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Literary Journalist as Woman Traveler: The Legacy of Harem Literature in *The Bookseller of Kabul*

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Abstract: Åsne Seierstad's *The Bookseller of Kabul* (2002) displays the characteristics of literary journalism, yet the main motif of the book brings to mind the literary innovations of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century *harem literature*. This term refers to a body of British women's travel writings from the period 1718–1918 that reported on the domestic lives of Muslim women living in the Middle East. Literary journalism and this subgenre of travel literature share an interest in reporting on the details of private, rather than public, life. Like the Victorian writers, Seierstad engaged in the representation of women's cross-cultural intersubjective experiences. She immersed herself in the more or less segregated daily lives of the women of the Rais family. *The Bookseller of Kabul*, in its narrative focus on hygiene, eating habits, clothing, and the physical appearance of Afghan women, recalls the formulas for writing harem literature. The elaborate descriptions serve to represent the women as immoral when they accept traditional ideals of femininity in a patriarchal society. As New Orientalism, Seierstad's book reinforces the classic opposition of colonial discourses between Westerners and Muslims. The rhetorical strategy of describing the bookseller's family in the image of a Western bourgeois family of the nineteenth-century places Afghan women historically at a stage of emancipation that Western women presumably passed more than a hundred years ago. As a whole, the narrative can be read as a warning to the West against trusting in military solutions to the societal problems Afghan women face.

Keywords: Seierstad – *The Bookseller of Kabul* – literary journalism – women's travel writing – harem literature – New Orientalism – cross-cultural reporting – gender

Norwegian journalist Åsne Seierstad went to Afghanistan to report on the United States-led invasion of the country in October 2001. She accompanied the forces of the Afghan Northern Alliance as they advanced from remote districts of deserts, mountains, and valleys into the capital. In Kabul, she met a bookseller named Shah Muhammad Rais. He invited her home for supper, and she encountered Afghan women for the first time. The family meal inspired Seierstad to write a book on the Rais household. She proposed the idea to the bookseller, and he accepted.¹

There can be little doubt that Seierstad gained access to the private sphere of the Rais family because she herself is a woman, as men and women live largely separate lives in Afghanistan. She stayed in the household for nearly four months, moving more or less freely as a Western woman between the public world of Afghan men and the domestic lives of Afghan women.

It is important to consider the significance of gender to modern literary journalism when discussing the legacy of *harem literature* in relation to *The Bookseller of Kabul*. Historian Billie Melman coined the term in her study of British women who wrote about the Middle East during the period 1718–1918.² Harem literature refers to a specific body of women's travel writings that report on the private, domestic lives of Muslim women.³ As such, it is an artifact to women,⁴ with traveling writers describing actual intersubjective encounters and observations. The writings engage in and transform the formulas of classic colonial discourses, that is, the political, academic, and cultural writings of European colonial powers on colonized peoples, and develop complex rhetorical strategies in order to report on eyewitness observations of Muslim women's lives for the reader.⁵ Like the writers of harem literature, Seierstad in Kabul engages in immersing herself in women's cross-cultural, intersubjective experiences. Her reporting provides an opportunity to investigate further how a twenty-first century literary journalistic narrative from Afghanistan can evoke the rhetorical strategies of nineteenth-century harem literature. A close reading of *Bookseller* and the literary analysis that follows lead to a discussion of the textual representation of the opposition between Western and Afghan women in New Orientalist discourses.

New Orientalism

Fatemeh Keshavarz-Karamustafa, hereafter referred to as Fatemeh Keshavarz, introduced the term *New Orientalism* in her study of popular Western writings on Muslims, post-September 11, 2001.⁶ The term refers to works, *Bookseller* among them, that responded to the urgent need in the West to become acquainted with and understand Muslim societies.⁷ What the writers who can be grouped under the New Orientalist heading have in common

is that they tend to reproduce the same kind of Orientalist discourse Edward Said analyzed in *Orientalism*, his influential work from 1978: that is, they continue to represent the local Muslims as paternalistic, uncomplicated, and unchangeable.⁸ The knowledge they convey reduces and simplifies the complexity of Muslim societies and culture for Western readers: "For example, it explains almost all undesirable Middle East incidents in terms of Muslim men's submission to God and Muslim women's submission to men."⁹ The New Orientalists write from a semi-inside perspective, while they more or less openly declare their preference for a Western cultural and political takeover.

When Seierstad was conducting her research in Kabul, the West's attention focused on the continuing war against terror under the Afghan Interim Administration of December 2001, led by Hamid Karzai. In order to legitimize the military invasion, Western political rhetoric evoked the obligation of Westerners to liberate Afghan women.¹⁰ Seierstad's work supplemented as well as challenged that rhetoric by allowing the reader to connect with the lives of individual Afghan women. The core question that fuels the narrative is what would this new political era—post-Taliban, spring 2002—have in store for women? On the one hand, the narrative shows women being optimistic about the future because the Taliban-imposed restrictions on them are now history. On the other hand, the story also bears the characteristics of a tragedy.¹¹ As the narrative unfolds to reveal the suppressive power of tradition, initial hope gives way to silent resignation.

In the foreword to *Bookseller*, Seierstad openly admits that she can lose her temper when challenged by Afghan males asserting their superiority: "The same thing was continually provoking me: the manner in which men treated women."¹² The narrative of Afghan family life as a whole can be read as a warning to the West against trusting in a military solution to the societal problems Afghan women face. After the book was published, several reports on living conditions for women justified Seierstad's pessimism. And ten years after the U.S.-led forces removed the Taliban from power in 2001, Afghanistan was rated the most dangerous place in the world for women.¹³

Literary Journalism and Harem Literature

John Hartsock has suggested that literary journalism differs from travelogues in that, while the reporting of the former might be based on a journey, the journey itself is never the central theme of the narrative.¹⁴ Still, he admits that a clear dividing line between the categories of travel writing and of literary journalism cannot be identified:

There is, however, another reason why travelogue and a narrative literary journalism cannot be so discretely separated. When we keep a narrative

account we keep a journal or journalism. When we travel, in all the meanings such a term can evoke, we journey. And the common Latin root for these in English is the diurnal, or the passage or journey of the day. After all, the Latin for journalist is *diurnarius*. Thus John Hersey's *Hiroshima* is a journal or journalism of a journey (consisting in that instance of a number of days) in all its existential meaning. We see it in Gunnar Larsen's Norwegian murder account discussed in this issue. We see it in the controversial *Bookseller of Kabul* by Norwegian Åsne Seierstad.¹⁵

Melman comments that harem literature stands out from travelogues in that the journey does not structure the narrative, since the central motif is the separate space of the *haremlik*: "By harem literature I mean writing concerned, mainly or wholly, with the material conditions of life and everyday domestic experiences of Muslim women."¹⁶ With its focus on the daily events of the domestic sphere, this kind of travel writing redefined the sphere of action: "More significantly harem literature as its very name implies focuses on the private life rather than the public, civic, or political one."¹⁷ Most literary journalists share these women writers' interest in what goes on in the private sphere. Norman Sims states that practitioners of the form tend to focus on day-to-day living:

Reporting on the lives of people at work, in love, going about the normal rounds of life, they confirm that the crucial moments of everyday life contain great drama and substance. Rather than hanging around the edges of powerful institutions, literary journalists attempt to penetrate the cultures that make institutions work.¹⁸

At the family meal, Seierstad realized that reporting on domestic life in Afghanistan could hold a key to understanding the dramatic changes that were taking place in society as a whole: "When I left I said to myself: 'This is Afghanistan.'¹⁹ She took part in the everyday routines of the Rais family from February to May 2002, in order to report for *Bookseller*:

Slowly I was introduced into family life. They told me things when they felt like it, not when I asked. They were not necessarily in the mood to talk when my notebook was at hand, but rather during a trip to the bazaar, on a bus, or late at night on the mattress.²⁰

Seierstad skillfully structures her reporting in *Bookseller* as a complex narrative, which relates her work further to literary journalism, as Hartssock defines the genre: "a body of writing that, to provide a working definition, reads like a novel or short story except that it is true or makes a truth claim to phenomenal experience."²¹ Reading *Bookseller* is reminiscent of getting to know a large family in real life: One by one, the personal narratives of individual family members unfold over time and intertwine with the narrative

of the entire family, and of Afghan society—historically and contemporarily.

In his 2007 book *True Stories*, Sims comments on the powerful use of suspense in a literary journalistic narrative: "Literary journalism—based on character and evolving scenes—holds the reader in a forward-moving web of time, often without knowledge of the outcome. In that way, it produces an experience similar to fiction rather than a report."²² The evolving plot of *Bookseller*—how the women will fare in the new political era—engages the reader on a multitude of levels: politically, intellectually, and emotionally.

Long-term reporting, or immersion, characterizes the work of literary journalists. "Unlike standard journalism, literary journalism demands immersion in complex, difficult subjects,"²³ Sims wrote in 1984. In 2007, he said several contemporary U.S. literary journalists were seeking cultural immersion, ". . . creating portraits of everyday life and of different cultural communities."²⁴ One of those literary journalists, Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, spent eleven years preparing and reporting from inside a family living in the Bronx, for her 2003 book, *Random Family*.²⁵ Both Seierstad and LeBlanc make women the central characters in their respective narratives, but where LeBlanc's voice appears as neutral, Seierstad's ideological stance towards the characters and the events in *Bookseller* can be detected. The subject of *Bookseller* also relates to Katherine Boo's 2012 book, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*.²⁶ Boo engages in transcultural reporting when she explores daily life in a community of families living in the slum quarter Annawadi of Mumbai. All three writers, Seierstad, LeBlanc, and Boo, focus on marginalized members of society—nationally or globally. In its representation of women's intercultural experiences in the domestic sphere, Seierstad's work from Afghanistan recalls harem literature.

Literary Innovations of Harem Literature

The majority of examples of harem literature in Melman's study date from the second half of the nineteenth century.²⁷ The rise in women's travelogues, published in book form as well as in periodicals, corresponded with a historical change in travel opportunities for middle-class Victorian women,²⁸ some of whom worked as professional journalists. One of the writers in Melman's study is the first British female sociologist, and journalist, Harriet Martineau (1802–1876). Melman refers to Martineau's 1848 book *Eastern Life: Present and Past* as harem literature.²⁹

Melman notes that in harem literature reporting on the domestic lives of Muslim women typically shifts between passages of general information and eyewitness descriptions. The informative sections do not necessarily derive from observation, but more often draw on external textual authorities on a

topic such as, for instance, the legal status of Muslim women in society.³⁰ In *Bookseller*, the narrative line regularly digresses into topics concerning Afghan history and culture in general and more specifically on subjects of importance to women—proposal, marriage, divorce, and childbirth. Sims discusses the use of expanding digressions in a narrative as a common strategy of literary journalists in order to “put their characters into a social world,”³¹ and the strategy further allows the journalist to educate the reader on the subject in question.³² Sims refers to the “explanatory narrative,” drawing from Jack Hart’s typology of narrative structures: “This is the John McPhee/*New Yorker* model of an action line broken by segments of expository digression.”³³ Seierstad’s digressions on cultural, political, and geographical topics are not lengthy, maybe a paragraph or so, and she weaves them eloquently into the action line. Often she introduces a topic briefly in one chapter, only to pick it up later and elaborate on it in a chapter where the information sheds light on the ongoing action. For instance, she refers to the Afghan Mujahedeen commander Ahmed Shah Massoud as “legendary” in chapter two, “Burning Books,” while she explains the impact of his life and death on Afghan society and on the international war on terrorism; and having “achieved mythic status” in chapter thirteen, “The Call from Ali,” where she reports on a religious event where prominent Afghan leaders, including Karzai, are present. Two Tunisian suicide bombers assassinated Massoud two days before September 11, 2001.³⁴

The most meaningful innovation of harem literature lies in the transformation of the clichés of the harem in colonial discourses to become a main motif for reporting on the domestic lives of Muslim women. In classic colonial discourses, the harem represented Oriental sexuality: “From the earliest encounters between Christians and Muslims till the present, the harem as the *locus* of an exotic and abnormal sexuality fascinated Westerners. It came to be regarded as a microcosmic Middle East, apotheosising the two characteristics perceived as essentially oriental: sensuality and violence.”³⁵ The writings of this kind of women’s travel literature normalize the harem by reporting on actual intersubjective encounters between British and Muslim women. Mary Roberts, in her 2007 study *Intimate Outsiders*, finds a realistic approach to details in harem literature: “These texts contain a plethora of descriptive detail that functioned to convince their readers that these were real harems rather than imaginary places.”³⁶ According to Melman, the writers tend to compare the status of Muslim women in society to their own status as women at home. Their comparisons often lead to more or less open criticism of the restrictions placed on British women in their own society.³⁷ For instance, in the eighteenth century the writers would acknowledge the freedom the veil and polygamy gave Ottoman women: “Yet, . . . veiling

not only liberates Ottoman women sexually, but makes them more mobile than their English sisters.”³⁸ The Victorians of the nineteenth century did not share their predecessors’ preoccupation regarding sexual liberty for women in society: “The most important, most dramatic change that took place in the literature on harems in the nineteenth century is the desexualisation of the Augustan notion of liberty and the domestication of the Orient.”³⁹ The Victorians shift the focus from comparing sexual freedom for Muslim and British women to comparing degrees of domestic freedom. Melman quotes several writers of the period who find that women of the Middle East possess legal, personal, and priority rights equal if not superior to their own. When describing Muslim women’s lodgings as an autonomous, feminine sphere of society, they recreate and feminize the harem in the Victorian image of an ideal middle-class home.⁴⁰

Reporting on Afghan Domestic Life

If Seierstad had been looking for a family to represent a majority of Afghans, she would have found one that is poor, illiterate, and living in the countryside. But she was not looking for this kind of symbolic family. In the foreword to *Bookseller*, she comments on her choice of characters: “I did not choose my family because I wanted it to represent all other families but because it inspired me.”⁴¹ This is not difficult to imagine, as the bookseller’s family was educated. Yet Seierstad’s approach to the bookseller’s family recalls the strategic approach to cross-cultural representation found in harem literature: that is, using the literary device of synecdoche that allows for “a detail,” a manner or a group of people “to evoke a cultural whole” for the reader.⁴² And so, despite choosing an atypical family, Seierstad’s reporting on the Rais family evokes women’s manners and morals in Afghanistan.

As for the decision to change the family name in the book from Rais to Khan (all of the family members were given pseudonyms), it was Seierstad’s. After the book was published, however, Rais identified himself as the real bookseller of Kabul to Norwegian media.⁴³ Outside of family members, the identities of most of the other characters in the narrative are to this day unknown to the public. The analysis of *Bookseller* that follows refers to the family members by their respective pseudonyms in the narrative.

Despite its title, the central character in the book is Leila, the bookseller’s youngest sister. She is one of twelve Khan family members residing in the apartment in Kabul. The bookseller’s mother Bibi Gul; another two of his sisters, Shakila and Bulbula; his two wives Sharifa and Sonya; and five of his children also live there. During her stay, Seierstad shares a room with Leila, among others, and does most of her reporting in or near the family home. On

one occasion, she accompanies the bookseller on a business trip to Peshawar, about 140 miles east of Kabul. Another time, she joins the bookseller's eldest son Mansur on a pilgrimage to Mazar-i-Sharif, about 200 miles north of Kabul. Otherwise, the majority of chapters focus on family life. The chapter titles, including "The Proposal," "The Matriarch," "The Smell of Dust," and "An Attempt," show that the narrative's focus revolves around issues such as polygamy, sexuality, hygiene, motherhood, and overall daily life in the domestic, feminine sphere of the Afghan family.

Seierstad's narrative offers no parallel to harem literature's criticism of the writer's own society back home. Nor does it project ideals of contemporary family life in the West onto the Khan family. Rather, the bookseller's family is described in the image of a Western bourgeois family of the nineteenth century. The themes of literary realism and naturalism recur in the narrative's focus on the conflicts between individual freedom and being bound by tradition, and between private and public spheres, as well as unjust class differences and the struggle for women's rights.

Seierstad's use of nineteenth-century Western literary devices serves as a rhetorical strategy to familiarize the reader with reported events. The well-known themes and conflicts of Western literature diminish the cultural gap between the reader and the Afghan family members. This further allows the reader to identify and empathize with Afghan women. The downside of this approach is that the framework of nineteenth-century novels tends to draw the reader toward thinking of Afghan women as underdeveloped. The narrative appears to place them historically at a stage of emancipation that Western women presumably passed more than a hundred years ago.

The Sultan and His Harem

A textual analysis of the legacy of harem literature in *Bookseller* relies on classic Orientalist discourses, not only with reference to the historical harem system, but also to the harem as a locus of Western imagination.⁴⁴ Melman comments on the endurance of the stock figure of the Muslim sultan and his harem in Oriental discourse: "And for a long stretch of time, a particularly *longue durée*, the odalisk, the domestic despot and the harem had been the most repeated, most enduring *topoi* of the Muslim eastern Mediterranean."⁴⁵ The Rais family flat in Kabul might not immediately be reminiscent of a Middle Eastern harem. The narrative evokes the stereotype of the exotic sultan and his women slaves by the choice of the bookseller's pseudonym: Sultan Khan, a name that combines two titles associated with Muslim leaders of authority and strength. The title of the book itself refers to the bookseller's position as the breadwinner and head of the family.

In the narrative Sultan Khan is portrayed as a liberated man. Originally educated as an engineer, his passion for literature made him change career paths in the 1970s. He went from constructing buildings to buying, printing, and selling books. The pro-Communist government imprisoned him in the 1980s for selling banned Islamic literature, and for behaving like a petit bourgeois. In 1992, the civil war between the Mujahedeen factions broke out, and their family flat in the Mikrorayon area in Kabul was situated right on the frontline. The bookseller brought his family to safety in Peshawar while he managed to visit Kabul from time to time to see to his bookstores.⁴⁶ When the Taliban came to power in 1996, the religious police burned his books and persecuted him for anti-Islamic behavior.⁴⁷ Apart from his second wife, Sharifa, and their daughter, Shabnam, the family returned from Peshawar to the apartment in Kabul soon after the Taliban fell, in November 2001.⁴⁸

Sultan Khan saw himself as a moderate Muslim and had nothing but contempt for the illiterates of the Taliban movement.⁴⁹ He looked forward to his country being modernized and prospering economically and intellectually. The bookseller welcomed the new policies on women: "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 about the emancipation of women."⁵⁰ Sultan Khan even encouraged the women in his family to throw away their burkas as soon as the new political era made it possible.

The narrative draws on the sovereign and unpredictable despot of Orientalist discourses more when describing Sultan Khan's patriarchal rule of his family: "When his father died Sultan took over the throne. His word is law. Anyone who does not obey him will be punished."⁵¹ The bookseller reigns over his relatives and his three bookstores in Kabul. He mercilessly persecutes a poor carpenter for stealing postcards from his store and fires his nephew Fazil for no reason. He commands his sons Mansur, Eqlal, and Aimal to work for him twelve hours a day. Seierstad sympathizes with the youngest, twelve-year-old Aimal, who would rather go to school.⁵² Sultan Khan refuses him permission without discussion.

Sultan Khan does little to support the initiatives of the women in his family to seize the opportunities offered in spring 2002. Two of his sisters, Leila and Shakila, are educated and can get professional employment. Leila is qualified to be an English teacher, all she needs to do is to register with the Ministry of Education, and Shakila already worked as a math and biology teacher before the civil war.⁵³ Shakila went back to teaching after she married. Sultan Khan took action only to arrange for the basic education of Sonya, his second wife. She was young when the Taliban closed schools for girls and

never learned to read or write. Sultan Khan did not want his wife to stay illiterate and decided to provide her with a private tutor.⁵⁴

The narrative of Sultan Khan's marriage to Sonya brings to mind the image of an Oriental tyrant driven by his own sexuality.⁵⁵ The opening chapter of the book recounts the story of how he became a polygamist. His relatives objected to his plans and the women refused to aid him in proposing to the girl's parents. He disregarded the Afghan custom of arranged marriages by proposing himself.⁵⁶ He bribed the parents of his young fiancée to allow him to meet with her alone before the wedding,⁵⁷ unheard of in Afghan culture. He even violated Afghan custom in his practice of polygamy: "In contrast to Sultan, men with more than one wife usually keep a balance in the relationships, spending one night with one wife, the next night with the other, for decades."⁵⁸ And Khan did not spare his first wife Sharifa humiliation: "At first Sultan would lock himself and Sonya into the bedroom for days on end, only occasionally demanding tea or water. Sharifa heard whispering and laughter commingling with sounds that cut her to the heart."⁵⁹ Seierstad tries to distance herself from Sultan Khan when describing the expression on his face while longing for Sonya on his way home from the business trip to Peshawar: "Sultan laughs. He twitches a bit. He is nearing Mikrorayon and the delicious child-woman."⁶⁰ Sonya was sixteen when they married. Sultan was about fifty.

Manners and Morals of Afghan Women

The Victorian writers of harem literature developed complex textual strategies to report on the daily lives of Muslim women. The literary devices of describing an Oriental women's character by references to her physical appearance had already become a cliché in the travel literature of the 1820s–1830s.⁶¹ In harem literature, elaborate descriptions of physical details served to refer to the manners and morals of Muslim women. Melman identifies four themes of the descriptions of women in these writings:

The first theme is the features of the *orientale* and her physique. The second is costume: dress and undress are used rhetorically and metaphorically as tropes and symbols of women's status and their position in society at large. Third is eating and table-manners, a particularly large category that comprises cookery, dietary habits, table etiquette, the nurture of infants and children, and so on. Fourth and last is hygiene, especially personal hygiene.⁶²

Melman finds that elaborating on physical descriptions proved useful for Victorian writers when the observation of Muslim women confronted them with areas of life of which they themselves could not speak. Melman's analysis does not refer to restrictions on textual representation set by the individual

writer on herself by herself. The analysis refers to the limits set by Victorian society of dominant discourses on femininity.

Women's sexuality was the most critical area Victorian writers could not textually represent. Confronted by the sensuality of Muslim women, the narrating voice of harem literature changes its tenor by starting to moralize, characterizing Muslim women as morally degraded by sensuality.⁶³ Elisabeth Oxfeldt identifies a similar Orientalist gesture of representation in her study of the nineteenth-century paintings and writings of the Danish-Polish artist Elisabeth Jerichau-Baumann. Confronted by the sexuality of four Jewish dancers, Jerichau-Baumann loses her composure and moralizes on the degradation of the Oriental women in general, "tapping into an Orientalist discourse, establishing the strong lines of division between East and West and thus also fixing her own identity."⁶⁴

In *Bookseller*, contemporary dominant Western discourses on femininity do not restrict Seierstad when it comes to textual representation of women's sexuality. Nevertheless, she moralizes while describing certain aspects of Afghan women's lives. The following analysis of the workings of Melman's four themes as found in *Bookseller* investigates the shifts from sympathy to moralization in the tenor of Seierstad's voice when reporting on the lives of Afghan women.

The Morals of Appearance

The descriptions of the young wife Sonya allude to the Victorian clichés of an Oriental woman in travel literature: Her eyes were "dark and almond-shaped," her hair "shining black," and her body "shapely, voluptuous."⁶⁵ The portrait of Sonya reminds us of the inactive, sensual concubine of the Oriental harem.⁶⁶ She seems content with her idle life in the family flat: "She wants nothing more than to sit at home, with a few visits to or from relatives, a new dress from time to time, every fifth year a gold bracelet."⁶⁷ Sultan Khan took her on a trip to see their relatives in Tehran, but she did not care to do anything else but play with her daughter on the floor: "She had only just glimpsed Tehran and had no wish to explore further."⁶⁸ In the narrative, Sonya aspires to nothing. The private instructor could not teach her to read and write: Sonya "gave up and asked Sultan if she could stop."⁶⁹ Sonya seems to want nothing more than to be the preferred wife of her husband and mother to his children. The narrating of Sonya's fear of giving birth to a second daughter reveals the distance in the moral standards between Seierstad and Sonya:

She prays to Allah that it will be a son. She asked me if I could pray for her too.

"What if it's another girl!"

Another little catastrophe in the Khan family.⁷⁰

From the perspective of Seierstad, Sonya's confirmation of the value of a son in Afghan tradition is not morally acceptable. Seierstad refers several times to the importance of giving birth to sons in Afghan culture. For instance, when reporting on Sultan's mother: "A woman gains stature by being a mother, especially of sons."⁷¹ Also, when Sultan's sister Mariam recounts her children being born: "She remembers the birth and the joy of having a boy. A big feast was held and she and her son received wonderful gifts. There were visits and much rejoicing. Two years later she gave birth to a girl; no more feasting or presents."⁷²

The tone of Seierstad's voice shows glimpses of sarcasm when describing the bookseller's sister Shakila as bride:

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 Perfact on her face, the eyes have been outlined with kohl, and she is wearing the new red lipstick. Her appearance too is perfect. A bride must look artificial, like a doll. The word for doll and bride is the same—*arus*.⁷³

The phrase "stand out like mountain peaks" does not praise Shakila's appearance but ridicules the artificial ideal of femininity she embodies. When referring to the common linguistic root for "doll" and "bride" in the local language and to the colors of the Afghan flag appearing in the bridal costume, the narrative could lead the reader to think of the artificial ideal of a bride-doll as being specifically Afghan. Furthermore, a reader familiar with Henrik Ibsen's 1879 drama, *A Doll's House*, could make associations to the bourgeois ideal of femininity opposed by the protagonist Nora in the play. The artificial ideal seems to be the same as Western women discarded more than a century ago.

The Status of the Burka

The burka was the one Afghan garment that was most heatedly debated in the West at the time Seierstad did her reporting in Kabul. It served as the very symbol of the Taliban regime's suppression of women. An entire chapter in *Bookseller* is dedicated to this item of women's clothing, when Seierstad reports on her own experience of wearing the burka to the market. According to Roberts, British writers of harem literature generally "refrained from . . . cultural cross-dressing" even though they eagerly adopted the disguise of the veil to explore the capacity of harem women to see while retaining their anonymity.⁷⁴ Seierstad reports in a more satirical tone on the experience of losing sight of her own and of other women's identities:

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.⁷⁵

The tone of Seierstad's voice shifts from ridiculing the scene to angrily pointing the finger at the suppressive patriarchal system. The chapter title, "Billowing, Fluttering, Winding," refers to the shapelessness of the garment itself, which in turn reflects upon the women wearing it. From the viewpoint of being inside a burka, other women cease to exist as individuals. They are referred to as "a heavily pregnant burka," "the lead burka" and "the two more energetic burkas."⁷⁶

In the foreword, Seierstad informs the reader more directly on her own horrific experience of wearing the burka. She lists the physical pain inflicted upon her before she claims: "How liberated you feel when you get home and can take it off."⁷⁷ The tradition of wearing a burka restricts women's movements and confines them to the home.

Indeed, in *Bookseller* overall, to wear or not to wear the burka becomes a question of women seizing or not seizing this post-Taliban opportunity to liberate themselves at this juncture. The person who seems most likely to succeed in this respect is Leila. She has promised herself that she will take off the burka as soon as the ex-king of Afghanistan returns: "The April morning when ex-king Zahir Shah set foot on Afghan soil, after thirty years in exile, she hung up her burka for good and told herself she would never again use the stinking thing." Sharifa, the educated first wife of Sultan Khan, soon follows her example. His second wife Sonya is more reluctant, and the narrative explains that she grew up during the Taliban regime and was accustomed to wearing it. Ultimately, Sultan Khan forbids Sonya to put on the garment because he does not want to appear to be a fundamentalist.⁷⁸

Sonya's seeming comfort with the burka is actually a relatively recent phenomenon. Many women were unaware of the recent origin of the burka tradition in Afghanistan: "Only a small number of Kabul women renounced the burka during the first spring after the fall of the Taliban, and very few of them know that their ancestors, Afghan women in the last century, were strangers to the burka."⁷⁹ Seierstad's ideological position is clear: there is no cultural, religious, or historical reason for Afghan women to accept the status quo.

Leila's Refusal

From time to time, Seierstad describes Leila with an empathic tone. She is the one Afghan woman in the family who appears most determined to stand out as an individual against tradition. The approval of Leila's moral character is noticeable in the descriptions of family eating habits.

For Melman, in traditional literature, food and eating habits of the Muslim East are symbols of the Orient as a *locus sensualis*. The Orientalists depicted the Muslim Others as generically lascivious and associated them with the vices of gluttony and promiscuity.⁸⁰ The *Bookseller* narrative elaborates on the Khan family's diet: "The fat and the cooking oil they pour over their food are manifested on their bodies. Deep-fried pancakes, pieces of potato dripping in fat, mutton in seasoned cooking-oil gravy."⁸¹ The moralizing tone indicates that the family indulges in comforting but unhealthy food.

Leila does most of the cooking in the family, and as a rule men and women are served different food. Sultan is served his favorite dishes. His preferred wife Sonya shares her husband's delicious meals, an arrangement to which she never objects. Leila expresses anger at her family's mindless acceptance of the unjust dietary system by refusing to eat leftovers from the indulging couple. As for Leila, "If she is condemned to eat beans, eat beans she will."⁸² The scene reveals her inner character and commitment to stand by her own truth.

The contrast between Leila and the other Afghan women in *Bookseller* who accept the status quo runs throughout the narrative. Her mother, Bibi Gul, allows herself to overeat: "She loves the taste of cooking oil, warm mutton fat, and deep-fried pakora, or sucking marrow from bones at the end of the meal."⁸³ The differences in eating habits between Leila, Sonya, and Bibi Gul match their status within the family system. Bibi Gul, as the mother of the male head of the family, is the top woman: "After Sultan, she is second in command."⁸⁴ Sonya has the second top position, as the bookseller's favorite wife. Leila comes last in every respect: "She is the afterthought at nineteen and at the bottom of the pecking order: youngest, unmarried, and a girl."⁸⁵

Melman's analysis of descriptions in harem literature of the eldest woman in a Muslim household illuminates the portrait of Bibi Gul: "The husband's mother was at the top of the domestic hierarchy. A few travellers went so far as to imply that the privileged position of sons' mothers was a relic of an archaic matriarchalism."⁸⁶ Bibi Gul enjoys the benefits of her privileged position as an Afghan matriarch: "Bibi Gul doesn't do a lick of work anymore. She sits in the corner, drinks tea, and broods. Her working life is over. When a woman has grown-up daughters, she becomes a sort of warden who bestows advice, guards the family's morals—in practice, the morals of the daughters."⁸⁷

The mother decides when and whom her daughters will marry. For a long time, Bibi Gul refuses to let her youngest daughter leave the household. She enjoys Leila's competent care and burdens her with the responsibility for her own health: "Leila makes sure that her mother does not eat herself to death."⁸⁸ The narrative places the real contrast between the three women not in their difference in status, but in the fact that Bibi Gul and Sonya enjoy whatever

benefits they may get within the suppressing system. They accept the status quo. Leila, on the other hand, has the inner power to say no to whatever benefits the system occasionally might throw in her direction. She does not want leftovers; she wants to liberate herself.

Mothers and Daughters

Descriptions of hygiene in Victorian harem literature metaphorically refer to the degraded sexual morals of Muslim women. When confronted with the eroticized aura of the *hammam*, women writers tended to moralize:

To distance themselves from the overtly sensuous atmosphere of the public bath, the writers resort to elaborate stratagems. A few are altogether silent. . . . The majority of writers, however, resort to excessive representation. They itemise the architectural detail, the paraphernalia of the bathers and the stages of bathing. Yet when they fix on bathers themselves, the tenor of the reporters changes and the descriptions become openly moralising.⁸⁹

When describing the *hammam* in *Bookseller*, Seierstad does not moralize about Afghan women's degraded sensuality. On the contrary, the description elaborates on the Afghan women's bodies worn out by childbirths: "Thin teenage girls have broad stretch marks from births their bodies were not yet ready for. Nearly all the women's bellies have cracked skin from giving birth too early and too frequently."⁹⁰ Mothers prepare their daughters for a future with lives much like theirs: "Mothers scrub their marriageable daughters while carefully scrutinizing their bodies."⁹¹ Seierstad moralizes about Afghan women being degraded by their own acceptance of traditional family life.

The *hammam* represents the one place in the narrative where the naked truth of the burdens of Afghan women in society surfaces. The women try hard to reduce the damage done to their bodies: "This is not pleasure but hard work."⁹² However, their efforts prove futile: "The women are now spotlessly clean under the burkas and the clothes, but the soft soap and the pink shampoo desperately fight against heavy odds. The women's own smells are soon restored. The smell of old slave, young slave."⁹³ The description of women's hygiene in *Bookseller* turns into a resentful comment on Afghan women's traditional status in society.

Confronted by Dust

In the book's foreword, Seierstad recounts her reporting: "[I] have tried to gather my impressions of a Kabul spring, of those who tried to throw winter off, grow and blossom, and others who felt condemned to go on 'eating dust,' as Leila would have put it."⁹⁴ The reference to her spring in Kabul implies that there might be a difference between the hopes raised by the change of seasons and the hope raised by the change of political regimes. In politics, there is no guarantee of summer.

Nevertheless, in the early months of 2002, the defeat of the Taliban raised Leila's hopes of freeing herself from the restricted life of the house. Leila's words in the foreword are echoed in the description of her daily chores—some people are condemned to eat dust, and she was determined not to be one of them. Not only did she attempt to go back to school, but she also made efforts to get a license to work as an English teacher. And last but not least, her hopes were raised of being able to marry a man who would allow her a professional vocation. In the end, societal resistance, tradition, and, ultimately, her own mother, overwhelmed Leila. In the final chapter, Bibi Gul accepts a proposal of marriage on Leila's behalf. Seierstad writes, "Leila has always done what her mother wanted. Now she says nothing. Wakil's son. With him her life will be exactly as it is now, only with more work and for more people"⁹⁵ The narrative leaves Leila heartbroken. She is one of the many people condemned to eating dust for the rest of their lives.

The descriptions of the actual dust of the capital Kabul metaphorically refer to Leila's fight against tradition. She is constantly sweeping dust off the floor of the apartment and off her skin: "This is the grime she now tries to scrub off her body. It rolls off in fat little rolls. It is the dust that sticks to her life."⁹⁶ Seierstad sympathizes with Leila's investment in the task. The tone changes radically in the close-up on Bibi Gul's nude body in the hammam: "She sits as in a trance, eyes closed, enjoying the heat. Now and again she makes a few lazy efforts at washing. She dips a 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."⁹⁷

According to Melman, the description of the elderly woman in the *hammam* serves as a moral lesson: "Almost every description of the bath boasts of the figure of the old bather, or better, the bath-keeper, or, *hammamci*, a living lesson to all women."⁹⁸ The message of the Victorian age was that giving in to sensuality degrades women's morals. In *Bookseller*, the description of Bibi Gul serves as a warning of degradation to women who accept the status quo in a traditional patriarchy.

One by one, Leila's attempts to free herself from tradition fail and, as they do, Seierstad starts to moralize even on her character: "Leila is not used to fighting for something—on the contrary, she is used to giving up."⁹⁹ The tone continues to shift between sympathy and resentment when commenting on Leila's situation: "Leila is at a standstill; a standstill in the mud of society and the dust of tradition. She has reached a deadlock in a system that is rooted in centuries-old traditions and that paralyzes half the population."¹⁰⁰ In the final chapter, titled "A Broken Heart," the sympathy of Seierstad's narrator pours out when describing Leila's having accepted her fate:

Leila feels how life, her youth, hope leave her—she is unable to save herself. She feels her heart, heavy and lonely like a stone, condemned to be crushed forever. . . . Her crushed heart she leaves behind. Soon it blends with the dust, which blows in through the window, the dust that lives in the carpets. That evening she will sweep it up and throw it out into the backyard.¹⁰¹

The factual dust of Kabul blends with the metaphorical dust of tradition, and Leila herself must throw away the scattered parts of her hopes of a better life. The final blow to her dreams has come from Bibi Gul, and Leila knows she cannot oppose her own mother. The book's most severe criticism of Afghan society is reserved not for men but for women who uphold traditional patriarchy.

Conclusion

The analysis of the tropes and narrative strategies of harem literature in *The Bookseller of Kabul* brings out the textual challenges of reporting on women's intercultural encounters. Seierstad's voice loses its composure when confronted with areas of women's lives about which dominant contemporary Western discourses on femininity cannot speak. By adopting the Orientalist gesture identified by Melman and Oxfeldt, the tone shifts from empathy to sarcastic moralizing when confronted by Afghan women giving in to traditional ideals of femininity in a patriarchal society. The elaborate descriptions of physical appearance, clothing, dietary habits, and hygiene serve to represent the Afghan women as morally degraded.

The majority of Afghan women in the narrative seem unable to detect the workings of the mechanisms of patriarchal suppression and the effects on their own lives and bodies. Metaphorically speaking, they do not see where the dust comes from. The harshest criticism in Seierstad's narrative strikes out against mothers who pass on the woman's burden to their daughters. Bibi Gul herself married Leila off. She did not ask what Leila wanted, and Leila could not oppose traditional custom by telling her. The narrative demonstrates that Afghan women will not succeed in their efforts to liberate themselves as long as they do not identify these suppressive mechanisms in traditional society.

The literary air of the nineteenth century draws the Western reader closer to the lives of Afghan women while at the same time creating a historical distance between contemporary Western societies and the Afghanistan of 2002. The rhetorical strategy evokes a time in Western history for the reader when the status of women in society changed dramatically. Yet the narrative allows the reader to think of Western women as having long ago passed this early stage in the unfolding history of emancipation. Afghan women seem to be inextricably stuck in the status quo.

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Notes

¹ The article refers to the 2003 first English edition published by Little, Brown of New York, Seierstad, *The Bookseller of Kabul*.

² Melman, *Women's Orient*, 16–17.

³ Melman, 16.

⁴ Melman, 16.

⁵ Melman, 101–3.

⁶ Keshavarz, *Jasmine and Stars*, 2–3, 51.

⁷ Keshavarz includes Seierstad's *Bookseller* in her analysis of Geraldine Brookes's *Nine Parts of Desire*, Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Teheran*, and Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*. She finds that the New Orientalism retains the attitude of superiority of classic Orientalism towards the Muslims: "Most importantly, it replicates the totalizing—and silencing—tendencies of the old Orientalists by virtue of erasing, through unnuanced narration, the complexity and richness in the local culture." Keshavarz, *Jasmine and Stars*, 3.

⁸ In a new preface to *Orientalism* from 2003, Said identified a reinforcement of the classical opposition between Westerners and Orientals as opposition between Westerners and Muslims in contemporary Western political rhetoric. Said, *Orientalism*, ii–iii.

⁹ Keshavarz, *Jasmine and Stars*, 3.

¹⁰ On the topic of Western political rhetoric, see Mackie, "The 'Afghan Girls,'" 120, and Lewis, "Feminism and Orientalism," 211.

¹¹ The *Bookseller's* original title in Norwegian includes the subtitle *En familie-tragedie*, which translates as *A Family Tragedy*. See Seierstad, *The Bookseller*.

¹² Seierstad, foreword to *Bookseller of Kabul*, xiv.

¹³ On the topic of the living conditions for Afghan women, see, for instance, the UNAMA / OHCHR reports, "Silence Is Violence," and Anderson, "TrustLaw Poll."

¹⁴ Hartsock suggests distinguishing between the genres by their main function, if it is topical or modal: "Travel narratives, on their face, belong to a topical genre." Hartsock, "Note from the Editor," 6–7.

¹⁵ Hartsock, 7.

¹⁶ Melman, *Women's Orients*, 16.

¹⁷ Melman, 16.

¹⁸ Sims, "The Literary Journalists," 3.

¹⁹ Seierstad, foreword to *Bookseller of Kabul*, x.

²⁰ Seierstad, xi.

²¹ Hartsock, introduction to *A History of American Literary Journalism*, 1.

²² Sims, *True Stories*, 236.

²³ Sims, "Literary Journalists," 3.

²⁴ Sims, *True Stories*, 279–80.

²⁵ LeBlanc, afterword to *Random Family*, 406.

²⁶ Boo, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*.

²⁷ Melman, *Women's Orients*, 10–11.

²⁸ For more on harem literature in Victorian society, see Lewis, "Harem Literature and Women's Travel," 48–49.

²⁹ Melman, *Women's Orients*, 50; see also Martineau, *Eastern Life: Present and Past*.

³⁰ Melman, 101.

³¹ Sims, *True Stories*, 292.

³² Sims, 294.

³³ Sims, 292.

³⁴ Seierstad, *Bookseller of Kabul*, 18–19, 150.

³⁵ Melman, *Women's Orients*, 60.

³⁶ Roberts, *Intimate Outsiders*, 62. Roberts draws on Melman's study on harem literature when she analyzes the texts to investigate questions of spectatorship. Roberts, 51.

³⁷ Melman, *Women's Orients*, 16–17, 87–88.

³⁸ Melman, 87.

³⁹ Melman, 99.

⁴⁰ Melman, 101.

⁴¹ Seierstad, foreword to *Bookseller of Kabul*, xv. Seierstad describes her reporting on the Rais family in the foreword, ix–xvi.

⁴² Melman, *Women's Orients*, 102.

⁴³ Rais arrived in Norway in the fall of 2003 denying he had ever given Seierstad consent to write a book on his private life. On the topic of ethical aspects of Seierstad's reporting, see, for instance, McKay, "Åsne Seierstad and the Bookseller of Kabul," 175–90.

⁴⁴ On the historical harem system, see Ahmed, "Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem," 521–34. For a post-colonial critique of the topos of harem in Western feminist discourses, see Zonana, "The Sultan and the Slave," 592–617.

⁴⁵ Melman, *Women's Orients*, 4.

⁴⁶ Seierstad, *Bookseller of Kabul*, 12–17.

⁴⁷ Seierstad, 10.

- ⁴⁸ Seierstad, 22; foreword, x.
⁴⁹ Seierstad, 12.
⁵⁰ Seierstad, 277.
⁵¹ Seierstad, 114.
⁵² Seierstad, 210.
⁵³ Seierstad, 71, 191.
⁵⁴ Seierstad, 184.
⁵⁵ The reading of Sultan Khan as the Oriental tyrant is indebted to Zonana's postcolonial analysis of the harem topos in Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847), where the male character Rochester is seen as a despotic sultan driven by sensuality. See note 44.
⁵⁶ Seierstad, *Bookseller of Kabul*, 3–4.
⁵⁷ Seierstad, 185.
⁵⁸ Seierstad, 26–27.
⁵⁹ Seierstad, 25.
⁶⁰ Seierstad, 66.
⁶¹ Melman, *Women's Orients*, 114.
⁶² Melman, 102.
⁶³ Melman, 130–36.
⁶⁴ Oxfeldt, *Journeys from Scandinavia*, 46.
⁶⁵ Seierstad, *Bookseller of Kabul*, 4.
⁶⁶ Melman, *Women's Orients*, 115.
⁶⁷ Seierstad, *Bookseller of Kabul*, 185–86.
⁶⁸ Seierstad, 185–86.
⁶⁹ Seierstad, 184.
⁷⁰ Seierstad, 288.
⁷¹ Seierstad, 120.
⁷² Seierstad, 199.
⁷³ Seierstad, *Bookseller of Kabul*, 95.
⁷⁴ Roberts, *Intimate Outsiders*, 93. Roberts finds that the writers enjoy wearing the veil: "Their texts disclose the scopic privilege they could accrue by playing with the veil as a means of seeing without being seen." Roberts, 106.
⁷⁵ Seierstad, *Bookseller of Kabul*, 85.
⁷⁶ Seierstad, 84.
⁷⁷ Seierstad, foreword, xv.
⁷⁸ Seierstad, 277.
⁷⁹ Seierstad, 90.
⁸⁰ Melman, *Women's Orients*, 122–23.
⁸¹ Seierstad, *Bookseller of Kabul*, 165.
⁸² Seierstad, 176.
⁸³ Seierstad, 107.
⁸⁴ Seierstad, 108.
⁸⁵ Seierstad, 120.
⁸⁶ Melman, *Women's Orients*, 145.
⁸⁷ Seierstad, *Bookseller of Kabul*, 108.

- ⁸⁸ Seierstad, 107.
⁸⁹ Melman, *Women's Orients*, 132–33.
⁹⁰ Seierstad, *Bookseller of Kabul*, 163.
⁹¹ Seierstad, 163.
⁹² Seierstad, 163.
⁹³ Seierstad, 170.
⁹⁴ Seierstad, foreword, xvi.
⁹⁵ Seierstad, 282.
⁹⁶ Seierstad, 168.
⁹⁷ Seierstad, 164.
⁹⁸ Melman, *Women's Orients*, 135.
⁹⁹ Seierstad, *Bookseller of Kabul*, 193.
¹⁰⁰ Seierstad, 193.
¹⁰¹ Seierstad, 282–83.

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