

The Pearl That Broke Its Shell Study Guide

The Pearl That Broke Its Shell by Nadia Hashimi

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Plot Summary

"The Pearl That Broke Its Shell," tells the story of a young girl in present day, Rahima. As she goes through various hardships, her Khala (aunt) Shaima tells Rahima the story of her great-great-grandmother, whose story bears resemblance to Rahima's. In the novel, Rahima's story is told in the present day; Shekiba's story is told as it happened in the late 1890s and early 1900s. Since the girls' stories are told concurrently, in this study guide, both stories are discussed in the present tense.

Rahima is a young girl with four sisters, all of whom want to attend school but aren't allowed to as instructed by their father. As a semi-solution, Rahima's Khala Shaima, her mother's sister, recommends that Rahima become a bacha posh, or a girl dressed as a boy, so that she may attend school as well as run errands for the family.

As a bacha posh, Rahima feels free being able to wear pants and joke around with boys her age. She is only uncomfortable when she's approached by older men in the street when she is running errands. In fact, Abdul Khaliq is one of the men who has his eye on Rahima when she is a bacha posh. However, she stays a bacha posh longer than is traditionally accepted, thus angering her father, who is an opiate addict who barely pays attention to his family but is still easily shamed by any inappropriate behavior by his daughters and/or wife.

As a consequence for staying a bacha posh for too long and for disrespecting her mother, Rahima is married off to Abdul Khaliq, a warlord to whom Arif, Rahima's father, feels indebted. Part of the deal is for Rahima's two older sisters, Parwin and Shahla, to be married off as well to Abdul Khaliq's cousins. They are married off on the same day, much to the despair of their mother, other sisters, and Khala Shaima.

As Rahima, Parwin, and Shahla prepare for their nikkah, which is their wedding day, Khala Shaima tells the girls of their great-great grandmother Shekiba. She is a young girl about Rahima's age when Khala Shaima starts the story, which is thirteen years old. As a two-year-old, half of Shekiba's face melted when hot oil fell onto her face, thus deforming her for the rest of her life. Though Shekiba is accepted by her family, she is rejected and shamed by everyone else, strangers and extended family alike.

Shekiba loses her mother and siblings to a national wave of cholera, and then soon thereafter her father to extreme despair. Shekiba continues tending her family's land, eventually looking like a man due to the hard physical labor she does. Months after her father dies, Shekiba's extended family takes over Shekiba and the land, making her their servant. Eventually they give her as a gift to fulfill a debt, and she becomes another family's servant.

When Rahima begins her life as Abdul Khaliq's fourth wife, she faces jealousy from his other wives. Since she is new and young, Abdul Khaliq calls on her more often than the other wives. She is terrified, but she obeys his and his mother's every command, for fear of severe reprimands, though beatings become a regular part of her life.



Shekiba's story is told in between Rahima's story. She serves Azizullah's family for a time, but after she attempts to obtain the land left to her by her father, Azizullah and his wife Marjan don't trust her and work hard to get rid of her. They gift her to the king so he can use Shekiba as a bacha posh guard for his harem. The lead guard, Ghafoor, shows Shekiba around. Shekiba trusts and likes Ghafoor, but remains guarded so as to protect herself.

When Shekiba puts on her guard clothing, she feels awkward but free, since being in pants is completely different than being in a skirt. She is unsure of her situation, but is thankful for now that she seems to be out of harm's way. She is also thankful to be away from her grandmother, whom she cursed before she left her home.

Shahnaz is Rahima's house-mate. She shows Rahima around the house and tells her how the compound works and what to expect. She has no sympathy for Rahima and acts jealous toward her, however not as jealous as Badriya, Abdul Khaliq's first wife. On the compound, Rahima makes friends with Jameela, Abdul Khaliq's second wife. Jameela is the kindest wife and acts more like an ally than a competitor.

Rahima meets the other wives' children. Hashmat is Badriya's son, and he is about Rahima's age. When the two meet, they recognize each other from when Rahima was a bacha posh. She is embarrassed, and at the same time missing that time in her life. Rahima is treated as a servant for Badriya and her mother-in-law, who regularly treats her like an embarrassment to the compound.

Rahima bears a son, whom she names Jahangir. The fact that he is a boy keeps Abdul Khaliq's beatings to a minimum, however they are not absent. Rahima believes Abdul Khaliq cares special for Jahangir, since she sees Abdul Khaliq having special moments with Jahangir that he does not seem to have with his other sons.

Rahima is occasionally allowed to visit her sister Parwin, whom she notices seems unhappy. Khala Shaima is allowed to visit from time to time, which is how Rahima continues to hear Shekiba's story. The girls are not able to visit Shahla, since she lives much farther away. One day after Rahima thinks of visiting Parwin but puts it off due to her house duties, she finds out that Parwin has set herself on fire and died at the hospital.

As a guard, Shekiba does as she's told and fits herself into palace life. She does her job and doesn't complain, even when the women of the harem argue with each other and treat Shekiba rudely. Shekiba is given heavy tasks, as she is shown to have strength like a man from her days of working on her family's land. One evening when Shekiba is on night duty, she notices a man escaping from the concubine. She is unable to catch up with him to find out who it is, though she lets the other guards know so they might try. The man continues sneaking in and out of the concubine, but the guards never are able to catch him.

During one of her visits, Khala Shaima suggests to Rahima that she ask Badriya if Rahima may accompany Badriya to Kabul when Badriya goes to the parliament



sessions. Rahima wonders to her Khala Shaima what would be the point, just like she wonders what the point was of the little education she received. Khala Shaima insists that Rahima's education will serve her well in the future, and tells her that Kabul would be a good experience. Rahima works up the courage to ask Badriya if she can accompany her under the guise of being her assistant, since Badriya can't read and Rahima can.

Jahangir is not allowed to accompany her to Kabul, so Jameela watches him. Rahima misses him greatly, but also enjoys her time in Kabul. She helps Badriya read, vote, and fill out documents. Rahima also attends a resource center meant for women of the parliament so they might improve their reading, writing, computer, and English skills.

Rahima continues drawing strength from Shekiba's story. Shekiba sees the King Habibullah's son, Amanullah, around the palace grounds from time to time. She thinks he's attractive, and she works out a plan to be the one he chooses for marriage, which is that she tells everyone with whom she interacts that she comes from a long line of women who bore mostly males so that he will choose her to be his wife. With Amanullah is Agha Aasif Baraan, one of Amanullah's trusted friends and advisors.

Shekiba's plan is ruined when one evening, Fatima, one of the women of the harem, falls ill. As the other women attempt to move Fatima into Benafsha's room, the girls discover that Benafsha has been having an affair when they see a man's hat lying haphazardly on the floor. Ghafoor goes to tell the king while the other women look after Fatima. Upon her return, she brings the news that the king has asked for Shekiba.

When Shekiba visits the king, she realizes that Ghafoor has blamed on Shekiba the entire situation of the mystery man, meaning that Shekiba is given the same punishment as Benafsha, which is imprisonment and then being stoned to death. Shekiba is angry; Benafsha is resigned.

During one of Rahima's visits to Kabul, Jahangir dies. She finds out from Jameela when she returns from Kabul that he fell ill soon after Rahima left for Kabul, but Bibi Gulalai, Rahima's mother-in-law, thought she could save Jahangir with tea and soup. Rahima is devastated and no longer sees purpose in her life with Abdul Khaliq. She is blamed for Jahangir's death by Bibi Gulalai and Abdul Khaliq, and therefore endures a harsher-than-usual beating from her husband as well as verbal reprimands from her mother-in-law.

Rahima mourns Jahangir long after the culturally-mandated 40 days of mourning are over. She returns to Kabul to assist Badriya at parliament. Unintentionally, Rahima shares her story with two women she met and has become friends with, Sufia and Hamida. The two women are members of parliament and are the ones who encouraged Rahima in the first place to attend the resource center. Sufia and Hamida escort a broken-hearted Rahima into the resource center, where they hope Ms. Franklin, the teacher, can help.



During imprisonment, Shekiba asks Benafsha why she had an affair. Benafsha insists Shekiba wouldn't understand, because it was for love. Shekiba overhears that her punishment may be changed, and in fact it is, as someone has requested Shekiba's hand in marriage. She hopes it's Amanullah, but knows it may not be. She must be present for Benafsha's stoning, though, and then afterwards she receives 100 lashings on her back as a replacement punishment for stoning. During her recovery, one of the other guards, Tariq, tells Shekiba that she is to be married in two days' time.

When Shekiba is brought forth for her nikkah, she learns it is Aasif Baraan, Amanullah's friend and advisor, who has requested Shekiba's hand in marriage. Shekiba knows Aasif was Benafsha's secret lover, and so it is as Aasif's wife she realizes that Aasif feels guilty, and since he couldn't save Benafsha he saves Shekiba. Another reason, brought to light by Aasif's first wife Gulnaz, is that Shekiba had bragged about being from a family that bore many sons. Since Gulnaz and Aasif have been married for a year at the point and Gulnaz has yet to produce a son, Shekiba is brought to the home as Aasif's second wife. Aasif is hoping that his shame will be erased by Shekiba bearing him a son, which she eventually does.

Though Shekiba deals with Gulnaz's aloof attitude much of the time, she is thankful to be living in a home where she is not beat and where there is only one other wife with which she must coexist. As she reflects on her life, she is glad to have taken the risks she's taken, since they have led her to a safe, sure life.

On her last visit to Kabul, Rahima pretends to fall ill so she can stay at the hotel room while Badriya attends parliament session. She is careful to be quiet as she puts on Hashmat's new clothing that she stole. When Rahima is certain that Hassan, the guard outside her room - but at the end of the hallway - is facing the other way, she opens the door as silently as possible, hoping he doesn't hear her.

Rahima makes her way out of her hotel room. She trips in the hallway, catching the attention of Hassan. He can only see the back of Rahima and so assumes it is a boy and does not go after her. Rahima makes her way out of the hotel, across town to where the proper bus will take her to a town far away. Though nervous she will be caught, Rahima finds the bus, gets off at the previously agreed-upon stop, and walks across the street to meet Ms. Franklin in a cafe.

Ms. Franklin has set up Rahima with a local woman's shelter, where she feels safe and secure away from Abdul Khaliq. Rahima writes to Khala Shaima, whose visits have been lessening in recent months due to Khala Shaima's ill health. Rahima writes of blue skies and singing birds, and she signs it, "Bibi Shekiba."



Chapters 1 - 7

Summary

The beginning of the book tells the beginning of Rahima's story, as well as the start of Shekiba's story. The chapters alternate between Rahima and Shekiba.

In Chapter 1, Rahima is introduced. She is the third of five sisters, the others being Shahla, Parwin, Rohila, and Sitara. The older girls, all but Sitara, are caught getting back to their house later than their mother (Madar, Raisa) had approved. They try to hide the fact that boys were bothering them on their way home from school because they are afraid their parents will keep them home from school, for going through the village has proven to be dangerous. The girls' father (Padar, Arif) decides to keep them home from school.

Rahima is not yet of marriageable age, and so she is given the task to go to the market to fetch food items for the family. Rahima is good at bargaining and gets better deals than even Madar has gotten in the past. Madar needs help with errands because Padar has been unreliable as of late, giving in to extreme mood swings that come and go at unexpected times.

Madar is pleased to have Rahima help with going to the market, as Madar is busy with Sitara who is a young baby.

Shahla has the most difficulty staying home and out of school. She is a social young woman and likes to be with her friends. She is average looking but because of her glowing personality, Shahla has many admirers. She makes Madar proud because she is mature.

Parwin is the most beautiful sister, and even in the entire extended family. She also has incredible artistic ability. However, she lacks social skills and was born with a bad hip, causing her to walk with a limp. Parwin prefers to be by herself or with her immediate family.

One of the reasons Padar is given to rage and unpredictable mood swings is his anger over his wife not bearing him any sons, which is a source of shame for his family.

Khala Shaima, Raisa's sister, visits regularly. She is single and invests a great deal in her nieces' and nephews' lives. She is quirky and speaks frequently in proverbs. When she finds out that Rahima and the rest of her sisters aren't being permitted to go to school anymore, she is outraged. She argues with Arif, but to no end. She has an idea that will help get the girls back to school. To make her point, Shaima begins telling the story of Shekiba, Rahima's great-great-grandmother.

In Chapter 2, the author goes back four generations as Khala Shaima tells the story of Rahima's great-great-grandmother Shekiba. It is the late 1890s in Afghanistan. Shekiba



means "gift"; someone has told Shekiba that she is a gift from Allah, the Arabic term for God.

The war for control of Central Asia is briefly described, namely the taking of certain parts of Afghanistan by Great Britain or the Soviet Union. Shekiba's family is different than some others. Her parents, Shafiqa (mother) and Ismail (father) were second cousins, the marriage arranged by Shekiba's paternal grandfather.

Ismail is the hardest working of all his brothers, and therefore is a source of pride for his father. However, Ismail's parents become less and less interested in Shafiqa and her children as time goes on, as Shafiqa is shy and keeps to herself. His family encourages him to leave her and to take a second wife, but Ismail remains with Shafiqa and their children at their home across the field from his parents' compound.

Shekiba has one sister and two brothers, all of whom are looked after mainly by Shafiqa. When Shekiba was 2 years old, she accidentally knocked hot oil from the stove, melting the left half of her face into "blistered and ragged flesh" (page 16). Her survival was considered by her own family to be a gift from Allah, but Bobo Shahgul, Ismail's mother, was just thankful it wasn't one of the boys.

Over time, Shekiba has become the outcast of her extended family, being avoided and talked down to or talked about by members of her extended family. Shafiqa reminds Shekiba of her value on a regular basis. However, Shafiqa and Ismail's family become more and more isolated from Ismail's brothers and his mother, as Shekiba prefers to stay at home and the extended family wants less and less to do with any of them, but especially Shafiqa and Shekiba.

Shekiba's sister Aqela was younger than Shekiba, but she would sing nursery rhymes to lift Shekiba and their mother's spirits. The family was tight-knit, and as such, Shekiba never felt lonely.

In 1903, a wave of cholera comes through Afghanistan, wiping out thousands of people. Shekiba loses all three of her siblings within a week, and three weeks later she loses her mother. Shekiba and Ismail then become determined to work hard on their land, though Ismail grows increasingly distant.

Together, Shekiba and Ismail work the farmland. Ismail's family again suggests that he start over with a new wife and a new family. However, Ismail is so heartbroken that none of his family's arrangements work out. The more Shekiba and Ismail work together side-by-side, the easier it is for him to think of her as a son. Over time, from the hard labor she does each day, Shekiba's features grow coarser, and her palms and foot soles become thick and callused. Some days, she runs the entire farm on her own.

With each passing year, Ismail grows increasingly tired and frail. Eventually, he succumbs to fatigue and passes away. Shekiba gives him a proper Afghan burial without telling any of her extended family. She is also careful to wash him without seeing his private parts. After she buries him, Shekiba walks back into the house, knowing she is now alone.



Chapter 3 goes back to Rahima. The women in the family debate making Rahima look like a boy. Arif doesn't want it because he doesn't think it'll make any kind of difference, since she will have to switch back to being a girl in just a few years.

Raisa tells Rahima it would be good for her to be a son to Arif instead of a daughter. She is confused at first, but then thinks it sounds wonderful. She looks forward to the freedom being a boy will allow her. Rahima knows her mother wants this because the family is running out of food, and with Arif being unreliable, someone has to be free to go to the market.

The author tells some of Arif's history, specifically how he fought with the mujahideen, the Afghan military force, against the Russians. After fighting for five years, Arif struggled to return to the person he was before the war. He and others thought a wife and children would restore him, but that has not been the case.

After Arif and Raisa had started their family, Arif tried working with his father as a carpenter. Unfortunately, he found it difficult to do so and returned to the warlord Abdul Khaliq to fight in his name. Raisa was left at home with all girls and bitter in-laws. Many of Rahima's extended family members died in the war, and a civil war existed on the family's compound just as much as it existed in Afghanistan. Raisa's family lived only a few kilometers away, but as is custom in Afghan culture, once they give their daughter to a suitor they stayed out of the couple's life together, with the exception of Shaima.

The war went back and forth, on and off, for multiple years. Abdul Khaliq Khan's forces took control of Rahima's town and the neighboring towns until the Taliban gained control some months later. The girls were pulled out of school, windows were blackened for safety, and music was banned for control. Abdul Khaliq Khan fought back, and after weeks of war, the men returned home victorious, having won their town back. Soon after, Abdul Khaliq Khan called Arif back to fight for different territories, which he did.

During the fighting, Arif visited his family just a couple days at a time. He would be filled with rage during his visits, but the children were too young during that time to know the difference. Bibi-jan, Rahima's grandmother, was sad after Arif's visits because of how different her son was from what he used to be.

Soon thereafter, Amrika (America) joined the fight and began actively bombing Afghanistan in retaliation for the Taliban bombing one of their buildings. Rahima and her family wondered, without speaking it out loud, why Amrika was so upset about just one building when half of Afghanistan had crumbled under the Taliban. They wondered why Amrika hadn't been upset about that, too.

Chapter 4 goes back to Shekiba, who continues working hard in the fields as though her father were still there by her side. Shekiba sometimes even enjoys being self-sufficient, but when she comes close to running out of resources she is less inclined to enjoy such a state.

The following Spring, Ismail's nephew, Hameed, comes calling for Ismail. Shekiba wards him off by telling Hameed that her father is not present right now. Hameed



demands to know where he is, but Shekiba insists just that he has gone out. Ismail is wanted at his mother's house, and Shekiba is asked to pass the message to Ismail. Three months later, two of Ismail's nephews come to bring him to Bobo Shahgul. Shekiba again insists that her father is not home, but the men threaten to enter the home anyway.

In Chapter 5, Rahima is made to look like a boy: her hair is cut like a boy's and she dresses in pants and a shirt. The family is unsure, but ultimately thinks Rahima looks enough like a boy to pass for one in the village. Rahima's name is changed to Rahim.

Parwin tells Rahima she needs to walk under a rainbow in order for her transformation to be complete. The idea comes from a poem telling the reader that if he or she wants to change his or her gender, he or she must walk under a rainbow to make it so.

In Chapter 6, Shekiba is carried on a large blanket back to the family compound, passing her family's gravestones as they walk. Shekiba doesn't see her uncles look at each other and realize that the entire family has passed. Her uncles wish they had been present to wash and bury their brother Ismail's body.

When Shekiba arrives at the compound, she is put in the courtyard. Bobo Shahgul scolds Shekiba for keeping it from the family that Ismail had passed away, telling Shekiba she will pay for her bad choices.

Shekiba is harshly undressed and bathed by the women in the family. She is also insulted any time one of the members of the family speak to her or about her; they call her lazy, ugly, and useless. Bobo Shahgul acts the worst in regards to treatment of Shekiba. As the matriarch of the family, she feels the right to hit Shekiba with her walking stick, order her around, and make her feel guilty for Ismail's death.

Sometimes, members of the family mockingly ask Shekiba what happened to her face. Shekiba never answers, so the members of the family begin answering for her with sarcastic and derogatory statements.

In Chapter 7, Rahima begins experiencing life as a boy. She stays at home for a couple of weeks before being let out into the village. This way, Rahima could get used to being Rahim, and the family could get used to having a brother and a son instead of a sister and a daughter. Arif's family criticizes Raisa for making Rahima a bacha posh, but Raisa goes ahead anyway. Arif barely recognizes the difference, since he isn't home consistently and when he is home, doesn't pay much attention to his family.

Khala Shaima visits and is an encouraging voice to Raisa, who is unsure of the choice they've made in making Rahima a boy. Shaima reminds Raisa that without Rahim, the girls cannot go to school or even to the market. Shaima insists that making Rahima into Rahim makes life better for everyone. Shaima refers to Rahima as "him".

Rahim's first errand is to the market for some oil and flour. He watches the other men and works to mimic their walking style, which is more lackadaisical than the women.



Rahim approaches the first shop he recognizes and bargains for some flour and oil, much to the shop-owner's dismay. Raisa, however, is proud of Rahim's bargaining skills.

Rahim is assigned other tasks, such as taking his sister's shoes to the repairman, bringing home bread from the baker's, and chasing a stray dog down the street. Arif begins referring to Rahima as Rahim, as Arif gives Rahim an order to send his sister to fetch Arif a cup of tea. He asks Rohila to do it, who gives Rahim an angry look. The other sisters become further irritated when, one month later, at the dawning of a new school year, Arif keeps the girls home from school but lets Rahim go.

At school, Rahim is put in the boys' classroom. The family knows before school starts that his cousin Muneer will be in the same class, but Raisa reminds Rahim to just mind his studies and stay out of trouble. The family knows that Rahim going to school will be a test for how well making Rahima into Rahim is working presently and will work for the future.

Muneer and Rahim walk to school together. Rahim explains to Muneer that he has always been Rahim. In Muneer's mind, there had never been a Rahima. Rahim thinks he feels the teacher staring at him, but wonders if that's just his imagination. During class, Rahim notices that the teacher at the boys' school is just as strict as the teacher at the girls' school, but that the boys are somewhat more rambunctious than the girls.

The boys Rahim meets through Muneer question Rahim about his name and make it a point to tell Rahim and Muneer that they've never seen Rahim before. However, the inquisition doesn't last long and the boys join in on a fun game of soccer, an activity that causes Rahim to say to herself, "I liked being a boy." (page 52).

Analysis

The first seven chapters lay the groundwork for the rest of the novel, as the events in these first set of chapters impact the rest of the novel. As Rahima is introduced, the reader can see she is a typical young girl who enjoys playing with her sisters. She is open about enjoying school and is upset when her father dictates that she and her sisters not attend. She's also upset with her mother for being the one to tell her father about the boys chasing the girls home from school.

Rahima clearly feels that the gender rules of Afghanistan are unfair. She has courage and is willing to try and find a solution so that she and her sisters may go to school. Rahima's view is supported by her Khala (Aunt) Shaima, who is the girls' mother's sister. Shaima believes that girls should be able to go to school and that the girls' father shouldn't be able to make that decision since he's a drug addict. Shaima is the person who suggests that Rahima become a bacha posh, which suggests she has a free spirit similar to Rahima's, since she's willing to try a fairly risky solution. Shaima is also the one who tells Rahima and the other girls about their Bibi Shekiba, their great-great grandmother who overcame difficult circumstances, partly due to her time as a bacha posh.



When Rahima's parents concede to her being a bacha posh, their permission is likely borne of multiple factors. For Arif, Rahima's father, having only daughters is a source of shame. Therefore, making one look like and immediately accepted as a boy would grant Arif some reprieve from his shame. For Raisa, Rahima's mother, having Rahima be a bacha posh will be helpful for running errands. Not only can she stay home with Sitara, but by having Rahima go Raisa doesn't have to deal with feeling publicly humiliated for her husband's drug use.

Raisa's shame is easy for the reader to see. Her husband didn't used to be strung out on opiate all the time, but after fighting in multiple battles and having a wife who bears him only daughters, Arif is living a life that he didn't plan to live. It is full of disappointment on the home front, and full of death on the war side. His attitude toward his wife would shame her, since she can't deliver the sons he wants and expects.

The fact that Raisa lets Rahima be a bacha posh seems to somewhat appease Arif, since he can mostly treat her as he would a son. The family takes on her boy name, Rahim, swiftly, indicating that they see the act as natural and acceptable. The fact that Rahima herself easily adapts to life as a bacha posh speaks to her free spirit, and how she is different than traditional females in her culture.

Throughout the novel, the reader sees Rahima's courage, and much of it stems from the fact that at the heart of it, she does not feel destined to live the traditional Afghan woman life. Her spirit may seem rebellious, but through her journey the reader might see that her spirit is just different; it may be rebellious, but not because she wishes to disrespect her culture, rather because she feels a different destiny than other women in her culture. The reader will see Rahima create her own destiny.

The beginning of Shekiba's story also lays the foundation for her journey. As a young girl, she has a life that would make anyone happy, as she is surrounded by an immediate family who loves her despite her disfigured face. The reader can see throughout Shekiba's story the impact her mother's kind words has on her for years after they are uttered, as Shekiba remembers that her mother viewed Shekiba as a gift, rather than a disfigured shamed. These kind words are important to Shekiba's confidence, as she has instilled in her from an early age that though she is not like the others, she still matters.

The reader can also see Shekiba's confidence as she works alongside her father. It would have been considered unusual and even somewhat improper for a young girl such as Shekiba to work alongside her dad as a son-daughter. Yet, she clearly feels a sense of loyalty to her family. Working so diligently with her father may be Shekiba's way of giving back to her mother and siblings the gift of love and security they gave her while they were alive.

Her strength and sense of determination continues even as she lives with her extended family and she is verbally and physically punished by her Bobo Shahgul. No matter how poorly she is treated, she obeys and continues trying to think of a way to get her father's land back into her possession. Shekiba, like Rahima, does not seem to believe in the



idea that her destiny should be chosen for her by someone else in her family. Shekiba knows what she wants, she only needs to find a way to get it. The strength of character she shows in the first section carries through the rest of the novel.

The reader might note the wars discussed on and off in the first section. They are fought in both Rahima and Shekiba's eras but are more of a background for the characters as they live their lives. The wars' significance to the story lies in the fact that they contribute to the unrest for both women and their families.

Discussion Question 1

What seems to be the reason for Rahima's initial reaction to being made to look like a boy?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Raisa insist that Rahima is to be called Rahim by even her sisters?

Discussion Question 3

What are some of the things Shekiba does that contradict her thought of wanting to die?

Vocabulary

burqas, tunic, pantaloons, circuitous, sahib, lasciviously, ferociously, bulbul, Qows, interment, bachem, khala, mujahideen, pockmarked, beseiged, pakol, salam, insolent, shola, bacha posh, agha-sahib, korma-katchaloo



Chapters 8 - 13

Summary

In Chapter 8, Shekiba has been handed most of the household chores in her grandmother's home. Her uncles' wives stop doing most of their work, as they find Shekiba incredibly capable of doing work with the strength of a man. Working busily is the way Shekiba prefers to spend her days, since the nights come faster that way.

Shekiba's secondary motivation for working so hard is to avoid a beating for not keeping up with her work. Her uncles' wives as well as her grandmother have no problem beating her if she and her work do not meeting their standards. Khala Zarmina is the most harsh, and Khala Samina is the mildest.

The family, at Kaka Freidun's insistence, gives Shekiba a new task of helping her uncles harvest the land. The new task is a stress for Shekiba because of all of her other duties; she wants to be sure she gets everything done in time. Bobo Shahgul agrees to Shekiba's new task, and wants her daughters-in-law to continue doing housework. The new arrangement angers Zarmina, so she makes sure there's always plenty for Shekiba to do.

Shekiba has a nickname among her extended family: Shekiba-e-shola. The nickname defines her based on her disability, as the narrator states that in Afghanistan, disabilities define people.

When Shekiba goes outside to help her uncles, she realizes that Bobo Shahgul had originally come looking for Ismail because Ismail was tilling the most fertile land owned by the family, and Bobo Shahgul and her other sons saw fit to at least partial ownership. In the field, Shekiba pulls an onion from the ground to the protest of Kaka Sheeragha. However, when she pulls it and it is perfectly ripe - almost rotten, in Shekiba's eyes - her uncles leave her alone.

Shekiba's uncles sit down with Bobo Shahgul to discuss a debt the family owes to a man named Azizullah. The man wants a wife for his son as payment, but none of the uncles want to give up any of their daughters. Bobo Shahgul suggests they offer Shekiba as a houseworker instead of a wife, since Azizullah's son is so young and there is time to find him a wife. The uncles protest, arguing that the offer will offend Azizullah since Shekiba is so ugly. They also wonder who will do the housework if she leaves. Bobo Shahgul says the same lazy women who did it before, meaning her sons' wives.

The chapter concludes with Shekiba speaking spiritually to her deceased mother, saying that the problem with gifts is that they are always given away. Shekiba is referencing her mother's constant encouragement that Shekiba's name means gift.

In Chapter 9, Shekiba is brought to Azizullah. Before Shekiba leaves Bobo Shahgul's home, she curses her grandmother, wishing her bones to be brittle, demons to haunt



her dreams, and a painful final breath. As a response, Bobo Shahgul hits Shekiba with her walking stick on each shoulder. Shekiba, however, leaves the house concealing a smile.

Once Shekiba and her uncles arrive at Azizullah's home, they are all welcomed in. Azizullah knows of Shekiba and her scars, but wants to see them before he decides to let her stay at his home. He does not show any reaction to her scars past furrowing his brows together, thus he decides to keep her. For his purposes, Azizullah tells her uncles, the appearance of Shekiba's face is insignificant. Shekiba's uncles sing her praises of how she speaks but not much, and of how hard of a worker she is. Azizullah reassures the uncles that their debt is paid so long as Shekiba works as hard and as well as they say she does.

Azizullah's wife Marjan is introduced to Shekiba. Marjan shows Shekiba around the house and the chores to be done on a regular basis. Shekiba notices that Marjan speaks without a condescending attitude. Instead, she simply states what must be done. Shekiba feels as though being in this house will be a reprieve from the oppression of her grandmother's house.

Azizullah and Marjan have four children, Maneeja (2), Jawad (7), Haris (8), and Fareed (10). Shekiba for the most part feels at home within two weeks. She only feels lonely at night. The boys remind Shekiba of her brothers, and each member of the family treats Shekiba with respect, not making comments about her disfigured face.

Chapter 10 goes back to Rahima. She is getting used to interacting with the boys in her neighborhood and in her school. She is uncomfortable when Abdullah or Ashraf make physical contact with her. Sometimes Rahima arrives home before her cousin Muneer, just to avoid extraneous interaction with the boys. Not wanting her mother to suspect anything, Rahima tells her mother she returns home early because she's hungry.

Madar (Raisa) still speaks around the fact that Rahima is now Rahim. Madar wants Rahim playing with the boys, and in fact, she encourages Rahim to push back when the other boys push Rahim, since it is in jest.

Padar (Arif) is home for three days and chain smokes in the living room. The girls get dizzy from the smell and so spend time in the courtyard. Rohila wonders what it would be like if one of their uncles was their father. At the same time, Rahim practices improving his game-marble skills. Shahla admonishes Rohila for wondering about having a different father, and Parwin proves why it's not possible and therefore not worth thinking about.

Shahla is caring for Sitara. Rahima notes how Shahla is about to enter into adolescence and Rohila, though three years younger, is ahead of Shahla in physical maturity. Rahima remembers trying on Shohila's bra once when Rohila accidentally left it in the washroom. The bra didn't fit Rahima, but sitting cross-legged on the floor was more comfortable for her, anyway.



The same night Shahla wonders what it would be like to have a different father, Arif is called on by Abdul Khaliq to fight alongside the Americans in a fight going on North of their village. Padar leaves for two months. Rahima is proud of her father, but her grandfather was suspicious of the Americans, though Rahima doesn't know why.

Khala Shaima visits Arif's family to see how Rahim is doing. Shaima is disappointed that the other sisters still are not attending school, but is happy to know Rahim is going and is getting good marks. Shaima wonders aloud when Raisa will feel comfortable letting the girls go to school, since there has been a war going on almost their entire lives.

In her arguments, Shaima disrespects Arif, though he is not present when she does so. Raisa defends her husband, but also asks that the topic be dropped since even though Raisa knows what kind of man he is, she cannot do anything about it. Shaima gives up about Arif, but she states her checking-up on the girls will go on.

Shaima evaluates Rahim's situation as a boy, asking him if he's having trouble with the other boys, if he's getting through the village okay, and if he's adjusting well to his new situation. Rahim asserts that he is adjusting well and is in fact enjoying his responsibilities within the family.

In their conversation about how Rahim is adjusting, Rahim mentions to Shaima that he saw her father's friend Abdul Khaliq in the market the previous day. Shaima and Raisa immediately become alarmed, and thus instruct Rahim to stay away from Abdul Khaliq.

Parwin asks to hear more about Shekiba. As Shaima begins telling more about Shekiba, Arif's mother walks in the door for a visit. She is condescending to Shaima, as well as to Raisa, and is disappointed to hear that nobody has heard from Arif or when he'll return from fighting. She tells the girls that a second wife has been arranged for Arif's brother Obaid, in order that he will breed more sons, as he only has two with his first wife.

Arif's mother doesn't stay long. When she leaves, Shaima quickly returns to telling the girls about Shekiba.

In Chapter 11, Shekiba is cooking for Azizullah and the family when Haris comes in to the kitchen asking for a sample. She tells him no, but he begs enough that she gives in.

Azizullah's brother, Hafizullah, is visiting. He is a friend of the monarchy. Azizullah has no interest in being such a high-up person, but does enjoy having a brother who has such a position. Hafizulla is hosting the king in an effort to make his way up to hakim of his province, as the current hakim, Sharifullah, has not been well-received as of late.

Hafizullah asks his brother about Shekiba and how she is working out as a helper at the house. Azizullah says she is doing a fine job and is more useful than a mule. Azizullah also states how Ismail, Shekiba's father, had made arrangements for his daughter to live with Bobo Shahgul and for his land, tools, and animals to be distributed among his brothers. Shekiba becomes angry, knowing that's a lie.



Hearing Azizullah speak of her father's land, Shekiba wonders where the deed to the land is. Shekiba knows she is heir to the land, despite how difficult it would be to actually obtain the land. She inquires to Marjan what might happen if she is heir to the land, though she asks so hypothetically speaking.

Marjan knows Shekiba is asking about her father's land, and advises Shekiba to forget about it. Yet, Shekiba continues the conversation, asking Marjan what would happen to the land if she were heir to it and she were a boy. Marjan affirms Shekiba's thought that if she were a son she would easily inherit the land, however she repeats her desire for the conversation to stop since to her, it is an absurd thought.

Shekiba thinks to herself that she has always been her father's daughter-son, so what is the difference? She knows she can live on her own and that she cannot go on as things are. Shekiba wants a way to make a life for herself.

In Chapter 12, Rahim's mother catches him playing too rowdily with the other boys. Rahima has started her monthly bleeding, but because Rahima, as Rahim, has been able to do so much for the family, Madar leaves things as they are. However, with Rahima's monthly bleeding comes feelings for a male friend who assumes Rahim is, in fact, a boy. The two are playing in the street, play-fighting with martial arts moves.

Rahim often is the one who starts the sparring, as he enjoys the closeness with Abdullah. During one such sparring, Abdullah is standing over Rahim with his legs straddled over Rahim's middle. Madar sees them and immediately calls Rahim home.

At home, Rahima and Madar tensely discuss what Madar saw in the streets. Rahima tries to explain, but Madar will not hear it, as she wants to get Arif's dinner done in an attempt to assuage any rage from Arif upon his return home later that evening.

When Rahima returns to the kitchen from her room, she sees that no food has been saved for her. She is angry, and at the same time, Madar is still angry about what she saw between Rahim and Abdullah earlier that day. Rahim angrily tells his father that his mother didn't save him any food, which angers Arif enough to slap his wife's twice on the face, so hard that blood trickles out of her mouth. Arif sends Rahim to Rahim's grandmother's house so that he may eat a proper dinner.

Chapter 13 goes back to Shekiba. She lies awake each night thinking of the deed to her family's property, wondering if there is a way for her to get her hands on it. She thinks on where the deed might be, and she determines that it is in the Qur'an, since her father told her once that all the answers are in the Qur'an.

Shekiba ponders many questions related to obtaining the deed, mainly how she would get out of the house for a day and over to her family's compound to retrieve the document.

Eventually, Shekiba works up her courage to ask Marjan if she could go visit her Bobo Shahgul for Eid, an upcoming holiday. Shekiba rehearses the question in her head



several times. Marjan agrees to ask Azizullah, but makes sure Shekiba understands there is much preparation to do for Eid.

When Marjan comes back to Shekiba with an answer, she is appalled at how Shekiba is sitting as she peels potatoes. Shekiba corrects her position, and Marjan tells her that Azizullah agrees to take Shekiba to visit Bobo Shahgul for Eid. Shekiba is surprised that Azizullah would accompany her, though she knows there's no way to back out of going.

Azizullah and Shekiba head out for Bobo Shahgul's home. She walks a few steps behind Azizullah out of respect, and she tries to memorize the route from Azizullah's home to Bobo Shahgul's home.

Part-way through Azizullah's journey, he has Shekiba stay in the courtyard of a friend's home while he goes to the masjid to say prayers. Sitting there, she wonders if she can get to and from her family's compound before Azizullah comes back, though ultimately she stays in place and waits for him to return.

When Azizullah and Shekiba arrive at Bobo Shahgul's home, the family is surprised to see her. On her way to Bobo Shahgul's room, Shekiba's Khala Samina tells Shekiba to not take Bobo Shahgul's insults so personally. Shekiba has a quick visit with Bobo Shahgul, as Bobo Shahgul wonders why Shekiba has come back to the home. Bobo Shahgul hits Shekiba twice before demanding she get out of the house.

As the men continue their visit in another room, Shekiba makes her way to her family's house. She notices that some of the cracks have been filled in with clay, and wonders if someone is trying to fix it up. She goes to the books and quickly finds the Qur'an on the top shelf. The deed is between the pages. She shoves the book under her shirt, apologizing to Allah as she does so, and swiftly makes her way back to her extended family's home. She is back in time so that nobody seems to know where she's gone.

Shekiba's family is falsely cordial to her. One of her uncles asks what Shekiba was doing at her old house, and Shekiba nonchalantly answers that she was praying. Azizullah and Shekiba leave without fanfare, though Shekiba knows her uncles are wondering what the motivation was behind the visit.

Analysis

Rahima's and Shekiba's stories both change drastically. For Rahima, her life as a bacha posh gets too carried away. Not only does she get too comfortable as a bacha posh and takes for granted her freedom, but she acts upon her pre-adolescent feelings toward a male peer. Both actions contribute to a harsh reprimanding by her mother, one that Rahima does not take well, since her mother tells her that she can no longer be a bacha posh.

Rahima's reaction illustrates to the reader various facets of Rahima's personality. For one, even though she has romantic feelings for a male peer, Rahima enjoys being a non-traditional Afghan female. The boys' gestures are of a friendly manner, but at any



age such physical contact between opposite sexes is considered highly inappropriate. Still, Rahima participates in the jesting with the boys because she likes one of them as more than a friend, and she wants to be free from constant watch and repression. Second, even someone who has no authority in her household can become entitled with just a little bit of power; being able to go to school and run errands for her mother seems to have given Rahima a sense of power, the result of which is entitlement.

The full extent of Rahima's attitude of entitlement is seen in her father's reaction to her mother, when Arif realizes Raisa didn't save Rahima - at that time, still Rahim - any dinner. His response tells the reader how seriously a family takes a young girl becoming a bacha posh. Even though Rahima is anatomically a girl, her as a bacha posh is taken as truth until the moment she is changed back. It is important for the reader to note this facet of Afghan culture, since women are generally devalued and men highly valued, unless the female can become a male for a period of time, during which she is highly valued because she is taken for a male.

The author introduces Abdul Khaliq in this section, as he approaches Rahim in the market. Her family's reaction should let the reader know that the author is foreshadowing what will be a tense situation for Rahim's family once he is no longer a bacha posh. Rahim's life is about to change drastically, and it involves Abdul Khaliq, though the reader doesn't yet know that.

Shekiba's life also changes drastically. She has already been pulled away from her home to live with her extended family. Her sense of determination and desire to live on her father's land has not waned, but it takes her some time to figure out how she might go about changing her situation.

The most remarkable thing to note about Shekiba in this section is the hope that she maintains and the risks she takes. Especially in her era, women in Afghan society were valued far less than men. Still, she creates a way for herself to obtain the land deed to her father's land, meanwhile hoping to the fullest extent that the hakim, the man in charge of her village, will grant her ownership to the land. Shekiba knows how slim her chance is of being granted ownership of her father's land, but she seems to be of the attitude that it is worth the risk just in case the risk pays off.

Azizullah's treatment of Shekiba can be noted as appropriate and even kind for a master to his servant. He doesn't have to allow her to accompany him on his journey, nor does he have to allow her to see her family. His treatment of Shekiba illustrates for the reader cultural expectations, gender inequality, since Azizullah is clearly in charge, as well as Shekiba's courage in the face of powerlessness.

The reader might also note Marjan's response to Shekiba's posture as she peels potatoes, which shows how older women in the novel subscribe to the gender ways that have always been followed in Afghan society. At this point Shekiba has not yet been a bacha posh, but the author is indicating that it will be as a bacha posh where Shekiba feels most comfortable in regards to her general personhood.



The events that happen to Rahim and Shekiba in this section are important to their journeys, as they show how the women's characters are refined from the very beginning. They overcome hardship at a greater rate than the other characters in the novel, and each must summon a great will to live in order to continue pushing forward.

Discussion Question 1

What are some of the ways the reader can see Rahima is enjoying being Rahim?

Discussion Question 2

What are some of Shekiba's character traits that would help her obtain the deed to her father's land?

Discussion Question 3

Why are Azizullah and Marjan insistent on Azizullah accompanying Shekiba on her visit to Bobo Shahgul?

Vocabulary

cumbersome, darning, Jumaa, madjid, portenous, impertinently, nikka, inshallah, qurbani, hakim, chador, mubarak, tacit, androgynous, monarchy



Chapters 14 - 21

Summary

Chapter 14 is about Rahima. She and her sisters are tense with one another for a short while following Rahima's stubborn attitude toward her mother that caused her mother to be beaten by her father. Rahima's sisters accuse her of being selfish and not caring about her wanting to be a boy impacts the rest of the family. Her sisters also blame her for Padar getting it in his head that his eldest daughters need to be married off.

Rahima thinks of a conversation between Shaima and Madar she'd once overheard. Shaima was trying to convince Madar to send the girls to school, especially Parwin, since Parwin would be the hardest to marry off.

Rahima apologizes to her mother, who blames herself as much as she blames Rahima for Arif's outburst of anger. Raisa tells her daughter that everything is out of her hands and that things will soon be changing, though she isn't sure how since, she says, "men are unpredictable creatures."

Chapter 15 goes back to Shekiba, who is trying to figure out how to bring her family's land deed to the hakim of her village. Marjan tells Shekiba that she spoke to Zarmina, Shekiba's uncle's wife. Marjan reports that Zarmina told Marjan that Shekiba didn't adjust well to Bobo Shahgul's home. Marjan begins watching Shekiba's every move, afraid of what she might do.

Shekiba hears Marjan and the other women in the house discuss sex. She also hears the women discuss how they never trusted her uncles and how Marjan is afraid that Shekiba will turn on the family. Marjan wants to send Shekiba back to her family and brings up the notion to Azizullah. However, Azizullah is not willing to risk the rift the action would cause. Azizullah promises to find another way to rid his home of Shekiba.

Two days later, Azizullah comes home with his brother, Hafizullah. King Habibullah will be coming to visit Hafizullah and the two discuss the event. Azizullah tells his brother he would like to offer Shekiba to the king as a gift. Hafizullah is unsure because of Shekiba's deformity, but Azizullah insists that because she is a good worker, there is a way to make it work.

Hafizullah tells his brother that the king has women who are kept as men to be guards for his harem, so that the guards do not take advantage of the king's concubine. Azizullah tells Hafizullah that Shekiba works and acts as a man around the house, and so Hafizullah agrees to present her as a gift to the king.

In Chapter 16, Rahima laments that Khala Shaima likes to keep the girls hanging with the story of Shekiba. Her father has been spending more and more time away from their home, and so Rahim has been spending time with Agha Barakzai as a way of avoiding



hanging out with the male friends she's made, especially Abdullah, the one on whom she has a crush.

Shala doesn't speak to Rahima beyond what is necessary. Instead, Shahla stays with her mother and is quiet around her father. The girls' grandmother comes to visit more often in order to see the unrest in the home for herself. She tells Raisa to tell Arif to visit her when he comes home.

Rahima listens to the conversation between her father and her grandmother by pretending to be kicking a ball around the courtyard as the two speak. She hears her grandmother telling Arif that Raisa has had plenty of time to give him a son, but she's failed. Arif agrees, but doesn't know where he'd put another woman and more children, since the family lives only in a small two-bedroom house. She wonders if Abdul Khaliq could help.

Eleven days later, Abdul Khaliq and his entourage show up at Arif and Raisa's home. He mentions Arif's previous statement that their family is in a conundrum of having no boys, many girls, and not enough money to care for all of them properly. As a solution, Abdul Khaliq suggests that he take Rahima - who is to be turned back from Rahim - as his wife, and his two cousins take Shahla and Parwin, Arif's two eldest daughters.

The women are listening from the kitchen and are fearful of what the warlord and Arif are discussing, but they do not interrupt the conversation.

Arif credits tradition for needing to discuss the matter with his father and his uncles, and won't allow Abdul Khaliq and his family come back two weeks from then. Abdul Khaliq agrees while reminding what a great honor it would be for Arif's daughters to marry into his family.

Raisa is upset with Arif for agreeing with Abdul Khaliq, but Arif insists that there is no other option. Arif blames Raisa for keeping Rahim a bacha posh for far too long. He also exclaims how there is no money, and that their daughters need to be married off soon or even more shame will be brought to the family.

Raisa suggests that her sister Shaima could be present when the men return, in order to reason with them for a different solution. Arif threatens to cut off Shaima's tongue if Shaima arrives to the house on the day Abdul Khaliq and his men return for Arif's answer. Arif insists that Abdul Khaliq can improve his family's lot. He tells his wife to fix Rahim, to make him back into Rahima.

Chapter 17 goes back to Shekiba's story. She sneaks out of Marjan and Azizullah's house in the early morning to try and get to the hakim; she wants to present the land deed so that she might have what is legally hers. Though Azizullah and Marjan don't see her leaving the house, once two men see her walking alone she feels forced to tell a lie about her being sent out to get medicine for Marjan. The two men take her to the local apothecary.



Once at the apothecary, Shekiba arbitrarily chooses medicine for Marjan. Once she and the men leave, Shekiba asks where the hakim's house is. The men are incredulous, but point her in the right direction anyway. At the house of the village authority, Shekiba makes her request that he grant her the land that, legally, is hers. The hakim knows who she is, but tells her she knows nothing of tradition as he rips up the deed.

Toward the beginning of her interaction with the hakim, Azizullah arrives and beats Shekiba even as she is begging the hakim to grant her the land. He hits her on the head twice, and on either side of her body once she's on the ground.

Chapters 18 and 19 are about Rahima. While Raisa waits to see what will happen to her daughters, Parwin draws pigeons who are sad because they feel like all of their friends have flown away and they have no one to talk to. Raisa tries to reason with Arif about the fate of her daughters, but to no avail.

Abdul Khaliq and his entourage return to discuss their offer with Arif's father and uncles. Arif tells Abdul Khaliq that Parwin was born with a lame leg, but that doesn't keep Abdul Khaliq from extending the offer to marry her off with Shahla and Rahima.

During the interaction, Rahima's uncle Fareed speaks, telling Abdul Khaliq that there is a bride price for each daughter married off, that of one million Afghanis. As the women are listening, Rahima learns from her mother's facial expression that her uncle Fareed is lying. Still, Abdul Khaliq pays a sum of money that completes the agreement between the two families.

Shahla is angry at Rahima for what has happened. That night, Rahima dreams of Abdul Khaliq. She dreams of having to leave with him as he threatens to beat her and members of her family look on. In her dream, she asks her family why they aren't helping her. Each person tells her, one at a time, that going with Abdul Khaliq is her naseeb, or destiny.

In Chapter 19, the nikkah, or wedding date, for Rahima and her sisters is set for two weeks from then. Shahla does not speak to Rahima for four days, blaming Rahima for her and Parwin having to be married off to a warlord's cousins. Raisa does not like what has happened, but tells the girls that everything is in Allah's hands, and that God has a plan for them.

Madar makes three baskets of shirnee, which is a basket of sweets presented to a groom's family at a nikkah. As she does so, she avoids her husband's eyes even as he looks on with approval.

Madar begins sleeping in the girls' room, but Padar doesn't notice. Instead, he focuses on his new monies and smoking opium. He also buys a chicken and demands his wife send some over to his mother.

Rahim is officially made back into Rahima. She starts to wear dresses again, she wears a chador to hide her short hair, and her pants and tunics are given to her uncle's wife for her boys. Now back to his daughter instead of his son, Arif ignores Rahima.



Rahima tries to hang around Shahla, bringing her food and helping her with her chores. Eventually, Shahla forgives Rahima and the two are kind to one another. Rahima asks if it will be awful, and Shahla doesn't answer, she only looks to the ground.

Khala Shaima is upset at what is happening with her nieces. She calls Arif, Arif's uncles, and Arif's father a "council of asses" (page 139) for deciding to marry off the three eldest daughters. Shaima insists that if she had been present, she could've helped. Raisa insists that Shaima couldn't have helped because the men had made up their minds.

Raisa indicates that she's contemplating killing herself so that there can be no weddings for a year, as Afghan tradition indicates. Shaima talks her out of it and is adamant that she will be present on the day of the nikkah. She then continues her story of Shekiba.

In Chapter 20, Shekiba is recovering from Azizullah's beating. Marjan has been coming to her three times a day to feed her and to help her heal. Marjan calls Shekiba a stupid girl for trying to reclaim her father's land based on a deed.

Azizullah returns from a visit with the king at Kafizullah's home. He tells Marjan that Shekiba should be presented that evening. Marjan tells her husband that Shekiba is ready. She warns the young girl to obey the word of God and to know her place in this world. Shekiba tells Marjan that she has no place in this world, but she goes with Marjan anyway.

Shekiba walks to the king without letting it be known that she still hurts from the beating given to her by Azizullah just a few days prior. The king accepts her as a gift, and Shekiba stays with Hafizullah's family until the morning when she leaves for Kabul with the king and the king's people. Shekiba still has her father's Qur'an tucked into her dress.

In Chapter 21, Rahima, Parwin, and Shahla are prepared to be married off to Abdul Khaliq and his cousins. Shaima is still angry about the situation, and Raisa still feels helpless in the situation.

During the nikkah for each girl, Shaima interrupts the prayers of the man officiating each ceremony. She is silenced each time, and finally slapped by Arif in front of the other men. Before each girl leaves her mother, Raisa cries and kisses their hands. Shahla and Parwin go to their father and to their suitors with little resistance. Rahima, however, kicks, screams, and cries for having to leave her family. Sitara asks Rahima where Parwin is going. When Rahima tells Sitara that Parwin will be living with a new family, Sitara doesn't understand that her sisters won't be coming back.

Abdul Khaliq smirks as Rahima squirms under her father's grip, and Rahima's new mother-in-law eyes her with criticism.



Analysis

Rahima's life as she knows it is completely changed. As a young girl in Afghanistan, Rahima likely knew that she would be married off at a reasonably young age. It is customary in her culture for parents to choose their daughters' suitors when the girl is a young teenager. However, Rahima likely does not expect her nikkah (wedding day) to happen the way it happens, since her marriage to Abdul Khaliq is born out of her father's need to please the warlord as well as his desire to exert his authority over his family, especially over his wife. Rahima probably also didn't expect that her nikkah would be on the same day as her two older sisters, especially since one of them is handicapped. Rahima likely feels great guilt over being the catalyst to have her two older sisters married off when and as they are.

Shaima's constant presence and continual dissidence at what is happening to her nieces is further evidence of her counterculture views, and is also a way for the reader to understand where Rahima may have gotten her free spirit, or at least where she got the influence for her own counterculture tendencies. The reader should note that Shaima may be allowed to voice her opinions the way she does because she is already considered an outcast, and thus her opinions don't matter much anyhow. However, the fact that she passionately shares them is significant to Rahima's journey.

Shekiba's experience in this section relates to Rahima's in that her life is drastically altered as a direct result of a form of disobedience. Attempting to sneakily get to the hakim so he may legally grant her the land of her father was a risk Shekiba was willing to take just in case it worked out. It didn't, and she received a beating that leaves her incapacitated for a couple days, but Shekiba's character is that of risk-taker. If she hadn't tried to reclaim her father's land she likely would have felt that she had let him down, which is something that, given her close relationships with her immediate family before they all perished, would have devastated her.

The author's language when Shekiba is being given away to the king indicates that it will be an easier life than Shekiba has experienced since her family died. Though Shekiba laments being given away for a second time, the king and his people are much gentler with her than the man who is giving her away. Out of all four of her life circumstances in the novel, it will be with the king that Shekiba feels most like herself and most at peace with who she is. The gentle and easy exchanging of her as a gift from Azizullah to the king may be the author's way of indicating such.

The men's roles in this section are of note, as they are overtly powerful, entitled, and in control of whichever domain they wish to be in control of. Rahima's father, though absent much of the time, still is able to exert his control as a male and marry off his three eldest daughters, thus pleasing his authority of a warlord. Azizullah makes sure Shekiba knows that she cannot do as she pleases, especially if it shames him. King Habibullah and Abdul Khaliq exert similar types of power, as they take women as they please.



Discussion Question 1

What seems to embarrass Arif the most during the interactions with Abdul Khaliq Khan?

Discussion Question 2

Aside from being able to interact freely with Abdullah, what seems to be Rahima's favorite part about being Rahim?

Discussion Question 3

What seems to be Shekiba's main motivation behind her decision to sneak out to see the hakim?

Vocabulary

entourage, platitudes, insolent, bray, flank, maseeb, opium, egregious



Chapters 22 - 28

Summary

Chapters 22 - 28 are mostly about Rahima, though two of the seven chapters - Chapters 22 and 28 - are about Shekiba.

In Chapter 22, Shekiba is brought to Arg-e-Shahi, more commonly referred to as Arg, the king's palace. As she is being prepared for cleansing, Shekiba remembers seeing Kabul on her ride to the palace. She sees Kabul as a place so large she never could have imagined it. She notices the streets lined with stores, houses with colorful doors, and people acknowledging the king's entourage as it passes through the city.

Shekiba is equally impressed with the palace. She notices the high arches, stone pillars, grand entrance, and stark greenery. Soldiers guard every corner. She sees the king from a distance and wonders if her path will ever cross his, since the palace grounds are so enormous.

Shekiba meets Ghafoor and is happily surprised that Ghafoor is a woman. Shekiba learns that she will be a guard for the king's harem, and that she will be a girl dressed as a boy. Ghafoor lets Shekiba rest for the evening, seeing the exhaustion on the young girl's face. Shekiba sleeps soundly for the first time in a long time.

The following morning, Ghafoor helps Shekiba look like a boy, washing and cutting Shekiba's hair, dressing her in boy's clothing, and giving her a corseted undergarment so that her breasts would not be noticeable. Shekiba feels liberated in the boy's clothing, though somewhat awkward since it is very different from female clothing.

Ghafoor asks Shekiba what happened to her face, and Shekiba is honest about being burned as a young child. Ghafoor comments that Shekiba belongs to them now, especially since Shekiba's immediate family is all dead and her extended family gave her away to repay a debt.

The reader learns that four other women-men guard the king's harem. Ghafoor shares some information about herself, namely that she comes from a modest family in a nearby village and was given away in return for a cow for the family. It took Ghafoor some time to adjust, but not much, since at the palace, the beatings are fewer, food is more plentiful, and she has taken on the responsibility of lead guard for the king's harem.

The other two guards along with Ghafoor and Shekiba - now Shekib - are sisters Karima and Khatol, now Karim and Qasim, respectively. Karim looks out for Qasim, and also argues with Ghafoor sometimes, making herself the second-in-charge. The last guard's name is Tariq, the newest addition before Shekib. Tariq wants to be noticed by the king and turned into one of his harems.



Shekiba meets some of the king's concubines: Benafsha is the youngest and is Tariq's favorite; Halima is the eldest with two daughters; Benazir is the darkest-skinned harem who is recently pregnant; and Sakina and Fatima are feisty girls who like to instigate turbulence among the girls in the harem. Fatima has borne the king one son. There are others, but Ghafoor said Shekiba would meet the others in time.

Shekiba is amazed at the life of a harem, as they do not cook, clean, tend to livestock, or carry buckets of water from a well. Ghafoor lets Shekiba know that everyone has a place in Arg.

Chapters 23 - 27 are about Rahima. She has been brought to Abdul Khaliq's home as his newest bride. She shares a home with Abdul Khaliq's third wife, Shahnaz, as Rahima is his fourth. Rahima's room in the small house has a cushion in the corner, a pillow, and a small table. Bibi Gulalai tells Rahima that a plate of food will be sent to her for the night, and the next day she will begin her new life in her new home. Rahima doesn't sleep at all that night.

The next morning, Shahnaz shows Rahima around the small house. Shahnaz acts disinterested in Rahima at first, though wants to know why Rahima's hair is so short. Rahima tells her it's because she was a bacha posh. Shahnaz is sure to remind Rahima that she will not be treated as a special son in her new home. Shahnaz has two children.

Rahima asks about the compound. She learns that Abdul Khaliq's first wife, Badriya, lives in the biggest home with her bedroom on the second level. His second wife is Jameela, who lives in the same house with Badriya but on the first level. Bibi Gulalai lives in the compound next to Abdul Khaliq's, but Shahnaz states that she visits often and that she is a strict woman.

Rahima then asks about Abdul Khaliq's cousins, trying to find out where her sisters are. She finds out Parwin is close by, just on the other side of a wall. Shahla is farther, about four kilometers away. Shahnaz tells Rahima to get used to the four walls of her house, since she won't get out very much.

Rahima learns that Shahnaz was taken by Abdul Khaliq from a village in south Afghanistan as he and his people pushed back the Taliban. She hasn't seen her family since. Rahima assumes that her father was part of that mission, since her father did much fighting with Abdul Khaliq.

Rahima starts cleaning, as Shahnaz tells her she should do. In the evening, Bibi Gulalai eats at Rahima's house. After dinner, she tells Rahima that Abdul Khaliq has asked for her. Rahima doesn't move when Bibi Gulalai tells her to go meet her husband, so Bibi Gulalai pulls Rahima up from her seat by her ear.

Shahnaz points Rahima to where she needs to go. Rahima is scared and asks Shahnaz to take her back to the house, but Shahnaz refuses and tells Rahima it'll be worse if she keeps the warlord waiting.



Rahima is afraid when she walks into Abdul Khaliq's room. He instructs her to listen to every word he says, because that's the way things work. He has her take off one piece of clothing at a time. Rahima feels dirty and unsure of herself. Abdul Khaliq is pleased with what he sees. He tells her he will show her that she's a woman, and not a bacha posh/boy any longer.

In Chapter 24, Rahima is in pain the day following her first taking by Abdul Khaliq. Shahnaz seems to take pity on her, though Rahima's duties at the house don't change.

Rahima begins to learn how to cook. Bibi Gulalai visits regularly to forcibly teach Rahima how to properly prepare a meal. Rahima tries apologizing for what she does wrong, but Bibi Gulalai doesn't like Rahima's attitude. Bibi Gulalai also doesn't approve of the food Rahima prepares. Shahnaz helped Rahima prepare the meal, but when Bibi Gulalai complains to Shahnaz about the food, Shahnaz lies and says Rahima insisted on making it herself.

Shahnaz later informs Rahima that Bibi Gulalai doesn't like Shahnaz because Bibi had wanted her son to take her niece as a wife.

Rahima doesn't trust Shahnaz, but knows the woman is currently her only chance at somewhat of an ally. Bibi Gulalai continues to visit frequently, checking Rahima's work and punishing her if it's not done well enough. Abdul Khaliq also continues to visit. He likes it when Rahima squirms. She feels powerless under him, and many nights lies awake, waiting for him to wake up and leave.

In Chapter 25, Rahima is still learning how to cook, this time from Shahnaz. Rahima asks Shahnaz how she might be able to go see her sisters, but Shahnaz tells her she'll have to ask Abdul Khaliq or his mother. Rahima continues doing her work around the compound, being summoned by Badriya to do laundry. Badriya is resentful of Abdul Khaliq for taking Rahima as a fourth wife, though she does not complain to Abdul Khaliq about it.

Rahima gets used to life at the compound. Though there is no armed fighting in Afghanistan at the moment, the warlord and his men still meet every day. His entourage stays around him constantly. The men eat together in the warlord's entertaining room. When the men finish their food, the women and children eat what was left. The third round of leftovers go to the servants. The women never leave the compound, and the wives' children all play and bicker as siblings. And most nights, Abdul Khaliq calls for Rahima.

Rahima is desperate to see her sisters. She runs to Bibi Gulalai in the courtyard, causing the woman to slap Rahima across the face for behaving in an unladylike manner. She dismisses Rahima's request to see her sisters.

Rahima asks Shahnaz why Badriya hates her so much, and how she can get Abdul Khaliq to ignore her instead of Badriya. Shahnaz tells Rahima the only way is to get old, and that Abdul Khaliq doesn't call on her anymore because she is old and has borne him children already.



Only one woman in the compound is kind to Rahima, and that is Jameela. Rahima meets Jameela's children, as well as one of Badriya's sons, Hashmat, who recognizes Rahima from when she was Rahim. Jameela tells him to mind his manners as Hashmat insists that Rahima was Rahim, and that maybe Abdullah and all his friends are also girls.

Rahima makes her way to her room, and when she does, she cries alone.

In Chapter 26, Rahima sneaks out of her compound and over to the next one to see Parwin. She makes up a story about Bibi Gulalai telling her it is acceptable. The servant who answers the door is confused but takes Rahima to Parwin's room anyway.

The sisters are happy to see each other. Parwin tells Rahima it's terrible there, just as it is where Rahima lives. Rahima finds out that Parwin has not been drawing anything new, which alarms Rahima since drawing is something Parwin loves to do. Rahima also finds out that Khala Shaima recently visited Parwin, and that she'd tried to see Rahima but wasn't allowed.

Rahima suggests to Parwin that they run away, but Parwin says Rahima is always making trouble. She says that she's okay where she's at, and that their mother told them to do what is asked of them. Soon after, Rahima is taken by force back to her compound.

In Chapter 27, Rahima's relationship with Bibi Gulalai is soured. Abdul Khaliq grows more and more aggressive and dominant, as his power and influence in the area grows. For two weeks, Rahima wakes up nauseated. She is afraid of what it might mean, and when she confides in Jameela it is confirmed: Rahima is pregnant.

Rahima wonders if Bibi Gulalai will treat her any better knowing she is pregnant, but Jameela tells Rahima not to tell anyone. Shahnaz soon recognizes the symptoms, though, and tells Rahima she's about to find out how difficult life can really be.

One month after Bibi Gulalai finds out Rahima is pregnant, Rahima is allowed visitors. Khala Shaima and Parwin come to visit. Shaima tells the girls that their mother has started taking the same drugs as their father, since she is having difficulty coping with the reality of her life. Rahima is angry that her mother is ending up just like her father.

Shaima also reveals that Arif divided the money from Abdul Khaliq between himself, his brothers, and his father, giving Raisa none of it. Shaima asks Parwin and Rahima how they are really doing. Parwin says she is fine and that she is treated well, and Rahima gives away a little more, though not very much.

Rahima, as narrator, indicates to the reader that Parwin ends up being the strongest of them all. She indicates that Shaima visits from time to time, brings Parwin to Rahima's home, and tells the girls more of their great-great-grandmother, Shekiba.

In Chapter 28, the author uses "Shekib" to name the chapter, instead of "Shekiba" as in all of Shekiba's previous chapters.



Shekib gets used to his new home with Ghafoor's help. He learns more about the grounds and the history of the palace from Ghafoor. Shekib asks if the women of the harem ever go into the king's main living building that he uses when he's not traveling. Ghafoor responds strongly, saying that women of the harem stay in the harem.

Shekib finds out that there are about 29 women in the harem and that once a woman becomes pregnant, the king does not pay attention to her until she is done being pregnant.

During their conversations, Ghafoor asks Shekib if his face hurts. Shekib answers no, and Ghafoor doesn't further the conversation.

Ghafoor explains to Shekib that their main job is to keep an eye on things, especially not letting anyone in or out of the harem without the guards' knowledge and approval. Ghafoor insists that it is their responsibility to guard against women who like to wander out, and men who like to wander in. Ghafoor also lets Shekib know that sometimes the women ask for help with something they can't do on their own.

The women of the harem become loud with excitement, and Shekib and Ghafoor find out that Amanullah, the king's son, has returned to the palace.

Analysis

In this section, Shekiba becomes acquainted with life at the palace. This position is one she never would have dreamed of being in, but it is one with which she becomes quickly comfortable. Being able to wear pants and not follow the traditional role of a woman in Afghanistan comes as a relief to Shekiba, since being a female is a condition that has put her in volatile situations. One illustration of this matter is the fact that during these chapters, Shekiba's chapters are titled "Shekib," indicating that she has a new identity and it is unwavering at this point.

The author indicates that Ghafoor is to be mostly trusted, but not all the way. Though she and Shekib work side by side and develop a relationship resembling friendship, Shekiba pays enough attention to Ghafoor's explanations of things and the way she behaves at certain times to know that she needs to keep a close eye on the relationship. One thing Shekib is sure to appreciate about Ghafoor, however, is the fact that Ghafoor doesn't make a big deal about Shekiba's face. In her life, most people with whom she's come into contact treat her as deformed, disabled, or disgusting. Ghafoor's quick move past the subject is likely something that helps Shekiba so quickly adapt to palace life.

The reader may note that Shekiba's current situation is a mix of luck and determination. She is given to the king as a gift by chance, but it is because she first risked claiming her own land. Though her intention was not to be given away by Azizullah but rather to be free of him to live on her own, the action of her risk was enough for Azizullah to want rid of her.



Rahima's experience at Abdul Khaliq's compound is the beginning of her new normal. Since she is pulled away from her immediate family, living as a fourth wife to an Afghan warlord is what Rahima must get used to, as she lives in this position for more than two years. At the compound, she deals with a great sense of powerlessness as she is subject to a traditional female role. She also deals with feelings of loneliness and helplessness, though she hopes that by following her mother's instructions to obey everything she is told to do, her fate will be less harsh than she's dreaming it will be.

Rahima's struggle with her mother-in-law is to be expected, since none of the grandmother/mother-in-law figures present in the novel are kind or likable, e.g. Bobo Shahgul and Rahima's grandmother. Bibi Gulalai makes sure Rahima understands which female is truly in charge. Rahima is made to feel guilty as she is humiliated by Bibi Gulalai for not knowing basic cooking skills or wifely duties.

The fact that Rahima can't rely on Shahnaz's solid friendship, as Shekiba cannot rely on Ghafoor's, speaks to the level of jealousy and competitiveness present among the women in this novel. No woman wants to be stuck with loyalties to another woman when her loyalties truly lie with the man toward whom they are obligated. In an environment where the women could get along, they choose not to so as to gain the upper hand whenever and wherever they can.

The arrival of the king's son at the conclusion of this section indicates to the reader that something is about to change, especially since there is great excitement among the women of the harem. His presence inspires excitement now, but it will be Shekiba who is truly inspired by his presence.

Discussion Question 1

What are some of the things making Rahima brave in her new living conditions?

Discussion Question 2

What seems to cause Bibi Gulalai the most anger in regards to Rahima?

Discussion Question 3

How is Shekiba's experience at Arg different than Rahima's experience at Abdul Khaliq's compound?

Vocabulary

portico, verdant, harem, downy, concubine, brassiere, oaf, rampart



Chapters 29 - 35

Summary

Shekib wonders aloud to Ghafoor about why the king's son's presence is such a big deal. Amanullah is the governor of Kabul and is in charge of the army and the treasury. Shekib thinks Ghafoor isn't telling her everything there is to know about either the treasury or Amanullah. Ghafoor does share, however, that Amanullah is of age and King Habibullah is looking for a wife for his son. The women in the king's harem are always on their best behavior when Amanullah is visiting.

Shekib is in the pool room as she contemplates life in the castle. She admits to herself that it is a comfortable living, but she also continues to be restless. Shekib wonders if her family can see her from heaven, which gets her thinking about her father's land. Thinking of her father's land - legally Shekib's land - makes Shekib angry.

Shekib thinks of Marjan's words to her when she lived as Marjan and Azizullah's servant as Shekiba. Shekib wonders what exactly is her place in this world, though she doesn't believe it's as a house servant, nor as an unwanted granddaughter or even a harem guard. So, Shekib starts wondering what she has to do to find her place. In the middle of daydreaming, a man yells for her, calling "Guard!"

The king asks Shekib to bring him Sakina. The king is impatient when Shekib is confused, but once he finds out Shekib is new, tells Shekib to have Sakina show the way. Shekib retrieves Sakina from the pool room, and Sakina walks with Shekib to the king's quarters.

While Shekib is waiting for Sakina to be ready to go, she overhears the other harem discussing his face. One woman compares it to a mushy breakfast food, haleem.

Shekib understands from this point out that the king can have whomever he wants, whenever he wants her. He visits the harem often but doesn't stay long, and he favors the women who have borne him sons over those who have borne him girls. The nine women who have given the king sons get the finest dresses with the nicest embroidery; they were more secure in their place at Arg than the others.

Over the next few months, Shekib pays close attention to the way the palace functions. She takes on tasks the other guards can't due to her great strength. Yet, she still wonders what her place in the world is.

As Shekib fulfills her obligations around the palace grounds, she gets a clear view of Amanullah. Shekib, as Shekiba, is attracted to the king's son immediately and watches him from across the grounds. Shekiba wonders what she looks like to Amanullah, since she knows half of her is beautiful. Shekiba begins to wonder what it would be like to have children, though she fears they would not look at her, for the scars on her face. As Shekiba watches Amanullah, an idea forms as to how she could change her fate from



being Shekib the palace guard the rest of her life, though the author doesn't reveal Shekib's idea in this chapter.

In Chapter 30, two years have passed for Rahima. She learns that her mother has become just as much of a drug addict as her father, and that Sitara and Rohila basically have to fend for themselves. Sometimes Rahima's grandmother stepped in to help.

Rahima is thankful she doesn't have to watch her family deteriorate, though she worries about her sisters. Shaima continues to visit, and Rahima enjoys hearing Shekiba's story.

Rahima named her son Jahangir after a character she, Abdullah, and Ashraf had created when Rahima was a bacha posh. The character is the strongest and smartest boy that has ever lived. Jahangir, Rahima's son, is 10 months old. Jameela delivered him, and she and Shahnaz cared for Jahangir the first week of his life while Rahima recovered from the birth. As Rahima takes care of her son, she falls in love with him and considers him her salvation.

Rahima decides she will visit Parwin, though she puts it off by a day so she can finish her preparations for one of Abdul Khaliq's visitors. Just after midday prayers, Rahima is working on the bread when she receives news that Parwin is at the hospital. Bibi Gulalai tries to tell her, but lets Jameela tell her instead. She relays the information that earlier in the day, Parwin set herself on fire. Parwin had doused herself in cooking oil and lit a match, setting herself on fire in the courtyard.

Rahima finds out that Parwin's compound had sent word to their parents about Parwin's death. When Rahima and Khala Shaima see each other for the first time after Parwin's death, they hug tight. Tuba, a woman from Parwin's compound, tells Shaima and Rahima that she was barely awake the last time Tuba had seen her. Shaima yells that it was the compound that destroyed Parwin. Tuba tries to be encouraging, but Rahima knows that Parwin is in bad enough shape that she likely will not live.

In Chapter 31, Parwin dies ten days after she had set herself on fire. Rahima was allowed to go to the funeral service. Rahima sees her mother at the post-funeral gathering and is saddened by her mother's state. Rahima's mother meets Jahangir, though after a moment seems disinterested, disappointing both Jahangir and Rahima.

Rohila and Sitara sit to Rahima's right. They both have grown taller and more mature, but they have the same faces as two years prior when Rahima left. Rohila's chest has started to show, and Rahima can tell Rohila is uncomfortable with her changing body. Rohila tells Rahima that their mother cries a lot at home, especially when Shaima is there, though her crying makes Shaima more angry.

Rahima finds out that Rohila sometimes goes to school, depending on the state of her parents. Sometimes Rohila has to clean up after Madar, or even get Madar up and dressed if Arif's mother is coming over for a visit.



Shahla isn't allowed to come to Parwin's ceremony because she had just recently given birth to her second child, and it wouldn't have been proper for her to be out and about so soon after giving birth.

Back at the compound, Rahima resumes her duties. Abdul Khaliq treats Jahangir with more love than his other sons. He is gentler, laughs more, and has more patience with Jahangir than with his other sons. Abdul Khaliq's older sons on the compound love their father, but they also fear him. They cause ruckus when he isn't around, but straighten up immediately in his presence.

Abdul Khaliq spends more and more time with foreigners and his advisers. After overhearing a conversation, Rahima learns that Abdul Khaliq is being encouraged to put a woman from his compound in the parliament, likely one of his wives. Abdul Khaliq doesn't like the idea, but it is a rule of the government to have a woman representative in parliament. Rahima hears the men discussing a pipeline project.

Chapter 32 goes back to Shekib, who, as Shekiba, wants to begin putting into place the details for her idea to change her fate from being a guard to whatever it is she's thinking she'll be. Shekib approaches Mahbuba, one of the king's harem women who has borne the king four sons. Shekib asks Mahbuba how she made sure to give birth to all sons.

Mahbuba is skeptical of Shekib at first and asks a few questions about her real name and about her being a woman-man. Mahbuba tells Shekib things that embarrass her as a young girl, but she also commits them to memory, hoping she can one day use the tips to bear a son. She wonders if the women really allow the king to do such things as Mahbuba described.

Shekib cannot stop thinking of Amanullah, but then hopes nobody can see it on her face what she is really thinking of, since she's thinking of him in a sexual manner.

At night, the guards sleep in a room just outside the harems' quarters and they each take turns standing watch throughout the night. Shekib enjoys the brisk night air, but is on-edge, ready to attack any force that threatens the girls or their living quarters. Shekib tells Ghafoor that night duty is not quiet as Ghafoor had suggested, but Ghafoor finds it funny that Shekib is so shook up.

Shekib gets used to night guard duty. One night, Tariq joins her and Shekib enjoys the company. Tariq asks if Shekib is happy living at Arg. Shekib doesn't want to give away anything of her plan, so she answers the question vaguely. Tariq wonders aloud how long the palace will keep her, Shekib, and the other guards as guards. Tariq wants to eventually marry, have children, and a home.

As the two women-men are chatting, they see and hear a figure coming from the side of the concubines' house. They are afraid to follow the figure they presume is a man, but they look inside the house to see if anyone who shouldn't be in there, is. When they find no evidence of anyone in the house, they are silent, knowing that if anyone at the palace finds out, the guards will be held responsible.



In Chapter 33, Shekib and Tariq enter their respective sleeping quarters when daylight comes. There had been no other noises or sightings the rest of the night. Shekib tells Ghafoor about what happened. The women-men are nervous, and they agree to look out each night for anything suspicious. They ask the harem women one by one, but they don't want to create a stir in case one of the harem women tells the king.

Qasim sees a figure while she is on duty, but she does not chase after him and Ghafoor is angry. The man continues visiting the harem about once a week, but the guards are not able to confront or identify him.

Shekib continues laying groundwork for her plan, which has still not been revealed to the reader. She approaches a few of the women of the harem, asking them if they've heard anything at night, but also mentioning her own family - the line of boys her mother, aunt, and grandmother had borne. She falsely tells the women that she is the only daughter of her family. Even when the women are confused by her confessions, Shekib persists, believing she doesn't have much time to carry out her plan.

In Chapter 34, Rahima and Shaima discuss Rahima's family, namely how awful Madar looks and how the girls are doing. Shaima states that all she wanted for the girls was for them to get some schooling. Rahima thinks it has done her no good, but Shaima tells her it will later in life.

Shaima laments that because Abdul Khaliq is Arif's damaat, Arif can get as much "medicine" - opium, to use as a drug - as he wants. Rahima expresses cynicism and anger toward her parents. Shaima tells her it will do no good to blame her mother.

Shaima asks Rahima how her husband is treating her. Rahima tells Shaima that Abdul Khaliq has been busy with his political affairs. Rahima tells Shaima what she's heard, about the warlord being suggested that a woman be elected to parliament. Shaima guesses that it will be Badriya, based on the fact that she's older and not pretty enough for men to want her too much. Shaima is correct.

In the following weeks, Badriya is groomed for election. She discusses getting her name out to the public. The other wives ask her about her pending responsibilities, but Badriya is evasive in her responses. Badriya is happy to have the attention on her, since she has been missing it since the young wives and women of the harem have taken Abdul Khaliq's attention.

One morning, Rahima is cleaning the chicken coop when she saw Badriya walking. Rahima notices Badriya has her left arm tucked and is walked with a limp reminiscent of Parwin's limp. When Rahima approaches Badriya, she notices bruises around the woman's collarbone. Badriya brushes off Rahima's concern.

Later, Rahima visits Jameela, who had been watching Jahangir. Rahima has taken to asking Jameela questions about children and about parenting. Jameela suggests that Badriya is getting beat by Abdul Khaliq for discussing the election and for enjoying the attention too much. Rahima wonders if his anger will stop him from letting her run for parliament, but Jameela thinks Abdul Khaliq will go through with it, since he wants the



power and through his wife can have his hand in many projects. After the beating, Badriya doesn't discuss the election.

In Chapter 35, Badriya and Abdul Khaliq travel frequently to Kabul. Badriya says she enjoys the trips, but Rahima believes that's a lie based on Badriya's demeanor.

Rahima worries about Jahangir's temper that has a tendency to flair from time to time, but she decides he spends enough time being loving and affectionate that she doesn't have to worry too much.

Shaima visits Rahima, but her breathing is more labored than it has been in the past. Rahima is worried about Shaima, but is thankful the woman still visits. They discuss Badriya's trips to Kabul and how exhausted Badriya looks when she returns from the trips.

Shaima suggests that Rahima could accompany Badriya to Kabul so she could see Kabul and have a unique experience. Rahima's interest is piqued, though she turns the conversation around and tells Shaima that she could go to Kabul, too, like she's always wanted. Shaima insists her time has passed, but that Rahima could offer to help Badriya read since Badriya doesn't know how, and also have a chance to see someplace new.

Rahima asks Shaima if she thinks one's naseeb, or destiny, can be changed. Shaima challenges Rahima that one's naseeb can be changed. Rahima wonders if it is blasphemous to change the naseeb that Allah has set for a person, but Shaima insists that nobody has actually spoken with Allah to know his true opinion on the topic.

Rahima continues pondering her naseeb, wondering if she could make her own just as her great-great-grandmother Shekiba did many years prior.

Analysis

Shekib's lack of understanding of why Amanullah's presence is such a big deal shows the smallness of where she comes from. In her remote village, residents do not have any reason to pay attention to happenings outside of their community. Ghafoor and many of the other women are likely from small villages as well, but their time at the palace has changed their perspective of what is important. The reader can see Shekiba's character remains, however, as her priorities stay the same. She comes to care about Amanullah because he is attractive to her, but her priority is still to make a better life for herself.

Shekiba's wondering what exactly is her place in this world is another indication that her character has not changed even though her circumstance has. Though her position in life has gotten considerably better from a conditions standpoint, her desire to be free and live a different destiny than a traditional Afghan woman is still in place. Moreover, though Shekiba feels more comfortable as Shekib than she did with her extended family and even as Azizullah's servant, she is someone who would like to choose her own fate.



Shekiba has been independent from a very young age; those tendencies haven't been squandered regardless of her improved situation.

The plan Shekiba begins to execute through various people around the palace grounds is not fully revealed, but the reader can see that Shekiba is making sure others understand the lineage she fabricates for her plan. In the Afghan culture, one's lineage determines one's worth, especially in a male/female sense. If a family line has many men, it is likely to be considered stronger and more desirable than a line with mostly women. Though she is from a remote village, she is wise enough to the ways of her culture, and as such, attempts to make a way for an important man to notice and desire her.

The hope Shekiba carries that Amanullah will choose her to marry speaks of Shekiba's tenacity, since it takes such a character trait to continue hoping for something better after losing one's entire family, being harshly punished regularly by one's extended family, being beaten to the point of incapacity by one's master, and then made to change one's entire self from a female to a male. It is this determination and grit that continues to inspire Rahima as she struggles in her new role as a wife.

Two years have passed for Rahima, and though she goes through the motions of being the fourth wife to a warlord, the reader can see that she is still miserable in her role. The fact that she has made a friend in Abdul Khaliq's third wife shows that she desperately sought female friendship, likely because of how used to female support she was from growing up with five sisters. Rahima's desire to be friends with Jameela and be able to emotionally depend on at least one other woman at the compound likely increases once Parwin dies, and even that shoulders Rahima with enough guilt to almost crumble her.

When Rahima becomes a mother, it seems her feelings toward her own parents change. Though the author does not discuss it, having Jahangir has likely given Rahima a new perspective on her parents, since having a child rearranges one's perception of parenthood. Rahima's parents have created a depressing situation at home due to their drug use, and Rahima's anger is likely a result of knowing now what it means to care for a child, and what it means for a child to depend on his parents. Rahima was never able to emotionally count on her father, but her mother has changed so much that even if Rahima and her parents were reunited, her mother wouldn't be able to offer what she needs.

One of Rahima's greatest respites is the potential to travel to Kabul. The fact that Khala Shaima suggests it is further evidence of her and Rahima's free spirits, as well as their courage. Khala Shaima has little to lose by suggesting it, but still for a woman to suggest that another woman travel to a major city without her husband takes courage, since men like to keep a close eye on their women. In this section, Rahima is incredulous that Khala Shaima would even suggest such a thing, but her pondering on her naseeb lets the reader know that she is seriously considering it. Rahima is not pondering her naseeb in a way that indicates she is leaving it completely up to Allah. Rather, Rahima is pondering her naseeb in a manner that suggests she'd like to create



her own, and she's wondering if going to Kabul as Badriya's assistant would propel her in the right direction.

Discussion Question 1

What seems to be the biggest factor in Shekib's timidity on the Arg grounds?

Discussion Question 2

How has Raisa's (Rahima's Madar) drug use impacted the way she views her family?

Discussion Question 3

What is different about Abdul Khaliq's relationship with Rahima's son, Jahangir?

Vocabulary

pomp, fateha, decorum, unfettered, coconspirator, conniving



Chapters 36 - 43

Summary

Chapter 36 is about Shekib. She sees Amanullah again walking through the grounds, and believes it is fate that has their paths crossing. Shekib hears Amanullah and Agha Baraan, a man she presumes he trusts, speaking about war, the army, and Afghanistan's will being strong. She believes he nods at her when the two make eye contact.

Shekib works to have contact with various people around the palace grounds as she continues trying to set her plan into place. Karim relieves Shekib of her post, and Shekib walks the gardens, by the statues, by the pond and two soldiers talking to each other. She looks out to Dilkhosha Palace, imagining that inside it is majestic, with doves flying around delicately and feeding on warm palace bread.

Shekib ponders how different things are at Arg than anything she had ever experienced before being traded to the king. She wonders if the important people at the palace think of the villages in Afghanistan that don't have running water or electricity.

Shekib is so lost in thought that she doesn't immediately see Agha Baraan sitting on a nearby bench, but when she does see him, she makes conversation and is sure to tell him of her duties at the castle, as well as the lie that she is the only girl in a long line of men borne in her family. Agha Baraan tells Shekib that the palace is home to many contradictions. He thinks Shekib is odd, but in an intriguing way.

Chapter 37 goes back to Rahima. She uses the opportunity of giving Badriya a back massage to ask Badriya to ask Abdul Khaliq if she can accompany them to Kabul as Badriya's assistant. Rahima frames it as being able to help Badriya read and write, which are skills Rahima has that she knows Badriya doesn't. Badriya gives Rahima a hard time for even suggesting it, though just a few days before she is to go to Kabul asks Abdul Khaliq if Rahima can accompany her; he agrees.

In Chapter 38, Shekib ponders on how different she is from her first day at the castle versus presently. Specifically, how confident she is in speaking to a stranger and looking people in the eye.

Time continues to pass. New concubines are brought to the harem, and the other ones get jealous. Benazir has a baby girl, and Fatima grows ill. Mrs. Brown is British and is the harem's physician who visits often; she is known as Khanum Behrown by the women of the harem. King Habibullah visits from time to time, sometimes during the day and occasionally at night. The unnamed and unknown visitor continues visiting, though rarely.

Amanullah stays close to the palace while the king travels. Shekib speaks positively to herself about the fact that she is young, able-bodied, strong, as well as ready and willing



to marry. King Habibullah wants his son to marry soon, though he is leaving the decision of whom he shall pick as his bride up to Amanullah.

Shekib knows Amanullah does not have much time. The author indicates that Shekib's plan is to marry Amanullah. As Shekib listens to Amanullah's conversation with Agha Baraan, she wonders if he isn't talking about Shekib, since he speaks of the hardship his choice-bride has had to face. Agha Baraan wonders what the king will say, but Amanullah thinks it will be fine since it was the palace that introduced Amanullah to his future bride. The name of Amanullah's choice is not given.

Three nights later, Shekib is on night duty when Fatima is sick enough that Khanum Behrown is called. The author states that it is with Fatima's illness that Shekib's naseeb, or destiny, changes course.

In Chapter 39, Rahima is on the way with Badriya to Kabul. She is sore because the night before, she had asked Abdul Khaliq one too many times if she could bring Jahangir along with her to Kabul. He beat her for her disobedience. Before she leaves for Kabul, Hashmat teases her about her days as a bacha posh. Even after Jameela reprimands Hashmat for speaking disrespectfully, Hashmat continues taunting Rahima.

Abdul Khaliq has made it clear to Rahima that she is to follow the guards' orders, though she is not to speak to the guards. He tells her the guards will watch out for her, but if she does anything wrong they will not hesitate to tell Abdul Khaliq.

When Rahima's vehicle approaches Kabul, Rahima watches wide-eyed. She thinks of Bibi Shekiba and how she must have felt coming into the city for the first time. Rahima gushes about Kabul as they drive through it. She even sees Arg-e-Shahi, the presidential palace where her Bibi Shekiba was a guard a century earlier.

As Rahima's vehicle arrives where they will be staying, Rahima sees men in military fatigues and helmets who don't look like they're from Afghanistan. Badriya tells her they're from various countries, including America and nations in Europe. Once Rahima is inside where she'll be staying, she gushes about that, too. However, Badriya tells Rahima that Abdul Khaliq will be having them stay in an apartment soon. The guards don't much verbally communicate with Badriya or Rahima, though they are never very far away.

The following day, Rahima goes to the parliament session with Badriya. The people at the parliament office are dressed in different clothes than Rahima is used to; some of the men are in dress slacks, button-down shirts, and ties, and some of the women are in button-down shirts, dress slacks, or even dress jackets.

At the security station, Badriya and Rahima easily pass through without being inspected since the guards know Badriya. There is a separate screening area for women so they are not patted down in public.

Other women on the parliament approach Badriya. Rahima notices that Badriya doesn't always know what to say in social situations. On the prompting of another woman,



Badriya introduces Rahima as her assistant. The women, Hamida and Sufia, encourage Rahima and Badriya to go to the resource center later that night so they might learn how to use computers, but Badriya insists she doesn't need to, as she says computers are easy. Rahima doesn't believe that's true, but she doesn't contend with Badriya's decline of the other women's offer.

Rahima does, however, ask about the resource center, what is available there, and who can attend. Badriya excuses both herself and Rahima, using the excuse that she wants to show Rahima around before parliament session begins.

In Chapter 40, the reader is back with Shekib. Fatima is ill and needs Dr. Behrowen. Shekib is on night duty when Fatima falls ill and has to wake up Ghafoor to make sure she's doing the right things. Ghafoor is irritated with Shekib for not checking on Fatima when one of the other harem girls said she was ill.

Dr. Behrowen needs Fatima to lie down, and the nearest bedroom is Benafsha's, who is slow to open the door for the doctor and Fatima. She eventually opens the door, and other women come in along with Dr. Behrowen and Fatima. Sakina points out a man's hat lying on the floor, for which Benafsha has no explanation. She begs for mercy from the other women in the harem. Halima encourages the women to focus on Fatima and worry about Benafsha later.

In Chapter 41, Benafsha continues asking the other women in the harem for mercy. Sakina decides that one of the guards should tell the king that Benafsha has had a man in her room. Ghafoor goes, since she is the one typically in charge of the guards. When she returns, she tells the other guards that the king is angry and that he wishes to speak with Shekib.

Shekib walks to the king frightened, but with her back straight and her head up. The king asks Shekib how she has not seen a man enter and leave the harem. He is angry that she claims to have seen nothing. She wonders what Ghafoor told the king and his men, and she knows that it wasn't the truth when the king calls her a liar. The king orders Shekib and Benafsha locked up in order to make examples of them both.

In Chapter 42, Shekib and Benafsha are locked up. Shekib wonders what made Benafsha risk everything the king gave her, but Benafsha tells her she wouldn't understand. Shekib thinks of Amanullah and wonders what he would think when he hears of the night's events. She wonders what their punishment will be, but Benafsha already knows she, at least, will be stoned.

In Chapter 43, Rahima attends her first parliament session. The room is bigger than she had imagined, and the men intimate her. She tries to ask Badriya questions, but Badriya gets angry and clearly does not want to answer her. Rahima meets Sufia and Hamida, two other women in the parliament, during a session break. Badriya is not sociable, but Rahima enjoys their company.

During a session the first week, parliamentarians are briefed on candidates for an upcoming election. A woman parliament member named Zamarud stands up and wants



to tell the rest of the parliament something about one of the candidates, but she is dismissed by a male member. Badriya tells Rahima that Zamarud is trouble because she pushes her ideas and talks too much. Zamarud reminds Rahima of her Khala Shaima, though Rahima does not socialize with Zamarud.

On the fifth day of session, Rahima misses Jahangir very much. She is thinking of him while Zamarud tries to speak but is again encouraged not to. Eventually, she is allowed to speak and tells the parliament of the dangers of allowing certain candidates into the governance of Afghanistan. Even when others began to speak over her, Zamarud continued. The sessions dissolves into chaos, and Badriya makes it clear to Rahima that they are to stay out of the yelling and arguing.

Rahima learns that the man Zamarud is worried about is a warlord, just as her husband is, though Rahima doesn't divulge the fact that her husband is a warlord. Rahima also learns that Badriya will be voting for the corrupt politicians, though Badriya doesn't say why. Rahima fills out the forms for Badriya. One form is about a group that travels to other countries to learn about their parliaments. Badriya sounds interested but tells Rahima to put it away.

Analysis

Shekiba's fate changes drastically once again. The reader is led to believe that Shekiba is making her own fate, since events seem to be falling in to place to support Shekiba's plan to marry the king's son. For example, Shekiba regularly passes Amanullah and Agha Baraan. Her effort at being near them and letting them know her facade of a lineage gives the reader even more evidence of her determination and grit. Even when she is positioned as a lowly member of the palace, Shekiba is not afraid to work for what she wants her fate to be.

Shekiba is aware of her own personal growth, as she observes how much more confident she is presently than when she first entered the palace as a guard. Her ability to look people in the eye is particularly significant because oftentimes, females are encouraged not to look people in the eye. However, because she is accepted as a bacha posh, some of the traditional rules for females in Afghanistan do not apply, giving Shekiba the freedom to do somewhat as she pleases, manners-wise. She must still abide by the social mores of superior-inferior relationships, but her gender rules are not so strict.

The shift in her confidence is important to note, as it is from Shekiba's strength that Rahima garners her own. With Rahima asking to go to Kabul, she is showing a confidence of her own. When she began her life with Abdul Khaliq, Rahima is quiet, to herself, and does not cause any trouble. She still tries to not cause any trouble, though sometimes her natural reaction incites violence from Abdul Khaliq, as it is interpreted as disrespect. However, if Rahima was the same presently as two years prior when she arrived as Abdul Khaliq's wife, she would not have asked to go to Kabul. Though she



has always had a free spirit and in her heart would have always wanted to go, she has over time built up the confidence to actually ask.

It is unclear if Rahima thinks she may be able to escape Abdul Khaliq by going to Kabul. It is likely that at first, Rahima doesn't think of escaping as a byproduct of going to Kabul. The idea may be planted, however, when she learns of and subsequently participates in the resource center. Her Khala Shaima's words from early in the novel that Rahima's education would be important in the future are coming to fruition.

Badriya's continued poor treatment of Rahima, despite Rahima's help at parliament, is likely born from two camps. On one hand, Badriya is likely jealous of Rahima because of Rahima's education and knowledge. It is likely that Badriya refuses to feel inferior to Rahima and she feels threatened. In that vein, Badriya may also know that along with Rahima's education and knowledge comes a free spirit that Rahima seems to pursue, such as venturing to Kabul. The reader may also see that Badriya knows Rahima's free spirit buried under her obedience to their husband as Badriya quickly and pointedly tells Rahima that they do not need to get involved in the arguing Zamarud has started. Second, Badriya is Abdul Khaliq's first wife and demands respect from all other women on the compound. She was the first one to be married to the warlord, and as such feels entitled to respect by all those she feels are inferior.

Discussion Question 1

What seems to surprise Rahima the most about the parliament trip to Kabul? How can you tell?

Discussion Question 2

How can the reader sense the tension in the house of the king's harem while Fatima is being tended to?

Discussion Question 3

What seems to anger Zamarud, the woman in parliament, the most during the session where she does not stop speaking amidst several requests?

Vocabulary

vizier, grandiose, deft, facetious, comport, stymie, heralded, caftan, kohl, brusquely, wan, supplication, onus, besmirched, iniquity, prostrated, dank



Chapters 44 - 49

Summary

Chapter 44 and 45 are both about Rahima. She learns that Badriya has been told who to vote for by Abdul Khaliq. She is irritated, but knows there is nothing that can be done about it. Badriya then gets irritated with Rahima for questioning her, and threatens to tell Abdul Khaliq of her questioning.

Rahima continues socializing with Sufia and Hamida, though the two women are not as friendly with Rahima now that Badriya has voted for certain people to get elected into the parliament. Hamida still invites Rahima and Badriya to the resource center. Badriya declines the offer, but Rahima goes to the resource center, where she is amazed and impressed with the possibilities of what she can learn. She is excited that it's like a school. Rahima does get uncomfortable when Sufia and Hamida begin asking questions about Badriya and Abdul Khaliq, so she changes the subject back to the resource center.

Ms. Franklin, the teacher at the resource center, spends two hours with Sufia, Hamida, and Rahima, teaching them the basics of using a computer. Rahima lets the other women know that she would like to come back. Their discussion is interrupted when they learn a bomb has gone off just outside the center. The reader learns the bomb was for Zamarud, though her fate is unknown.

In Chapter 45, Rahima and Badriya are brought back to the compound after Abdul Khaliq hears about the bombing. There are many rumors flying about Zamarud's condition as well as the root of the attack, but all Rahima wants is to return to Jahangir. When she returns to the compound, Rahima is happy to see Jahangir, and he her, though she is immediately put to work by her mother-in-law.

Rahima sends word to Khala Shaima that she has returned from Kabul. As she waits for a visit from her aunt, she also waits to know from Abdul Khaliq if she and Badriya will be allowed to return to Kabul after the bombing incident. Rahima overhears Bibi Gulalai and Badriya talk about Abdul Khaliq taking a fifth wife but needing to get rid of one since it is against the hadith to take a fifth wife. Bibi Gulalai calls Rahima worthless, and Rahima wonders what her fate will be. She seeks advice from Jameela, but Jameela is also unsure of what will happen.

Khala Shaima visits. She is weaker than the last time she visited. Shaima confirms Zamarud's condition, which is that her leg was burned in the attack but nothing else. Rahima learns that Zamarud wants to come back to the parliament, and Shaima is supportive of her bravery and her independence. Rahima confides in Khala Shaima about what she overheard from Bibi Gulalai and Badriya. To encourage her niece, Shaima tells Rahima more about Shekiba.



Chapters 46 and 47 go back to Shekib. Two days pass without food or water, until the women learn that they are both to be stoned. Shekiba tries to argue but the guard will not listen. She yells at Benafsha, who apologizes for Shekiba's misfortune. She cites love as the reason for her disobedience, and proceeds to recite lyrics from a song Shekiba had never before heard.

The next morning Shekiba overhears pieces of a conversation, and the words she hears indicate that she may not be stoned, and that she may, in fact, be given away in marriage. She doesn't know to whom, but she is happy to have had her life spared.

Benafsha is taken away by two guards to be executed, quietly repeating "Allahu akbar." She is offered mercy if she would reveal the name of the man with whom she had intimate relations, but Benafsha does not reveal his name. She is buried up to her chest and then stoned to death as Shekib and others watch.

In Chapter 47, the title of the chapter changes back to "Shekiba." Shekiba thinks of Benafsha's limp body over and over as she receives one hundred lashings on her back, which she takes silently. She wonders still to whom she will be married, though she mentions what she knows to nobody. Dr. Behrown tends to Shekiba's wounds and the other guards, absent Ghafoor, visit her as she recovers. Tariq feels guilty for what Shekib had to go through, but she is also the one to bring back the news from the palace: Shekiba is to be ready in two days, as that is when she will be given in marriage.

Chapter 48 goes back to present-day Rahima. It is the holiday of Eid and Rahima learns from Jameela that Abdul Khaliq is having Rahima and Badriya go back to Kabul for the parliament session because of a political deal he has with foreigners who want to build a pipe through their province. Rahima and the other wives pay their respects to Bibi Gulalai for the holiday, which is an appropriate gesture in the Afghan culture.

Shahla comes to Rahima's house to visit. Rahima is surprised but so happy to see her sister, who looks well. They reference their mother but don't discuss her. Instead, they discuss their children and compliment each other. Shahla has named her youngest child, a daughter, Parwin. Shahla claims that when she hears the name Parwin, she thinks of light, even though others think of darkness.

In Chapter 49, the author writes again of Shekiba, who is being prepped for her nikkah, though she still doesn't know to whom she will be married. Halima tells Shekiba that intimacy is painful the first time, but that it gets easier. She hopes for a child for Shekiba.

Two days after Tariq brings word that Shekiba is to be married, a soldier comes to retrieve her for the nikkah. Before she leaves the harem, Shekiba curses Ghafoor, blaming Ghafoor for the lashes Shekiba bore as a consequence for knowing about Benafsha and not telling the king.

Shekiba is grateful for the opportunity to marry. She continues to believe it is Amanullah. She is surprised to hear Agha Baraan's name, the man whom Benafsha claimed she



loved. Shekiba hesitates before agreeing to the marriage. Still, she signs the paper, making the marriage official.

Analysis

Rahima's activity in this section goes back and forth between appropriate wife duties and rebellious self-improvement. Rahima's obedience to her mother-in-law upon returning from Kabul early, at Abdul Khaliq's insistence, is an appropriate action for a young wife. Especially as Abdul Khaliq's fourth wife, Rahima is subject to the other wives' as well Abdul Khaliq and his mother's directives. She never complains and she never back-talks, as she knows obedience is the surest way to be left alone in regards to verbal and physical reprimands.

Rahima's rebellious self-improvement pertains to her visits to the resource center. Though the center is meant for women parliament members, Abdul Khaliq would likely not want his wife attending a resource center where there is internet and knowledge that could teach her things he doesn't want her to know. Her participation in the resource center does not come across as intentionally rebellious. Rather, it comes from a place of wanting more knowledge purely because she enjoys learning. The reader can see that in her excitement in learning.

Abdul Khaliq's instruction for Rahima and Badriya to immediately return to the compound after the bomb meant for Zamarud is further evidence of his authority over them, as well as the man's general authority over the woman in the Afghan culture. Badriya and Rahima, as well as their guards, don't even consider refuting Abdul Khaliq's instruction to return home. When he decides something, it is to be as soon as possible or someone will be punished.

The seed for Rahima to escape is likely planted when she overhears Bibi Gulalai talking about Abdul Khaliq wanting a new wife. She knows that as the last wife, she is likely to be the one removed from the house, and it will likely be violent. Khala Shaima is a good encouragement for Rahima, as always. The author continues to foreshadow Khala Shaima's death with her progressive weakness.

Shekiba's story continues to encourage Rahima. In the face of possibly being stoned for a crime that one of the women in the harem committed, Shekiba still holds on to hope that she'll be free. When she overhears that she will be married, a spark of excitement likely goes through her as she hopes that her plan to convince Amanullah - from a distance - to marry her has worked. She takes her lashings silently, which goes along with her character from the rest of the novel. She has always been someone to deal with adversity silently, taking it in until it's over, at which time she still doesn't complain; she only seeks to move on.

When Shekiba learns that her husband is to be Agha Baraan, she knows he was Benafsha's lover, but she is confused as to why he wants to marry her. The author indicates his guilt in the incident with Benafsha, but not the reasoning for his decision to



take Shekiba as his wife. The reader might assume that he feels guilty for having Benafsha stoned and so works to save at least one person involved in the king's punishment for a crime he committed.

Shekiba's curse to Ghafoor is the second curse she spells on someone in the novel; the first was her grandmother when she was given to Azizullah toward the beginning of the novel. Shekiba's use of curses is likely her way to gain at least an emotional upper hand, since she is treated as an inferior individual by almost every person with whom she interacts.

The lyrics Benafsha recites to Shekiba are essential to note, as they pertain to the title of the novel. The lyrics are from a thirteenth century Persian poet and they are talking about love, begging the heart to open. Benafsha is referring to her feelings for Aasif Baraan; their love for one another is the only instance of love in the entire novel. In regards to the lyrics, the author may want the reader to understand that the women in "The Pearl That Broke Its Shell" must be willing to take risks and think about their lives in a different way than other women in their lives. The lyrics may also indicate that the girls in the novel are happy and whole until they are either sold, traded, or gifted, which is when their self-value plummets, as they feel broken and used.

Discussion Question 1

What are three indications that Badriya sees herself as more important than Rahima?

Discussion Question 2

Why might the king have walked away for the execution?

Discussion Question 3

What is significant about Rahima and Jameela's friendship?

Vocabulary

aped, throes, demurely, leers, toddled, atonement, brusquely, reprehensible, salves, divulge, stooge, yammering



Chapters 50 - 59

Summary

Chapters 50 and 51 are about Rahima and Badriya at a parliament session in Kabul. On their way to Kabul, Rahima thinks about her visit with Shahla and how it made her miss home and Parwin. However, Rahima sees that Shahla's mother-in-law seems to be nicer to Shahla and then Bibi Gulalai, which is something that gives Rahima solace. Rahima also thinks about how Shahla named her daughter Parwin, and how bold that is to name someone after a person with a disability. Rahima doesn't know if she would be able to do that.

Thinking about Jahangir, she is glad to have him even though the childbirth nearly killed her. She hopes if she has a second child, it is a girl, and she will be named Shekiba.

Badriya warns Rahima to look out for herself. Rahima is sarcastic in her response and as a result is slapped by Badriya. At the hotel, there is a television in their room that is removed almost immediately upon their arrival. Rahima remembers when she watched television at home once, and how Abdul Khaliq had become very angry and violent.

When Badriya and Rahima arrive to the parliament session, they find out two women have decided to not return on account of the attack on Zamarud. Hamida, Sufia, and Badriya are all afraid, too. Badriya expresses her fear by going directly to the hotel after the sessions. Hamida and Sufia go with Rahima to the resource center where Ms. Franklin continues teaching English and computer skills.

While Rahima is at the center, a woman named Fakhria who works at a woman's shelter in Kabul comes in and asks if she can take classes. Even though the resource center is funded for women in the parliament, Ms. Franklin allows her to participate in classes. Fakhria tells the other girls of a girl at the shelter named Murwarid, who came to the shelter a bruised 15-year-old with just one ear, who didn't want to go back to where she'd come from; she had been married off to a man in his sixties when she was just 8 years old. Rahima can hear Khala Shaima telling her that this girl found her escape, so why hadn't Rahima?

Chapter 51 starts with Rahima reading news stories from the local paper to Badriya. They are interrupted by a knock at the door. Abdul Khaliq called from the compound and asks for Badriya. When Badriya comes back to the room, she tells Rahima that Jahangir is ill and the two women must return home immediately. Maroof brings the car around immediately and the two wives head for home. Badriya is unable to tell Rahima how bad his illness is because she doesn't know, and so Rahima is terrified that the worst has happened and Jahangir has died.



Chapter 52 is about Shekiba. She is brought to Agha (Aasif) Baraan's home where she meets his first wife, Gulnaz. Agha Baraan is quiet on the way home as well as when they arrive at his house. Shekiba is terrified of being a wife.

When Shekiba and Gulnaz meet, Gulnaz asks to see Shekiba's face. Shekiba looks at Gulnaz straight in the eye. Gulnaz only winces and then moves on. She shows Shekiba around the house, which Shekiba observes is similar to Bobo Shahgul's. Gulnaz tells Shekiba not to call her Khanum Gulnaz, since that is something an inferior would say to a superior. Gulnaz also tells Shekiba to not expect to change anything just because Agha Baraan wants Shekiba in the house.

Shekiba asks Gulnaz why she was brought to be Agha Baraan's wife, but Gulnaz doesn't answer her. Shekiba feels out of place, especially having to be a woman again and because she doesn't know why Agha Baraan brought her to be his second wife. Eventually she realizes she was brought to the house because he believes she can bear children and that she will bear males.

Shekiba and Gulnaz do not argue but they are not immediately friends. Gulnaz discusses only household chores with Shekiba, and Shekiba eats separately from Gulnaz and Aasif. Four nights pass before Aasif comes to Shekiba's room. He is clearly uncomfortable, and states how he regrets what happened to Benafsha. He tells Shekiba that Gulnaz is not happy, but that things will get better.

Chapters 53 and 54 pertain to Rahima and the situation with Jahangir. Upon arriving home, Rahima finds out from Jameela that Jahangir has in fact died. Rahima cries for her son as Bibi Gulalai blames Rahima, and Abdul Khaliq yells for someone to bring him his prayer cap. Rahima and Abdul Khaliq share a brief intimate moment as they share the grief for their son.

In Chapter 54, mourning begins for Jahangir. Rahima has trouble keeping herself together. She is led to Jameela's room to see Jahangir, as she hopes that whispering his name will wake him up. Bibi Gulalai also wails, asking Allah why her grandson was taken from her and that he was too young to be taken.

The appropriate mourning rituals are performed, prayers are said, and people come to pay their respects. Shaima and Shahla both come to visit Rahima during the mourning period. Abdul Khaliq curses Rahima's father for not coming to visit. During her visit, Shaima tells Rahima and Shahla that their parents have gotten worse, unable to be up and about in the house. Rohila and Sitara both wanted to visit Rahima, but their grandmother wouldn't let them go without their mother.

In the 40-day mourning period that follows, Jameela looks after Rahima. Abdul Khaliq lets her be for the most part, dealing with his grief in his own quiet way. Four weeks after Jahangir's death Rahima asks Jameela what happened with Jahangir, how he fell ill and what happened after. Jameela tells Rahima of the fever he contracted and how his body wouldn't cool, then how his stomach started hurting, covered with red spots on the fourth day of the illness. By the end of that day, Jahangir had become delirious.



Abdul Khaliq came and cradled Jahangir in his arms until the driver and guards arrived to take Jahangir to the hospital. The next morning, Abdul Khaliq comes back to the compound without Jahangir, crying, since his son has died. The doctor thinks Jahangir had developed a stomach infection.

Rahima wants to know why Jahangir wasn't taken to the doctor sooner. Jameela is hesitant to answer, but when she does, she tells Rahima that Abdul Khaliq wanted to take Jahangir to the doctor but Bibi Gulalai stopped him, thinking she could heal him with tea and soup she was making. The information freshens Rahima's hatred for Bibi Gulalai, and her own guilt is amplified when Jameela confirms that Jahangir had called for his mommy when he was ill.

Chapters 55 and 56 take place with Shekiba. She keeps up her duties at the house, cooking and cleaning. Her interactions with Aasif are still brief, but polite. She learns by listening to a conversation between Gulnaz and Aasif that there is to be a wedding in three months' time at the palace; the king's son is marrying.

Aasif and Gulnaz talk about how the king is not entirely happy with whom Amanullah has chosen for a wife, a woman named Tarzi who thinks Habibullah has not done enough to bring Afghanistan to modern times. Aasif is sure that Amanullah will eventually be king, and that he will listen to Tarzi's ideas for what will be good for the country. In their conversation, Aasif makes it clear that he will be staying away from the palace.

After Aasif and Gulnaz are out of the kitchen is when Shekiba fixes herself some food. That night, Aasif enters her room, reluctant but certain that she needs to fulfill her duties as a wife. She is panicked and clenches her teeth as Aasif consummates their marriage.

In Chapter 56, Shekiba is now relieved that their first intimate encounter is over and she knows what she can expect from here on out. He doesn't go to her room often, and when he does, it is a brief visit. When she has her monthly bleeding is the only time they are not intimate. After five months, Aasif is frustrated and angry that Shekiba is still not pregnant. However, unlike the other men she has known, Aasif doesn't hit her, he only breaks something in the other room.

Gulnaz enters Shekiba's room and the two share a positive interaction as Gulnaz shares how she has been with Aasif for a year and still hasn't gotten pregnant. Gulnaz has tried every tea and herb available and still has not gotten pregnant. She also asks Shekiba about being a guard for the harem and if she liked her job there. The two women also discuss Aasif's relationship with Benafsha, and how Gulnaz found out because Aasif's sister told her. Shekiba knows that it is because of his guilt over Benafsha that saved her life, and for that, she is grateful.

Chapter 57 is about Rahima, who is still in mourning, though she is being told by her mother-in-law that she is to stop. Khala Shaima visits and the two talk vaguely about Kabul and Rahima's experience in the city. Rahima alludes to the fact that she may want to try and escape, since she believes her husband is going to kill her anyway.



Chapters 58 and 59 continue with Shekiba's experience at Aasif's house. She and Gulnaz are getting along better as they bond over Aasif's anger over neither one of them bearing a child. Eventually, Gulnaz does become pregnant. They do not discuss the condition with Aasif, but once he realizes what is going on, he is satisfied until the baby is born and it is female.

Shekiba cares for Gulnaz in her post-partum state; she is in pain and Shekiba stays with her while she recovers. Aasif is angry that Gulnaz has borne him a daughter, which Gulnaz names Shabnam, after her mother. Shekiba helps with Shabnam, taking turns with Gulnaz in feeding and bathing her.

Aasif's mother visits and criticizes Gulnaz and Shekiba through a compliment. She also thanks Shekiba for the rosewater cookies Shekiba sent over. After her visit, Shekiba watches three caged canaries in her living room.

In Chapter 59, Shekiba is pregnant. She has observed Aasif enjoying Shabnam when he thinks nobody else is looking, and so she hopes to have a son. Aasif notices that Shekiba is pregnant when she is six months along and he is hopeful that it will be a boy. Shekiba worries that Gulnaz will be envious of her pregnancy, but the two women carry on as before.

Three months later, Shekiba gives birth to a son. Aasif names him Shah, meaning "a king among men." He believes his son will be a better king than the current one, which is still Habibullah.

Shortly after Shah is born, a cholera wave goes through Afghanistan. Because of what happened to her family, Shekiba is extremely fearful of the illness and takes extreme precaution in protecting her son, herself, and the household. Shekiba is so extreme that she offends Gulnaz, since she won't let Shah out of her sight, even to be watched by Gulnaz.

The chapter concludes with one of the three canaries having died in the cage.

Analysis

As Rahima continues accompanying Badriya to Kabul, the reader can see an increased confidence in Rahima. She is tiring of life as it stands, which the reader can see in her sarcastic response to Badriya. Rahima is just so full of anger, frustration, and helplessness at how she is being forced to live her life. At this point, Rahima does not seem to think that the experience of going to Kabul and attending the resource center outweighs how she's forced to live back at Abdul Khaliq's compound.

Rahima's feelings likely increase once Jahangir dies. Her son gave her purpose, a reason to continue trying and doing the best she could. Without him, Rahima's inspiration lies with Shekiba. However, Shekiba's story is finite, in the past, and different from hers. She can only hope to gather strength from what Shekiba overcame.



Rahima's mourning period shows the reader that even though Rahima questions traditional Afghanistan culture, she abides by it. Whether it's out of obligation to her husband and mother-in-law, second-nature, or genuine desire to follow her culture's ways, Rahima goes through the appropriate motions for 40 days of mourning. However, as can be typical with a tragic event, Rahima questions everything she knows to be right, e.g. wondering why the mourning period is 40 days and if she's really supposed to feel different on the 41st day. Her attitude lets the reader know that despite her mourning and her sense of powerlessness at the hands of Abdul Khaliq, Rahima has not given up her free spirit and her desire for things to be different than they've always been.

Badriya's attitude toward Rahima when she receives the news about Jahangir should be noted by the reader, as it is counter to her usual demeanor toward Rahima. Her swiftness suggests she understands why Rahima would want to get back to the compound as soon as possible, and Badriya's semi-compassion suggests the understanding and empathy of a mother. Though the women of the compound are generally competitive, each knows what it's like to be a mother, and none want to imagine what it's like to lose a child.

Bibi Gulalai's role in Jahangir's death is also to be noted. She likely feels a great amount of guilt, since she is the one who kept Jahangir from going to the hospital. However, Bibi Gulalai will not openly express that guilt, nor will she give even one indication that she feels such; as matriarch of the compound, Bibi Gulalai's pride is too great to show guilt, an emotion she likely considers a weakness. In that same situation, Jameela's hesitation in telling Rahima that Bibi Gulalai wouldn't take Jahangir to the doctor's lets the reader know that Jameela doesn't want to make the situation worse. She tries to tell Rahima to just accept that he's dead and begin/feel through the mourning process, rather than trying to fill in every detail. Rahima doesn't take Jameela's advice, but the fact that Jameela tries says that she cares for Rahima and their friendship.

Shekiba's story during this time is somewhat opposite to Rahima's, as Shekiba's life is about to even out for good. She is married now and it is understood that she and Gulnaz will be Aasif Baraan's only wives for the rest of their lives. Though she is terrified of consummating her marriage to Aasif, his obvious hesitation and despair may make Shekiba feel a little better, to know that she is not being taken as violently and as selfishly as other women she's known, such as the women of the harem.

Shekiba's relationship with Gulnaz should be noted, as well. Since her siblings, Shekiba's only ever had a friendship with Ghafoor. However, Shekiba couldn't fully trust Ghafoor, and so she is hesitant in fully trusting Gulnaz. Their friendship goes back and forth as Aasif's attitude toward the two women ebbs and flows, but in the end, the two are amicable with one another. Gulnaz is not a competitive woman, and neither is Shekiba. Even after Gulnaz gives birth to a girl and Shekiba to a boy, making Shekiba more valuable to Aasif from a cultural standpoint, the two eventually live peaceably with one another and care for one another when each needs it. Gulnaz's attitude provides the kind of co-existence Shekiba thrives under; she's not being scrutinized or criticized by someone in her home, and where one lacks the other picks up.



The lack of total healing from Shekiba's past is evident in her reaction to the cholera wave when Shah is a baby. The fact that she won't let him out of her sight and keeps everything exceedingly clean lets the reader know that not only was she permanently scarred emotionally by what happened to her family, but she also is determined to prevent the same situation from happening to her son. Though Shekiba cares for Gulnaz and Aasif as members of her same household, her son is her priority.

Discussion Question 1

Does Rahima seem to agree with Khala Shaima's reasoning of why Abdul Khaliq does not want her to watch television? How can you tell?

Discussion Question 2

How and why is Rahima's mourning for Jahangir bothersome to her mother-in-law?

Discussion Question 3

What are some of the potential consequences if what Aasif says about Amanullah eventually being king is true?

Vocabulary

endearments, tufted, serum, wanly, intuited, repugnance, syncopated, crestfallen, talisman



Chapters 60 - 69

Summary

In Chapter 60, it is February 1919. Shabnam and Shah get along very well, and Gulnaz and Shekiba are back to working alongside each other in a more cooled manner. King Habibullah is killed while hunting with his brothers. The king's brother is appointed to the throne, but Amanullah quickly reverses that decision and takes the throne himself. The people in the city of Kabul are nervous for the state of their country, but Shekiba believes in Amanullah's ability to be king.

Aasif works himself close to Amanullah again after having distanced himself from the palace after the Benafsha incident.

As the man in charge, Amanullah sends Afghan military to India in order for Afghanistan to claim its independence from England. Three months after the fighting begins, Aasif returns home from the palace with such news.

Chapters 61-63 are about Rahima. The official mourning period for Jahangir ends at 40 days, but Rahima remains sad. She questions the Afghan tradition of mourning for 40 days and wonders if she's supposed to feel different on the 41st day than she does on the 40th. When the mourning period is over, Abdul Khaliq calls Rahima to his room for the first time since before Jahangir died. She is reluctant, so he beats her. Along with beating Rahima, Abdul Khaliq yells at her, mocking her for being a bacha posh. When she leaves his room, she knows he has beat her hard enough that she has lost the child inside of her.

In Chapter 62, Rahima has to decide if she is going to the parliament session with Badriya. In making her decision, Rahima remembers going to Jahangir's grave with her mother-in-law. Rahima was not allowed to mourn loudly, according to her mother-in-law, so as to not shame the family. Bibi Gulalai, however, had wailed and cried loudly about her grandson dying so young.

At the cemetery, Rahima learns that Bibi Gulalai didn't get along with her mother-in-law, just as she and Rahima don't get along. The irony, however, is not outwardly observed by Bibi Gulalai. Instead, Bibi Gulalai continues bossing Rahima around.

In Chapter 63, Rahima goes to parliament with Badriya, though she has trouble concentrating. On this trip, Badriya is more relaxed with Rahima than she has been in the past, which allows her to spend more time with Sufia and Hamida at the resource center.

Badriya tells Rahima more and more about their husband's new prospective wife, a girl named Khatol. Rahima asks what will happen to the rest of the wives, since having a fifth wife would go against the hadith, but Badriya insists that nothing will happen to any of the other wives.



Rahima continues going to the resource center, and Badriya continues staying in their hotel room when parliament is not in session; though she claims to be visiting her cousin. Rahima thinks she's too afraid of Abdul Khaliq to actually go anywhere. At the resource center, Rahima practices typing, as she types letters to her sister that she will never send.

Rahima thinks of Khala Shaima, who continues to get older. Rahima remembers how Shaima told Rahima and the girls of Bibi Shekiba, and how the girls should take strength from Shekiba's story. Rahima is proud to be a descendant of Shekiba, though she has a hard time telling that to Khala Shaima.

One evening while still in Kabul, Rahima wants to go for a walk since Badriya has been complaining the entire day. She knows she shouldn't go to the street unchaperoned, so she goes to tell Hassan and Maroof that she'd like to go for a walk. As she approaches, she hears them talking about how Maroof told Abdul Khaliq that Rahima has been attending the resource center after parliament sessions. Neither of the men are happy Abdul Khaliq knows, but Maroof knows he had to tell his boss or risk a harsh punishment for being untruthful. She also hears them talking about when Abdul Khaliq eyed her as a bacha posh, which the reader learns is when Abdul Khaliq began to desire her as his wife.

Rahima knows she isn't safe. She thinks of the women in the shelter and she thinks of the fact that Abdul Khaliq wants a fifth wife but can truly only have four. She counts three days until they're due to return home.

Chapters 64 and 65 are Shekiba's conclusion. Shabnam and Shah are close to one another like true siblings, not knowing about the resentment between their mothers. In the years to come, neither Shekiba nor Gulnaz have any more children. Despite pressure from his mother, Aasif doesn't take another wife, as he believes his home isn't big enough and he could not afford it.

A co-worker of Aasif's stops by his house with his wife, Mahnaz, who is from the same village as Shekiba. The reader finds out that Mahnaz knows most of Shekiba's family, especially the uncles. Shekiba wonders how her family is doing, and Mahnaz confirms they are not doing well; Shekiba's grandmother has passed away and the land - Shekiba's father's land - is not yielding good crops.

Mahnaz invites Shekiba to hear the queen speak, and Aasif consents to her going. At the event, in Chapter 65, Mahnaz and Shekiba stand in a large crowd. Shekiba brings Shah, though he is uninterested in the queen's speech. Mahanz confides in Shekiba that she and her husband have gone through difficult times, since her husband did not agree with what the government officials were doing.

When Queen Soraya joins Amanullah on the podium, Shekiba is impressed with how she looks and with how she carries herself. She sees the queen as having deserved her role as Amanullah's wife. In her speech, the queen's main point is change. As such, she removes her chador, her head scarf, and declares that head scarves for women are no



longer mandatory in Kabul. Queen Soraya talks about how women need to be just as much a part of the government as men, and that women should be able to acquire as much knowledge as men.

During the queen's speech, Shekiba reflects on her life and how happy she is to have taken risks in her life. She is thankful to be where she's at, and is hopeful for the future, not only for herself, but also for her child.

Chapters 66-69 are Rahima's conclusion. In Chapter 66, she puts extra effort into making sure Badriya, Hassan, and Maroof have no idea that she overheard Hassan and Maroof talking about what Maroof told Abdul Khaliq about Rahima attending the resource center. She continues with business-as-usual, which includes telling Sufia and Hamid her story - what her family used to be like, how she was married off, what Abdul Khaliq is like, and Jahangir. She also tells the women of the conversations she's recently overheard, about Abdul Khaliq wanting to take another wife but stay within the laws of the hadith, as well as Maroof telling him about her going to the center.

Chapter 67 is one of the last days before Badriya and Rahima are set to return home from Kabul. Badriya goes by herself to the parliament session as Rahima feigns a stomach illness in order to stay behind. When she is sure that Badriya is gone for good, Rahima cuts her hair with scissors she finds in Badriya's bag. She puts on boys' clothes she stole from Hashmat. As silently as she can, she leaves her hotel room and goes toward the exit. Hassan sees her, but thinks she's a boy and so doesn't stop her from leaving. As Rahim, Rahima walks through the lobby then out to the streets, hoping she won't be caught.

In Chapter 68, Rahima - as Rahim - makes her way through the city and finds the correct bus to a town named Wazir Akbar Khan. She gets on the bus behind two men. Rahima waits until she sees what she was told to look for, which is a road lined with shops, and specifically, a beauty shop between an electronics store and a food vendor. When she sees the right road, she gets off the bus.

Rahima arrives in Wazir Akbar Khan and finds the cafe she was told to find. Inside, Ms. Franklin is waiting for her. Rahima stays at a shelter Ms. Franklin found that should prove difficult for Abdul Khaliq to find her.

In the final chapter, Rahima sees Hamida and Sufia, who are both excited to see her free. This is the only time Rahima sees Hamida and Sufia, so that there could be no trail from Rahima to Abdul Khaliq. At the shelter, Rahima finds hope for a different future. She writes to her Khala Shaima, telling her of the blue skies and the birds. Though Rahima cannot know immediately that Shaima has received the letter, she learns years later that Shaima did receive the letter, as it was found in her hands as Shaima was on her deathbed. The letter is signed "Bibi Shekiba."



Analysis

The last section of the novel is the closing of Shekiba and Rahima's stories, though it can be said that the conclusion of the novel is where each woman's life truly begins.

For Shekiba, she has settled in to her role as Aasif's wife, Shah's mother, and Gulnaz's housemate. She is peaceful about her life and does not regret the risks she's taken. Her story remains an inspiration for Rahima since Shekiba is a woman who took risks, lived in various roles as a young girl, and ultimately came into a life circumstance where she is safe and can be genuinely happy. Though it is not the life she imagined for herself, Shekiba knows it's better than almost anything she could have. Her attraction to Amanullah hasn't gone away, but it is typical for a vulnerable girl to find a powerful man attractive. However, the fact that Shekiba doesn't lament over not being able to marry him lets the reader know that Shekiba has accepted her fate.

When Amanullah's wife makes her speech about change, the reader can see how much her action of removing the chador impacts the women in the audience. The reader may also note that even though the queen sets a significant change for the women of Afghanistan in Shekiba's time, women's position in society does not change much as compared to Rahima's time. Social change is not easy, and the cultural expectations in Afghanistan are strong and deeply rooted.

Rahima's conclusion is similar to Shekiba's in that she finds peace within herself, though Rahima's involves an escape whereas Shekiba's involved a staying-put. Rahima's escape is one that takes a great amount of courage and careful planning. She may not have had the courage without losing Jahangir, since with a son she would have been permanently tied to Abdu Khaliq and the compound. Rahima likely sees her escape as partially for Jahangir, since ultimately she would have preferred her son to grow up in a different environment than on a warlord's compound.

Rahima's escape should be noted for its perceived ease, as well. Rahima's choices worked out because everything fell into place: Hasaan was faced the opposite way from her hotel room door, she convinced Badriya of her stomach ache, she was late but the bus was still running to the agreed-upon stop a good distance from the hotel, and even though she was late Ms. Franklin was waiting at the cafe. If just one thing had been wrong about her escape, it would not have been possible, and she very likely would have died at Abdul Khaliq's hands.

Rahima has been inspired by Bibi Shekiba's story all throughout the novel, which is evident in how intently she listens to Khala Shaima's stories and how she thinks about Shekiba during some of her precarious circumstances. Yet, Shekiba's influence is never so pronounced as when the reader finds out that Rahima's letter to Khala Shaima was signed "Bibi Shekiba." Not only is it a guise so that Rahima cannot be traced, but it is a feeling of connection for Rahima with her great-great-grandmother. The letter may also be seen as an indication of Khala Shaima's influence on Rahima, since it is to her Rahima writes instead of to her own parents.



Neither Rahima nor Shekiba relied on their families of origin to carry them through their difficult times, but both women's families of origin provided at least an initial strength that helped Rahima and Shekiba develop their character to the point of overcoming great hardships and sustaining a determination through their respective situations.

It may be noted that the author's conclusion lets the reader know that the author sees change as possible not just for the women of Afghanistan, but for the culture in general. Every part of Rahima's escape, as well as Shekiba's attitude of being thankful for her own daring character, lets the reader know that the author has faith in the women of Afghanistan, that they might be able to live the life they want to live despite prevalent oppressive attitudes throughout various facets of the nation.

Discussion Question 1

Why might the king's death have rejuvenated Aasif's caring for legal decisions made by the palace?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Rahima so motivated to go to Kabul, even though she continues to mourn Jahangir and deal with the aftermath of Abdul Khaliq's beating?

Discussion Question 3

What part of Shekiba's character speaks to the fact that she is moved by Amanullah's presence?

Vocabulary

rancor, embittered, consternation, flaunting, vitriol, dignitaries



Characters

Rahima

Rahima is one of the two main characters. Her story takes place in present day, and as her story unfolds, she draws strength from Shekiba's journey, which happened about a century prior. Rahima is one of five sisters, though she does not seem competitive, only jovial, in their presence. Rahima loves to learn and is most upset out of her sisters when her father won't let them go to school. Thus, she is most excited when Khala Shaima convinces Rahima's parents to make her a bacha posh, or a girl dressed as a boy.

As a bacha posh, Rahima feels free, something she never feels as a girl. It is her experience as a bacha posh that encourages her escape from her warlord husband many years later. It is almost as if being a bacha posh has brought out the truth in her character, that of a helper, someone who likes to complete useful tasks, a life-long learner, and an independent person. Her character also comes through when she accompanies Badriya to Kabul; at the heart of it, Rahima is a free spirit who desires to have different experiences and not be stuck with a man who has multiple wives whom he beats.

Rahima's marriage to the warlord Abdul Khaliq frightens and angers her, though she does her best to follow her mother's advice and does every single thing Abdul Khaliq and his mother, Bibi Gulalai, tell her to do. She is obedient until she feels passionately about something that she feels as though she can't help herself but to do what is best for her.

Shekiba

Shekiba is one of the two main characters. Her story takes place in the late 1890s through the early 1900s. Her life starts with a happy childhood; even though half of her face melted from an accident with hot oil when she was just two years old, she and her brothers, sisters, and parents were happy on their land. They did not bother often with Shekiba's paternal side of the family, though the family lived on the same compound, just one lot over.

At a young age, however, Shekiba loses her entire family, first her siblings and mother to a wave of cholera, and then her father to old age and likely loneliness and despair. Shekiba continues tending the land, acting more like a man than a woman, since she wants to stay where her family lived. Shekiba has a great amount of strength, as she lived alone, tended her family's land alone, risked her life to claim her land, dealt with physical violence from her family, was traded twice as though she had little value, and took one hundred lashes as a punishment for not telling the king about Benafsha's lover. Through all of her trials, Shekiba doesn't complain; she only works to make things better.



Shekiba's range of emotions have likely gone from gladness while her family was alive, to despair and loneliness when her family all passed away. She has also likely dealt with a great amount of fear, since she had no idea her fate with Azizullah or with the king. Her experiences and the emotions she's felt through them lead the reader to understand her inner strength, and why the only thing she desires is to live a simple life, one free from violence and fear.

Khala Shaima

Khala Shaima is Rahima's aunt. Shaima likely has felt much shame and loneliness in her life, since she is disabled and single, two dishonorable conditions for an Afghan woman. However, she seems to have used her conditions to forge a personality that is distinct and quite different than almost every other Afghan woman in the novel. She is blunt, unafraid of consequences from her brazen statements, and she is the one who tells Rahima the story of their Bibi Shekiba. Shaima despises Rahima's father and is honest about that with her sister, Rahima's mother.

Shaima believes in education for girls, knowing that even though it may do them no good presently, it will be useful later in life. Rahima finds that she is right, since it is her love for learning that puts Rahima in the resource center, and it is the resource center staff that helps Rahima escape.

Bobo Shahgul

Bobo Shahgul is Shekiba's grandmother. Though she is only in a small portion of the novel, Bobo Shahgul is one of Shekiba's greatest influences in Shekiba taking a risk to escape her family, as Bobo Shahgul is mean and treats Shekiba as though she has absolutely no value. It is Bobo Shahgul's verbal and physical attacks that make Shekiba not dread leaving when she is given to Azizullah as a debt payment. In fact, when Shekiba is given to Azizullah, she sees it as a possible relief from Bobo Shahgul. When Shekiba's grandmother dies, Shekiba does not express any sadness.

Abdul Khaliq

Abdul Khaliq is a warlord who uses power and force - both physical and political - to get what he wants. With his wives, he uses his position as husband as well as physical violence in order to get them to do as he pleases. He expects sons from them, and he expects immediate obedience. For his political interests, Abdul Khaliq has a friend in the parliament after whom Badriya is ordered to copycat her vote.

Abdul Khaliq is shown as a violent man, especially toward his wives. He is also shown as a religious man, as he desires to follow religious traditions. For example, the hadith, a religious text claiming the words of a prophet for the religion of Islam, says that a man must take no more than four wives. So, even though Abdul Khaliq treats his wives with little respect and does what he wants as a warlord, he will not take a fifth wife until one



of his current wives is gotten rid of and he follows the culturally-appropriate Muslim mourning period of 40 days when his son Jahangir dies.

Bibi Gulalai

Bibi Gulalai is Rahima's mother-in-law. She is a proud woman who thinks little of Rahima, and in fact she seems to think less of Rahima than any of Abdul Khaliq's other wives. Bibi Gulalai does not hesitate to verbally and physically reprimand Rahima if she feels Rahima is being disrespectful, slow, or stupid. She is involved in her son's business as much as she can be.

Bibi Gulalai is quite concerned with appearances and with propriety. For example, when visitors accompany her to Rahima's house, Bibi Gulalai is sure to point out what needs to be brought out for guests, if Rahima doesn't do it quickly enough.

When Jahangir dies, Bibi Gulalai's character is revealed even more so when she reprimands Rahima for mourning too loudly, even though Bibi Gulalai mourns just as loudly. It is also revealed that she had a tumultuous relationship with her own mother-in-law, though she does not seem to see the irony of the situation of her not getting along with her daughter-in-law.

King Habibullah

King Habibullah is the King of Afghanistan during Shekiba's story. He is a man who has multiple wives as well as a harem of more than twenty women. He is a powerful man who gets what he wants, whether by force or by instilling fear in others via demands or his mere presence. He has brothers who want to take over the throne, but it is his son Amanullah whom he wants to take the throne, and it is Amanullah who eventually does.

King Habibullah's character is evident in the fact that he has multiple wives and a harem; he feels entitled to the women and he enjoys being in a position of power. His character is also revealed when Benafsha is sentenced to be stoned to death but Shekiba is spared; both are acts of honor. Benafsha is stoned to death because that is the traditional sentence, and Shekiba is spared because she has been requested as a wife by a man whom Habibullah respects; following the honor code is typically quite important to Afghan men, and King Habibullah seems to be no different.

His significance in the story lies in that he is crucial to Shekiba's fate, since it is him who takes her in as a guard and him who decides to spare her life for marriage to Agha Baraan. King Habibullah changes Shekiba's naseeb.



Benafsha

Benafsha is one of the women of the king's harem. She is unkind, haughty, and acts as though she is entitled to more respect than the other women. Benafsha has an affair with Agha Baraan, and when the king finds out, sentences her to be stoned to death.

While imprisoned, Benafsha speaks of love, which is something the other women in the novel do not do. She also refuses to give up Agha Baraan's name when offered mercy if she does so. These two actions speak of a courage and a hope for something different, which are character traits that Benafsha does not openly exude.

It is because of Benafsha that Shekiba's fate changes. Though it is uncertain as to what might have become of her had she never gotten in trouble, it is because of Benafsha's affair and Ghafoor's tattling to the king that Shekiba is to be stoned (before Agha Baraan saves her by requesting she become his wife).

Ghafoor

Ghafoor is the principal guard at the king's harem. She acclimates Shekiba once Shekiba arrives from Azizullah's home. She encourages Shekiba and seems to be a fast friend, though there is something about her Shekiba just doesn't trust.

Ghafoor is a character who enjoys her position of power, as well as exerting it over others. She thrives in delegating tasks or in having something important to do for the king. Her disinterest in Shekiba's fate may be either a disinterest in other people in general, or a general kindness that she seems to display from time to time.

Badriya

Badriya is Abdul Khaliq's first wife, and she likes for everyone to know it. Badriya feels privileged as Abdul Khaliq's first wife, because she is the first one he picked. She has always been the one with whom Abdul Khaliq discussed political and business matters, and for that she carries herself with a haughtiness not present with the other wives.

Badriya demands a certain level of respect from the other wives. She is also jealous, as Abdul Khaliq comes to her less and less the older she gets. Many of Badriya's actions are out of pride; she wants everyone to know how important she is, even though she cannot read or write and therefore needs Rahima to help her at the parliament sessions.

The reader might note that Badriya does not accompany Rahima to the resource center in Kabul, but she doesn't report Rahima's behavior to Abdul Khaliq, either. Whether it's because she doesn't care, she wants Rahima to keep learning so she can help Badriya at parliament, or she feels a certain loyalty to another woman in a position similar to hers, is unclear. Either way, Badriya spares Rahima Abdul Khaliq's wrath by keeping that information to herself.



Ms. Franklin

Ms. Franklin is an essential character in the novel, though she is only present in the last third of the novel. She is the teacher at the resource center in Kabul where Rahima learns how to use a computer and how to type a letter. Though the reader does not read of how the plan is formulated, it is through Ms. Franklin that Rahima is able to escape Abdul Khaliq, which is an action that changes the entire course of Rahima's life. Without Ms. Franklin, Rahima's escape would have been much harder, maybe even impossible.

Agha (Aasif) Baraan

Agha (Aasif) Baraan is the man with whom Benafsha has an affair. He is also friend and layman counselor to King Habibullah's son, Amanullah. He keeps his distance from the palace after Benafsha is stoned to death, but once Amanullah takes the throne, Aasif works his way back in.

Aasif is different than many of the other men in the novel. He is somewhat violent when he is angry, but never with his wives or children, only with material objects he can break. This may be because Aasif is never in a strong position of power, so he may not feel the need to overly exert his power over the people in his life. He is also different in that he cherishes his daughter, Shabnam, borne to him by Gulnaz. Though he keeps this a secret, the affection is present.

Jameela

Jameela is one of Abdul Khaliq's wives, and she is Rahima's favorite. Jameela is genuine, kind, helpful, and honest. Her character speaks of no jealousy whatsoever, and she seems to only wish for friends at the compound rather than enemies. Jameela is Rahima's closest confidant at the compound, and the one who watches over Jahangir while Rahima is in Kabul. It is Jameela who cares for Rahima after Jahangir dies. The other wives seem to leave her alone, and she, them.

Gulnaz

Gulnaz is Agha Baraan, or Aasif Baraan's first wife. She has been married to Aasif for one year and has yet to bear him a son, thus she is a great disappointment to Aasif and to his mother. When Shekiba arrives at the house as Aasif's second wife, Gulnaz is standoffish at first, but warms once the women can commiserate over Aasif's anger at neither one of them bearing any children.

Gulnaz has a tendency to be jealous until she thinks she has gained, or regained, the upper hand. The reader can see this in her attitude toward Shekiba, how it goes back and forth between aloof and friend-like. The reader can also see that Gulnaz enjoys



being a wife, and is appreciative of her husband's demeanor, though loud when he's angry, Aasif is never physical with either Gulnaz or Shekiba.

Jahangir

Jahangir is Rahima's son. Though he doesn't play a large part in the novel, he should be noted by the reader, as Rahima experiences significant character changes due to Jahangir. It is after Jahangir is born that Rahima seems to find more purpose in her existence. She and her son are very close, and though she does not care for her husband and the father of her son, she is grateful to have him. He is a typical child, laughing a lot and loving his mother.

Jahangir changes Rahima again when he falls ill and dies while Rahima is in Kabul for parliament session. His death is the catalyst for Rahima working harder than ever to find an escape from Abdul Khaliq.



Symbols and Symbolism

Khala Shaima's proverbs

Khala Shaima speaks in proverbs, which may be a way for her to show her wisdom. Khala Shaima is not valued or respected by her extended family nor by the town. However, she has strong opinions, especially regarding what women should and shouldn't be allowed to do. Her speaking in proverbs may be a way for her to show that even though she is not valued or respected, she can contribute worthwhile points to a conversation and to a situation.

Shekiba's smile

Shekiba's smile comes out after she is given to Azizullah. She has toiled for many months by herself, then under the harsh watch of her extended family. Therefore, to smile is to show some hope for the future. Shekiba's smile, though only half of a whole smile since half of her face is melted, signifies hope and a will to live that may be surprising to the reader, given how she is treated by others.

Shekiba's land deed

The deed to Shekiba's family's land is an important object in Shekiba's story. For one, its presence and the fact that it's hidden in the Qur'an tells the reader – and Shekiba – that Shekiba's father wanted any remaining family, of his wife and children, to own the land, since he tells Shekiba that all the answers can be found in the Qur'an. Second, the land deed gives Shekiba hope, albeit for a short amount of time until it is ripped up by the village hakim, or leadership. Third, the fact that the deed is ripped up is a way for the hakim to show that women, while possibly legally entitled to their family's land if left it by the original owner, don't actually have any power in terms of land-holding capabilities.

Shekiba and Rahima's bacha posh clothing

The boys' clothing worn by Shekiba and Rahima, as Shekib and Rahim respectively, symbolizes freedom to both girls. In their pants and tunics, Shekib and Rahima feel free to act on the wild spirits they feel must be contained as girls.

Chador/burqa

The chador, as well as the burqa, is worn by various women throughout the novel. Each are meant to cover women's bodies, the burqa more than the chador. The purpose of these garments is propriety, as it is considered indecent in Afghan culture for women to



show too much of their bodies or shapes. The garments are also an outer expression of the limitations women have in Afghanistan.

Bombing at parliament

The bombing outside the parliament building that was meant for Zamarud, is also likely a message for all women who want to get involved in politics. The message in the bombing may be that while women are legally required to be in parliament, that does not mean their views are valued. By sending an explosive to an outspoken woman, the senders want women to know that they are not valued in government and will be punished if they see fit to involve themselves too much.

Song lyrics

The song lyrics on page 305 relate to pearl whose shell gets broken, which relates to the title of the novel. A pearl is a beautiful, shiny gem. The females in this novel are happy, whole girls until they are either sold, traded, or gifted, which is when their self-value plummets. Badriya is reciting the song lyrics when she is to be stoned to death after having a secret affair. The reader may connect the girls losing their self-worth, as well as anything that will protect them, with being sold, traded, or gifted. And as the girls lose their self-worth, they no longer feel whole or beautiful or worthy, only used and dispensable.

Three birds

Three birds are present throughout the novel. First, when Parwin draws three birds and, when describing them, talks about them flying away one by one. Three birds are also present in Shekiba's house, where there are three caged canaries. The canaries retreat when Shekiba puts her hand in the cage, and one ends up dying. The birds are likely symbolic of Parwin, Shahla, and Rahima, three of the five sisters who are married off at the same time to the same family. As with one of the birds, one of the sisters dies, too.

Rahima's dream

In Chapter 18, Rahima has a dream that Abdul Khaliq comes for her and is forceful with her, pulling her by the arm and laughing about it, as her family watches her but does nothing to help her. The dream is a symbol of her powerlessness in having to be married off to Abdul Khaliq. The dream also indicates her fear and sheer terror at being married off.



Shekib considering Ghafoor a viper

A viper is known as a venomous snake. For Shekiba to compare Ghafoor to a viper by calling her one, rather than assimilating her to one, is Shekiba's way of saying that Ghafoor is someone who is willing to hurt others, poison them even, if it means she gets her way.



Settings

Kabul, Afghanistan

The whole of the novel takes place in Afghanistan, but Kabul is one of the main settings within the country. Kabul is much different than both Shekiba and Rahima's villages; it is busier, has more shops, more people, and is a means of escape for both girls.

Kabul is the location of Arg, the palace where Shekiba is a guard for the king's harem. She does not see much of Kabul, but she sees enough to be excited when she sees how different it is than her village.

Kabul is also where Badriya and Rahima go to parliament sessions, and thus it is home to the resource center that is paramount to Rahima's escape from Abdul Khaliq. To Rahima, Kabul is an exciting, bustling place full of possibilities.

Rahima's house and village

Rahima's village is not named, but it is an important setting. Not only is Rahima's family home there, but it is when Rahima goes into town that Abdul Khaliq first sees and eyes her to be one of his wives. Her village is small and rural, with typical markets such as grocery and shoe repair.

Rahima's family's home is small, with only two rooms aside from the living room and kitchen. All five sisters share one room, and the mother and father share the other room.

Arg-e-shahi

Arg is in Kabul, but much of the novel takes place on the palace grounds, and therefore can be considered its own setting. In Shekiba's time, both King Habibullah and his son Amanullah have the throne at Arg. The palace grounds are described as ornate, detailed, majestic, colorful, and grand. There is a palace, at least one large courtyard, a pool room, and the concubine where the women of the king's harem stay.

Shekiba's family compound and village

Shekiba's family's compound consists of her family of origin's home, as well as the home of her grandmother and those of her uncles. She, like Rahima, comes from a small, rural village. The village is only described once, when Shekiba attempts to gain access to the land she legally owns.

Bobo Shahgul's house is adjacent to Shekiba's family's house and land. Shekiba's family's land is fertile, since she and her father work hard to keep it that way. Shekiba



experiences great pain at her home and at her grandmother's house, but when she thinks of the property she thinks of the happy times she had before her family members perished.

Azizullah's home

Shekiba lives with Azizullah and his wife Marjan for a time before being given to the king. Though Shekiba experiences beatings from time to time, it is at Azizullah's home that Shekiba becomes less afraid of her future, even thinking she might have a better one than she might have had if she had stayed with her extended family. The home is moderate, bigger than her family's, but Shekiba has no trouble keeping up with the chores.



Themes and Motifs

Family

Family dynamics are central to the start of each main character's story. For Rahima, her family starts as whole and somewhat well but morphs into all seven of them being on completely separate planes, as Rahima, Parwin, and Shahla are married off, Madar and Padar are drug addicts, and Sitara and Rohila are left to fend for themselves. The change in their family dynamic happens when the three girls are married off, since that is when their mother loses hope for a different future for her daughters.

Rahima continues thinking about and worrying about her family for years after she is married off, as one's family of origin determines a child's fate. Rahima's father wants to please Abdul Khaliq, and therefore gives the warlord and his two cousins his three daughters.

Shekiba's family dynamics are similar to Rahima's in that she starts off in a fully-functioning family before her situation takes a drastic turn and her family dynamics become abusive and oppressive. Again, Shekiba's family of origin determines her future, as the death of her family members puts her in the care of her extended family, who pay off a debt with Shekiba as a servant.

Shekiba's sense of a family is ultimately positive, as she lives with her husband Aasif, their son Shah, and Aasif's first wife Gulnaz and her daughter Shabnam. For this family, Shekiba is thankful that her husband is a man who is not physically violent.

Family dynamics are also present in the ways Abdul Khaliq's wives and the king's wives care for their sons. Though the situations are culturally different than what a Westerner would typically think of as a family, the women who bear children must tend to their children.

Gender inequality

Gender inequality is one of the most prominent themes present in "The Pearl That Broke Its Shell." Though the inequality between the genders is culturally accurate and culturally specific, the differences between what men and women are allowed to do, wear, own, and be are distinct and an essential piece of both Rahima and Shekiba's stories.

The author presents men in Afghanistan as having it much easier than women. For example, men are allowed and encouraged to go to school, as it is expected they will work to provide for a family someday and therefore need a good education. Females are allowed to go to school but they are not encouraged, since it is assumed they will be a housewife and a mother, making a formal education unnecessary.



Rahima's love for school and for learning surprises her, since girls are not encouraged to attend school. She remains committed to her cause, though, and attends the resource center after parliament sessions. The center is specifically for women in the parliament, since men are allowed free and easy access to schools as they grow up and women are not.

The author also presents that women are not allowed to own land, even if it is legally theirs, and that while women are allowed to participate in parliament, their presence is not appreciated and they are expected to keep quiet. When a woman in parliament does not keep quiet and is vocal about her oppositional viewpoint, she is the target of a bombing.

The men in the novel have multiple wives - most have the maximum number allowed by the hadith, a religious text of instructions said to be from the Prophet, as followed by the Muslim religion. King Habibullah goes a step further, showing his power as king and as a man, by having four wives as well as a harem of women at his beckon-call.

Gender inequality also shows itself in the fact that it is unsafe for women to be out and about on their own, where it is perfectly safe for men. One reason Rahima and her sisters are kept from going to school when they are young is because their parents are afraid of boys teasing them, hurting them, or going after them. Even if it's in a teasing manner, parents of young girls do not feel safe letting them go to or through town by themselves.

Death

Death comes in many different forms in "The Pearl That Broke Its Shell," and it is present throughout the novel. For Shekiba, one of the main characters of the novel, death comes to her via a national wave of cholera, during which all three of her siblings and her mother perish within one month of each other. Out of despair, her father becomes emotionally despondent and eventually dies several months later. Shekiba and her father perform a burial tradition for the children and her mother, and then Shekiba carries out the same tradition for her father when he passes.

Shekiba is surrounded by death again years later, when she must watch Benafsha get stoned to death. Though *sangsaar*, the Arab word for stoning, is to be Shekiba's punishment, she is saved by marriage. Benafsha's death affects Shekiba in a similar way as her family's deaths from years prior. Both circumstances bring Shekiba sadness and fear, since the aftermath of each death in regards to Shekiba's fate is uncertain.

For Rahima, death comes unexpectedly when her son Jahangir dies as a toddler. With his death comes a host of emotions, the strongest of which seems to be guilt since he dies while Rahima is in Kabul for a parliament session. Jahangir's death is a catalyst for Rahima to escape Abdul Khaliq. Jahangir had given Rahima purpose, and without him, her greatest desire is to be free.



Jahangir's death is also an example of how women in Afghanistan sometimes question their culture's customs. The mourning period in the Muslim religion is 40 days. Rahima is a young woman who does not see fit to do as everyone has always done, and so questions why the mourning period is 40 days, and why she's expected to feel different on the 41st day after his death.

Both of the main characters have significant experiences with death, and each impacts the young women in different ways. However, both young women's lives are improved as a result of what they learn from each death.

Overcoming hardship

One of the cornerstones of "The Pearl That Broke Its Shell" is the fact that Rahima draws on her great-great grandmother's story in order to survive her own. Shekiba must overcome being beaten, given away, and then eventually whipped 100 times, before she is in a place where she feels safe. Though there are points in the novel where Shekiba wonders why her life was spared by the illness, her determination in making it through the various trials in her life is great and is enough to help Rahima through her trials.

Rahima's hardship starts when she is married off by a father who never paid real attention to her. She is married at 13 years old and is terrified of being a wife. She must deal with jealousy from the other wives, beatings from Abdul Khaliq, being pregnant at just 15 years old, and being away from her family. She draws on Shekiba's story, as well as the confidence inspired from her friends Hamida and Sufia, in order to escape.

The men in the novel do not tend to show overcoming hardship, but in the few instances where they do, it is expressed in vastly different ways than the women. However, Abdul Khaliq does show difficulty in overcoming Jahangir's death. His way of dealing with it is increased aggression. Similarly, Aasif deals with having two wives and no sons with increased aggression. Though he doesn't hit his wives, he throws and breaks items in his home.

The way in which the characters of the novel overcome hardship are culturally appropriate, as the women stay reserved and the men lash out, both socially acceptable.

Identity

A sense of identity seems to be a goal of several of the characters in "The Pearl That Broke Its Shell." Rahima finds an identity with which she is comfortable when she is a bacha posh, and it is not until the end of the novel when she is again a bacha posh that she again feels that secure sense of identity. Though she likes being with her sisters, it is with the boys her age that Rahima feels like her true self – her free spirit – can be let out.



Shekiba's identity lies in the fact that she is half-and-half. She sees herself as half pretty and half monster, since that is how she is perceived by others. Often it can be from others that a person gains his or her identity, and such is true in Shekiba's case. She carries various identities throughout the novel, including sister, daughter, son-daughter, granddaughter, servant, harem guard, and finally wife and mother.

On the whole, women in the novel express their identities in conservative ways, as is the cultural expectation for the gender. The men, however, are the complete opposite, which is also the cultural expectation for the gender. For example, the warlord Abdul Khaliq and King Habibullah are able to express their identities as men in power by forcing whomever they want to do whatever they want. On the other hand, Rahima has to look like a boy in order to be free to be herself, since as a girl not only will she get harassed, but she's not allowed, via societal mores, to complete tasks for the family generally reserved for the sons.

Belonging

Lacking and longing to experience a sense of belonging is present for every main character in "The Pearl That Broke Its Shell", as well as for some of the minor characters. By extension, a sense of belonging is present for each family in the novel, as well.

For Shekiba, she observes and subsequently laments that she is not a whole anything; she is half girl/half boy, she is half a beautiful face/half ugly face, and she is half of Aasif's wife, as she is one of two wives living in the same house. Shekiba doesn't know where she belongs: does she belong on her family's land after every member of family dies? Does she belong with her extended family because they're blood, even though they treat her horribly? Does she belong with Azizullah and Marjan, as a guard for the harem, or as Aasif's wife?

Shekiba goes through five different roles in her life with five distinct sets of people, and therefore struggles to figure out exactly where she belongs. Eventually, she decides that it is okay where she is, since she's safe with a man who doesn't beat her, especially since she's borne him a son. However, there is a sense of longing even in her final speech that speaks to wanting a definitive answer of where she belongs.

Rahima's sense of belonging changes less often than Shekiba's. At the beginning of the novel, Rahima knows where she belongs: with her family, as a bacha posh. She knows her place as a bacha posh and she likes it, as she feels like she fits in well running tasks for her mother and horsing around with the boys her age.

When Rahima is married off to Abdul Khaliq, she finds a different sense of belonging. Though it is a belonging which she doesn't particularly like, Rahima finds her place at Abdul Khaliq's compound with a friend in Jameela, a mother to Jahangir, and then finally as Badriya's assistant. With each new situation Rahima is placed in, she works to find her place, which may possibly be because of her mom's advice to do as she is told.



Longing for a sense of belonging can also be seen with the king's harem. Each woman, when written about, likes to speak of her time with the king and how the king prefers her. The same goes for the king's and Abdul Khaliq's wives; they each like to know that the king wants them and they each like to feel they belong to someone.

Loss

Though loss may seem too similar to death to count it as a separate idea, the loss experienced by characters in "The Pearl That Broke Its Shell" does not only come in the form of people who die, though that is significant aspect of it.

For Shekiba, she loses everything that makes her feel safe, comfortable, and as though she belongs, including her siblings, parents, home, and land. The loss of her siblings and parents is bad enough, but it is the loss of her home and her land that has a lasting impact on her decisions as a young lady, as she works to reclaim her home and her land despite the fact that women in her time did not own land.

Shekiba's different responses to the loss of her family versus the loss of her land may be because she has the power to potentially change one set of circumstances. Though she ultimately is not able to reclaim her land and her home, she tries. With the loss of her siblings and parents, there is nothing she can do to change that circumstance and therefore she must accept it.

For Rahima, her losses are mostly intangible. Though she loses Jahangir to a stomach infection, Rahima also loses her freedom, her close family relationships, and her sense of self-worth – though she regains this through her trips to parliament.

Rahima's freedom is perhaps her greatest loss, since her sense of freedom when she becomes a bacha posh is strong. Rahima loves being a bacha posh, as she is able to participate in more activities that release the free spirit within her. When Rahima is married off to Abdul Khaliq, her sense of freedom is gone for a few years until she escapes.

During the time Rahima is married to Abdul Khaliq, she also loses her sense of self-worth and her close relationships with her sisters and her mother. Both of these losses manifest themselves in Rahima's attachment to Jameela, as the older woman acts as a pseudo-sister and sometimes even a pseudo-mother, for Rahima. Having a close relationship with another female she trusts likely gives Rahima the strength, confidence, and possibly discernment to trust Ms. Franklin, Sufia, and Hamida, who ultimately help her escape completely from Abdul Khaliq.

Other characters' losses that should be noted are Rahima's parents, Gulnaz, and Aasif. Rahima's parents lose three of their five daughters at one time. Their father, Arif, does not seem to view it as a loss, but a business transaction. Their mother, however, feels a great sense of loss and deals with it by becoming an opiate addict.



Gulnaz loses her place in the home when Shekiba is brought to the house and eventually gives Aasif a son. Gulnaz deals with her loss by exuding aloofness and irritation.

Guilt

Guilt is an interesting emotion and theme to note throughout “The Pearl That Broke Its Shell,” since most of the actions carried out by the characters are typical of Afghan society. The main characters feel guilt in different situations, but each time the emotion is just as strong.

For Shekiba, the guilt is survivor’s guilt. She and her father are the only ones from her family of origin to survive the wave of cholera from the early 1900s, but since her father dies soon after, she wonders for a long time after why she is the one who was spared.

For Rahima, she feels guilt as a young girl and again as a young woman. When she is still living at home, Rahima stays a bacha posh longer than it is proper, and one of the consequences is violent anger from her father that negatively impacts her mother. Rahima feels guilty for the bruises and pain her mother receives from Rahima’s father, as she feels they are because of her actions and attitudes. Subsequently, Rahima feels guilty for Parwin and Shahla being married off, since they are married off as a consequence of Rahima’s improper actions as a bacha posh. Later, Rahima feels guilty for Jahangir’s death since she’s not there for him when he passes away.

The guilt felt by the two main female characters of the novel propels each of them to change. For Shekiba, her survivor’s guilt propels her to attempt an escape from her servant life so she might be able to get back to her land. For Rahima, the guilt she feels as a young girl when she and her sisters are married off is redeemed by her obedience to Abdul Khaliq and her attempted visits to Parwin.

The men in the novel don’t express guilt, as they feel entitled to every good thing they receive. When a negative thing comes a man’s way, such as when Jahangir dies, the man tends to make the woman feel guilty for creating the negative situation. For example, Abdul Khaliq and his mother make Rahima feel responsible for his death.

Powerlessness

Powerless is a prominent theme in “The Pearl That Broke Its Shell,” and pertains mostly to the women. In traditional Arab culture, and in the examples given in this novel, the men carry the power and influence. It is the men who dictate what the women can do, where their women can go, and with whom their women can communicate.

For example, Rahima’s sense of powerlessness is present from the moment she is married off to the moment she escapes several years later. She has no say in being married to a warlord and leaving her family, and neither does she have any say in with whom she lives and her life on Abdul Khaliq’s compound. She has a semblance of



power when she is allowed to accompany Badriya to Kabul for parliament, but everything she does there aside from assisting Badriya is of great risk, because Abdul Khaliq holds the power to dictate what she does and does not do.

Shekiba's sense of powerlessness occurs less often than Rahima's. She maintains her father's land for some time before she and the land are taken over by her extended family. At this point, Shekiba holds a great amount of power in regards to her life. However, when she is forced to live with her extended family, she loses all autonomy and is subject to her grandmother's rules. It is the same for her at Azizullah's as well as on the palace grounds, since other are in control of her. However, since Shekiba is a guard over the king's harem, she holds some power and sway as a member of the palace staff.

The ancillary female characters in the novel experience a greater sense of powerlessness, since they are subject to the men's whims and desires. The women in the king's harem must abide by the king's rules and are only physically for the king. Their powerlessness is best shown when Benafsha is stoned for having an affair.

Coercion

Coercion is the other side of powerlessness in "The Pearl That Broke Its Shell," since the women who feel powerless are made to feel that way by men who coerce them into doing whatever it is the men want done.

Abdul Khaliq coerces his wives into doing whatever it is he asks them to do. For three of the four wives, that equates to tasks at the house. For Badriya, the coercion takes place at parliament, when Badriya is forced to vote a certain way based on Abdul Khaliq's instructions.

King Habibullah's coercion is never seen directly by the reader, but his actions are understood as coercive since he is the king and holds a great amount of power. For example, he decides that he wants multiple wives as well as a concubine full of women for his own pleasure at any given time. He uses his power to coerce women into giving him what he wants. His power is also used to coerce other families to give them what he wants, such as Azizullah and Marjan giving the king Shekiba as a guard.

The author makes it clear that the men do the coercing and the women do the acquiescing, as is typical for Afghan culture.

Jealousy/envy

Jealousy is one of the strongest emotions present for the characters in "The Pearl That Broke Its Shell," with both the men and the women. For the men, their jealousy is shown through their power. For example, Abdul Khaliq and King Habibullah like their women to be their own. The fact that a woman's punishment for adultery is stoning means that it's



taken very seriously. The men are jealous, as they believe their women should be their own.

The women in the novel return the feelings of their husband and are jealous of the other women who are intimate with their husband. Abdul Khaliq's wives, with the exception of Jameela and Rahima, are jealous of the other women when Abdul Khaliq calls on them for intimacy.

Jealousy is expressed by the men through their punishments, and by women through their speech, which is condescending and competitive with the other women in their lives. The reader should note that the women are jealous of each other despite the fact that for a man to have several wives is common and accepted.

Shekiba and Rahima are unique in their peer groups for not being jealous. To them, however, they are young girls who are married off against their will.

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The author makes it clear that the men do the coercing and the women do the acquiescing, as is typical for Afghan culture.

Fate

A person's fate, or naseeb in the Arab language as used in the novel, is a reality for several of the characters in "The Pearl That Broke Its Shell," though it is mainly referenced in regards to Rahima and Shekiba.

As is traditional in the Arab culture, one's naseeb is wondered and thought about regularly. It is not regularly discussed, rather it is more of an understanding that an individual believes in a naseeb from Allah. The term is used in reference to any person's



future, e.g., Amanullah's naseeb is not discussed by himself, rather it is referenced by Shaima as she tells Shekiba's story.

When a situation changes, a person may wonder if their entire naseeb is changing, or if that event is pushing the individual toward his or her original naseeb. For example, Rahima's mother knows that Rahima's naseeb will be fulfilled, no matter how rashly her father acts. Raisa trusts in Allah's will for her daughters' lives. Even though this naseeb puts Rahima in the hands of a warlord, the naseeb is to be believed in and followed.

The reader should note that since Rahima is counterculture to her traditional friends and family, as is Khala Shaima. Thus, the two women question the authority of the concept of one's naseeb being the reason for every circumstance, particularly bad ones. Rahima and Shaima are women who want solutions and change, rather than acquiescing to what is and what has always been. As an example, Rahima wonders if Sufia really believes that it is in the naseeb of officials who are elected even though they're corrupt. Rahima also wonders about a person's naseeb in regards to Parwin and Jahangir's deaths, as they died so young and, to Rahima, unnecessarily.

The reader should also note that, as part of the narrative structure, Rahima draws strength from Shekiba, who seems to take opportunities to make her own naseeb. For example, she obeys whomever is in charge of her, but she also is unafraid of taking risks in order to change her destiny.

Proving worthiness

Many of the characters in "The Pearl That Broke Its Shell" work to prove their worthiness, to whom they prove their worthiness depends on each individual situation. The similarities in proving worthiness lie in the gender, as doing so is different for men than it is for women.

Rahima proves her worthiness to her family of origin when she is made a bacha posh, as she makes herself useful by running errands that her father cannot complete because he is high on opiates. When she is married off, Rahima is forced to prove her worthiness to Abdul Khaliq. In the novel, and by extension in tradition Arab culture, women prove their worthiness by bearing children, and especially by bearing sons.

Similarly, Shekiba must prove her worthiness when she becomes a wife by bearing a boy. Prior to bearing a son, Shekiba must prove her worthiness as a son-daughter to her father after the rest of her siblings die. She must also prove herself as a servant, and then as a guard for the king's harem. In each situation, proving unworthiness carries a strong consequence.

For the men in the novel, their worthiness is proved by having multiple women, having at least one wife that gives him sons, and by how large his sphere of influence is. Abdul Khaliq, the warlord, and King Habibullah have multiple wives, and as such, they feel worthy of their male peers, especially since the wives have born them sons. Though



both men have significant power, they both still aim to show they are worthy of their position in society.

Cultural expectations

Cultural expectations carries great significance in “The Pearl That Broke Its Shell.” The Afghanistan culture is full of expectations that, when not met or exceeded, are an embarrassment for the person not meeting them. There are cultural expectations for every scenario, and not following them results in punishment, usually physical, and sometimes as harsh as death. The society believes in honor as one of its cornerstones, and therefore when interacting with others, whether your peers or superiors, certain expectations must be met.

Cultural expectations play out in gender differences, as discussed in the gender inequality theme. Cultural expectations play out in families of origin, as the father, no matter how absent he is, still carries the authority of his daughters’ fates. It is the father’s family, and he and his mother-in-law are in charge, no questions asked.

The concept also plays out in the interactions between male characters. For example, the warlord expects – and is culturally entitled to – a certain degree of respect, especially when he visits a person’s home. The reader can see the level to which a warlord requires such respect when he arrives to Rahima’s home, once to discuss the arranged marriages and again to carry out the nikkah.

The reader may also note cultural nuances when visitors are welcomed into a home. Either the dominant woman in a home – as in Rahima’s mother – or one of the lowly woman in a home – if she is treated as a servant – is expected to prepare dried fruit and nuts for guests. It is an expectation that, if not met, is an embarrassment for the host.

Acquiescence

Related to powerlessness is the idea of acquiescence, which is a strong theme for the female characters throughout “The Pearl That Broke Its Shell.” Whether the character is a wife, daughter, mother, or member of parliament, the women in the novel acquiesce to the men in their lives.

As a wife, the women in the novel must acquiesce to their husband’s intimacy demands. Whether she wants to or not, a wife must be physically obedient to her husband. The acquiescence comes in the wife’s attitude and demeanor. At first, she is reluctant and terrified. As time goes on, she acquiesces in her spirit that her life is what it is. When a wife becomes a mother, she acquiesces to her husband in a different way. As a mother, a woman must raise her children as her husband approves.

The author writes about some women who participate in parliament. It is legally required for women to be part of parliament, but they are expected to keep their thoughts to themselves and simply go along with what the men are doing. When one woman does



not acquiesce and stay quiet during a parliament session, she is threatened and/or punished.

As a daughter, a girl must acquiesce to her father's instructions. For example, Rahima and her sisters had to give in to their father's instruction to not go to school. A daughter must also agree to marry whomever her father has for her to marry.

Courage

Courage is the concept that gets Rahima out of her life with a warlord, and it is what Shekiba uses in order to sustain herself through her difficult times.

Becoming a bacha posh takes some courage for Rahima, but not a great amount, since she feels more comfortable as a bacha posh than she does as a girl. However, it lays the groundwork for the courage she eventually needs to be Abdul Khaliq's wife, deal with the jealousy from other wives, accompany Badriya to Kabul, attend the resource center, and ultimately, leave Abdul Khaliq.

Though Rahima may not think so, she exhibits courage throughout the novel. It isn't easy for her to consummate her marriage to Abdul Khaliq, as she is only 13 years old and he is much older and has much more sexual experience. Still, she obeys, gets herself into the groove of the compound, and remains complicit even while she plans an escape, all of which take courage since her punishment would be either a severe beating, or possibly death.

Shekiba's courage sustains her through her difficult times. Though she wonders why she is spared illness and remains alive after her entire family of origin dies, she does not give up. She does what her extended family demands of her, then what Azizullah demands of her. She works up the courage to obtain her father's Qur'an and ask the hakim to grant her her land. Late, when she is a guard for the king's harem, Shekiba's courage shows in her immediate undertaking of guard tasks.

Courage may also be seen in Khala Shaima, as she is considered a disgrace to the family but does not let that slow down her opinion-sharing. She faces regular ridicule and shame; nonetheless she fearlessly shares her opinions about Rahima and her sisters, as well as about their father.



Styles

Point of View

“The Pearl That Broke Its Shell” is told from two different perspectives, one being Rahima as she narrates her own story, and the other being Khala Shaima as she narrates Shekiba’s story.

As Rahima’s perspective is told in the first person, the reader can get a full sense of the emotions she feels through each of her experiences. Rahima’s story is being told from the first-hand source, and so the information is fresh, unfiltered, and therefore possibly easier for the reader to empathize with. It is also important to note that since Rahima tells her story in the first person but hears Shekiba’s story in the third person, the reader can watch Rahima draw strength from the story of her great-great grandmother.

By Khala Shaima to be telling Shekiba’s story, the reader is able to relate it to Rahima’s story. Shekiba’s story is being told as a source of strength for her great-great granddaughter, and since Shekiba is not alive to know the impact her choices have on her descendants, it is appropriate that her story is being told by a living member of the family.

Language and Meaning

“The Pearl That Broke Its Shell” is written in English, but the reader understands that the characters are speaking in their native language. Afghanistan has two official languages, Pashto and Dari, but Dari is the language mentioned by a few of the characters in the novel. The author uses some Dari words, such as chador, for a woman’s headscarf. However, she lets the reader know immediately to what the word refers.

The author is American-born, but her parents – and therefore, ancestors – originate from Afghanistan. A nation’s language is essential to understanding their culture. Since the book is written in English and was published for American markets, the whole of the novel is in English with some contextual Dari placed throughout the text.

The benefit for the reader of the author including native-language words is that the reader might better grasp the Afghan culture, which is cornerstone to understanding the entire novel. Without culture-specific language, the significance of plot points may not be as prominent.

Structure

The storytelling of “The Pearl That Broke Its Shell” begins with Rahima, a young girl of about 10 years at the start of the novel. She tells her story in the first person. When it is



suggested by her Khala Shaima that Rahima become a bacha posh, or a girl dressed as a boy, Khala Shaima begins telling Rahima and her sisters the story of their Bibi (great-great grandmother) Shekiba, who was also a bacha posh for a period. There is no rhythm to the alternating stories; rather, Shekiba's story is told when Khala Shaima visits Rahima, whether that's at her home with her family, or when she is able to visit Rahima after she becomes Abdul Khaliq's wife.

The lack of pattern gives the reader a sense of how a story such as this might be told in real life, since the one telling the story needs to be present in order for the story to be told. The structure of the story is also indicative of the long-standing Afghan tradition of oral storytelling.

Quotes

Madar-jan would busy herself with housework, feeling the weight of disappointment on her shoulders.

-- Rahima as narrator (chapter 1 paragraph 4)

Importance: "The Pearl That Broke Its Shell" is a novel about women in Afghanistan and the lives in which they live. This statement, being so early in the novel, sets a tone for the reader. Madar-jan is one of the predominant figures in the first three sections of the novel, so the fact that she is under the weight of disappointment lets the reader know that if one of the strongest women in the novel feels burdened, the girls and women under her are likely to feel similar.

Remember, 'Shekiba' means 'a gift.' You are our gift, my daughter. No need to let others gawk at you.

-- Shafiqa (chapter 2 paragraph 3)

Importance: As one of the main characters in the novel, Shekiba's story is one of the most important for the reader to understand. Her story is one of loneliness and isolation, but in order for the reader to understand how significant these feelings are for Shekiba, the reader must see from where Shekiba has come, which is a family who loved her and was not ashamed of her. Shekiba's mother's words will help Shekiba through difficult times in future years.

He clouded his mind with the opium that Abdul Khaliq kept around, as crucial to his men's ability to wage war as the ammunition strapped to their backs.

-- Rahima as narrator (chapter 3 paragraph 1)

Importance: Rahima is talking of her father Arif, and his addiction to the drug, opium. Arif's addiction to opium, which is warlord supplied to his men, is something that Arif worked to secure even in between times of fighting. This addiction did damage to Arif's relationships with his family, eventually contributing to his decision to marry off his three eldest daughters. It's important that the reader understand how Arif was controlled by Abdul Khaliq, both on the battle field and off.

In Afghanistan, disabilities defined people.

-- Shekiba as narrator (chapter 8 paragraph 4)

Importance: In this statement, the author is mixing fiction with cultural fact. It is generally counted as true that people with disabilities have a difficult time in the Afghanistan society. The cultural aspect of this novel is crucial to understanding the thoughts, motives, and behaviors of every character involved. Also, the reader should note that while Shekiba is considered disabled, she is an excellent house worker and that seems to help her skirt the general stigma that would come with having a disability.



I wanted Khala Shaima to approve, especially since it had been her who had won me these new freedoms.

-- Rahima (chapter 10 paragraph 2)

Importance: As Rahima becomes a boy, she appreciates the freedom it allows her. To want an elder's approval is natural, especially in the Afghan culture. Rahima's statement indicates the cultural more of respecting one's elders stands in her family, and also that Rahima takes her newfound freedom with a humble attitude, being especially grateful to the one who thought of it in the first place.

Azizullah had no patience for such highbrow relations but he did enjoy the secondary benefits that came with having a strategically placed brother.

-- Shaima as Narrator (chapter 11 paragraph 16)

Importance: Loyalty to one's family and the connections each member of the family can provide for their kin are typically an important measure in Afghan culture. It is important, in understanding Shekiba's experience at Azizullah's home and how she is eventually given away, to understand Azizullah's character.

You think that just because you're wearing pants and you strap your breasts down every morning that no one will care what you do.

-- Shahla (chapter 14 paragraph 13)

Importance: Rahima, as Rahim, has just caused a riff in the family after being angry with her mother for not saving her any food; Arif beat his wife, and Rahima's sisters are upset with her for it. The statement shows how wrapped up in being Rahim Rahima has gotten, and the consequences to her family for doing so. As a bacha posh, Rahima has been acting as though she is immune to certain difficulties or consequences, but her sister's admonishment shows that to be untrue.

Shekiba was not a whole anything, she realized.

-- Shaima, as narrator (chapter 15 paragraph 7)

Importance: Shekiba's biggest struggle at this point is her identity. She doesn't know where she belongs, since she has no immediate family to claim, she doesn't want to claim her extended family, and her current owner is thinking nothing of giving her away. She has half a face, she doesn't fit in with the men and doesn't fit in with the women, and has no ally. Feeling incomplete is part of her now knowing or having a true identity.

Is it any business of yours? Just tell him what I've asked.

-- Rahima's grandmother (chapter 16 paragraph 6)

Importance: The mother of a son has much authority, and therefore Rahima's paternal grandmother holds much authority over Rahima's family. She wants Rahima to know her place, not only because she is a young girl, but because Rahima's anger at Raisa for having only girls.



There was a bathroom just outside my door, the likes of which I had never before seen. It was modern, with running water and a toilet.

-- Rahima as narrator (chapter 23 paragraph 2)

Importance: This statement underscores the difference in Rahima's living conditions from her home with her four sisters and her parents, to the house she shares with Shahnaz on Abdul Khaliq's compound. Rahima is from a much lower class than Abdul Khaliq, and the fact that she comes from a house without a toilet and running water in the bathroom is significant example of such a class division.

Anyway, he is the king. He takes what he wants.

-- Ghafoor (chapter 28 paragraph 7)

Importance: Ghafoor is explaining why the king can do what he wants. Shekiba, being secluded from civilization for a good portion of her life before being traded to Arg, is naive to how her country works in regards to class and power differences. There are examples to show Shekiba's naivete, such as thinking the hakim would grant her her father's land, and the fact that Ghafoor has to spell out this power difference is just another example.

For the first time in a long time, Shekiba slept soundly, surrounded by women pretending to be men.

-- Shaima, as narrator (chapter 22 paragraph 3)

Importance: One of Shekiba's most significant struggles in the novel is that of belonging. She has lived in fear and loneliness since her mother and siblings died, and now that she is surrounded by individuals who seem to be like her and, more importantly, don't pose a physical threat, Shekiba feels like she can relax for the first time in a long time.

Seeing the torn deed scatter in the hakim's courtyard like fallen leaves had hurt more than Azizullah's beating.

-- Shaima, as narrator (chapter 29 paragraph 6)

Importance: Shekiba deals with the loss of her entire family, being forced off her land, being forced into servanthood by her extended family and then by Azizullah and Marjan, and now she's a guard at the king's palace. The fact that Shekiba remembers Azizullah's beating to be less hurtful than losing her land speaks to Shekiba's desire to have what is rightfully hers, and to have somewhere and something to call her own.

There was no honesty in our lives.

-- Rahima (chapter 30 paragraph 4)

Importance: Rahima is mourning Parwin's death. She is upset that Parwin's smile and joy were faked, and that she couldn't - or didn't - do anything to stop it. Rahima is only 13 years old when she is married off to Abdul Khaliq, so she is young enough at the beginning of her marriage to still naively expect honesty from those in positions of



power. At this point, Rahima is 15 years old and has experienced much in the two years since she was married off. She now recognizes the lack of honesty in the lives of Afghan women. She is tired of it and she doesn't agree with it, but she acknowledges it.

She found it liberating to walk about, her hands in her pocket and her face to the sun.
-- Shaima, as narrator (chapter 32 paragraph 7)

Importance: Shaima is talking about Shekiba and the comfort Shekiba has in walking around as a man. Shekiba is a woman who has had great difficulty fitting in anywhere she's lived since her family died, so for her to feel comfort - and something the author suggests is joy, based on her pointing her face toward the sun - is significant.

Bigger people meant bigger problems.
-- Shaima, as narrator (chapter 33 paragraph 3)

Importance: Shaima is telling the story of Shekiba, and this statement is in regards to Shekiba trying to work out a plan to change her naseeb. Shekiba knows she's in the king's palace and therefore has to be careful, because since he is the ultimate in terms of power in Afghanistan, he can cause much more damage to her than Azizullah or her family could. It is also important for the reader to note that one might typically associate bigger people with opulence and ease, yet Shekiba recognizes that it is opulent and easy for only those who are at the top.

I was starting to taste the possibility of change here.
-- Rahima (chapter 39 paragraph 6)

Importance: Rahima was married off to Abdul Khaliq against her, her sisters', and her mother's wills. There is nothing she would like more than to see her sisters again and be able to have a different life. Even though she's not sure she wants to return home, given her parents' current state, she knows she doesn't want to be beckoned to Abdul Khaliq anymore. Her being able to sense a change is coming is a significant for Rahima.

She had made a fatal mistake and they could do nothing for her.
-- Shaima, as narrator (chapter 41 paragraph 2)

Importance: There is unity, yet division, within the women of the king's harem. The women treat each other like sisters with their bickering and even their laughs sometimes. However, they are unable to protect each other when one of them betrays the king. It's important for the reader to understand the dynamic, as it is an example of gender differences, power structure, and loyalties.

All of Afghanistan twinkled by lanterns but the palace shone, a beacon for the rest of the country.
-- Shaima, as narrator (chapter 42 paragraph 4)

Importance: The statement is a strong visual reference to how well off the king is compared to the rest of his nation. As the war-torn country lacks electricity and running



water, the king's palace has both of those, and more. The reference to the palace being a beacon is also a way for the author to underscore the power held by the king, and the reverence with which he is treated by the rest of the nation.

His gray turban sat coiled on his head like a serpent.

-- Rahima, as narrator (chapter 44 paragraph 6)

Importance: A serpent is generally a negative comparison. If Rahima - or the author - had seen the man who is being described as a favorable character or person, a different, more king analogy might have been used. The man being described is the man Abdul Khaliq arranged for Badriya to follow her voting after, a practice which infuriates Rahima, Hamida, and Sufia.

Though her face twisted in pain with each blow, she did not make a sound.

-- Shaima, as narrator (chapter 47 paragraph 2)

Importance: Shekiba is known throughout the novel as having a quiet strength. She keeps to herself and carries about as she needs to. During the most significant beating of her life thus far, Shekiba keeps her character in tact. She may act this way so as to not provoke her punisher with additional lashes. Shekiba also may feel she deserves the punishment. She also likely feels gratitude at not having been stoned.

But I couldn't think of my mother without missing her, missing the way she held me on the day of our nikkahs, the day that broke her.

-- Rahima (chapter 50 paragraph 3)

Importance: A significant portion of this novel touches on the guilt that the women characters feel, even when it is the men who act in such ways that may typically elicit guilt. This statement resonates guilt from Rahima, as though she is part of the reason her mother is broken. The burden Rahima carries for her family is heavy.

Shekiba turned, making a point to look Gulnaz in the eye.

-- Shaima, as narrator (chapter 51 paragraph 7)

Importance: Shekiba's confidence from the beginning of the novel to now is vastly different. Through her experiences of being traded as payment for a debt, twice, then spared her life though she may have been stoned, Shekiba has learned that she has inherent value and is therefore not going to let anyone make her feel belittled.

I was looking over the edge of a cliff.

-- Rahima (chapter 54 paragraph 5)

Importance: Rahima is not prone to expressing a range of emotions, though that is likely out of necessity than actual character. When her son dies is when Rahima shows the greatest emotion. The cliff she mentions here is a metaphoric one. She already feels a great amount of guilt for not being present when Jahangir died, so to be asking



additional questions about the circumstances surrounding his death is an emotional edge that, while dangerous, is one she can't help but get nearer to.

Shekiba froze. It was not like Gulnaz to make sure a statement and it made Shekiba fidget. She picked up the baby instead of responding.

-- Shaima, as narrator (chapter 58 paragraph 14)

Importance: Shekiba, though grown in confidence, is still not used to hearing that she is wanted or appreciated. Therefore, when she is paid a compliment or told that she is appreciated, she is unsure of how to respond. Gulnaz's sentiment is one that Shekiba has not experienced since she was a young child and wanted by her family.

Sometimes you have to act out of line, I suppose. Sometimes you have to take a chance if you want something badly enough.

-- Shekiba (chapter 65 paragraph 9)

Importance: Shekiba is reflecting on her life and the chain of events that led her to her current state. She is grateful for having a rebellious spirit, because without it she would not be enjoying the freedom she experiences with Agha Baraan. Though she is married, she is not beaten and enjoys a comfortable living. Shekiba clearly does not regret the risks she took that ultimately led her to be married with a son.

Rahim wound in and out of the streets, heading further away from the hotel and in the opposite direction of the parliament building.

-- Rahima (chapter 67 paragraph 10)

Importance: Here, Rahima refers to herself as Rahim, though in the third person, as though he is not really she. Rahima separates the two personalities, as though they cannot coexist but must be separated in order to be real. This is an important note for the reader, as Rahima as Rahim is as much a part of her identity as her hair is of her body.