

# **Brick Lane Study Guide**

## **Brick Lane by Monica Ali**

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# Plot Summary

*Brick Lane* is the story of Nazneen, a young Bangladeshi woman given into an arranged marriage to Chanu Ahmed, a man almost twice her age. Chanu takes her to London, where he has lived and worked for almost two decades. Nazneen not only has to learn to live with Chanu, but she has to survive in a whole new culture as well.

In the small Bangladeshi estate community in London, Nazneen falls in love with ice-skating, which she learns about from television. Nazneen meets other Bangladeshi people who grow through their own struggles. Some of them struggle against the traditions they left behind, while others struggle against the new traditions that their English-born children are exposed to. Nazneen and Chanu become well-acquainted with; Mrs. Islam, a wealthy widow who Chanu describes as "a respectable-type;" Dr. Azad, a successful professional with a family he is ashamed of; and Razia Iqbal, a woman who becomes Nazneen's best friend despite Chanu's admonishments that she is not a respectable-type of woman.

In the early years of their marriage, Nazneen, who was at first impressed with her husband's credentials and his collection of books and furniture, becomes more and more annoyed with him. Chanu talks but doesn't act. He plans a lot but he doesn't accomplish his goals, and, like most Muslim men from their part of the world, he won't allow her to leave their estate alone or to work.

Nazneen gives birth to a son, Raqib, and, as they watch Bengali youth turn to drugs and alcohol, Chanu vows to take his family back home before they are affected by such vices. Dr. Azad describes this desire to return as the Going Home Syndrome. Many Bengalis plan to return, he explains, but they can never raise the money that they need for such a move. When Raqib dies before his first birthday, the traumatic event brings Nazneen and Chanu closer to each other. Nazneen begins to understand that they're both seeking the same thing, but are taking different paths towards their goals. Chanu, for his part, begins to show Nazneen more respect. He makes a vow to stop talking and to start acting.

Raqib's death is the turning point that takes the reader deeper into the world of women in Bangladesh. Through a series of letters that span thirteen years, *Brick Lane* begins to tell the story of Nazneen's younger sister, Hasina. Hasina eloped in a "love marriage" and ran off to Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. Though Hasina is miles away from Nazneen, the two women's lives are intertwined. Together and alone, Nazneen and Hasina must deal with the lessons their mother ("Amma") taught them before she died. Chief among these is the lesson of Fate. Amma warned her daughters not to struggle against Fate and to treat life with the same indifference with which life would treat them. Nazneen abides by this lesson for most of her life, but begins to grow out of it, most noticeably when she decided not to leave her sick son Raqib to his fate, but rushed him to the hospital for treatment. Hasina, on the other hand, seems to have always fought against her fate. Nazneen thinks sometimes that perhaps what Hasina did was what she was fated to do.



Hasina's letters talk about the hardships in Dhaka as she describes the political climate that prevailed between 1988 and 2001 which was a time of upheavals and change. Hasina runs away from her first husband, works in a garment factory, and is soon fired because of a jealous woman's lies. Hasina then works as a cook for a while, after which she tries selling handmade crafts. After searching in vain for another sewing job, Hasina works as a prostitute and then marries a former client who soon tires of her. After a period of homelessness, Hasina finally ends up in a home for destitute women where she stays until she is rescued by "Lovely" Begum, a woman with a different set of problems. Lovely is married to Jameshed "James" Rashid, and she is mainly concerned about her looks (she is a former beauty queen) and about keeping up with women who are even wealthier than she is. Like all the other women in the novel, Lovely thinks she would have gone further in life had it not been for her marriage.

Through descriptions of characters and events, Hasina's letters bring to light issues of real social concern in Bangladesh; environmental pollution, mob violence, child labor, child trafficking, HIV/AIDS, and domestic violence. Through Hasina's letters, the reader also learns about changes taking place in Nazneen's life. She and Chanu have two girls, Shahana and Bibi. Chanu drifts from job to job, and both he and Nazneen fall into brief periods of depression. Chanu has not changed, and blames his failures on racism. Chanu also constantly rants about the terrible things the Western world has done to the developing world and to Muslims.

As the drug problem in their London community gets worse, even affecting Razia's son, Tariq, and as his own adolescent daughters become more Westernized, Chanu becomes more determined to bring his family back home. Chanu is so desperate that he borrows money from Mrs. Islam (by now a known usurer); lets Nazneen do some sewing work at home, and accepts a job as a cab driver with Kempton Kars. These new developments change the course of their lives drastically, as Nazneen begins having an affair with the man who brings her the sewing work from his uncle's sweatshop. Karim excites her because, in her view, he knows his place in the world. Karim is sure of himself and he makes Nazneen feel that everything she says is important.

By the time Karim appears in Nazneen's life, the Bengali youth in their community have formed gangs, and they are being affected by the now infamous September 2001 attacks on America. When a group known as the Lion Hearts begins passing anti-Islam leaflets around, Karim forms a group called the Bengal Tigers to counter their claims and defend their religion.

In the meantime, Nazneen and Chanu are trapped in England by Mrs. Islam, who keeps taking all their savings, above what they owe her, with the help of her two sons who serve as her thugs.

With the all the pressures weighing on her; having to balance the needs of her family, the impending trip home, their debt, and the illicit affair that Karim wants to see end in marriage, Nazneen eventually suffers a nervous breakdown. After her recovery, Nazneen finds the power within herself to stop Mrs. Islam, to be more assertive at home, and to end the relationship with Karim.



In the end Dr. Azad gives Chanu the rest of the money they need for the trip, but Nazneen tells Chanu at the last moment that she and the girls can't go. For Chanu, "the pull of the land is stronger than the pull of blood," and he tells Nazneen he can't stay.

Nazneen stays in London and she survives with the help of Razia. The women establish a sewing business with some of their other friends and they make a good living catering mainly to white women who will pay high prices for Bangladeshi/Indian-style clothing. The novel ends with a surprise trip for Nazneen. Nazneen's daughters and Razia take her to an ice-skating rink for the first time, where she will be free to skate, they tell her, even in her sari.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

The story opens with the birth of the main character, Nazneen, in the Mymensingh District of East Pakistan. Her mother, Rupban, mistakes the pain of her contractions for indigestion. After an hour and forty-five minutes of bearing it in silence, Rupban lets out a screech that brings her husband Hamid running to kill whoever is attacking her. But it is too late, by the time Hamid finds out what is really happening and fetches the old midwife, Banesa, the baby has already been delivered and is showing no signs of life.

Banesa, who has claimed to be 120 years old for the past several years, announces that the baby is dead and she accuses Rupban of not calling her on time just so that she can save some money. Rupban's sister-in-law, Mumtaz, accidentally drops the slippery newborn on the bed, and, to their shock, the dead baby starts to cry. Banesa who is a little embarrassed by her error tells Rupban she has two choices. She can take the baby to a hospital, or leave her to her fate. "Of course," she reminds the new mother, "Fate will decide everything in the end, whatever route you follow" (pg. 3). Rupban chooses not to stand in the way of Fate, and, for four days, Rupban cries and worries about Nazneen's refusal to feed. Finally, on the fifth day after her birth, Nazneen begins to take her mother's nipple. This dramatic episode of Nazneen entry into the world becomes known as the story of How You Were Left to Your Fate.

Rupban (*Amma*) teaches her daughter Nazneen to be still in her heart and mind, to accept the Grace of God and to treat life with indifference. Consequently, Nazneen grows up living by the principle that what can not be changed must be borne. According to Rupban nothing can be changed so everything has to be borne. Nazneen's life is stark contrast to that of her younger sister, Hasina, who had a mind of her own. Hasina eloped at 16, much to the chagrin of their father, Hamid (*Abba*). When Hamid arranges Nazneen's marriage to a man almost twice her age, she accepts without a fuss and only hopes to be as good a wife as her mother.

Chapter 1 continues in Tower Hamlets, London. The story rejoins Nazneen who is now newlywed at 18 to Chanu Ahmed and, having just finished the housework, she is getting ready to prepare dinner. Nazneen looks out of her window and waves to a fat, tattooed lady who sits by her curtainless window in her apartment across the courtyard. Nazneen thinks about visiting her, but she is afraid of knocking on the wrong apartment door, and of being unable to communicate with The Tattoo Lady once she finds her. Nazneen has been in London for six months, but she only knows two words in English; *sorry* and *thank you*.

Chanu is bringing a guest for dinner and Nazneen is worried that something might go wrong. To reassure herself she reads a random passage from the Holy Qur'an, and it gives her the calm that she was seeking. Nazneen cleans the cluttered apartment. She is proud of the many colorful rugs, numerous pieces of mismatched furniture,



certificates adorning the walls, and the showcase full of pottery animals, china figures, and plastic fruit. Though every morning she wishes for something else from life, Nazneen believes her father arranged a good marriage for her.

To get her mind focused again, Nazneen recites another passage, by memory this time, from the Holy Qur'an. The recitation puts her to sleep and Nazneen wakes up from her dream of Bangladesh in a panic over how much time she has lost. As she cuts the onions, her mind races with thoughts of what her sister Hasina might be doing. Nazneen also remembers overhearing Chanu describe her on the phone as a hard worker, an unspoiled village girl, who was not beautiful. Although he also described her as not so ugly, Nazneen still feels the sting of hearing him tell the person on the phone, by way of a proverb, that any wife is better than no wife. She wonders if the person was Dr. Azad, the guest who is expected for dinner and who has been invited mainly because he knows Chanu's boss, Mr. Dalloway.

Nazneen thinks of her newfound loneliness, and she decides that she misses people more than anything. Her thoughts soon drift back to Hasina, and she fetches the shoebox from the large, black wardrobe to reread the letter Hasina sent. Hasina writes, in broken English, about her husband Malek, who is doing well in his job, "*Even we have nothing I happy,*" she writes. "*We have love. Love is happiness,*" (pg.11). Hasina is praying for a son and she hopes that one day she will be forgiven for eloping and that she will be loved by Malek's mother.

Nazneen's letter-reading is interrupted by the doorbell. Some of their neighbors have come to visit. At the door is Razia and Mrs. Islam who are mainly concerned with gossip and rumors. Nazneen serves them tea and they discuss an accident in which a woman falling to her death from a window. It seems that the accident may have been a suicide. Nazneen is now more worried than ever about dinner, but proper Bengali etiquette forbids her from asking her guests to leave. She is relieved when they finally do leave.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

The opening chapter of *Brick Lane* introduces the reader to the protagonist and the land and people that will shape her future. Nazneen has a mother who instills in her an almost reverent respect of Fate, a father who is not pleased that she came out a girl, and a beautiful, headstrong younger sister who causes all of them to worry about her. We see from the beginning that Nazneen will have to face, and perhaps struggle against, a life full of restrictive cultural traditions and marginalization. Indeed, a flash forward informs us that at the age of thirty-four, after sixteen years of marriage to an unsuccessful husband, Nazneen no longer waits for the future to be revealed, but takes control of her own destiny.

The box shape of the estate in which Nazneen and Chanu live brings to mind a prison and it foreshadows what Nazneen's existence will come to feel like in these apartments, with the other Bengali immigrants. Her surroundings in London paint a bleak picture. There is dead grass, broken paving stones, dogs defecating, and smelly trash bins,





which forms a stark contrast with the green and gold fields of Bangladesh. Inside their apartment, the clutter serves two purposes, the objects show us what we might find in a typical Bengali home, and they represent the disorder and confusion that Nazneen has married into. One piece of furniture, the large black wardrobe in which she hides Hasina's letters, is particularly symbolic. Nazneen sometimes dreams that the wardrobe falls on her and crushes her into the mattress. In other dreams Nazneen is locked inside the wardrobe but nobody hears her hammering to get out.



# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Summary

At dinner with Nazneen and Chanu, Dr. Azad laments about the deterioration of the Bengali youth who are frequenting pubs and nightclubs. When Chanu vows to go back home before this happens to his children, Dr. Azad reveals that once, he too had the Going Home Syndrome. Dr. Azad explains that the Going Home Syndrome happens because although the body is in England, the heart remains home, in Bangladesh. People always, find some reason not to go back whether it is; natural disasters, bureaucracy, or, more often than not, lack of funds. When Nazneen says they would not need much money to live back home, Chanu is visibly uncomfortable that she has spoken up.

As they eat, Nazneen can't help but compare the two men. Dr. Azad is small, quiet, and wears a spotless shirt. Her husband is fat, loud, and he has an oily yellow stain where he spilled some food on his shirt. Chanu, who has been in England for sixteen years, is relying on his credentials and a good word from Dr. Azad to get a promotion from Mr. Dalloway. Chanu had ambitions and big dreams when he first came to London, but he found things different than he expected. To the British, his academic and family backgrounds mean nothing. He is just another peasant from Bangladesh here. Nazneen is especially embarrassed for Chanu when it turns out that Dr. Azad does not know the Mr. Dalloway whom Chanu says is his patient.

After Dr. Azad leaves, Nazneen clears away the dinner dishes until something on television captivates her. A pair of figure skaters are performing, and Nazneen is enthralled enough to ask Chanu what the sport is called. With her accent, she has trouble saying 'ice-skating' properly, and she wonders aloud about taking English classes, but Chanu dismisses the idea as useless. Chanu returns to talking about the promotion he wants so much. His knew idea is to go to the pub with his boss, and Nazneen is disgusted by what she sees as his stupidity. Chanu also begins to speak of a rival for the promotion, a man named Wilkie, who, Chanu says, is part of the racist white underclass that doesn't want people like him to succeed.

Later that evening, Nazneen cuts Chanu's corns with a razor and she eats alone in the kitchen after he falls asleep. She thinks of Hasina and tries to imagine what it would be like to fall in love. Nazneen also wonders about the woman who fell or jumped to her death. She wonders what thoughts the woman had as she approached her end and Nazneen suddenly feels sure that the woman jumped, rather than fell.

Nazneen's days soon fall into a tolerable routine, with the only notable moments occurring when she watches ice-skating on television. While she watches the skaters, Nazneen forgets about all the petty little things going on in her mind and in her life and she feels like a new and glorious person. When the skating competition ends after a week, Nazneen begins to pray five times a day. She finds it remarkable that Chanu



doesn't pray or read the Holy Qur'an. She begins to pray for his promotion, but she doesn't give it as much importance as her prayers for another letter from her sister. One night Nazneen dreams of being a girl and playing with 6-year-old Hasina in Gouripur when both of them were loved by their parents and were free to roam around the village. She awakes longing for that time.

Chanu discourages Nazneen from going out, citing the fact that Bengali men will gossip about her and ruin her reputation if they see her on the streets. So Nazneen stays at home in the estate working and saying to herself for comfort, as her Amma always did, "Just wait and see, that's all we can do" (pg. 27). Mumtaz, the aunt who dropped the newborn Nazneen, is the same woman who found Nazneen's mother dead in the barn, wearing her best sari and leaning forward with an upright spear pierced through her heart. Nazneen remembers that Mumtaz never spoke to Abba after that.

As Nazneen eventually begins to get acquainted with her neighbors, Razia moves into the estate and becomes one of her favorite friends. Razia is funny and being with her takes Nazneen's mind off Hasina. Nazneen is worried because since Hasina's second letter arrived six months ago (scrawled this time instead of neatly written), she has written back three times but has not yet received a reply.

Razia comes by to visit Nazneen with stories of Bengali kids gone bad and of a girl taken out of a British school and sent home to Bangladesh to be married. Razia fears for her own children (Tariq and Shefali) and, though she thinks Hasina's story is romantic, she vows that she will never allow Shefali to marry for love.

Nazneen soon tells Chanu, in a roundabout way and without using the word, that she is pregnant. Chanu immediately assumes that his first child will be a boy and he is certain that his new status as a father-to-be will help him get the promotion.

To Nazneen's joy, a letter from Hasina finally arrives, but its contents break her heart.

## Chapter 2 Analysis

In Chapter 2 another side of Nazneen is revealed, the side that is moved by the urgency, intensity, and assertion that comes through as the ice-skaters perform on television. Nazneen's transformation as she watches them reveals to the reader the depth of her desire for a dramatically different life. This longing is reiterated when Nazneen comes to believe that the 'accident' with the woman falling off the balcony had to be suicide. Nazneen believes that the woman jumped, with a smile on her face, in defiance of everything and everyone. Subconsciously, Nazneen's image of the smiling woman reflects her view of her own mother who was found dead under very suspicious circumstances.

While Nazneen dreams of change, other characters in her world are attached to tradition. Chanu, for example, *thinks* he is modern but he doesn't want Nazneen to go out of the estate without him. Chanu is worried that the Bengali men would gossip about her and ruin her reputation. Razia is also trapped by Bengali tradition. Although she

thinks Hasina's story of elopement is romantic, and although she seems to disapprove of the Bengali parents who took their daughter out of school and sent her home to an arranged marriage, Razia vows that she will never let her own daughter marry for love.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

Chanu goes off to work bundled up in a warm jacket with a furry hood. Nazneen thinks he looks like a turtle. She watches him from the window and then looks at The Tattoo Lady across the courtyard, Nazneen marvels at how anyone can be poor *and* fat. When Chanu is gone, Nazneen leaves the flat, goes out past the other front doors with their peeling paint, and through the hallways that smell of urine. Nazneen crosses the road into Brick Lane, and begins walking through the neighborhood and making a series of turns with no destination in mind. At first, Nazneen is intimidated by the many people bustling about, until she realizes, to her joy, that she is practically invisible to them.

Nazneen sits on a park bench, lost, like Hasina is in Dhaka now that she has left her abusive husband. In her letter, Hasina explains that she can't stay with someone who beats her and says that he loves her at the same time. She describes a beggar woman she sees everyday in Dhaka. The woman is bent in half at the waist so that she must sit on the ground and use her bottom and palms to move. Hasina says that it looks like someone is pressing a big foot on the woman's back, but even so, she goes wherever she wants. Hasina says that this woman gives her courage. Nazneen weeps a bit, both for her sister and for her own predicament. As she tries to find her way home she bumps into a man who tries to talk to her first in Hindi, then in Urdu. But she doesn't understand him.

Nazneen eventually returns to the estate and starts to cook. Chanu comes home soon afterward and they talk about Hasina. When Nazneen suggests that maybe he could go to Dhaka to find her, he responds with sarcasm that embitters her. "Anything is possible," she now believes. Nazneen is proud of the way she managed to find a restroom and later ask directions in a Bengali restaurant to find her way home (pg. 40). From that moment on Nazneen stops praying for Chanu's promotion, she hides hot peppers in his food, pairs dirty socks with his clean ones, nicks him on purpose when she cuts his corns, and messes up his files.

On Nazneen's next pre-natal visit, Mrs. Islam goes along as her chaperone and asks about her problems with Chanu. When Nazneen isn't forthcoming, Mrs. Islam tells her a story about how a group of village women got their men to dig them a well by withholding sex. "If you think you are powerless, then you are," she tells Nazneen. "Everything is in you, where God put it (pg. 42).

In Dr. Azad's office, Nazneen again compares him with Chanu. Dr. Azad's words have authority, she thinks, while Chanu throws his about foolishly. At her husband's request, Nazneen invites Dr. Azad over for a second meal with them and he accepts with pleasure. Nazneen learns that Chanu has been to see Dr. Azad three or four times recently for various reasons. On one of his visits Chanu brought the doctor a petition for him to sign.



Back at the estate, Razia comes over to visit and gossip. Nazneen shows her Hasina's latest letter in which she writes that her landlord, Mr. Chowdhury, will get her a job in a garment factory. Nazneen is resentful when she tells Razia that the only thing Chanu says is that Hasina should be left to her fate. Razia asks about the promotion and Nazneen tells that her Chanu says Mr. Dalloway is a racist. Nazneen has noticed that Chanu has begun to talk less of the promotion. Instead, he now goes on and on about racism. Razia does not agree with Chanu's stereotype of whites. Razia wants to know why he complains if life is better in England than in Bangladesh, and why he stays if it is worse than in Bangladesh. Razia also points out the very good things that the British government provides to the poor and the unemployed; money, housing, and free schooling. Before Razia leaves for her English class, she takes off her hat to reveal her new short haircut. Nazneen is shocked by her haircut and she wants to know if her husband will be angry. Razia doesn't care what he'll think.

Nazneen's rebellions against Chanu go unnoticed and she begins to feel trapped in her environment. She asks Chanu if she may go to the college with Razia for English classes, but he tells her that she is going to be a mother and she will have enough to do. He babbles on about the petition he is circulating to establish a mobile library for the estate and he wonders if Dr. Azad will help him get more signatures because he only has seven or eight so far. Chanu is a bit concerned because Dr. Azad has implied that he (Chanu) did something dishonest by inserting a clause in the petition, that says Chanu should be put in charge of the library, *after* he had collected some signatures.

That night, Nazneen eats alone in the kitchen again. Refusing to let him see her eat has become Nazneen's way of making her self-restraint and self-denial visible to Chanu. As she eats that night, she thinks of Gouripur and wonders if she could really go back to the inconveniences of living there. Nazneen has grown quite comfortable with amenities such as flushing toilets and electric ovens.

Chanu, asleep in bed with his face in a book, makes Nazneen think of Makku Pagla, a lunatic from her village who used to read a lot and died when he fell into the well. Nazneen remembers that after Makku Pagla was taken out of the well, her father left town for three days. Her mother distressed herself by his repeated and unexplained absences became distraught when Nazneen who was just a little girl at the time, asked where her father had gone. "If God wanted us to ask questions," she told Nazneen, "he would have made us men" (pg. 53).

## Chapter 3 Analysis

Nazneen is lost in London, and Hasina is lost in Dhaka. They are in two cities that are very different from each other, but the cities present the sisters with very similar challenges. Nazneen and Hasina both struggle against oppression and tradition, and they must rely on the men in their lives to help them. The beggar woman that Hasina describes is symbolic of what the sisters feel; a large foot is pressing down on their backs.



Nazneen, who has begun to notice the flaws in the furniture that surrounds them, feels trapped inside her pregnant body and inside the estate apartments. But ironically, while she longs for the jasmine and sunshine and the simple things from her village, she doesn't know if she can do without the conveniences she has gotten used to.

The first indication that Nazneen's change is beginning is the feeling of triumph that engulfs her after she uses her own wits to find her way back home. Nazneen begins to believe in herself and, most importantly, in the fact that anything is possible. This new belief is quite contrary to the beliefs her mother taught her which was that nothing can be changed. Her little rebellions against Chanu, though they do not work, make her feel powerful. Nazneen is doing what she can.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

Nazneen's baby boy, Mohammed Raqib, is a month old. Chanu calls him "Ruku." Nazneen is mesmerized by her creation and amazed that Chanu had anything to do with it. Chanu annoys her with the way he talks constantly about the baby. For him, Raqib has become, "a set of questions, an array of possibilities, and a spark for debate" (pg. 55). Chanu examines the baby's progress, and plans for his future. Nazneen observes that Chanu sees himself in his child, "this time with chances seized, not missed" (pg. 55).

It is four months later and the baby is now five months old. Nazneen tells Chanu that she does not want to be disturbed if Mrs. Islam comes over while she is taking a nap. Chanu responds by telling her how much he approves of Mrs. Islam and how much he disapproves of Razia. He says that Mrs. Islam is a respectable, educated woman from a good family, while Razia cuts her hair like a tramp, has a wayward child, and has an uneducated husband in a menial job. He hints that he does not want Nazneen to see Razia anymore.

Mrs. Islam comes to visit, and as usual, she is full of advice about what Nazneen should do with the baby. Nazneen tunes out what she is saying, and takes the baby with her to look out of the window. The view from the window is bleak as there is foul trash, boys with a radio smoking cigarettes, dull metal window frames, and uninspiring bricks everywhere she looks. Nazneen wonders why the tattoo lady continues to wait and watch when there is nothing to see.

Mrs. Islam announces that she is taking Raqib for the afternoon to play with her young niece, but Nazneen ignores her. Later, when Mrs. Islam prompts her to get the baby ready, Nazneen suggests the niece come to her place instead. Mrs. Islam ignores the suggestion and refuses to hear Nazneen's refusal. When Nazneen makes it clear that she will not give in, Mrs. Islam is offended and she subtly compares Nazneen to the white people who keep their lives private. Nazneen knows she could soften the blow of her refusal with a few respectful words, but she chooses not to. As Mrs. Islam leaves, Nazneen notices that there is something wrong with the old lady's hip.

Nazneen has noticed that Chanu no longer talks about what he will do 'when' he gets the promotion. Now he says 'if' he gets his promotion. He has stopped complaining of racism and he has started speaking of resigning from the council. Chanu has also started to call Dr. Azad a snob because the man has not yet returned their hospitality with a dinner invitation of his own.

Nazneen wonders if Chanu will ever earn his degree or finish any of the many things he has planned to accomplish. Chanu has been collecting second-hand furniture to restore, and they now have eleven chairs and no space. Nazneen shows her disapproval by





refusing to sit in his latest acquisition. She still will not eat when he is around, and she has started missing her prayers. Hasina has been writing and her letters make Nazneen dream that she is independent too. Nazneen daydreams of Dhaka and she often finds her mind wandering all day until Chanu returns home from work.

Despite Chanu's objections, Nazneen still sees her friend Razia. Razia complains that her husband works too hard and sends too much of his wages back home to Bangladesh. Razia wants to get a job in a factory so that she can buy whatever she needs and she doesn't care what her husband or the community will think. In fact, Razia has even stopped wearing the traditional saris that restrict her movement. Nazneen observes the piles of possessions and canned food in Razia's home and she thinks about how grateful they were at home in Bangladesh if they had a table and a chair and some food to eat. When Nazneen tells her what Mrs. Islam has said about their friend Jorina working in a factory, that Jorina has brought shame to her family, Razia says that Mrs. Islam is being a hypocrite. Razia explains that Mrs. Islam uses her handkerchiefs to send signals to her sons as they conduct business deals. Razia hints that the business is a questionable one, but she refuses to elaborate.

A few months later, at long last, Nazneen and Chanu are on their way to Dr. Azad's house with the baby. On the bus, Nazneen double-checks to make sure she has everything Raqib needs and Chanu begins rehearsing lines he could say when they get there. Nazneen is embarrassed when she realizes that they have not even been invited and she wonders why her father gave her to this man. Nazneen has begun to feel restless and listless in her life with Chanu, and she can't escape from the feeling. Her mind wanders often to memories of home. On the bus now, she remembers Mustafa the cowman being punished for kidnapping a young girl and she remembers her mother and her aunt lamenting that as women, they would suffer in silence. At Dr. Azad's house a woman smoking a cigarette and wearing a short purple skirt with purple painted nails and streaked hair opens the door. Chanu is certain that they have the wrong place, but it is indeed the home of Dr. Azad.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Chapter 4 is full of characters and scenes that illustrate the theme of tradition vs. modernism, and the related theme of inter-generational conflict. Chanu sees Mrs. Islam, who is very traditional, as respectable, while he sees modern Razia as unrespectable. Razia has abandoned her traditional saris for tracksuits that give her more freedom of movement. Mrs. Islam by contrast lectures Nazneen on how to care for her baby. Chanu is already planting the seeds of the conflict between traditional beliefs and modern beliefs when he plans his son's future.

Nazneen is definitely changing, as evidenced by her open disobedience of Chanu when she refuses to sit in his new chair, and by her persistence in saying no to the intimidating Mrs. Islam. Nazneen readily tunes them both out when she is tired of their chatter, and she knows how to brush them off with meek words that appease them. She says things such as, "Anything you say, husband," (pg. 50) to keep Chanu happy.



Nazneen, no longer a newlywed fresh from the village, has started to see things from a different perspective. The furniture and household items which she was once proud of have become unsightly clutter that deprives her of space. With disdain, she notices that Chanu wears trousers that are shiny at the knees and a shoe with a sole that is coming unstitched.

Now an adult and a mother herself, Nazneen thinks often of her own mother. Both she and Hasina have begun to see parallels between themselves and their mother Amma. They begin to understand more about Amma's life, but some questions still remain unanswered.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

Nazneen and Chanu are at Dr. Azad's house, uninvited. Dr. Azad is visibly shocked to see them, and he attempts to discourage them from staying. But Mrs. Azad overrules him and invites them to stay for dinner. Mrs. Azad is loud and uncouth, she orders her husband around, speaks her opinion, drinks beer openly, and dares to shush her husband and his guest when their talking disturbs her television-watching. Dinner is unpleasant, and Nazneen thinks that maybe Dr. Azad comes over to their place just for the food.

To Nazneen's surprise, Chanu requests a beer too, with the explanation that every now and then it won't hurt him, since he is an adult. Chanu reveals that he has plans to go home and build a house before Ruku gets spoiled by the Western culture. When he says the only thing holding him back is insufficient funds, Dr. Azad reminds him, a bit cynically, of the promotion that is coming. When Chanu shares his ideas for some money-making ventures but laments that he has no capital, Dr. Azad suggests Chanu make some.

The Azads' daughter comes in soon after Nazneen and Chanu have arrived. Wearing a short skirt and speaking English, she asks for money to go to a pub. Dr. Azad is furious and embarrassed, but Mrs. Azad gives the girl what she wants. This exchange prompts Chanu to talk about the unfortunate clash of cultures and of generations that immigrants face.

Mrs. Azad is not at all impressed by Chanu's academic credentials and puts her own husband's literary pursuits down. "He puts his nose inside a book because the smell of real life offends him," she says of Dr. Azad (pg. 77). Nazneen now believes Dr. Azad comes to them to get away from his wife. Mrs. Azad is disdainful of Chanu's complaints about racism and the struggle to hang on to one's heritage and traditions and she launches into a passionate tirade about those Bengalis who refuse to change. By the end of the visit, Nazneen believes that Dr. Azad also comes to their house to observe someone who is unhappier than he is.

Back at their own home, Nazneen dreams that Hasina is at the garment factory ironing her own hand and face, but laughing. Nazneen wakes up from the dream to find Raqib burning with fever. She and Chanu are alarmed when they find it impossible to wake their little baby up.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

Mrs. Azad is quite the opposite of her refined husband. She is also quite unlike the typical Bengali woman as she is even more extreme than Razia with the way she has assimilated into Western culture. As Nazneen begins to break free from her prison, Mrs.



Azad serves to illustrate a boundary that Nazneen can move towards or stay away from as she finds her new self.

In this chapter it becomes apparent that Chanu is afflicted by the Going Home Syndrome that Dr. Azad once described. Chanu is bent on returning home, but he is being held back by a lack of money. In fact, Chanu's growing obsession with finding capital for his ventures foreshadows more drama about money issues.

Nazneen's dream at the end of this chapter represents Hasina in trouble. Hasina is apparently hurting herself, but she doesn't know it.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

Nazneen and Chanu rush Raqib to the hospital in an ambulance. His illness brings about profound changes in both of his parents. By their third day in the hospital, Nazneen no longer wants to pull away from Chanu and Chanu is not only speaking a little less and a little more softly, but he is also speaking directly to his wife instead of to an imaginary audience behind her. Nazneen's irritation with Chanu begins to subside when she realizes that he is looking for the same fundamental things she seeks, but that he has a different approach to them.

Nazneen believes she willed Raqib to live and the thought makes her very happy. Her friends Nazma, Sorupa, Jorina, and Razia come to visit them in the hospital. Razia practices a few English words and phrases from her language class. She is now wearing trousers but she is still complaining that her husband won't let her work. Razia and her husband have been fighting bitterly at home. Razia recently found out that his wages are going to an imam in their village to build a mosque and he complains that she is spending too much. Nazneen begs her to make up with her husband for the children's sake, but Razia refuses to acknowledge any redeeming quality in her husband.

When Chanu enters the hospital room with the food he cooked, Razia gets up to leave. Chanu, it turns out, is a very good cook, and Nazneen is eating with him again. Nazneen sends Chanu to check on the baby, and while he is gone, Razia tells Nazneen the truth about Mrs. Islam. The old lady is a usurer who uses her sons as thugs to bully people into paying back their high-interest loans. Razia also tells her that the tattoo lady is no longer there because she has been sent to a mental institution. "Someone should have got to her sooner," Razia says. "Did no one see?" (pg. 91).

Nazneen uses prayer beads to pray in the hospital. She realizes that it was actually God, and not herself, who willed Raqib to live. She vows to start praying in a more meaningful way.

Chanu returns to work on the eighth day of the baby's hospitalization. Nazneen waits for him at the end of the day. She begins to tell him what she found out about Mrs. Islam, but he already knows. In fact, Mrs. Islam's hypocrisy has inspired him to do away with his own. He vows that he is going to stop talking and start acting. Chanu has already exercised his new attitude by resigning from his job and he plans to come clean with his relatives who keep sending him, "begging letters." All these years he has let them think that he is rich, but now he's going to end the charade. Nazneen wonders, just for a moment, what they will do for money.

Looking at her son, Nazneen is finally, after 21 years, enraged that she was left to her fate. She wonders how her mother could just leave her like that. She remembers



helping Mumtaz wash Amma before the burial, and she remembers finally crying that day when she saw her father act kindly to the children who were playing in the rain. Back in the present, Nazneen does not blame her father for wandering away from Amma so often. She thinks Amma's helpless tears drove him away.

After a nap, Nazneen awakes to find Chanu gone and Razia looking at the baby. Razia announces that her husband is dead. Razia's husband was killed when seventeen frozen cows fell on top of him at the slaughterhouse. Razia is sad, but still resentful that all their money has gone to build a mosque and that her husband has died before its erection. When Nazneen tries to comfort her, Razia groans and says she can finally get that factory job now that her husband is no longer in the way.

Nazneen takes a break from the hospital and goes back to the Tower Hamlets to tidy up the flat in preparation for Raqib's homecoming. After the pristine hospital, the cluttered flat looks like it is inhabited by lunatics. Nazneen notices that Chanu has actually begun to restore a chair, and Hanufa, a neighbor, drops in with some food. Nazneen takes a bath, and afterwards she tries on a pair of Chanu's trousers. Nazneen then she hikes her underskirt up to see what she looks like in a short skirt. For a while, she has fun looking in the mirror and pretending to ice-skate. Nazneen finally cleans up the apartment and sits down to write a letter to Hasina. She writes and rewrites the letter in an effort to describe adequately the reason why she was so happy in the hospital when Raqib was still recovering. She was happy because she had not accepted what was happening to him, she had fought it. In the end, though, she does not include that part in her letter. Instead, she writes a brief note about the baby's illness, and promises a longer letter later. When Nazneen leaves the flat again, she is amused by the Bengali boys who flirt with her.

Back at the hospital, Chanu tells Nazneen Raqib is gone. She doesn't understand at first. And then she does, but she refuses to hear it. Raqib is dead. Chanu says that he will not be able to handle washing him. Nazneen says that she will do it. She has seen it done in the village many times before.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

Both Nazneen and Chanu reach major turning points in this chapter. After three years of escalating irritation, Nazneen begins to understand her husband and she sees that the two of them are not as different from each other as she thought they were. Nazneen is confident, or hopeful, that love will follow from this new understanding. Chanu, for his part, begins to talk a little less and to listen a little more. He also talks directly to his wife instead of to an audience behind her, and he makes good on his vow to start acting on his plans.

Another major turning point for Nazneen comes when she acknowledges her mother's mistakes and weaknesses and when she realizes that Amma was not really the saint that Abba said she was. For the first time, Nazneen sees how her father might have been affected by Amma's complacency and helplessness.

The illness of Raqib serves to bring Nazneen and Chanu to a crossroads in their relationship. With Raqib's death a week later, it is clear that their new relationship will either be unraveled or strengthened.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

Hasina is writing from Dhaka, Bangladesh. The first letter begins with a Prayer of Light to comfort Nazneen and Chanu in the wake of Raqib's death. Subsequent letters tell the story, over a period of 13 years, of Hasina's life in Dhaka. The letters also give us clues about what is happening in Nazneen's life at the same time.

1988 (3 letters) There is unrest in Dhaka. The workers are on strike, but Hasina is fine. She has a job at a garment factory and her landlord, Mr. Chowdhury, is like a father to her. He is going to fix the plaster on her walls and the leaks in her roof at the rooming house. Some of Hasina's new friends at work include; Shahnaz, who is educated and quite modern; Aleya, whose husband is always there to pick her up after work; and Renu, a widow who reminds Hasina of Amma. In London, Chanu has a new job and he is again speaking of a promotion. But by the end of the year he is already complaining.

1989 (5 letters) The garment girls are having some trouble with religious fundamentalists who say that men and women working together is sinful. The fundamentalists have spread rumors that garment girls are getting pregnant. Ayela's jealous husband is worried and he beats her when she gets a company gift for her hard work. Renu is being punished by the factory management, and Shahnaz advises Hasina to tone down her make-up and to stay away from Abdul, a male worker who "looks at her wrong." Mr. Chowdhury visits Hasina at the rooming house several times and asks her, as his daughter, to rub his feet. Hasina says he never minds when she can not pay her full rent. After a full year there, however, he has still not fixed up her room. Back in London, Nazneen is expecting a baby but Chanu is still out of work and he has given up on his chair restoration venture.

1990 (4 letters) Hasina is being shunned at the garment factory, but she doesn't know why. Only Abdul still speaks to her. After a few months she finds out her friends have turned against her because there are rumors that she is paying cheaper rent because there is something illicit going on between her and Mr. Chowdhury. Now that she knows the charge, she believes a word about the truth to the influential Shahnaz will change their attitudes. But nothing changes, except that Abdul grows to love her. Meanwhile, Nazneen has a baby girl and Chanu earns a certificate in bookkeeping.

1991 (4 letters) One of the women at the factory lies to the factory manager about Hasina and Abdul, but only Hasina is fired for allegedly engaging in prostitution. Mr. Chowdhury is lonely, and he hints that he might take Hasina into his home, either as a servant or a wife. She tells him she has been laid off and he no longer asks her for rent. Hasina begins to cook for the jute men, and to raise chickens. One of the jute men, Hussain, becomes a good friend. When Mr. Chowdhury learns why Hasina was fired, he gets angry and rapes her. She blames herself, and she is filled with shame and despair. "God have given me life..." (pg.117). Mr. Chowdhury begins to visit her once or twice a





week. Nazneen wants to send money, but Chanu refuses. Nazneen also wants Hasina to live with them in London, but Chanu says they must save for the new baby on the way.

1992 (2 letters) Mr. Chowdhury comes to see Hasina less and less. She is afraid he will soon put her out of the rooming house. When she can't find another machining job, Hasina turns to making crafts, but the police drive her off the street when she tries to sell them. Hussain gives her things from time to time, and soon he begins coming to her room at night. In London, Nazneen and Chanu have a second girl.

1993 (1 letter) Almost a full year goes by before Hasina writes to Nazneen again. She has become a real prostitute now, with Hussain as her pimp. He is no longer a jute man. Hussain has four girls indentured to him for, "a few years." He tells Hasina apologetically that the best prices are paid for 11-12 year old girls. Hasina goes back to the factory to see her old friends, but only Shahnaz is there. Hasina wonders if they ever really friends. Afterwards, she walks around contemplating what has happened to her. "I walk around factory gates around the walls. If it possible to hate bricks I hating them. This factory have ruin me" (pg. 119).

1994 (1 letter) It is the rainy season again, and Hasina's room is still leaking. Hasina longs for her life in the village. She thinks of Renu sometimes, and of Mumtaz and Amma. Over in London, Chanu has found a job at Leisure Center.

1995 (8 letters, all in the first half of the year) Hasina meets an albino named Ahmed, and he asks her to marry him. She doesn't want to, because she is already married. But Hussain encourages her to do it. He frees her from her obligation to him, saying to her, "you are damaged past repair." Hasina marries Ahmed and he expects her to keep everything neat according to his high standards. Hasina makes friends with other wives and she chats with them on the rooftop garden of the place where they all live. She is sometimes paranoid about running into her first husband and she is still sometimes haunted by her past as a prostitute.

Ahmed has told Hasina that he will take her to his village to meet his father and two brothers. He has accepted the fact that she will never have a child for him, but he complains that her face has changed since he first met her. In the end, Ahmed doesn't take her to the village after all.

Hussain dies and Hasina goes to his funeral. The jute men don't speak to her, and she takes it as a sign of respect.

Ahmed becomes displeased with Hasina and accuses her of putting a curse on him to make him marry her. He is ashamed to show her to his family and he begins going out alone. Hasina tells him they are going through a "bad patch" and she pleads with him to stay.

In London, Chanu has developed a stomach ulcer, and Nazneen is on medication for depression.



1996 (1 letter) A year has passed since her last letter to Nazneen. Hasina has been homeless and she is out of work.

2001 (1 letter) After almost five years of silence, Hasina writes to Nazneen again. She has been moving here and there, she says, but now she has a job as a maid in a good house.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

This series of 30 letters from Hasina chronicles her life over a period of 13 years.

Hasina is wholesome, chaste, innocent, naïve, and trusting. As time goes on, she moves becomes a garment worker, an entrepreneur, a prostitute, and finally she becomes, a housemaid. This chapter serves to illustrate the turbulence and hardships of life in Dhaka, and, more specifically, of the life of poor working women.

At the same time, Nazneen's own powerlessness is documented. Although she obediently went into an arranged marriage, she too is unhappy. In this chapter, bricks are reinforced as an important symbol when the author uses them as a symbol in Hasina's life as well. While the bricks of Tower Hamlets and Brick Lane imprison Nazneen, the bricks of the garment factory have ruined Hasina's life.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

Tower Hamlets, London, February 2001. Thirteen years have passed since Raqib's death, and Nazneen is now 34 years old. Chanu is teaching their daughters, Shahana and Bibi, how to recite "My Golden Bengal." They are preparing to return home to Bangladesh as soon as they have enough money. Shahana is completely against going home. She doesn't like Bengali music, clothes or food, and she wants to wear jeans. Shahana makes her father angry and he often threatens, "the little memsahib," using her sister, Bibi, as the messenger. After the stressful and forced recitation, the girls escape to bed. Shahana throws a tantrum and kicks her mother in the shins.

At night, when it's quiet, Nazneen is alert to the different sounds coming from the community around them. She has grown used to cutting Chanu's corns, a task that once disgusted her. As she cuts Chanu's corns he tells her that they must go home now, while Shahana is still a child, or it will be too late. Nazneen glances at the dusty photo of Raqib and thinks about Hasina. She wants to go back to Bangladesh for Hasina, but she knows Shahana will never forgive her. Nazneen remembers his sarcastic reply when she asked Chanu to let Hasina come to London. But, to save Hasina from further shame, she had not told Chanu the whole truth about Hasina's condition.

Chanu talks about the glory days of Bengal, and he complains that Bengalis, especially the Sylhetis, have lost pride in their nation. All they hear and know about their country now is floods and famines, he says.

That night, Nazneen eats alone in the kitchen and thinks about getting a job so that she can secretly save money for the Dhaka trip and for Hasina. When Bibi joins her in the kitchen, they both silently savor the precious time together.

Razia, now a British citizen sporting a sweatshirt with the Union Jack on it, comes by to visit Nazneen. She is old and arthritic and she blames her aches on sewing all day. She lights up a cigarette, makes fun of Chanu, and talks about her children, Tariq and Shefali. Razia is worried that Tariq spends too much time studying in his room and she is unhappy about Shefali wanting to take a year off to "do nothing."

When Razia drops her cigarette on Nazneen's green and purple rug and apologizes for spoiling it, Nazneen tells her that when a rug is already green and purple, there's not much one can do to spoil it.

Chanu comes home with a sewing machine for Nazneen and a computer for himself. Excited, he calls the girls to see. Nazneen wonders where he got the money for the items, but she doesn't ask. Later, back in their room, Shahana sulks because her father has forbidden them to speak English, but *he* does so whenever he feels like it. Nazneen wonders if there would be this much conflict between Chanu and Shahana if Shahana



were a boy. Nazneen has learned a bit of English over the years, mainly from her children who demanded to be understood.

Razia coaches Nazneen on how to use the sewing machine. Razia learns all of its features in just two weeks. One day, when Chanu is out, Mrs. Islam comes by. In thirteen years she has not aged noticeably, but she has a bad hip and she declares herself to be in her declining years. Mrs. Islam carries around Ralgex Heat Spray for her hip, and her big black bag is full of medications. She drinks Benylin Chesty Coughs all the time, even though Nazneen has never heard her cough. Mrs. Islam tells Nazneen that she has not yet seen her girls at the new mosque school which she has endowed. Chanu is against sending the girls to the school, even though he has told Mrs. Islam he will. Nazneen tries to avoid the topic by asking Mrs. Islam about her hip. Mrs. Islam shows her the hip and insists that she doesn't want the new hip her sons are urging her to get. Mrs. Islam says people must give their money to the mosque instead. After a while, Mrs. Islam asks Nazneen to open her bag and put the money in the side pocket. Nazneen searches in the bag, but she can not find any money. Mrs. Islam gets angry and screeches at her. She tells her there should be £50, as arranged. Only then does Nazneen understand that Chanu borrowed money from Mrs. Islam, and that she has come to collect. Nazneen points to her sewing machine and tells Mrs. Islam that she has no work yet. Mrs. Islam tells her to pay when she can, but she promises to come with her sons next time. She tells Nazneen that God always gives presents a way and Nazneen has to find it.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

In chapter 8 we come back to the world of Nazneen and Chanu. We left them 13 years ago wondering if their new love and respect for each other would continue and we return to them knowing that it did not. Chanu is still insufferable, and Nazneen has gone back to eating alone in the kitchen at night.

Nazneen and Chanu have not been spared the intergenerational conflict between immigrants and their European-born children. Their two daughters are already westernized and they don't want to conform to Bengali customs and modes of dress. Chanu is afflicted with Going Home Syndrome and he is so desperate to go back to Bangladesh that he risks alienating his daughters, and he borrows money from Mrs. Islam who is a usurer.

Nazneen's dialogue in this chapter shows her growth. She has developed many insights of her own, and she is no longer afraid or embarrassed to share her thoughts and opinions with Chanu or her friends.



# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

Chanu is on his new computer, exploring the internet and marveling at its power. Shahnaz announces that they use the internet at school but Chanu ignores her. Her new fringe bothers him and he considers it another sign of her insolence. Chanu looks up a couple of websites about Bangladesh, but Shahana doesn't want to see them because she says it's boring. Chanu remains calm until she corrects his English. Bibi doesn't want to relay his threat to Shahana so she asks Nazneen if *she* will do it instead. Chanu flies into a rage, threatens to kill Shahana, and starts to beat her with the mouse.

Later, in bed, Nazneen tells Chanu about Mrs. Islam's visit. He smiles "unevenly" and tells her that he will take care of it.

When the girls are asleep, Nazneen and Chanu go into their room to look at them and tuck them in. Nazneen notices that Chanu is not only baffled by them, but he is afraid of them. She rests her head on his shoulder in a moment of tenderness and compassion. Later, she remembers the period of his life when he abandoned all his plans and stayed in bed. He stopped grumbling and he stopped eating, but it was only when he stopped reading that Nazneen grew worried. Chanu had worked hard, Nazneen acknowledged, but he was slighted by everyone around him. Soon after he retreated to his bed, Job Centre offered him work as a dishwasher and Chanu found some new life in ordering his daughters around and using them to turn the pages of his books as he read.

Nazneen observes her family. Her daughter Bibi is always seeking approval while Chanu who is always offended, and Shahana is always embarrassed and angry. Her family makes Nazneen feel like she's, "walking through a field of snakes," and it is a battle to get through each day. She wonders if she loves her daughters properly, and she wonders how to send money to Hasina. Nazneen has trouble sleeping at night and only prayer helps to dull the pain she feels.

The next day, Nazneen picks Bibi up from school and hears from her friend Jorina that the imam at the mosque was recently questioned by the police for two hours. Meanwhile, Nazma and Sorupa talk to Razia, but they stop when Nazneen approaches. Nazneen can understand English well enough now to understand that the two white women were discussing ways to slim down their dogs, and she is surprised by their conversation.

That evening, Chanu comes home with trousers for Nazneen to hem. He becomes a middleman for her. Chanu brings her sewing work, supervises, and collects her earnings. For the first two months of work, Nazneen doesn't even know how much money she is making. She is relieved when Chanu finally stops helping her and goes back to his books.



One evening Chanu calls the family together to announce that he has a job as cab driver #1619 at Kampton Kars. His wages, he says proudly, will go into the Home Fund. When Chanu becomes a cab driver, Karim replaces him as a middleman who brings Nazneen sewing work.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

Several revelations in this chapter give the reader a deeper understanding of the main characters and their struggles. The first revelation is that despite Chanu's degree in English literature and his constant reading, Chanu does not always speak proper English. This fact may explain why he has trouble getting or keeping a job. The anger Chanu shows towards his daughter Shahana also becomes more understandable in light of this revelation because Shahana has the ability (unlike Nazneen who speaks even less English than Chanu does) to see his failings.

In this chapter, the author reveals through Nazneen's memories that Chanu suffered a period of depression sometime during the 13 years of Hasina's letters. Nazneen, who is struggling now and exhausted with the burden of meeting her family's competing needs, seems to have kept news of Chanu's depression from Hasina in order to keep up her own appearances as well as his.

Chapter 9 draws an important parallel between the lives of Nazneen and Hasina. While Hasina's life as a prostitute was controlled by Hussain, Nazneen's work as a seamstress is controlled by Chanu. Both women work to be empowered and independent, but instead become enslaved and exploited.

Finally, with the introduction of Karim into Nazneen's life, Chapter 9 signals a major turning point in *Brick Lane*.



# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

Nazneen observes Karim closely, but inconspicuously. Karim tells her that his uncle owns the "sweatshop" which she works for. Karim is sure of himself, but he stammers when he speaks Bengali. The second time he stops by the flat, Karim comes running in with a box of "filthy leaflets" he had snatched from members of the Lion Hearts, an organization he describes as "a front." When Nazneen refers to Bangladesh as "our country," Karim makes it clear that he considers England to be his country. Karim talks to Nazneen while he waits for her to finish sewing a few hems

Chanu often works in the evening for Kampton Kars, so evenings at the flat are more relaxed for Nazneen and the girls. As Nazneen sews, she thinks of all the money she has stashed away in different parts of the house. Her wages are £3.50 per hour, and she plans to put her savings in the bank in the morning.

Sometimes Chanu works all night. Chanu doesn't talk about his new job, and the only thing he has to say about his new colleagues is that they are ignorant. "You see, all my life I have struggled," he explains. "And for what? What good has it done? I have finished with all that. Now I just take the money. I say thank you. I count it" (pg. 154).

As Nazneen helps the girls tidy their room, Shahana announces that she is going to run away rather than go to Bangladesh. Bibi says she wants stay too. Nazneen tells them they'll just have to wait and see. In answer to Bibi's question about whether she wants to go, Nazneen tells them the story of How You Were Left to Your Fate. Shahana tells her that it's not an answer.

Nazneen is starting to forget the village, and she only remembers it clearly in her dreams. One night she dreams of Mumtaz and her mynah bird that she loved so much. The bird laughed like Abba, and Amma kept warning that it would fly away. One day, as the elders gathered for a meeting, they heard Mumtaz scream. Someone had broken the neck of her bird.

When Nazneen wakes up from her dream, she goes out to finish some sewing. She tries on one of the sequined vests and she fantasizes she is ice skating with Karim. Then she stops to reread some letters from Hasina.

The three letters from Hasina are written in early 1991 from Dhanmondi, a prominent Dhaka neighborhood. In the first letter, Hasina, with a renewed faith in God, says she was taken from the House of Falling Women by her new boss, a beautiful woman named Lovely. Lovely and her husband James have two children, Jimmy who is 3 1/2, and Daisy, who has just begun to walk and who loves Hasina very much. They live on a street with fancy houses, but they have a problem with plastic bags littering the place. At the end of their street is a rickshaw workshop, where the vehicles are painted with





images of the Taj Mahal, mosques, tigers, film stars, and "Britainy Spear," a singer from the USA. Hasina says her duties are to take care of the children, to do the laundry, wash dishes, and run errands. In the next two letters, Hasina reveals that Lovely is a former beauty queen who is a bit insecure and who feels that she would have gone further in life were it not for her marriage to James. Lovely tells Hasina that she has missed her chances in life. Hasina also tells Nazneen that James works for Bangla National Plastics and that the company's products have been temporarily banned. Hasina also talks of the chef Zaid whom she describes as strange. The elections are coming and Zaid is secretive about his politics, but keeps warning them that his time is coming. Lovely, who envies her wealthier best friend Betty, is constantly worried that Zaid will leave them for a better position.

Razia interrupts Nazneen's letter-reading, complaining that the sewing factory has been closed down by health inspectors. She suspects; however, that the department of Immigration has something to do with it. Razia helps Nazneen with her sewing, and, as they work, Nazneen thinks of Hasina and how happy she had been at the garment factory. She thinks too of the stepmother who lived with them for a short time in their village after Amma died. Nazneen wonders how long it took before the woman ended up where Hasina did.

Razia says she wants to go back to work soon because her children, especially Tariq, need the money. She jokes that she might turn to Mrs. Islam for a loan, and Nazneen wonders if she's hinting that she knows about their debt. But Nazneen realizes that Razia does not know. Nazneen recalls how Mrs. Islam and her sons came a few days ago and forced Chanu to fill the black bag with money until she dropped her spotted handkerchief to let him know when it was enough.

The next morning Karim comes for the vests and Nazneen is not certain how to behave while he is there. He talks about his father who was a bus conductor for 25 years and who never wanted to make any trouble. Karim's phone alerts him to prayer time and he prays in her home, on a prayer mat that Nazneen rolls out for him. Watching him pray makes Nazneen dizzy, and in a flash-forward, the author reveals that Nazneen and Karim later fall into a sexual relationship.

Before he leaves, Karim invites Nazneen to a meeting. They need some older women there, he says, and it isn't until he is gone that Nazneen realizes he sees *her* as an older woman.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

Chapter 10 returns to the theme of Fate. After so many years of failure, Chanu has stopped struggling to achieve certain goals, and has resigned himself to his fate. "You see, all my life I have struggled," he says. "And for what? What good has it done? I have finished with all that. Now I just take the money. I say thank you. I count it" (pg.154).





Nazneen finds herself retelling the story of *How You Were Left to Your Fate* and repeating to her daughters the same words her own Amma always said, "We just have to wait and see. We do not know what God has in his mind," (pg. 154).

Hasina says that all her life she has looked for love, but since she has stopped looking, love has come to her now in the form of baby Daisy.



# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary

Nazneen has finished her housework, and with nothing else to do, she goes to the meeting without Chanu's knowledge or permission. About 20 people gather to select a name, a mission, and leaders for their group. Among them is a black man who has tried several other religions already. After some bickering, they decide to call themselves the Bengal Tigers and to fight for Muslim rights and culture. Karim is elected Chairman by a margin of one vote over his rival and Nazneen proudly realizes that it is because of her participation.

Karim continues to bring sewing work to Nazneen and to talk to her about the world. She is "shamed" and excited by his knowledge, and she relishes the Bengali newsletters that he leaves for her. She wants Chanu to see them and know that she too is reading and learning about the world, but she always hides them just before he comes home. The problems Nazneen reads about begin to make her own problems seem small.

Karim continues to say his prayers at her flat.

## Chapter 11 Analysis

With the establishment of the Bengal Tigers, who vow to stand against any opposing group, the scene is set for the inevitable gang conflicts. The bickering among the group members at their very first meeting is a clue to the complications that will arise due to different personalities and beliefs within the Muslim community.



# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary

Dr. Azad is again a dinner guest at the home of Nazneen and Chanu. In between their respective speeches about drug abuse and the English atrocities against their colonies, he and Chanu trade pleasantries that are actually their way of scoring points over each other. They compete to see who has the best of their miserable lives. Dr. Azad continues to come to dinner at their flat, but he has never once invited Nazneen and Chanu over since the time they arrived, uninvited, over 13 years ago. Dr. Azad does not like to even discuss his wife and daughter (now married) because he is ashamed of them. Playing on this weakness, Chanu calls his "good girls" in to show off their poetry skills. Chanu is sensitive about his employment status and the mobile library which he never got started. Dr. Azad asks him about how many signatures he collected for it, and Chanu makes up numbers. Nazneen feels Chanu "wins" tonight, after he asks Dr. Azad about his elusive son-in-law.

Later that evening someone pushes a leaflet into the letterbox and Shahana picks it up. The leaflet is entitled "Multicultural Murders," and it sends Chanu into a rage. The leaflet is anti-Islam and it urges parents to withdraw their children from religious instruction in the schools. Chanu rededicates himself to going home and vows that *all* of his wages will now go into the Home Fund. That night, for the first time since their marriage, he takes the Qur'an down to read.

On a walk with Chanu through Brick Lane, Nazneen observes the ethnic restaurants, immodestly dressed girls, and the nice houses that always seem to be void of people. Someone working on a laptop makes her think of Chanu's dusty, unused computer, and when she sees the Karim's rival, the Questioner, she starts to think of Karim. When Nazneen's thoughts about Karim make her inadvertently say something out loud, Chanu, who is going on and on about whites who feel threatened by foreigners, thinks she is commenting on something he has just said. The guilt brings tears to her eyes and Chanu thinks the tears come from her longing for Bangladesh. Chanu tells her that he will consider a teaching job at Dhaka University but this, to Nazneen, means disaster ahead. When they see Mrs. Islam and her son in the distance, they take a side street to avoid her.

A leaflet war soon begins on the estate. Both The Bengal Tigers and The Lion Hearts are sending out leaflets. Chanu comments that in his time, the young people kept quiet. Soon, a march against the Mullahs (and a counter-march) is organized and, with so much tension in the neighborhood, Nazneen begins picking both girls up from school.

Karim complains about the leafleting, and says he wants to see more action. But although he wants people to take action, he continues to produce the leaflets. Karim complains about the apathetic youth who won't join their fight, and he claims ownership of the Bengal Tigers. Karim confides to Nazneen that the Questioner's preferred



strategy would be a major hindrance to the group. Nazneen watches Karim and compares him to Chanu. When restless, she observes, Chanu shows unease while Karim shows energy.

In the bath that night, after a list of ordinary thoughts, Nazneen lets herself think of Karim and how he has managed to find his place in the world which is a feat, she, Hasina, and Chanu have never been able to perform.

The next day, on the way back from picking the girls after school, there is a confrontation between the police and the Questioner at the estate. Upstairs, the girls do their homework and Nazneen begins a letter to Hasina. Nazneen tries to tell her sister about the leaflet war, but then she stops to reread some of Hasina's letters.

Hasina, writing in April and May 2001, tells Nazneen that she mustn't send money, just longer letters. She says she has made friends with a happy maid next door, that James is worried about the upcoming elections, and that Lovely's friend Betty has started a charity for HIV Innocents; married women who have been infected by straying husbands. Hasina also relates her eye-witness account of seeing robbers murdered by a mob, and of her friend Monju whose husband poured acid on her face while his brother and sister held her down.

Nazneen tries to resume writing, but she tears up the letter in which she tells Hasina about being in love. She thinks she hears someone at the door, and she wonders if it's Mrs. Islam. She still has no idea how much they owe the woman. When Bibi comes into the room, Nazneen tries to hide her worries. Bibi's presence suddenly makes Nazneen think of their recent trip to the Dr. Azad's office. Bibi had tonsillitis, and while they were waiting to see the doctor's they saw Tariq in the waiting room looking very bad and displaying the symptoms of a drug user.

The next evening, another leaflet makes Chanu angry because it honors a martyr and asks for money to help the families of martyrs. Nazneen remembers how moved Karim was when she gave him money to support orphans in a Gaza refugee camp. Chanu's rage escalates when Shahana turns on the television, but the images on the screen quiet him, The news is showing the aftermath of a riot in Oldham, a Muslim community near London.

## Chapter 12 Analysis

For the first time, Nazneen makes a link between the signs of drug use and the behavior of Razia's son Tariq. This provides another opportunity for her to grow. Will she leave Tariq to his fate, or will she intervene to help save him?

The fact that Chanu takes the Qur'an down to read it for the first time in at least 15 years is significant because it illustrates the seriousness of the threat (or the perceived threat). Even a non-practicing Muslims like Chanu feel that they must brace themselves against the threat.



Chapter 12 shows parallels between Chanu and Karim, who both think their generation did (or is doing) the right thing. Karim, though young himself, is already criticizing the generation coming after him. Karim makes the same vow that Chanu did so many years ago; he will stop talking and start doing.



# Chapter 13

## Chapter 13 Summary

Nazneen puts on her red and gold silk sari, although there is no special occasion for it. At first it feels as light as air, and then it feels as heavy as chains. She thinks about wearing a skater's costume, and how that might change her life. She wonders if perhaps it is clothing, and not fate, that dictates a person's life.

That afternoon, on a trip out for some thread, she runs into the secretary of the Bengal Tigers and he ushers her into the meeting that is about to start. She reluctantly sits down, but she soon begins to catch the excitement of the others. The Questioner wants to open the meeting without waiting for Karim to arrive, but by the time he and the secretary have argued about the procedure has shown up. Karim strides on to the stage, and opens the meeting with no preamble. Nazneen is suddenly glad she wore her special sari because Karim will see her in it.

The first item for discussion is an unauthorized leaflet about Chechnya written and distributed by the Questioner. Karim demands that the Questioner leave with his leaflets if he won't follow procedure. But the Questioner captures the audience by passing out moving pictures of Iraqi children and telling their stories. Karim suggests they help their own neighborhood first, before they start reaching out to the world. During the ensuing argument, the Questioner loses the audience, especially when he turns against the women and refuses to address them. Karim, on the other hand, addresses both the brothers and the sisters, allows everyone to speak, and makes each person feel important as they discuss a possible trip to Oldham.

Nazneen hurries home after the meeting and waits by the door for Karim to come. When he does, they kiss and they go to bed together for the first time.

## Chapter 13 Analysis

The good silk sari in this chapter represents the end of innocence for Nazneen, just as it did for her mother many years earlier. When Nazneen puts on her good silk sari in the morning, she doesn't know why, but later in the day, in the presence of Karim, she is glad she wore it. Nazneen's mother wore her best silk sari on the day she committed suicide in the barn, and Nazneen wears hers the day she begins her illicit affair with Karim.



# Chapter 14

## Chapter 14 Summary

After over 30 years in the United Kingdom, Chanu decides it's time to see the sights. He gears up like a tourist for a day out with the family and Nazneen vows to make it a good day for him. They visit Buckingham Palace first, and Nazneen thinks that if she were the queen she'd break it down and rebuild it to be more interesting like the Taj Mahal.

Chanu narrates history from a guidebook. Nazneen asks him a lot of questions that he is happy to answer. In fact, she talks and laughs so much that he gets worried and asks her if she has had too much sun. She laughs some more, and Bibi and Shahana join in.

They return to the Palace to take pictures with a disposable panoramic camera, and Nazneen bribes Shahana to smile for a photo with her father. A passing tourist takes a picture of all of them together and Nazneen realizes that this is the first time they have ever posed for a photograph. It gives her hope that things will hold together for them, but in the end, the pictures come out as blurs of color.

After an elaborate picnic in St. James Park, Chanu falls asleep and the girls go for a walk. Nazneen stays near him and thinks of Karim. She reminds herself, as she often does now that her life is filled with meaning, that she is nothing. Nazneen and Karim have developed signals so that he knows when it's safe to come up to the flat, and though she often thinks of giving him the "no" signal but she never does. Karim is the only man who has ever seen her naked, and their lovemaking is forcefully passionate. Nazneen knows she's just playing with him, but she can also see that Karim is taking it very seriously. Sometimes their affair makes her anxious, but most of the time Nazneen feels good about it. The affair makes everything else seem better. Nazneen now sees her daughters as intelligent, witty and sensitive; her husband as caring, honest, and thirsty for knowledge; and even housework as satisfying. Since the affair began, Nazneen no longer attends the Bengal Tigers meetings, and the Lion Hearts have stopped their leaflet campaign. Karim is a bit worried about their silence. He has become an Islamic scholar and he tells her about what he is learning.

Shahana and Bibi jolt Nazneen out of her thoughts when they return from their walk. Chanu wakes up and goes to get them ice cream. While he is gone Shahana asks her mother if she loves him. But Nazneen does not give her a direct answer; instead she dodges the question until Chanu returns.

On Monday morning, Mrs. Islam comes by to collect. She tells Nazneen they still owe her £1000 and she wants their ticket money. Nazneen adds £20 to the 50 that Chanu left.

Later, Nazneen goes with Razia to Wentworth Street to buy some cloth. Nazneen asks about Tariq and Razia tells her he is going out more and more. Nazneen wants to tell Razia about everything going on in her mind and in her life, but has difficulty doing so.



Finally, she tells her about Mrs. Islam. Razia says she knows someone who has been paying Mrs. Islam for six or seven years and she promises to help Nazneen do something about it. When Razia is ready to pay for the cloth she has chosen, she can't find the £40 she thought she had in her purse. Nazneen tells her that Dr. Azad says about drug users often steal money from their own parents. But Razia refuses to make the connection and she thanks God that no one in her family has that problem.

At dusk, while Nazneen is cleaning up and the girls are watching TV, Chanu reads and talks about how the British have destroyed the textile industry. Nazneen regrets all the time she has wasted that could have spent learning and she wishes Shahana and Bibi would listen more to their father. Chanu then shows them his latest purchase for his cab which is a wooden bead mat that is supposed to take away tension as he drives. Chanu has paid a lot of fines and penalties since he started driving, including a fine to release his vehicle after it was towed. He has also been taken to court, where he lost his case.

As Chanu tries out his bead mat, he begins a conversation with Shahana and comments on her being at the top of her class in school. Chanu begins a speech about how he has not achieved success and she tells him not to worry. As he continues talking, Shahana tells him about a neighbor who recently sold his flat for £160,000 because he signed up for the *Right to Buy* option 15 years before. But Chanu just keeps talking and he doesn't seem to hear her.

That night, Nazneen has trouble sleeping and so she goes to the kitchen sink to wash a few things. Suddenly, the horror of what she has done with Karim comes rushing over her and she vomits into the sink. She remembers Amma's warning that God sees everything. Then Amma is there, squatting on the kitchen floor, explaining to her daughter that life is a test and to pass it she simply has to endure.

## Chapter 14 Analysis

Nazneen hoped that taking a picture as a family would hold them together. The fact that the picture came out as a blur of color foreshadows the end of their family union as they know it.

It seems a setback at first that Nazneen now reminds herself that she is nothing, but it is significant that she *has* to remind herself. By now Nazneen knows for a fact that she has the power to create her own destiny and to change the lives of others.

Chapter 14 reveals the extent of Chanu's spending habits and finally provides a possible explanation for the large amount of money they owe Mrs. Islam.

Amma appears to answer the questions Nazneen had as a little girl about the pain that women suffer. Amma also offers a final lesson to help Nazneen cope with what is happening in her life. In a sense though, Amma also admits that she herself did not pass the test of life, for she could not and did not endure the pain.





# Chapter 15

## Chapter 15 Summary

Nazneen collapses on the kitchen floor and Dr. Azad diagnoses her condition as nervous exhaustion. She is in bed, delirious, for several days. Nazneen finally sits up during one of Dr. Azad's visits. Chanu is very excited and anxious to see her eat. Dr. Azad prescribes more bed rest. Chanu and Dr. Azad exchange a few words about Mrs. Azad and the mobile library yet again, and Nazneen, observing them, thinks that she now knows what draws them together; they draw strength from each other's weaknesses.

Nazneen recovers from her slump and notices that the flat is a mess. She feels there is something she should be thinking about, but she can't quite place a finger on it. She looks out of the window at the kids below, and Chanu and Shahana come to look out with her. Shahana tells them the names of the kids and a bit about their living situations.

When the girls go to bed, Nazneen tries to grasp the memory that is eluding her. She sees her sewing machine and remembers her work, but it isn't until Chanu goes to bed that she finally remembers Karim. She reminds herself that she is nothing and gets down the Qur'an to look for some comfort. The Qur'an doesn't comfort her. Nazneen eventually finds peace by reading some of Hasina's letters.

Writing from June to August 2001, Hasina tells the full story of Monju. Monju's husband, a child trafficker, wanted to sell their newborn baby. When she refused, he poured acid on the baby. Monju became a beggar to pay for her son's reconstructive operations, and when she refused to give the money to her husband, he poured acid on her too.

Hasina describes the house she lives in with Lovely, and the construction work going on with two tired young boys helping. Hasina also writes about an elaborate dinner party that Lovely and James had for Betty and her husband. While Lovely and Betty looked bored, their husbands talked about the elections and the nation's plastic bag pollution problem. In the kitchen, Zaid remarked that the men were complaining about a system without noticing or acknowledging the creators of the system. He then told Hasina stories of Bengalis who went abroad to work, and came back with nothing to show for it. He trusts Chanu though, after having lived some 20 years in England, as Hasina tells him, to come home and make things in his village work the way they are supposed to.

The day after Nazneen gets up, Chanu stays home from work. When Bibi asks her about her breakdown, Nazneen assures the child that she is better now. Chanu tells her Razia came to visit when she was sick, but Nazneen doesn't remember the visit. Chanu describes Razia as kind-hearted, even though he still feels that she's not really a "respectable-type." Nazneen finds some refuge in cleaning up the flat, and after a while Razia, Nazma, and Sorupa come by to visit with the latest gossip.



The next day, as she's cleaning up the bedroom, Nazneen thinks of Hasina and of her breakfast on the plane over from Bangladesh, and how it made her cry. Nazneen thinks of all the things she should have done over the years since her arrival. Karim comes in the afternoon and, after a few awkward moments, they head for the bedroom. Karim professes his love for her, but Nazneen is wondering how to end their relationship. Karim tells her he was away in Bradford, and that no one comes to Bengal Tigers meeting anymore. When he talks about the counter-march that they never had, Nazneen suggests that they plan a march to celebrate rather than to defend themselves.

Karim sits at Chanu's computer, and Nazneen doesn't care if Chanu comes home and finds him there. Nazneen asks him what he's looking at on the internet, and he tells her that it's a Bangla village. When she finds out he has never been to Bangladesh, she feels pity for him. She goes to the kitchen to make some tea and when she comes out with it Karim reads to her from an Islamic website a teaching about adultery. She wonders if he's trying to tell her something or if he came upon it by chance. Nazneen pours his tea down the drain and tells him that it's time for him to go home.

There are posters all over the Dogwood Estate about the upcoming festival organized by the Bengal Tigers and the Bengal Cubs. Chanu forbids the girls to go to the festival planning meeting and when Shahana asks again he threatens to beat her to a bloody pulp. Nazneen yells, to everyone's amazement, that the girls *will* go to the meeting and she tells Chanu to watch what he says to them. A few days later, Chanu announces that they'll all go to the meeting.

The day before the meeting, Chanu calls the girls to hear something he has just read. A study had been done by the London School of Economics, and they have determined that Bangladesh is the happiest nation in the world. Nazneen refuses to believe the study. When Chanu asks why, she tells him that Hasina is there and she is not happy. She then tells Chanu the truth about all that has happened to Hasina, and when she is finished, he says that something must be done and that he will come up with a plan.

On the morning after the festival planning meeting, Nazneen goes to see Hanufa. Hanufa fills her in on the news of the some of the other women and their kids, and mentions the commotion surrounding the upcoming festival. Nazneen remembers how warm and satisfied she had felt sitting next to her husband in front of her lover. Hanufa invites Nazneen to attend a massage course with her, but she says she has too much work to do. Back at the flat, Razia is waiting for her in tears; Tariq has sold all her furniture.

## Chapter 15 Analysis

For a while after her breakdown, Chanu begins to refer to Nazneen in the third person as if she is a new person, which, of course, she is. Nazneen is more assertive, overrules Chanu's instructions to Shahana and Bibi, defends her daughters against his verbal abuse, and finally finds the courage to tell Chanu exactly what has been



happening to Hasina. The new Nazneen is also bold enough to send Karim home when he displeases her,

Hasina's letters in this chapter bring up some serious societal issues in Dhaka as though they are normal and common place. Hasina describes child trafficking, domestic violence, child labor, and the proliferation of plastic bags that block drains, cause floods, and destroy farms. These are the things Chanu never mentions when he speaks of his beautiful country and their great tradition and culture.

Chapter 15 marks the beginning of a resolution for Razia, who is finally ready to admit that her son Tariq has a drug problem.



# Chapter 16

## Chapter 16 Summary

Nazneen is in Razia's apartment. Razia furnished it nicely after the death of her husband, but it is now empty because Tariq has sold all the furniture, the television, and the VCR. Shefali is there too, and she gets angry when her mother asks her if she knew her brother was on drugs. Razia tells Nazneen the story that Tariq told her about his using and selling drugs. Nazneen goes with Razia to Dr. Azad's office. On the way, she begins to tell Razia about her affair with Karim, but Razia doesn't want to hear about it. Nazneen is surprised to see Razia bow at Dr. Azad's feet. Dr. Azad tells Razia that Tariq must *want* to be cured.

Preparations for the festival are underway. Shahana and Bibi are working on a backdrop for the crafts stand. Chanu is on the festival's classical music committee, but he wishes there was a poetry committee as well. As they work, Chanu recites Bengali poetry and then he tells his family that he will build a house in Dhaka first, and then one in the village. Chanu begins to sing a song. The girls, taking advantage of his the fact that he closes his eyes during the chorus, begin to sneak out of the room. However, something in the song makes them stay and listen.

Hasina writes in August 2001 to say that Betty has started a charity for married women infected with HIV by straying husbands. Lovely wants a charity of her own, and she considers doing something about child labor until Hasina points out the two children working in their own back yard.

Nazneen, still recovering from her illness, rests a lot and sometimes speaks harshly to Chanu, the girls, and even to Mrs. Islam. Karim comes to her again when the girls are back in school, and their forbidden liaison sends her into a depression. "When you have fallen low, she [tells] herself, what hurts is pretending you are high" (pg. 267). Nothing Chanu does can help her feel better, even when he finds some ice-skating on television it does not cheer her up. He tells Shahana and Bibi their mother is a fan, but Nazneen makes him turn the TV off.

Nazneen begins spending time looking out of the window, as she did when they first arrived on the estate. But now she no longer sees idyllic village scenes in her mind. Nazneen now sees what is in front of her; flats, people, and gangs of unfamiliar boys among the dead grass and concrete.

One day, as Nazneen is thinking of how Chanu has still done nothing for Hasina despite his promise, he races in and turns on the television. Together, he and Nazneen watch images of a plane hitting a building. The image is played over and over, and they watch mesmerized as the building collapses. Nazma enters while they are watching and, with a knowing look, asks if she is still getting plenty of sewing work. Nazneen's stomach turns as she realizes that her friends know about Karim. The girls come home from



school and join their parents in front of the television. That night, Nazneen dreams of Gouripur.

A few of the Muslims from Dogwood Estate experience a backlash from what happened in New York. When Chanu reads about the air strikes planned against Afghanistan, he declares that it is time to go. He begins counting money, and Nazneen adds to it what she has saved. Chanu calls Shahana and Bibi and tells them something he never wants them to forget; during the famine of 42-43, thousands of Bangladeshis died while the British continued to export their grain.

Chanu becomes very serious about making and saving more money. He cuts down on spending and he even starts to dodge Mrs. Islam. One day when he comes home, Karim is at his computer. Chanu gives him a little speech about how he thought everything was possible in his younger days.

Karim cancels the festival because of the tensions surrounding the impending strikes by the USA. Chanu becomes very quiet and his ulcers flare up. He buys a suitcase, and, to Nazneen's surprise, he makes no speech about it. To her, this is a sign that they are really going home.

When Muslim kids are told to be inconspicuous, Karim exchanges his trainers and jeans and gold chain for traditional Bangladeshi outfits with a skullcap. He also begins to see the internet as a new avenue for radical action, and spends more time at the computer. Karim's new style of dress reminds Nazneen of Arzoo, a poor laborer in their village who once found a red jacket and was teased mercilessly whenever he wore it. The lesson Arzoo learned was that clothes are not just clothes. Clothes can be very important. Nazneen wonders how she would describe Karim to Hasina. She wants him to stop praying at her house, but she can't ask him to stop. Nazneen wishes Chanu would find out about the affair and kill her. When she tells Karim she is going to Dhaka, he tells her to divorce Chanu and marry him. Karim tells her that when he went to Bradford he turned down a girl that his family had chosen for him.

By October, the suitcase is heavy with items for the trip, and Chanu has stopped eating. One day, someone comes by to fix their long-broken toilet. The next day a leaflet is dropped in the letterbox announcing a March Against the Mullahs. Karim is excited about the leaflet, but when Chanu sees it, he goes to his room in silence.

## Chapter 16 Analysis

The last two lines of the chorus in Chanu's song ask a question: "What keeps you tied to the corner of a room?" (pg. 266) The question is powerful enough to keep his daughters still, and to make Nazneen think about it all day. The question is one that each character is asking of himself or herself. It is one that could be asked of all the Bangladeshi immigrants on the estate, especially those who complain about London but won't leave.



Chapter 16 marks a major turning point for Nazneen, Chanu, and Karim. For Nazneen, the village is now completely gone and she sees only the realities of her life in London. Chanu and Karim are both spurred to action by the catastrophic September 2001 events in America. The backlash makes Chanu take serious steps towards his goal and it makes Karim take a more radical stance in his expression and in the defense of his religion.



# Chapter 17

## Chapter 17 Summary

When a Muslim boy is stabbed, the estate buzzes with rumors, speculation, and lies about the incident. Even the boy's name is in dispute. Nazneen, Razia, and some of the other mothers talk about it outside the grocery store. Nazma and Sorupa soon hint maliciously at Razia's troubles with Tariq, and their barbs depress her for the rest of the day. Nazneen and Razia continue on together, and Nazneen suddenly realizes that none of the women had spoken to her. She wonders if she is being shunned for her un-Islamic behavior with Karim, as Hanufa was for taking a massage class. As they pass by the stores and look at the window displays, Nazneen and Razia marvel at the high prices that white women are willing to pay for ethnic clothes.

That evening, Chanu adds more of his traffic fines to the envelope he has addressed to the council. The girls, who now seem resigned to going to Bangladesh, ask Nazneen to tell them a story about Mumtaz. Later on in the evening, Nazneen also tells them the story of Amma's jinni and the public exorcism that cured her.

As Karim gets busier with the Bengal Tigers and the plans for the counter-march, Nazneen sees less and less of him. When they are together he talks of marriage, and Nazneen grows more worried about what will happen regarding the trip back home. Finally, in a moment of revelation she vows that she will decide her fate rather than just wait and see.

As the date for the march approaches, Chanu begins to talk less, and Karim begins to talk more. Karim also begins to deny the existence of gangs on the estate, when just a few weeks before he was complaining about them.

Nazneen receives a letter from Hasina about Lovely's new charity, Acid Innocents. Lovely helped Hasina keep her promise to Monju by paying for her son's operation. After she heard the good news and confessed a secret to Hasina, Monju died in peace.

## Chapter 17 Analysis

This chapter underlines the strength of the friendship between Nazneen and Razia. They support each other no matter what is going on in their lives and they are not influenced by anyone else's opinion.

The stabbing of the Muslim boy marks the beginning of the violence in the London Bangladeshi community. Chanu prepares for it by getting ready to leave, while Karim prepares by getting ready to fight.

Nazneen provides more insight into Amma's life when she recalls the story of her mother's possession by a jinni, and its subsequent exorcism. Apparently, Amma may have been mentally ill.





# Chapter 18

## Chapter 18 Summary

The Bengal Tigers call a meeting that Chanu wants them all to attend. Nazneen says no at first, but she changes her mind when she sees Chanu's elaborate preparations. Apparently he plans to make a speech. Nazneen wonders if he is going to fight Karim for her with his words. However, there are so many disagreements at the meeting regarding the march, and Karim talks so much that Chanu becomes miserable and does not speak after all.

Later, Nazneen runs into Mrs. Islam at the butcher shop. Mrs. Islam tells her they need to pay what they owe her before they leave with the money that Dr. Azad gave them for the tickets. This is the first Nazneen is hearing about this, and she wonders why Dr. Azad gave them the money.

Chanu comes home with the airline tickets at last. The flight is only five days away. Nazneen wants to know what he will do in Dhaka and he tells her that he will go into the soap business.

At Razia's flat, Tariq is locked up in a bedroom. While Razia and Nazneen talk, he knocks on the bedroom door and begs to be let out. He tells his mother he is better now. The two women try to ignore him. Nazneen's thoughts are occupied with the trip. She has decided that they will go home and she is excited about seeing Hasina in just three days. She wonders what Karim will do without her. Her excitement soon turns to dread as she fears the move to Dhaka will be a disaster for the family. In the meantime, Tariq is getting more desperate for his freedom. He finally admits that all he needs is a £5 fix and he starts to scream profanities at his mother for keeping him locked up. Razia asks about Karim, and Nazneen tells her how he makes her feel. Razia listens and tells her that she is *in love*. Dr. Azad soon comes to give Tariq his medication and a snowstorm as a gift. He tells Nazneen that his wife gave him the snowstorm back in the time when they still gave each other gifts. He explains that theirs was a love marriage and that back then he didn't know there were, "two kinds of love - the kind that starts big but soon ends, and the kind that grows like a pearl."

That night Nazneen has a dream in which she getting her hair braided by Amma. Amma is telling her the story of how she was left to her fate, and suddenly, Nazneen is glued down and trapped to her seat by sticky tendrils and fronds. When Nazneen wakes up Amma appears in her green and gold sari and tells her that when she stood between Raqib and his fate, she killed him. Nazneen screams and Chanu comforts her, telling her it was just a dream.



## Chapter 18 Analysis

Nazneen is still conflicted about the trip to Bangladesh. A part of her wants to go, and a part of her wants to stay. The nightmare she has in the night represents the way she feels when awake; glued down and trapped by the sticky tendrils and fronds of life.

Chapter 18 gives some insight into Dr. Azad that allows the reader to feel some empathy for him. Like Hasina, he too had a love marriage that failed. Unlike Hasina though, he stayed with his spouse and he has suffered for it.



# Chapter 19

## Chapter 19 Summary

This chapter occurs in October of 2001. In a letter, Hasina tells her sister that she is restless. It's good being with Lovely, but she is yearning for her own place. She then goes on to confess a secret. She says she saw Amma dressed in her fine Dhaka sari on the day she committed suicide. She followed Amma to the barn, and watched as she tried the tips of the spears to find one sharp enough. Hasina says Amma was wrong in many ways, especially in her belief that women can't do anything about their own lives. Hasina apologizes for having to tell her secret, and prays that Allah will forgive Amma and show Mercy on her for taking the only way out that she knew of.

## Chapter 19 Analysis

Hasina has been resentful of her mother's weaknesses and has spent many years trying not to be like her. At this point in her life, Hasina finally recognizes that Amma did indeed act to change her life, in the end.



# Chapter 20

## Chapter 20 Summary

Nazneen folds up Hasina's letter. It's a day before the flight and she has decided not to go. She packs up the girls' room, and then looks for Mrs. Islam's address. Before she finds it, Mrs. Islam comes by with her two sons with gifts for the girls. The sons talk about the upcoming march, and Mrs. Islam predicts that not more than 10 whites will show up for it. When Mrs. Islam asks for a final £200, Nazneen refuses. The sons break the glass showcase, but Nazneen stands her ground and challenges Mrs. Islam to swear on the Qur'an that they still owe her money. Mrs. Islam threatens she'll tell Chanu things Nazneen may not want him to know. Nazneen replies that he already knows. Mrs. Islam goes away angry, especially with the son who says aloud that Nazneen and Chanu had paid too much anyway. Nazneen smiles, pleased with herself. "God provided a way, and I found it," she says to herself (pg. 333).

On her way to see Karim, Nazneen reconsiders her view of him. At first she had thought he knew his place in the world, but now she sees that he has questions and answers, just like she does. Karim defends his place so strongly because he has no place. Nazneen admits to herself that she only saw what she wanted to see in him. She saw his possibilities, but she did not see the life-shaping disappointments that had yet to happen.

When they meet, Nazneen tells Karim she's not going to Bangladesh and that she doesn't want to marry him. He tries not to show it, but Nazneen can tell that he is relieved. They sit and have lunch. Nazneen notices he's suddenly speaking Bengali without stammering. He tells her he only stammers when he's nervous. Karim asks Nazneen why she doesn't want him, and suggests it is because of the sin of the affair. But Nazneen replies that it is because they made each other up, each seeing in the other only what they wanted to see.

By eight p.m. the estate is eerily empty. Nazneen, on her way to Razia's, runs into Dr. Azad who has just come from her flat. Nazneen wonders why Dr. Azad gave Chanu the money. Was it to get rid of him? Nazneen asks Dr. Azad if his wife has left him. His answer indicates that she is still living with him but she is only with him physically not emotionally. Nazneen asks him why he gave Chanu the money, and, with a sincere smile, he says it is because Chanu is a very good friend of his.

On the day of the flight, Shahana and Bibi are distressed and waiting for her. Nazneen has decided that they are not going to Bangladesh, but she doesn't want to tell them yet. She tells them instead that sometimes things don't turn out so badly and that they must wait and see. Meanwhile, out in the sitting room, Chanu is labeling items for shipping, auction, sale, and charitable foundations. The night before, he had confessed to not being the greatest husband or father, but wanted assurance that he was not bad



either. Nazneen told him she was lucky that her father had chosen an educated man for her.

Referring to the broken showcase, Chanu asks Nazneen what made her want to put the computer on a glass cabinet. Nazneen explains that she was just trying to tidy up. Chanu goes to see Dr. Azad and to get some food for his trip, and Nazneen looks out of the window at the people getting ready for the march. Most of the participants are older men, but there are some active white people among them. They begin chanting, but it isn't until Chanu returns to the flat that she learns that they are chanting "Workers! United!" Chanu tells her the white people are from the Socialist Workers' Party and they are using the crowd to promote their own agenda.

When the courtyard is clear, Chanu leaves again to go and buy soap for his future business. Nazneen lays down to rest and she has a vision of a baby-sized Chanu sitting in the plane. Soon, Bibi comes in crying and she announces that Shahana has run away.

## Chapter 20 Analysis

It is ironic that Mrs. Islam's own advice to Nazneen is what Nazneen finally uses to end the debt payments and rid her family of Mrs. Islam. God provided a way through Mrs. Islam's self-righteousness, and Nazneen found it and used it to her advantage.

For the reader, Chanu is restored to a certain level of respect in this chapter. This happens in three instances. First, Nazneen recognizes that Karim has not lived long enough to experience the disappointments that will shape his life while Chanu has. Next, Dr. Azad dispels all notions that Chanu is a pest to him when he happily and sincerely describes Chanu as his very good friend. Finally, Nazneen's heart swells with pride when she tells Chanu that she is lucky her father chose an educated man for her.



# Chapter 21

## Chapter 21 Summary

Bibi tells Nazneen that Shahana ran away with her friend Nishi. Nazneen runs out hoping to find them at the Shalimar Café on Brick Lane, where Bibi says they planned to meet before taking the train to Paignton. Nazneen finds that riot police have blockaded Brick Lane because of disturbances. Nazneen slips around them during a distraction and runs right into the middle of the riot where groups of boys are toppling a police car, throwing things, and chanting, "Long Live the Bengal Tigers!" The black man from the meetings is there praying in the center of it all, and Nazneen makes him run to safety. When he stops to pray again she leaves him and hides with the others. The Questioner is in the middle of the chaos asking through a megaphone why they are fighting each other, and a reporter and cameraman soon turn their attention to him.

The crowd begins to run, and as Nazneen runs with them, Karim grabs her and pulls her into the doorway where he is standing. She tells him that she is looking for Shahana. When she asks what is happening, Karim explains that the boy who was stabbed got out of the hospital and the riot is revenge gone awry. He says only 20 - 30 Lion Hearts showed up for the march. Karim urges Nazneen to go home, but just then she spots Shahana and her friend in a restaurant.

Back home, Chanu keeps talking and talking as if he knows what Nazneen has to say, but doesn't want to hear it. The aftermath of the riot is being covered on television and Shahana and Bibi are in the bathroom. Chanu is excited about the things they will do and the places they will go in Bangladesh. When Nazneen finally tells Chanu she can't go, tears stream down his cheeks and he tells her that he can't stay. They are both very sad. Later in the night, when Nazneen can not sleep, she goes to the kitchen to cook something. There, she sees the picture of Chanu with his daughters the day they went out to see the sights. She thinks of how he had told the family that evening that there was a change of plans; he would go first to pave the way and they would come later. The girls were worried about him having to take care of himself but he assured them that he could. He even bent over to show them that he could cut his own corns now that his stomach was noticeably smaller.

Shahana and Bibi join Nazneen in the kitchen to eat. Bibi is still worried about her father, but Shahana predicts that he will come back and be happier. Bibi wants to know if they will go home and Nazneen starts to tell her to wait and see. But she catches herself mid-sentence and says instead that the three of them will decide together.

Razia is examining a sketch of an outfit someone has ordered and trying to figure out how much to charge. Razia, Nazneen and their friends have established a sewing business. Razia set it up and now she travels across the country collecting orders. Hanufa announces that Mrs. Islam is ill, but no one takes the news seriously. They joke



about how no doctor has found anything wrong with her and how she's going back home with all her bank accounts. Someone asks about Tariq, and Razia says he's OK.

On her way out to buy a few things, Nazneen looks up at her new window boxes. She hurries so that she'll get back home before the girls. She thinks of Bibi, who is just now starting to relax after the trauma of Shahana running away; of Razia, without whom she would not have money to support the family; and of Karim, who has disappeared. Nazneen observes the estate, which shows no evidence of the chaos that ensued there just a few weeks before. Politicians, councilors, and television crews had come by after the riots, and the drug dealers had been arrested. There had been quite a few changes and improvements in the community.

On her way back home, Nazneen asks a young man what happened to the Bengal Tigers. He tells her they have disbanded and that Karim has gone to Bangladesh. He implies that Karim has gone for jihad (Holy War). The young man invites Nazneen to a political group that he is about to start, and she says she'll come, now that she knows what she can do.

Back in the flat, Nazneen sketches a design while she listens to the radio. She plans to send Hasina some money when Razia pays her, although she hasn't received a letter from Hasina for two months. Chanu, on the other hand, writes every week and calls once a month from Bangladesh. When she asks him if Bangladesh is what he expected, he answers her by saying that you can't step in the same river twice. Once he tells Nazneen he saw Hasina. He says she's with a good family, but that she needs her own place.

Nazneen takes a break from her sketching and turns up the new song on the radio. She dances wildly to the singer's encouragement to *Shout!* until the phone interrupts her. Chanu is calling to tell her that Hasina has run off with Lovely's cook. Nazneen tells Chanu that she has run off because Hasina isn't going to give up on her dreams. Chanu wants her to visit with the girls for a holiday. She says that they might visit and she can almost see Chanu smiling with joy. He tells her in an unsteady voice that it's what he wants most.

In the last scene of *Brick Lane*, Razia, Shahana, and Bibi take Nazneen on a surprise outing. When they get off the bus, they blindfold her and guide her along. Razia won't let her peek, even when Shahana and Bibi go away for a bit. When they finally take the blindfold off, Nazneen is in front of a huge white circle of dazzling ice. Nazneen also sees, "the criss-cross patterns of a thousand scars, the colors that shifted and changed in the lights, [and] the unchanging nature of what lay beneath" (pg. 369). Nazneen is worried about skating in her sari, but Razia reminds her that in England she can do anything.



## Chapter 21 Analysis

In the last chapter of the novel all the tension between the Bengal Tigers and the Lion Hearts culminates in a riot. Muslims fight Muslims and whites fight Muslims and Brick Lane is on fire. In the end there is no clear winner and no one can make sense of the violence. The riot is symbolic of the senseless violence taking place all around the Muslim world.

Early in the novel, Chanu remarked that people with Dr. Azad's Going Home Syndrome feel the pull of the land more strongly than they feel the pull of their family ties. Chanu proves that this is true in this chapter when he tells Nazneen that he can't stay in London. He is sad about having to leave without his family, but it is something he feels he must do.

Nazneen, like Hasina, has come to terms with Amma's mistakes. She no longer waits for things to happen, but takes charge of her own destiny. Nazneen no longer tells her daughters the story of *How You Were Left to Your Fate*, but instead involves them in the family decision making. Once afraid to talk to strangers, Nazneen now leaves the estate when she pleases and talks to anyone without hesitation. In the acts of braving a riot to find her lost daughter, deciding to stay in London, and managing to support her family, Nazneen becomes independence and self-confidence far beyond anything Amma ever dared to imagine. Without her husband, Nazneen is definitely happier and better off. Meanwhile, Chanu is finding the new Bangladesh very different from the Bangladesh he knew and loved.

Two symbols that run throughout the novel are beautifully intertwined in the final scene: The sari, which for many women means some restriction, and ice-skating, which for Nazneen means passion and freedom. At the end of the novel, Nazneen, in her sari, looks closely at the ice for the first time and finally understands its significance for her. The ice is symbolic of life's ups and downs, of people's ability to grow and change, and of the strength of the human spirit.





# Characters

## Nazneen Ahmed

Nazneen was pronounced dead by the old midwife who arrived a few minutes after her birth. It wasn't until her aunt Mumtaz dropped her by mistake that she began to show some signs of life. Nazneen's mother Rupban was told that she could take the baby to the hospital, or leave her survival up to fate. Rupban decided to leave Nazneen to her fate, and she almost lost her. Nazneen grew up listening to her mother tell the story of *How You Were Left to Your Fate*. She spends the early part of her life taking whatever life gives her without complaining, including an arranged marriage to a man nearly twice her age. Her husband Chanu describes her as a simple, unspoiled village girl. She overhears him tell someone that she is not beautiful, but she is not so ugly either.

After her marriage, Nazneen begins to question the power of Fate and she struggles with what her mother taught her about accepting and enduring everything. With each small step she takes towards taking control of her own life, she gains more confidence in herself and her abilities. Karim, the young man who brings Nazneen sewing work, makes her feel important. He empowers her with new knowledge about the world and the power that she can have within it. They fall into an adulterous relationship which, together with the demands from her family, leads Nazneen to have a nervous breakdown. Nazneen emerges from her illness more determined than ever to control her own destiny. She finds the strength to leave Karim and she refuses to return to Bangladesh with Chanu. By the end of the novel, Nazneen is very different from the Nazneen we first met. She is self-reliant, decisive, happy, free, and determined not to teach her daughters the same lessons that her own mother taught her.

## Chanu Ahmed

Chanu is Nazneen's husband. He is nearly twice her age, when they get married, and he is very ambitious. He talks and plans a lot, but he never accomplishes anything. Chanu tells Nazneen the world is against him. He blames his problems on discrimination and racism, and he constantly talks about the history of western atrocities against Bangladesh and other developing nations. Chanu reads a lot, and he is always thirsting for knowledge. He can recite poetry and quote literature from memory. He is proud of his degree in English literature from Dhaka University and he continues to take numerous courses on various topics. His certificates line the walls of the flat.

Chanu likes to think that he is a modern man, and that he is better than the "peasants" who live up to all the negative stereotypes about Bangladeshis. But he, too, holds on to traditional values and is concerned about respectability and what people will say. When their son Raqib is sick, Chanu vows to stop talking and start acting. But Raqib dies and Chanu continues his old behavior. At one time Chanu goes through a period of depression because of all the disappointments in his life. Chanu is determined to return



to Bangladesh before his daughters become too westernized and fall into English vices. This decision causes great conflict between him and his children, who consider London their home and England their country. Nazneen observes that Chanu is both afraid of and baffled by his daughters. He has serious conflicts with Shahana, his eldest daughter, and Nazneen wonders if things would be different had Shahana been a boy. Chanu is a heartrending character. His behavior makes the reader laugh sometimes, but mostly in a sad way. We empathize with him more and more as the novel advances, and by the end we understand that his move to Bangladesh signifies his own growth. He has finally stopped talking and he has finally acted.

## Hasina

Hasina is Nazneen's beautiful younger sister. While Nazneen was an obedient child, Hasina always had a mind of her own. She eloped at 16 with a boy named Malek and moved to Dhaka. When the love marriage doesn't work out, Hasina gets a job at a garment factory to support herself. She fights hard not to be like her mother, who was always waiting and suffering. She stays away from anyone (like her co-worker Renu) who reminds her of Amma. Hasina is innocent, naïve, and trusting. She sees the best in everyone and she doesn't recognize or understand hurtful attitudes like cynicism or sarcasm. Because of this, she doesn't even suspect that it was her friend Shahnaz who got her fired from the garment factory. With no other sewing jobs available, Hasina becomes a cook, raises chickens to sell their eggs, tries selling handmade crafts, falls into prostitution, and eventually works as a maid. She is strong and independent, but she is always restless. She has a faith in God that wavers during hard times in her life, but eventually comes back stronger than ever. Through all her hardships, Hasina never stops looking for love and happiness. At the end of the novel Hasina runs off again, this time with the cook who worked in the same household where she was a maid.

## Mrs. Islam

Mrs. Islam is an elderly woman who is well-respected in the Bangladeshi community of Tower Hamlets. She has hard eyes and a hairy wart on her face. She has a reputation for knowing everything and she often fakes modesty to make herself seem more importance. Mrs. Islam is self-righteous, but there are nasty rumors about her that turn out to be true. Mrs. Islam she is a money-lender who collects very high interest and uses her to forces borrowers to pay back much more than what they owe her. Mrs. Islam uses handkerchiefs to signal when each collection is enough. Mrs. Islam's husband was a wealthy man and people say she made him that way. Mrs. Islam says unkind things about her dead husband and she thinks that their two sons only have half a brain. Mrs. Islam uses her age to gain sympathy and, in the last half of the novel, she carries a can of Ralgex Heat Spray with her to emphasize her suffering. Mrs. Islam also begins to support a mosque, and she endows a mosque school. Though she calls herself a friend, Mrs. Islam treats Nazneen and Chanu just as she does other borrowers. Fortunately, from the beginning of the novel Mrs. Islam has advised Nazneen that she is not powerless and that she has everything she needs within her,



where God put it. Mrs. Islam's advice prompts Nazneen to use the Holy Qur'an to force Mrs. Islam to stop collecting payments from them.

## Razia Iqbal

Razia is Nazneen's neighbor and friend. She is funny and irreverent. Razia's husband allows her to take an English class, but he won't let her work and he accuses her of overspending and wasting food. Razia's husband starts sending all of his money to Bangladesh to support the building of a mosque. Razia is independent and strong-willed. She doesn't care what people think of her. She cuts her hair short and abandons her sari for a tracksuit which gives her more freedom. After her husband is killed by 17 frozen cows in a slaughterhouse accident, Razia clears the clutter from her flat and begins working at a sewing factory to support herself and her two children, Tariq and Shefali. Razia becomes a British citizen and proudly sports a sweatshirt with the Union Jack (the British flag) emblazoned on the front. When her son Tariq becomes a drug addict, Razia refuses to believe that such a thing could happen to her family. When Tariq begins sells their furniture, Razia finally accepts his addiction and she gets him the help that he needs. Razia is a strong character, a good friend, and an astute businesswoman. When the sewing factory where she works shuts down, she begins a sewing business with Nazneen and the other women from the estate. She inspires and empowers them all.

## Dr. Azad

Dr. Azad is a successful man. He speaks in a whisper, and he is very proper and dignified. Dr. Azad first enters Nazneen's life after Chanu invites him to their flat for dinner. Chanu wants a promotion at work and he thinks that the influential doctor can help him get it. Dr. Azad is so different from Chanu that Nazneen often wonders why he continues to accept her husband's dinner invitations. As the story develops, the reader learns that Dr. Azad's life is not so successful after all. He is embarrassed by his wife and daughter who drink beer and who do not dress or act like typical Bengali women. In all the years they know each other, Dr. Azad never invites Nazneen and Chanu to his home. In the end, however, he provides Chanu, who he describes as his very good friend, with the balance of the money necessary to get his family back to Bangladesh.

## Karim

Karim serves as the middleman for his uncle's sweatshop. As a part of his job he takes sewing work to Nazneen's flat. Karim stammers when he speaks Bengali, but he seems otherwise sure of himself. Nazneen likes to think that he has found his place in the world. Karim wears trainers and a gold chain, and he has a mobile phone. He feels that his father's generation was too complacent and that the generation coming up after him is too apathetic. In response to anti-Islam sentiments written in leaflets by some members of their community, Karim forms a group called the Bengal Tigers. Karim is



elected Chairman, but he has a close rival known as, "the Questioner." Nazneen is present at the group's first meeting, and she helps to elect Karim. Karim eventually has an affair with Nazneen and offers to marry her.

As tensions in the community increase after the September 2001 attacks in the USA, Karim grows more and more radical in his defense of Islam and of the Muslim youth in his community. Once Karim chided the youth for being part of gangs, but he now tells everyone that the youths are just innocent groups of boys. Karim begins wearing Panjabi clothes and a skullcap, and he plans a counter-march against the Lion Hearts. When the marches end in a riot and Nazneen ends their relationship, Karim goes to Bangladesh for the first time in his life. Rumor has it that he went for jihad.

## Lovely

Lovely Begum is a former beauty queen who, like the other women in the novel, is looking for something more out of life. She is insecure and always strives to be the most beautiful and the best dressed. She is envious of her wealthier friend Betty, who has a bigger house, her own car and driver, and more servants. Lovely wants to do something with her life, and eventually she finds satisfaction by starting a charity for child victims of acid attacks.



## Objects/Places

### Mymensingh District

This is the region where Nazneen and her sister Hasina were born in northern Bangladesh.

### Tower Hamlets

Tower Hamlets is the name of the London community where Nazneen and Chanu live with other Bangladeshi immigrants.

### Gouripur

Gouripur is the name of the village in which Nazneen was born. In London, she often daydreams of Gouripur and the simple life they had there.

### Ice-Skating

Nazneen sees ice-skating for the first time on British television. She is mesmerized by the sport and she often pretends that she is skating on ice.

### Mrs. Islam's handkerchiefs

It is rumored that Mrs. Islam is a money-lender who uses her different handkerchiefs to give signals to her sons during business deals, just as she did with her husband when he was alive.

### Dhaka

Dhaka is the capital city of Bangladesh. It is where Hasina lives and works, and it is where Chanu goes when he returns to Bangladesh.

### Garment factory

Hasina works in a garment factory in Dhaka until she is fired because of a jealous woman's lies. Razia works for a garment factory in London, and eventually, so does Nazneen.



## **Brick Lane**

Brick Lane is the main street near Tower Hamlets. It is lined with ethnic restaurants, grocery stores, and cloth shops. Brick Lane is the scene of the riot in the novel's climax.

## **Sari**

The sari is the traditional dress of women on the south Asian continent. It is a long piece of fabric wrapped around the waist to form a long skirt, then wrapped around the upper body and sometimes draped over the head as well.

## **Snowstorms**

Dr. Azad collects snowstorms. The water-filled glass domes are calming, he says, but they also remind him of a happier time in his marriage.

## **Panjabi Pajama**

The Panjabi pajama is a traditional outfit worn by Muslim men. Younger immigrants often prefer to wear Western clothing, but as Karim becomes more radical, he wears Panjabi pajama to make a statement.



# Themes

## Fate

The main theme in *Brick Lane* is the role of Fate in shaping one's destiny. When Nazneen is born sickly, the midwife tells the new mother that she can take the baby to the hospital, or just leave her to her fate. Nazneen's mother chooses to wait and see what will happen. As they grow up, Nazneen and her sister Hasina are taught that fighting Fate can be fatal. Their mother, "Amma," teaches them that nothing can be changed and that everything must be borne. Amma kills herself when the girls are still small. Nazneen takes Amma's lessons to heart, but Hasina rebels early on. At 16, Hasina elopes with a young boy for a love marriage. Nazneen is soon given away in an arranged marriage which she does not protest at all. While Nazneen is in London with her new husband, she worries about Hasina but she often wonders if perhaps Hasina was fated to the life she has "chosen." With the revelation of her mother's suicide, Nazneen finally understands and accepts the fact that she can choose her path in life. Hasina, who has known about the suicide all along, stops resenting her mother's complacency when she realizes that Amma did act, although the path she chose was a forbidden one. Eventually, Nazneen begins to make decisions about her life rather than waiting to see what will happen to her. In doing so, she makes a better life for herself and her daughters. Hasina, in the meantime, continues to search for love and happiness. Both sisters fight their fate, but end up living the life they were fated to live. As Banesa the old midwife explained when Nazneen was born, "Of course, Fate will decide everything in the end, whatever route you follow" (Chapter 1, pg. 3).

## Inter-generational Conflict

The issue of inter-generational conflict plays a major role in *Brick Lane*. In England, displaced from their country, Bangladeshi immigrants try to recreate what they have left behind, but their English-born children are influenced by the only country they know. The older folks want things to remain the same, but the younger generation wants to experience life for themselves and they want to fit in with their peers. This is a universal and age-old conflict, but it is perhaps more pronounced when a group is displaced and has the influence of another culture to contend with as well. The older Bangladeshis in the London community are appalled by the way their children dress and by their experimentation with drugs and alcohol. The younger generation looks at their parent's inaction in the face of great social troubles with disgust. The older people see their culture being destroyed, while the younger ones simply see it changing. The cycle will continue, as evidenced by Karim who criticizes both his father's generation *and* the generation of adolescents coming up after him.



## Self-Empowerment

The theme of self-empowerment is developed within all the major storylines in *Brick Lane*. Nazneen goes from being a complacent daughter and wife to an independent woman who makes a difference in her own life and in the lives of others. Mrs. Islam, a wealthy widow, keeps her power in the community by being a ruthless money-lender. Hasina, who is strongly opposed to the philosophy of waiting and suffering, makes every effort to make a happy life for herself. Lovely, though relatively better off than the other women in the novel, also strives to reach a certain level of achievement and self-worth by forming a charity to help children deliberately burned by acid. Razia, who is fiercely independent, takes English classes and rebels against her husband when he refuses to let her work. Razia also gets a job after her husband dies and unburdens herself of other cultural shackles (like the sari). Razia then earns her British citizenship. By the end of the novel Razia helps to empower her friends as well when she sets up a sewing business. Even Amma, who encouraged her daughters to accept everything that life gave them, takes control of her own life in her final act of suicide. Almost all the women in the novel felt they would do better (and did indeed they do better) without the men in their lives. The power is within them, where God put it.



# Style

## Point of View

The story in *Brick Lane* is told mainly in the third person, from Nazneen's point of view. The reader sees all the major and minor characters through her eyes. As she becomes more mature, so do her observations. We thus get to see the other characters in more depth as the novel progresses. The back-story of the novel comes from Nazneen's memories and daydreams.

A portion of the story is told in the first person in the form of letters written to Nazneen by her younger sister Hasina. Writing from Dhaka, Hasina's commentary informs the reader about societal issues and the plight of poor women in that part of the world. Hasina also gives us some insight into the prevailing politics at the time.

## Setting

Nazneen's story unfolds on two continents, Asia and Europe. It begins in Gouripur, a village in the Mymensingh District of East Pakistan, just a few years before the civil war between East and West Pakistan. The war ended when East Pakistan declared themselves a separate nation called Bangladesh. The story continues in London, England, where many Bangladeshis fled to seek refuge from the political upheavals in their country or to seek job opportunities.

The main characters in the novel all have ties to Bangladesh. Most of the characters were born there and many of them are tied to the land in some way, even if they have never been there. Through her memories of the past, Nazneen paints the Bangladesh village where she was born as an idyllic place, full of jade green fields, lush vegetation, unusual individuals, and extraordinary events. Chanu says Bangladesh used to be known as The Paradise of Nations. In London, their immigrant community contains Bangladeshi grocery stores, cloth shops, restaurants, a mosque, and a mosque school. It is only one of several such communities, and some of the residents have lived there for two or three decades.

## Language and Meaning

The majority of the novel which is written from Nazneen's point of view is written in standard British English. Hasina's letters, on the other hand, are written in her broken English. *Brick Lane* contains a rich scattering of Bengali words and parables throughout the novel. The author uses the English version of the word in dialogue soon after its first appearance so that the meaning is clear.

## Structure

*Brick Lane* consists of 21 chapters. The novel begins with the main character's back-story so that the reader learns about the early influences in her life. The novel then moves into the present day, but continues to revisit the past through Nazneen's thoughts and dreams. One chapter (Chapter 7) consists of 30 letters written from Dhaka by Hasina over a period of 13 years. The letters reveal what is happening in Nazneen's life during the same 13-year period. Subsequent chapters include more of Hasina's letters mixed in with Nazneen's day to day thoughts and actions.



## Quotes

"Fighting against one's Fate can weaken the blood. Sometimes, or perhaps most times, it can be fatal." Chapter 1, pg. 4

"What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne." Chapter 1, pg. 4

"The pull of the land is stronger even than the pull of blood." Chapter 2, pg. 17

"If you think you are powerless, then you are. Everything is within you, where God put it." Chapter 3, pg. 42

"You can spread your soul over a paddy field, you can whisper to a mango tree, you can feel the earth beneath your toes and know that this is the place, the place where it begins and ends. But what can you tell to a pile of bricks? The bricks will not be moved." Chapter 4, pg. 58

"Sometime when people see a beautiful thing they want to destroy it. The thing make them feel ugly so they act ugly." Chapter 7, pg. 117

"God have given me life but he has curse it. He put rocks in my path thorns under feet snakes over head. Which way I turn any way it is dark. He never light it. If I drink water it turn to mud eat food it poison me. I stretch out my hand it burn and my side it wither. This is what He plan for me." Chapter 7, pg. 117

"God always gives a way. You just have to find it." Chapter 8, pg. 142

"This unchanging of thing, it is number one blessing." Chapter 10, pg. 160

"Get on the train of repentance, sister, before it passes your station." Chapter 11, pg. 170

"By raising her hand, or not raising it, she could alter the course of events, of affairs in the world of which she knew nothing." Chapter 11, pg. 175

"When the thought crept into her mind that the power was inside her, that she was its creator, she dismissed it as conceited. How could such a weak woman unleash a force so strong?" Chapter 14, pg. 218

"Don't you know this life is a test? Some He tests with riches and good fortune. Many men have failed such a test. And they will be judged. Others He tests with illness or poverty, or with jinn who come in the shape of men - or of husbands." Chapter 14, pg. 235

"Only the constant vigilance and planning, the low-level, unremarked and unrewarded activity of a woman kept the household from crumbling." Chapter 15, pg. 241



"O Baul of the road,

O Baul, my heart,

What keeps you tied

To the corner of a room?" Chapter 16, pg. 266

"...Hope and Despair are nothing against the world and what it holds and what it holds for you." Chapter 16, pg. 271

"What I did not know...is that there are two kinds of love. The kind that starts off big and slowly wears away, that seems you can never use it up and then one day is finished. And the kind you don't notice at first, but which adds a little bit to itself every day, like an oyster makes a pearl, grain by grain, a jewel from the sand." Chapter 19, pgs. 320-21

"Sometimes things don't turn out so badly. Sometimes the bad things that you think are coming don't come at all. You just have to wait and see." Chapter 20, pg. 342

"But that is our problem - making lives for our children. They want to make them for themselves." Chapter 21, pg. 362

"She looked at the ice and slowly it revealed itself. The criss-cross patterns of a thousand surface scars, the colors that shifted and changed in the lights, the unchanging nature of what lay beneath." Chapter 21, pg. 369

"This is England...You can do whatever you like." Chapter 21, pg. 369



## Topics for Discussion

Explain the significance of the novel's title.

Discuss the inter-generational conflict between immigrants and their European-born children. What are the root causes of the trouble between them?

Why do you think Amma was so opposed to fighting Fate? What gave Nazneen and Hasina the courage to go against their mother's teaching?

What does Chanu mean when he says, "You can't step into the same river twice"?

What are the major turning points in Nazneen's struggle for self-empowerment?

Discuss the parallels between Chanu and Karim. How are they similar? What are the major differences between them?

Compare and Contrast the love marriages of Hasina and Dr. Azad. How does gender play a role in how they survive the failures of their love marriages?

Explain Nazneen's reaction to Chanu's announcement that Hasina has run off with the cook. What does it reveal about her growth as an individual?

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