed that this department operated both at home and abroad in their mission to seek out and eliminate Saddam's perceived opponents.

Mayada gives an explicit description of Saddam's barbaric rule and the cannibalistic operations of the Mukhabarat. Saddam was notable for terror against his own people. 'The Economist' described Saddam as "one of the last of the twentieth century's great dictators, but not the least in terms of egotism, or cruelty, or morbid will to power". Saddam's regime was responsible for the deaths of at least 2,50,000 Iraqis and committed war crimes in Iran, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International issued regular reports of widespread imprisonment and torture. *Mayada* gives us the personal accounts of a number of such souls who were subjected to this kind of brutality and torture.

Mayada reveals Saddam's personality cut to the readers. Saddam has to be aptly regarded a machismo, vain and unexaggeratedly paranoid. As a sign of his consolidation of power, Saddam's personality cult pervaded Iraqi society. He had thousands of portraits, posters, statues and murals erected in his honour all over the country. His face could be seen on the sides of office buildings, schools, airports and shops, as well as Iraqi currency. Saddam's personality cult reflected his efforts to appeal to the various elements in Iraqi society. This was seen in his variety of apparel: he appeared in the costumes of the Bedouin, the traditional clothes of the Iraqi peasant (which he essentially wore during his childhood), and even Kurdish clothing, but also appeared in Western suits, fitted by his favourite tailor, projecting the image of an urbane and modern leader. *Mayada*, the protagonist of Sasson's novel, provides an interesting anecdote wherein she reveals that Saddam's choice of Western suits were quit of a poor taste. *Mayada's* mother, Salwa Al-Husri considered as one of the most fashionable women in Iraq was asked to

select appropriate day wears for Saddam on his request. Sometimes, he would also be portrayed as a devout Muslim, wearing full headdress and robe, praying toward Mecca. But he soon discarded civilian clothes altogether when the war with Iran erupted. Since then, he was never seen out of his military uniform. He also erected statues around the country which Iraqis toppled after his fall.

Saddam was a man entirely obsessed with him. Mayada gives us a first person account of her personal experience of Saddam's disturbing and eccentric machismo. When she received her first award from Saddam, she was gifted "an expensive Pateck Phillipe with diamonds in white gold and the name Saddam written inside the watch, and the second one was an Omega gold watch with Saddam's picture on the face"(154). Mayada recounts that she put away both the watches since she couldn't bear to see his face, or his name, every few minutes. The book also reveals his determined and obstinate desire to unleash himself onto every fraction of Iraqi society. He also unabashedly presented himself on screen during his reign. The following excerpt from the novel shows thus.

The evening news had begun. On the television screen, a male figure smiled as images of soldiers and exploding fireworks suiled behind his shoulder. He began to sing a songabout Saddam, a tune that was played before every newcast:

“Oh Saddam, our victories;
Oh Saddam, our beloved;
You carry the nation's dawn
Between your eyes.
Oh Saddam, everything is good.
With you
Allah! Allah! We are happy;
Because Saddam lights our days”.

The image of Saddam Hussein flashed on screen. He was first shown patting the heads of dark-curved school girls in billowy white dresses. Then he was depicted striding onto a balcony to wave at his chanting supporters clamouring approvingly below. The newscaster's image reappeared, and he continued to praise Saddam's greatness. (166)

Saddam Hussein was dogmatic and in many ways resembled a primitive peasant who had donned the robes of supreme power. He managed to sustain his dictatorship with brute force throughout Iraq but he was widely condemned in the west for the brutality of his dictatorship. The international community especially the U.S continued to view Saddam as a bellicose tyrant who was a threat to the stability of the region. After the September 11 attacks, Vladimir Putin began to tell the United States that Iraq was preparing terrorist attacks against the United States. In January 2002 state of the Union Address to Congress, President George W. Bush spoke of 'an axis of evil'(54) consisting of Iran, North Korea and Iraq. Moreover, Bush announced that he would possibly take action to topple the Iraq Government, because of the threat of its weapons of mass destruction. The Iraqi government and military collapsed within three weeks of the beginning of the U.S 2003 invasion of Iraq on 20th March. By the beginning of April, U.S forces occupied much of Iraq. The resistance of the much weakened Iraqi Army either crumbled or

shifted to guerrilla tactics, and it appeared that Saddam had lost control of Iraq. Saddam was placed at the top of the U.S list of ‘most wanted Iraqis’. In July 2003, his sons Uday and Quesay and a fourteen-year-old grandson Mustapha were killed in a three hour gunfight with the U.S forces. On 13 December 2003, Saddam Hussein was captured by American forces at a farmhouse in Ad-Dawr near Tikrit in a hole in Operation Red Dawn. Following his capture on 13 December, Saddam was transported to a U.S base near Tikrit, and later taken to the American base near Baghdad. On 5 November 2006, Saddam Hussein was found guilty of crimes against humanity and sentenced to death by hanging. Saddam’s half brother, Barzan Ibrahim and Award Hamed al-Bandar, head of Iraq’s Revolutionary Court in 1982, were convicted of similar charges. “The verdict and sentencing were both appealed, but subsequently affirmed by Iraq’s Supreme Court of Appeals.”(100) “On 30 December 2006, Saddam was hanged”(9) “despite his wish to be shot (which he felt would be more dignified).”(101).

Jean Sasson’s *Mayada* is set against the backdrop of the epitome of Saddam’s tyrannical rule and genocidal regime. Though the book assumed definite form and shape in 2003 after the coalition forces removed Hussein from power, it reflects some of the most brutal aspects of his reign and ultimate terror that prevailed all over Iraq. The book even shifts through Iraq’s history as well as certain incidents that were hitherto unknown to the modern world. The book was an outcome of Mayada’s decision to let the world know the truth about Iraqi life. Pertaining to her wish, the book written by Sasson presented the truth before the world “as told by someone who had seen Iraq from every angle, from Saddam’s palaces to Saddam’s torture chambers.”(24). Sasson’s *Mayada* thus forms a part of humanism, realism, history and literary resistance against oppression. Mayada along with the shadow women of her cell exposes the world the vandalism, hypocrisy, anarchy, autocracy as well as the genocidal racism prevalent under Saddam Hussein’s military regime. She also proves to be a reminder for generations to come of the chaotic history of Iraq as well as a nation’s struggle to overcome its enslavement.

Works Cited:

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