

## **There is more to Images than Meets the Eye: A Visual-Social Semiotic Reading of Sasson's *Princess***

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(Received: ۲۷th, October, ۲۰۱۶, Accepted: ۲۴th, September, ۲۰۱۷ Date of publication: June, ۲۰۱۹)

At the end of twentieth century and through the spread of advertisement industry, visual technology enhanced so much so that it turned out as one of the most fundamental aspects of life in the contemporary era. Such wide spread of visual power in social, personal, and political areas of contemporary world has not only foregrounded the significance of the “visual signs” in comparison with “verbal signs” in everyday communication but also encouraged many critics, including Mirzoeff, Rogoff, Kress, and Leeuwen to call the post-global age aptly as the epoch of “visual culture.” Turning into the major means of communication, visual signs have gradually replaced other means of communication, especially with the emergence of smart phones. However, naturalization of such replacement as well as the “passive observing” of such images on the part of the viewers have complicated or even concealed the very power of representation such signs usually hold. However, such complexity does not mean that communication happens in vacuum. On the other hand, such communication also, as Stuart Hall declares, takes place based on “conceptual maps” which are shared by people. As the Saussurian verbal structure is based on the conventional relation between “the signifier” and “the signified,” the visual sign system (even in its iconic images) consists of images which convey a conventional meaning to the viewers. Such basis reveals the extent to which linguistic structures, in a broad sense, and visual sign systems in specific are context-based and can be treated as “texts” which represent a specific power discourse (Azcárate and Gimber ۷). In such perception, the images are no longer mistaken with real things or events, and their meanings are considered as the product

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of “representation” process (Hall ۴۸). In such conditions, visual signs are treated more like those of artistic, cultural “constructs” of complicated codes, than the unbiased, true-to-life reflections of outside reality. Through this perspective, then, not only can the old-fashioned motto of “seeing is believing” be challenged, but also the documentary images can be interpreted as “symbolic constructs” which are political deep down and in line with specific discursive power. It is in line with such complexity of visual signs and the prevalence of images in virtual sites, magazines, posters, book covers, and catalogues that visual-social semiotic approach proved necessary to uncover what the ordinary eyes cannot recognize. The basis of this approach is the fact that books, sites, or posters convey their messages mostly through their visual signs than through verbal structures and that the verbal and visual message in most cases can contradict each other. In line with this idea, the present article is an attempt to focus on the political, cultural nature of the book covers of *Princess: A True Story of Life behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia* (۱۹۹۲), written by Jean Sasson, the bestseller American writer of the contemporary era. In this book, Sasson tries, as she claims, to convey the plights and pain Sultana, the Saudi princess, has been through. She declares that her book, which has been written through the princess’s demand, can set free all women who are subject to the patriarchal tyranny prevalent in Islamic Societies. She has written her work in a way to put Islam and Islamic Shariah into blame for women’s suffering and pain. Regarding her book’s verbal message, one might say the book gives voice to the voiceless in the tyranny of Saudi Regime. However, the point is that the book cover conveys a different one. As a bestseller, her book’s first publication refers back to ۱۹۹۲; yet, with the onset of “war against terror” in the West, triggered by attacks at twin towers, the book was republished. The remarkable point about this recent publication was its dramatic change in its cover. Portraying a dark, faceless female figure in chador against a white background, the ۱۹۹۲- book cover has now been replaced with a close-shot image of an Arab woman’s face with typical oriental features of kohled eyes staring at the viewer through a hand-made black burka. Studying the images through a visual-social semiotics and putting them beside the feminist, liberal call for Muslim women’s freedom propagandized by the writer reveal how these pictures, representing the discourse of oriental feminism, have tried to manipulate readers mind to justify the current policy of the West against Muslims in post-terror era. In fact, what Sasson declares to be her support for Muslim

women's freedom from the tyranny of patriarchy and Islam is revealed to be her approval of the political hegemony of "the West" against "the East." If she puts forth a dark image of a Muslim woman in her ۱۹۹۲-book cover to demonstrate through the technique of comparison and contrast the superiority of the free (uncovered), cultured western woman against her bound (covered), primitive oriental sisters, she also tries to justify the West's treatment of women. However, after September eleventh (۹/۱۱) and with the beginning of the era of terror, Sasson's book cover changes again to reveal a different policy. In this cover, reader comes across a woman's face covered in burka which straightly looks into reader's eyes and calls for help. Such an image is to provoke the reader to take steps against tyrannical Islamic culture and put an end to suppressive regime, which puts it in line with the Islam phobia prevalent at the time of terror. In tandem with the neo-imperial discourse of power, Sasson's second book cover also tries to represent Islam as the mere source of violence and Muslims as the only agents of terror. Involving oriental women in challenges between West and East, Sasson seems to repeat the old strategy of imperial regimes which abused the status of oriental women to guarantee their own rules in colonial era. The curious point, however, is the fact that despite the apparent simplicity of these book covers, they have reduced the complicated challenge of the West against the East to a mere piece of clothing, i.e., burka, to justify the attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq as the civilizing missions undertaken by white men to save their oriental sisters.

**Key words:** visual-social semiotics, front covers, oriental woman, *Princess*, postcolonial Feminism