

Beneath a Marble Sky: A Novel of the Taj Mahal Study Guide

**Beneath a Marble Sky: A Novel of the Taj Mahal by
John Shors**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

Beneath a Marble Sky: A Novel of the Taj Mahal Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Part 1, Narration.....	6
Part 1, Chapters 1-3.....	7
Part 1, Chapters 4-5.....	10
Part 2, Narration.....	12
Part 2, Chapters 6-7.....	13
Part 2, Chapters 8-9.....	16
Part 2, Chapters 10-11.....	18
Part 2, Chapters 12-13.....	20
Part 3, Narration.....	22
Part 3, Chapters 14-16.....	23
Part 3, Chapters 17-18.....	25
Part 3, Chapters 19-21.....	27
Part 4, Narration.....	29
Part 4, Chapters 22-25.....	30
Characters.....	33
Objects/Places.....	38
Themes.....	40
Style.....	43
Quotes.....	46
Topics for Discussion.....	48



Plot Summary

Beneath a Marble Sky is the story of a woman's journey to self-acceptance. Jahanara wants to love and be loved, according to the example her parents, Shah Jahan and Arjumand Mumtaz Mahal, have set, but in order to find love, even within the restricted world of a woman in seventeenth century Hindustan, she must first come to love herself. When her mother dies in childbirth, Jahanara tries to follow in her footsteps by advising her brother, Dara, and, at times, her father as well, but she never feels worthy of this responsibility. In the architect, Isa, she finds love and support, but in order to truly celebrate their love, she must first rid herself of the ties that bind, and her compulsion to prove herself worthy to her loved ones.

Thirteen-year old Jahanara, daughter of Emperor Shah Jahan and Arjumand Mumtaz Mahal, plays with her brothers and sisters in the harem of the Red Fort at Agra. She is a curious and clever girl, but she is conscious of the fact that she is close to turning the corner on womanhood. She loves her older brother, Dara, the heir to the throne, but her younger brother, Aurangzeb, frightens her with his jealousy and cruelty. At a river outing, Jahanara becomes convinced that Aurangzeb would have let her drown, and she begins to avoid him. Aside from Aurangzeb, her childhood is idyllic and privileged. She basks in the glory of her parents' love for each other and dreams of the day when such a love will be hers.

The perfection of Jahanara's childhood is shattered first by her arranged marriage, at age sixteen, to an older brute of a man, Khondamir, and then by the unexpected death of her mother in childbirth. The combined efforts of Jahanara, her father, and the court physician cannot save the Emperor's beloved wife. Before she dies, Arjumand makes Jahanara promise to watch over her father. Shah Jahan is heartbroken by her death, and he weeps in an agony of grief.

Arjumand's death leaves a huge hole in Jahanara's life, but she soon has a reason to overcome her sorrow. Shah Jahan calls on the greatest builder of the day, Ustad Isa, to construct an unparalleled mausoleum for his wife. The young architect is willing to take on the project, but requires a painting of Arjumand for inspiration. Shah Jahan offers the face of his daughter, Jahanara, as a mirror of her mother. The emperor also assigns Jahanara to the project to act as his agent when he is taken up with other matters of state. Jahanara finds love and acceptance with Isa, along with a stunned admiration of his vision for the great building that will honor her mother.

The mausoleum, which Shah Jahan names Taj Mahal using his nickname for Arjumand, develops slowly; the blocks of marble are heavy and awkward, and the foundation must be laid deeply to ensure its future stability. The work is difficult, but fulfilling. As the building grows, so does the love that Jahanara and Isa share. They are not free, however, to show their love in public. In her father, Jahanara finds a sympathetic heart. He makes secret arrangements twice for Isa and Jahanara to be together. They share their love in a safe house in the city that can be accessed by a long, secret tunnel from the Red Fort. Soon, they conceive a child. Jahanara has learned to manipulate her



stupid, often absent husband, and she convinces him that the child is his. She safely delivers a daughter, whom she names Arjumand.

Meanwhile, her brother Aurangzeb fights for the Empire in Persia and the Deccan region, gaining physical strength and knowledge of war. His support among the nobles of the court increases along with his many victories. Dara, the heir, is the exact opposite. Philosophical and dreamy, he relies on his study of religious texts to guide his decision-making. He too has support among the nobles, but Jahanara fears that his gentle, tolerant disposition will be overrun by the ruthless ambition of Aurangzeb. Jahanara defends Dara when she can and keeps close tabs on Aurangzeb through her friend, Ladli, who becomes his lover in order to spy on him. Jahanara also sends Nizam, her faithful slave, off to fight in the army with Aurangzeb. She needs friends in these positions in order to defend her family against Aurangzeb's ambition.

Even though she sees the conflict between her brothers on the horizon, when she happens upon Aurangzeb late one night, transfixed by a cobra ready to strike, she cannot stand by and let her brother die. She slays the snake with Aurangzeb's sword. Aurangzeb then turns on her, accusing her of planting the serpent to assassinate him. His ingratitude angers her and she lashes out, making a permanent, powerful enemy of her brother. She has now chosen sides and cannot go back.

After eleven years, the Taj Mahal is complete, but with its completion, Shah Jahan loses his desire to live without his beloved Arjumand, and falls ill. Aurangzeb seizes the moment and makes a grab for the throne. Jahanara schemes desperately with her father and brother, Dara, to repulse Aurangzeb, but they are ultimately defeated in battle. Aurangzeb executes Dara and Dara's son for heresy, and then throws Jahanara and her father in a small cell that overlooks the Taj Mahal. Her only consolation is that Isa and their daughter, Arjumand, have fled the city and are safe from Aurangzeb's ruthless revenge.

Jahanara spends several years imprisoned with her father until her faithful servant, Nizam, comes with news of Isa, and a plan to escape. After bribing her jailers, she travels with Nizam to Bijapur, where Isa is being held prisoner as he builds a mosque for the Sultan. Jahanara strikes a bargain with the Sultan, offering the information that will help them assassinate Aurangzeb in exchange for Isa and Arjumand's freedom. The Sultan reluctantly agrees, but first Isa must complete the mosque.

After spending a week with her loved ones, Jahanara returns in disguise to Agra and her father, compelled to watch over him by her love and the promise she made to her mother. She finds him in a terrible state: weak, filthy, and near death. In her anger, she reveals her identity to the jailer who slams the cell door on her. Her mistake has put her right back in prison. She spends the time she has helping her father and making him comfortable again. Soon, however, her callous husband, Khondamir comes to wreak his own revenge for her faithlessness and insults. He rapes her brutally, but she manages to rally enough to curse him as he leaves her bruised and bleeding. Aurangzeb arrives at the cell to accuse her of again trying to assassinate him. He has his men torture her, wanting her to give up the name of her accomplice. Craftily, she names her lout of a



husband. Aurangzeb kills him on the spot, but spares Jahanara in order to see her suffer.

Shortly after, Jahanara's father succumbs to his illness and dies. He is happy in his last moments to be joining his beloved in heaven. Aurangzeb stages an elaborate funeral at the Taj Mahal and demands that Jahanara be present and dressed in her best finery. He has her delivered to the harem, where the women clean her up and then scheme to help her escape. With the women's help, she breaks free of the Red Fort and finds Isa, Arjumand, and her friends, Ladli and Nizam, in Calcutta.

Together they make a life for themselves by the sea, finding the love of their small family preferable to the glory and danger of the Mughal court. They live on in peace into their old age, but after Isa's death, Jahanara decides the time is right to tell her granddaughters of their legacy. She does so in the shadow of the Taj Mahal, and as she does, she thinks about Isa, her beloved architect who built such a tangible testament to the power of love.



Part 1, Narration

Part 1, Narration Summary

Beneath a Marble Sky is both a love story and a tale of a woman who must find her own true path while bearing the restrictions of having been born a girl and a daughter of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan and his peerless wife, Arjumand Mumtaz Mahal. In the opulent world of the seventeenth century Hindustani court, Jahanara wants to find the love and respect that are her due because she sees the wondrous love her parents have together, a love that transcends even life, but she also feels the strong pull of duty and the responsibility that comes with being born a princess. Her family is everything to her and she makes promises to herself, her mother, and her brothers, only to find that the one promise she is always able to keep is to love unconditionally.

The novel begins on the banks of the Yamuna River under the shadow of the great Taj Mahal. A grandmother has brought her two granddaughters, Rurayya and Gulbudan, to this place to tell them a fantastic story about love, hate, revenge, and redemption. The story is hers to tell because it happened to her. The grandmother is Jahanara, daughter of Shah Jahan and Arjumand, and she was once a princess of the imperial court. At first the granddaughters doubt her story. They cannot believe they are the grandnieces of the current cruel and hated Emperor Alamgir, but their grandmother, Jaha, tells them to listen and believe. She begins with a love story, the meeting of two souls, the young prince Khurram, later known as Shah Jahan, and his love Arjumand, whom he called Mumtaz Mahal, Chosen One of the Palace.

Part 1, Narration Analysis

The author begins his tale with the authoritative voice of an old woman, a grandmother who can finally reveal her best-kept secret to her dear granddaughters. This frame story allows the author to establish the reliability of the narrator, and to reassure the reader that Jahanara will survive her trials and tribulations. The frame story, or story surrounding a story, takes some of the suspense out of the narration, but what the author loses in reader anticipation he gains in narrator trustworthiness. The reader believes Jahanara because she is old, and she has had time to reflect on her story and tell it well. The granddaughters also look to Nizam, their grandmother's friend, for confirmation and he nods. The reader sees that Nizam knows the story too, which gives it even more weight. The frame story also allows the author to explain Jahanara's character motivations from a perspective that the young Jahanara could not have. The grandmother can comment on political changes and outside influences in a believable way, where the young Jahanara would have no such insight.



Part I, Chapters 1-3

Part I, Chapters 1-3 Summary

In chapter one, "My Awakening," the narrator, thirteen-year-old Jahanara, introduces herself and her brothers and sisters to the reader as the princes and princesses play in the luxurious harem at the Red Fort of Agra. Jahanara toys with a cricket she has captured in a jeweled cage and talks to her older brother Dara until her younger brother, Aurangzeb, interrupts them. Aurangzeb taunts Jahanara, and when their bickering threatens to become a brawl, it draws the attention of their mother, Arjumand, the legendary beauty and wife of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan.

To stop the quarrel, Arjumand takes the children to see their father as he conducts the business of the Empire in the Diwan-i Am, or audience hall of the Fort. Shah Jahan acknowledges the arrival of his family, particularly his eldest son and heir, Dara, and his favored wife. He calls on Arjumand's wisdom to help him settle a question of law regarding a stolen sack of rice. Arjumand stuns young Jahanara when she calls the girl forward to feel the thief's hands. Jahanara pronounces them the hands of a farmer. Her statement pleases Arjumand, who then recommends to Shah Jahan that the man's life be spared but that his land be given to the noble from whom he stole. The Empress will employ him as her gardener. The Emperor is well satisfied with Arjumand's solution, but Jahanara notices Aurangzeb's jealous glare and feels uneasy.

Later that evening, as the family dines in splendor along the bank of the Yamuna River, Jahanara thinks about the differences between her brothers. She also thinks about her future and the possibility that she will find a great love in her life. Basking in the praise of both her parents, she pretends to fall asleep. She hears her parents declare their eternal love for each other and share a kiss.

In chapter two, "First Betrayal," Aurangzeb's petty attacks on Jahanara and Dara grow worse and more frequent. She tells Dara that Aurangzeb reminds her of a bee, and warns that they could get stung at any time.

Jahanara has planned an outing to the river with her best friend, the servant girl Ladli, but her mother insists she take her brothers with her on the adventure. The outing is a treat for all and they all play in the water, dunking and splashing each other. Later, Jahanara tries to convince the cynical Ladli that her brother Dara is taken with her. Ladli goes to sit with Dara on the riverbank while Jahanara stays in the water, floating and dreaming of her future love.

Suddenly she is thrust under the water, she cannot breathe or see in the murky river. Panicked, she manages to come up for air and sees that Aurangzeb is her tormentor. He teases her cruelly about her budding breasts and she strikes him hard with her fist, cutting his face with her ring. Not one to forgive and forget, an angry Aurangzeb vows revenge and stalks off, leaving Jahanara in the river.



Jahanara then hears the frightened cry of a young child who has been swept downstream into deeper water. She tries to save the child, but gets pulled into the strong current too. Aurangzeb sees her from his position on the bank but makes no effort to aid them. Jahanara becomes terrified as the water grows deeper and colder, and her hold on the young child weakens.

Fortunately, a couple of fishermen in a boat see them and row out to help. Aurangzeb, to Jahanara's surprise, is in the boat and throws her a rope. Despite this, Jahanara remains convinced that he would have let her drown if the fishermen had not seen her. Later, she tries to tell her brother Dara about Aurangzeb's treachery but he does not believe her. Jahanara has learned to fear Aurangzeb.

In chapter three, "Childhood Lost," Jahanara has persistent nightmares about Aurangzeb's vengeance. When he doesn't follow up on his threats, however, Jahanara's attention turns from the world of children to the world of adults. Under her mother's tutelage, Jahanara becomes skilled in the social interactions of the Mughal court. She also begins training to run her own household. Her mother is preparing her for her future marriage, not only cooking and care of servants, but also the nature of men's desire.

Her brothers also learn lessons in statecraft and diplomacy but only Aurangzeb takes them seriously. Jahanara's brother, Dara, who will someday be Emperor, is too absorbed in philosophical and religious texts to give much attention to squabbles between the nobles and wars with the Persians.

This fact concerns Jahanara so much that she talks to Dara, chiding him for his inattention to Imperial business. They discuss whether they will marry for love as their parents obviously have. Then Jahanara mentions Aurangzeb's popularity with the nobles and whether his hostility towards his brother will lead him to try to take the throne from Dara by force. Dara states that he could never fight Aurangzeb, his own brother. Loving Dara as she does, Jahanara decides at that moment that she must do everything she can to protect her brother.

Part I, Chapters 1-3 Analysis

The first three chapters serve to introduce Jahanara as the narrator of her own life story, but the point of these chapters is to set up the conflicts and emotions that form the core of Jahanara's quest for self-acceptance. She establishes the nature of her relationships with her brothers, her mother and father, and with the two key servants in her life, Nizam and Ladli. With Dara, she is loving and kind, and they are very close. With Aurangzeb, she is confused at his hostility and afraid of his sudden vengefulness and deliberate cruelty. Nizam, her mother's slave and manservant, is a silent witness to her development as a young girl of the court. He is always in the background, protecting her and her mother. Ladli, a Hindu servant who works in the kitchen, is her best friend and confidant. They trade stories about future loves, Ladli in an earthy way, and Jahanara on a more esoteric plane, even while they giggle together as young girls do.



These chapters also build in the reader's mind the vast and luxurious setting of the unimaginably opulent court that is Jahanara's home. She describes the jewels, the clothes, the harem, and the Peacock Throne itself. She is not just any child of loving parents, but the daughter of Shah Jahan, Emperor of a vast territory of Hindustan that covers most of modern day India, and Arjumand Mumtaz Mahal, The Chosen One of the Palace. Her mother's legendary beauty is a feature of the court too.

Jahanara understands clearly that with her position of privilege comes responsibility. She studies hard in order to be worthy of her parents' love.

Her mother is a dominant figure in Jahanara's young life. There is gentle love, but also a dose of hard reality present in Arjumand's desire to impart a measure of her wisdom and her techniques for clever scheming to her impulsive daughter. Arjumand can also see the potential conflict that glimmers on the horizon, given the differing natures of her two oldest sons. She uses the time she has to teach Jahanara to negotiate this treacherous path with care and purpose.

The enduring and passionate love her mother and father have for each other forms a bedrock of stability for Jahanara as she puts aside her childhood concerns and learns to navigate the world of adults. Like any young teenager, Jahanara is confused by new feelings within herself and changing relationships within her family. Her bewilderment is clearly evident when she and Dara talk about a potential future in which Aurangzeb might make a grab for the throne, but neither can see a future where one brother kills the other. The incident with Aurangzeb at the river foreshadows coming conflicts between herself and her brothers. That Aurangzeb, should he successfully defeat Dara, will rule with hate and fear is clear even in these beginning chapters. What Jahanara cannot see at this point is what she is going to be able to do about any of it.



Part I, Chapters 4-5

Part I, Chapters 4-5 Summary

In chapter four, "Darkness," at age sixteen, Jahanara weds the man her parents have chosen for her. Khondamir is a wealthy merchant, important to the Empire's trade relationships, and more than twice Jahanara's age. Jahanara dreads her wedding day, but also desires to please her mother and father by doing her duty to strengthen the Empire. The marriage ceremony itself is elaborate and lengthy, her jewels and dress are magnificent, and the wedding feast is lavish. A nervous Jahanara, repelled by her coarse, loutish new husband, drinks more wine than she should at the wedding banquet.

The drink proves to be a blessing, however, as it numbs her to the brutal insensitivity of her introduction to her marital duties in the bedroom. Khondamir takes his new bride's virginity in a short, violent episode, after which he falls into a drunken stupor. Jahanara cries herself to sleep, bitterly disappointed by her arranged marriage.

Though she tries in the succeeding days with her husband to find something redeeming in his character and earn his affection, he repudiates her efforts. She begins to consider him a "dull-witted camel." She hates him for causing her pain, and she misses her family terribly. She bargains with him after a particularly bad meal, promising to save his fruit trees if he will let her visit the Red Fort. He agrees grudgingly and she takes a horse to see her friend Ladli. Ladli helps her feel better about her marriage, and while she is with her friend, Jahanara can even feel hopeful that she will find true love someday.

In chapter five, "A Promise to Keep," Jahanara is finally able to see her family as they return from the Empire's war campaigns in the Deccan region to the south. She is sitting with Khondamir watching the victory parade when Dara rides up to invite her to the Fort. The next day, while her father, her husband, and Aurangzeb participate in a special hunt called a *quamargah*, Jahanara discusses the recent battle with Dara and her mother. During their discussion, Dara describes Aurangzeb's courage and ruthlessness on the battlefield. Dara has been amazed by his brother's clarity of purpose when all around them is chaos and death. Arjumand believes that Aurangzeb's soldierly skills compliment Dara's artistic and philosophical talents. Together they make an excellent combination. For the first time, Jahanara disagrees with her mother, but she does not express her difference of opinion.

Arjumand is large with her fourteenth child, and when Jahanara reveals the pain and disappointment of her marriage, the Empress devises a way for Jahanara to be with her family for a while. Jahanara will accompany Arjumand when she goes on campaign with the Emperor, since Arjumand is so near her time to have the baby.



The baby arrives while the emperor is engaged in a long campaign against the Deccan. Well experienced in giving birth, a calm Arjumand calls the physician to attend her. Jahanara and her father are present; and at first, all seems well. During Arjumand's lengthy labor, however, the birth begins to go badly. The baby is turned in a breech position, and the physician is not able to prevent the cord from wrapping around his neck. The baby is born dead. The physician and Shah Jahan try to stop Arjumand's bleeding but it is too late.

Knowing death is close, Arjumand extracts promises from both her husband and Jahanara. She asks Shah Jahan to build her something beautiful, and then she asks her young daughter to take care of the Emperor and watch over him. Arjumand dies and, bereft, Jahanara and her father weep over her together.

Part I, Chapters 4-5 Analysis

These two chapters mark the final end to Jahanara's childhood. She marries the man her parents choose for her, but he is brutal and stupid. It is the first chink in the armor of her devotion to her parents. They have not chosen wisely for her, and though she does not say it, she cannot forgive them for their decision. The next chink comes when she notices that Arjumand has a blind spot when it comes to her violent, vengeful son Aurangzeb. The Empress cannot see that Aurangzeb's ambition will drive him to take the throne from Dara. She only sees that her sons' talents complement each other. In any case, Jahanara is grateful to leave her husband for a while and go to help her mother through her imminent childbirth.

Arjumand's death is entirely unexpected. She has been through the process of birth so many times with such success that even the physician doesn't imagine any difficulty. Jahanara and her father are heartbroken when she dies, but it is the promises that Arjumand extracts from them both that will bind Jahanara even tighter to her father and to the fate of her family. Shah Jahan's promise to build something beautiful for Arjumand results in the Taj Mahal, a project that takes eleven years to complete. Jahanara's promise to watch over her father puts her in danger over and over again.

A storm rages outside the tent where Arjumand lies giving birth and sets the stage for the dramatic event of the difficult birth and death of Jahanara's mother. The rain symbolizes the tears that will be shed for Arjumand and her family in the coming years.



Part 2, Narration

Part 2, Narration Summary

The grandmother, Jaha, explains that her father was forever changed by his grief for his favored wife. However, good comes even from this darkness because when he emerges from a lengthy mourning period, he calls upon the Empire's most talented architect to build a mausoleum such as the world has never seen. The architect's name is Isa.

Part 2, Narration Analysis

The narration serves to explain and foreshadow the most important event in Jahanara's life: the arrival of Ustad Isa to build the Taj Mahal. The reader does not know yet what role Isa will play in Jahanara's life, but the grandmother says he is "everything."



Part 2, Chapters 6-7

Part 2, Chapters 6-7 Summary

In chapter six, "The Truth of Dreams," Emperor Shah Jahan and his family mourn the death of their beloved wife and mother. Aurangzeb is given control of a large part of the army and he leaves to fight the Persians in the north. Shah Jahan directs Dara to deal with the court squabbles and then demands that Jahanara help her father create a design for a mausoleum for Arjumand. To this end, the Emperor puts her in charge of the project when he cannot be present. Then he introduces Ustad Isa, Ustad meaning Master as in Master Builder.

Isa is a surprisingly young man, Jahanara shyly notes with interest, but he is renowned throughout the Empire for his buildings of incredible beauty. The Emperor demands that he build a magnificent edifice in honor of Arjumand, all in white, that captures the grace and splendor of a woman. Isa agrees to the plan but has some demands of his own. To pull off such a project, he must have many men, twenty thousand or more, the finest materials, and time. Shah Jahan promises that he will have all that and more.

Isa then makes one last demand. He must have a portrait of Arjumand at the height of her beauty. In answer, the Emperor offers the face of his daughter, Jahanara, saying that it is a "mirror of her mother's." Jahanara is overwhelmed by her father's faith in her abilities and his perception of her resemblance to her mother.

Jahanara meets Isa again at the project site and is struck by his cheerful calm and his amazing vision for the mausoleum. She is also secretly attracted to his body, which is strong from lifting stones, and his smile, which flashes often with humor. She has many questions for him, and he listens to her with respect and good grace. He invites her back to the site that night to see it in the moonlight.

Back at the Fort, she meets up with Ladli. They discuss the terrible giant of a man Aurangzeb has brought home with him from the wars. His name is Balkhi, and he is known to be a vicious killer. Ladli fears Aurangzeb, but also feels him watching her. Jahanara tells Ladli that she must never show Aurangzeb any fear. She also thinks that Ladli might be able spy on him, using his interest in her as bait.

That night, Jahanara returns to the site in the moonlight. Isa shows her his artistic concept of the building that will honor her mother. She is so overwhelmed and overjoyed by his vision that she empties her lungs in a shout of joy and relief.

In chapter seven, "Pain and Longing," work on the mausoleum begins. The foundation is laid in a vast pit of mud near the Yamuna River. Isa and Jahanara form a friendship during their association as work companions. Warmer feelings grow between them as time goes on, but they do not mention their growing attraction out of respect for Jahanara's marriage and for fear of jeopardizing work on the mausoleum.



Jahanara's relationship with her husband deteriorates further when she is unable to conceive a child. Her husband blames this circumstance entirely on her, but she believes that it is his fault because he is extremely promiscuous but has no children. He remains brutal, striking her at will, and having sex with other women in their bedroom.

Jahanara now has little time to attend to the politics of the Empire because she spends her days at the work site. At a public execution she is required to attend, however, she manages to anger and offend her brother, Aurangzeb. Elephants that are specially trained to slay a man accomplish the killing of the thieving criminals. In the middle of the proceedings, however, Jahanara demands mercy for a young boy implicated in the crimes. She convinces her father to stay his punishment, but when Aurangzeb objects, she shows her disdain by spitting in his direction. The public insult is dire, and though her father supports her, Jahanara knows that Aurangzeb will wreak his revenge.

The young boy dies anyway when Aurangzeb's henchman, Balkhi, castrates him. Jahanara is distraught and terrified, but she must think of a plan to save herself from Aurangzeb's anger. She convinces Ladli to betray her by revealing that Jahanara has "stolen" a gold ring and hidden it from Khondamir. She knows that Khondamir will be angry, but that his punishment will be much less severe than anything Aurangzeb will do. Though her friend is happy to help her, the women mourn the fact that they will never again be able to be friends in public for fear that Aurangzeb will discover their ruse. Khondamir shortly discovers the "crime" from Aurangzeb. He beats Jahanara severely and then kicks her out of his house.

She goes to the mausoleum to find Isa. He comforts her, but can do little to defend her from her monster of a husband and her vengeful brother. Jahanara realizes at that moment that she has fallen in love with Isa, but she can never reveal that love to anyone, including Isa himself.

Part 2, Chapters 6-7 Analysis

Shah Jahan's grief for Arjumand seems all-consuming to Jahanara. Her father changes before her eyes, and with her mother dead, the bedrock of stability that was her parents' love crumbles. Jahanara is now truly on her own and she mourns not only her mother, but her own loss of innocence. When the Emperor emerges from his grief to begin work on the mausoleum to honor his wife, Jahanara can only feel grateful that they now have a purpose once again.

When Shah Jahan introduces Jahanara to Isa and says that her face is a mirror of her mother's, the reader has the first glimpse that Jahanara could be the equal of her mother not only in spirit, but also in beauty. Though Jahanara downplays the comparison in her own mind, Isa does not hesitate to agree with the Emperor's assessment. Isa's respectful interest in Jahanara's questions and opinions is like rain on her parched soul. She has learned to deal with her husband's abuses matter-of-factly, but Khondamir's cruel treatment of her, in addition to her grief, has battered her self-



esteem. Under Isa's regard, she blossoms again into a feisty young woman, a true reflection of her mother.

Her increased confidence, however, encouraged by Isa's loving attention, leads her to make a mistake that is almost fatal. She insults her dangerous brother, Aurangzeb, in her zeal to save the life of a child. In order to avoid a worse fate, she must come up with a punishment that will appease Aurangzeb. Her sharp mind comes to her rescue in this situation when she immediately sees the advantage of having Ladli "betray" her: she can now use Ladli to spy on Aurangzeb in order to protect herself and her brother. Suffering the depths of humiliation and pain after a brutal beating from her husband, she turns to Isa for comfort, and realizes both that she loves him and that for his own safety, she can never reveal that love. It is a bittersweet moment for Jahanara.



Part 2, Chapters 8-9

Part 2, Chapters 8-9 Summary

In chapter eight, "Allah Smiles," Jahanara seeks to atone for her mistakes by pouring her love and attention into the building of the mausoleum. During the Muslim observance of Ramadan, the Month of Blessing, she is able to pray and heal in peace. Her husband, still smarting from her insults, beats her regularly, but never as badly as that one night. She bears the pain philosophically, wanting only to continue her work on the mausoleum.

She is able to get away for a few days to Delhi with Isa. They must travel there by the river to pick up a load of white marble for the immense platform of the structure they are building. She and Isa spend time together outside the constraints of spying eyes, but they still do not act on their feelings for each other.

As they sit atop a huge mound of stone on the river barge, Isa reveals his love to her on their trip back to Agra. They kiss for the first time, but even as they watch a falling star and celebrate their love, Jahanara fears they are doomed.

In chapter nine, "A Sense of Love," it is the fourth year of construction on the mausoleum. Jahanara's father comes to the work site to inspect the progress of the construction. He is extremely pleased by the progress and for the first time, he calls the mausoleum the Taj Mahal. It means, "Chosen One of the Palace," and it was Shah Jahan's nickname for his beloved Arjumand. He also notices Jahanara's regard for the talented architect, Isa. When she asks him for advice, he replies, "Never deny yourself love, my child. For to deny love is to deny God's greatest gift. And who are we to deny God?"

Fearful and still unsure of the risk, Jahanara begins to avoid Isa's company. She cannot bear the thought of jeopardizing the project, and at the same time wonders that Isa does not guess what she is feeling. Fortunately, her father intervenes to bring the lovers together. With only Nizam to accompany her, she embarks on an errand in the country for her father, only to find that he has arranged for the lovers to meet in secret. Isa, and only Isa, is at the inn where she is staying. They share an idyllic three days together, grateful for the Emperor's gift. Having tasted such happiness, however, Jahanara plots and plans how they might live as man and wife in the future.

Part 2, Chapters 8-9 Analysis

These two chapters chronicle the development of Jahanara's love for Isa, juxtaposed against the construction of the Taj Mahal. There is a feeling that nothing must jeopardize the building of such a monument to love. There is also irony in the idea that the Taj Mahal represents Jahanara's ticket to love and freedom even as it anchors her and Isa to Agra. They want to run away, but they cannot. They want to escape to celebrate their



love, but they know they must always return. Isa states he was meant to build the Taj Mahal, and that he was fated to meet Jahanara. Their only escape will be when the Taj Mahal is complete. Jahanara's father aids them to meet in secret as lovers, but such a powerful man as the emperor could surely free them to live together somewhere else. His ulterior motive must be for them to pour their love, and possibly their frustration too, into the Taj Mahal.



Part 2, Chapters 10-11

Part 2, Chapters 10-11 Summary

In chapter ten, "Brothers as Princes," Jahanara meets secretly with Ladli, who tells Jahanara of a plot Aurangzeb has put into action to murder Dara when he travels to Persia to negotiate a peace settlement. Ladli reveals that she has indeed become Aurangzeb's lover in order to find out all his secrets. Jahanara is appalled that her friend has sacrificed everything for her, and she feels deeply guilty that she has dragged Ladli into a life of misery.

Jahanara goes to Dara to warn him of the plot, but will not reveal the source of her information. Dara thinks little of her warning, promising only to be watchful and increase the number of bodyguards protecting him. Unsatisfied with Dara's solution, she decides to take matters into her own hands in order to protect her brother.

She crafts a plan to feed Dara rotten meat so that he will sicken enough to miss the journey to Persia with Aurangzeb, but not so much that his life is in danger. In order to carry out this risky plan, she enlists the aid of Arjumand's old physician as well as that of Nizam, the servant who tastes all of their food. Dara eats the meat and, later that evening, becomes violently ill. The emperor, who does not know of the plan, calls in the physician. Jahanara is nearly crazy with worry at the risk she has taken. She cannot sleep and quarrels publicly with her friend Ladli to ensure that Aurangzeb suspects nothing. Fortunately for Dara, by dawn he has recovered and Aurangzeb has already left for Persia without him.

In chapter eleven, "Daybreak," Isa reveals the inner decorated walls of the mausoleum to Jahanara and her father. The walls are masterpieces, inlaid with a garden of jewels and precious stones, and they are breathtaking in their detailed beauty. The three of them are alone for a few minutes in the mausoleum, and in that time the Emperor notices that Jahanara wears her heart on her sleeve for the architect Isa. When Shah Jahan and his daughter are alone, he cautions her to be careful while still encouraging her love. Jahanara then receives another gift from her father. He tells her of a secret passageway built by his grandfather that connects her mother's former chambers to a small, safe house in the city. He has decided to sell this house to Isa. That way, Jahanara can meet secretly with her love as often as she can get away. The first time she travels through the passage, she is frightened but determined. Her father has told her about a trap in the middle of the corridor, which she must avoid or be crushed by falling rock.

She successfully navigates the passage, and Isa meets her at the house. They are overjoyed at the time they can spend together making love, and discussing a future that now seems possible. They talk about having a child together, but in order to avoid suspicion, Jahanara must trick her husband into believing the child is his. She crafts a



plan to convince Khondamir of his virility: she feeds him prepared bull testicles to "strengthen his seed."

Meanwhile, Aurangzeb stirs up trouble between the Muslims and the Hindus in the Empire by destroying Hindu temples, but his absences to fight an ongoing war with the Deccans mitigate his direct influence. Dara continues his philosophical ways by writing a treatise called *The Mingling of the Two Oceans*, with which he aims to ease the animosity among the Muslims and Hindus by proving the religions share similar foundations.

To her immense joy, and Isa's delight, Jahanara becomes pregnant. She hopes for a girl, which Khondamir will have little to do with, whereas a son would be the pride of his "father." Isa nurtures her through her pregnancy, composing a poignant letter to his unborn child. Jahanara's labor goes well, and she delivers a healthy baby girl. The emperor ensures that Isa greets his new daughter, and they name her Arjumand after Jahanara's mother.

Part 2, Chapters 10-11 Analysis

In these two chapters, the author raises the stakes by putting Jahanara firmly in the middle of the conflict between her two brothers. Jahanara shows her cleverness in saving Dara through the food poisoning technique, but Dara's insistence on religious tolerance foreshadows a weakness that Aurangzeb will exploit. Ladli shows herself as a worthy and loyal ally to Jahanara when she warns her of the plot to kill Dara, but their secret meeting reveals the toll it is taking on Ladli's spirit to tie herself so closely to the violent Aurangzeb. Jahanara has learned to manipulate her stupid and often absent husband to the point that she can risk having a child fathered by her lover, Isa. Shah Jahan, meanwhile, continues to aid Jahanara to find love, but in ways that keep her tied to the Red Fort. He knows that Isa and Jahanara must remain in Agra to complete the mausoleum, so he grants them freedom to enjoy their love, but in secret. The Taj Mahal grows in size and beauty, a silent testimony to love and to sacrifice.



Part 2, Chapters 12-13

Part 2, Chapters 12-13 Summary

In chapter twelve, "Friends for Trade," Jahanara and Isa delight in their daughter, meeting often in the secret house. Jahanara takes the baby, Arjumand, with her almost every night to see Isa. Khondamir, busy with trade and disappointed with a girl child, ignores the baby completely.

Work continues on the Taj Mahal. The labor is arduous and dangerous. Jahanara regrets that many men have died in its construction, crushed by falling stones. There are always more workers, however, to take their places as the building of the mausoleum seems a sacred task. Slowly the Taj Mahal rises, grand and white and beautiful.

Aurangzeb returns from fighting in Persia. He has adopted a strict form of Islam, which angers and insults the Hindu majority. Jahanara looks closely to see how the nobles have arrayed themselves behind her two brothers, but the split seems fairly even. The brothers argue in front of Shah Jahan as he seeks to curb Aurangzeb's jealousy and religious fanaticism. The Emperor even goes so far as to state that Jahanara would make a better Emperor than either of them. Disgusted, Shah Jahan sends Aurangzeb off to fight again. Dara, the favored son, is not spared Shah Jahan's frustrated anger, either, as the Emperor rebukes him for having his head in the clouds. When both sons leave to attend to their duties, Jahanara's father asks for her help in coaching Dara to be a fiercer leader of men, and a better schemer, like herself. She reluctantly takes on the role of adviser, her mother's role, in fact, and concocts a scheme to find out what Aurangzeb is up to. She asks her trusted servant, Nizam, to serve in the army under the command of her brother, and to travel with him to Persia and Deccan.

Later that night, as she second guesses her actions with Isa, he reassures her that she is doing what is best for her family, her father, and the Taj Mahal. He then reveals his deepest wish for her, which is for her to love herself. "Live as you want, and you shall be at peace." But this, Jahanara thinks, is impossible.

In chapter thirteen, "Karma," one of the minarets on the Taj Mahal is finally completed. The feat is cause for celebration for Isa, Jahanara, and the laborers who toil endlessly on the immense structure. The Emperor provides food and drink for the workers and they party late into the night.

Upon her return to the Red Fort from the celebrations, Jahanara comes upon Aurangzeb in his bedroom. Aurangzeb is transfixed by a cobra coiled to strike. Jahanara hesitates to save him, wondering both at his inability to act, and whether it would be better for all if he died. In the end, however, she cannot stand by and let her brother be killed. She enters the room and severs the snake's head from its body with Aurangzeb's sword. Instead of being grateful for her intervention, Aurangzeb accuses her of planting



the snake to assassinate him. He instantly demands proof of her loyalty, requiring that she support him in his bid for the throne. She refuses to deny Dara, however, and Aurangzeb turns ugly and vengeful. When he threatens to give her over to his men, Jahanara becomes angry. She flicks the head of the snake at Aurangzeb and takes satisfaction in his shriek of fear. She labels him a coward and leaves the room knowing there will be no peace between them, and that she has confirmed herself as Aurangzeb's mortal enemy.

Part 2, Chapters 12-13 Analysis

Though Jahanara's life is relatively fulfilled at this point in the story, these chapters show a brewing conflict that neither she nor her father can control. She has a beautiful daughter, a man she loves, and fulfilling work on the Taj Mahal. Despite her scheming behind the scenes, however, Jahanara knows that Aurangzeb's courage as a military leader has endeared him to his men and to some of the nobles that rule the empire. She even questions at one point whether she should support Aurangzeb over Dara in order to save her family from destruction. Even though Dara tries hard to please his father, he cannot focus on the fact that his brother is determined to oust him from the favored spot, and that this conflict will come down to the last man standing.

Isa tries to point out that she lives her life too much for her family, that to be truly happy, Jahanara must live for herself alone. This is too difficult a concept for Jahanara to grasp, tied as she is by a promise to her mother to watch over her father. She has essentially taken her mother's place, but feels ill equipped to make the decisions she knows her mother would make. She does win a battle with her baser nature, however, when she saves Aurangzeb from the cobra. Though his life hangs in the balance for a few moments, in the end, Jahanara cannot stand by and see him killed. It would be as if she had killed him herself. When Aurangzeb asks her for her loyalty, however, she shows her true colors, unable to tolerate the idea of such a cruel man ruling the Empire instead of the gentler, more reasonable Dara.



Part 3, Narration

Part 3, Narration Summary

Jaha's granddaughters ask her why she did not just let the serpent kill Aurangzeb. Even after so many years, Jahanara wonders that too, but knows that she could not have stood by and watched the cobra kill her brother. For all his faults and all the misery he caused, he was her brother and she was not a killer. When they ask her what made him the way he was she says, "Aurangzeb, who feared so many things, could only quiet his fear by giving it to others."

Part 3, Narration Analysis

The frame story of the grandmother telling the tale to her granddaughters provides needed explanation. The reader knows that Jahanara had the courage, perhaps, to kill her brother and save her family from suffering. In the narration, the grandmotherly figure of Jaha explains just why she could not do that. She was not a killer and she could not stand by and see her brother die such a death. The question then arises: Does her action in saving Aurangzeb then make Dara's death inevitable? She made a promise to herself to protect Dara, but she doesn't commit the ultimate act that would allow Dara to take the throne unimpeded. Could she have saved her brother from death and her father from imprisonment? The narration provides a reflection on the difficulty of this decision for Jahanara, given what happened soon after that.



Part 3, Chapters 14-16

Part 3, Chapters 14-16 Summary

In chapter fourteen, "A Tear on the Cheek of Time," Jahanara sends Nizam off to war. After traveling with the army for over a year, Nizam returns to tell Jahanara that Aurangzeb is a fierce and fearless warrior, well respected by his men. Meanwhile, Jahanara and Isa continue their work on her mother's mausoleum. Around the time Jahanara's daughter, Arjumand, turns seven, workers lay the last stone. The Taj Mahal is complete. The Emperor, in his delight, declares a month of celebration.

After eleven years of construction, Shah Jahan is impatient to see the building in its full glory, but he must wait until the workers pull down the extensive scaffolding, a job that could take months. He calls on all of his population, including the army, to come and aid the laborers, sending out word that the materials are free for the taking. The people pull the scaffolding down in a day or two, so that Shah Jahan can see the building by moonlight. He is overcome with joy and sorrow, finally knowing he has kept the promise he made to his dying wife. Inside the tomb chamber, Jahanara ponders that the "[T]he marble shone as if possessed of a magical transparency, as if each arch and wall were luminous from within. We seemed to stand beneath a white marble sky."

Later, Jahanara asks Isa what his plans are now that the Taj is completed. He talks about a time in the future when they can grow old together by the sea. She asks him to promise her it will happen. "All will be fine," he says.

In chapter fifteen, "The Hands of Isa," the triumph of completing the Taj Mahal is overshadowed by Shah Jahan's sudden illness less than a year after the celebration. Aurangzeb sees his chance and makes a determined grab for the Peacock Throne. He kills two of his younger brothers, Shah and Murad, while they are on campaign in Persia. One of Shah's officers survives to warn the emperor that Aurangzeb is now marching on the Red Fort at Agra. Jahanara and her father, along with Dara and Nizam, hatch a plan to defend Agra by meeting Aurangzeb before he gets to the city.

Before the plan can be carried out, Aurangzeb, perhaps knowing the threat Jahanara poses, sends his assassin Balkhi to kill her and her daughter, Arjumand. They barely escape with their lives, fleeing through the secret tunnel to the safe house. Balkhi stumbles on the booby trap, drawing the rock walls down on himself, while Isa pulls Jahanara and Arjumand to safety. The ordeal traumatizes Arjumand, but Jahanara seeks to reassure her by revealing that Isa is her true father and will keep her safe.

Knowing Dara's imminent danger, she convinces a reluctant Isa to take Arjumand and flee. She must remain behind to ensure that Aurangzeb engages with Dara instead of skirting the defending forces and taking the Red Fort. Isa agrees but wonders why Jahanara must always try to save everyone. "Because I love them. I love them too much to let go," explains Jahanara.



In chapter sixteen, "Consequences," having taken care of Isa and her daughter, Jahanara returns to the Red Fort where her father still lies ill. He is surprised that she has stayed, but she knows she must be present at the confrontation between her brothers, in order for the plan to work. She sneaks away from the Fort dressed as a soldier and heads to the field of battle. Her intention is to goad Aurangzeb into fighting, when he could easily take the undefended Red Fort with his seasoned troops. Jahanara knows her presence, still alive and scheming, will inflame Aurangzeb and he will attack. Nizam can then bring the cavalry to bear, surprising Aurangzeb's flank. It is their only chance.

When Aurangzeb arrives on a white warhorse, demanding Dara's head and his son's head, Jahanara accuses Aurangzeb of cowardice. Enraged, he positions his men to attack. Even in the face of Aurangzeb's fury, for a few moments after Nizam arrives with the cavalry, it looks like Dara's army will prevail. Then Dara's elephant is hit by cannon fire and he goes down. Believing that their prince is dead, Dara's troops lose focus. Aurangzeb's army overruns their position.

In the confusion, Jahanara is thrown from her horse. Nizam, seeing her in difficulty, fights like a wild man but he cannot reach her. An officer protects her and reveals that Dara has been taken by Aurangzeb, who now goes by the title Alamgir, which means "Conqueror of the World." Jahanara asks the officer to strike her unconscious in order to avoid a worse fate should Aurangzeb find her living. Her world goes black.

Part 3, Chapters 14-16 Analysis

With the completion of the Taj Mahal, Shah Jahan's main reason for living disintegrates. He becomes ill shortly after, precipitating the conflict between his sons. Aurangzeb shows himself to be as ruthless and as skilled as Jahanara has feared. He has consolidated his favor and support among the nobles through his deeds in the army, in spite of his cruelty toward the Hindu population and toward his enemies, the Persians. The clever trap in the corridor to the safe house saves her and Arjumand from Aurangzeb's assassin, Balkhi, but the experience terrifies her, and she knows she must ensure her daughter's safety before she can help her brother. Isa pleads with her to stay with them, but her duty to her father and brother is too strong. She has not fulfilled her promise to her mother to watch over her father, and she knows she is a much better tactician than Dara. There is an incredible moment of hope during the battle, when in spite of the actual history involved, the reader can imagine that Dara will be victorious. Aurangzeb, however, is too strong in the arts of war and his brother, though he fights valiantly, is overcome. Jahanara must now face the reality of the event she has feared since she was a child. She has failed to save Dara and failed to keep the throne for him. She knows Aurangzeb, as a devout Muslim, cannot kill their father too. Her only solace is that Isa and her daughter have fled the city. She has to believe they are safe.



Part 3, Chapters 17-18

Part 3, Chapters 17-18 Summary

In chapter seventeen, "Death and Dishonor," Aurangzeb takes the Red Fort in less than a day. He imprisons the Emperor in the Musamman Burj, the Octagonal Tower, where he can just glimpse the Taj Mahal from one of the windows. Jahanara is thrown into a cell with two hungry cheetahs. She finds out from her jailers that Aurangzeb has condemned Dara to death, along with Dara's young son. The charge is heresy.

Jahanara survives the night by thinking of Isa and Arjumand and hoping they are safe. She defends herself against the hungry cheetahs with an old bone. Just as she grows desperate, Ladli comes with raw meat for the big cats and information for Jahanara. Aurangzeb will not kill Jahanara for fear of angering the people and jeopardizing his hold on the throne. The next morning Aurangzeb fetches Jahanara, surprised that the cats have not mauled her. She must attend Dara's execution. In the courtyard, a distraught Jahanara breaks from her guards and runs to embrace Dara. "Go with God," she tells him, moments before he loses his head to the executioner's massive sword. Aurangzeb spares no mercy for Dara's son, even though Jahanara pleads for the child's life.

Jahanara is forced to join her father in his cell in the Musamman Burj. She reveals all that has happened and together they weep for their family. Khondamir comes to the cell along with Ladli and Aurangzeb. Jahanara baits her husband, but Aurangzeb prevents him from striking her because he knows she needs to look well in order for him to retain the nobles' support. Jahanara threatens her brother with a cobra, telling him if she dies, her assassin will place a snake in his bed. Hate and helplessness rises in her for these men who have used her with such cruelty, she lashes out with the information that Khondamir is not the father of her child. He backhands her and then Aurangzeb punches her in the stomach. They leave her locked in with her father and she feels as if she has entered hell.

In chapter eighteen, "Curse of the Living," Jahanara succumbs to the tedium of long imprisonment by sleeping often and poring over her failings. Her father's needs help keep her focused on what is important, however; and he slowly begins to improve in health.

Aurangzeb, now Alamgir, makes another visit to their cell to show Jahanara a dead cobra that he had killed in his bed when Ladli was with him. The snake's fangs had been removed so it was harmless, but he is sure Jahanara placed it there to warn him. Knowing Ladli, Jahanara thinks it was her friend who did so to reinforce Jahanara's threat. The threat has taken hold in Aurangzeb's mind and it is clear that he is afraid to harm Jahanara now. In any case, Aurangzeb leaves again to continue his wars of expansion in Persia and the Deccan, leaving Jahanara and her father imprisoned. Jahanara wiles away the time by discussing the burden of rule and duty with her father.



She is in despair over the fate of Isa and Arjumand, but her father reassures her, as does Ladli, by way of a gift and a note. Ladli has sent her a peregrine falcon to entertain them. They name it Akbar.

Months, then years pass for Jahanara and her father in their small prison. As time wears on, she finds it difficult to concern herself with Aurangzeb and the outside world. But, as she says, "Ultimately, my love saved me, for my love gave me strength." Finally, Nizam comes to visit bearing news of the whereabouts of Isa and Arjumand. Jahanara is fired anew with determination to reunite with her lover and their daughter.

Shah Jahan, Jahanara, and Nizam devise a scheme to bribe their jailers. Jahanara is heartbroken to leave her father in the small cell, but he insists. She escapes with Nizam and they begin a journey south to Bijapur where Isa and Arjumand are being held prisoner so they can complete a mosque for the Sultan who rules there.

Part 3, Chapters 17-18 Analysis

In these chapters, Aurangzeb's ruthlessness knows no boundary, but despite this, there are indications that his control of the situation is precarious. More than once he refrains from harming, or allowing Khondamir to harm Jahanara for fear of angering the nobles. Killing a brother to seize power they can understand, but killing a woman, especially a daughter of the peerless Arjumand, would be murder. He also forces her to attend the execution of her brother Dara as a show of his dominance. The execution is heartbreaking, and the reader senses with Dara's death an end to light and the beginning of a long period of darkness. Jahanara also makes reference, as she bears witness to her brother's murder, to the fact that she wishes the Hindu population would rise up against Aurangzeb and overthrow him, a reference that has resonance in history and current events. Religious tolerance in India has been hard won over centuries and it still hangs in the balance even in the twenty-first century. Aurangzeb's power grab and execution of a moderate, tolerant prince raises the question of whether history would have been kinder to the Hindus in India if Dara instead of Aurangzeb had taken over for his father. These are insights Jahanara cannot know from her perspective, but the author hints at them through the device of a sister's knowledge of her two brothers.

The falcon, Akbar, serves as a metaphor of a person bound to a situation by habit or by love. When Jahanara and her father try to set the bird free, it flies back to them through the open window. The falcon's behavior mirrors Jahanara's actions as she seeks freedom to find Isa and Arjumand, and it foreshadows her eventual return to Agra and her father. It also mirrors Ladli's actions. Ladli's life and her fate are tied to Jahanara's. Even though Ladli comes and goes to spy on Aurangzeb, her loyalty remains always with Jahanara.



Part 3, Chapters 19-21

Part 3, Chapters 19-21 Summary

In chapter nineteen, "Journeys," Jahanara and Nizam travel south, avoiding the many war parties, pilgrims, and other travelers on the road. Their mood turns more lighthearted as they put the city of Agra behind them. One night, while reminiscing about Jahanara's mother, she tries to tease Nizam into telling her the name of his love. He won't reveal it, however, knowing Jahanara will much prefer discovering it on her own.

Their journey takes them through fields of battle, and many scenes of the ongoing war. As they slowly move south, Jahanara works out a plan to free Isa from the Sultan of Bijapur. She must use Aurangzeb's life as a bargaining chip. Nizam shows surprise that she would betray her brother, but she feels she now has no choice but to offer him up in return for her family. A group of warriors chases them until Jahanara casts their gold coins behind them and the brigands stop to gather it up. They rest by a river, and something Nizam says prompts Jahanara to guess that it is Ladli he loves. Delighted, Jahanara vows to herself that they will be together someday.

In chapter twenty, "Shivaji," Nizam and Jahanara arrive at the gates of Bijapur and Jahanara puts her plan into action. They walk unchallenged all the way to the Sultan's reception room. On the way, Jahanara hears that the Sultan is entertaining Shivaji, the military leader of the Hindu Marathas. This information gives her hope, though both men are sworn enemies of the Empire. Finding the Sultan and Shivaji together, Jahanara reveals herself and proposes a bargain. In exchange for information that will allow him to assassinate Aurangzeb, the Sultan must free Isa and his daughter. Unfortunately, the Sultan is not willing to part with his clever architect, especially as he is in the middle of building an elaborate mosque in Bijapur. At Shivaji's urging, the Sultan agrees to the exchange, but he will not release Isa and his daughter until the mosque is complete. In addition, he grants Jahanara only two days to spend with her loved ones who are prisoners in Bijapur. In retaliation, Jahanara states that she will not reveal the secret to gain access to Aurangzeb until Isa and her daughter are free. Shivaji is impressed by Jahanara's decisiveness and bargaining skills. "I'm glad we fight your men," he says, "A battle with such women would surely break us." Jahanara agrees with him, but curiously feels that she has "found a friend among enemies."

In chapter twenty-one, "Rebirth," Shivaji escorts Jahanara and Nizam to his quarters, promising to bring Isa and Arjumand there. Jahanara is impatient to see Isa but takes time to thank Nizam for his loyalty and service. Isa and Arjumand arrive and are stunned to see Jahanara. Their reunion is joyful and profound. Isa appears still strong and healthy, and Arjumand has grown into a beautiful young woman. The little family trades stories of their escape and imprisonment, but their happiness is marred by the fact that Jahanara must go back to Agra. They have indeed found a friend in Shivaji, however, and the two days promised by the Sultan has been increased to a week or so at Shivaji's urging.



Jahanara, Isa and Arjumand travel down to Goa, to the sea, where they play like children in the water. They live in the present moment, enjoying each other's company in this wonderful moment out of time. Observing that her daughter is nearly grown, Jahanara vows that she will help Arjumand find a loving man to marry someday, regardless of his standing in society. She and Isa talk about Jahanara's loyalty to her father. He questions the risk that she is about to take in returning to Agra. Jahanara, however, is convinced that she can once again outsmart Aurangzeb in order to see her father one more time. She must fulfill her promise to her mother to look after him. Isa relents, knowing his position is risky too as he remains the prisoner of the Sultan until the mosque is complete.

Torn by what they must do, they sit and watch the falling stars. Isa asks Jahanara to think of him when she sits near the Taj Mahal again and looks at the sky because he will be looking at the sky too and thinking of her.

Part 3, Chapters 19-21 Analysis

Finally freed from her prison lethargy, Jahanara returns to her former active personality, even teasing the taciturn Nizam about his love interest. Her guilt at committing her two servants to such dangerous enterprises shows, however, when she vows that Nizam and Ladli will know happiness together. Jahanara's quick thinking saves them from the war party, but her assertiveness, unusual for a woman of her time almost gets them killed in the Sultan's palace. Fortunately, Shivaji views her as a curiosity and comes to her aid.

Again the reader gets a mere hint of Jahanara's beauty and her possible effect on men when she shows up at the palace in tattered, skimpy clothes. Since she does not consciously use her looks as a tool as her mother did, the reader must speculate that Shivaji is intrigued by not only her fierceness, but also her seductiveness. He wants to see what sort of man could hold the interest of such a woman.

Her willingness to trade her brother's life for her love's freedom is the first sign that Aurangzeb has irrevocably severed any family feeling she might have for him. Although Isa has grave reservations about her return to Agra, she cannot escape the feeling that her father needs her. The metaphor of the falcon, Akbar, holds true as the freed Jahanara returns to roost at the Red Fort.



Part 4, Narration

Part 4, Narration Summary

Jahanara's granddaughters question her again, unable to believe that she would just leave Isa and Arjumand in Bijapur. Jahanara explains how she felt unworthy of her father's love and how she went back to prove to herself that the Emperor's love and trust had not been misplaced. She makes a point of telling them that they must learn the lesson from her mistake: they need not prove anything to anyone in their lives, including themselves.

Part 4, Narration Analysis

The author, in this explanation by the grandmotherly figure, provides Jahanara's central motivation for her actions. From the beginning she has felt unworthy, like she had to prove her love to her father and perhaps her mother as well. Some of that feeling came from the mere fact that she was born a girl, and therefore was not as worthy as her brothers. There are hints of this motivation throughout the story, but here the author allows Jahanara to make a lesson of her essential quest for love and understanding. She admonishes her granddaughters to believe in themselves, as she never could.



Part 4, Chapters 22-25

Part 4, Chapters 22-25 Summary

In chapter twenty-two, "Allah's Desertion," Jahanara returns to Agra and goes to the Red Fort disguised as an older noblewoman. She discovers her father alive in the octagonal room, but in a terrible state. His health has declined once again, and the room has descended into chaos and filth. In her anger at her father's condition, she inadvertently reveals her identity to the guards. She argues with the main jailer, but he is Aurangzeb's creature, and he locks her in with her father. She is again a prisoner in the tower. Realizing she has made a grave mistake, she tries to focus on cleaning the room to make it habitable for her father. She sees to his needs as well, making him as comfortable as she can in the lice infested quarters.

Her husband, Khondamir, comes to the cell and wreaks his revenge for her unfaithfulness and insults by raping her viciously, uncaring that her father is near death in the same room. He seeks the name of her lover, but she refuses to tell him. Bleeding and in terrible pain, Jahanara defiantly curses Khondamir as he leaves her behind in the cell. Once he departs, however, she succumbs to shame and hopelessness, believing that Allah has truly abandoned her.

In chapter twenty-three, "Retribution," Jahanara must become re-accustomed to the life of a prisoner. She works again to help her father recover some strength, while keeping the incident with Khondamir to herself. She has a vague idea that if Shah Jahan recovers enough, he will be able to overthrow Aurangzeb, and fix the terrible problems her brother has created.

Finally, Aurangzeb comes to the octagonal tower with Ladli and Khondamir to confront Jahanara. He accuses her of once again trying to assassinate him. He has his men hold her under water in an attempt to get a name from her, but she resists. Desperate and near drowning, she lies to Aurangzeb, telling him that the assassinations were ordered by her husband Khondamir, whom she claims to love. Khondamir is appalled, seeking to deny everything, but Jahanara is very convincing. Aurangzeb kills him on the spot. Jahanara narrowly escapes death too by pretending that she wants Aurangzeb to kill her. She begs him to end her life while she prays to Mecca. Aurangzeb relents and lets her live so he can see her suffer. Later, her father reassures her that she has done the right thing, though her clever revenge brings her little satisfaction and only emptiness.

Ladli comes in secret to tell Jahanara that she is leaving. Aurangzeb has beaten her, blaming her for Khondamir's treachery. Aurangzeb has become even more cruel and zealous since Shivaji bested him in the mountains in a battle that also took the life of the Sultan of Bijapur. Ecstatic at this news, Jahanara orders Ladli to go south to find Shivaji and to take Nizam with her; together they can free Isa and Arjumand now that the Sultan is dead. Jahanara will meet up with them in Calcutta as soon as she is free



herself. Ladli agrees and then offers her own advice: Jahanara must convince Aurangzeb that she wants to die and he will leave her alone.

In chapter twenty-four, "Passages," Jahanara fasts, drinking only water and juice until she becomes weak and listless. Aurangzeb, just as Ladli predicted, comes often to rejoice in her decline. However, as her health weakens, so does that of her father until one day, he feels himself slipping away. He extracts one last promise from Jahanara, to be happy and live as a child might, and then he dies.

Agra and the Empire grieve for the great Shah Jahan. Aurangzeb decides to hold an immense funeral for his father at the Taj Mahal. He demands that Jahanara attend, dressed in her best clothing, in order to appease the nobles. Aurangzeb has her taken to the harem. The women there, all known to Jahanara from her childhood, bathe her and then plot to save her. Jahanara is amazed by their resourcefulness, but all have a story to tell of her mother's kindness to them. They ensure she leaves the Red Fort in secret, wrapped in a carpet. She finds herself on a boat, and then asks the boatman to take her to Calcutta. Her escape is that simple.

Just as she planned, she meets Isa at the largest mosque in Calcutta where he has gone to pray every day and where she told Ladli she would wait for him. He is, of course, overjoyed that she is safe and well. She is delighted that her plan was successful. She tells Isa of her promise to her father. In response, he urges her to kick her horse forward, throw back her head, and ride like a child would. Finally, Jahanara is free.

In this final chapter, "The Clarity of Twilight," Jahanara tells of the many happy years that she and Isa and Arjumand spent living by the sea. Isa and Jahanara are able to share their love with each other and the world. They also rejoice in seeing their dear friends, Nizam and Ladli, find comfort in each other. The family grows older. Arjumand marries a fisherman, a good man who loves her. Then, as time wears on, first Ladli dies and then Jahanara's beloved Isa goes to God as she holds him in her arms.

Part 4, Chapters 22-25 Analysis

The final chapters are the race toward the climax, which is Jahanara's confrontation with Aurangzeb where he kills Khondamir, and the denouement, which is her escape from Agra and her final years living by the sea. The rape and beating by Khondamir sets up the final confrontation, as Jahanara no longer feels any remorse or guilt for her unfaithfulness to her husband. He has shown himself to be a monster of inhumanity.

Though she is in an extreme situation during the confrontation, her mind remains relatively calm. In this she is much like her brother Aurangzeb. The author has hinted of this similarity between brother and sister in other parts of the book. Dara and Nizam both reported in earlier scenes that Aurangzeb is the essence of calm in the storm of battle. Jahanara, in this situation, has that talent as well.

She plays her advantage, using the men's prejudices against them to get what she wants. She wins, but finds revenge cold, especially after her father dies.

The escape from the harem and the meeting with Isa in Calcutta seem, in the end, anti-climactic. The author may have chosen this note deliberately, wanting to stress the utter normalcy of Jahanara's later years. Here is an old woman telling a fantastic story to her granddaughters, she has lived through it all and what endures is, of course, her love. It is an everyday story, and one that every person can relate to: a woman who travels through many hardships with the help of her friends finds, in the end, that love just is.



Characters

Princess Jahanara

Jahanara is the main character of the novel. It is her story and she tells it from her point of view in first person. She is the eldest daughter of the seventeenth century Mughal Emperor, Shah Jahan, and his beloved wife, Arjumand. Her brother, Dara, heir to the throne, is older by one year. Jahanara describes her appearance as a combination of her parents' features, but thinks that she does not come close to matching her mother in either beauty or cleverness. Her father, and later Isa, makes comments that indicate she is indeed beautiful, but she is unsure of her beauty and does not use it as a weapon. Her best friend and confidant is Ladli, a Hindu servant at the palace. Her mortal enemy, though she tries to prevent it, is Aurangzeb, her younger brother. At age sixteen, she marries Khondamir, a brutish older man her parents have chosen in order to strengthen the Empire. She quickly discovers her violent, uncaring husband is not worth her love and she avoids him whenever possible. When her mother dies in childbirth, Jahanara is heartbroken. Her father hires a young architect to build a grand mausoleum to honor his wife, and Jahanara finds her love.

Since Jahanara tells the story, the reader has no direct knowledge of how the other characters think and feel about her, but in conversation and through their reactions, they describe her characteristics. According to their comments she is, at various moments in the story, impatient, clever, scheming, beautiful, caring, stubborn, fierce, demanding, over-cautious, seeking, short-sighted, graceful, loving, ruthless, and loyal. The best description of the bag of contradictions that is Jahanara's character comes from Isa. He says she is, ". . . beauty and grace and wisdom all gathered up in one little frame. . . .I think that in order for you to love yourself, you need other people to love you. This is your only weakness, Jahanara. Because you live your life as others deem you should. You live it for your father, your mother, for everyone but yourself."

Isa

Isa is Jahanara's love interest in the novel, who does not enter the story until chapter six. He tells her his background on the first day they meet. He was born in Persia to a builder and designer, but when his mother died and his father became ill, his father had him apprenticed to an architect who was from Delhi. With his parents both dead, he came to live with his master in Hindustan, and he began to build. When Jahanara meets Isa, he is twenty-two years old and she is not quite seventeen. He has already made a name for himself designing several buildings that have caught the Emperor's eye. The Taj Mahal will be his greatest work. As a designer and skilled worker, Isa comes from a different world than Jahanara, but on the project of the Taj Mahal, they introduce each other to new things. The personality trait that can most be associated with the character of Isa is patience. It is a quality he needs in abundance as he works over eleven years to raise the Taj Mahal. He also needs patience to love Jahanara, because she does



everything for everybody but herself, and until she comes to love herself, she cannot truly devote any love to him.

Aurangzeb

Aurangzeb is the antagonist in the novel. He is the second son of Shah Jahan and Arjumand. From the beginning of Jahanara's story, Aurangzeb shows himself to be vengeful, envious, and cruel. Jahanara and Dara talk often about their brother, discussing at first what they must have done wrong to make him so hateful. Later, Jahanara must scheme both with Dara and behind his back to defend her family from Aurangzeb's ambition.

Aurangzeb embraces a fundamental form of Islam, striking down Hindu temples in his zeal. He also studies statecraft and war fighting, taking over the army for his father and winning many victories for the Empire. Ultimately, he chooses his moment and takes the throne from his father and brother. He has Dara executed for heresy, along with Dara's young son, but his hold on the throne is not assured until his father dies after a long imprisonment. Jahanara is a constant thorn in his side, particularly because she is able to play on his fears, threatening to assassinate him with a cobra. Fear rules Aurangzeb's life, and toward the end of the story, Jahanara can see that her best revenge is to live a fulfilled life and leaves her brother to nurture his phobias.

Shah Jahan

Shah Jahan, born Khurram, son of Jahangir, is the great Mughal Emperor. After a series of political marriages, he marries the love of his life, a young, beautiful, and clever shop girl named Arjumand. Together they have many children, including Jahanara, Dara, and Aurangzeb, but Arjumand ends up dying in childbirth. On her deathbed, she demands Shah Jahan build her something beautiful. It becomes the great work of his life, but when it is complete, he falls ill leaving the way open for Aurangzeb to grab the throne from his older brother. In any case, the Taj Mahal stands as an eternal testament to Shah Jahan's belief in love, especially his love for one woman, Mumtaz Mahal.

Dara

Dara is Jahanara's beloved older brother. He is thoughtful and scholarly, spending his time translating ancient texts into readable languages, and composing treatises on religion. He does not have the stomach for warfare, however, and he leaves that arena to his brother, Aurangzeb, to his own peril. When Aurangzeb comes to seize the throne, Dara musters a good fight, but, in the end, is defeated. It is an irony in the story that a man so well known for his religious tolerance should be executed for heresy, along with his young and innocent son.



Ladli

Ladli is a Hindu servant who works mainly in the kitchens at the Red Fort of Agra. She is Princess Jahanara's confidant and best friend, and she is as earthy as she is beautiful. The two are so tied that Ladli is willing to sacrifice her personal freedom and private honor to seek information for her friend, Jahanara. To that end, Ladli becomes Aurangzeb's lover and manages to save Jahanara several times before she must leave in order to stay alive. Jahanara does her best to repay her friend by bringing her along when she leaves the Red Fort forever.

Nizam

Nizam is Arjumand's slave and bodyguard, who later performs that service for Jahanara. He is strong, loyal to a fault, and perhaps smarter than he looks. Jahanara grants him his freedom, but asks that he serve with Aurangzeb in the army so she can keep tabs on her brother. Nizam helps her to escape her imprisonment, traveling many miles with her to Bijapur. Along the road she discovers that he harbors feeling for her friend, Ladli. She thinks this is a perfect match, and Nizam is the beneficiary of her matchmaking. He remains with her even when she tells her granddaughters her story.

Khondamir

Khondamir is Jahanara's husband, chosen for her by her parents because of his vast wealth and trading connections. He quickly shows himself to be cruel, uncaring, and vengeful. Jahanara feels little remorse when she falls in love with Isa and is unfaithful to who she considers to be a pig of a man.

Arjumand (Mumtaz Mahal)

Arjumand, called Mumtaz Mahal or just Taj, by Emperor Shah Jahan, is Jahanara's mother and the legendary inspiration for the Taj Mahal. Arjumand is wise and beautiful, but she is subject to the same restrictions as every other woman in the harem, a fact that chafes her. Though she dies in childbirth early in Jahanara's story, the young princess spends nearly the rest of the novel trying to live up to the high standard set by her mother.

Arjumand (Jahanara's daughter)

Jahanara and Isa have a daughter they name Arjumand. Jahanara convinces the unaware Khondamir that the girl is his child, but reveals to her daughter the truth when Aurangzeb comes to take the city. Arjumand flees with her real father, Isa, and Jahanara does not see her again until she is almost a woman.



Balkhi

Balkhi is the monstrous servant Aurangzeb brings back from the wars in Persia. He is known to be a killer, and Aurangzeb uses him to intimidate both Jahanara and Ladli. He is killed when he trips the booby trap chasing Jahanara through the secret corridor.

Gulbadan

Gulbadan is a granddaughter of Jahanara, and a daughter of Arjumand.

Rurayya

Rurayya is a granddaughter of Jahanara, and a daughter of Arjumand.

Shivaji

Shivaji is the leader of the Hindu Maranths. He is a fierce warrior who develops a soft spot for Jahanara when she comes to plead for Isa's freedom from the Sultan of Bijapur. Shivaji also hands Aurangzeb his first major defeat, which contributes to his loss of control in the confrontation with Jahanara.

Sultan of Bijapur

Sultan of Bijapur is a noble who lives in the Deccan region and has enough power to hold out against the Empire in its wars of expansion. The Sultan holds Isa and Arjumand prisoner while they complete a mosque for him in Bijapur.

Lord Babur

Lord Babur is a noble who has brought the criminal Ismail before the Emperor for justice.

Ismail

Ismail a thief who has stolen rice from Lord Babur. Jahanara feels his hands and proclaims him a farmer, and Arjumand makes him her gardener.

Suleiman

Suleiman is Dara's son who is beheaded at age thirteen, along with his father, by order of his uncle, Aurangzeb.

Shah and Murad

Shah and Murad are Jahanara's much younger twin brothers. Aurangzeb has them killed in Persia when he sets out to wrest the throne from Dara and his father.



Objects/Places

Peacock Throne

The Peacock Throne was the raised dais in the reception hall, the Diwan-i Am, at the Red Fort at Agra, and was the ceremonial seat of power for the Mughal Emperors. The dais was surrounded by pillars that held a canopy. Atop the canopy was a gold peacock with jewel encrusted tail feathers.

Taj Mahal

The Taj Mahal is a massive marble structure built with Arabic, Persian, and Hindustani influences, which was commissioned by Emperor Shah Jahan as a mausoleum to honor his wife, Arjumand. Both the Emperor's and his wife's remains are there.

Islam

Islam is a monotheistic religion that holds as its central tenets submission to God, and acknowledgment of Muhammad as His final prophet. The Qu'ran, also spelled Koran, is the written word of Islam.

Hinduism

Hinduism is a polytheistic religion and philosophy that encourages belief in reincarnation, and the central and eternal oneness to all things. Hindus welcome many paths to achieve salvation from earthly pain and suffering.

Upanishads

The Upanishads are a series of teachings, written in ancient Sanskrit, that explain the essential philosophical underpinnings of Hinduism.

Harem

In Muslim culture, a harem can be a place, and also a collective of women. A harem constitutes the living quarters for wives, concubines, and other women of a household, including children. It also can mean that group of women themselves.

Cobra

A cobra is a venomous snake native to the Indian subcontinent.



Fighting Elephants

The Persians especially used elephants specially trained in combat formations to provide a type of cavalry during a battle.

Heresy

Heresy is a controversial change or objection to a belief system or religion, which can often contradict long established practices.

Nobles

Members of the nobility were mainly large landowners who owed loyalty to a king or emperor, and often had hereditary titles passed down through the generations.



Themes

Love Conquers All

Love Conquers All is a traditional theme in which the protagonist goes through a series of emotional trials to find love and happiness at the end of the story. Love brings the main character through these trials, and love is the protagonist's reward. Love truly is the central theme of *Beneath a Marble Sky*. The singular relationship between Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan and his breathtaking wife, Arjumand, is the stuff of legend, which moves people to believe in the power of love even four hundred years after the event. It is this relationship that serves as an example for Jahanara as she moves from childhood into adulthood and, eventually, celebrates her own true love. The author of *Beneath a Marble Sky* uses the Taj Mahal, the international symbol of a man's devotion to one woman, as a backdrop to the events that teach Jahanara the power of love.

Before she truly understands love in all of its forms, Jahanara experiences several personal crises, which make her doubt that she is worthy of the love and admiration of her family, and also the attention of her love interest, Isa. First, her parents choose for her a horrible, brutal man for her husband. The much older Khondamir does not have even a spark of compassion for his young bride. Jahanara must fight through her disillusionment, which she does with the help of her best friend, Ladli, and her mother, Arjumand. She also reconciles her bitter disappointment by telling herself that she is doing her duty to the Empire and her father with her marriage to Khondamir. She learns from this that love can help one endure the most brutal of hardships.

Second, Jahanara's mother dies in childbirth, leaving her rudderless in the sea of her father's and her own grief. She overcomes her devastation in the same way her father does, by immersing herself in the building project that will become the Taj Mahal.

The attraction she feels for Isa is wrapped up in his vision for the Taj Mahal. His respectful attention to her opinions and thoughts is a balm to her abused soul. Isa becomes her lover and then the father of her child, but she is unable to experience the fullness of that love because they must meet in secret. Nothing can jeopardize the building of her mother's mausoleum.

Her loyalty to her father prevents her from fleeing Agra with her lover and their child. She learns from this that love is not there to tie one down, or make demands on one's time. And it cannot be fully enjoyed in secret.

Third, when Jahanara saves her brother, Aurangzeb, from the striking cobra, she does so because she feels an echo of childhood love for her brother, but he finally extinguishes that love through his ruthless ambition. He demands that she join him, but she cannot turn away from the other brother that she truly loves, the brother of her heart, Dara. She makes her choice, rejecting Aurangzeb's twisted aspirations. In doing



so, she learns another lesson in love: that it must be freely given, not bargained for like a bracelet in the market. And that love does not force one to choose.

The grandmother Jahanara, telling her story to her granddaughters, reveals her final lesson to them before the climax of the book: love does not have to be proven, love just is. Jahanara returns to Agra after making the bargain with the Sultan of Bijapur because she feels she must prove herself worthy of her father's many kindnesses to her. She feels redeemed when she can help him to die in peace, but her revenge on her wicked husband feels empty. The harem women show their love for her, and for her mother, by helping her to escape. This is a source of love that she did not know existed and it helps her to seize the day and finally love herself, and in doing so she becomes free to enjoy the love that others feel for her.

Jahanara's final statement in the story sums up clearly the theme of love conquering all. She says, "I've tasted this oneness we call love. Death cannot steal it. Nor temper it. No, I'll take my love with me, wherever I shall travel. And it shall endure."

Envy

Envy is when a person feels a painful, covetous desire for another's possessions or advantages. Envy as a theme in *Beneath a Marble Sky* is the chief emotion that drives the antagonist, Aurangzeb. Even though the story is told entirely from Jahanara's point of view, she details enough of Aurangzeb's actions for the reader to get a sense that envy and fear impel his every action. Aurangzeb is always watching, always looking for a way to insert himself between Jahanara and her parents, or Dara. Jahanara doesn't ascribe envy to Aurangzeb's motivations until later because she has trouble believing that she, a mere girl, could have anything that the boy-child, Aurangzeb, could want. In fact, she herself feels envious of her brothers' advantages and their freedom.

However, Jahanara has what Aurangzeb wants most of all: the love and respect of her brother, Dara, and her parents. The more Aurangzeb turns to violence, battle, and religious ascetism, the more his father praises Dara's scholarly tolerance, adding fuel to the flame of Aurangzeb's envy of his brother. Dara is also Arjumand's choice to be heir to the Peacock Throne, and there is a sense that Aurangzeb turns to success on the field of battle in order to grab attention in any way he can find it. In the final confrontation with Jahanara, she notes that he looks diminished, spare and somewhat broken in body, even while he wields his power with a ruthless, almost mindless, rage. As Walt Whitman once said, "When I peruse the conquered fame of heroes and the victories of mighty generals, I do not envy the generals." And neither does the reader envy Aurangzeb his success in seizing all and gaining nothing.

The Power of Beauty

The theme of the power of beauty threads sinuously through the narrative of *Beneath a Marble Sky*. The peerless Arjumand, Jahanara's mother, wields her beauty to influence events at court through her husband. Her comments to Jahanara give the reader a



sense that the societal constraints on Arjumand's power chafe, and that where a lesser woman would recede into the background, Arjumand leads with her beauty.

Jahanara comments on the many beautiful adornments in the Diwan-i Am, the beauty of her friend Ladli, Isa's stunning smile, and her father's beautiful prose. She reserves her best praise, however, for the grandeur of the completed Taj Mahal, calling its beauty otherworldly, and heaven-like. "How could we have created this monument, which seemed almost too beautiful for this world?" she wonders, adding, "Surely this creation was fit only for God. He should walk within its walls and He alone should contemplate its rapture."

Beyond these observations of the power of physical beauty, it is Isa who makes the most poignant remark concerning beauty when he tells Jahanara that beauty is an idea, not a physical thing. Beauty lasts because it is in one's mind, not merely what one sees.



Style

Point of View

The author uses first person point of view in the narrative. The only narrator is Jahanara, but the author switches from the grandmother speaking to her granddaughters in the frame narration at the beginning of each part, to Jahanara telling the story in real-time as it is happening from her point of view. The majority of the story is told in the real-time narration. Readers are privy to Jahanara's thoughts only, though there is a mix of exposition, dialog, and inner monologue throughout the novel. The author uses the frame story to establish the reliability of his narrator. Since the grandmother is telling her granddaughters details about events that happened to her in the past, the story carries more weight than if the young Jahanara had just started speaking with no frame of reference for the reader. Since the setting is historical, the frame allows the author to blend the explanations of historical circumstances into the narrative.

Jahanara as the narrator does not tell every event, but focuses on the main events that draw the story forward. For example, she glosses over her activities during her many years of imprisonment, telling only of her closeness to her father, and situations where something changes for better or worse. In using the grandmother, the author also has the opportunity to explain the setting, which the young Jahanara would take for granted, but that the grandmother must describe to her granddaughters who are not familiar with the places of their grandmother's youth. Thus, the reader has the experience of seeing the setting and listening to the descriptions of the other characters with a believable level of detail.

Setting

The novel is set mainly in seventeenth century Agra, which is an ancient city located in the north-central part of modern day India, known then as Hindustan. During the time in which the story takes place, sometime between 1650 and 1700, that area of the Indian subcontinent was ruled by the Mughals, and had been for hundreds of years. The narrator, Jahanara, talks about the Red Fort at Agra, which is the setting for much of the story, as a vast complex of sumptuous palaces, mosques, harem spaces, and reception halls that were all contained behind a thick, fortified wall. Shah Jahan and his family had their main residence at the Red Fort.

From the Red Fort, the Taj Mahal can be seen from the Musamman Burj, the Octagonal Tower in the harem, in which Shah Jahan and Jahanara were imprisoned. The Taj Mahal building site near the Yamuna River is also a setting for part of the story, as is the legendary Taj Mahal itself. Jahanara and Isa travel to Delhi to get marble stones for the structure, floating them back up the river on huge barges. Jahanara is delighted to spend time in the markets of Delhi, pretending to be a private citizen instead of a



Mughal princess. Jahanara also travels south with Nizam to Bijapur in the Deccan region to bargain for Isa's freedom at the palace of the Sultan. Later, she and Isa travel to the sea together with their daughter, spending time at Goa on the east coast of the subcontinent. After her final escape, Jahanara meets Isa in Calcutta and they end their days in a fishing village by the sea.

Language and Meaning

The author's word choice tends to be on the formal side, as befits an educated princess who is telling the story as an old woman, even during the scenes of her childhood. Jahanara's voice grows stronger or weaker depending on her situation, and when she glosses over time through various events, her voice takes on a vague distance. There is never a sense, however, that Jahanara speaks directly to a reader, instead her audience is contemporary to her own time, as seen from the perspective of one who has lived many years. The author directly contrasts Jahanara's word choice in dialog with the Hindu servant, Ladli, who is coarser and less refined in her speech. Dialog also differentiates Jahanara's father, who is bluff and authoritative to start and then less so after Arjumand dies. Khondamir is singled out by his gross crudity, Dara by his intellectual quotations, and Aurangzeb by his zealous epithets for the non-believers that surround him. The only person who is difficult to capture through his word choice is Isa. The author may have chosen to keep Isa a mystery to the reader, as he was somewhat a mystery to Jahanara herself. The author scatters Persian, Hindustani, and Arabic terms through the text, but not so much that the device is distracting. Here the frame story allows the author to explain the terms in a believable way, as the grandmother Jahanara would explain to her granddaughters words or situations they did not know.

Structure

The novel is comprised of four parts, the chapters being unequally divided among the parts. Part 1 has five chapters, Parts 2 and 3 have eight chapters each, and Part 4 has four chapters. Each part begins with an epigraph from Mughal historical or religious texts, Rumi, the Qu'ran, the Upanishads, and The Mingling of the Two Oceans, which foreshadows or comments on events in that section. Part 1 concerns mainly Jahanara's childhood with the turning point being her marriage to Khondamir and the death of her mother. In Part 2, Jahanara meets Isa, the love of her life, and building commences on the Taj Mahal. The turning point of Part 2 is when Jahanara chooses sides in the conflict between her brothers after she saves Aurangzeb from the cobra. Part 3 chronicles the completion of the Taj Mahal and Aurangzeb's grab for the throne in the wake of Shah Jahan's illness. Descent into darkness comes when Aurangzeb executes Dara and throws his father and sister in prison. At the end of Part 3, Jahanara experiences a rebirth when she reconnects with Isa and her daughter in Goa by the sea. Part 4 contains the climax and final confrontation between Jahanara and Aurangzeb, followed by the denouement where she finds Isa and lives out her life with him in a fishing village by the sea. The chapter titles also provide a nugget of commentary on the chapter's contents.



Since the entire story is told from Jahanara's point of view, there are no real subplots, except for a hint of Ladli and Nizam's lives as they carry out Jahanara's wishes, often under brutal conditions. This hint of a subplot is neatly tied up when Ladli and Nizam form a couple at the end of the book, living out their days as husband and wife in a reflection of the happiness Jahanara finds with Isa.

The pace of the novel runs from steady to quick, picking up speed toward the end of each Part. The tedious months and years spent in building the Taj Mahal and, for Jahanara and her father, in prison, the author covers in brief summary. The pace runs quickly with action sequences, often showing violence. The story then takes a more moderate pace during sequences of plotting and planning, and the get-acquainted moments between the lovers. The frame story surrounds the linear time line of Jahanara's life at the Red Fort. Her story unfolds in time sequence with no flashbacks to earlier times or situations. The linear structure of the story creates anticipation in the reader based on foreshadowing from the frame story and from commentary made by Jahanara in the narrative.



Quotes

"Dealing with men is like juggling hot coals. They're fairly harmless if you take precautions, but by Allah, they can burn you if you don't pay attention."

Chap. 1, p. 27

"I loathe the jewels. But diamonds mean power and without power I'm without worth."

Chap. 5, p. 71

"The Peacock Throne still glittered, but the man atop it did not."

Chap. 6, p. 81

"I'll need your help. Enemies will attack my plans, my methods and my costs. Nothing will happen without a friend I can trust."

"I can be that friend."

Chap. 7, p. 96

"What can I say other than he was one of those rare people who made everyone around him feel better?"

Chap. 8, p. 117

"Never deny yourself love, my child. For to deny love is to deny God's greatest gift. And who are we to deny God?"

Chap. 9, p. 126

"She was so strong, so certain of the paths before her. My strength, if it can be called that, is born of necessity. It's false, and therefore, I'm false."

Chap. 10, p. 142

"You should love yourself. But alas I think that in order to love yourself, you need other people to love you. This is your only weakness, Jahanara. Because you live your life as you believe others deem you should. You live it for your father, your mother, for everyone but yourself."

Chap. 12, p. 186

"Aurangzeb, who feared so many things, could only quiet his fear by giving it to others."

Part 3, p. 195

"How could we have created this monument, which seemed almost too beautiful for this world? . . . Surely this creation was fit only for God. He should walk within its walls and He alone should contemplate its rapture. . . .The tomb chamber was the centerpiece of the Taj Mahal and a sight to chill one's flesh. It was shaped as an octagon, with eight arched doorways offering access. A dozen men standing atop each other couldn't have reached the domed ceiling. Blackness should have prevailed here, yet the marble shone as if possessed of a magical transparency, as if each arch and wall were



luminous from within. We seemed to stand beneath a white marble sky."
Chap. 14, pp. 203-04

"I fell to my knees, crying as I'd never cried as a child, weeping as only an adult could. For I had seen the light of my brother, and now, in his absence, the world was cloaked in darkness."
Chap. 17, p. 240

"Ultimately, my love saved me, for my love gave me strength."
Chap. 18, p. 253

"'Are all Mughal women such as you?'
'If Allah had wanted me to be useless he wouldn't have given me a brain.'
'I'm glad we fight your men. A battle with such women would surely break us.'
Chap. 20, p. 280



Topics for Discussion

Jahanara spends some time in the beginning of the novel describing her mother Arjumand's legendary physical beauty and comparing her own looks to that of her mother. Does Jahanara's resemblance to her mother help her or harm her in the course of the story? Do people who are considered beautiful by others have advantages in life that others do not have? Can beauty ever be a disadvantage?

Jahanara's brothers Dara and Aurangzeb embody opposite temperaments and interests in their characters. Where Aurangzeb is vicious, warlike, and vengeful, his brother Dara is philosophical, peace loving, and diplomatic, but all these qualities can be necessary in a ruler, particularly an emperor. Is it possible to find all of these qualities in one person? Are there any characters in the novel who show a blend of these opposite characteristics?

Jahanara grows up in a harem surrounded by women and children. Does she consider that an advantage or a disadvantage? How does being female in seventeenth century Hindustan inhibit Jahanara from doing what she wants to do in life? How does being female help her accomplish her goals?

Both Jahanara and her father, Shah Jahan, make promises to Arjumand right before her death. What are these promises? How are they fulfilled during the course of the book? Would it have been easier or less dangerous for them had Jahanara and her father not kept their promises?

The story is set during the period of the Mughal Empire in Hindustan. At that same time in history two women, Mary I and Elizabeth I, had already ruled in England as queens. If Jahanara had been allowed to rule in her country, would she have made a good Empress? Why or why not?

Discuss the part religion plays in the story. The Mughal Empire under Shah Jahan was known for its religious tolerance, bringing together both Muslims and Hindus under one government. What role does religion play in Jahanara's daily life? How does she feel about her brother Aurangzeb's devoutness? Aurangzeb executes his brother Dara, accusing him of heresy. Was Dara a heretic?

The author introduces Jahanara to the reader as an old woman telling her story to her granddaughters. Does this make Jahanara more or less reliable as a narrator? Why? Would the story have been strengthened by the addition of another point of view?