

The Bookseller of Kabul Study Guide

The Bookseller of Kabul by Åsne Seierstad

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Plot Summary

The Bookseller of Kabul by Asne Seierstad is the story of the Sultan Kahn family. The book tells the story of how people cope with the trials and tribulations of everyday life in a country with oppressive customs and traditions. The author lives with the Kahn family in their small crowded apartment to experience everyday life and to gather information for the book. In doing so, she reveals the oppressive nature of the life of Afghani women.

Sultan Kahn is a bookseller. He receives training as an engineer but gives up that career because of his interest in books. He loves books from the time he is a child. As a student, he buys textbooks in Tehran and sells them in Kabul for a handsome profit. Eventually, he goes to Tehran and Pakistan, buys many crates of books and returns to Kabul and opens a bookstore. He prospers.

Sultan believes in making most all kinds of books available. He wants to protect Afghan history and culture and therefore does not adhere to the rules of the Soviets or fundamentalists as to what is forbidden. As a result of this, he is imprisoned several times and his books are burned, but he always recovers. He protects the history and culture of his country by hiding thousands of books in attics around Kabul. At one point, his wife Sharifa spends a year living in Pakistan running a part of the book business from there during a bad period in the war.

Sultan has three bookstores in Kabul. He considers himself to be a rich man. He is born to a poor family in a village outside of Kabul and is self made. He moves his family into a block of Soviet style apartments during the Soviet occupation. At this time, they are luxury middle class apartments. After all of the years of fighting there is little water and electricity in the apartments. Between eleven and thirteen people live in the four room apartment and one room is used exclusively as a storeroom.

All of these people living in such a small apartment are not happy. Seierstad looks at the lives of these people and the oppressive life of women. They have no choice in the selection of a husband or much else. Under the rule of the Taliban, they are forbidden to work and cannot go out without wearing the burka. Sultan is an authoritative person who demands respect and obedience. No one in the family dares to disobey him. As a result of this, they are all unhappy.

The Bookseller of Kabul is fascinating reading. The author portrays the everyday lives of the people under three different kinds of repressive regimes and the struggles of one man to do what he could to preserve the history and culture of his country.



The Proposal, Burning Books, pg. 3-22

The Proposal, Burning Books, pg. 3-22 Summary and Analysis

Sultan wants to take a new wife and looks for someone to help him. The local custom requires that a female member of the family has to convey the proposal but none of his relatives want to. He has selected three girls, all from his clan, which is also custom. His first wife, Sharifa, is now over fifty and he has three sons and a daughter by her.

Since no one will do his bidding for him, he goes to talk to the parents himself. The first is Sonya, a sixteen year old. Sultan acts as if he is representing someone else and is told she is too young. He keeps returning for the next several days until the parents agree to the deal. Sonya is not happy with the idea but knows it will help her family and her own standing in Afghan society.

Sultan returns home to tell his family the news. They cannot believe what he has done. Sharifa and his family are upset but no one speaks against him. A very upset Sharifa has to take part in some of the rituals but refuses to attend the actual marriage ceremony two months later. The other female relatives show their opposition by not dressing up for the ceremony.

Burning Books opens on a cold November afternoon in 1999. There is a fire in the street in Charhai-e-Sadaret. The religious police have raided Sultan's book store and are burning the books that they feel are objectionable. Today, they burn books with pictures. The bookseller, Sultan, is arrested for anti-Islamic behavior. He knows that the books he sells are in violation of Taliban policy but he believes in free thought.

Sultan begins buying and selling books when he is a student. He loves books and only works as an engineer for a short while. Then he goes to Tehran and buys crates of books and returns to Kabul to open his own bookstore in the 1970s.

There is political unrest in Afghanistan after Sultan opens his bookstore and when the monarchy is abolished in 1973 Sultan's business prospers. When the Soviets invade in 1979, Sultan continues to sell Mujaheddin literature, even though it is forbidden. Sultan is arrested and spends a year in prison. He is arrested again five years later.

When fighting begins in Kabul in 1992, Sultan takes his family to Pakistan. He has to restock his looted bookstore when he returns. When the Taliban come to power, his books are again burned and the museum's artwork destroyed. This is the environment in which Sultan tries to save the bits of Afghan culture.

By the summer of 2001, Sultan applies for visas to Canada. He now owns three bookstores in Kabul and is targeted. Many of the books are hidden in attics around Kabul.



Crime and Punishment, Suicide and Song, pg. 23-40

Crime and Punishment, Suicide and Song, pg. 23-40 Summary and Analysis

Sharifa waits in Peshawar while Sultan is still in Kabul. She is not happy in Peshawar. At this point, Sultan has been married to Sonya for two years, and Sharifa for eighteen years. She is handling some of his book business from Peshawar. Everyday Sharifa waits for Sultan to appear. When he does not, she joins the other women for prayer and feast.

The women talk about the beating of sixteen year old Saliqa, who had been receiving notes from a boy through Shabnam, Sharifa's daughter. Saliqa began lying to meet with him. She is found out and considered to have disgraced the family. The women talk of Saliqa's situation and that of other women who have been improperly involved with men. They talk of the story of Jamila whose husband left her at his brothers, waiting for a visa. A man was seen crawling in and out of her window. Her husband's family threw her out. Her own family eventually killed her to end their disgrace.

Suicide and Song discusses how love is taboo with Afghan women. They do not marry whomever they choose or for love. This can be a serious crime punishable by death because it violates the concept of honor. Marriages are arranged by the families. As a result of this, forbidden love is usually the theme of poems. These poems usually show the hatred of the Afghan women for their situation.

The Business Trip, pg. 41-67

The Business Trip, pg. 41-67 Summary and Analysis

The mountainous border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan is controlled by the tribes, not by either government. In Pakistan, the government only has authority on twenty yards on either side of paved roads. Sultan travels to Pakistan in the tribal area paths. He rides a saddle-less horse and wears his oldest clothes. When he is past the border area, he will travel by car for the hour ride to Peshawar. He hates to travel this way but the Pakistan border is basically closed to Afghans.

Sultan arrives at the apartment. He and Sharifa discuss the latest news in both countries. According to custom, he has to visit various relatives which he hates to do and he does this the next day after completing some business errands. The day after they visit some distant relatives to discuss the possibility of marriage for Sultan's brother, Yunis. Yunis wants the younger daughter, Belqisa but the parents want her to marry Mansur, Sultan's son. They cannot agree with Sultan and his family leaves. Sultan says they will eventually agree to allow Belqisa to marry Yunis.

Sultan goes on to Lahore from Peshawar. He travels by bus. His purpose is to have textbooks printed for the school children. He wants books that are not ideologically based. Sultan has his own books printed instead of buying from foreign publishers. There are no controls in Pakistan.

Sultan meets with a man named Talha to discuss printing the one hundred thirteen titles he needs for the school children. Then they discuss books for Sultan's bookshops. After conducting business, they sit and talk with other people in the publishing business. They talk about the Taliban. He spends several days conducting his business in Lahore and then takes a bus back to Kabul and Sonya.



Do You Want to Make Me Sad, pg. 68-80

Do You Want to Make Me Sad, pg. 68-80 Summary and Analysis

Sultan negotiates the deal for the marriage of his sisters, Shakila and Bulbula. His mother, Bibi Gul, has kept them from marrying for many years. They are both in their thirties and Bulbula never has recovered from an illness she had as a child and she is illiterate. Shakila has been a teacher in the village of Deh Khudaidad. Shakila is in love with colleague from the school named Mahmoud. They are separated when Mahmoud receives a promotion and moves away. Then the war begins and the Taliban come to power.

Under the Taliban, girls' schools are closed. Women are not allowed to work. After five years of being at home, Sultan negotiates her marriage to Wakil. Shakila is not happy about the situation but her mother tells her to be quiet. At a party for the engaged couple, Shakila asks Wakil if he will allow her to work when they are married, and he says yes. Then she finds out that Wakil wants her to wear a burka. he is not happy about this since women are now allowed to wear modern clothing. She says that she will wear modern clothing and not the burka.

Afterward, Shakila tells her sister that she is sad about the situation.



No Admission to Heaven, Billowing, Fluttering, Winding, pg. 81-93

No Admission to Heaven, Billowing, Fluttering, Winding, pg. 81-93 Summary and Analysis

This chapter presents the sixteen decrees that were imposed when the Taliban entered Kabul in September 1996. The sixteen decrees are:

1. Prohibition against the exposure of females—Burka required
2. Ban on music
3. Ban on shaving
4. Mandatory prayer
5. Ban on raising pigeons and bird fighting
6. Ban on narcotics
7. No flying kites
8. No reproduction of pictures
9. Ban on gambling
10. Ban on American and British hairstyles
11. Ban on loan interest, exchange charges and transaction charges
12. No washing clothes at the river bend
13. No music or dancing at weddings
14. No drum playing
15. Tailors cannot sew clothes for women or take their measurements
16. Ban on witchcraft

Billowing, Fluttering, Winding begins by saying the blue burkas blend together. The author is describing the women as they are shopping and how uncomfortable the burka is. The women are stopping in Kabul's bazaar.



Many woman's organizations form after the end of Taliban rule. Girls are able to attend school again and allowed to work.

The burka has come and gone throughout Afghan history. For awhile the burka is the choice of the rich. By the 1970s, few women wear the burka. Under Islamic law, they are required to wear the burka.

Shakila and her sisters finish their shopping for the wedding and return home.

Wedding, pg. 94-105

Wedding, pg. 94-105 Summary and Analysis

It is now the day before the wedding. In the evening, the hands and feet of the bride and groom will be painted with henna. The men and women celebrate their feasts in separate rooms. Shakila sits on a couch and watches. Due to custom, she is not allowed to smile, dance or act happy to be leaving her mother or sad to be joining her mother-in-law.

After the dancing, the women eat and then perform the henna ceremony. After Shakila's hands and feet are painted and bound, she sleeps on a mat next to her mother. After a few hours sleep, her hands and feet are unwrapped. After breakfast, Shakila and her sisters go to the beauty salon. Shakila then must don her burka without ruining her hairdo. She leaves it on until she arrives at the site of the wedding at Mariam's house. There she changes into her white dress.

When Wakil arrives, they walk in together. The situation is surrounded with tradition and superstition. For example, the bride and groom must sit down at the same time. If they do not, it affects who dominates decisions in the marriage. Then they are covered with a blanket and look at each other with a mirror. A prayer is said over their heads. After cutting the cake, the group enjoys music and dancing.

After the feast, the newlyweds drive to Wakil's house where the bride and groom and close family members are served green tea. The bedroom has been decorated by Mariam. The next day, Bibi Gul is given the piece of cloth with the blood on it to signify that Shakila was a virgin. If the cloth had not been bloody, Shakila would have been returned to her family.



The Matriarch, Temptation, pg. 106-130

The Matriarch, Temptation, pg. 106-130 Summary and Analysis

After the wedding, the mother mourns the loss of her daughter. She can now only see her when the husband allows it. Bibi Gul takes consolation in food. Her daughter Bulbula is next to be married, and then there will only be Leila to look after her. She vows not to allow Leila to marry while she is still alive.

Bibi Gul lives with Sultan. There are now eleven people living in the four room apartment. The fourth room is the storeroom that is full of boxes. Each of the women keeps a locked chest with her private treasures in it. Sultan also keeps many books there. The bookcase in the room is the only furniture.

Mats are used for sleeping and sitting. Some walls consist of only bedsheets. The kitchen has a sink, stove and hot plate. A cubicle functions as the bath room. Their living conditions are the result of the civil war. The flat was in the middle of the battle and badly damaged. Even though the civil war ended six years ago, there has been little cleaning up.

The apartments were built in the Soviet era in the Soviet style and were for the middle class. They were a status symbol at the time. Now there is little electricity or running water.

Sultan has been head of the family since his father's death. He believes in being strict with them so they will prosper. A family member who disobeys is banished, like Sultan's brother Farid who started his own bookstore. The family members who see Farid must do so without Sultan's knowledge.

Each of Bibi Gul's thirteen children is named and discussed. She only knows the exact birth date of one so the rest must try to figure out their age.

In Temptations, a beautiful young woman comes into Mansur's bookstore looking for a chemistry book. He tells her to come back the next day. Mansur hates books and the book business. When the woman returns, he tells her he has the book at home. He doesn't have the book she wants and they go to a restaurant. She never returns.

Mansur tells a friend, Rahimulah, the story. He tells Mansur to only try the poor ones and widows and shows him a room that he has for that purpose.

The Call from Ali, pg. 131-162

The Call from Ali, pg. 131-162 Summary and Analysis

Mansur is unhappy after he learns what Rahimullah does. He is seventeen and very unhappy with life at the book store and in Afghanistan. He has no time for any kind of social life because of his chores at the bookstore.

Many feasts are planned for the Afghani New Year. The people cannot celebrate under the Taliban. The New Year is celebrated on March 21. Mansur wants to make a pilgrimage to Mazar-i-Sharif but needs Sultan's permission. When Sultan refuses, Mansur is angry. Sultan says he can go next year.

His Iranian friend cannot get through the Salang tunnel and returns to Kabul. He tells Mansur that he is going the next day and that Sultan says that Mansur can go with. Mansur and his friend, Akbar, leave the next day. They look at the war torn area as they travel and read an old Afghan travel guide that indicates the points of interest. They pass plenty of burned out tanks and signs warning of mines if they slid off the road.

They finally reach the blue mosque. The area and the restaurants are packed with pilgrims. They stay in the area that night and the next morning Mansur awakens to prayer call. The men wait with the crowd to see Hamid Karzi raise Ali's banner. They listen to the speeches.

After the ceremony, Mansur buys gifts for the members of his family. He then goes to visit the crypt and has the fights blessed by the mullahs. After the visit, Mansur feels blessed and cleansed.



The Smell of Dust, pgs. 163-180

The Smell of Dust, pgs. 163-180 Summary and Analysis

The women bathe and scrub themselves and the children at the baths. Bibi Gul relaxes in the warmth of the pool under Leila's watchful eye. Leila is always busy caring for her mother. At home, she helps with the younger children. After seeing the men and children off, Leila has breakfast, then begins the house work. She feels unwelcome in Sultan's home, as do her brother, mother and sister.

After the baths, the women dress, don their burkas and walk home. Leila never walks alone and is never alone. They arrive home to find that Sharifa has returned. She has brought all of them presents and they all sit and talk about the news and gossip from both countries.

Leila cooks the dinner for them. She is a good cook. She is good at everything she does which is why she has so many tasks and chores. They all rely on her. Leila is hoping that she and her mother will go with Yunus when he marries. Leila is still up working at midnight after everyone else is asleep.

An Attempt, pg. 181-193

An Attempt, pg. 181-193 Summary and Analysis

One day Leila enrolls in an English course. When she arrives at the classroom, she is surprised to find that there are boys in the class. In spite of them, she removes her burka. She does not return because of the boys in the class. Leila is angry at Sultan for not allowing her to attend high school. She resents Sonya because of the privileges she has as Sultan's wife.

Sonya is content with her life. She is awaiting the birth of her second child, hoping it will be a son. Sonya is worried that Sultan will take a third wife if she gives birth to another daughter.

When Leila sees Sultan send Mariam's son home, she decides that she has to have a plan. Sultan could throw her out also. She goes to visit her sister Shakila in Deh Khudaridad. Shakila works as a biology teacher and is happy in her role as wife and mother. Leila wants Shakila to help her find work as a teacher of English at the village school. Leila finds that she must apply through the Ministry of Education.

Leila must figure out how to go to the Ministry of Education without Sultan finding out. Her school certificate is in Pakistan and she has to wait several weeks for the papers to arrive. No one in the family is in favor of Leila's plan. She still has to figure out how to go to the Ministry of Education.



Can God Die, The Dreary Room, pg.,- 194-213

Can God Die, The Dreary Room, pg.,- 194-213 Summary and Analysis

Fazil, the nephew that Sultan sent home, is doing detention homework and does not like it. He cannot answer the question properly. He tells his grandmother that the teacher makes him nervous. Fazil does his reading about the Prophet. He studies prayers and then goes to sleep. He is up at five the next morning for school.

Fazil is Mariam's son. She was widowed when the boy was three and married her dead husband's younger brother. Yunus enrolled Fazil in Esteqlal, which was one of the best schools in Kabul. Mariam thinks it is best that Fazil is in school and not at Sultan's working.

There are fifty boys in Fazil's class and he attends school the next day.

The Dreary Room begins by discussing Aimal, who is the youngest son of Sultan. He is eleven. After eating breakfast, he leaves at eight in the morning and works for twelve hours selling soft drinks and candy at a Kabul hotel. When the hotel is built in the 1960s, it is the best in Kabul. It is just about destroyed in the war and is very slowly renovated. The new regime is now working on the hotel but there is not much business for the shopkeepers.

The center of the lobby has a small area for prayer. There is a television that has only one channel that is on all day. Aimal spends most of his day talking to the other workers. There are journalists there until the Taliban falls. Then there are government workers and their staffs. They do not buy much.

Aimal wants to go to school like Fazil.



The Carpenter, pg. 214-244

The Carpenter, pg. 214-244 Summary and Analysis

Mansur runs to his father's store to tell him that the carpenter tried to steal two hundred postcards. Sultan has known the carpenter, Jalaluddin, since they lived in the village. Sultan hires the man to make shelves so he can display books as they do in Western bookshops. The postcards are an important source of income for the bookseller and is about two weeks wages for the carpenter. Sultan, taking Rasul with him, drives to the village to talk to the carpenter.

They pick up Jalaluddin and are driving him to the police. He says he only wanted to show the postcards to his children. He begs not to be put in jail and says he will pay for the cards the carpenter talks about how poor he is as they drive to the house of Mirdzjan, the policeman. Halaluddin finally admits that he has taken a larger number of cards. They drive the man home and he returns the cards.

The next day the carpenter and his father appear at the bookstore. Jalaluddin begs forgiveness and his father says that he has beaten him and beats him in the shop until the man runs out.

Sultan thinks the man may have stolen as many as eight thousand cards and sold them to stall holders. He wants Mansur and Mirdzhan to investigate while he is in Iran.

At Jalaluddin's house, his father continues to beat him, much to the horror of his family.

The next morning, Mansur wakes feeling free. His father is out of town. He decides that he will enjoy himself until Sultan returns. Mansur wants to meet girls so he enrolls in English class. He spots a girl that he likes but she refuses to have anything to do with him and stops attending the class. He Then finds his father will return the next day. He has done none of his chores.

The women from the carpenter's house visit Sultan's apartment. The police came for the carpenter when he was not home. They took his father and uncle. Sultan's women can do nothing but say they will talk to Sultan.

Later that day, Jalaluddin is arrested. The police tell Sultan that they can hold the carpenter for seventy-two hours at which Sultan and Mansur will have to decide whether they want to withdraw the complaint. The carpenter can be imprisoned for six years.

Mansur talks to the police about how thieves are punished and then learns about the punishment for alcohol and other crimes. After leaving the police station, Mansur goes home for lunch and the women urge him to withdraw the complaint. Sultan refuses. The carpenter finally explains why he stole the postcards and who he sold them to. The police arrest the kiosk owner and seize the postcards from the stall.



My Mother Osama, pg. 244-266

My Mother Osama, pg. 244-266 Summary and Analysis

The battle against the al-Qaida and bin Ladin takes place along the Afghan-Pakistani border. Tajmir is one of the men the area charged with finding them. He is presently acting as interpreter for an American magazine. Tajmir lives near Sultan and his family and turns his paycheck over to his mother, Feroza.

Tajmir is married with a small daughter. He is telling his life story to a journalist named Bob. After lunch they see some soldiers of Padsha Khan and stop to talk to them. Padsha Kahn rules the region as the local warlord. Feroza does not know that he receives extra pay for travel in danger areas. Bob and Tajmir go on to Khost, which is where Mullah Omar and the Taliban had their base. Bob interviews Kamal Khan, the commander. These men are the opponents of Hamid Karzai.

After talking Kahn, Bob and Tajmir go to the police station to interview Mustafa, the chief and the opponent of the Khan clan. Afterward, they spend the night at a hotel in Khost. Bob explains to the men what the World Trade Center buildings are and shows them a picture of Osama bin Ladin. They have never seen a picture of bin Ladin.

Bob and Tajmir remain in Khost for several days and then return to Kabul.



A Broken Heart, pg. 267-284

A Broken Heart, pg. 267-284 Summary and Analysis

Leila receives letters that cause her to dream of another, better life. She wants out of the house and situation that she is in. When she wants to go shopping for onions, Sharifa tells her to send one of the boys. When Aimal arrives, he hands her another letter and a package containing a wristwatch. The letter is signed "K." Karim wants her to acknowledge his feelings.

Leila had seen Karim only once when she and Sonya brought lunch to Aimal at the hotel. Karim works for a Japanese television company. He lives alone.

One day Mansur invites him to dinner but Leila is not there. He only catches a glimpse of her even though he spends the night there. The next day Karim's sister visits the family.

Leila does not tell anyone about the letters. She has heard the stories of women killed by their brothers for disgracing their family by seeing men. Leila views Karim as a way of escaping the family. He could give her the kind of life she wants. The three suitors she had could not.

Karim arranges a meeting between Leila and the Minister of Education. She has a hard time finding some thing to wear and borrows a skirt and blouse from Sonya who has Western clothes as gifts from Sultan. She and the women no longer wear burkas. Karim accompanies Sharifa and Leila to the Ministry of Education. The minister signs Leila's papers. She passes the oral test but is missing one form.

The next day Karim travels to Jalalbad to talk to his family. They agree to send his sister to begin marriage negotiations. Karim is warned by Wakil to stay away from Leila. Wakil's wife's family comes to ask for Leila. The hope leaves Leila. However, she is quiet.



Epilogue,. pg. 285-288

Epilogue,. pg. 285-288 Summary and Analysis

Soon after the author leaves Kabul, the Kahn family have an argument that leads to their breakup. This results in Yunus, Bibi Gul, Leila and Bulbula moving out of the apartment. They move in with Farid and never return to Sultan's apartment. Leila has no further contact with Karim, who is offered a scholarship to study in Egypt.

The carpenter receives a three year prison term.

Sharifa wants to work as a teacher. Sultan has no objections but Mansur does. Since he is the oldest son, Sharifa cannot work as a teacher.

Bulbula marries Rasul and Maraam gives birth to a son. Sonya is pregnant and hoping to produce a son. In the end, Sonya and Sharifa are the only women left in Sultan's household.

Characters

Sultan Khan

Sultan Khan is a Kabul bookseller whose family the author lived with. He is married to Sharifa and has three sons and a daughter by her. When he decides to take a second wife, Sharifa and the female members of the family are very upset. He marries Sonya, a sixteen year old member of his clan.

Sultan is a free thinker who does not agree with the policies of the Taliban. As a result of this, he is arrested and his books burned. He is a believer but a moderate Muslim who feels contempt for the Taliban.

Sultan is born to a poor family in Deh Khudaidad in the 1950s. His parents send him to school and he works around his school schedule. He begins buying books and then selling them. Sultan's training is as an engineer but he gives up that occupations to become a bookseller. He lives at his parents' home and peddles to his bookstore in Kabul everyday. Arrested and imprisoned twice for selling forbidden books, he marries Sharifa when he is thirty five years of age.

Sultan is descended from Tajiks and speaks both Pashtoo and Dari. He is not very interested in tribal politics. He is also very strict with his family because he is interested in building a business base in Afghanistan. This leads to the break up of the family as his brother, mother and sisters move out after a quarrel. They do not give him the respect he feels he is due.

Sharifa

Sharifa is the first wife of Sultan Khan. The daughter of a general, she marries Sultan when he is thirty five years of age. They have four children. Sharifa is very upset when Sultan takes a second and younger wife, Sonya. Sharifa is not happy about Sonya but cannot really divorce without being ostracized by society. Sharifa does her duty and plays the role of the model wife. Sharifa is from the Pashtoon tribe.

After Sultan's marriage to Sonja, Sharifa is never happy. Sonja very obviously is favored by Sultan but Sharifa still obeys him. She spends a year of the war living in Pakistan and remains after most of the family returns to Kabul. She handles the bookstore orders from the apartment and remains there as long as Sultan wants her to.

Sharifa tries to support her family as best as she can emotionally. Mansur orders her around and is always rude and disobedient. She knows that Leila wants to teach and says she will go with her to the Ministry of Education, but does not. Sharifa is also qualified to work as a teacher if she wants since she also has papers from Pakistan. Her son Mansur will not allow her to work as a teacher. Sultan does not object, but she



cannot work without Mansur's permission. In the end, Sonya and Sharifa are the only women remaining in Sultan's house, in addition to Sonya's little girl.

Leila

Leila is the younger sister of Sultan. She is nineteen when the author, Asne Seierstad, comes to live with them to gather information for her book. Sultan basically places her in charge of the author while she is staying with the family. Leila is very unhappy with her life. She wants to teach English but never completes the application process. Leila is interested in Karim as a suitor but loses contact with him when she moves out of Sultan's home.

Mansur

Mansur is the sixteen year old son of Sultan and Sharifa. He runs one of Sultan's three bookstores in Kabul. He is very unhappy under the domineering authority of his father. He is surly and goes out and has fun when his father is out of town. As the oldest son, he forbids his mother to teach. Even though he wants to attend school, he remains working for his father.

Sonya

Sonya is the second wife of Sultan and is sixteen when she marries him. She comes from a poor family and the marriage helps her family and gives her more standing in Afghan society. Sonya is from the Tajik tribe. She is favored by Sultan which causes some problems with Sharifa. She has a daughter, Latifa, and is expecting her second child at the end of the book.

Karim

Karim works for a Japanese television company. He lives alone since his father's remarriage. His room at the hotel is paid for by his employer and he earns a good salary. Karim sees Leila once when she and Sonya bring lunch for Aimal and begins sending her notes and presents through Aimal. He has no contact with Leila after she moves out of Sultan's home. Karim is offered a scholarship in Egypt.

Jalaluddin

Jalaluddin is a carpenter from the village of Deh Khadaidad. When building some shelves in the bookstore run by Mansur, he steals some postcards. He is beaten by his father for the thievery and eventually arrested and receives a three year prison term.



Hamid Karzi

Hamid Karzi is the leader of Afghanistan. He is a Pashtoon from Kandahar.

Shabnam

Shabnam is the daughter of Sharifa and Sultan and is the youngest child.

Aimal

Aimal is the twelve year old son of Sultan and Sharifa.

Eqbal

Eqbal is the fourteen year old son of Sultan and Sharifa.



Objects/Places

Kabul

Kabul is the capital of Afghanistan and the place where Sultan Khan and his family live.

Charhai-e-Sadarat

Charhai-e-Sadaret is a traffic circle in Kabul where a book burning takes place.

Tehran

Tehran is the capital of Iran, where Sultan travels with his uncle when he is in school.

Deh Khudaidad

Deh Khudaidad is a village outside of Kabul where Sultan Khan is born.

Peshawar

Peshwar is a city in Pakistan where some members of Sultan's family live during the civil war in Kabul.

Lahore

Lahore is the city in Pakistan that is a cultural and artistic center.

Mazar-i-Sharif

Mazar-i-Sharif is a place in Afghanistan where many believe the tomb of Ali is. It is three hundred miles from Kabul.

Hindu Kush

Hindu Kush is a mountain range north of Kabul.

Khost

Khost is the area of Afghanistan where Mullah Omar had his support base. It is visited by Tajmir and Bob.

Jalalabad

Jalalabad is a city in Afghanistan where Karim's family lives.



Themes

Unhappiness

One of the most prevalent themes of the book is the unhappiness of the people, especially the women. The women have few rights in Afghan society, especially when it came to marriage. All marriages were negotiated between the families. Women cannot date or be seen in public with men without their families consent. They have to wear the burka which only leaves their eyes exposed. The women are totally under the domination of the men in their family.

In a family like Sultan's, who is so domineering and authoritative, no one is happy and no one dares to disagree or oppose him. Those who do were ostracized from the family, which is what happens to Farid, Sultan's younger brother and, at the end of the book, to his mother, brother and sisters. They disagree with Sultan and are thrown out because they did not give him the respect he feels he deserves.

Leila, Sultan's younger daughter, is very unhappy. Her role in life is to wait on her mother and to be the household servant. She does not have a life of her own and no hope of a better life until Karim tries to meet her. She wants to teach but cannot get the approval she needs. Leila dreams of marrying Karim because he will give her a different kind of life. However, as his family is beginning to negotiate, they move out of Sultan's apartment and she loses contact with him. Marriage to her other suitors would leave her in the same position of a household servant. The unhappiness of the people is part of their life.

Ambition

Ambition is another theme of the book, basically the ambition of Sultan Kahn. Sultan is a very ambitious man once he becomes a bookseller. Every thing he does is directed at establishing a base for the book business empire in Kabul. His son Mansur is not allowed to go to school or have any life of his own because he is needed to run one of the bookstores. Sultan expects the family to sacrifice for his business goals and to be as dedicated as he is to achieving his goals. He has plans to expand his business. He publishes his own books because Pakistan has no laws prohibiting books from being copies. Sultan has plans to print textbooks and establish libraries. His ambition is partly based on principle and his desire to help preserve the history and culture of Afghanistan.

Sultan's ambition to build a business stems from his need to be successful and to build a secure financial based for his family. As a result of this he tends to be autocratic and domineering. It is his way or nothing. He demands total obedience which is why his oldest son Mansur is so unhappy. His father's ambition leaves him no time for a life of his own. It is Sultan's ambition that makes him successful.

Principle

Another theme of the book is adhering to one's principles, and this applies especially to Sultan. He is stubborn, and opinionated but he acts according to his principles and beliefs. This is especially apparent in his not obeying the rules for books and forbidden material. Sultan acts as a bookseller under three repressive regimes and does not follow the rules of any of them. Sultan feels he has an obligation to try to preserve Afghan culture and history. As a result of this he stocks the kinds of books and material that he wants and feels is appropriate, not what the ruling regime feels is appropriate. This leads to the confiscation and burning of his books and prison terms several times under the different regimes. Sultan serves his time and then goes right back to doing what got him arrested. In his desire to preserve Afghan culture and art, he has thousands of books hidden in attics around Kabul. He also has some stored in an apartment in Pakistan from which his first wife Sharifa operates a part of his book business during the war.

Sultan's principles also apply to the way he treated his family. He is opinionated and authoritative and tolerates no dissension or disobedience. Disagreeing or questioning Sultan is taken as a sign of disrespect and results in being ostracized from the family.

Style

Perspective

The book is written in the third person point of view with the narrator being the author who lived with the Kahn family for a while to gather material for the book and to experience everyday life in Afghanistan. This allows her to learn the trials and tribulations of everyday life and to learn how people cope with it. She writes about each of the family members and what their life is like and what they can and cannot do about it. She writes about several other people she meets.

Seierstad could have written the book from the first person point of view and told of her own experiences, but this would have confined the knowledge of the reader to events that occurred in the presence of the author. The third person point of view allows the author greater latitude to provide background, historical and other information to the reader.

The book is obviously written from the author's perspective, which is one of a Westerner and a female. She is a Norwegian and pays particular attention to the life of women. She is a journalist and well qualified to write a book of this kind. She has reported on events from various war torn areas. In addition, she spends time living with the Kahn family experiencing their everyday life. Sierstad writes a very readable book from a perspective that is agreeable to the reader and appropriate to the book.

Tone

The tone of the book is more or less subjective with the author presenting the lives of various people in Kabul. Sierstad presents the lives of the characters with their likes and dislikes. She captures their angers and fears and, in the case of many of the women like Leila, their despair. Many of them are more or less trapped by life and cannot have the kind of life that they want to. The whole society is bound by traditions and customs, not to mention the role of the repressive regimes. The life of the women is totally dominated by the men. They cannot go out and talk to men or go out alone. They have no say in the choice of a husband since it is the families who decide. They can be killed if they are caught with a man because of the disgrace they bring on their families. The women are basically servants of the men. The author basically gets her points across by the topics she discusses, like the women wearing the burka and the way women are expected to act in various situation.

The tone of the book conveys the author's attitude. Even though she may not specifically state a point, it comes through by how she presents her material. She is a Westerner viewing a non-Western society, and this is conveyed to the reader. The tone of the book makes it realistic to the reader and makes it believable. The author does not force her point of view on the reader.

Structure

The structure of the book is rather simple and works very well for the book. There is a Foreward at the beginning of the book in which the author explains how she came to write the book and how she lived with the Kahn family to obtain the information for the book and to experience the everyday life of a Kabul citizen. She explains how she met Sultan Kahn and how she had spent six weeks with the people of the Northern Alliance. Having shopped in his bookstore, she was interested in his stories and experiences. When she proposed the book and living with his family, he immediately agreed.

The structure of the book is very simple. There are nineteen chapters and an Epilogue. There are no chapter numbers, only chapter titles. Each chapter is devoted to a particular topic or person and each reveals information about the Kahn family and life in Kabul. The Epilogue basically provides follow up information about the various people discussed in the book.

The book is very readable. It is a translation but written in everyday English. There is plenty of dialogue based on discussions with people so the reader is able to know the characters. There are many foreign language words used which are defined for the reader. This makes the book more realistic for the reader. There are no pictures in the book or maps. The book is easy reading for the reader and well worth the time spent reading it.



Quotes

"Lucky the armed half-wits did not look behind the shelves, Sultan thought on his way to detention. The most prohibited books he had stashed away ingeniously. He brought them out only if someone asked specially for them and if he thought he could trust the person who asked," (Books, pg. 10).

"In Afghanistan a woman's longing for love is taboo. It is forbidden by the tribes' notion of honor and by the mullahs. Young people have no right to meet, to love, or to choose. Love has little to do with romance; on the contrary, love can be interpreted as committing a serious crime, punishable by death," (Song, pg. 37).

"He ponders the difference between the two wives. When he is with Sharifa, she looks after everything, remembers appointments, organizes, arranges. Sharifa puts Sultan first, his needs and wants. Sonya does what she is told but never takes the initiative," (Trip, pg. 66).

"Then civil war broke out, the school was closed, and Shakila fled to Pakistan. After four years the Taliban arrived and although the rockets stopped and peace returned to Kabul, her old school never reopened. Girls' schools stayed closed, and like all women in Kabul, Shakila lost the chance overnight of finding another job," (Sad, pg. 73).

"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," (Billowing, pg. 85).

"For many of the guests this is the first wedding they have celebrated since the Taliban left Kabul, in other words, the first wedding with music and dancing. The Taliban deprived people of half the joy of wedding feasts when they took the music away," (Wedding, pg. 103).

"When his father died Sultan took over the throne. His word is law. Anyone who does not obey him will be punished. Not only does he lord it over the household, but he also tries to rule over the siblings who have moved away," (Matriarch, pg. 114).

"...The new year that starts today, the year 1381, is the year of renewal. That is the year in which it will be safe and secure to live in Afghanistan. We will safeguard peace and develop out society. Today we accept help from the whole world; one day, one day, we will be a country that helps the world,' he cries and the multitude shouts for joy," (Ali, pg. 149).

"Anything to get out of Sultan's household, where no one appreciates her. Sultan complains that her cooking is not according to his likes, that she eats too much, and that she does not obey Sonya in everything. Mansur is always on her back, pecking at her," (Dust, pg. 178).



"The Taliban may have disappeared but they are still present in Leila's head, and in Bibi Gul's and Sharifa's and in Sonya's. The women in Mikrorayon are glad the Taliban era is over, they can play music, they can dance, paint their toenails—as long as no one sees them and they can hide under the safe burka," (Attempt, pgs. 183-184).

"But he is a father who trusts no one but his own sons to run the shops, a father who did not bother to register his sons when the schools in Kabul opened again after the New Year's celebrations at the spring equinox. Aimal begged and pleaded but Sultan insisted: 'You are going to be a businessman. The best place to learn that is in the shop,'" (Room, pg. 210).

"We have nothing to eat; we're starving, look at the children. But we'll pay you back for the postcards," (Carpenter, pg. 231).

"People like him are responsible for the fact that there is never peace in Afghanistan. To him power is more important than peace. He's made enough to jeopardize the lives of thousands just so he can be in charge. I can't imagine why the Americans want to cooperate with a man like that,' he says," (Osama, pg. 255).

"The letters cause her to dream. About another life. The scribbles give her thoughts a lift and her life some quivering excitement. Both are new to Leila. Suddenly there is a world inside her head she never knew existed," (Heart, pg. 267).

"An argument resulted in a fight and the words between Sultan and the two wives on one side and Leila and Bibi Gul on the other were so irreconcilable that it would have been difficult to continue living together," (Epilogue, pg. 285).

Topics for Discussion

Who were the Taliban? What kind of rule did they impose on Afghanistan?

What kind of life do women have in Afghanistan, especially under the rule of the Taliban?

How are marriages arranged in Afghanistan? Why do the women submit?

What is Mansur's opinion of his father? Why? What does Mansur want?

Discuss the kind of life the women in Sultan's family lead? Are any of them really happy?

What kind of conflict is there in Sultan between the modern and the traditional? How does it manifest itself?

None of the people in Sultan's house are happy. Why? Why don't any of them express their opinions?