

I. Introduction

The Freelance Journalist

Asne Seierstad lifts the lid on Afghan family life in her fictionalized account of her time in Afghanistan, *The Bookseller of Kabul*. It is a non-fiction book written by a Norwegian journalist about a bookseller, Shah Muhammad Rais (whose name was changed to Sultan Khan), and his family in Kabul, Afghanistan. It contrasts with other varieties of nonfiction, in the sense that it makes no attempt in describing the average or overview of Kabul, or its booksellers, and instead, more like a novel, focuses on characters and the daily issues that they face. It describes through the events Afghan traditions, family models, and the role of women. The changes felt by the Afghan population as they go through the rule of the USSR, Taliban, and coalition-supported democracy. The balance between Westernization and traditional Islam is also very much the theme of the novel.

The Bookseller of Kabul, although a non-fiction, definitely reads like a novel. Asne Seierstad has changed the names of the characters in the book, but even with that, it is obvious to Afghans who the bookseller is. When the book was translated into English, the real bookseller was outraged. He has even tried suing Seierstad and her publisher, and he has also written and published his own version of events.

Asne Seierstad is a Norwegian freelance journalist. She studied Russian, Spanish, and the history of Philosophy at Oslo University. Asne Seierstad studied at the University of Oslo where she successfully completed her studies in Russian, Spanish and the history of philosophy. She worked as a correspondent in Russia between 1993 and 1996. From 1993 until 1996 she reported for the *Arbeiderbladet* in Russia and in 1997 from China. From 1998 until 2000 she worked for the national television network *NRK* where she reported from the Serbian breakaway province of

Kosovo. She then worked as a correspondent in China in 1997. In 2001 she followed the Northern Alliance into Kabul after the fall of the Taliban government. As a reporter she is particularly remembered for her hard work, especially in war zones such as Afghanistan, Iraq and most recently Chechnya, as well as for her reports on the September 11 attacks in the United States of America.

With Their Backs to the World: Portraits from Serbia, her first book, is an account of the time she spent reporting in Russia. This book was extended and republished in 2004 when she again visited Serbia. The name was changed slightly, to *Portraits of Serbia*, signaling that Serbia's back is no longer turned to the world. In her book *Portraits From Serbia*, Seierstad follows thirteen people from different parts of the country, representing a rough cross-section of Serbia. She describes their lives and records their thoughts, providing a degree of insight into Serbia's national psyche and its historical causes. She visited Serbia three times during the process of writing the book, first in 1999, after the NATO bombing campaign, when Milosevic was still in power and when UN sanctions were still in place. She visited again during the democratic revolution in 2000. Her final visit came in 2004 after the assassination of the Serbian Prime Minister, Zoran Djindjic and the deportation of alleged war criminals to the ICTY in The Hague, with most of her characters feeling disillusioned with the country's lack of progress. As well as talking about ordinary Serbians, including a displaced Serbian family from Kosovo, Seierstad also writes about her interviews with famous Serbian politicians from both Milošević's Socialist Party and the Democratic parties of Serbia.

The Bookseller of Kabul, her second, bestselling book, is an account of the time she spent living with an Afghan family in Kabul after the fall of the Taliban in 2001. Her other books include, *One Hundred and One Days: A Baghdad Journal*. It

describes the three months she spent in Iraq in the build-up to the US-led invasion in 2003, and most recently *Angel of Grozny: Inside Chechnya*, an account of the time she spent in Chechnya after the war.

The Bookseller of Kabul was the result of a simple yet courageous idea. After having spent six weeks in Afghanistan with the Northern Alliance, Seierstad made for Kabul. While in Kabul she met the intriguing owner of a bookshop and soon found herself spending hours listening to his stories of life under the various regimes, communist, Mujahedeen, and Taliban. Each was destructive and tyrannical in its own unique way and each forced the bookseller to defend his beloved books, often without success. The interesting subject and the unique perspective set the stage for the book but what makes it all click is the fictionalized form. Rather than attempt to report what she found in a straightforward non-fiction work, Seierstad turns the facts and feelings she uncovers into a fictionalized story. As a result, *The Bookseller of Kabul* reads like a novel rather than a contemporary news account.

Asne stayed with a bookseller in Kabul, Sultan Khan, and his family and wrote a book about it named *The Bookseller of Kabul*. When Khan later read this book, he was very unhappy with the way she had described him and his family. He claimed that he was falsely portrayed as a tyrant, when all he had done was to invite Seierstad to be a guest in his home. Seierstad claimed that she had simply described things the way she experienced them. The novel paints an unflattering portrait of Khan as a seeker after freedom and liberal values in his country whilst at the same time maintaining an iron grip on his family, and in particular its female members. Life for many Muslim women is difficult, and that is clearly portrayed in this book.

The Bookseller of Kabul is Asne's unblinking account of the inner workings of an Afghan family. The novel depicts Afghan men as savage warriors, jealous of their

honor, harsh to their long-suffering women, fanatically religious. And Afghan women who are forced to wear the *burqa* and be virtual slaves to their husbands deserve our pity. The author presents Shah not as a hero, but as a tyrant who buys a teenage bride without telling his wife of 30 years, sells books yet deprives his sons of education and uses his sister as a maid, refusing to let her become a teacher. He also gets a poor carpenter jailed for three years for stealing a few postcards, leaving the man's destitute family including two daughters who have polio with no means of support. The book has turned Shah into the personification of the repression of women by Afghan men.

With 220,000 copies sold to date in Norway alone, her book is the country's biggest nonfiction best seller ever. And it has done almost as well in Sweden and Denmark. It helped that Ms. Seierstad, a 33-year-old newspaper and television reporter who has covered wars in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq, was already something of a celebrity in Norway. But her account of living in the family of an English-speaking Kabul bookseller, whom she portrays as a liberal to the world and a tyrannical patriarch at home, also shocked Nordic audiences with its intimate look at the repressed condition of Afghan women.

Ever since its publication and translation, Seierstad's *The Bookseller of Kabul* has drawn a lot of critical attentions. The text has been variously critiqued and interpreted. The body of criticism on this text has done much to highlight the significance of Seierstad as an author. Highlighting the difficult Afghan culture in the *Bookseller Kabul*, Yvonne Ridley comments:

Afghan culture, as Seierstad makes clear, is a great deal more complex than is portrayed in the western media. When the Taliban were routed from Kabul, television station across the globe broadcast images of

women burning their burqua and men shaving off their beards.

Unfortunately, the truth was not so straightforward and thanks to such book. We are better able to understand why Afghan women are still struggling for any sort of real freedom. (38)

Similarly, Carol Bere explores the situation of Afghan women and argues whether fiction, non-fiction, or so-called immersion journalism, provocative works like *The Bookseller of Kabul* adds to the growing body of literature that explores the situation of Afghan women from historical, social and cultural perspectives. Women's rights to freedom, to personal choices – whether in work or in marriage and education in a country where the literacy rates for women and marginal are certainly the subtext, indeed the implicit argument of *The Bookseller of Kabul* (17). Lucille M Bone argues:

The Bookseller of Kabul manifests home tyranny: Yet home, in a cramped, war – Battered apartment shared by mother, sibling, wives, children and nephews, Sultan is a tyrant. With the exception of Sultan's mother, women in Khan family have especially grim prospects: the birth of a daughter is considered a tragedy, and marriage, already arranged, confers status but often means trading one form of drudgery for another. (148)

Likewise, the novel *Bookseller of Kabul* deals with the position of women.

Karen Steel views:

Women in Afghanistan remain hidden anonymous identifiable only as burkas', their value determined by their pre-marital purity; and then by their ability to bear sons. This would seem to be the fate of all of Sultan Khan's female relatives including Bibigul, his mother, given away at eleven to a man in his thirties; Sharifa, his pensioned – off'

wife; Sonya, his sixteen- year – old second wife; Feroza, his pretty and hardworking older sister who was sold at fifteen to a rich man in his forties in order to fund sultan’s own education and finally his younger sitters. (55)

Though Seierstad’s *The Bookseller of Kabul* has been studied variously by different critics, none of them have comprehensively dealt with the issue I have raised. Seierstad represents the Afghan culture as inferior and the other to European culture. She depicts the Afghan society with negative images and by stereotyping them. Seierstad as a westerner reconfirms the orientalist structure in her misrepresentation of the Afghans in *The Bookseller of Kabul*. Thus, the area I have chosen for my research is a new territory that is worthy of research.

II. Poetics and Politics of Representation

Encountering Other Cultures

The term culture generally refers to patterns of human activity and the symbolic structures that give such activities significance and importance. Cultures can be understood as system of symbols and meanings that even their creators contest, that lack fixed boundaries, that are constantly in flux, and that interact and compete with one another. Different definitions of culture reflect different theoretical bases for understanding, or criteria for evaluating, human activity. Culture can be defined as all the ways of life including arts, beliefs and institutions of a population that is passed down from generation to generation. Culture has been called the way of life for an entire society. As such, it includes codes of manners, dress, language, religion, rituals, norms of behavior such as law and morality, and systems of belief as well as the art. A culture, then, is by definition at least, a set of cultural objects.

Culture is manifested in music, literature, lifestyle, painting and sculpture, theater and film and similar things. Although some people identify culture in terms of consumption and consumer goods anthropologists understand culture to refer not only to consumption goods, but to the general processes which produce such goods and give them meaning, and to the social relationships and practices in which such objects and processes become embedded. For them, culture thus includes art, science, as well as moral systems. According to sociologist Robert Bierstedt, the definition of culture is:

Culture is the complex whole that consists of everything we think, do and have as a member of a society. Culture is the sum of integrated learned behavior patterns, which are the characteristics of the members of society and which are therefore not the result of biological

inheritance. (23)

Many people have an idea of culture that developed in Europe during the 18th and early 19th centuries. This notion of culture reflects inequalities within European societies, and between European powers and their colonies around the world. It identifies “culture” with “civilization” and contrasts it with “nature.” According to this way of thinking, one can classify some countries and nations as more civilized than others, and some people as more cultured than others. Culture also refers to elite activities such as museum-caliber art and classical music, and the word cultured describes people who know about, and take part in, these activities. Following this trajectory, Mike Featherstone talks about global culture as:

We can point to the existence of a global culture in the restricted sense of ‘third cultures.’ It is a set of practices, bodies of knowledge, conventions and lifestyles that have developed in ways which have become increasingly independent of nation-states. There are a number of trans-societal institutions, cultures and cultural producers who cannot be understood as merely agents and representatives of their nation-states. (350)

From the 19th century onwards, some social critics have accepted this contrast between the highest and lowest culture, but have stressed the refinement and sophistication of high culture as corrupting and unnatural developments that obscure and distort people’s essential nature. Today most social scientists reject the monadic conception of culture, and the opposition of culture to nature. They recognize non-elites as just as cultured as elites by simply regarding them as just cultured in a different way.

During the Romantic era, scholars in Germany, especially those concerned with nationalist movements developed a more inclusive notion of culture as “worldview.” In this mode of thought, a distinct and incommensurable world view characterizes each ethnic group. Although more inclusive than earlier views, this approach to culture still allowed for distinctions between “civilized” and “primitive” or “tribal” cultures. By the late 19th century, anthropologists had adopted and adapted the term culture to a broader definition that they could apply to a wider variety of societies. Attentive to the theory of evolution, they assumed that all human beings evolved equally, and that the fact that all humans have cultures must in some way result from human evolution. In his article *New Ethnicities*, Stuart Hall writes about ethnic cultural identity as:

We are all, ethnically located and our ethnic cultural identities are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are. But this is also a recognition that this is not an ethnicity which is doomed to survive, only by marginalizing, dispossessing, displacing and forgetting other ethnicities. This precisely is the politics of ethnicity predicted on difference and diversity. (94)

They also showed some reluctance to use biological evolution to explain differences between specific cultures and the society as a whole. In the 1950s, subcultures began to be the subject of study by sociologists. The 20th century also saw the popularization of the idea of corporate culture that was distinct and malleable within the context of an employing organization or a workplace. Modern cultural theory also considers the possibility that of culture itself as product of stabilization tendencies inherent in evolutionary pressures toward self-similarity and self-cognition of societies as wholes, or tribalism.

Large societies often have subcultures, or groups of people with distinct sets of behavior and beliefs that differentiate them from a larger culture of which they are a part. The subculture may be distinctive because of the age of its members, or by their race, ethnicity, class or gender. The qualities that determine a subculture as distinct may be aesthetic, religious, occupational, political, sexual or a combination of these factors. Cultures, by predisposition, both embrace and resist change, depending on culture traits. For example, men and women have complementary roles in many cultures. One gender might desire that affect the other, as happened in the second half of the 20th century in western cultures. Thus there are both dynamic influences that encourage acceptance of new things, and conservative forces that resist change. Social conflict and the development of technologies can produce changes within a society by altering social dynamics and promoting new cultural models. Environmental conditions and contact with other societies may enter as factors, spurring or enabling generative action.

Anthropology exerted a strong influence on the development of cross-culturalism in literary and cultural studies. Cross-culturalism is sometimes construed as ideological, in that it advocates values such as those associated with transculturation, transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, interculturalism, and globalism. Nevertheless, cross-culturalism is a fundamentally neutral term, in that favorable portrayal of other cultures or the processes of cultural mixing are not essential to the categorization of a work or writer as cross-cultural. cross-culturalism is concerned with exchange beyond the boundaries of the nation or cultural group.

Cross-culturalism in literary and cultural studies is a useful rubric for works, writers and artists that do not fit within a single cultural tradition. To the extent that cultures are national, the cross-cultural may be considered as overlapping the

transnational. The cross-cultural can also be said to incorporate the colonial and the postcolonial, since colonialism is by definition a form of cross-culturalism. Travel literature also makes up a substantial component of cross-cultural literature.

In the 19th century, culture was used by some people to refer to a wide array of human activities, and by others as a synonym for “civilization“. In the 20th century, anthropologists began theorizing about culture as an object of scientific analysis. Some used it to distinguish human adaptive strategies from the largely instinctive adaptive strategies of animals, including the adaptive strategies of other primates and non-human hominids, whereas others used it to refer to symbolic representations and expressions of human experience, with no direct adaptive value. According to many theories that have gained wide acceptance among anthropologists, culture exhibits the way that humans interpret their biology and their environment. According to this point of view, culture becomes such an integral part of human existence that it is the human environment, and most cultural change can be attributed to human adaptation to historical events. Moreover, given that culture is seen as the primary adaptive mechanism of humans and takes place much faster than human biological evolution, most cultural change can be viewed as culture adapting to itself.

Cultural hegemony is the concept that a diverse culture can be ruled or dominated by one group or class, that everyday practices and shared beliefs provide the foundation for complex systems of domination. Critics of the concept of cultural hegemony have noted that it tends to imply a false consciousness of the working class, which suggests that the masses of people are gullible and easily manipulated. The cultural hegemony argument is also a subtle put-down of other cultures. It assumes that they are so weak or ignorant that they cannot be trusted to decide for themselves what they should see and hear. These people should, ‘for their own good,’

be protected from invasive American culture, so that their “native” cultures will be preserved.

Cultural imperialism is the practice of promoting, separating, or artificially injecting the culture or language of one nation into another. It is usually the case that the former is a large, economically or militarily powerful nation and the latter is a smaller, less important one. Cultural imperialism can take the form of an active, formal policy or a general attitude. The term is usually used in a pejorative sense, usually in conjunction with a call to reject foreign influence. Cultural imperialism can refer to either the forced acculturation of a subject population, or to the voluntary embracing of a foreign culture by individuals who do so of their own free will. Since these are two very different referents, the validity of the term has been called into question. The term cultural imperialism is understood differently in particular discourses.

Cultural influence can be seen by the receiving culture as either a threat to or an enrichment of its cultural identity. It seems therefore useful to distinguish between cultural imperialism as an attitude of superiority, and the position of a culture or group that seeks to complement its own cultural production, considered partly deficient, with imported products or values. The imported products or services can themselves represent, or be associated with, certain values such as consumerism. Some believe that the newly globalized economy of the late 20th and early 21st century has facilitated this process through the use of new information technology. This kind of cultural imperialism is derived from what is called soft power.

Cross-cultural communication tries to bring together relatively unrelated areas as cultural anthropology and established areas of communication. Its core is to establish and understand how people from different cultures communicate with each

other. Its charge is to produce some guidelines with which people from different cultures can better communicate with each other. Cross-cultural communication, as in many scholarly fields, is a combination of many other fields. These fields include anthropology, cultural studies, psychology and communication. The field has also moved both toward the treatment of interethnic relations, and toward the study of communication strategies used by co-cultural populations.

Edward Said: Orientalism and Occidentalism

Edward Said, one of the founders of the field of post-colonial studies, wrote extensively on the subject of cultural imperialism, and his work is considered by many to form an important cornerstone in this area of study. His work attempts to highlight the inaccuracies of many assumptions about cultures and societies, and is largely informed by Michel Foucault's concepts of discourse and power. The relatively new academic field of post-colonial theory has been the source for most of the in-depth work on the idea of discursive and other non-military mechanisms of imperialism, and its validity is disputed by those who deny that these forms are genuinely imperialistic.

Orientalism, Edward Said argued that European travel writing, notwithstanding its claims to be pure knowledge or harmless entertainment, must be seen as part of the apparatus of empire. It provided not only the information but also the conceptual framework of the images of 'savages', which enabled imperialism and colonialism:

The orient had helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea personality and experience. Yet none of this orient is merely imaginative. The orient is an integral part of European material

civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part of culturally and even ideologically. (1-2)

With this Eurocentric notion, the westerners always define the orient as the matter of interpretation for them. To maintain the superior identity of the West, the discourses play vital role for analyzing and imposing the oriental stereotype which dominate and prove their hegemonic nature. Edward Said further clarifies this point as, “the relationship between occident and orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degree of complex hegemony...” (1). Hegemony is the power of the ruling class to convince other classes that their interest is the interest of all. Because of this, ruling class becomes successful in promoting its own interest in the society.

Discourses, according to Said, cannot be free from social and political sphere of an era. Different types of conflicts and contradictions, which are at play in the society, are at the heart of the text in a contextualized form. The text in this context becomes even more powerful because the language used to produce the text not only reflects the reality but it also creates text's own reality by which it can achieve power and authority over the reality itself. Such texts or discourses produce a tradition of knowledge “whose material presence, weight”, according to Said, “not the originality of a given author, is really responsible for the texts produced out of it” (94). Here, the text is governing the reality not reality governing the text. Said, asserting the power of the text, writes in “Crisis of Orientalism” that people, places and experiences can always be described by a book so much so that he book(or text) acquires a greater authority, an use, even than the actuality it describes” (93). This is to say that language used to create text instead refers to itself rather than reflecting the context external to it. Edward Said in his Book *Representations of Intellectual* argues:

The construction of the fiction like “East” and “West” to say nothing of racialist essence like subject races, oriental, Aryan, Negroes and like, were what my books attempted to combat. For from encouraging a sense of aggrieved primal innocence in countries which had suffered the ravages of colonialism, I stated repeatedly that mythical abstractions such as these were lies, as were the various rhetoric’s of blame they gave rise to; cultures are too intermingled, their contexts and histories too interdependent and hybrid, for surgical separation into large and mostly ideological oppositions like orient and occident. (XI-XII)

The psychological domination of culturally privileged is clearly seen in the concept of Said’s *Orientalism*. Grounding upon the psychological concept of attitude the occident clearly others the orient and this same concept reveals or manifests in orientalism. Orient and oriental have come to define their identities always in relation to what they are not, and therefore, what they are demonized as ‘others’. Occident deliberately produces ‘the other’ in order to create its identity and then, consolidate colonial power over the ‘other’. They become always conscious about heir belongingness, which in turn bars them from promoting mutual bond with the ‘other’. Unlike orient, they believe ‘we’ are true human being; so, ‘we’ have the right to govern, to rule and even possess ‘them’. Their psychological attitude makes them believe that it is their human prerogative not only to manage the non-white but also to own it, to teach it an to make it civilize. Said clearly shows the purposes served by orientalism:

...to subordinate or underplay military power in order to aggrandize the project of glorious knowledge acquired in the process of political

domination of the orient; to formulate the orient, to give it shape, identity, definition with full recognition of its place in memory, its importance to imperial strategy, and its “natural” role as an appendage to Europe; to dignify all the knowledge collected during colonial occupation with the title “contribution to modern learning.” (43)

Significantly, the discourse of orientalism persists into the present, particularly in the West’s relationship with orient, as is evidenced in its study, its reporting in the media, its representation in general. The representation declares the oriental obscurity, alienation, and strangeness. So the westerner feels the responsibility to bring the lost orient into identification. The identification created by the West to study the orient becomes a set of symbol and image which estranges the orient rather than to make it familiar. The images and symbols used to refer the orient are made for the purpose of degenerating the demoralizing the orient. The discourse represents the oriental as savage, barbaric, uncivilized, immoral, and unfinished. These are the authoritative symbols which help the West to maintain its supremacy. The symbols and images imposed upon the oriental create the binary representing the westerners as educated, civilized, and moral.

The significant of orientalism is a mode of knowing the other, a supreme example of the construction of the other, and a form of authority. The orient is phenomenon constructed by generations of intellectuals, artists, commentator, writers, politicians, and more importantly, construction by the naturalizing of wide range of orientalist assumptions and stereotypes. The relationship between the occident and the orient is a relationship between powers, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony. Consequently, orientalist discourse, for Said, is more valuable as a sign of power exerted by the West over the orient than a true discourse about the

orient. Said further says that eighteen century onwards, there emerged. “a complex orient suitable for study in the academy, for display in the museum, for reconstruction in the colonial office, for theoretical illustration in anthropological biological, linguistic, racial, and historical thesis about mankind and the universe”(7).

Orientalism is not, however, a western plot to hold down the oriental world. Said asserts it as:

A distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts; it is an elaboration not only of a basic geographical distinction... but also of a whole series of ‘interests’ which not only crates but maintains. It is, rather than expresses, a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even incorporate, what is a manifestly different world. (12)

In fact orientalism is a cultural and political fact which has germinated by analyzing and interpreting the orient. The discourse is manipulated by power which belongs to West. So the main aim of the discourse is to represent the oriental culture, geography religion, and socio-economic milieu. Within a familiar framework of grammatical and symbolic structure the orient is represented. The main purpose served by the discourse is the experimentation with lives, and above all with meaning of oriental geography, culture, religion and language.

Representation: Distortion of Fact

Man for many philosophers, both ancient and modern is regarded as the representational animal, the creature whose distinct character is the creation and the manipulation of signs. Representations are signs that stand in for and take the place of something else. It is through representation people know and understand the world

and reality through the act of naming it. Representation has been associated with aesthetics and semiotics. The term representation carries a range of meanings and interpretations. In literary theory representation is commonly defined in three ways.

1. To look like or resemble.
2. To stand in for something or someone.
3. To present a second time to re-present.

Representation began with early literary theory in the ideas of Plato and Aristotle, and has evolved into a significant component of language, Saussurian and communication studies. Representation has always played a central role in the understanding of literature. Immanuel Kant says about representation as:

It is merely empirical law, that representations which have often followed or accompanied one another finally become associated, and are so set in a relation whereby, even in the absence of the object, one of these representations can, in accordance with a fixed rule, bring about a transition of the mind to the other. (45)

Representation is the ability of texts to draw upon features of the world and present them to the viewer, not simply as reflections, but more so, as constructions. Representations are influenced by culture and in much the same way, have the capacity to shape culture and mould society's attitudes, values, perceptions and behaviors. Representation in literary theory is also sometimes referred too mimesis, the Greek word which means imitation or representation.

Since ancient times representation has played a central role in understanding literature, aesthetics and semiotics. Plato and Aristotle are key figures in early literary theory who considered literature as simply one form of representation. Aristotle deemed mimesis as natural to man, therefore considering representations as necessary

for peoples learning and being in the world. Plato, in contrast, looked upon representation with more caution. He recognized that literature is a representation of life, yet also believed that representations create worlds of illusion leading one away from the real things. For Plato, representation, like contemporary media, intervenes between the viewer and the real, creating illusions which lead one away from the real things. Plato believed that representation needs therefore, to be controlled and monitored due to the possible dangers resulting in its ability to foster antisocial emotions or encourage the imitation of evil. In *Art and Illusion* Plato says:

The artist's representation is a long way removed from truth, and he is able to reproduce everything because he never penetrates beneath the superficial appearance of anything. Then the artist's representation stands at third removed from reality. Then do you think we might call him author? (31)

It is also important to note that one apprehends reality only through representations of reality, through texts, discourses and images. But because one can see reality only through representation it does not follow that one does not see reality at all. Reality is always more extensive and complicated than any system of representation can possibly comprehend. Consequently, throughout the history of human culture, people have become dissatisfied with language's ability to express reality and as a result have developed new modes of representation. It is necessary to construct new ways of seeing reality, as people only know reality through representation. From this arise the contrasting and alternate theories and representational modes of abstraction, realism and modernism, to name a few.

It is from Plato's caution that in the modern era many are aware of political and ideological issues and the influences of representations. It is impossible to divorce

representations from culture and the society that produces them. In the contemporary world there exist restrictions on subject matter, limiting the kinds of representational signs allowed to be employed, as well as boundaries that limit the audience or viewers of particular representations. The accuracy of the representations can by no means be guaranteed, as they operate in a system of signs that can never work in isolation from other signs or cultural factors. For instance, the interpretation and reading of representations function in the context of a body of rules for interpreting, and within a society many of these codes or conventions are informally agreed upon and have been established over a number of years. Such understandings however, are not set in stone and may alter between times, places, peoples and contexts. How though, does this 'agreement' or understanding of representation occur?

The western writing reveals the images, representation, and depiction of culture, geography and people of non-west. These texts involve westerners' point of view concerning the superiority of their culture, race and religion. Such texts are not accounts of different people and societies, but a projection of their desires of scientific/objective knowledge. West and westerners within that textual model are situated as normative. They invent certain images and symbols that help them analyze and interpret the orient. Such designation of framework represents the orient, as Said writes in his *Orientalism*, "a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences"(1). Such discourse portrays the oriental as primitive, insurrectionary force, and libidinous. These shared assumptions of westerners vastly differ from the cultural realities of the world societies because the fact or nature of the orient does not remain static. The westerners manipulate the raw material from the imperial quest of the travelers and traders of the European

organization to explore the orient. They create static symbols and images to study the orient. The orient subject is characterized as 'other' through such writing which makes the distinction between 'we', the westerners, and they, the other. So, the representation asserts the idea of western identity as a superior one in comparison to other.

Representation of other culture with the known western symbolic system is really a misleading. It is happening in each case when West tries to interpret non-west society, culture, values, as well as social customs and symbols. When west finds other culture dissimilar to their culture it represents subordinate representation of its binary with different propagations. As Bill Ascroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffen argue in *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*:

... it is the through education and in terms of modes of production and consumption that colonialist representations persist and currently circulate in, for instance, popular television shows, cartoons, novels the derogatory representations they promulgated that they offered a transparent 'window' on a objective reality' that relations between producers and consumers, or writers and readers, did not really exist and thus did not foster and reflect unequal colonialist power relations.

(15)

The texts, which colonizers used to show their objective knowledge and the fragility of the colonized, tried to decipher unfamiliar spaces by the stock descriptions and authoritative symbols from the fantastical tales of the earlier travelers.

Strangeness was made comprehensible by using everyday names, dependable conventions, both rhetorical and syntactic. In writings as various as romances, memoirs, adventure tales the view of the world as directed from the colonial

metropolis was consolidated and confirmed. The aim was to legitimize colonial rules in the indigenous people and to extend the imperialism. Elleke Boehmer further states in *Colonial and Postcolonial literature*:

From the early days of colonization [...] not only text in general, but also literature, broadly defined, underpinned efforts to interpret other lands, offering home audience a way of thinking about exploration. Western conquest, nation valor, new colonial acquisition. Traveler, traders, administrator, settlers, 'read' the strange and new by drawing on familiar books such as the *Bible* or *Pilgrim's Progress*. (19)

So, a traveler's imagination was able to work associatively with a familiar framework of grammatical and symbolic structure which brought geography into being.

The European textuality defines itself as a rational being by representing the characterization of colonized people as secondary, abject, weak and feminine. The discourse can be taken to refer to that collection of symbolic practices, including textual codes and conventions and implied meanings, which Europe deployed in the process of colonial expansion and, in particular, in understanding the bizarre and apparently unintelligible strangeness with which it came into contact. Its interpretations were an expression of its mastery which mobilized its authority through certain symbols. Race, classification, therefore, could be used to explain not only biological variety but the superiority or inferiority of different cultural types ranged on a scale of evolutionary progress. Boehmer further explains it as:

[...] characterization of the European was asserted in relation to an opposite, a 'rest' of the world and other. Depending on the context, this opposite took the form of women or slave, servant or beast, and with

the onset of colonization, as became the colonized a category of representation which subsumed within itself those other significance of difference. The feminized colonial other allowed the European the more intensively to realize himself- and in certain conditions, herself also. (81)

One example of paradigmatic text of western representation is Daniel Defoe's *Robison Crusoe* (1719). In this text Defoe represents Crusoe as an agent of western representative. The text represents Crusoe as superior human being who, after all, confirms his identity of being white belongingness and the disciple of Christianity. Crusoe, like the archetypal colonialist, strives to assert his own reality and establishes right to the Island. The act of renaming the cannibal 'Friday' represents Crusoe as a father figure who has authority to control the slave. It explains Crusoe's concern to make of the cannibal survivor Friday, an image of him, and an opposite who will confirm the reality of his own being. Thus the West conceived of its superiority relative to the perceived lack of power, self-consciousness, or ability to think and rule, of colonized peoples. The act of Christianizing 'Friday' is the image which shows westerners as conquerors and civilizers of the world.

Said's foundational orientalism examines the process by which this discursive formation emerges. Said holds the belief that the discourse of orientalism has been functioning from the ancient times. The Greco-Roman writers reflected the orients, in their writing, always in the static manner. In their writing they drew a line of geography between two continents-Europe and rest. In this model Europe was powerful and articulate; the 'other' was defeated and distant. These were the lenses through which the orient was experienced, and they shaped the language, perception, and form of the encounter between West and non-West. And, the representation of the

orient, until now, remained always same because the west inherited and articulated the same 'images' of the orient as 'barbaric', 'uncivilized', 'sensual', 'enigmatic' that needed 'our' project of civilizing 'then'.

Such types of patronizing and didactic qualities of the orientalist representation were self-containing, self-reinforcing character of a closed system having no empirical base of analyzing 'other'. The orient is always represented as outsiders in the rhetoric of orientalist. By manipulating certain images of the orient, the westerners legitimated the vocabulary which could help them control and dominate the orient. What is far more significant is that Said has assembled that whole narrative of European literature from Aeschylus to Edward Lane, as a history of literature's complicity in inferiorization of the orient. Said further expresses his idea in *Orientalism*:

Imaginative geography, from the vivid portraits to be found in the *Inferno*..., legitimates a vocabulary, a universe of representative discourse peculiar to the discussion and understanding of the Islam and the Orient [...] the vocabulary employed whenever the orient is spoken or written about is asset of representative figures, or tropes. (36)

In this way we need not look for correspondence between the language used to depict the orient and the orient itself. These figures are like stylized characters in a play.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century until the end of World War II Europe dominated the orient, since World War II America dominated the orient, and approached it as Europe once did. The American produced large body of texts representing the stereotype of oriental culture, religion, and politics. And the American orientalist manipulated their writings by making their culture, religion and

politics an epitome that was essential to follow by the orient. The power that they manipulated through language changed into knowledge which could govern the rest of the world. The 'knowledge' defined other culture as primitive, religion as conservative and heretical, and the political practice as terror-stricken. But in reality the discourse made by the American imperial policy could not involve the orient as it is. The language that the orientalist used to define the orient can not be judgmental.

Said advocates it as:

In any instance of at least written language, there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a re-presence, or a representation. The value, efficacy, strength, apparent veracity of written statement about the orient therefore relies very little, and cannot instrumentally depend on the orient as such. On the contrary, the written statement is presence to the reader by virtue of its having excluded displaced, made supererogatory and such real things as 'the orient'. Thus all of orientalism stands froth and away from the orient that orientalism makes sense at all depends more on the west than on the orient, and this sense is directly indebted to various western techniques of representation that make the orient visible, clear, "there" in discourse about it. (10-11)

Michel Foucault has similarly insisted both upon the materiality and the social productivity of discourse. Foucault is concerned about the involvement of textual practices in relation to power. The written discourses or the texts are representation because they are always constructed.

Discourse, according to Foucault, is produced in which concepts of madness, criminality, and sexual abnormality and so on are defined in relation to sanity, justice

and sexual normality. Such discursive formation massively determines and constrains the forms of knowledge, the types of normality and the nature and subjectivity, which prevails in a particular period.

Foucault argues that the rules and procedures, which determine what is normal or rational, have the power to silence what they exclude. His main point, here, is that the meaning of any discourse depends on who controls it. So truth can be proved wrong by power. People recognize particular pieces of philosophy or scientific theory as true, only if it fits the description of truth laid down by the intellectual or political institution of the day, by members of ruling elite or the existing ideologies of knowledge.

Every system of knowledge establishes rules for exclusion and discriminations and it always implies taking sides. The discursive practices have no universal validity but are historically dominant ways of controlling and preserving social relations of exploitation. Foucault's interest is in historical dimension of discursive change. System of knowledge establishes rules and procedures governing the particular epoch by exclusion and regulation. Foucault regards the nature of discourse as an event in time since it is not only that which represents struggle or systems of domination, but the object through which and with which we struggle-the power we seek to possess. For him, as for Nietzsche, any attempt to produce and control discourse is will to power.

Foucault sees every action and every historical event as an exercise in the exchange of power. He has spent a large bulk of his career analyzing the ebb and system of power in different situations and with relevance to different aspects of human life. Structure organizes and broadens the web of power. The overall volume or power rises with each individual involved in the play. The society is a huge web

and much of the power tends to be concentrated toward the higher echelons. Power flows simultaneously in different directions and different volumes according to the various forms of “power relation” in the “network” of power exchange. Regarding power and truth Foucault writes in *Truth and Power*:

problem does not consist in drawing the line between that in a discourse which falls under the category of scientificity or truth and that which comes under some other category, but in seeing historically how effects of truth are produced within discourse which in themselves are neither true nor false. (1139)

“regime of truth” according to its belief, values, and mores. Foucault identifies the creation of truth in contemporary western society with five trails: the centering of truth on scientific discourse, accountability of truth to economic and political forces, the diffusion and consumption of truth via societal apparatuses, the control of the distribution of truth by political and economic apparatuses and the fact that it is the issue of a whole political debate and social confrontation. Individuals would do well to recognize the ultimate truth. ‘Truth’ is the construct of the political and economic forces that command the majority of the power within the social web. There is no truly universal truth at all therefore the intellectual can not convey universal truth. So that he or she can be connected to one of the truth generating apparatuses of the society. As Foucault explains it:

“Truth” is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statement. “Truth” is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produces and sustains it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A “regime” of truth. (1145)

Because of this, Foucault sees the problem in the representation of the discourse. The representation of orient can thus be regarded as a manner of orientalized writing, vision and study, dominated by imperatives, perspectives, and ideological biases. The discourse is a system of representation framed by a whole set of forces that brings the non-west into western learning and western consciousness. So, the representation of oriental people, geography, culture, religion and language cannot be matched with the essence of real orient. The representation is distortion of fact because the fact or nature of the orient does not remain static but the western knowledge about it becomes static and unchangeable.

III. Sultan Khan Through The Eyes of Asne Seierstad

In February 2002, Asne Seierstad, a Norwegian journalist, moved in with an Afghan bookstore owner named Shah Mohammed Rais and his family. She had asked Rais if she might write about his home life in order to document a different side of Afghanistan than she had seen while covering the American-led campaign against the Taliban, and he readily agreed. Seierstad lived with the family for four months, and then wrote a detailed account of the experience, in which she portrayed the bookseller as a liberal intellectual in public but a tyrant to his family. In the introduction, the author piously notes:

The whole family knew that the purpose of my stay was to write a book. If there was something they did not want me to write, they told me. Nevertheless, I have chosen to keep the Khan family and the other people I quote anonymous. No one asked me to, I just felt it was right.

(5)

The Bookseller of Kabul is an intriguing account of a typical Afghan family's life presented in simplistic and often clichéd language. The book is an important contribution to the contemporary literature on Afghan life, culture, women, and even Islam. In her introductions Asne has included a note about her enraged feelings as a Western female when she says that she has never been so angry as when she was living with this family and that she has never had such desire to hit someone. The center of debate concerning representation by Seierstad is pointed out by Carol Bere in her article as:

Some critics questioned the credibility of Seierstad's portrait of the Khan family, her actual knowledge of Afghanistan, and whether she had breached ethics by accepting Khan's hospitality and then

portraying him as a hard-line patriarch. Others said that Seierstad's book was one-sided, that she had essentially reinforced pre-existing Western views, or perhaps myths, about the position of Afghan women. Yet critical reception of the book in general continues to be encouraging, and Seierstad claims substantial support from Afghan women in Norway and elsewhere. (12)

The tyranny exhibited by the family Patriarch, is a combination of learned traits, and also of traits of a man trapped within his own body, within the confines of the turmoil and crossroads that occur in his country, Afghanistan. He is unable to exert control in any other way, than to exert it upon his family members, and especially upon the women in his life, who dote on him unfailingly, knowing that at any given moment, they could be thrown out on the street. The book appears to focus less on the "book-selling" aspect rather than his personality and family life. Carol Bere mentions how Asne was able to get herself embedded in the Khan household, when she visited Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban as:

With the fine-tuned instincts of a good journalist, Seierstad viewed the bookseller as "a history book on two feet," and proposed to Khan that she write a book about his family. With his blessing, she moved into the crowded Khan household in February 2002, with the objective of learning first-hand about the society and culture of the Afghan people. She wore Afghan clothes (including, occasionally, the burka), slept on a mattress next to Khan's youngest daughter, Leila, and, as much as possible, became part of the fabric of family life for four months. (9)

After reading, the readers seem to come away from the book without loathing Sultan Khan, for his pompous arrogance and selfishness. Sultan Khan is a successful

businessman and a traditional Afghani male head of household. The novel is a haunting memoir about Khan, a tyrant in disguise as a bookseller, in Kabul. He loves books, as a means to survival, not necessarily in order to bring them to the people of Kabul. He uses his tyranny to keep his sons out of school, having them work long hours at his book store. Sultan Khan supervises Mansur's work as:

His father will not do without him for the short time the trip will take. He says Mansur must catalogue, supervise carpenters putting up new shelves, sell books. He won't trust anyone else. He won't even trust his future brother-in-law Rasul. Mansur seethes with anger. Because he dreaded asking his father he postponed it until the last night before departure. (135)

The good side of Sultan Khan can be seen as a lover of books. Visiting his shop in a hotel in Kabul on several occasions, Asne seems to be impressed by the English-speaking bookseller, his collection of books on Afghan history and literature, and his dedication to promoting knowledge of Afghan culture and history. This has been no easy task, and Sultan built and rebuilt his business after his collection was destroyed successively by the Communists, the Mujahadeen, and the Taliban. He has hidden books around the region, covered pictures in books with paper to circumvent the Taliban's ban on images, fled on a couple of occasions with his family to Pakistan, and survived imprisonment. And, like many of the Afghan people, Sultan Khan had endured years of political upheaval, wars, and the destruction of his home. The plight of Afghan bookseller Sultan Khan is a good metaphor for the decades of self-destruction that his country has endured. "First the Communists burned my books, then the Mujahadeen looted and pillaged, finally the Taliban burned them all over again" (2), he says.

Seierstad is not without admiration for Sultan's genuine love of books, his ability to build a successful business, and for the personal risks he has taken to bring books into Afghanistan, to provide Afghans with knowledge and pride in their culture. He has also provided relatively well for his large family, although his actions are inconsistent, both modern and traditional:

In many ways, Sultan was a liberal. When he was in Iran he had bought Sonya Western clothes. He often referred to the burka as an oppressive cage, and he was pleased that the new government included female ministers. In his heart, he wanted Afghanistan to be a modern country, and he talked warmly of the emancipation of women. But at home he remained the authoritarian patriarch. When it came to ruling his own family, Sultan had only one model: his father. (14)

But Seierstad discovers that the public persona of Khan, an English-speaking, educated, successful bookseller and entrepreneur, is at odds with the private Sultan, a tyrannical patriarch at home, whose word is law and whose offenses against human dignity are often harsh. He takes a teenaged second wife while his first wife, Sharifa, is in the humiliating position of living in the same house, continuing to wait on him. His sons have not been educated, and 12-year-old Aimal works seven days a week, 12 hours a day at Sultan's hotel booth, while Mansur (or Manu), Sultan's teenage son, who also works these long hours at another bookshop, is frustrated by his lack of freedom and his father's refusal to let him attend school. Sultan seems to exercise power over his family where his power at play owes much to the work of Michel Foucault, who says:

Power resides in all all aspects of a knowledge system: in the construction of archives, the codification of information and

communication chains through which knowledge is disseminated. Nor is 'truth' a special kind of knowledge which allows us to escape the pervasive reach of power: truth and power are also intertwined. Each society has constructed its own 'regime of truth', elaborating frameworks, institutions and discourses which validate particular procedures and permit us to distinguish true from false statements.

(1136)

Asne's reporting on what life are like in post Taliban Afghanistan paints a fairly grim picture of a society fraught with ignorance and corruption. It is a society where women are merely chattel with little or no say in their future. Education is pretty much non-existent, and what passes for such is pathetic. Even that little, however, is routinely denied to the feminine gender. It was also particularly surprising, as well as ironic, that Sultan Khan, being a bookseller and purporting to love books, denied even his sons an education. Asne's reporting on Afgannistan with European spectacles seems to toe the line of Edward Said as:

My idea is that European and then American interest in the Orient was political according to some of the obvious historical accounts of it. But it was the culture that created that interest that acted dynamically along with brute political, economic, and military rationales to make the Orient the varied and complicated place that is obviously was in the field. (344)

We also get a basic sense of modern Afghan history and what life was like under the Taliban, although most of the book takes place after the Taliban were overthrown. It is refreshing to note the contrasts between the harsh existence during the Taliban regime and the liberal mentalities of the past. The novel is also interesting

to read about fashionably attired young ladies and the former customs of toasting weddings with champagne. We become acquainted with a few tenets of Islam that we might not have known previously, such a key difference between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims and the difference between that which is permitted (*halal*) and that which is forbidden (*haram*). Eliot Smithsonian Marshall in his article *Unveiling Afghanistan* points to the misrepresentation in the novel as:

She intended to pay homage to a man who had quietly resisted the Taliban; she came away with quite a different story. Seierstad stayed several months and produced a manuscript entitled *The Bookseller of Kabul*. A Kabul book dealer, Shah Mohammed Rais, somehow obtained galley proofs of the book, recognized himself as its subject and boarded a flight to London, where he filed a lawsuit to block its publication. He objected to “misrepresentations of me, my family and my country.” The “misrepresentations” consisted of Seierstad’s portrayal of his tyrannical behavior in the household--largely toward the women but also toward his sons. The enlightened champion of Afghan literature was also, Seierstad writes, “an authoritarian patriarch.” (112)

The book provides a penetrating look at a complex and complicated family forced to live under horrific conditions. Within the context of his society, Sultan Khan is an enlightened and liberal man. He reads widely and believes in freedom of thought and speech. But for all that Khan is a liberal man in a conservative society, he is still a product of a highly conservative society. He, himself was repressed for three decades, by the regimes who controlled Afghanistan. He in the end becomes a stifling force himself, the epitome of a man who represses women, and does it proudly, as if it is his

due. He also represses his sons, with his work ethic, forcing it upon them, in an abusive manner. Khan is more than a bookseller in Kabul. He is a proud man, a stubborn man, a man willing to give up familial ties in the name of money, not for his love of books. Commenting on the marginalized role of the Afghan women, E. J. Graff writes:

Asne Seierstad's nonfiction *The Bookseller of Kabul*, which reports on her months-long stay with an Afghan family, is another war reporting book that escapes the genre's usual limitations. Seierstad delivers a startling, readable, and intimate view of the gender-apartheid regime under which Afghan women live; her book relieved me of the desire to "respect cultural diversity" when that includes the cultural habit of treating women as slaves. (48)

Asne's account is of the tragedy, contradictions, rivalries, and daily frustrations of a middle-class Afghan family. She accompanied the women as they shopped and dressed for a wedding and was privy to the negotiations for the marriage. She tells of the death by suffocation of a young woman who met her lover in secret, the bored meanderings of a 12-year-old boy forced to work 12-hour days selling candy in a hotel lobby, and of going on a religious pilgrimage with a restless, frustrated teen. All this is recounted with journalistic objectivity in spite of her close ties to the Khans. Describing Shakila's appearance as a bride on her wedding day, Asne opines:

Her costume is red, green, black and gold. It looks as though the Afghan Flag, strewn with gold dust, has been draped over her. Her breasts stand out like mountain peaks. The bra she bought, measured by eye, obviously fits. The waistline is drawn in tightly, under the

dress. She has applied a thick layer of Perfect on her face, the eyes have been outlined with kohl and she is wearing the new, red lip stick. Her appearance, too, is perfect. A bride must look artificial, like a doll. The word for doll and bride is the same. (99)

Khan is not a likeable man but his story, which the author tells in great detail, goes a long way in explaining who he is and why he acts as he does. As a bookseller, Khan was tortured first by the Soviets and then by the Taliban. Not surprisingly, he seeks, above all, to protect himself and all he owns from the ravages of war. This means, of course, that Khan forces the members of his family to do his bidding. Khan is a despot. His actions toward his two wives, his children, his siblings and his nephews all reflect his desire to control his fate in a society which has allowed him no control over his own life. Asne's modus operandi in the Afghan family is outlined by Jackie Gropman, as he says:

Her account is of the tragedy, contradictions, rivalries, and daily frustrations of a middle-class Afghan family. She accompanied the women as they shopped and dressed for a wedding and was privy to the negotiations for the marriage. She tells of the death by suffocation of a young woman who met her lover in secret, the bored meanderings of a 12-year-old boy forced to work 12-hour days selling candy in a hotel lobby, and of going on a religious pilgrimage with a restless, frustrated teen. All this is recounted with journalistic objectivity in spite of her close ties to the Khans. (76)

Asne says she wrote honestly of the fiercely patriarchal Afghanistan/Muslim traditional family structure that keeps his tyranny intact and subjugates all women, regardless of their educational level or social status. *The Bookseller of Kabul* gives a

voice to the women in the extended Family, a voice that speaks for millions of women in the Middle East, a voice that must be heard. Especially heartbreaking is the fate of Leila, sister of Sultan Khan, educated, literate, bright - but unable to speak up for herself to escape a lifetime of servitude. Narrating Leila's deplorable condition Asne writes:

Leila rolls dirt and loose skin off her body. Black strips are rubbed off, into the hemp glove or down on to the floor. Several weeks have passed since Leila washed properly and many months since she visited the hammam. There is not often water at home and Leila Does not see the need to wash too often- you only get dirty again anyway. (162)

The bookseller, Sultan Khan, is a canny and shrewd business man, as well as a devout Muslim, who despite his love of books, seems to have learned little from the knowledge at his fingertips. He rules the roost like a patriarchal despot with a decidedly strict view of the role of women. In fact, it is through the women in his household that the reader is drawn into how truly circumscribed and stultifying life is for Afghani women, even after the Taliban is no longer in power. Khan rules his household as if it were a feudal fiefdom, with little thought, concern, or interest in the desires, hopes, and dreams of the members of his household. Vanni Cappelli Poughkeepsie begs to differ from the accounts given in *The Bookseller of Kabul*. She says that the cruel tyrant depicted in this book is not the man she knows as:

Having been a guest at Rais's home on numerous occasions over the last two years, I can testify that the atmosphere of oppression and sadness depicted simply does not exist. Though their formal education has indeed been disrupted by war and work, his multilingual sons are among the most culturally literate youngsters in Kabul; their general

awareness of the world outside Afghanistan and penchant for joking are a constant uplift amid the grinding desolation of the capital.

Seierstad speaks neither Pashto nor Dari, the principal languages of the country, leaving the veracity of her long passages of dialogue open to question. (4)

The Bookseller of Kabul adds to the growing body of literature that explores the situation of Afghan women from historical, social, and cultural perspectives. Women's rights to freedom, to personal choices, whether in work or in marriage and to education in a country where the literacy rates for women are marginal, are certainly the subtext of the novel. Seierstad's greatest sympathies are with the women in the Khan family. The women suffer greatly at the hands of Sultan Khan, not least his first wife Sharifa, a qualified teacher who at the beginning of the book is subjected to the humiliation of a second wife entering her household. She was an un-educated teenager, whom she specifically must welcome into the family as her own. One persuasive example among many from *The Bookseller of Kabul*, in which Asne implies that Afghan women are victims of entrenched cultural traditions, their confidence undermined, and their basic human rights to freedom nonexistent as:

She loses sight of her all the time. The billowing burka merges with every other billowing burka. Sky-blue everywhere. They walk on, and weave their heads around in all directions to see better. Burka women are like horses with blinkers: they can look only in one direction.

Where the eye narrows, the grille stops and thick material takes its place; impossible to glance sideways. The whole head must turn; another trick by the burka- inventor: a man must know what his wife is looking at. (89)

Seierstad says her story is of one family in Afghanistan, but it is apparent that, she considers the situation of the Khan women a proxy for the position of all women in Afghanistan. Seierstad's greatest anger seems to be directed at the tradition of arranged marriages, which she refers to as the buying and selling of women, the treating of women as objects. In Khan's household, the conflict begins with his decision to take a second wife shortly after his first, Sharifa, turns 50. Sultan Khan, in his early 50s, picks out a voluptuous 16-year-old cousin, Sonya, only to find that members of his family, rent by old loyalties and grudges, refuse to arrange the marriage. He must break with tradition and act on his own behalf, largely because he is prosperous and he succeeds. Thus, Sultan negotiated with the parents of Sonya, his teenaged bride, to marry her. Describing how Sultan bribed Sonya's family, the author writes:

He had bribed her parents to enable him to spend time alone with Sonya before the wedding. The engaged couple are not supposed to see each other between the engagement party and the wedding day, a custom rarely observed. But it was one thing to go shopping together, quite another to spend nights together. That shopping together, quite another to spend nights together. That was unheard of. Her big brother wanted to defend her honour with a knife when he learnt that Sultan had paid the parents money to be allowed to stay overnight before the wedding night. But Sonya's indignant brother, too, was silenced with ready cash and Sultan got his way. (182)

Seierstad also describes a trip to the markets of Kabul in which, covered from head to foot in a blue burka, she tags behind the women of the household, jostling down alleyways, shrouded in billowing, heavy fabric, "The smell of saffron, garlic,

dried pepper, and fresh pakora penetrates the stiff material and mingles with sweat, breath, and the smell of strong soap” (91), she writes. “The nylon material is so dense that one can smell one’s own breath” (88), she observes.

Only when the women have returned to the cool apartment do they pull the cloaks over their heads, hang them on a nail and heave a sigh of relief. Seierstad feels that the omnipresent burqua ostensibly is meant to protect women’s and men’s virtue, and whether in blue or black, reduces the wearer to the status of a shadow, neither to be viewed, acknowledged nor addressed. *The Bookseller of Kabul* portrays the stereotypical version of how Westerners view Afghan domestic family life. Buy what Seierstad won’t know is the rich and diverse history of this land, and the fact that while the Khan family may have been presented accurately, their experience is not necessarily reflective of an entire population. Seierstad’s version of her truth clashes with Afghan culture and in relation to this point, Foucault says:

Truth is centred on the form of scientific discourse and the institution which produce it; it is subject to constant economic and political excitement; it is the object, under diverse forms, of immense diffusion and consumption; it is produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses; it is the issue of a whole political debate and social confrontation. (1144)

The most sympathetic character in the book is Leila, Sultan’s youngest sister, and with whom the author had the closest relationship. Seierstad makes convincing efforts to suggest the feelings of hopelessness of Leila. The youngest sister, Leila, the drudge who cooks and cleans for the Khan family, is perhaps the most poignant. Leila wants to teach English, but her attempts to navigate bureaucratic requirements

frustrate her, and she retreats, her life at a standstill, “She has reached a deadlock in a system that is rooted in centuries-old traditions and that paralyzes half the population”(165). Knowing the bond that formed between these women, it does not feel overly contrived when Seierstad “goes inside” this girl and describes her dreams and disappointments. Feeling helpless about Leila’s pathetic state, Asne narrates:

Leila is the first to get up in the morning and goes to bed last. She lights the stove in the living room with thin sticks, while the sleeping bodies of her family are still snoring. Next she lights the wood-burning stove in the bathroom and boils water for cooking, washing and washing up. Whilst it is still dark she fills bottles, pots and pans with water. There is never electricity at this time of the day and Leila has got used to groping around in the dark. (163)

Leila, who as the youngest unmarried daughter of the clan, is at the very bottom of the hierarchy. Hers is a truly miserable existence indeed, and she captures the essence of confinement, subservience and “eating dust”. Through Seierstad’s western feminine portrayal of Leila, she becomes the representative of victimized womanhood under Islam. Rais’s 19-year-old sister, Leila, is a virtual household slave who suffers from dizzy spells because she never sees the sunlight in Kabul, one of the world’s sunniest cities. Even though Leila speaks English and longs to work as a teacher, she languishes at home because none of her male relatives can be bothered to escort her to the Ministry of Education to fill out the necessary paperwork. Seierstad’s discourse on Afghanistan though misrepresented in the novel seems to echo Said’s Orientalism discourse as:

The fabric of as thick a discourse as Orientalism has survived and functioned in western society because of its richness: all I have done is

to describe parts of that fabric at certain movements and merely to suggest the existence of a larger whole, detailed, interesting, dotted with fascinating figures, text, and events. (356)

Leila is responsible for all kitchen duties in the bookseller's household.

Having availed herself of Leila's hospitality and desire to serve, Asne sees things in a different light when Leila jumps up to bring tea and food to her male relatives who return home after a day's work. In those circumstances, she is enraged, deeming it as abuse and the enslavement of Leila by chauvinistic males. Another horrifying incident in the book is the story of the niece of Khans first wife, here referred to as a neighbor, who was killed by her brothers for having an affair while her new husband had returned to the US temporarily.

Khan's 30-something sister, Shakila, whose career as a teacher was cut off by wars, a necessary flight to Pakistan, and later, life under the Taliban, is married off to a distant relative, a widower with several children, in a "third-rate wedding," while the unfortunate Bibula is thrown in free of charge to another distant cousin. Shakila has little choice, and her qualms about the marriage are quickly dismissed by Bibi Gul, who states flatly that "he's a good husband for you" (104).

Seierstad's sympathies go somewhat astray in her unflattering description of Sultan's mother, Bibi Gul, at the *hamman*, for which she has been criticized. A full-figured woman close to 70, Bibi Gul was married at 11 to a man 20 years her senior, bore 13 children, and is now a widow, given to excessive eating. The description of Sulatn's elderly mother at a public bath is embarrassing enough to a Western reader, but unimaginably invasive from an Afghan point of view as:

Leila's mother Bibi Gul, who must be nearing seventy, sits naked in a pool on the floor. Her long grey hair, which is normally hidden under a

pale- blue shawl, flows down her back. She unties it only in the hammam. It is so long that the ends float around in the pool on the floor. She sits as in a trance, eyes closed, enjoying the heat. Now and facecloth in the bowl Leila has put out for her. But she soon gives up, she cannot reach round her tummy and her arms feel too heavy to lift. Her breasts rest heavily over her big stomach. She remains sitting in a trance, stock still, like a big, grey statue. (162)

To say that there is a culture clash here is an understatement. For Seierstad, the issue was how women and other vulnerable people were treated in Afghan society. And indeed, much of the drama in her story comes from what she portrays as the bookseller's casual abuse of those around him. Sultan exiles his loyal wife of 16 years to Pakistan in order to make room for a 16-year-old second wife.

When a destitute carpenter steals postcards from his shop, he sees to it that the man is jailed for three years while his wife and seven children starve. Meanwhile, he forces his 12-year-old son to spend 12 hours a day, seven days a week, in a hotel lobby, working by himself selling candy in a dank little booth the child refers to as the dreary room. Lucille M. Boone writes about Sultan Khan and his extended family. She says that they are comparatively well educated and well off, yet their experiences exemplify the difficulties of effecting change in post-Taliban Kabul. On the position of women in *The Bookseller of Kabul*, she writes:

With the exception of Sultan's mother, women in the Khan family have especially grim prospects: the birth of a daughter is considered a tragedy, and marriage, always arranged, confers status but often means trading one form of drudgery for another. Seirestad presents a vivid, intimate, yet frustrating picture of family life after the Taliban. (46)

Sultan is a complex and ultimately rather sad character. When Leila and his elderly mother move out of the house after a family dispute in the final chapter, he plaintively invokes the public good in an effort to justify his private behavior.

The book is a denunciation of a society that systematically denies women their dignity and autonomy. Seierstad is hardly the first person to point out that women have suffered in Afghanistan. But her book is a reminder that the famously misogynist Taliban were only an extreme manifestation of a basic reality. As in many traditional societies, Afghan women have remained structurally subordinate to Afghan men no matter which government happens to be in power. *The Bookseller of Kabul* is an effective portrait of one rather unhappy Afghan family. It is certainly the most intimate description of an Afghan household ever produced by a Western journalist. Seierstad seems to be pointing out to the repression of Afghan women and she seems to echo what Foucault says about repression as:

Repression is a concept used above all in relation to sexuality. It was held that bourgeois society represses sexuality, stifles sexual desire and so forth. This discourse serves to make possible a whole series of interventions, tactical and positive interventions of surveillance, circulations, control and so forth, which seems to have been intimately linked with techniques that give the appearance of repression. (1139)

Seierstad penned this astounding portrait of a nation recovering from war, undergoing political flux and mired in misogyny and poverty. As a Westerner, she had the privilege of traveling between the worlds of men and women, and though the book is ostensibly a portrait of Khan, its real strength is the intimacy and brutal honesty with which it portrays the lives of Afghani living under fundamentalist Islam. *The Bookseller of Kabul* is a searing attack on the way Afghan men treat women.

Seierstad makes no effort to disguise her anger at the plight of the Afghan women she lived with and at a culture in which a woman can be killed for adultery. Narrating how a daughter's wedding changes the Afghan family, Asne writes:

A wedding is like a small death. The bride's family mourns in the days following the wedding, as though it were a funeral. A daughter is lost, sold or given away. The mothers' daughters, where they go, who they meet, what they wear, what they eat. They have spent most of the day together, got up together, swept the house together, and cooked together. After the wedding the daughter disappears, completely; she goes from one family to the other. She cannot visit when she wants, only when her husband allows her. Her family cannot drop in on her without an invitation. (109)

The result has been a cross-cultural literary feud concerning representation. A bitter argument between Asne Seierstad and Shah Mohammed Rais, a businessman from the impoverished Muslim country whose intimate family business she revealed. The focus of their clash is *The Bookseller of Kabul*, Seierstad's poignant tale about life in the rubble of war. It is Rais, who shoulders this cultural indictment of Afghan males. He is the bookseller at the center of Seierstad's story, portrayed as a domineering, frequently cruel patriarch who makes life miserable for his sister and first wife.

His quarrels with Seierstad's research and conclusions are numerous and diverse. It ranges from shock at her detailed description of women's bodies as they bathe to what he says is the misrepresentation of traditional Afghan bargaining over marriage expenses as the buying and selling of women. And he accuses Seierstad of concocting events, including what he sees as an egregious reference to the perverse

sexual practices of his wife's aunt. Rais also complains about Seierstad's portrayal of his sister, Leila, a beautifully drawn character whose life emerges in the book as a Sisyphean series of household chores, her ambitions stunted by servitude to the men in the family.

The Bookseller of Kabul is a revealing portrait of the condition of women in a male-dominated society, and of children who are forced to go to work when they should really be in school. Both groups suffering much more than men as their country shakily emerges from the shadows of the repressive Taliban regime. Somewhat unfairly, the book measures the quality of life of these women against the yardstick of the Western ideals of gender equality and liberation. This approach, by its very nature, cannot give rise to a nuanced interpretation that takes cultural differences into perspective.

The bookseller was demonstrating his culture's emphasis on hospitality when he allowed Ms. Seierstad to come into his home and live with his family. By painting such a picture of the titular character, she violates his culture's expectation that a guest will only have good things to say about a gracious host. Ms. Seierstad seems to have seen her journalistic honesty as the more compelling obligation when compared to gratitude for the family's hospitality.

When the bookseller in question received a copy of the book in English, he was disgruntled and unhappy with the representation in the book. The conflict between liberal western values and centuries-old Afghan traditions inevitably runs through *The Bookseller of Kabul*. Sierstad never claims that her family is representative of the Afghani people, but she has been accused of misrepresentation. Yet events that the author doesn't actually witness or participate in, she recounts from conversations with members of the family, primarily Sultan Khan's sister. The novel

is her birds-eye view of life in Afghanistan that has been grossly misrepresented.

Therefore, we can say that *The Bookseller of Kabul* is a voyeuristic portrait of real people who live in an intensely conservative society that places a premium on domestic privacy.

IV. Conclusion

Shah Muhammad Rais (Sultan Khan) gained fame after the Norwegian journalist Asne Seierstad wrote a bestselling novel, *The Bookseller of Kabul*, on his life running a bookshop in the Afghan capital after the fall of the Taliban. Mr Rais, regards himself as a books missionary, and that he is seeking to satisfy Afghans' voracious appetite for books and reading, even in the midst of conflict and poverty. Asne's book described him as a man whose love of literature had exposed him to great risks over thirty years in the trade. But it also depicted him as a committed Muslim with uncompromising views on the role of women, with the reader being introduced to his first wife, Sharifa, after she has just learned that he is taking a new, 16-year-old bride. After the publication of *The Bookseller of Kabul*, it was an instant worldwide success. But Mr Rais, who had invited Seierstad to live with his two wives and five children, regarded her documentation as a betrayal and a gross misrepresentation, and he began legal proceedings against her as well as writing his own book to vindicate himself. Seierstad's account was not well received by her host, Mr. Khan. And some equally critical Western writers charge that she has regurgitated every stereotype about how women fare under Islam.

Seierstad does not appear in the book, and claims that she has just written what she saw, and has not made judgments. This is somewhat disingenuous, since the mere selection of incidents, the reporting of internal thoughts of the characters, and the choice of descriptive language itself implies judgment. *The Bookseller of Kabul* is an intimate portrayal beneath the burkhas of Afghan women quietly yearning for love or education on their own terms. In the household Seierstad had to rely on three people in the Khan family who speak English as interpreters: Sultan, his son Mansur, and daughter, Leila.

The book does provide a penetrating look at a complex and complicated family forced to live under horrific conditions. Within the context of his society, Sultan Khan is an enlightened and liberal man. No fundamentalist, he reads widely and believes in freedom of thought and speech. But for all that Khan is a liberal man in a conservative society, he is still a product of a highly conservative society. As such, he is a polygamist and a man who forces his sons to bind to his will.

Contrary to what other reviewers have said, Sierstad never claims that her family is representative of the Afghani people. In her introduction, she notes that she picked the Khan family because she found them and their stories compelling. She says, however, that the family is by no means typical as they are literate, middle class and urban. The book has intimate insight into an Afghani middle class family. It deals about the oppressively traditional father, women under the yoke of that tradition and the filthy living conditions. Sultan Khan is an autocratic patriarch, whose idea of being liberal is permitting the women of his home to leave the house without wearing a burka. Khan determines the fate of his sons, wives, and daughters. No one is allowed to exert any autonomy over their own life, without having to leave home. Privacy, volition, emotions, expectations and dreams of a better future are elusive, almost non-existent concepts for anyone other than Khan in this home. This does fit in neatly with our stereotypes of life for Muslim women.

Seierstad's sympathies clearly lie with the young women whom she writes are "above all, objects to be bartered or sold" (75). Freedom from the Taliban has not meant freedom for Afghan women. "Men still decide" (84), she writes. That certainly holds true in the Khan household, where the family patriarch arranges marriages with the same business acumen he uses to plot book deals.

Sultan, has two wives and many children and this affects the family structure, plus, how it affects the two women. The family also lives with Sultan's mother, sisters, and brothers and how the women have to take care of the family. For the sustenance of the family, Sultan owns a book shop where he keeps books of old Afghan culture and stories. The story takes place right after the Taliban's regime crumbled. The women still wear their burkas in town and how even though the Taliban has left, how some old habits from them still stay the same.

The cruelties go on. And yet, Rais has dedicated his life to the preservation of Afghan literary culture. For his pains, he was jailed and tortured under the Communists, under the mujahedeen and Taliban regimes, his store was looted and his books burned. Throughout this ordeal, he collected thousands of rare volumes of Afghan history and literature that he hopes will one day form the nucleus of a new national library.

In this way, the novel depicts the misrepresentation of the Afghan people, their society and culture. There is politics behind such misrepresentation. The politics is deeply influenced by the West which never regards oriental people and culture positively.

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