

# **Ali & Nino Study Guide**

**Ali & Nino by Lev Nussimbaum**

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# Plot Summary

Ali and Nino by Kurban Said is a tragic love story set in Russian-ruled Caucasia and Persia at the time of World War I. The young protagonists reflect the tensions of East and West in times of joy and despair, showing that love can rise above ideology and centuries-old hatred.

Ali and Nino opens in Baku, a town transformed by the discovery of oil. The Tartars like Ali Khan Shirvanshir resent the governing Russians and the influx of Western culture and mores. Ali as a schoolboy falls in love with beautiful Nino Kipiani, a royal Georgian Christian. Before they can marry, however, World War I erupts. Ali's friends enlist in the Russian army, but Ali bides his time until his homeland is actually threatened. Ali's freedom is removed when Nino is kidnapped by erstwhile friend Malik Nachararyan. Ali pursues and murders the culprit, opening a blood-feud, which forces Ali to flee to the wilds of Daghestan. There he becomes a prodigal son, wallowing in wine and hashish, which Nino hears about and comes to verify. They make love, get married, and live happily until word comes that Baku is safe.

That peace, however, is short-lived and after Ali distinguishes himself in warfare, they go into exile in Persia. It is not a shabby exile, for a branch of the Shirvanshirs lives there, close to court. Life in Teheran is familiar and pleasant for Ali, but a horrible never-ending trial for Nino, who is kept house-bound in the one-woman harem, and badgered about her behavior. Egged on to find meaning in life by participating in the bloody Shiite rites of Tenth of Moharram, Ali faces a wife who hates him and insists on leaving.

The times allow the Shirvanshirs to return to Baku and to take part in leadership of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Entertaining dignitaries in their Western-style home, breaking taboos and making even Nino uncomfortable becomes a daily duty. Ali turns down a transfer to the Consulate in Paris, which Nino had coveted. He cannot bear to leave his homeland. Parenthood creates additional stresses, and the family takes a vacation. During it, they learn of a massive new Russian invasion, intent on controlling the oil reserves. Ali remains to defend his homeland, promising to join Nino and the baby in Tiflis. Ali is killed manning his machine gun, however, and old friend Iljas Beg jots on the last page of the journal that Ali has been keeping—the present book—that he hopes to get the story to Nino some day.



# Chapters 1-3

## Chapters 1-3 Summary

At the Russian boys' school in Baku, a professor challenges students to choose between "progressive Europe" and "reactionary Asia." Ali Khan Shirvanshir, who lives in an opulent Asian-style house, prefers Asia but is glad that beautiful Nino Kipiani, a Georgian Christian attending the lyceum, is not forced to wear the veil. Ali's uncle visits from Iran, seeking medical help for a favorite wife. Ali shows proper Eastern decorum. He plans to marry Nino and study in Moscow—or kidnap her to Teheran.

Ali joins his father and uncle on the flat roof to enjoy Asian delicacies. Ali envies his uncle's elegance and disdains the European knife and fork. The uncle talks of 30 years traveling with the King of Kings and seeing how uncultured unbelievers are, but still prosper against Islam. When the elders go to bed, Ali looks at his town, which is like a kernel in a nut: Westernized Outer Town and traditional Old Town, separated by a wall. Much blood has flowed in Baku over time, as Persians and Russian fight to control it. Because Russian justice is too mild, blood-feuds and Sharia are common.

The students endure Russian Orthodox prayers before facing a row of solemn examiners. Ali passes math, physics, Russian, and religion, but has trouble with history because an ancestor is treacherously killed at Gandsha. By not parroting the teachers, Ali forfeits honors, but his proud father grants him three wishes. Ali and Nino arrange to meet in the Governor's Garden after he endures a paternal lecture on the clean Muslim life and avoiding politics. They debate the harem and veils, kiss "improperly," and decide Ali should join the Kipianis in Shusha for the summer. His father allows this wish.

## Chapters 1-3 Analysis

The first three chapters establish the primary theme of the novel: the cultural conflict between East and West, which is particularly evident in Baku, a town on the western coast of the Caspian Sea. Personified in two adolescent lovers, Ali Khan Shirvanshir, a wealthy Shiite Muslim, and Princess Nino Kipiani, a beautiful Georgian Christian, the conflict is illustrated in many ways. A Russian teacher tells his mixed class of Muslims, Armenians, Poles, and Russians ("sectarians" mean non-Orthodox Christians, most often Anabaptists) that they must decide whether to embrace "progressive Europe" or "reactionary Asia."

Ali considers the difference between eating elegantly with two fingers and thumb like his uncle and prosaically with knife and fork like Nino's family, meditates on the differences between Russian law and the Sharia, approving of the drowning of a wife caught in adultery and commiserating with her avenging husband's loneliness. He pictures Baku as "a kernel in a nut," and his mental meandering through Old and Outer cities helps the



reader see the cultural differences. Petroleum's riches have brought the two worlds together in Baku.

During final exams, Ali draws a question about the Battle of Gandsha and his summary provides background on a region that has passed back and forth between Asiatic masters before becoming part of the Russian Empire when General Madatov defeats Persia. Ali's ancestor, Ibrahim Khan Shirvanshir, who earlier helps Hassan Kuli Khan decapitate Prince Zizianshvili, is captured and shot. Had Ali said that the Treaty of Turkmentschai is a blessing to Persia by opening it to Western culture and markets, he would have gained honors; instead, he declares that it devastates the five provinces of Azerbaijan and Georgia that are annexed and merely graduates.

After graduation, Ali is welcomed to manhood by his father and uncle, being lectured on being a good Muslim in the tradition of Imam Dshafar. Ali repeatedly in the novel declares this allegiance. It refers to Ja'far al-Sadiq, the Sixth Imam for both Twelver and Ismaili Shiites. After Ja'far new schisms develop, so Ali is declaring he is above modern squabbles. During the Religion portion of his exams, Ali distinguishes right-believing Shiites from corrupt Sunni Muslims by confessing his namesake is God's viceroy. The Sunni-Shiite rift will be discussed often in the novel.

Finally, meeting in the park after graduation, Ali and Nino debate the institution of the harem and value of the veil. Nino opposes both vehemently. Earlier in this section, Ali's uncle has been seen traveling with four contentious wives and a lizard-faced eunuch needed to control the household. It is noted that the Koran allows up to four wives at one time but demands that they be treated equally. Ali is happy that beautiful Nino does not wear a veil but valiantly defends the Muslim ethos that demands it. Late in the novel, Nino will feel degraded by the Western habits of looking and touching women. In between, she will experience a toned-down version of the harem, which will become the crux of the culture conflict. At ages 17 and 19, however, Nino and Ali are happy together and need nothing more.



# Chapters 4-6

## Chapters 4-6 Summary

Iljas Beg hosts the graduation party in his father's palace. Ali bates the gullible headmaster about the mythical "Leprosarium," used whenever students want to play hooky, and reveals that Mehmed Haidar, the school's bane, is married and his son is also enrolled. The Russians call Persian singers "donkey howling," and the Christian girls avoid the Muslim boys. Nino arrives, late, looking the part of a Georgian princess with the face of a "Byzantine Madonna." She joins Iljas Beg in dancing the wild "Shamil's Prayer." Ali has taken the precaution of switching daggers with Iljas so when it nails Nino's handkerchief to the floor, his rights are protected.

Waiting five days in Shusha for Nino, Ali hears nostalgic and exaggerated tales about Karabagh's surpassing excellence. Shusha stands high in the wooded mountains, where its Armenian and Muslim populations live in peace. It boasts many churches, mosques, and holy places, preeminently the miraculous Holy Grove of St. Sary Beg. Central to the myth is the red-gold "Horse of Karabagh," who has only 12 living descendants. The "Ashouks" are native poets appointed by the Prophet Elias during the Hour of Sleep on the Night Kadir during Ramadan. None are left, but craftsmen muddle on, insulting one another in competitive recitals.

Ali joins in the Georgian feast at the Well of Pechapür. Prince Dadiani invites Nino and him to his castle to see the typical forest of Mingrelia. Nino claims that Ali is afraid of trees, but he merely prefers desert sands. Woods are oppressive and complicated. Dadiani agrees: the one true division among humans is their preference for deserts and woods, fanaticism vs. creativity. As Malik Nachararyan, a philosophizing Armenian, enters the discussion, Nino and Ali slip away to kiss and talk. Nino lets Ali fondle her breasts and declares her love for him, but when he proposes marriage, she points out the religious obstacles and tells him she wants to finish school. She warns against kidnapping her in the Asian manner, which would start a blood-feud. Walking back, they find no one has missed them, but Nachararyan looks patronizing.

## Chapters 4-6 Analysis

Chapter 4 concludes Ali's school day, showing him enjoying his new status as a free person, antagonizing the hapless old headmaster. Fellow graduate Iljas Beg hosts the graduation party. His elderly father, Seinal Aga, born a peasant and still barely literate, has grown fabulously wealthy on oil. He fears his riches will be his ruin, despite his many charities, and has lost his family except Iljas after killing an unfaithful young wife. This execution under Sharia law reinforces the earlier discussion. The party shows how the younger generation dividing along religious lines for male/female contacts. Russian, Georgian, and Armenian girls stick together and avoid Muslim boys. The three Christian groups are in varying degrees incompatible. Note that the Russian teachers find Asian



music offensive; comparative aesthetics and taste continues to play a major role in the novel.

Arriving in Shusha for the summer with the Kipianis, Ali is fed a steady diet of local fables emphasizing how Karabagh surpasses the world in artistic accomplishments and military prowess. Tongue-in-cheek, Ali wonders how a local church can be 3,000 years older than Christianity, but the locals have an answer for everything. Legends of a local saint are subject to rational criticism, but believers harbor no doubts. A Shah is said to have offered his entire harem for the red-gold "Horse of Karabagh"; Ali does not bother to point out that that Shah is a eunuch, having little need for a harem. One of a dozen descendants of that great beast is soon to play an important role in the novel. The story of the Ashouks, linked to inspiration of the Prophet Elias, ends with the victor in the competition lamenting he cannot behead his opponent as in the good old days.

The Georgians are next shown partying, immersed in their own legends. Woods and desert become another metaphor for the West/East dichotomy, with the desert being equated with fanaticism and the woods with creativity. Ali offers no objection. This analogy is repeated later in the novel. The noble Armenian who enters the conversation, allowing Ali and Nino to slip away unnoticed, is destined to play a critical role in the chapters. When Ali proposes marriage cleverly by suggesting that the newly-created Georgian princess will not her rank for long, Nino remarks that Khan is no middling title but doubts "Khanness" means much. She worries about having to convert to Islam, for it is illegal in the Russian Empire and will lead to their exile to Siberia. Ali assures her this is not necessary, but relatives and friends opinions are sure to weigh in on that, and Nino has already said he is an Asiatic who will not change. Nino worries about their children's religion and about finishing school and warns Ali against doing things the Eastern way and throwing her across a saddle and galloping to Persia (which he has already considered). This fear, the prospect of blood-feud, and the "Horse of Karabagh" soon come together, linked with the Nachararyan.



# Chapters 7-9

## Chapters 7-9 Summary

Lying on a divan, Ali considers how his love for Nino differs from the Asian norm, where boys congregate to watch girls fetch water and, when lovestruck, let relatives close the deal. Without the veil, one sees much of a woman—but not what hides within. Ali is disgusted that Nino enjoys being looked at in public and caressed in private. She has been to Russia too often, but may still be a good wife. He falls asleep, imagining the wedding and the pranks of the bridal chamber, and awakens to hear that the Czar has declared war on several European monarchs. Persia and Turkey are staying out of the unbelievers' war. Bells ring and crowds form, asking Ali as he gallops to Nino's house if he is off to war. The Kipianis have returned to Baku. Angry at himself for not thinking of duty first, Ali calms down only to confront Count Nelikov, thirsty for blood and riding his red-gold horse, which he saddles only for war. A telegram from his father summons Ali home.

Kotshi, Ali's bodyguard, pictures the thin Russian Czar fighting hefty Kaiser Giljom (Wilhelm) and ancient Franz Josef lifting a sword, believing that blood-feuds cannot be relegated to others. Kotshi is anxious to fight and Ali envies him his simple faith. Russian education has made Ali introspective. At the station, men are storming trains, regardless of where they are going, sure that relatives back home are suffering. Ali obtains seats by tipping the conductor and the set off westbound to war. Seeing an eastbound caravan, however, Ali regrets his impulsiveness. With the Asiatic blood lust, Kotshi does not care whom he fights. Ali can enter the manly war only when his homeland is threatened. He must be available then. He knows that people will blame Nino's eyes for leading him astray, but he will defend them too.

Most Russians have left Baku to defend the Homeland. Oil prices are up and people are prospering. Ali recites for his father the family's heroic military history serving Persia and Russia, denies he is being dishonorable, and uses his second wish to join the fight later, when the country needs him. The local Mullah agrees and convinces Ali's father. On the streets, however, war fever inflames youth. Studying to become officers, Iljas Beg and Mehmed Haidar are spiteful. Ali hopes that despite their dilettantish training they will be brave if boorish leaders at the front. Looking to sea and longing for the culture and dreaming of Persia, Ali instead visits the Kipianis, to ask if Nino can accompany him to the opera. They are gracious about Ali's not going immediately to war. Nino is relieved but surprised.

## Chapters 7-9 Analysis

Chapter 7 opens with Ali resting on a divan, imagining his wedding. He considers how his courtship of Nino diverges from the cultural norm of the East. Ali paints a wonderful word picture of young men sitting around the village well, pretending not to look at the





girls fetching water while coyly checking out the boys. Once a boy gets lovestruck, relatives take over, determining the bride-price from the anticipated number of children and other economic factors. Ali anticipates a traditional Muslim wedding, with his friends warding off evil omens. The wedding party is segregated by sex: bride and groom entertain their own friends. When they come together, they anticipate pranks and Ali must single-handedly untie the intricate knots on Nino's leather corset. He must show sufficient patience not to cut her loose and he must do it quickly enough not to annoy the guests waiting for a gunshot to signal consummation. A reader would lack such a full description of this major social event without Ali's dream, for as will be seen, the actual marriage is quick and informal.

Chapters 8 and 9 move to examination of the blood-lust brought on by war. Ali awakens to hear that Russia is at war with Germany and Austro-Hungary, with England, France, and Japan also siding with Serbia. Ali has been traveling with a Kotshi, a dependable professional armed servant hired by his father. Kotshi's, Ali remarks are "brigands by inclination," and this one sees World War I as an example of the blood-feud. Someone has killed Franz-Josef's son, so Franz-Josef must fight, even though he is said to be 100 years old. The diminutive Czar Nicholas II is related by blood to the Serbian Kralj (King), so he must come to his aid. Neither can stand a chance in single-handed warfare with beefy Kaiser Giljom (Wilhelm), and if the monarchs are killed, the Russian's sole heir is sickly while the German has many big sons. Ali plays along, defending blood-feud as a God-given principle that can be awkward but is necessary and just. His explanation that the other monarchs, being related by blood or faith, join in is less appealing, particularly with the Japanese who have a god of their own and France, which, as a Republic, must be godless. Kotshi is lusting for battle, to return a rich hero or die a true man. He does not care for whom and against whom he fights. Ali quickly regrets jumping on a westbound train and talks himself into returning to Baku and to pick his time for entering the war.

At home, his father believes him a coward, which allows Ali to recite the family's long and illustrious military history, part of which has already been told during his final exam in history. The Shirvanshir family has been split in service to Persia and Russia, and has fought as late as the Russo-Japanese War of 1905. It takes the Mullah, a trained scholar citing the Koran and traditions of the Prophet hours to convince Ali's father that he is not obligated to join in the Christian war, but only Ali's father is convinced. His friends shun him, or are at least so caught up in war fever that they have no time for him. He visits two as they prepare to become officers and is not impressed by the odds of Moscow not being invaded with men of this caliber and training defending it. Ali is holding himself as a kind of elite reserve on which the country can draw when it truly faces danger. He will make good on his promise twice during the novel.



# Chapters 10-12

## Chapters 10-12 Summary

Ali recalls a mournful but spiritual performance of the Passion Play of Holy Hussein in Teheran and contrasts it with Eugene Onegin as the opera is about to begin in the dazzling Baku Opera House. During intermission, he and Nino chat with Nachararyan, who claims an incurable kidney disease precludes army service. Later, he drives them to the City Club, where he talks about the three great Caucasian people as a trinity, a meeting of East and West. Russia is their cultural enemy. Nino objects, as taught in school: Persians and Turks have torn Transcaucasia apart, but the Russians have been invited in. Ali stays silent. Nachararyan concedes the point but insists the Russians are no longer needed to keep peace and Persia is no longer an enemy. He also admits that he is a hedonist. After dropping off Nino, Nachararyan asks Ali if they will marry and offers help overcome difficulties, for he believes in intermarriage. Ali is disturbed to think that he has found a decent Armenian. Entering his house, Ali glances at the Koran, open to a strict warning against Satan's snares—and contrasts it the night's enjoyments. Old Hashim the Lovelorn ("Madjnun") lulls Ali to sleep, thinking life is still wonderful.

A month into the war, everyone admits that Ali has been wise not to enlist. The Ottoman Empire declares Holy War to free Muslims from Russian and England control. No Muslim can fight the Sultan, whose troops will unite all believers. As his friends study maps, Ali declares that the Turks will enter Baku through the Armenian Quarter. Ali does not feel sorry for his friends who have taken their officer's oath and cannot back out. Unable to think clearly, Ali visits his old classmate, Seyd Mustafa, whose clarity of vision he admires. Instead, he finds Seyd ranting about Shiites fighting for the renegade Sunnite Caliph, Iran being cut in half, and the True Faith destroyed. When Ali appeals to the myth of Turanian blood uniting the Turkic peoples, Seyd rants about most of them being pagans. Faith in Muhammad's revelations alone has merit. Calming, himself, Seyd says that he knows Ali wants to marry Nino and has no objections. Women have no soul, so faith does not matter. They need only be chaste and bear many children, who must be Shiites. Georgians are part of the "loot" promised by Muhammad to his followers. Ali goes home, happy that the Holy Book is on his side.

Ali rides beside his father to the Gate of the Gray Wolf, a pair of weathered rocks in the desert through which legend says the Osmons enter Anatolia. An Osman, Enver Bey, is leading liberators back to Caucasia. When Ali declares he wants to marry, Safar Khan offers to build a villa and use of the summer house at Mardakjany, and insists they name their first son Ibrahim in honor of their ancestor. When Ali announces he will marry Nino, Safar remarks that her hips are too narrow but Georgians are good child bearers. He hopes for a grandson by May. He warns against Christian influences in the home and taking other wives unless Nino is barren. He must not commit adultery. He must not beat her while she is pregnant or ever take her advice. One should love one's country, war, and beautiful items but not women. God requires only that a woman love her husband. Ali considers this wisdom, but heads off his father's offer to negotiate with



Kipianis. They ride on, past the derricks at Bibi-Eibat and stop at the Bailov Garrison to visit Iljas Beg and Mehmed Haidar and announce the news. Resting in his cool Eastern-style room, Ali is interrupted when Nino phones to say she is dying of heat and needs help with mathematics. Ali rushes to her.

## Chapters 10-12 Analysis

The contrast between Eastern and Western culture is exemplified in two performances: the Passion Play of Holy Hussein in Teheran and the Tchaikovsky opera, Eugene Onegin. Ali is still moved by the Passion Play, which he experiences at some point in Teheran, with the delivery of Hussein's head on a platter to Khalif Jasid (Caliph Yazid). It is starkly set, and all-male; even the roles of Fatima (Muhammad's favorite daughter and Hussein's mother) and Eve (the first-created woman) are played by bearded males. A Mullah collects spectator's pious tears for their magic power. Eugene Onegin, adopted from the Pushkin poem. Ali says that after the "easy, elegant and complete victory" by the selfish main character, it is time for him, Nino, and Nachararyan to celebrate. Ali, who has been seen sipping alcohol in private, refuses to drink champagne in public. Hussein's martyrdom returns later in the novel in the bloody rites performed by Shiite Muslims on the tenth day of Muharram. Ali's getting swept up in the fervor makes Nino hate him. This historical event marks the division of Muslims into Sunni and Shiite and the novel contains innumerable allusions to it, often quite subtle.

At the club, the conversation turns to the war. Nino remarks, tongue in cheek, that she seems to be sitting between the only two Caucasians—in the sense of natives of the Caucasus Mountains—who do not want to go to war. Armenians and Georgians enjoy a reputation for bloodthirstiness. Nachararyan favors a federation of Caucasians independent of Turkey, Persia, and Russia, and sees the Russians as the most dangerous enemy. Nino rather charmingly parrots the party line drummed into students in Russian schools: the Russians come not to expand their Empire but to enforce peace. More historical tidbits are fed to the reader in an unobtrusive fashion. The evening concludes subtly. Nachararyan offers to help Ali overcome the self-evident roadblocks to an intermarriage that he feels will be good for society at large, and Ali is disturbed to think he has found a decent Armenian. That phrase exemplifies the level of intercommunal prejudice and strife that exists and is soon to be unleashed into violence. Nachararyan will soon prove anything but decent and will lead to abrupt changes in Ali's life.

The Sunni/Shiite rift in Islam is examined when Ali visits his old friend Seyd Mustafa, who rants about the "renegade" Ottoman Sultan, a Sunni Muslim, enlisting Shiites, whose blood his predecessor has shed copiously, Ali appeals to the myth of Turan unifying all the Muslim people of Asia. Seyd Mustafa insists that the Prophet's blood flows in his veins, and that alone matters. Turkic peoples inhabit all of Siberia but are pagans, allowed by God to go astray. Ali sees that Seyd Mustafa is on his way to becoming an sage, uncompromising Imam but still loves him.



Calming himself, Seyd Mustafa announces that he knows the reason for Ali's visit—he wants to marry Nino, and Seyd Mustafa approves. Woman is just an acre in which man plants his seed; she lacks soul and intelligence. Ali had expected to be condemned for wanting to marry a Christian. Seyd Mustafa adds that, lacking a soul, there is no reason for Nino to convert to Islam. Sons must, of course, be Shiites. Seyd Mustafa describes a Seldjuk Emperor marrying a Georgian Christian and making her the Sun rising above the Lion who holds the sword as a symbol of his reign. Georgian women, Seyd Mustafa declares, are part of the "loot" that Muhammad promises his followers.

Ali's ride in the desert with his father to announce his plans to marry introduces more legend/history—the Osmons entering Anatolia (Asiatic Turkey) centuries earlier and now are returning under Enver Bey to liberate Caucasia. The four-times married but currently single father offers practical advice on marriage: not to beat a wife while she is pregnant and to do the opposite of whatever she recommends. It is hard to imagine how Ali has developed his enlightened ideas. When Ali talks of love, Safar Khan reminds him of "Leila and Madjnoun" and Hafis' "Ghasels of Love." The former is a tragic Arabic love story also popular in Persian literature. It has already been mentioned that majnun in Arabic means lovesick. Ghazals are classic love poems, often with mystical themes, and Hafis (Hafez) is a famous Persian poet. He cautions, however, that Hafis is rumored never to have made love to a woman.

Chapter 12 briefly notes that Count Melikov, owner of the red-golden horse, is taking command of the Baku Garrison. This becomes crucial in the chapters ahead. Note that as father and son are driving by the garrison, which is adjacent to the prison, Ali wonders if shooting means an execution. Stopping to see Ali's friends they see that this time that is not the case. The suggestion is that the Russian regime is rigorous. The oil derricks, earlier contrasted with graceful minarets, are now likened to scaffolds of "evil dark wood."



# Chapters 13-15

## Chapters 13-15 Summary

Through a thick fog, Ali hurries, exhausted, through Baku and runs into Nachararyan, who takes him to a coffee house. Ali tells of his visit to the Kipianis, who rejoice in his proposal but want Nino to finish school first. For his sake, they point out differences in religion and upbringing and the terrible war. When it ends and they are older, they can discuss marriage. Ali is furious and insulted—and ready to kidnap Nino to Persia. The Armenian calms him and offers to talk to the Prince. Kidnapping should be a last resort. Ali is happy to have an ally. A friend of Ali's father says it is shameful to embrace an Armenian, but Ali finds such hatred stupid.

For the next few weeks, Ali and Nino's lives revolve around the telephone. She calls every day with news and reports about Nachararyan befriending her father. Her parents warn her about wild Muslims and that the war could last 20 years. Nino loves Ali and does not want to wait—but warns that he dare not kidnap her. Nino calls when her parents give in and her father lectures Ali about marriage meaning mutual trust, respect, and equality. Ali renounces the veil and harem. Nachararyan is waiting in his car, self-satisfied. At home, Ali informs his father that he is engaged and leaves arrangements up to him.

Autumn and winter arrive and caravans bring battle loot and prisoners of war. Trains bring fresh troops from Russia and the wounded from the West. When the Czar fires Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolayevitch as commander of the army, he assumes the governorship of Transcaucasia and invades Turkey. When scorching summer returns, much has happened but nothing has changed in Baku or the world. Friends surround Ali and Nino constantly. Nachararyan talks of future love among the Caucasian people, but Mehmed Haidar says few Armenians will survive. It is rumored that Nachararyan is transferring his money to Sweden. When Nino passes her exams, her father takes her and Ali to Tiflis to introduce him to family.

The dizzying party given by the House of Orbeliani in the Didube Gardens runs all night with songs, dances, and conversations about ancient battles and genealogies. Other relatives grab Ali and Nino before they can sleep in a cycle of hospitality that spans a week. It is so different from the quiet, dignified receptions Ali is used to in Teheran. On the eighth day, male cousins abduct Ali to the a sulfur bath to relax. Amidst the joviality, they hear rumors that the Turks and the Germans are both headed to Tiflis. Georgia is always caught in a "pair of red-hot tongs." The Czar has sent Bagration to his death leading the Erevan Regiment; his son, the true king, is being hidden. The cousins take Ali to his next engagement.

Nino and Ali sit in the Café Mephisto looking at Mount David and its monastery. Nino is named for her great aunt, the widow of a famed Russian writer/diplomat who is buried there after a mob murders him in Teheran. Since one of the instigators is a Shirvanshir,



Ali says that they ought to be blood-enemies, not lovers. They walk through Old Town, Nino venerates her patron saint and asks her forgiveness. Nino shows Ali a Western city without bigoted fools, a city destroyed and overrun countless times in history, but the people remain. Nino wants Ali to love the West, but knows that he clings to the crumbling East and will one day declare that she is "just an acre." Ali talks about loving Nino and about love being the same in Georgia and Iran. Their poetry have the same roots. Nino asks if Ali loves her soul. Annoyed, he claims that he does and asks why she loves him. Nino weeps, swearing never again to hold Ali responsible for Genghis Khan and every Muslim who has ever killed a Georgian. She loves woods and meadows and is afraid of Ali because he loves the wild world of hills and sand.

Nino leads Ali into a bazaar alive with the sounds and smells of 80 nations, then to the mountaintop monastery to "celebrate their reconciliation." Nino tells the story of how a pregnant unwed princess tries to frame the monk, David. Women who cannot conceive come here to bathe in the holy fountain. Nino wants to wait a year for that. Ali suggests that they can live in Tiflis, but Nino thinks it better to stay in Baku, with winter trips to Paris and Berlin. Back in town, they walk holding one another by the guarded gate of the Grand Duke, whom they see walking inside. Only God knows who will conquer Ali and Nino's beloved homeland.

## Chapters 13-15 Analysis

Prince Kipianis is prudent dealing with young Ali's proposal of marriage, wanting his daughter to finish school and considering it wise to wait until after the war. Ali takes it as a family insult and instantaneously revives centuries of Muslim-Georgian conflict. Ali portrays the telephone—a great, hulking instrument—as a baneful lifeline to Nino, as she reports progress in Nachararyan's efforts to convince her father to allow them to marry. Cultural items emerge, including the poetic debt that both Christian peoples owe to the Persian rubaiyat. When Nachararyan succeeds, Ali hugs him in public, and is reprimanded by a friend of his father. While Armenians make up a quarter of Baku's population, it is clear that they are for some reason hated. It is rumored that Nachararyan is sending his fortune abroad. This theme deepens going forward, particularly when the fanatic Mehmed Haidar declares that soon few Armenians will survive, strongly suggesting a pogrom.

Chapter 14 skips ahead several seasons of the year, summarizing the troop movements briskly and noting that the new governor is pushing the campaign against the Turks. Author Kurban Said speaking through Ali wrongly states that Grand Duke Nikolai Romanov is the czar's uncle; they are second cousins. The scene then jumps to Tiflis (Tbilisi) to meet the future in-laws. Tiflis is revealed as a Western city by design but with an Eastern-style bazaar where eighty cultures coexist. Various branches of the ancient Kipianis family take turns wining and dining the couple, exhausting them. Ali contrasts this to the quiet, dignified receptions one finds in Teheran. Exuberant Georgian life, exemplified in folk songs and dances, is described at length.





The legendary founding of Tiflis is told while Ali and some of Nino's male cousins lounge in a steam bath. A king goes hunting with a falcon that pursues a pheasant, and both are found, dead in a scalding hot spring. The king cuts down the forest and builds a city. The Tiflis visit allows much history to come out, as Persians, Byzantines, Arabs, and the Seljuk Turks take turns conquering the city and putting their cultural stamp on it for a while. Nino emphasizes, however, that the Georgians survive it all. She talks with special reverence about Queen Tamar and reign and the poet Shota Rustaveli, whom Nachararyan had cited in his arguments with Nino's father.

In one of the choicest morsels in the novel, Nino is made the great-niece and namesake of the widow of the Russian writer/diplomat, Alexander Griboyedov, who is buried in Tiflis after being brutally murdered by a mob in Teheran. As one of the instigators is a Shirvanshir, Ali remarks that he and Nino should be blood-enemies rather than lovers. She says the sort of tombstone she sets up for Ali will depend on the life he lives. When her attempt to balance a stone on the gravestone fails, Nino worries about the omen so close to their wedding date. While venerating her patron saint, who brings Christianity to Georgia, Nino breaks down and pours out her worries about being the wife of a Muslim. She then regrets having put on Ali responsibility for all who have invaded her country or killed its people. She fears the woods/desert dichotomy. Seeing the palace of the Georgian kings turned into a Russian political prison, notorious for torture and killing, Nino feels her allegiances to Russia shaken. Earlier, in the bath house, Ali has heard about the czar sending the dethroned king to his death at the front and loyalists hiding his son.



# Chapters 16-18

## Chapters 16-18 Summary

The Grand Duke conquers half of Turkey and Persia and he intends to restore the cross to Hagia Sophia. Safar Khan orders Ali to attend a meeting of oil princes, forcing him to ask Nachararyan to chaperon Nino to the opera. The invitees, worth an aggregate \$1 billion rubles, include Seinal Aga, the Assadullah brothers, fearsome Ali and peaceful Mirza; sullen Burjat Sadé, henpecked Jussuf Oghly, and Aga Musa Nagi, a Ba'haist received with honor because of his 200 million rubles. After the required hour of smalltalk, they get down to business: ensuring Baku's future amidst the uncertainties of war. All are happy to wait and watch. When the meeting ends, Ali goes to see Iljas Beg, who talks of the monotony of war and being deployed to the front. Dim Mehmed Haidar cannot shoot at Muslims, even Sunnis, and he cannot defect. He wishes they could burn the derricks and build a beautiful blue mosque instead. Seyd Mustafa rushes in to say that Nachararyan has kidnapped Nino.

Mehmed Haidar runs to saddle horses while Iljas Beg calms Ali and arms him with dagger and gun. Seyd Mustafa had left the Mullah's tent as the sinful theater empties and sees and hears the abduction. Nachararyan claims to love Nino and is determined to save her from a savage Muslim. He plans to stop at Mardakjany en route to marriage in Moscow and settling in Sweden. Nino tries to fight him off. Mehmed has stolen Melikov's red-gold horse and Ali rides in wild fury, even biting the horse's neck. Nachararyan clearly has foreseen a Turkish massacre of Armenians and destruction of Baku. The road is bad for cars, allowing Ali to overtake them. Ali shoots out a tire, throws his gun away, draws his dagger, and expertly disarms Nachararyan of his pistol. Nino sits trembling but expressionless. Ali plunges into the underbrush after Nachararyan and across a melon field. Trained in European boxing, Nachararyan lands the first punch, but Ali fights back like a wolf. Nachararyan slashes Ali with his own knife, but Ali recovers it and, egged on by Mehmed, buries it in his enemy's heart. Back at the road, Seyd Mustafa holds Nino on his saddle and asks which of them should kill her. Moved by her beautiful eyes, Ali orders her delivered home safely.

In an âoul (fortified village) in mountainous Daghestan, accessible only by a twisting path, Ali lies on the roof of a stone hut, smoking hashish. He flees here after a police inspector delivers a warrant for his arrest. Safar Khan lies about his son fleeing to Persia. Iljas Beg and Mehmed Haidar are ordered to the front because of Melikov's horse. Prince Kipiani has begged Safar Khan to let them marry and flee, but with Ali "kanly" (under vendetta) to the Nachararyans and Melikovs, he may not. Iran is closed to him. Safar Khan is satisfied with Ali's performance, but would have preferred that he slay Nino. He sends Ali off until the affair is forgotten, entrusting him to his friend Kasi Mullah on the "bring of the wild abyss." Kasi Mullah tells Ali the tale of Andalal, an outcast prince who becomes the Shah's advisor and leads a raid against his old village; ten years later, homesick, he appears and asks to be judged for his crime. When Ali rejects it as ancient nonsense, Kasi Mulla tells of Imam Shamil's holy war just 50 years





ago. Caught between two precepts of the Koran, Shamil accepts the bloody beating to which his mother is sentenced. Kasi Mulla worries that Ali is so ill, for few survive illness in Daghestan.

## Chapters 16-18 Analysis

Chapter 16 shows a gathering of the "oil princes" of Baku. Such wealth has earlier been hinted at, but now is revealed to amount to an astounding \$1 billion rubles. They assume that wealth exempts them from the fate of Baku, whatever it may be, but debate it nonetheless. One declares that a Turkish victory is the lesser of two evils, for a Russian one will vindictively wipe away all trace of the culture of Islam. Several suggest that revolution is near in Russia in the wake of German victories (Germans being rationalized as Western Turks). One cites Rasputin's debaucheries at court as a harbinger of revolt. A lawyer foresees an independent Shiite country after the war, based on oil riches, which the whole world needs. Everyone happy to wait and watch, while building institutions to care for war's casualties to show their honor while not fighting. The presence of a heretic Baha'i allows for description of this esoteric and syncretist faith recently born in Persia. Nagi preaches the heresy openly. The meeting ends with Ali depressed. He had missed an opera date with Nino to attend. As he is visiting his friends at the army barracks, word comes that the escort Ali personally arranges has kidnapped Nino.

Nachararyan's act changes all of the characters' lives. Mehmed Haidar borrows the commandant's prized horse so Ali can ride in hot pursuit. When he finds out, Melikov gets drunk, orders the tainted beast destroyed, and dispatches the garrison to the front. Ali suffers the first "honorable" scar of his life fighting with Nachararyan, who has studied boxing in the West. He is no match for a "desert wolf" who clamps his teeth down on the fat Armenian's neck. Ali understands Nachararyan's motivation for fleeing to Stockholm and eventually London, but refuses to be scorned as a savage. Ali resents being told where to strike the fatal knife blow, but earlier he nearly gets himself killed by throwing away his revolver as though it were a one-shot gun. Ali faces the choice of killing Nino, having his friend kill Nino, or sparing her life. All are valid under the Koran. Nino's big eyes convince him to spare her, a decision that Seyd Mustafa and Ali's father both regret. By delicious coincidence, Seyd Mustafa had left a spiritual encounter at the same time that the sinful theater empties out, and thus sees and hears the plot.

Chapter 18 is already set in the wilds of Daghestan, where Ali flees as a "kanly," a person being pursued in a blood-feud. Nino's father wants them to marry and emigrate, but Ali's insists that a kanly cannot marry. The police are also searching for him and have forwarded warrants to Persia, so Ali proceeds instead up the shore of the Caspian Sea to the capital and then inland along tortuous paths to the *âoul* (fortress) of a garrulous old friend. Through a haze of hashish, Ali has little interest in the mullah's moralistic stories, ancient and modern.



# Chapters 19-21

## Chapters 19-21 Summary

Women carry precious satchels of earth and manure to produce gardens amidst the rocks. Wandering by one of these plots, Ali jokes with a farmer about greasing his squeaky wheels and learns that the Abreks are the only locals who practice stealth. They are outcasts, victims of injustice, who swear in the mosque to murder and kill without pity. Ali considers becoming one. Back at the cottage, Ali finds Arslan Aga, a rich younger boy from school, who claims to be on his way to Kislovodsk. Seeing through the lie, Ali still orders a celebration and plies the boy with wine. People in Baku are betting whether Ali will marry Nino. Only when Ali asks when Arslan last tells the truth does he spill all of the gossip. Nino has been ill in Tiflis, where the family has bought an estate, but now is home, drinking heavily, partying with Russians, and refusing to go to Moscow as her father wants. She beats her pet dog, whom she calls Seyd Mustafa. Iljas Beg has been decorated, Mehmed Haidar wounded, and Nachararyan's villa has been burnt down. Arslan has been writing for the newspaper, but plans to die becoming king. When Arslan passes out, Ali wonders how much of this is true. Catching a lizard, he contemplates what he should do to it and Nino. He releases the lizard and smokes hashish until the call to prayer.

One day, Ali wakes up to see Nino calling him lazybones and recommending he quit hashish. Arslan tells everyone that Ali wants to murder Nino, so she comes to see, brought by Seyd Mustafa. She has missed Ali. After they make love for the first time, Nino talks about going willingly with Nachararyan, not being kidnapped. She now realizes her mistake and deserves to die. She plans to go to Moscow. Ali asks Seyd Mustafa, seated outside the door with his rifle, to call a Mullah to marry them. Seyd insists on performing the ceremony himself. Nino is willing to share Ali's remote exile, doing the housework without servants. Seyd Mustafa writes out the marriage contract, specifying that Nino will retain her religion. The bride, groom, and two witnesses sign, and Seyd Mustafa seals it. An hour later they throw the hashish pipe into the abyss.

Life becomes wonderful. Nino adapts easily to village life, preparing meals, fetching water, gossiping, and washing Ali's feet. Although she does not want to return to Baku, Ali believes she deserves a better life. When Ali's father visits, he declares her an excellent wife but terrible cook. Once they hear of a roaming Armenian, but the villagers dispose of him away, so as not to blot their honor. They hear nothing about the war until a letter arrives from Arslan who says there has been a revolution removing all authority and threat. It is safe for Ali and Nino to come home. Nino is ecstatic.

Baku is full of scarlet banners, nighttime looting, and daytime shooting. Ali plans to stay until the Turks arrive, but Nino favors moving to Persia. Ali attends a meeting of the Islamic Benevolent Society, where Iljas Beg advocates Muslims joining the "Wild Division" in alliance with Armenian nationalists seeking to return to their homeland. Armed with a dagger, Seyd Mustafa declares that Muslims must not depend on



unbelievers. The local Armenians' leader, Stepa Lalai, is unreliable because Muslim have killed his parents. Unable to sleep, Nino informs Ali that she will name her son for him. Word comes that the Armenians have joined the Russians in demanding a Muslim surrender. Trained to use a machine gun, Ali is assigned to the left side of the Zizianashvili Gate, in charge of 30 men. Safar Khan, who is on Staff, insists that Nino catch the last boat to Persia. Nino vows that no Russian will rape her and stays. The Muslims assume their positions and wait. Nino serves lunch. Seyd Mustafa chants from the minaret and joins the defenders, Koran tucked in his belt. When the bell tolls three, gunfire erupts.

## Chapters 19-21 Analysis

These chapters show another turn around in Ali's life. Destroying himself on wine and hashish, Ali learns about the savage Abreks, professional criminals under a sacred vow to take pity on no one. Ali contemplates such a vow, since all he cares about is lost. This is fit into scenes of rural life as Daghestan is living out of their mountainous terrain.

Arslan Aga from Baku, still in school, comes to the village, offering various claims for how he happens to be in so isolated an area (Kislovodsk to the north is a spa town and Arslan's family is rich). Given enough wine he tells all he knows. Nino seems to be out of control, beating her pet dog, drinking excessively, and dancing with Russian soldiers. Ali is upset. Arslan appears to tell everyone in Baku about Ali's addictions, for Seyd Mustafa accompanies Nino to Daghestan to check on him. She confesses going willingly with Nachararyan because escape to the West seems best, and is willing to be killed. Instead, they make love for the first time. Nino is amazed that Ali is willing to marry her now that she is fallen, but he does, within the hour. The Muslim marriage contract is examined. Nino keeps her religion. Having been cured of his depression, Ali throws away his water pipe.

Village life agrees with Nino, and pages are devoted to showing her acculturation. Her father wants them to move to comfort in the West, unwittingly mentioning the cities to which Nachararyan had suggested they live together, thereby raising his daughter's hackles. She wants only to be a good Eastern wife. She is apparently a miserable cook, but Ali is kind. The interlude ends when Arslan writes about the czar's abdication and the breakdown of all authority in Baku. It is safe to return and Nino is ecstatic. Ali is also happy, for he had always wanted more for Nino than the village could provide. They will later look back on Daghestan nostalgically.

Chapter 21 shows Baku a politicized ghost town. The Armenians want to emigrate to their homeland. The Muslims want the remaining Russians to depart. The Turks are advancing. As Ali and his friends—the two officers being relieved of their oath to the person of the former czar and Seyd Mustafa now armed with a dagger and sometimes a rifle—discuss the situation, the theme of blood—family loyalty—is renewed. The Armenians who, it should be noted have been suffering persecution and pogrom for decades inside the Ottoman Empire by this point in the novel, are divided into nationalists and anarchists. The Muslims are certain that "blood" will solidify them



against Russians (fellow Christians but divided over key doctrines) and Muslims. The chief Armenian leader has lost his parents at the hands of Muslims, so any talk of alliance must be suspect. Nachararyan's decision to flee to Europe has shown how deadly serious is the "Armenian Question," and this is reinforced by the Armenians willingness to consider allying with Muslims to retreat to their homeland. Indeed, Russians and Armenians pull together and the Muslims set up behind the battlements on the Old Wall overlooking Duma Square. Ali is assigned to a machine gun at the gate where his ancestor is murdered, a position that at the end of the novel proves fatal, but this comes after an interlude.



# Chapters 22-24

## Chapters 22-24 Summary

Riding a sailboat into exile, survivors of the three-day battle talk about the dead: Mehmed Haidar, the Nachararyan whole family (killed by Ali's machine guns), and most men of the mosque, already wearing shrouds. Iljas has survived but fled town. The Shirvanshir home is sacked. Nino, who had heard rumors of Ali's death, sits trembling. Safar Khan discussing legends with the boatman angers Ali, for Asia has fallen. His father corrects: the borders have merely shifted again. Even if the Muslims had won, Baku would have been further Europeanized. One need not lust wildly for blood. Like all old Persians, Safar Khan knows of another world into which he can withdraw and be unassailable. Ali and his contemporaries see only present events. As Ali looks out over the Caspian, Nino asks what they will do in Persia, a land asleep for 1,000 years, which knows no gunfire. Persia appears on the fourth day and they step ashore at Enseli. Ali's uncle has sent a car.

As they travel along a dry river bed from Enseli to Resht, they meet a caravan carrying 200-300 corpses to burial in the holy town of Kerbela. Resht is centuries old, dirty, dusty, and small-scaled. The Governor orders an escort for the "naked woman"—Nino, who is not wearing a veil. The desert is also full of bandits. Finally they enter the Gate of Teheran, pass through the sea of beggars and dervishes, and follow a maze of alleys to the suburb of Shimran. Blue tiles make the palace look cool and friendly. Ali and Nino fall asleep immediately on soft cushions. When they finally awaken, hungry, Ali orders the eunuch to fetch Persian delicacies. The eunuch is horrified to see Nino grab rice with her left hand; when Ali shows her how it is properly done with the right hand, Nino laughs for the first time since Baku. Ali explains that they are in the uncle's harem, cared for by 28 servants. Jahja Kuli introduces himself as the head eunuch, who will soon have Nino conforming to norms. Ali asks him to go easy, as Nino is pregnant. Seyd Mustafa waits in the Master's Suite to see Ali. Explaining that outside males may not enter the harem, Ali goes to see his friend, and is shocked when she joins them in the library. Seyd is horrified but polite and tactful. Jahja later apologizes for not being able to control Nino.

Four weeks into their stay, Ali is at peace, in the gardens and roaming the bazaar buying presents for Nino, who is miserable. She had enjoyed Daghestan but cannot come to terms with Persian etiquette. The police forbid Ali to take her on the streets uncovered and they may not receive guests together. Finally, Ali orders a closed coach with crystal windows so he can show her the town. Still she is bored and wants to meet the wives and daughters of the European colony, but such mixing is forbidden. Returning from a visit with Ali's aunts and cousins, Nino reports that they believe all of the time they spend together is spent having sex. They envy her and she feels filthy. Ali buys more presents. Nino cannot attend the all-male reception for Safar Khan, but must stay home with the eunuch, who disapproves of Ali's pampering her.



Persian nightlife begins at nightfall as the world cools down. The uncle's palace is done up with garlands and lanterns. They greet first the elderly, large-nosed Prince, who remarks about the superiority of Persian cucumbers to all others, and other guests hasten to agree. They agree that only Persians appreciate beauty. Ali's uncle recites a poem by Abu Said, heretical but lovely. They talk about a proposed treaty with England that will leave defense to them. The uncle believes Britain appreciates Persian culture and oil—both "lighten the world." Ali dares ask why Persian cannot raise its own army, having forgotten that noble Persians look down on soldiering. Others talk of Persia enjoying divine protection and needing no sword. Recalling the foreign soldiers and ragged policemen he has seen, Ali fears laying down weapons before Europe. Persia is again degenerate, loving poetry over machine guns, and it is dying gracefully. Inadvertently quoting Omar Khayyam and Dakiki aloud puts Ali back in favor. At midnight the dining room opens for a large, swift meal. A cousin asks envies Ali for fighting. Persia cannot even build roads fit for motor cars. Smiling at the chase to Mardakjany, Ali asks why roads are needed. Bahram Khan lists all of the modern things that statesmen overlook. He also quotes modern poems with terrible rhymes but sharp meaning. The relics of the past must be retired and new realities dealt with: forts, schools, hospitals, taxation, laws, and men like Ali. The tired old noblemen leading the country must retire and people of action like Ali should take over. Instead, he buys up the bazaar. Ali's beloved "Soul of Asia" should be retired to a museum. When the meal ends, as he debates staying, Ali grows homesick for Baku, where Nino smiles, and tells Bahram that he cannot remain a refugee. Bahram calls him "Madjnoun" (Lover/Madman), guessing Ali's secret.

## Chapters 22-24 Analysis

The battle for Baku is seen through discussions among the few survivors sailing the Caspian Sea towards Persian exile. Among the stories is a reference to Seyd Mustafa chanting the "Ya Sin" before battle. Called the "Heart of the Koran," this sura is traditionally recited over the dead, to obtain God's mercy in their passing. The "mosque men," presumably the most pious, don burial shrouds before going into battle. Ali fires his machine gun until he runs out of ammunition and kills a man in hand-to-hand combat, an image that keeps returning to him: a black leather jacket turning red. As they sail, Ali is annoyed that his father and the skipper can exchange old folk tales, but sees that the older generation is in touch with another world beyond this one. Only Seyd Mustafa in Ali's generation shows such an inclination.

Landing in Persia is like landing on another world. The bustling customs official is, of course, impressed that Shirvanshirs are arriving, and Ali's uncle has provided them a car to whisk them to his palace. It is characterized with the opulent imagery of the East, and turns out to be a Ford that takes a half hour to start. En route to Teheran, they pass Shiites carrying a caravan of corpses to be buried in Kerbala, the holy city where Imam Hussain ibn Ali, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, is assassinated and buried. The author breaks the pious picture by imagining Turkish border officials needing to check the merchandise before letting the caravan pass.



The trip through Teheran proper is dealt with swiftly: another crowded Eastern town. Ali and Nino, exhausted, fall asleep instantly. Ali wakes up smelling the unique scent of the harem. Nino wakes up hungry. The house eunuch is on hand to witness Nino's constant faux pas and to comment to Ali about them. Ali has earlier admired the grace with which his uncle eats with two fingers of his right hand and thumb. Nino plunges into the rice with her left hand, reserved for other, less delicate tasks in the East. Ali knows that Nino's mistakes will ruin his—and the family's—reputation, but he does not want to oppress her either. He uses her pregnancy as a reason to handle her gently. The tooth inspection becomes a minor but humorous motif going forward. Nino's first big run-in is over inviting Seyd Mustafa into the garden for tea or her sitting with the two men in the library. Both are forbidden by Persian etiquette. Note how, in the Persian milieu, Seyd Mustafa is horrified, whereas in Daghestan he had accepted things as they were. Still, he manages to be polite about it. Nino declares that having survived Baku, she will not be intimidated by a eunuch. Ali feels badly but cannot buck the system. He cannot take Ali on the street without a veil or let her mingle with Westerners. He buys her presents, but nothing makes her smile.

An all-male reception attended by a Persian royal prince affords much fawning behavior and new details of upper class behavior before concentrating on the tension between Persia's old poetic ways and modern Iran's need for military and infrastructure. Having heard of Ali's exploits with a machine gun, his cousin wants him to stay and build the new nation. Ali, however, is sad to see the East relegated to a museum and realizes that he loves Baku and the way Nino is alive there.





# Chapters 25-27

## Chapters 25-27 Summary

Ali marks a map with flags to picture what the newspapers report. Feth Ali Khan proclaims a Free Republic of Azerbaijan and with Enver Bey and other pashas is encircling Russian-occupied Baku. Jahja reports on Nino's latest antics, which have caused him to lose face and he wants to call in an exorcist. Ali pays no attention, knowing that Nino is doing it for sport. Firing Jahja would do no good, for his replacement could be worse. Looking at the flags, Jahja suggests simply moving them to victory and says praying during Moharram could provide such strength. Nino's parents are visiting Teheran and she spends much time with them.

Ali sends for Seyd Mustafa. Ali longs to be with Iljas Beg is on the battlefield, but Russian and English troops guard all roads to the front. Persia is retreating like a snail. Arslan Aga arrives among refugees and one of his articles is soon banned by the censors, which he takes as a badge of honor. Having blown Ali's deeds up to heroic proportions, Arslan leaves paper, pen, and ink for Ali to record his hero's feelings. Instead, Ali writes his story, starting at school. Ali admits to Seyd Mustafa that his life is a tangle and is lectured about Hussein, the Twelve Imams, and Unseen One whom Seyd Mustafa sees and hears in everything. Ali should take part in suffering on the tenth of Moharram. If the Holy Sacrifice makes no sense to Ali, nothing can.

Between games of Nardy, Nino gloats about pulling Jahja's aching tooth and forbidding him to eat sweets for a week. She cannot wait to return to Baku. Europeans are leaving town to avoid seeing the bloody rituals for Hussein, a "malignant force" on Nino and the baby. She returns to her parents' flat, leaving Ali with his flags and map. A tambourine brings Ali to the window and he is drawn out among the thousands chanting, carrying Shiite flags, and flagellating, pounding, or cutting themselves with beatific smiles. After passing the Emperor's Palace, draped in mourning, Ali finds himself alone on Cannon Square, hurting and crusted with blood. A coachman takes him home. Nino sobs, trembles, and repeatedly declares she hates him for showing his soul this way. In the morning, she reproaches herself for not caring for Ali's wounds and for hating Persia. When the drums of Hussein begin again, Ali covers it with an blaring aria from Gounod's Faust

In the autumn, the refugees return to liberated Baku. Nino has carte blanche in restoring the house, assuring it is as different as possible from a Persian harem. Ali is sad to live like a European, but his father says it is his turn to give in after all that Nino has endured. Baku is part of Europe now forever. Feth Ali Khan is Prime Minister and Mirza Assadullah Foreign Minister, and for the first time, Ali feels at home in his own country. Turkish officers talk about an Empire of Turan uniting everyone of Turkish blood. On the day of the big parade, only Seyd Mustafa stands apart, full of hatred, having seen a Bulgarian military cross among the Pasha's medals. Iljas Beg sees a need for quick





reforms on the European model, while remaining true to Islam, but Seyd Mustafa regards the prospect with contempt.

The Caliph's plenipotentiary signs a ceasefire and the Pasha reviews the troops in Baku for a last time. British occupation troops arrive. Feti Ali Khan summons Ali, remarks on his ability with languages, asks about Nino and the progress of the house, and names him attaché to the Foreign Minister. Nino speeds work on completing the house.

## Chapters 25-27 Analysis

These chapters are dominated by the formation of a Free Republic of Azerbaijan whose capital is Baku and whose Prime Minister is Feth Ali Khan, the lawyer seen at the gathering of oil princes. Ali Khan remains in Persia, frustrated that he cannot join the fighting. He bides his time, moving little green flags representing the various Muslim forces (green being the sacred color in Islam) around a map, circling the red flags representing Russian forces. His eunuch is twice used to inject a bit of levity. First, asking why he does not simply move the green flags into Baku and remove the red ones, as though he were playing chess. When Ali objects that he does not have the power to do so, the eunuch recommends he pray hard during the sacred month of Moharram, which is at hand. He also wants to bring in a sorceress to exorcise Nino, but Ali is not hearing anything around him.

The Tenth of Moharram come to the fore. The passion play of Hussein has been mentioned, rather in passing, earlier in the novel, and the intense loyalty of Shiites to the martyr and the place of his martyrdom have been well established throughout the work. Nino's parents are visiting Teheran, conveniently putting her out of the picture, after she revels in having gotten even with her nemesis the eunuch and making clear that self-flagellation is an abhorrent, barbaric custom that she does not care to witness. Seyd Mustafa, as demanding as ever, visits and again lays out the tenets of Shiism. Ali dislikes being lectured like a schoolboy, but is not willing to flagellate himself. Seyd Mustafa declares that if he does not understand and embrace the "Holy Sacrifice" he can understand nothing.

Ali tinkers with his flags, fiddles his rosary (worry beads), whose coming unstrung unnerves him, and is drawn into the procession of flagellates outside his window. The chant, "Shah-ssé—Wah-ssé" becomes a refrain, embodying the mesmerizing effect of all everything that is going on on the street. Ali pounds his chest (one of the three pious means of self-torture) until someone hands him a heavy chain he starts flailing his back raw, precisely what he had said a short time earlier was unthinkable. Ali is in religious ecstasy, submitting completely — "submission" being the mean of Islam in Arabic.

The procession winds through Teheran as all the roofs are jammed with onlookers. It passes the Dutch Consulate, where Nino and her parents see Ali in a frenzy. Ali comes home crusted with blood to find Nino mortified. She does nothing to alleviate his pain as a good wife should and declares she hates him for showing his true soul. They make up in the morning, but Nino insists she must leave this country. Ali believes Baku will be



free in two weeks. When the drums of Hussein begin again, marking the start of the passion play proper, Ali turns on the gramophone to cover the sound with an blaring aria from Gounod's Faust, an opera about a magician who sells his soul to the devil for power and knowledge. The refugees are repatriated, Turkey withdraws from the war, and the British enter. Ali is offered a post in government because he and Nino both speak English and she is rebuilding their sacked house in the Western style. It is not precisely a pact with the devil, but the specter of Faust hangs over events as the final chapters unfold.



# Chapters 28-29

## Chapters 28-29 Summary

Ali and Nino talk as disjointedly as the Teach Yourself English primer as they prepare for their first diplomatic reception in their newly-decorated home. Nino is nostalgic about the âoul. As he greets guests, Ali wonders if they are expecting belly-dancers instead of proper English manners and whiskey and soda. In light conversations, Nino dispels myths about Azerbaijan. Ali reminds himself that Nino is a Christian as men look her over and touch her fingers, but still feels shame and fury. Nino looks frightened. As he serves liquor and cigars, officers dare to compliment Ali on his beautiful wife and home. He fights not to box ears. He talks about cultural progress despite the Russians and plans for sending young people abroad to study. A former British Consul in Persia believes that Azerbaijan is ready for independence and should be recognized. Ali reports this to Mirza Assadullah, and adds that he feels like an idiot. He notices that he and Nino whisper as Mirza leaves.

Upstairs, Nino is exuberant about how well she has played savior of the country. She is ravishingly beautiful. Ali sits with her on the edge of the bed—a first for him—but they make love on the floor, which becomes a joke between them. Weeks pass with Nino entertaining officers and their ladies and Ali working in the Ministry. She advises Mirza on how to behave with Westerners and jokes she may become Chief of Protocol. One day, Ali reads in the newspaper that he has been transferred to Paris. Furious, he confronts Mirza, who believes that he and Nino are perfect for the Consulate, but does not insist when Ali threatens to resign. He refuse to leave his homeland. Nino is devastated. Ali explains that he would feel as much a fish out of water in Paris as she had in Teheran and some day would come to hate her. Nino agrees to be content with keeping her European house. He promises that once the baby is born they will take their belated honeymoon in the West and annual trips thereafter. He is not a tyrant. Nino wants their child to belong neither to Europe or the desert, just to them.

As Nino writhes and screams in labor, Ali and his father talk on the roof about Ali's difficult birth and sickly first years, cured by stuffing him inside a newly-slaughtered cow. They pray together, reciting Arabic words without thinking. When a servant touches Ali's shoulder, he breaks off and goes to Nino. She announces a daughter in Tartar, a language she hardly knows. Ali holds his ugly little "toy," whom Nino declares beautiful, and names her Tamar, a name that both Muslims and Christians use. Safar Khan takes Ali for a gallop across the sand dunes.

Days pass as Nino cares for Toy and is cruel to Ali as never before. He retreats into work, where he gets progress reports on Toy's cleverness. Reports on Ali's desk show men in Versailles deciding the fate of the East. When Azerbaijan's sovereignty is recognized, the British troops withdraw, and Ali worries about 160 million Russians swallowing them up for the oil. Turkey and Persia are powerless allies. Ali's father and Nino's parents both go home and Russian diplomats sign a treaty without reading it. The



Foreign Minister declares that everything is in God's hands. Political parties are fighting and Russian workers are threatening to strike. Ali suggests going to Georgia for the summer, but Nino refuses. She suggests all of them going to Gandsha. Ali shows Nino the historical sites and they settle into the little house. Nino declares that Toy is hers alone, as the first son will be his alone. They avoid newspapers and get no letters.

Late in the summer, Iljas Beg gallops up, announcing that the Russians are in Baku, whole train loads arriving from Jalama. The ministers have fled or been arrested. The soldiers had been defending against Armenians. Iljas is recruiting partisans. In Gandsha machine guns bark. Ali writes hastily to get his story down on paper. He refuses to abandon his country, despite Iljas' begging—for dying Azerbaijan may need his talents again. Ali puts Nino and the baby on the last train to Tiflis, promising to follow in a few days. Nino wails and trembles. She kisses him goodbye and rides away looking like a frightened bird.

Unknown Prince Mansur Mirza Kadjar arrives to command the Azerbaijanis. Word comes via Arslan Aga of Russian atrocities in Baku. He asks to join the partisans. Ali is lightly wounded in hand-to-hand combat in which he and Arslan each kills a Russian. Arslan believes himself a coward, but continues fighting. The fighters know that 25,000 Turks and 250 million Muslims are behind them, if time allows. Ali fires his machine gun madly into the Russians. Arslan Aga falls dead in a hero's death and the Russians sound retreat. The battle will resume in hours on the bridge where Ibrahim Khan Shirvanshir dies for the freedom of his people.

Iljas Beg adds a postscript: Ali dies at 5:45 behind his machine gun. He hopes to get this book to his widow. They bury Ali shortly before the Russian begin their final attack. The Republic, like Ali Khan Shirvanshir, has died.

## Chapters 28-29 Analysis

As Ali and Nino reaches its finale, Ali describes entertaining Western diplomats with a combination of bemusement and agitation, as Eastern and Western mores and customs rub irritatingly. Nino delights in lying about harems and eunuchs to make Azerbaijan look progressive, and an old British diplomat declares it looks like they are ready for independence. Ali receives a transfer to Paris, which he rejects angrily, to Nino's dismay. He will visit the West but not live there without mosques and minarets and the desert. The subject of Nino's whispering with the Foreign Minister, about which Ali had wondered, comes clear.

Ali and his father are on the roof—the last vestige of Eastern culture in the house—during the ordeal of Nino's labor. Safar Khan tells about Ali's difficult birth, which costs his mother her life. He points out when Nino will begin cursing him as all wives do during labor. More Eastern customs surrounding birth and childhood disease come out. Father and son mechanically perform their prayers in Arabic, a foreign tongue to them. Note how little fanfare there is after the birth. It would be quite different if the baby had



been a boy. Ali and his father ride in the desert, but Ali cannot hear what his father is saying. Ali takes little interest in the "Toy's" development.

Word from Versailles, site of the Peace Conference at the end of World War I, brings hope for some but for Ali foreboding. Note his tongue-in-cheek phrasing: the Great Powers are carving up the defeated Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires into tiny states, deciding their fates for them. Britain obligingly withdraws its troops, but this only leaves Azerbaijan open to the Russians. Note that there are factions among the Russians—it is the start of their savage Civil War—but all Russians want Baku's oil. Turkey and Persia are hopeless allies. The Republic is doomed.

Ali wants to get Nino and the Toy safely to Tiflis, but she will go nowhere without him, and they compromise on the Shirvanshir property at Gandsha, recently the site of fighting. Over the vacation hangs the memory of Ali's ancestor dying at the bridge. When they hear of the Russian coup in Baku and Soviet atrocities, Ali insists that Nino and the baby go ahead of him to Tiflis. She wails, knowing that Ali will not come. Earlier in the novel she speaks of being a young widow. Ilijas Beg pleads with Ali to save himself as an irreplaceable asset for a future Azerbaijan. His cousin had earlier begged him to stay in Persia for the same reason. Ali refuses and makes a final stand.

Throughout the novel the most important events are related after the fact. So it is with Ali's death. Only late in the novel is it revealed that Ali's first-person narrative is a written document. The touching postscript is added by Ilijas' Beg, telling how Ali is shot eight times, topples into the dry river bed, and has been buried. He and the Republic die together. Ilijas hopes to get the diary to Nino.



# Characters

## Ali Khan Shirvanshir

The male protagonist, Ali is a descendant of a noble Shiite Muslim family, first met as a 13-year-old student in the Imperial Russian Humanistic High School of Baku, being exposed to Western values but retaining a love for the desert. He has already visited Tehran, where a branch of the Shirvanshir family resides, Daghestan, Tiflis, Kislovodsk, and Persia, and plans on attending the prestigious Lazarev Institute for Oriental Languages in Moscow after graduation. Ali has a "monkey's instinct for languages and dialects" and is so fluent in Russian that he can affect various regional dialects. He also learns English, which becomes important late in the novel.

By age 18, Ali is in love with a beautiful Georgian Christian girl, Nino Kipiani, and determined to marry her. He is glad that Baku does not require the veil. As a graduation present from his proud father, Ali collects a summer vacation in Gandsha with the Kipianis. Waiting for Nino, Ali hears that war has broken out in Europe. His father summons him home and is upset that Ali does not join the Russian army immediately. Nino is also surprised but pleased. Ali contends that when war comes to their region he will defend his country. This unpopular sentiment is soon envied when the Ottoman Empire enters the conflict, requiring Ali's Shiite friends to fight Sunni Muslims.

When Ali proposes marriage, Nino points out the religious obstacles and wants to finish school. Ali dislikes the way Nino enjoys being looked at in public and caressed in private. The Kipianis rejoice at Ali's proposal but want her to finish school, which enrages Ali at being turned down by infidels. He considers kidnapping her in the Asian manner, but allows himself to be calmed by Malik Nachararyan, through whose intercessions of the Prince gives in. Ali is exhausted meeting the future in-laws in Tiflis. Ali suggests that they can live in Tiflis, but Nino thinks it better to stay in Baku, with winter trips to Paris and Berlin.

Required by his father to attend a political meeting, Ali asks Nachararyan to chaperon Nino to the opera. Ali learns from Seyd Mustafa that Nachararyan has kidnapped Nino, and pursues and kills his rival. Moved by Nino's beautiful eyes, Ali spares her life before fleeing the blood-feud in remote Daghestan. There Ali hears that people in Baku are betting whether they will marry and that Nino has taken up some bad habits. Hearing that Ali wants to murder her and has become a drunk, Nino goes to see. After they make love for the first time, Nino reveals that she had gone willingly with Nachararyan, but Ali still wants to marry, and Seyd Mustafa performs the brief ceremony. Nino adapts easily to village life, but when it is safe to return to Baku, goes happily. The peace is short-lived. Ali mans a machine gun against the allied Russians and Armenians out to massacre the Muslims. After a three day fight in which Ali's reputation grows legendary, the family goes into exile in Persia. Ali adapts easily, but Nino feels an outcast and prisoner. Ali tries to compensate by buying her presents in the bazaar.



Egged on by Seyd Mustafa and enthralled by the percussion and chants, Ali joins the bloody rite of the Tenth of Moharram. Arriving home bloodied and aching, he hears that Nino hates him for revealing his soul. She is mortified to have seen him in the mob and insists on going home as soon as possible. With the establishment of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Shirvanshirs return to Baku and Ali gives Nino carte blanche in restoring the house in the Western mode. Ali becomes an attaché in the Foreign Ministry and with Nino is called upon to entertain foreign dignitaries. Ali is revolted by the way men look at Nino in revealing evening clothes, but endures. He throws himself into work all the harder after Nino gives birth to a daughter, Tamara, nicknamed "Toy," and turns mean. He turns down a posting in Paris, knowing he would be a fish out of water. While on vacation in Gandsha, Ali learns of new fighting in Baku as the Russians pour troops into the region. He puts Nino and the baby on a train to Tiflis, promising to follow in a few days. Instead, he mans the machine gun again and dies in a hail of bullets. His old friend, Iljas Beg, retrieves his body for burial and discovers a diary—the text of this book—in his pocket. Iljas hopes to give it to Nino.

## **Nino Hanum Shirvanshir (née Kipiani)**

The female protagonist, Nino is a Georgian Christian of noble origin, attending the Girl's Lyceum of the Holy Queen Tamar in Baku. Ali Khan Shirvanshir, the male protagonist, sees her as the most beautiful girl in the world. From their first meeting, Nino gets Ali to sit beneath her desk and feed her answers. At age 17, she is given the title of Princess by the Russian tsar. She is named for a second cousin, Nino Tshavtshavadse, the widow of the Russian poet Alexander Griboyedov, killed in Teheran by a mob and buried in Tiflis. St. Nino, her patron saint, is the Georgians' "Queen of Queens."

When Ali proposes marriage, Nino points out the religious obstacles, wants to finish school, and warns against kidnapping her in the Asian manner. Ali dislikes the way Nino enjoys being looked at in public and caressed in private. Nino is surprised that Ali does not volunteer for the army when war breaks out, but is also relieved. The Kipianis rejoice at Ali's proposal but want Nino to finish school. Through the intercessions of Malik Nachararyan, the Prince gives in and takes Nino and Ali to Tiflis to introduce him to family. Nino wants Ali to love the West and swears never again to hold him responsible for historical acts by Muslims against Georgians. Nino loves woods and meadows and is afraid of Ali because he loves the wild world of hills and sand. Ali suggests that they can live in Tiflis, but Nino thinks it better to stay in Baku, with winter trips to Paris and Berlin.

When Ali must attend a political meeting, Nachararyan chaperons Nino to the opera, but then makes off with her. Seyd Mustafa overhears talk of marriage in Moscow and life in Sweden, tells Ali, and Ali races to overtake and kill his rival. Moved by Nino's beautiful eyes, Ali spares her life before fleeing the blood-feud in remote Daghestan. There Ali hears that people in Baku are betting whether they will marry and that Nino has taken to drinking heavily, partying with Russians, and beating her pet dog. Hearing that Ali wants to murder her and has become a drunk, Nino goes to see. After they make love for the first time, Nino talks about going willingly with Nachararyan. Ali still wants to marry, and





Seyd Mustafa performs the brief ceremony. Nino adapts easily to village life, preparing meals, fetching water, gossiping, and washing Ali's feet. When word comes that it is safe to return to Baku, Nino is ecstatic.

When civil war breaks out, Nino refuses to go to Persia, vowing that no Russian will rape her. Nonetheless, the whole family goes into exile. In Persia, Nino is considered a "naked woman" for refusing to wear a veil and cannot adjust to the restrictive rules of etiquette, which keep her house-bound and isolated. Nino's chief pastime is tormenting the eunuch who is intent on breaking her willful behavior. Nino already cannot wait to return to Baku when she sees Ali participate in self-flagellation on the Tenth of Moharram. She declares that she hates him for showing his soul.

After returning home, Nino enjoys *carte blanche* in restoring the house in the Western mode. Entertaining foreign dignitaries, Nino looks frightened, and jokes about becoming Chief of Protocol. After giving birth to a daughter, Tamar, nicknamed "Toy," Nino grows cruel to Ali as never before. While vacationing at Gandsha, she declares that Toy is hers alone, as the first son will be Ali's alone. When a new war breaks out, Nino and the baby go to Tiflis ahead of Ali. Nino kisses Ali goodbye and rides away looking like a frightened bird. She becomes, as she had feared earlier, a young widow.

## Hafis Seyd Mustafa Meshedi

Protagonist Ali Khan Shirvanshir's boyhood friend, Seyd Mustafa is a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, a status reflected in his green turban and sash and the title "Seyd." He has a pockmarked face and small slits for eyes. His father is the Imam of a small mosque near the Baku fort, and his grandfather is a famous sage in the holy city of Meshed, a position Seyd Mustafa hopes one way to obtain. In school he is first characterized as having to flee the classroom to vomit when a schoolmate mentions ham. Seyd Mustafa prays five times a day, writes the hated Caliph Yazid's name on the soles of his feet so he can tread on the heretic all day, and flagellates himself annually on the Tenth of Moharram. Ali's girlfriend Nino Kipiani finds him bigoted and hateful, but Ali admires his clarity of vision.

Years later, a month into World War I, when the Ottoman Sultan has declared Holy War, intending to liberate Muslims from Russian and British control, Seyd Mustafa rants about the "renegade" insists that Turkish "blood" does not matter, for Turkic peoples in Siberia are pagans, allowed by God to go astray. Ali sees that Seyd Mustafa is on his way to becoming a fanatic but still loves him.

Seyd Mustafa anticipates Ali's announcement that he wants to marry Nino and approves, even though she is a Christian. Since women have no soul or intellect, it is not necessary for her to convert to Islam. The children, of course, must be Shiites. Seyd Mustafa happens to be leaving a spiritual meeting when he sees Malik Nachararyan emerge from the sinful theater and kidnap Nino. Alerting Ali, Seyd Mustafa follows to where Nachararyan's car is overtaken, and holds Nino in his saddle, awaiting orders. Ali spares Nino's life to Seyd Mustafa's disappointment. Months later, Seyd Mustafa





escorts Nino to the remote Daghestani âoul where Ali is hiding, having heard that Ali is destroying himself with wine and hashish. Seyd Mustafa marries Ali and Nino and helps throw away the hashish pipe.

Seyd Mustafa joins the exiles from Baku in Teheran, living at the Mosque of the Sepahlesar. During the sacred month of Moharram, Seyd Mustafa argues that Ali should shed his blood in the flagellation, since he cannot shed it fighting at the front. Ali refuses, but finds the ritual mesmerizing and joins the crowd. Nino is mortified and disgusted and more determined than ever to return home. When the Russians retake Baku, Seyd Mustafa is beaten and forced to eat pork, but escapes and flees to Meshed. The Russians murder his father.

## **Ali and Mirza Assadullah**

Wealthy Muslim brothers in Baku, Mirza loves money, wisdom, and peace, while Ali is "like Zarathustra's fire," loving war, adventure, and danger. They attend the planning meeting of Baku notables held at the Shirvanshir home on the night of Nino's kidnapping. Mirza believes that a Turkish victory will be better for Baku than a Russian one, for the latter would be vindictive and wipe out all trace of Islam. Brother Ali suggests that the czar may not survive the war and that they can kill every Russian in their land. He longs to "exterminate all foreigners." Ali Assadullah leads farmers in the defense of Baku against the Russians and Armenians following the czar's abdication, and Mirza becomes Foreign Minister of the short-lived Free Republic of Azerbaijan. He tries to reassign Ali and Nino Shirvanshir to the Paris consulate, but Ali refuses to leave his homeland.

## **Arslan Aga**

A rich, younger student at the Russian Imperial School from which Ali Khan Shirvanshir graduates, Arslan finds Ali in the wiles of Daghestan, where he is hiding from the blood feud. Ali sees that Arslan is an inveterate liar, and plies him with wine to get the latest gossip. Arslan tells wicked tales about Nino Kipiani, Ali's betrothed, and then tells her that Ali is going to pieces without her. Nino goes to Ali and they quietly marry. Arslan is next seen in Teheran among the exiles, writing lurid stories that get censored. He takes this as a compliment. Arslan exaggerates stories about Ali's bravery during the three day fight for Baku and gives him writing materials to jot down his thoughts on bravery. Instead, Ali writes the present book. Arslan joins in the second battle against the Russians at Gandsha, where he declares himself a coward, but he dies a hero's death in combat.

## **Imam Dshafar**

Protagonist Ali Khan Shirvanshir repeatedly declares that he is a Shiite Muslim in the tradition of Ja'far al-Sadiq, whom Twelver and Ismaili Muslims believe is the sixth Imam



and successor to Muhammad. Since Shiites divide over who succeeds Ja'far, Ali is declaring he is above modern squabbles.

## Feth Ali Khan

A lawyer from Choja who attends the meeting at the Shirvanshir home on the night of Nino's kidnapping, Feth Ali foresees an independent Shiite country after the war, thanks to Azerbaijan's oil wealth. When it comes about, Feth Ali serves as Prime Minister.

## Mehmed Haidar

A dull-witted student in the Imperial Russian Humanistic High School of Baku, Mehmed is the school's bane, secretly married at 16 and forced several times to repeat a year. His young son is also enrolled, possibly against regulations. No one knows his wife's name and she is kept veiled. At the outbreak of World War I, Mehmed joins the Russian army and studies to be an officer, enjoying the opportunity to leave school honorably. He passes the exam just before the Ottoman Sultan declares Holy War, making it impossible for a Muslim to fight for the infidel Czar. Drilling his company at Bailov Garrison, Mehmed Haidar is serious.. When word comes that Nino has been kidnapped, Haidar impulsively steals the commandant's prized red-gold horse for Ali to ride in pursuit. As a result of the adventure, the garrison is sent to the front lines. Haidar's father pays to avoid having his son court martialed. Mehmed Haidar is killed during the first battle for Baku and his face is mutilated.

## Iljas Beg

Protagonist Ali Khan Shirvanshir's schoolmate, who lives in a 40-room palace in Baku, Iljas ("Beg" is an honorific title) hosts the students' graduation party. At the outbreak of World War I, Iljas joins the Russian army, studies to be an officer, and passes the exam just before the Ottoman Sultan declares Holy War, making it impossible for a Muslim to fight for the infidel Czar. Ilja's father pays an enormous amount of money to get him assigned to the local garrison. Drilling his company at Bailov Garrison, Iljas looks like a "delicate puppy." After the fall of Baku to the Russians and Armenians, Iljas returns to the fight on the steppes of Gandsha (Elisabethpol). Exiled in Persia, Ali envies Iljas active fighting. During the short-lived Republic of Azerbaijan, Iljas plays an active but nondescript role. He gallops to Gandsha, the Shirvanshir summer home to tell Ali about the Russian invasion of Baku. They fight together at the bridge where Ali dies. Iljas retrieves his body for burial and finds his diary, which he hopes to take to Nino.

## Kasi Mullah

Protagonist Ali Khan Shirvanshir's host in the remote Daghestani âoul to which he flees after killing Malik Nachararyan, Kasi Mullah is a garrulous fellow, sharing stories ancient and modern, and hooking Ali on hashish to relieve the pain of a superficial knife wound.



## Jahja Kuli

Jahja is protagonist Ali Khan Shirvanshir's "guard of honor" in the Shimran Palace near Teheran, which Ali's uncle puts at the family's disposal during their exile from Baku. That is to say, Jahja is his the eunuch, literate and knowledgeable about treating women, who keeps order in the household. Jahja and Nino clash about etiquette throughout the stay, with her constantly egging him on and he wanting to have her exorcised. Nino gets the final laugh by pulling an infected tooth for Jahja after he has often lectured her on dental hygiene.

## Count Melikov

A nobleman from Shusha and the proud owner of legendary red-golden horses that he allows out of the stable only to ride to war, Melikov encounters protagonist Ali Khan Shirvanshir at the beginning of World War I in the mountains. Melikov subsequently takes command of the Baku Garrison. When word comes that Nino Kipiani has been kidnapped, Mehmed Haidar, one of Melikov's junior officers, steals a horse for Ali to ride in pursuit. When Melikov learns of this, he gets drunk, orders the animal destroyed, and moves the garrison to the front.

## Aga Musa Nagi

A small, thin Ba'haist, Nagi arrives late for the meeting at the Shirvanshir home on the night of Nino's kidnapping. Although he is an apostate from Shiism, he is received with honor because of his 200 million ruble fortune. Nagi has built a house of charity dedicated to the memory of his late son Ismail. Nagi is killed in the first battle for Baku.

## Malik Nachararyan

A philosophically-minded Armenian with protruding eyes, bushy eyebrows, and a propensity for drinking, Nachararyan joins in the discussion of woods and deserts at the Georgian feast at the Well of Pechapür, hosted by Nino Kipiani's father after Ali Khan Shirvanshir's graduation. The Nachararyans are the noblest Armenian family in Karabagh. The father is a general. Malik is fat but as healthy as an ox, and unmarried at age 30. Nino and Ali next meet Nachararyan at a performance of the opera Eugene Onegin, where he claims that he is exempt from the Russian draft because a skillful doctor has diagnosed "an incurable empyem of the kidney atrabilarian." Over dinner at the City Club, Nachararyan talks about the three great Caucasian people, a trinity, a meeting of East and West. He insists the Russians are no longer needed as peace keepers and Persia is no longer an enemy. He also admits that he is a hedonist.

When Prince Kipiani asks Ali and Nino to postpone marriage until after her graduation and the end of the war, Nachararyan visits repeatedly, befriending the Georgian, talking about cultural matters of interest to both nationalities and convincing him that Ali is a



good man, albeit a Muslim. The father gives in. When Ali is forced to skip an opera date to attend an important political meeting, he entrusts Nino to Nachararyan, only to hear afterwards that he has kidnapped her, intending to marry in Moscow and then move to Sweden, where he has been gradually sending his fortune. Ali chases them, confronts Nachararyan, who strikes the first blow, using his Western boxing training, but is killed by Ali, who fights like a wolf. The Nachararyans initiate a blood-feud, forcing Ali to flee into mountainous Daghestan. Machine gunners under Ali's command kill the surviving Nachararyans during the first battle for Baku.

## **Jussuf Oghly**

One of the rich Muslims invited to a planning meeting at the Shirvanshir home on the night of Nino's kidnapping, Oghly is envious of Burjat Sadé' with four wives, for his one-wife threatens to cut up any mistress he might take and will not even mention what she would do to him.

## **Burjat Sadé**

A sullen man, bitter about the war, Sadé has four wives and 15-18 children. Worth millions of rubles, Sadé attends the planning meeting of Baku notables held at the Shirvanshir home on the night of Nino's kidnapping.

## **Professor Sanin**

A professor at the Imperial Russian Humanistic High School of Baku, the pompous Sanin considers it a banishment to live among Asiatics.

## **Seinal Aga**

A peasant from Binijady in his 70s as the novel begins, Seinal Aga is worth 70 million rubles on oil when the novel begins. He believes that despite his many charities, he is bound for ruin. His family has fallen apart after he kills an unfaithful 18-year-old wife, and the only son who does not desert him is Iljas Beg. The class graduation party is held in his 40-room palace. Seinal Aga pays to keep his son away from the front to preclude his having to fight fellow Muslims, and attends the planning meeting of notables held at the Shirvanshir home on the night of Nino's kidnapping. When the Russians attack Baku for the second time, they slaughter Seinal Aga.

## **Assad es Saltaneh Shirvanshir**

Protagonist Ali Khan Shirvanshir's paternal uncle, who lives in Teheran, Assad es Saltaneh has been addressed as "Assad-ed-Dawleh" (Lion of the Empire) since receiving the title from the Persian Shah Nasr-ed-Din, whom he serves for 30 years and



travels extensively. He has four contentious wives, the youngest of whom cannot bear children. After exhausting Eastern methods, he brings everyone to Baku to seek Western medical help. Assad es Saltaneh has a broad, patrician beard and finger nails tinted with henna in memory of the Martyr Hussein, and small, tired eyes. He is a stickler for "Good Manners and Aristocratic Upbringing." After the fall of Baku to the Russians and Armenians, he opens his palace in suburban Simran to his brother, Ali, and Nino.

## **Bahram Khan Shirvanshir**

Protagonist Ali Khan Shirvanshir's cousin living in Teheran, Bahram Khan wants to see Persia throw off the past and become a modern country. When they have, he would enshrine the "soul of Asia" in a museum. Bahram Khan wants Ali to remain even after Baku is liberated to help with the building, but Ali needs emotionally to go home.

## **Safar Khan Shirvanshir**

Protagonist Ali Khan Shirvanshir's father, Safar Khan has been four times married but is currently wifeless. Ali's mother dies in childbirth. Safar Khan offers to build Ali a villa when he marries and use of the summer house at Mardakjany, and insists that his first grandson be named Ibrahim in honor of their ancestor. When Ali says that Nino Kipiani is his chosen bride, Safar warns against Christian influences in the home and taking other wives unless Nino is barren. Ali must not commit adultery, beat Nino while she is pregnant, or ever take her advice. Earlier, at graduation, Safar Khan lectures Ali on his duties as a pious Muslim and advises him to avoid politics. When World War I begins, Safar Khan is embarrassed that Ali does not enlist, but accepts from a Mulla that he is not obligated. Safar Khan hosts Baku's rich Muslims to his home for consultations, and when fighting breaks out serves on Staff at the Benevolent Society. He insists that Nino be on the last boat to Persia, for the Russians are sure to rape remaining women. Safar Khan prays with his son while Nino gives birth and soon afterwards returns to Persia, where he intends to remarry. He offers them sanctuary, should they need it.



# Objects/Places

## Baha'i

The 19th-century syncretist faith founded in Persia by the Bab, whom Shah Nasreddin brutally tortures to death, Baha'i teaches the unity of God, religion, and humankind. Buddha, Confucius, Christ, Muhammad, and others are worshiped. Peace and justice are bound to win out. A small, thin Aga Musa Nagi, a Ba'haist who has apostatized from Shiism, is received with honor among the oil princes of Baku because of his 200 million rubles. Nagi, who has built a house of charity dedicated to the memory of his late son Ismail, preaches to the group the need to understand that there are no blacks and whites. Each person's soul is part of the whole. The Shiites are "nonplussed" by this heresy.

## Baku

A city on the west coast of the Caspian Sea, Baku is the central setting for most of the novel. Baku is first depicted during the last years of pre-revolutionary Russian rule. Many of the locals have gotten fabulously rich on oil and the industry has attracted Russian and other foreign workers. The local Shiite Muslims resent these "unbelievers." Protagonist Ali Khan Shirvanshir loves this city nestled between the "faceless, leaden, unfathomable" sea and the flat desert. He describes Baku as "a kernel in a nut."

The Outer Town has wide streets, modern amenities including telephones, automobiles, theaters—and greedy oil people seeking only to get rich and leave; his beloved Nino Kipiani lives there. Old Town, where Ali lives, is a maze of alleys, fortresses, minarets, and ruins. They are separated by the Old Wall. The Maiden's Tower on the Eastern Wall is a landmark referenced throughout the novel. Zizianashvili's Gate stands opposite the Shirvanshir Palace. During the first siege of Baku by the Russians and Armenians, Ali is assigned to a machine gun position at this gate. There is a long-established and influential Armenian minority in Baku, who massacre the Muslims during that siege, forcing Ali and Nino to flee for months to Teheran. When they return, Ali and Nino find the Shirvanshir Palace in ruins and Nino cleans it up and decorates it as a Western residence, which the Foreign Ministry of the new Republic of Azerbaijan uses to woo allies.

The actual oil fields are located at Bibi-Eibat. At the start of the novel, they are being exploited with German machinery installed by the Nobel family. Central to the early part of the novel are boys' and girls' secondary schools located opposite one another on Nikolai Street. Ali and Nino enjoy meeting in the park and walking on the Esplanade. They are in Gadsha, a Shirvanshir estate when the Russians to Baku by the train load. Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan either flee or are arrested and killed by the Red Terror.



## Daghestan

Usually spelled "Dagestan" in English, Daghestan is a mountainous region in Caucasia, northwest of Baku, the wild, inaccessible area to which protagonist Ali Khan Shirvanshir flees to avoid arrest after killing Malik Nachararyan. Ali is brought to Daghestan still recovering from a superficial knife wound to the ribs. Stopping in the capital, Machatsh-Kalé (usually spelled "Machachkala" in English), up the coast of the Caspian Sea from Baku, Ali then moves inland toward Chunsach, and settles in an âoul, or fortified village, accessible only by a twisting path. Huts are built of massive stones in staircase fashion up the steep slopes. Normally averse to tobacco, Ali takes up smoking it laced with hashish.

Ali is found by a younger student, Arslan Aga, who tells Nino Kipiani, Ali's erstwhile fiancée before she is kidnapped by Nachararyan, and she in the company of his pious boyhood friend comes to see him. They marry and set up primitive housekeeping in the âoul, with ally going to Chunsach to buy her "fruits of civilisation" including a gramophone. It is the happiest time of their married life. Hearing of the czar's overthrow, Ali and Nino return to Baku, but she remains forever nostalgic for Daghestan.

## Imperial Russian Humanistic High School of Baku

A secondary school for boys in Baku, the Imperial Russian school is a non-boarding institution following the Latin school curriculum. Locals nickname it the "House of Wisdom." It teaches 40 boys: 30 Muslims, four Armenians, two Poles, three Sectarians, and one Russian. As the novel opens, Professor Sanin lectures flatly about their region being the natural border between Europe and Asia and arguments can be made for it belonging culturally to either continent. His challenge to decide which side to take becomes the central theme of the novel. Students wear smart gray uniforms with silver buttons, epaulets, and cockade. Professors consider a posting here as punishment, and many are assaulted in the narrow streets. Thus, they tend to look the other way when Muslim students cheat and are loath to fail them on exams. At the graduation party, Ali debunks to the Head Master the myth of the "Leprosarium," leaving the remaining students to come up with a new excuse for playing hooky.

## Lyceum of the Holy Queen Tamar

A girls' school across the street from the Imperial Russian Humanistic High School of Baku, the Lyceum of Holy Tamar dresses its students in chaste blue dress uniforms and white aprons. Beautiful Nino Kipiani is among the students. For years Ali Khan Shirvanshir helps her with her mathematics. When Nino gives birth to her daughter, she names her Tamar after the Georgian "Queen of Queens," canonized shortly after her death. Ali notes that the name is used by both Muslims and Christians.





## Mardakjany

Malik Nachararyan's rich villa in the suburbs of Baku, Mardakjany is built of marble and surrounded with an oasis of fruit trees. The road from Baku is poorly paved, allowing protagonist Ali Khan Shirvanshir on horseback to overtake him. Stabbed with his own knife, Ali pursues Nachararyan through the melon fields and murders him, setting off a police search and several blood-feuds. These force Ali to flee into the mountains.

## Moharram / Passion of Hussain

First mentioned as protagonist Ali Khan Shirvanshir sits in the Baku Opera House waiting for Tchaikovsky's opera Eugene Onegin to begin, the Passion of Hussain is sometimes enacted on stage by pious Shiites. Later in the novel, Ali gets caught up in the frantic celebrations that mark the tenth day of the Muslim month of Muharram, the most important time in the Shiite year. The tenth day (Ashura) commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Hussain ibn Ali, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson on the plains of Kerbela in present-day Iraq. Hussain had been en route with family and companions from Mecca to a final confrontation with the corrupt Caliph Yazid Moawia. Yazid kills him brutally. Shiites celebrate the tragic event by processions, recitations of the story, and brutal self-flagellation. When Ali flagellates himself, Nino declares him a hateful barbarian and says she cannot remain in Persia.

## Ottoman Empire (Turkey)

Ruled by the Sunni Muslim Sultan Mehmed V Rashid, the Ottoman Empire declares Holy War a month into World War I, intending to free all Muslims from Russian and British control. The Prophet Muhammad's green flag is hoisted over the palace in Constantinople/Stambul. Shiite fanatics like Seyd Mustafa, protagonist Ali Khan Shirvanshir's boyhood friend, cannot forget centuries of being butchered by Sunnis in order to fight for the Sultan. Enver Bey, a Turkish general and rising star in the Young Turk movement, engineers the alliance with German that brings the Osmons (the name of the Asian tribe from which "Ottoman" is derived) into the war and personally commands the Caucasus campaign. Riding in the desert, Ali recalls the Osmons invading Anatolia from Asia via the Gate of the Gray Wolfe (Sary Kurt) in the desert near Baku.

## Teheran

Usually spelled "Tehran" in English, Teheran is the capital of Persia (modern day Iran), said to be the oldest city in the world, "Roga Rey in Babylonian, the "City of Kings." A branch of the Shirvanshir Family lives in Teheran as part of the elite. Its suburb, Shimran, takes center stage in the latter part of the novel after the fall of Baku to the revolutionary Russians and Armenians. The survivors drive there in an old Ford, which seems to be the pride of the Shirvanshir family in Teheran. The ornately lettered black





Gate of Teheran is surrounded by beggars and dervishes. The party makes its way quickly through alleys across Cannon Square, and out the Imperial Diamond Gate to Shimran and protagonist Ali Khan Shirvanshir's uncle's blue-tiled palace that he has put at their disposal. Nino jokes that she has finally landed in the harem, albeit a one-woman harem. Ali enjoys being back in an Eastern milieu but Nino is miserable, enduring the culture shock. She says she hates Ali after seeing him take part in the bloody Tenth of Moharram rituals and demands they repatriate as soon as possible. A cousin pleads with Ali to remain and help modernize Persia.

## Tiflis

Usually spelled "Tbilisi" in English, Tiflis is the capital of Georgia, founded, says tradition, when a king is hunting and finds his prey and his falcon dead in a sulfur-rich spring. The city grows up around it. When Nino Kipiani's family takes Ali Khan Shirvanshir to Tiflis to meet his future in-laws, there is a week of grueling activities before male cousins take him to relax and rejuvenate in the hot springs where all the famous conquerors of Asia have washed themselves clean of blood. Nino and Ali sit in the Café Mephisto looking at Mount David and its monastery, where the Russian writer and diplomat, Alexander Griboyedov, is buried after being murdered by a mob in Teheran. They also walk through the bazaar to restore Ali's spirit after spending too long in the European-style city. At the end of the novel, Nino and her new-born baby go to Tiflis to evade more warfare.



# Themes

## Religion

Ali and Nino is saturated with the trappings of religion, which comes off generally as having few redeeming qualities. All of the principal characters profess religion, but only a few are shown as fanatics. Christianity is primarily represented by female protagonist Nino, a Georgian who professes Greek Orthodoxy. She is well versed in and sentimental about the legends of the bringing of Christianity to Georgia by her namesake, but does not abide by the moral strictures against premarital sex. The Armenian tradition, separated from the Greeks in antiquity over obtuse theological questions, is represented by Nachararyan, a rich man who admits to being a hedonist. Russian Orthodoxy, the state religion, is shown blithely performing its ritual in the school. Protestants "Sectarrians" are mentioned only in passing, when one eats a ham sandwich, nauseating a strict Shiite Muslim student.

Muslims have since 680 CE been divided into Sunnis and Shiites. The split is often related with great passion from the dominant Shiite point of view and the depth of the animosity is shown subtly and overtly. The martyrdom of Imam Hussain ibn Ali, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad on the plains of Kerbela by the corrupt Caliph Yazid Moawia, is celebrated on the Tenth of Moharram by processions, recitations of the story, and brutal self-flagellation. Late in the novel, Ali gets caught up in the frantic celebrations, causing a major rift between him and Nino. Ali's friend and de facto religious guide, Seyd Mustafa, is a direct descendant of the Prophet. He voices the Shiite view on Sunnis as renegades. When the Sunni Sultan of Turkey declares Holy War during World War I, intending to free all Muslims from Russian and British domination, Shiite soldiers' consciences are bothered by the prospect of fighting fellow Muslims, but Seyd Mustafa sees the Turks cutting Iran in half, and destroying the True Faith. When the Bolsheviks conquer Baku, they force loud-mouthed Seyd Mustafa to eat pork to defile him. The novel shows many facets of Muslim life, including the simple marriage ceremony, which is essentially a contract, and the rooftop prayers directed towards the Kaaba in Mecca in Arabic, which is virtually incomprehensible to the Tartars.

Another fanatic for his faith is a Baha'i, a 19th-century sect that teaches the oneness of God, religion, and humankind. It recognizes Buddha, Confucius, and other emissaries of God along with Christ and Muhammad. Musa Nagi is an apostate from Shiism but is received with honor among the oil princes because of his 200 million ruble fortune. He has established a charitable foundation in memory of his late son. The other oil princes know little about the esoteric faith but figure it must be a terrible heresy because of the bloodthirstiness with which it is persecuted in Persia. Jews, another rich minority in the region are strangely absent from the novel.



## Blood

The Caucasus is peopled by many nationalities, separated into distinct quarters, and all having long memories for past mistreatment. Shiites see the blood-feud, whereby murderers and their families are held liable by the victim's survivors, as an institution ordained by God and useful in the maintenance of social order. They admit that it sometimes gets out of hand, creating new victims and a snowballing of violence. Male protagonist Ali Khan Shirvanshir has to flee to remote Daghestan after killing Malik Nachararyan for supposedly kidnapping his fiancée, Nino Kipiani. Ali has to explain World War I to his simple-minded, bloodthirsty guard as a blood-feud between the Austro-Hungarian Emperor whose heir is murdered by a Serb and the Serbian Kralj (King). The German Kaiser and Russian Tsar join in because of blood ties. The monarchs must certainly fight hand-to-hand because blood-feud cannot be consigned to mere soldiers.

After the Russians withdraw from the war, there is talk of a pan-Turkic state, based on the myth of Turan unifying all the Muslim people of Asia. Fanatic Shiite Seyd Mustafa insists that the Prophet's blood that flows in his veins is all that matters. Turkic peoples inhabiting Siberia are pagans, allowed by God to go astray. The Ottomans, following the Sunni tradition of Islam are likewise "renegades" and may not be joined in Holy War.

A great deal of real, liquid blood flows in the novel, including Ali's. In the end, that is all that really counts. Ali and Azerbaijan bleed to death together.

## Women

Ali and Nino is very much a novel about a woman surviving and trying to flourish in a patriarchal world. Nino Kipiani, a Georgian Christian must obey her father's order to hold off marrying Ali Khan Shirvanshir until she graduates and World War I ends. She makes Ali promise that he will not require her to wear the veil or live in a harem. Ali's uncle has four wives as allowed by the Koran on strict condition that all be treated equally. Ali's father advises him to treat Ali kindly, never beat her when she is pregnant, but also never to listen to her advice. Ali's friend, Seyd Mustafa, is blunter: women have no soul and no mind. They are the "acre" in which a man sows his seed. Women must love their one husband and be faithful. Adultery is, according to the Sharia Law, punished by brutal drowning by the cockled husband, who then cries crocodile tears about his loneliness. Because women are mindless and soulless, their religion does not matter. Nino, therefore, does not have to convert to Islam when she marries Ali.

Ali is possessive and jealous but declares he truly love Nino, including her soul. He sees advantages of mystery in the veil, but promises not to force it on her. She turns down his every offer of beautiful scarves, even though wearing one would allow her to go out on the streets in Teheran. Instead, she broods at home, alone in the harem, contending with the eunuch who wants to teach her proper behavior. Ali tries to compensate by buying her gifts and spending time with her, until she learns that



relatives are joking enviously about all of the sex she is getting, since husbands and wives spend time together only for that purpose. Otherwise, they lead separate lives.

Back in Baku, serving as unofficial hostess for the Republic of Azerbaijan, Nino shows that she has picked up some of the Eastern mores. She resents Western officers touching her fingers in greeting and gazing at her back, revealed in evening gowns. Ali too is offended, but holds his temper.

# Style

## Point of View

Ali and Nino is told in the first person, past tense, by Ali Khan Shirvanshir. It begins with a quick summary of life in the Russian school and concentrates on Nino Kipiani being the most beautiful girl in the world. The odd comment in passing that, "All this had been five years ago," is the first hint that the novel is a written document of some sort rather than simply reminiscences.

This fact is revealed rather late in the novel, when Ali is given writing materials by a would-be journalist, eager to learn Ali's inner thoughts as a war hero. Instead, Ali begins his recording his story. Final confirmation comes only in the touching postscript added by his boyhood friend, Iljas Beg, who retrieves the notebook from Ali's dead body as he prepares him for burial.

The notebooks is not, strictly speaking a diary, because Ali describes himself as writing fitfully during free moments during what turns out to be his final battle, trying to get everything down on paper. For whom he is writing is not indicated. Some parts are clearly written at leisure, for the betray an eye and ear for detail and a certain joy at describing them with literary flair. Wherever he goes and with whomever he speaks, Ali pulls out bits of history, legend, poetry, and song, and records them at length.

## Setting

Ali and Nino is set primarily in Baku, a town on the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea where oil has recently been struck and is being developed by Nobel family. It has created immense wealth among a handful of Muslim notables and gathered large numbers of disgruntled foreign laborers. Religious and racial tensions run high, but all told, Baku is a meeting place for "progressive Europe" and "reactionary Asia" in comparative cultural harmony.

The novel opens shortly before the first shots of World War I, and closes after the Bolshevik Revolution and the proclamation of—and quick quashing of—an independent Republic of Azerbaijan. In the course of the novel, Ali and Nino travel to mountainous Daghestan, Georgia, and Iran. Major scenes are set in a small, isolated, thoroughly primitive *âoul* and in the family's plush palace in Iran, particularly in the harem, where the Christian Nino experiences the most radical culture shock. The couple strolls around historic Tiflis (Tbilissi), discussing history and culture. The novel ends with Ali dying while manning his machine gun at the same bridge in Gandsha (Elisabethpol) where a Shirvanshir ancestor is treacherously killed long before.

## Language and Meaning

According to the afterword and editorial comments, *Ali and Nino* is first published in 1937 in German and largely forgotten until it appears in English translation in 1970. Jenia Graman stumbles on a copy in a used book store after World War II, is impressed, translates it, and sees to its publication. There is no indication of who Graman is or what her qualifications as a translator might be. She retains the German spellings for all names, titles, places, and objects. A reader not versed in Muslim culture will find it merely difficult to sound out these words and phrases. Anyone else will be frustrated trying to figure out who or what is being discussed.

The end materials also reveal that "Kurban Said" is a pseudonym for Baroness Elfriede Ehrenfels, an Austrian writer, and Lev Nussimbaum, a Jew born in Baku who converts to Islam and takes the name of Essad Bey. From exile in Berlin, he writes biographies of notable figures in history. Who writes what parts cannot be determined, but the story even in translation is eerily sensitive to male/female and East/West perspectives. Ali and Nino each love their respective worlds, but are able to see the other's perspective and given them room to enjoy.

History, legend, fable, myth, religion, philosophy, and song play heavily in the novel, and the reader gets a good picture of the culture of Caucasia. The narrator, Ali, pays attention to the cultural differences and while biased, is a careful observer. While not given to guffawing, he sees the humor in many situations, particularly Nino's struggles with the eunuch. He tells of his participation in the bloody Tenth of Moharram march with the detachment of a mystic swept away and transported. He applies the same objectivity to other crisis points in his life

## Structure

*Ali and Nino* consists of twenty-nine numbered but untitled chapters. There are no larger division of the text. Only late in the novel is it suggested that the text is male protagonist Ali Khan Shirvanshir's written reminiscences, which is confirmed only after his battlefield death. The story progresses chronologically, with occasional personal flashbacks and frequent reminiscences about historical and literary subjects.

The first part pictures Baku as a town transformed by the discovery of oil. The Tartars like Ali resent the governing Russians and the influx of Western culture and mores. Ali as a schoolboy falls in love with Nino Kipiani, a royal Georgian Christian. Before they can marry, World War I breaks out. Ali's freedom is removed when Nino is kidnapped and his pursuit and murder of the culprit opens a blood-feud and force Ali to flee to the wilds of Daghestan. There he becomes a prodigal son, wallowing in wine and hashish, but Nino comes to him, they marry, and live happily until word comes that Baku is safe. The peace is short-lived and after Ali distinguishes himself in warfare, they go into exile in Persia.



Life in Teheran is pleasant for Ali, who has family there, but a horrible burden for Nino, who is kept house-bound and badgered about her behavior. Life in the one-woman harem ruled by a eunuch is described at length, with many humorous incidents. There is no humor when Ali joins in the bloody rites of Tenth of Moharram, and Nino insists on leaving. The times allow their return to Baku and a flourishing as members of the leadership of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Parenthood does not improve marital bliss, however, and the family takes a vacation. During it, they learn of a new Russian invasion, and Ali stays behind to defend his homeland, promising to join Nino and the baby in Tiflis. He is killed and friend Iljas Beg hopes he can get the diary to Nino some day.





## Quotes

"Our old town is full of secrets and mysteries, hidden nooks and little alleys. I love these soft night murmurs, the moon over the flat roofs, and the hot quiet afternoons in the mosque's courtyard with its atmosphere of silent meditation. God let me be born here, a Muslim of the Shiite faith, in the religion of Imam Dshafar. May he be merciful and let me die here, in the same street, in the same house where I was born. Me and Nino, a Christian, who eats with knife and fork, has laughing eyes and wears filmy silk stockings" Chapter 2, pg. 19.

"Dadiani looked at me thoughtfully: 'You have the soul of a desert man,' he said. 'Maybe that is the one real vision between men: wood men and desert men. The Orient's dry intoxication comes from the desert, where hot wind and hot sand make men drunk, where the world is simple and without problems. The woods are full of questions. Only the desert does not ask, does not give, and does not promise anything. But the fire of the soul comes from the wood. The desert man—i can see him—has but one face, and knows but one truth, and that truth fulfills him. The woodman has many faces. The fanatic comes from the desert, the creator from the woods. Maybe that is the main difference between East and West.'" Chapter 6, pg. 51.

" 'All right,' said my father. After that he did not talk of war any more, but looked at me sideways, searchingly. Maybe his son was not a degenerate after all. I talked to the Mullah of the Mosque Taza-Pir. He understood me immediately. He came to our house in his flowing robes, spreading the fragrance of ambergris, and was closeted with my father for a long time. He told him that according to the Koran this was was not a part of a Muslim's duty, and quoted many of the Prophet's adages in support of this. After that I had peace and quiet in my house. But in my house only. Lust for war was spreading amongst the young folks, and not every one had the sense enough to hold back. Sometimes I went to see my friends. I passed Zizianashvili's Gate, turned into Ashum Alley, crossed the Street of Holy Olga, and strolled towards Seinal Aga's house."Chapter 9, pgs. 76-77.

"Seyd gave me a wise, searching look. 'I say yes, Ali Khan. A man must marry, preferably the woman he likes. She need not like him in return. A wise man does not court a woman. The woman is just the acre, on which the man sows. Must the field love the farmer? Enough that the farmer loves the field. Marry, but never forget: the woman is just an acre.'

" 'So you believe that a woman has neither soul nor intelligence?'

"He looked at me pityingly: 'How can you ask, Ali Khan? Of course she hasn't. Why should a woman have either? It is enough for her to be chaste and have many children. The Law says: the evidence of one man is more than the evidence of three women. Never forget that, Ali Khan.' I had been quite prepared to hear the pious Seyd Mustafa curse me for wanting to marry a Christian, who did not like him, so I was really touched



by his answer. It proved again that he was honest and wise. 'So you don't mind her being a Christian? Or should she become a Muslim?'

" 'Why should she?' he asked. 'A creature without soul and intelligence has no faith anyway. No Paradise or Hell is waiting for a woman. When she dies she just disintegrates into nothing. The sons must of course be Shiites.' I nodded." Chapter 11, pgs. 95-96.

" 'And what will you do now, Khan?' asked Nachararyan.

" 'Kidnap Nino and take her to Persia. I can't take this lying down! To say No to a Shirvanshir! Who does he think he is? I feel dishonoured, Nachararyan. The House of Shirvanshir is older than the Kipianis. Under Aga Mohammed Shah we destroyed the whole of Georgia. Then any Kipiani would have been only too pleased to give his daughter to a Shirvanshir. What does he mean, difference in religion? Is Christianity better than Islam? And my honour? My own father will laugh at me. A Christian refuses me his daughter. We Mohammedans are wolves who have lost their teeth. A hundred years ago...' My fury choked me and stopped my outburst. Just as well—already I had said much that would better be left unsaid. Nachararyan was a Christian too. He had every right to feel insulted. But he was not." Chapter 12, pg. 107.

" 'And then all reading and writing should be forbidden, we'd use candles instead of electricity, and elect the most stupid man king of the country.' Mehmed Haidar did not rise to the legpull.

" 'That's right,' he said, 'in the olden times there were many more stupid people about. And they built canals instead of oil derricks, and robbed the foreigners instead of letting them rob us. In those times people were happier than they are now.' I felt like embracing and kissing the simple fellow. He spoke as if he himself were a chunk of our poor tortured earth. But suddenly a wild knocking at the door made me jump. I looked out. Seyd Mustafa rushed into the room. His turban hung to one side over his glistening brow. His green belt had come loose, his grey cape was dusty. He fell on a chair and gasped: 'Nachararyan has kidnapped Nino. Half an hour ago. They're on the road to Mardakjany.'" Chapter 16, pgs. 143-144.

"With a steady hand she wrote: 'Nino Hanum Shirvanshir.' Then the witnesses signed. Seyd Mustafa brought out the seal with his name on it and pressed it to the paper. There it was, in lovely Kufi script: 'Hafis Seyd Mustafa Meshedi, Slave to the Lord of the Word.' He gave me the document. Then he embraced me and said in Persian: 'I am not a good man, Ali Khan. But Arslan Aga told me that without Nino you're going to ruin in the mountains, and becoming a drunkard. That is a sin. Nino asked me to take her here. If it is true what she says, love her. If it is not true we'll kill her tomorrow.'

" 'It is not true anymore, Seyd, but we won't kill her, even so.'

"He gave me a puzzled look. Then he looked round the room and laughed. One hour later we cast the hashish pipe ceremoniously into the abyss. And that was all there was to our wedding." Chapter 20, pg. 175.



"I went back to my room. Nino was talking on the telephone. 'No, Mama,' I heard her say, 'I'm staying here. There is really no danger, you know. Thanks, Papa, don't worry, we've got enough food. Yes, thank you. But please don't worry. I'm not coming. I'm not!' She raised her voice on the last word, it was a cry. She put the receiver down. 'You are right, Nino,' I said, 'you wouldn't be safe at your parents' house either. At eight o'clock the last boat leaves for Persia. Pack your things.'

"She blushed deeply. 'You're sending me away, Ali Khan?'

"Never had I seen Nino blush like this. 'You'll be safe in Teheran, Nino. If the enemies win they'll rape all women.'

"She raised her head and said defiantly: 'They won't rape me, Ali Khan—not me. Don't worry.'

" 'Go to Persia, Nino, please! There's still time.'

" 'Stop it,' she said severely. 'Ali, I'm terribly afraid, of the enemy, of the battle, of all the terrible things that are going to happen. But I'm staying here. I can't help you, but I belong to you. I have to stay here, that's all there is to it.' That was all. I kissed her eyes and felt very proud. She was a good wife, even when she defied me." Chapter 21, pgs. 188-189.

" 'My name is Jahja Kuli. I am the guard of your honour, Khan. I can read, write, and do sums. I know all about management and how to treat women. You can depend on me. I can see this is a wild one, but in time I will teach her how to behave. Tell me when she has periods, so I can make note of it and remember. I'll have to know this, so I can judge her moods. For I'm sure she can be ill-tempered. I'll wash and shave her myself. I see she has even got hair in her armpits. It is really terrible how in some countries women's education is neglected. Tomorrow I'll dye her nails red, and before she goes to bed I'll look into her mouth.'

" 'Good heavens, what for?'

" 'Women with bad teeth have foul breath, so I must see her teeth and smell her breath.'

" 'What's the creature jabbering about?' asked Nino.

" 'He's recommending a dentist. Seems a queer character.'" Chapter 23, pg. 202.

"I stood at the window. Suddenly I was overcome by a new and irresistible feeling—the cry gripped my soul with it warning, and I was filled with the desire for utter submission. I saw the drops of blood in the dust of the street, and I heard the sound of the tambourine, calling and liberating. This was it: the Mystery of the Unseen, the Gate of Sorrow, that leads to the Grace of the Redeemer. I pressed my lips together, and my hands gripped the windowsill. I saw the Hand of Fatima, and all the visible world sank away from me. Once more I heard the hollow sound of the drum—then the rhythm of the wild cries was in me. I had become part of the crowd. I walked with the broad-shouldered men, and my fists hammered against my naked breast. Later I sensed the cool darkness of a mosque around me, and heard the Imam's plaintive call. Someone put a heavy chain into my hand, and I felt the burning pain on my back. Hours passed. A wide square lay in front of me, and from my throat came, wind and joyous, the old cry: 'Shah-ssé ... Wah-ssé...'" Chapter 27, pgs. 234-235.



She crossed the hall and came to me. Her hand touched my sleeve, as if asking for help. 'Ali Khan,' she said softly, 'you feel now the way I felt when I went to see your aunts and cousins in Teheran. What are all these men to me? I don't want them to look at me like that.' Then she turned away and took the major's wife's hand. I heard her say: 'You should really see our National Theatre. Just now Shakespeare is being translated into our Tartar language. Next week will be the first night of "Hamlet."' I wiped the sweat off my brow and thought of the severe laws of hospitality: The is an old saying: 'If a guest enters your house holding the severed head of your only son in his hand, you must still receive him, offer him food and drink and honour him as a gust.' That is a wise law. But sometimes it is very difficult to keep." Chapter 28 pg. 253.

"Ali Khan Shirvanshir fell at quarter past five on the bridge of Gandsha behind his machine-gun. His body fell into the dry river bed. I went down. He was pierced by eight bullets. In his pocket I found this book. God willing, I will take it to his wife. We buried him in the early morning, shortly before the Russians started the last attack. The life of our Republic has come to an end, as has the life of Ali Khan Shirvanshir." Chapter 20, pgs. 275.

## Topics for Discussion

How are women dealt with in *Ali and Nino*?

How do Iljas Beg and Seyd Mustafa differ in their evaluation of Westernization?

How do legends and poetry unite and divide the people of Caucasia in this novel?

Is petroleum a blessing or a curse to Baku?

Ali claims to be a practicing Shiite. Does his depiction of his religion help readers appreciate and understand it better?

Is Iljas Beg correct: Ali has an obligation to survive the war to serve another day? Are there irreplaceable individuals?

How is the Sharia—Islamic Law—portrayed in the novel?