

## Interpellation of Subalternity and Duality in Behavior: How Subalterns Resist Oppression While Simultaneously Perpetuating It

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**Abstract:** *The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) is one of the best predictors of behavioral intention and the ultimate behavior of individuals. Its three constructs—'Attitude,' or the belief of a person towards a behavior; 'Subjective Norms,' or the perceived social pressure to perform or not perform the behavior; and 'Perceived Behavioral Control,' or the individual's perception of how likely they are to pull off that behavior—predict a person's behavior towards a phenomenon (Ajzen). Any unfavorable construct decreases the likelihood of engaging in that particular behavior. This research paper applies TPB to Sultan in Asne Seierstad's *The Bookseller of Kabul* (2002) to understand his contradictory attitude towards the follies he seems to challenge and perpetuate. Sultan is an outwardly free-minded bookseller, but at home, he perpetuates orthodoxy. The study examines how gender conditioning and hegemonic masculinity shape his subjective norms and perceived behavioral control, leading to contradictions in his attitude, intention, and behavior. The research follows an interpretivist philosophy, using an inductive approach with close reading and textual analysis as qualitative methods. The paper demonstrates how, despite progressive ideas, individuals in patriarchal societies show resistance to change in the duality of their attitude due to external factors at play.*

**Keywords:** Cultural Subaltern, Gender Conditioning, Hegemonic Masculinity, Orthodoxy, Patriarchy

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### 1. Introduction

*The Bookseller of Kabul* is a documentation by Norwegian journalist Asne Seierstad, telling the story of a bookseller Sultan Khan in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Through her close observation of Sultan and his family, Seierstad unveils the contradictions in his behavior towards orthodoxy in his public and private life. Sultan is an open-minded intellectual in public space. He supports secular education and resists Taliban-imposed censorship; yet, within the four walls of his typical Afghani household, Sultan is all in for rigid patriarchal norms. This paradox of resistance and complicity reflects the broader social dynamics where subalterns navigate between contradictory forces in oppressive structures.

An extensive study supports the concepts of Subalternity, a term rooted in postcolonial studies and discussed by scholars such as Antonio Gramsci and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. She makes a comment on the idea of subaltern resistance, framing the identity of Subalterns as lacking agency and representation within dominant discourses. There is further argumentation on the mediation of subaltern voices through structures of power, pointing to the complication of their ability to achieve true agency (Spivak 1988). While Sultan does not fit the traditional economic or political definition of a subaltern, he can be classified as a cultural subaltern—one who, despite his social and economic power, remains bound by the ideological and gendered constraints of his society.

R.W. Connell comes out to explain the theory of Hegemonic masculinity as that which plays a crucial role in understanding the shaping of Sultan's contradictory behavior. Connell argues that masculinity is a social construct that is continually redefined by cultural and historical contexts (Connell 2005). Sultan embodies this notion as he simultaneously resists and reinforces patriarchal norms. His actions raise critical questions about the extent to which subalterns can resist oppression when they are conditioned to uphold the very structures they seek to challenge.

This study employs the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to further analyze Sultan's internal conflicts. A theory proposed by Icek Ajzen, TPB explains the role of three key factors impacting individual behavior. These three key factors of attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control determine an individual's ultimate behavior towards a phenomenon (Ajzen 1991). There presents evidence of a tug-and-war between Sultan's progressive attitudes toward education and freedom and internalized beliefs about gender roles. Societal expectations and cultural conditioning come out as key players, conducive to this conflict and a complex interplay of resistance and complicity.

There is existing literature on subalternity and gender dynamics that explore the navigation of power structures by marginalized individuals. There is emphasis on the contradictory nature of subaltern identity, where individuals may simultaneously resist and perpetuate oppression (Mohanty 2003). There is further discussion by writers such as Judith Butler and Bell Hooks on how gender norms shape subaltern experiences; their studies underscore the need to examine gender alongside class and race. However, there remains a gap in applying psychological frameworks such as TPB to subaltern studies, particularly in cultural contexts like Afghanistan.

The objective of this research is to illustrate the complexity of subaltern identity by analyzing Sultan Khan's behavior through the lenses of cultural subalternity, hegemonic masculinity, and the Theory of Planned Behavior. The research participates in the contribution of an advanced understanding of subaltern individuals, which will entail studying the factors of internalized ideologies and external pressures being conducive to the shaping of their agency. In doing so, the research is another step to highlight the intricate ways in which subalterns negotiate their roles within oppressive systems, often reinforcing the very structures they resist.

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## 2. Materials and Methods

A qualitative research methodology will be put to use to study the character of Sultan Khan. Drawing from textual analysis and theoretical frameworks, the use of postcolonial theories of subalternity, gender studies, and behavioral psychology will work to explore the interplay between hegemonic masculinity and gender conditioning. There is use of the approach of close reading to analyze the character of Sultan Khan, which has its focus the contradictions between his public and private personas. The study employs critical discourse analysis to examine Sultan's behavioral pattern with an emphasis on the intersection of resistance and complicity in patriarchal structure, while the concepts of subalternity, hegemonic masculinity, and TPB together come to uncover deeper meanings in relevant passages from the text.

The research is structured around three primary theoretical frameworks of Subalternity, hegemonic masculinity, and TPB. Scholars like Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak has done a thorough study on the concept of subalternity and pointed the importance of lending ears to the real voice of subalterns. In her words, "Subalterns cannot speak," she points that because their (subalterns) stories are always voiced through those in power, the process of resistance becomes highly complicated. Subalterns fight against the oppressive structures, but often their actions tend to make stronger the system against which they show resistance; Sultan's character is a perfect example of this phenomenon. Sultan deals with the social and political challenges of his time but simultaneously promotes patriarchal structures through his actions, the behavior that adds to the pervasion of gender oppression in his community. R.W. Connell explained the idea of hegemonic masculinity, which suggests the strong effect that gender norms have on thoughts and behavior of people. Connell is of the view that masculinity is not a fixed construct that upon its creation stays the same ever after. But according to him, it's such a role that keeps changing according to the rules and situations of society. In simple terms, masculinity is a part of society-made rules, which are being defined and negotiated all the time; in *The Bookseller of Kabul*, one can view Sultan's actions through this lens. He resists orthodox constraints in public but simultaneously embodies engrained patriarchal values that reinforce the subjugation of women in his family and society. The duality raises questions as to what degree subalterns can resist oppression in the case when they are conditioned by an internalized force to uphold oppressive norms.

The theory of planned behavior introduces three factors attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control that influence individual behavior (Ajzen). The theory is a valuable tool to analyze the gap between the thoughts and actions of the Sultan whose internalized beliefs around societal expectations and masculinity often don't align with his desire for change; Sultan recognizes injustice against women, but his adherence to traditional gender roles limits his capacity for transformative action. This gap between what people think (ideas) and what they do (actions) ideas lead to subalterns being stuck in the cycle of resistance and complicity due to their internal beliefs and external pressures. Primary data for this research is derived from *The Bookseller of Kabul*. Secondary sources include academic journal articles, books, and critical essays discussing subaltern studies, gender studies, and behavioral psychology. Scholarly works by Judith Butler, Bell Hooks, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Edward Said, and Homi K. Bhabha supplement the analysis.

Limitations of the study might appear the non-inclusion of ethnographic data or firsthand interviews. Additionally, the interpretation of Sultan's character relies on the author's perspective, which may be

influenced by external biases. While the Theory of Planned Behavior provides a structured framework, its application to literary studies is relatively unexplored. As this research is based on textual analysis and secondary data, no human or animal subjects were involved. Consequently, no ethical approval was required. However, due diligence has been exercised to ensure that all sources are properly cited and that the interpretations remain faithful to the original text.

### 3. Results and Discussion

Looking at Sultan Khan through the perspective of subalternity, hegemonic masculinity, and theory of planned behavior explains the phenomenon of a conflict between resistance and complicity. When subalterns face oppressive structures, their behavior often is a struggle; on one hand, they resist oppression, on the other their actions perpetuate the very same system. Three key themes from the analysis reflecting Sultan's resistance, complicity, and internalized societal expectations structure the results sections.

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#### Sultan's Duality: Public Progressiveness and Private Orthodoxy

*Sultan's Liberal Views in Public Sphere:* Sultan's character reflects a highly progressive and open-minded attitude, especially in his public life. Coming from a poor background and living in a society that presses rules to restrict many people, especially women, Sultan challenges the system through his subtle resistance. He values independence over tradition, giving more importance to his work than society's expectations. In the Chapter "Burning Books," for example, Sultan worries that his mother is forcing him to marry when he wants to focus on his work and stick to the decision of Independence.

Another example that shows sultan's liberal side is when he consents Asne Seierstad, a female journalist, to enter his home, live and interact with his family members, and document their lives. Being a habitant of a society notorious for restricting women, Sultans' initiative to let a woman, let alone a journalist, enter his private life reflects his progressive mindset.

*Traditional Views in Private Sphere:* Despite keeping a liberal outlook in some areas of his life, Sultan keeps highly traditional views around gender rules and family dynamics. His actions show defiance against orthodoxy, which contradicts his actions that conform to them in private life. In Chapter "An Attempt," Sultan states: "I must prepare her for the wedding night. She is very young, and I am experienced." (Seierstad 135). This statement reflects his belief in a patriarchal system where there is control of men and women bow down to the desires of their husbands.

Sultan's views and attitude towards women becomes clearer through his second wife. Sonia, frets over the issue that her husband will bring a third wife home if she births a girl. This attitude shows the preference of men over women in the society that Sultan is a part of. Similarly, in chapter "The Carpenter", Sultan's authoritarian nature comes in view when he shouts at his son, "You are to obey me in everything! Everything. What is wrong with you? Why are you so rude to your father?" (Seierstad 168). This behavior presents as Sultan mirroring the controlling nature of his elders, possible his own father, as Seierstad herself points out in the book. This oppressive tendency of Sultan towards his son and wives shows his carrying forward the patriarchal and authoritarian family structures with the same oppressive methods that his male ancestors used.

#### Influence of Hegemonic Masculinity on Sultan's Actions

Aligning with the findings of R.W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, the study shows Sultan's actions as moulded by societal expectations of the male participants of his society. Despite recognizing the injustices faced by women, Sultan upholds patriarchal norms due to deeply ingrained beliefs and external pressures. This tension highlights the difficulty subaltern figures face when resisting systemic structures they themselves are conditioned to enforce.

#### Theory of Planned Behavior: Predicting Sultan's Actions

Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) helps reveal in Sultan a cognitive dissonance between the three components of TPB, namely Sultan's attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. The study finds that while Sultan harbors progressive thoughts, his behavior is dictated by perceived societal expectations and cultural obligations.

TPB Component	Sultan's Response	Result
Attitude	Supports women's education in principle	Conflicted by his internalized beliefs
Subjective Norms	Feels pressure to conform to patriarchal expectations	Enforces gendered roles at home
Perceived Behavioral Control	Believes societal structures limit his ability to reform	Maintains status quo in his personal life

### Implications for Subaltern Studies

The struggle that Sultan faces suggests that his story isn't just limited to personal struggle. His contradictions also reflect a broader pattern that is visible in subaltern studies and highlight that being a subaltern isn't about just facing oppression. But subaltern identity is such a dynamic mix where resistance and complicity survive together. Sultan's struggle showcases his efforts to fight against oppressive systems that fail when he unknowingly continues the same systems in his personal space.

Through Sultan, we see that the association of a subaltern individual isn't limited to his identity as an oppressed, or a rebel against oppression. On one hand, Sultan promotes intellectual freedom and education against the authoritative regime of Taliban, on the other reinforces patriarchal norms at home. This struggle showcases that the analysis of subaltern identity cannot be done through a linear framework. Sultan's example highlights the complexity that subalterns can be an oppressed and an oppressor simultaneously, which calls for the need for a nuanced approach for subaltern studies.

### Suggestions for Further Research

Applying the theory of intersectionality can make one understand how the elements of gender, culture, religion and social class altogether effect Sultan's thoughts and actions. This framework underlines that one's identity isn't a result of just one element but an intersection of several social categories. This framework has the potential to help explore complex layers of Sultan's character since it explains how the subset of different elements of his identity influences his thinking and shapes behavior.

### 4. Conclusion

The reason behind Sultan's contradictory behavior comes out in a complex interplay between several factors that overlap and create a duality in him that reflects on different aspects of his life. Gender conditioning is the foundation that influences Sultan's thoughts and values from a very young age. His behavior is also a result of the pressure of hegemonic masculinity that dictates to him that to count as a respected and successful man, he must exercise his authority at home. Sultan's character represents the difficult battles faced by marginalized individuals fighting against oppression. Sultan raises his voice against the stagnating authority of the Taliban in Afghanistan, which reflects his progressive beliefs. However, his support of patriarchal and authoritarian practices within four walls highlights the strong influence of deeply rooted cultural norms and societal expectations in shaping behavior. Sultan's contradictions aptly make clear the conflict that subalterns may face in their community and immediate environment. The dynamic shows how oppression is often challenged and maintained simultaneously in real life experiences of a subaltern due to exposition to their environment.

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