

A Thousand Splendid Suns Study Guide

A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini

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Plot Summary

Miriam is a bastard daughter of a wealthy man, and she is given away in marriage to a much older shoemaker, Rasheed. She disappoints him by failing to produce a child, and their marriage is an unhappy one. Another child, Laila, is raised down the street from Miriam and Rasheed. Her best friend is a one-legged boy, Tariq, and as war and political instability settles on Kabul, they become lovers. They are separated when Tariq's family flees to Pakistan, and then Laila's parents are killed in a rocket attack. When Laila is taken in by Miriam and Rasheed, she is already pregnant with Tariq's child, but Rasheed marries her, and for nine months, treats her well, because he still hopes for a boy. When Laila gives birth to Aziza, a girl, he begins to treat her worse and worse, until finally Miriam intercedes in a fight, and kills him with a shovel. She is executed for the murder of her husband, but Tariq returns from Pakistan and takes Laila and his daughter and Laila's daughter by Rasheed back to Pakistan with him. When American forces move the Taliban out of Afghanistan, Laila and Tariq return to Afghanistan with their children, and Laila is pregnant with another child, whom she will name after Miriam.

Miriam is raised outside of Herat in a cabin. When she goes into town to see her father's house, her mother is driven to distraction, and kills herself. Miriam goes to stay with her father's family, but only for a couple of weeks, before she is married off to a shoemaker from Kabul, who does not treat her well. When she has several miscarriages, and cannot produce a child for him, their marriage becomes miserable, and he mistreats her.

On the night of the coup, when Afghanistan communists overthrow Daoud Khan's government, Fariba gives birth to Laila. Her husband, Hakim, is a scholar who teaches the girl poetry and history. This is encouraged by the new communist government, which allows women to study for professions. The reader meets Laila at age nine, when she is best friends with the carpenter's one-legged son Tariq.

As the political situation devolves in Afghanistan, Kabul is attacked by Mujahideen, and Tariq's family makes plans to leave. Finally so does Laila's family, but as they are packing, a bomb hits their house, killing Laila's mother and father.

Laila is taken in by Rasheed, Miriam's husband, and nursed back to health. She is pregnant with Tariq's child, and agrees to marry Rasheed after Rasheed arranges for someone to tell her that Tariq was killed.

Laila enjoys Rasheed's favor for a time again when she gives birth to a son, Zalmai, but Rasheed eventually mistreats her, and she and Miriam try to run away. They are caught and sent back home, and Rasheed locks Laila in her room without food for two days.

After this, the drought comes to Kabul, and also the war. Laila is restricted, and conditions get bad enough that they give Aziza away to an orphanage because they cannot provide for her. Life becomes a difficult grind for her and Miriam, as Rasheed becomes more and more gruff and domineering, and political conditions worsen.



Things come to a head when Tariq shows up in Kabul, and Zalmi sees him waiting across the street for Laila. Miriam takes him upstairs while Laila and Tariq get to know each other again downstairs.

This visit from Tariq infuriates Rasheed, when Zalmi tells him, and he locks the child in his room, and begins to beat Laila. She tries to fight back, but soon he has her pinned by the throat. Miriam hits Rasheed once with a shovel, stunning him, then hits him again with all her force, killing him. Laila thinks they can escape together, but Miriam takes responsibility for her act, and turns herself in, to protect Laila and Aziza and Zalmi. At the trial, she tells the judge what happens, but the judge knows that the crime is not his to forgive—she must die and ask forgiveness herself from Allah.

After Miriam's death, Laila and Tariq take Aziza and Zalmi to Pakistan, where Tariq has been working. They make a new life there, and when the WTC attacks take place, and the U.S. declares war on Afghanistan, the Taliban is finally removed from power. Laila tells Tariq that she wants to go back there, because it will give Miriam's life meaning if they make contributions with theirs. They go to Herat first, where Laila gets a box that Jalil had given to Mullah Faizullah for Miriam. It has a letter of apology, and also money that would have been her inheritance. Laila and Tariq use this money to help an orphanage in Kabul, and they are pregnant with another baby. Aziza and Zalmi and Tariq consider boy names for the baby—Laila already knows what its name will be if it's a girl.



Chapters 1-7

Chapters 1-7 Summary

In Chapter 1, Miriam is an illegitimate child, born to Nana after she had an affair with Jalil, in whose house she worked as a maid. Miriam recalls having broken her mother's teapot, and her mother called her "a clumsy little harami (bastard)" (p. 4). When Miriam was older, she understood what the word meant not so much from a literal definition as by her mother's tone. It meant she was unwanted or a weed. Miriam's mother is always cursing and complaining, but her father, Jalil, is an easy-going man who tells her about the places he has seen, and the famous poets. Nana is upset by the stories Jalil tells Miriam, because she envies him his wealth and power. Jalil has three wives and nine legitimate children, and owns a cinema. Nana tells Miriam that Jalil had pointed the finger at her, and blamed her for seducing him. "Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always." (p. 7).

In Chapter 2, Nana tells Miriam that she (Nana) was a weed to Jalil. She says that she refused to live in Herat where Jalil lived. Nana tells she almost married once, but she had an epileptic seizure, and the suitor backed out. Miriam describes meeting the messengers who bring them supplies. Nana tells Jalil built it himself—"his idea of penance." (p. 11). Nana tells Jalil had not bothered to summon a doctor when she gave birth to Miriam in 1959. Jalil told Miriam a different version of the story, which Miriam prefers. When Miriam asks him, he agrees that Nana's story is correct, but he says that he rode over immediately.

In Chapter 3, Miriam recalls the sound of a wheelbarrow wheel approaching over the rocky trail to the kolba. Nana greets the messengers by throwing rocks at them, but Miriam lets the messengers talk to her. Nana tries to turn Miriam against them, and she tells Miriam that she loves her. There are a few people Nana allows to visit: Bibi jo, an old woman, and Mullah Faizullah, Miriam's tutor. Mullah Faizullah teaches her to read the Koran. She asks him if she can go to a real school, and Mullah Faizullah asks Nana, but Nana refuses to let her go.

In Chapter 4, unlike her mother, Miriam loves having visitors to the kolba. She would sleep badly on Tuesday nights in advance of Jalil's visits. She would pace the kolba until he arrived, then she would run into his arms. Jalil tells Nana about another child he has had, and Nana is bitter about the fact that her daughter is not counted among his children. Jalil sits with Miriam and they sing songs and draw pictures together. He tells her about events in the outside world, the coup in Afghanistan in 1973. He gives Miriam a necklace, and Miriam begins to wonder what it would be like to go through Herat, to hear people say "there goes Jalil Khan with his daughter." (p. 24).

In Chapter 5, Miriam says that she wants to go to the cinema with Jalil for her fifteenth birthday. Nana and Jalil both agree that it is not a good idea. Miriam tells Jalil that she wants him to take her, but he demurs. When Jalil does finally offer to meet her at the



kolba at noon the next day, Nana is furious, and accuses Miriam of betraying her. Miriam waits for Jalil, looking down on Herat, wearing her best dress. When Jalil does not show up, Miriam walks down the hill toward Herat. She finds Jalil's house, and waits outside his wall, spurning the rice and water a girl brings her. In the morning, a man comes to take her home—because "Jalil Khan says so" he says (p. 34) but Miriam runs into the house. She is only there a second before she is scooped up and sent home. When Miriam gets back to the kolba, she finds that Nana has hung herself from a tree by the clearing.

In Chapter 6, after Nana is buried, Miriam goes to live with Jalil, but now she can hear him with Nana's ears, and she distrusts his promises. She does not expect anything to turn out well for her. When they arrive at Jalil's house, he installs her in a guest room, and tells her to make herself at home, but she knows she is not at home. A girl with tattoos brings food for Miriam. In the morning, Nilofaur comes in, an eight year old daughter of Jalil's. She plays a record for Miriam. Mullah Faizullah comes to see Miriam, and tells her that her mother did a terrible thing to her, to herself, and to Allah, but Allah will forgive her. A week later, Miriam is invited downstairs by Afsoon, Nilofaur's mother. She says that it is important.

In Chapter 7, Miriam enters a room where Jalil sits with his wives. They tell her that she has a suitor, Rasheed, a shoemaker from Kabul. He is forty-five to Miriam's fifteen, and his son has just recently drowned in a lake. Miriam says that she doesn't want this, and she offers to go live with Mullah Faizullah, but no one wants that either, and she is already promised to Rasheed. Miriam appeals to Jalil, to tell them that this won't happen, but he yells at her, and when Miriam is escorted back to her room, a lock clicks shut behind her.

Chapters 1-7 Analysis

Chapter 1 introduces the reader to one of the main characters, Miriam, and her mother, Nana, living in their kolba. Miriam is at an age where she finds her father fascinating, as he represents the world beyond the limits of the kolba and hills. Her mother is unhappy about her regard for her father, and it seems like there will be some tension about how this relationship between Miriam and Jalil goes forward. It is not clear what the plot of the book will be, at this point, but the characters have interesting aspects.

In Chapter 2, there is a discrepancy between Nana's version of events and Jalil's version, and Miriam is caught in the middle, incapable of knowing who to believe. The reader does not know, although it does look like the rich man's stories might be less accurate than the poor woman's—he can afford the luxury of lies. It is still not clear which example Miriam will follow: Nana's or Jalil's.

In Chapter 3, when Mullah Faizullah tries to convince Nana to let Miriam go to a real school, Nana refuses, because the world is cruel, and Miriam will be tormented by mean children. She really wants to keep Miriam home with her, but her dismissal of the situation does not leave Miriam feeling very comfortable. There is still not a real tension



between Miriam and Nana, but like many mothers and daughters, it seems realistic to expect that there will be tension soon.

In Chapter 4, now the tension begins to take shape as Miriam starts to wonder what it would be like to live in her father's world as his daughter, instead of as a Harami, bastard, in the kolba.

In Chapter 5, fairly quickly, now, the tension between Jalil and Nana in Miriam's life has worked itself out into an event that will change everything for Miriam: now she will not be able to stay in the kolba. She has also suffered two shocks: Jalil's renunciation of her, and her mother's renunciation of everything. These will certainly be driving her throughout the rest of the book.

Chapter 6 is a transitional chapter, that slows the pace between Nana's death and Miriam's marriage to Rasheed. Miriam has suffered a crisis in learning to distrust Jalil, and she makes a pathetic character, with no one to look out for her except for Mullah Faizullah.

In Chapter 7, Miriam is married off to Rasheed as a way of finding a place for her. This is culturally very different from what Americans typically expect, so there is a certain tension here, as the reader's expectations conflict with the forced marriage of a young girl. Hosseini does not explain much but the marriage is experienced from Miriam's side and she is nervous and outraged by the arrangement.



Chapters 8-15

Chapters 8-15 Summary

In Chapter 8, in the morning is the marriage ceremony. Miriam is given nice clothes, and she is introduced to a mullah and Rasheed comes in. He is preceded by cigarette smoke and thick cologne. Rasheed has tickets for the return to Kabul, so the ceremony must take place quickly. When Miriam is asked whether she takes Rasheed for her husband, she does not answer, but one of Jalil's wives answers for her, "She does." Rasheed produces the rings, and forces the too-tight ring over Miriam's finger. Miriam and Rasheed prepare to take the bus together to Kabul. Before they go, Miriam and Jalil talk briefly. Jalil says that he will come and visit, but Miriam knows that this is a lie. Miriam is angry that she cannot even say goodbye to Mullah Faizullah, and Jalil is upset when she leaves, but Rasheed does not do much to comfort her.

In Chapter 9, Miriam and Rasheed arrive in Kabul, and Rasheed shows Miriam her room. Miriam cannot understand Rasheed well, because of his accent and dialect, and she is unhappy, but there is nothing to be done. She can't go home, and she can't return to Jalil. She studies her surroundings, the yard, the outhouse. She begins to cry, and Rasheed tells her that he has no patience for women's crying. He tells her that she will be sleeping in the guest room. Rasheed has put tuberose on the windowsill for Miriam's sake—her name means tuberose—and she is awkward in expressing her appreciation. He asks if he frightens her, but she feels he is making fun of her.

In Chapter 10, Miriam does not leave her room for the first few days. When Rasheed is out, she studies the house a little at a time, trying to figure out how she will ever be at home here. She reminisces about Mullah Faizullah and Herat, and at the end of each day, she is practically in an agony of anticipation for Rasheed's return home. Rasheed typically tells Miriam about his day—he makes shoes for high-level officers in the government. He talks to her about politics and asks Miriam if she is ever going to unpack her suitcase. He tells her that he has run out of patience, that he expects her to act like a wife tomorrow. The next morning, Miriam unpacks, and begins to clean her room and the rest of the house. She prepares lentils with carrots and potatoes, in addition to bread, and then she sets out to the communal tandoor, or oven. Miriam overhears a number of conversations on the way to the tandoor, and she is intimidated by all the other people. Fariba (who will turn out to be Laila's mother) taps on her shoulder and asks if she is Rasheed's new wife. Miriam starts to get overwhelmed by all the women's interest in her, and she runs away. She cannot recognize Rasheed's house, though, and has to ask for it. When Rasheed comes home, Miriam serves him dinner, and he is not thrilled, but he is not entirely critical either. When Rasheed tells her that he food might be a little bit better than good, she is delighted to finally get some recognition and praise. Rasheed tells her that an important part of being a wife is keeping herself hidden when she is out in public, and he gives her a burqa.



In Chapter 11, Miriam tries on the burqa and finds that it is disorienting to cover herself. She loses her peripheral vision, but she finds that she enjoys the anonymity. No one can see her expressions, so she is safe from them. Rasheed takes her to a park, and a kebab house. She sees Rasheed as someone who protects her, and she has her first experience of restaurants, and of ice cream. In the city, she feels ignorant and inexperienced, compared to the Westernized women with their fancy clothes and handbags. When Rasheed makes Miriam a gift of a shawl, he shows her respect by averting his eyes from her. That night, he gets in bed with her, and undresses her. They have intercourse, which is a first for Miriam, and even though she is shell shocked, he tells her "there is no shame in this Miriam. It's what married people do. It's what the Prophet himself and his wives did. There is no shame." (p. 77).

In Chapter 12, at Ramadan in 1974, Miriam sees the holiday transform the entire city, and the experience is sweet. Rasheed is becoming more gruff with her. Miriam recalls Ramadan at the kolba, where Mullah Faizullah would come to visit. When Miriam and Rasheed go into the streets, Fariba recognizes Miriam, and Rasheed warns Miriam away from her. "She's a nosy gossip, that one," he tells her. (p. 80). When visitors come to the house, Rasheed shoos Miriam upstairs, and she feels cut off from the company, but she also felt like a prized possession. When she is cleaning, one day, though, she finds Rasheed's girly magazines, and is horrified that he should go to these naked women with his desire. She also finds a gun in Rasheed's drawer, and a photo of his drowned son Yunus. This experience fills Miriam with mixed emotions—shame for having snooped, but also sadness for Rasheed's sake, for the loss of his son. It makes her feel kinship with him for the first time.

In Chapter 13, Miriam is pregnant at the beginning of this chapter. She is noticing colors everywhere, and considering baby names. Rasheed is interested in boy names, but doesn't care what they name a girl. In the morning, Miriam finds that Rasheed has been building a crib for the baby. He has been buying boy baby clothes, and making preparations for a boy. When company comes, and Miriam is by herself, she thinks with pride of the step she is taking by having a baby. Rasheed takes her to a bathhouse, and she sits by herself, scrubbing her heels. Suddenly "there was blood and she was screaming" as she has a miscarriage. (p. 90).

In Chapter 14, Miriam grieves over the miscarriage, as everything reminds her of her failure to have the baby. Other people's children make her angry and sad. She feels that she is a failure, that she effectively killed her mother. The change affects Rasheed as well—he is quiet more often, and more often irritated by Miriam. In conversation, he is impatient and snappish, and when Miriam suggests they have a burial, he leaves it up to her. He is not involved.

Chapter 15 begins with the murder of Mir Akbar Khyber, a prominent Communist. This is the event that began the downfall of President Daoud Khan's government, but when Miriam asks about what's going on, Rasheed hushes her, insulting her for her ignorance. It is four years later, and Miriam has had six more miscarriages, and she has become really afraid of Rasheed's moods, his violence, and his presence. Military planes fly over Kabul, and the government is toppled. The communists begin to execute



everyone involved in Daoud Khan's regime, and they make promises about how things will be better. There will be education for girls and more camaraderie. Miriam wonders whether Jalil will be dispossessed of his cinema and wealth. Down the street from Miriam, Fariba gives birth to a new baby, and names it Laila. Miriam serves Rasheed dinner, but he complains, and storms out of the house. He comes back in with pebbles, and tells them to put them in her mouth. He makes her chew, and tells her that this is what her rice is like, to eat. She breaks two molars as a result.

Chapters 8-15 Analysis

In Chapter 8, the wedding takes place against Miriam's wishes, but the cultural expectations for everyone around her are not offended by the arrangement—this seems to be common enough. Women do not have much status, so they can be exchanged between men, as Jalil is giving her to Rasheed. Her despair is hard to read, but it is still early in the novel, so the reader is not sure how this low point will appear in the larger picture.

In Chapter 9, Miriam's introduction to married life is a bit harsh. She is obviously unhappy, and Rasheed is gruff at best. He is also ominous, and Miriam does not have any options. He expects her to be happy for the tiny gesture of putting tuberoses on her windowsill, but this is the only nice thing he's done for her.

In Chapter 10, as Miriam starts to adjust, it does not look much like she will have a good time. Rasheed treats her like an unpleasant servant, and he is in control of everything. She does not have a say in anything. She gets no help from other women, but has to figure everything out for herself, and the novel shows the reader her terror. When she does finally get some small praise for her cooking, it is quickly undercut by Rasheed's demand that she wear a burqa. The novel seems to be an exercise in suffering, although the reader has met Miriam at a time when she was finding the courage to venture to Jalil's house alone—and now the reader has to wonder what else she will be enterprising enough to do.

In Chapter 11, marriage with Rasheed is a mixed bag for Miriam, but it is mostly unpleasant. She is surprised to find that she can enjoy certain aspects of wearing a burqa, and Rasheed does take care of her when they go out, but his lovemaking is gruff at best, like his personality, and her pain is considerable but not considered at all. To a Westerner reading this account, it seems heartless, although of course it was the standard for thousands of years in many cultures.

Chapter 12 is a mixed bag, both revolting Miriam and filling her with hope, for the first time, that she and Rasheed might have some sadness in common, and that it might unite them. The girlie magazines, though, give a contrary indication, that they will remain split by cultural attitudes about women and men and sex and power.

Chapter 13: Miriam's hopes are quickly dashed, as she has a miscarriage, and the baby she expected washes out of her in the bathhouse. The loss is hers alone—since



Rasheed cannot share it with her, she has just disappointed him. Her grief takes her back to her mother, who said that the snowfall reminded her of women's suffering, the silence of it, the silent endurance.

Chapter 14: Grief drives a wedge between Miriam and Rasheed. She feels like a failure, and returns to her grief and shock from her mother's death. The miscarriage makes her guilty, and also angry at Rasheed. Rasheed retreats from her as if she had failed him.

Chapter 15: Things just don't get better for Miriam. Her miscarriages continue—six of them—and when the regime falls, her childhood is lost to a repressive regime. The progressive times are just beginning, but she is in an unsympathetic marriage, with a man who resents her presence, and treats her like a failure.



Chapters 16-20

Chapters 16-20 Summary

In Chapter 16, Laila and Tariq are best friends, and Laila expects to miss Tariq as he is going to be away for thirteen. Laila's mother (the reader knows that this is Fariba, whom Miriam met at the tandoor) is yelling at her husband, Babi, who is a sensitive scholar. Fariba and Babi are fighting downstairs. Her mother is passionate and headstrong and impatient, her father (Babi) is sheepish and moderate. He has taught Laila Persian and Afghani poetry, and he is excited about the prospect that she will be educated herself. Laila's father tells her that Tariq is back from the trip, and when she runs down the street to Tariq's house, she sees a Mercedes Benz parked outside of Rasheed's house. (The reader will find out that this is Jalil, dying, come to see Miriam).

In school, Laila is forbidden to cover herself, because the communists have promised opportunity for girls and women. Laila's nickname is 'revolutionary girl' because she was born on the night of the revolution. Jihad and coup are forbidden terms for the change of government. Laila receives a communist education. When Laila walks home with her friends Giti and Hasina, they talk about marriage and suitors, and they make plans to discourage unwanted suitors. Babi has always told Laila that the most important thing in life is schooling.

In Chapter 17, Laila is being pursued by a boy with a squirt gun, although it is not clear to the reader that it is water Laila might be shot with. The gun has piss in it, and Laila arrives home terror-stricken, and dives into a bath. Laila recalls that when her mother was having bad days, she would stay in her room and not open the door. When Mammy had good days, the house was filled with contentment, and she would tell Laila how she fell in love with Babi. Laila was two years old when her older brothers Ahmad and Noor left for the jihad against the Russians. Mammy's walls are covered with photos of Ahmad and Noor. The Afghans are fighting the Russians in the north, and the Russians are reputed to use landmines and torture in their campaign to subdue the Afghans. Laila tells her mother about the squirt gun incident, but Mammy is uninterested. She tells Laila that Laila doesn't know what it's like to feel grief for absent sons.

In Chapter 18, Laila fixes the screen door her father has not fixed. She is waiting for Tariq to come back, and she is giddy with relief when she sees Tariq's flashlight from down the street, blinking at her. Laila likes everything about Tariq's house and his parents. They are warm and welcoming toward her, and treat her like a daughter. They always eat as a family, unlike Laila's parents. Tariq and Laila are intimate friends, but she has the reputation for being smarter. They are just at the age when it is becoming clear that sex is going to be tricky to navigate, in the Afghanistan they live in. When Tariq sees the boy who'd shot piss at Laila, and he beats him with his false leg. He never bothers Laila again. Mammy does not typically make dinner, but Babi and Laila have leftovers. Babi helps Laila with her homework. He tells her that this is a good time for women in Afghanistan. They are teachers, ministers, and professionals.



In Chapter 19, a stocky man comes to the door with news that Ahmad and Noor have been killed in fighting in the north. General Massoud himself prayed for them, and this impresses Fariba, who has great faith in the cause that killed her sons. At the funeral, Laila is shooed away by the older women. At the wake at the house, she takes her spot beside her mother, and Miriam and Rasheed come in to pay respects. Mammy has a remote spiritless look.

Laila does not register the deaths of her brothers, since she never knew them. Her brother, Tariq, is alive and well, and she cannot grieve.

In Chapter 20, Ahmad and Noor's deaths make Mammy more religious, but she neglects everything else in her life, and she begins to suffer from pains and aches and complaints. She idealizes her dead sons, and Laila complains—inwardly, never to her mother—that she herself is right there, waiting to be loved.

Mammy even admits that she hasn't been much of a mother to her. Laila tells her that she is afraid that she might do something to herself, and Mammy admits that she has thought of it. Laila is hurt when her mother tells her that she herself as Laila is not the reason that she wants to stay alive. Instead, she wishes to see the cause her sons died from triumph in the end.

Chapters 16-20 Analysis

Chapter 16 introduces the reader to Laila and Tariq, who will figure prominently in the whole last part of the book. Tariq has lost a leg, but Laila cannot live without him. When he goes away, she suffers. Laila has blond hair, and she was born on the night of the coup, which is now called the revolution. The communists are educating girls, and Laila's father, Babi, is a scholar who teaches her poetry, and encourages her to follow her inclination. This is a drastic difference from the life Miriam has been living. Laila and Tariq seem to go together, and this is a contrast to Miriam's story as well. Laila has Tariq in a way that Miriam never had anyone else. She was always on her own.

Chapter 17 gives the reader more information about Afghan history, with the war against the Russians consuming the country. Laila's mother Mammy is grief-stricken over the absence of her sons.

In Chapter 18, this is a good time for women, in Afghanistan, and Laila, who was born on the night of the revolution, is associated with its values, which include education and opportunity and modernization. She and Tariq are notoriously good friends, and their friendship is going to test how progressive Afghanistan has come to be. The reader has seen how Miriam was treated. How will Laila be treated?

Chapter 19 shows the reader the gap between Laila and her mother, which opens because of her brothers' deaths. Laila thinks of Tariq as her brother, and the reader braces for Afghanistan itself to somehow interrupt their fraternal affection.



In Chapter 20, Laila is upset to see her mother so helpless in her grief, but there is nothing she can do, nor could there be. Her brothers were older than her, and she never knew them, so the loss is negligible for her, even though Mammy is devastated. Grief has yet to teach her anything—probably she is too young to be touched by it. Not with her affection for Tariq, certainly. She feels full and fortunate because of him.



Chapters 21-26

Chapters 21-26 Summary

In Chapter 21, the Soviet army withdraws from Afghanistan. Babi has taken Laila and Tariq to visit the two enormous Buddhas carved into the cliff at Bamiyan. Babi, Laila and Tariq climb to the top, and Babi is proud to be able to show Laila and Tariq this view. Babi tells Laila that he married Fariba because of her laugh, and he says that it's been very hard to lose two sons. He says that he thinks about leaving Afghanistan for Pakistan or America. He thinks about opening a restaurant in California, but he knows that Fariba will object that they need to stay in the country their sons died for.

Laila talks about having read Hemingway's "Old Man and the Sea", in which Santiago catches an enormous fish, but the sharks eat it before he can get it home. The chapter ends with a treaty when the Soviets declare peace with Afghanistan. But Mammy will not be satisfied until the Mujahideen holds a victory parade right there in Kabul.

In Chapter 22. Laila goes with her parents to see the last Soviet convoy leave Kabul in 1989. Tariq shows up in a Russian hat. Babi is listening to a man say that the Soviets will still be funding a civil war by giving arms and money to Najibullah.

Laila and Tariq go to the cinema the next day, and they agree that they are never getting married. They watch the movie, and laugh innocent laughter about the Soviet film they're watching.

In Chapter 23, three years later, Tariq's father has had a series of strokes. The fighting has remained a constant, as the Mujahideen has been warring against Najibullah. Najibullah's government falls in 1992, and the communists are thrown out of power. The peace is short-lived, though, as the different bands of Mujahideen fighters turn against each other. Mammy's favorite is Massoud, the Lion of Panjshir. Najibullah's surrender brings Mammy back to life. She rises from bed, and begins to pay attention to Laila, and her friendship with Tariq. She warns Laila against getting too close with him. Laila begins to notice how she is looked at, and begins to worry, herself. Mammy throws a big party as the transitional government puts itself together. Laila and her friend Giti talk about boys and the marriage Giti expects to make. Tariq calls Laila out of the party, and smokes a cigarette, which she disapproves of. But Laila and Tariq turn the others' attention into a game, and it only strengthens their intimacy in the end. When they return to the party, a Pashtun fellow is fighting with a Tajik over politics. The détente unravels and now armed militias begin to fight each other. Rockets begin to rain down on Kabul.

In Chapter 24, Kabul is under attack and people are dying. When the bombs explode, Laila and her family know they have been spared, but they have to wonder who has been killed. Tariq tells her what has happened, as Laila has been confined in the house during the bombings. When they are nervous together, he holds her hand, and then



kiss. It's June 1992 and the fighting is intense. Laila's father wants to flee to Pakistan, but Fariba refuses, out of loyalty to the nation her sons fought for. Babi tries to argue that the factions have betrayed that cause, but she refuses to leave. Things became so unsafe that Laila drops out of school. Laila and Tariq are also beginning to get intimate, kissing for long periods. Laila's friend Giti is blown up by a bomb and they find her foot two weeks later on a nearby rooftop.

In Chapter 25, Tariq tells Laila that he and his family are leaving for Pakistan. Tariq's father's heart is not strong enough for the strain of rocket attacks. Many others are fleeing, but Fariba still refuses to leave with Laila and Hakim. Laila and Tariq make love for the first time, and Tariq says that he wants to marry Laila, but Laila thinks of her mother telling her that she is all she has, and she doesn't have the heart to leave her mother. Tariq leaves, and Laila is left in Kabul with her parents.

In Chapter 26, finally Fariba has agreed to move: a bullet has come into the inner wall of the house, and Fariba and Babi are scared. They have lost their sons, but they still have Laila, and do not want to lose her. As they prepare to move, Laila thinks about the guilt and pleasure of making love with Tariq. She describes the pain of losing Tariq as an amputee's pain for losing a limb. Laila and her family pare down their possessions and sell the rest. Leaving Kabul makes Babi think of the line from Saib-e-Tabrizi:

"One could not count the moons that shimmer on her roofs

Or the thousand splendid suns that hide behind her walls."

A bomb blows up Laila's house, and kills both of her parents. The next thing she knows is that she cannot hear and it hurts to breathe.

Chapters 21-26 Analysis

In Chapter 21, Afghanistan is the main character in this chapter. Babi takes Laila and Tariq to Bamiyan to show them the history and the landscape that persists through every invasion. It is an ominous image, the Buddhas that endure every invasion, because they will be dynamited in a later chapter—a portentous symbol of Afghani culture. The peace that accompanies the Soviet withdrawal is not satisfying for Fariba, she is still unhappy about the loss of her sons, and refuses to relinquish her grief.

In Chapter 22, after the weight of the history and the tragedy of Fariba's grief, this chapter is a short interlude, which shows the reader that Laila and Tariq are still young and innocent, and marriage are still far off for them.

Chapter 23 brings a couple of threads to a point. Laila's relationship with Tariq is finally a topic of open discussion, not just anticipation, and the political status of Afghanistan is front and center, with the instability following Najibullah's stepping down. The instability is increasing, but the reader holding the book knows the book is not halfway done, yet, so he will just have to hold on and see how this is going to turn out. The suspense,



though, is being built effectively, with the combination of war and marriage, making it global and personal at the same time.

In Chapter 24, the stakes are beginning to rise in Afghanistan and in the relationship between Laila and Tariq. This is still information for the reader. It is not clear what power Laila and Tariq even have, to choose their fates, but their reactions show the measure of the events surrounding them, and their intimacy shows the historical events for mere backdrop, behind their affection.

In Chapter 25, the reader sees that the course of this love is not going to run smooth. Laila and Tariq are destined to be separated, and there are two explanations, one political, one personal: the war, and Fariba's refusal to relocate. They are interwoven, and the emotions are hard to bear, but nothing can be solved yet—no one has the power to solve anything, only to flee.

Chapter 26 is a climax of sorts and the end of Part 2. After dangling the possibility of escape—and an American-style exile from home, emigration to a land of prosperity, etc. Laila's parents are killed and this throws her back into Kabul society. Rasheed and Miriam are the ones who find her in the rubble and nurse her, but she does not know this yet. There is only the agonizing loss of family as well as the lost intimacy with Tariq, which is still very present to her.



Chapters 27-35

Chapters 27-35 Summary

In Chapter 27, Laila is being nursed by Miriam and Rasheed. Rasheed had found her in the rubble with metal stuck in her shoulder. Rasheed tells her that Tariq's house has been occupied by militia boys, but then it too has been blown up. Laila says that she should be there, and Miriam cannot console her. She remembers the words from the Koran being insufficient when Mullah Faizullah read them at her mother's funeral.

In Chapter 28, Abdul Sharif comes to Rasheed's house to tell Laila that he was in a hospital with Tariq, and he was there when Tariq died of wounds from being fired upon in the convoy of refugees. As Laila takes the news, she finds herself resembling her mother, except that she isn't screaming, she's just paralyzed with grief.

In Chapter 29, Miriam is furious to see Rasheed so solicitous of Laila in her recovery. She has lost any affection she ever got from him, but now he treats everything Laila says as brilliant. Talking with Miriam at night, Rasheed justifies his decision to marry Laila. Miriam cannot do anything to prevent him. He says that he wants to normalize the situation, since people will talk if he keeps taking care of Laila without marrying. She is only fourteen to his sixty-plus, but the law is on his side, and the war makes it a practical decision, particularly for Laila. She would not get far if she were to try to leave town on her own, and her beauty would only land her in a brothel or get her raped and killed.

In Chapter 30, Rasheed trades in Miriam's old wedding ring to buy a ring for Laila. When she thought that she could join Tariq in Pakistan, Laila planned to leave Afghanistan, but now it is too dangerous, especially with her pregnancy. She marries Rasheed, and accepts him as a lover, in order to camouflage the pregnancy that has already started.

In Chapter 31, Miriam and Laila avoid each other around the house. Rasheed tries to generate conversation at meals, but the antipathy between them is too strong. He tells Laila the rules such as not to leave the house without him or be uncovered. He tells Miriam that she will get what Laila needs. He makes Miriam his eyes and ears in his absence, setting the women against each other. Laila tries to moderate Rasheed's words, and apologize to Miriam, but the situation itself is too unfair, especially after everything Miriam has suffered at Rasheed's hands and she is angry. She tells Laila the rules herself, and divides the chores up so they are a little more equitable.

In Chapter 32, Laila remembers hearing how Rasheed's son had died: Rasheed himself was "crying drunk" at the time (p. 227). Miriam suffers when Laila tells Rasheed that she is pregnant. Her status leaps even higher in Rasheed's eyes, and Miriam is treated even more coarsely.



In Afghanistan, the factions begin to fight each other. "Sayyaf was fighting the Hazaras. The Hazaras were fighting Massoud. And he's fighting Hekmatyar, who has the support of the Pakistanis. No one knew where Dostum would stand." (p. 230). Like Miriam, Laila finds comfort in the anonymity of the burqa when she goes to Rasheed's shoe shop. She has her "first true fight" with Miriam: Miriam blamed Laila for a spoon's being misplaced, and they called each other names.

In Chapter 33, in the spring of 1993, Laila gives birth to her baby, Aziza. Rasheed is unhappy not to have a son, and he is curt and careless of her. He hates the noises and sounds the baby makes, but Laila loves her new baby, which is Tariq's, anyway. Laila asks Rasheed for appropriate clothes for Aziza—he had only bought boy's clothes. Miriam is incensed to watch Laila's devotion to the baby, and she is spiteful even when Laila 'falls from grace' in Rasheed's eyes. When Laila refuses to sleep with him, Rasheed attacks Miriam, as if she had set Laila against him. But then Laila attacks Rasheed to protect Miriam. When Miriam wakes up in the middle of the night, she puts her finger in the baby's hand, and lets the baby hold her finger for a long time.

In Chapter 34, Laila loves to lie with her daughter. Rasheed asks her what there used to be between her and Tariq, but she says there was nothing. Sometimes she steals from Rasheed, as she expects to leave him and go to Pakistan. One morning Laila wakes up to find baby clothes outside her door. Miriam had made them for the babies she never had, and she thanks Laila for standing up for her, and now Aziza begins to recognize and develop affection for Miriam.

In Chapter 35, in 1994, the fighting intensifies, and "there was looting, murder, and, increasingly, rape, which was used to intimidate civilians and reward militiamen." (p. 253). Rasheed waves his gun around and vows to protect his household. One night, Miriam tells Laila her whole story, of Jalil and her mother and her epilepsy. Laila returns the favor by inviting Miriam to run away with her.

Chapters 27-35 Analysis

Chapter 27 begins another part, so the reader is put back in the position of gathering information and getting oriented to determine what's happened. The reader knows that Laila's parents have been killed, and Tariq is gone. She has been injured, but will likely survive. There is no real tension between her and Miriam yet, but neither is there any desire that would create tension. Instead, there is just recovery and an uncertain future.

In Chapter 28, the reader will find out later that this story of Tariq's death is a big lie concocted by Rasheed so that he can marry Laila, but the impact is real to the reader in the process of reading, and the news is devastating. Bad things just keep happening, and the characters are hardly beginning to develop the ability to handle the grief that descends on them. Miriam's Nana's words ring distantly about the silence with which women bear suffering but Laila, like Miriam, has yet to develop an ability to bear up. She is just numb.



In Chapter 29, Laila has not seen it yet, but she is about to experience the decisions Afghani women have to face, which are compounded by the wartime circumstances. She cannot get by on her own, and she is hasty to accept Rasheed's proposal. It will keep her alive and with Tariq's child inside her, she will at least have something of Tariq.

In Chapter 30, a mother's virtue seems to be different from other kinds of virtue and Laila seems to be practicing a canniness that resembles a survival instinct, in marrying Rasheed. She knows it is unfair to Miriam, and this unfairness will take some time to reconcile, but it is what her baby needs, even though it is still tiny. The ramifications of this decision will affect the rest of the novel.

In Chapter 31, Laila's biggest difficulty is not accepting Rasheed but it is in handling the new opposition with Miriam. Miriam is hostile toward Laila, and she has no say in her husband's decision, so she is hardly civil to Laila, even though Laila herself wanted nothing of this situation.

In Chapter 32, as Rasheed is delighted by Laila's pregnancy, tensions between Laila and Miriam are increasing, so that their fight over the misplaced spoon devolves into name calling and anger. There does not seem to be much possibility of a resolution, but the situation seems like it might be able to go on for a long time, as Miriam's marriage has, in misery.

Chapter 33: Suddenly the gap between Miriam and Laila is closing: they are both in the same position, outside of Rasheed's favor. Rasheed is so unhappy that Laila has a girl—and that she is happy with it, happy outside of his power—that he takes it out on Miriam. When Laila protects her, the bond begins to form between them.

Chapter 34: The reader knows that Laila has no respect for Rasheed, but now she is beginning to collect money by taking it from him, to make a fund to escape to Pakistan. Rasheed is suspicious of her tie with Tariq. Miriam gives Laila her baby clothes for Aziza, and a friendship begins to develop between them—now the power has started to shift, and there is the possibility that something will oppose Rasheed—and withstand the political and military violence surrounding Miriam and Laila.

Chapter 35: As the political situation deteriorates, and Kabul becomes less safe, Miriam and Laila begin to take matters into their own hands, and make plans to leave. Their intimacy is a big help to the narrative, which has gotten heavy and depressing, with Rasheed in power, and political violence taking place everywhere around Kabul.



Chapters 36-40

Chapters 36-40 Summary

In Chapter 36, Miriam and Laila make their escape in a taxi to the bus station. There they ask a man traveling with his wife and child to pose as a cousin. When they go to board the bus, though, he turns them in to the Mujahideen militiamen, who are strictly policing the integrity of Islamic law, or Shari'a.

Miriam and Laila are interrogated, and sent back to Rasheed. When they arrive back home, Rasheed beats Miriam, then locks Laila in her room with Aziza. He nails the doors shut and covers the windows, and leaves her there for two days without water. When he comes in, he kicks Laila so hard she pisses blood for three days.

In Chapter 37, in 1996, the Taliban arrive in Kabul. Their arrival promises to end the infighting between factions. Najibullah has been hung as an example. As the Taliban drive through the streets with bullhorns, they announce the new laws: Afghanistan will be a strict Islamist state, and people will be beaten if they do not follow the laws: men will wear beards, women will wear burqas, singing and dancing are forbidden, as are books, cards, films, and music.

In Chapter 38, Islamists destroyed Afghani art and artifacts at the museum, and they destroy libraries and cinemas. ON Fridays, Rasheed goes to the stadium to watch the punishments. He has turned against Laila, and threatens to give Aziza away, which he would be within his rights to do.

Laila finds that she is pregnant, and tries to dislodge the fetus with a bicycle spoke. But she cannot do it. "She had seen enough killing of innocent civilians caught in the crossfire of enemies." (p. 284).

In Chapter 39, when Laila goes into labor, she is turned away from the hospital, which is a men's-only hospital. She goes to the women's hospital and conditions there are so bad, the doctors don't have what they need, and they are forced even to operate in burqas. Laila needs a cesarean and she is cut open without anesthetic. Miriam admires her for how long she waits to scream when she is cut open.

In Chapter 40, Miriam and Laila dig a hole to bury the tv to hide it from the Taliban. There is drought in Afghanistan, and the people are leaving, or suffering. Zalmai is now two, and Laila loves him in spite of her disdain for Rasheed. Laila and Aziza have become inseparable, although Rasheed threatens to turn her into a beggar on the street. She slaps Rasheed, then punches him, until he lifts her off the ground by the throat. Dropping the tv into the hole makes Laila dream that she is burying Aziza.



Chapters 36-40 Analysis

In Chapter 36, the failure of Miriam and Laila's escape attempt is a blow to the developing narrative - the reader has begun to hope that the intimacy between the two women will find better circumstances to grow in, but their betrayal by their 'cousin' is a hard fact to stomach. The beating Rasheed gives them both is a hard fact, and it delays any pleasure the reader might expect from the conclusion. It does, however, also demonize Rasheed, so that his eventual murder seems less objectionable.

In Chapter 37, the advent of the Taliban is good news only to someone like Rasheed, who has a business that will thrive better in stable times than in unstable times. He has little to lose by the harsh Islamic laws whereas Laila watches everything she was raised to appreciate become against the law.

In Chapter 38, when Laila becomes pregnant, the idea fills her with revulsion but so does the idea of killing the baby. There is too much killing for her—even the misery of the child's likely existence seems preferable to her to the non-existence of death.

In Chapter 39: Miriam and Laila become closer through this chapter, which is really about the Taliban and its changes in Afghanistan. Medical supplies are rare, and prohibitions have a stifling effect on the doctors. The inhumane scene of Miriam and Laila trying to get seen at the hospital seems intended to inspire dread in the reader, and to demonstrate the terrible parts of Miriam and Laila's situation.

In Chapter 40: It is not clear what Miriam and Laila are digging a hole for, at the beginning of the chapter, so the reader wonders if it is for the new baby, or for Aziza, or perhaps for Rasheed. When it is revealed that it is for the tv, there is some relief, but the absurdity of the situation is clear, and the Taliban looks outrageous for their thoroughgoing repressions. The drought only worsens conditions, forcing people out of Afghanistan to Iran and Pakistan, and making life harder for those who stayed. Laila is still standing up for herself, and now Aziza, but she is paying a price for it, in Rasheed's beatings.



Chapters 41-47

Chapters 41-47 Summary

In Chapter 41, the third year of the drought, 2000, is the summer of Titanic, as the American movie swept through Kabul and gave everyone images for the tragic lovers defying convention to get away. Rasheed loses everything in a fire, and then has to find work as a cook, or in other jobs, where he is often fired for his belligerent personality. He fights more with Miriam and Laila, and threatens to kill Laila.

Miriam tries to get in touch with Jalil. It had been his Mercedes outside of Rasheed's house, in Laila's childhood: he had left her a letter when she wouldn't see him. She calls the mayor's office in Herat, and finds out that Jalil has died in 1987.

In Chapter 42, in April 2001, Massoud is fighting from the north against Taliban forces in the south. Laila learns that the Taliban has dynamited the Buddhas at Bamiyan, but she is indifferent, her own life is so miserable. Laila and Rasheed take Aziza to an orphanage and leave her there, because they cannot take care of her. The orphanage director talks with them and reassure Laila that she is not a bad person, that the conditions have put many parents in this position. Back at home, Laila is distracted with her grief, and Miriam tries to convince her not to make it worse for herself. Rasheed soon stops coming with Laila to visit Aziza at the orphanage, and Laila goes by herself, subjecting herself to searches and beatings by the Taliban militiamen. But she will not stop trying to see her daughter. During a visit Aziza tells Laila about the tectonic plates on the earth, and Laila watches her become smarter and smarter—but she still wants to come home, and she has developed a stutter. Rasheed has found work as a doorman at a hotel. One day while he is at work, Zalmai complains about a man standing near the house: it is Tariq.

In Chapter 43, Miriam keeps Zalmai distracted while Laila and Tariq catch up downstairs. Zalmai is upset by the strange man in the house.

In Chapter 44, Tariq tells Laila about being in prison, and the beatings he took. She regrets marrying Rasheed, but she thought Tariq was dead. He tells her that his parents have died, and he tells her about his goat. He is working as a caretaker at a Victorian resort in Pakistan.

At dinner, Zalmai tells Rasheed that "Mammy has a new friend." (p. 334).

Tariq tells Laila about his trip to Pakistan with his family, and their difficulties. His father died, and he himself stole a blanket from another boy.

Rasheed figures out who Laila's visitor is, and accuses her of lying to him. She says that he lied to her about Tariq's death, and he tells her that he knew all along that the child was Tariq's. Tariq tells Laila that he wrote her volumes, but she never got any letters. He tells her about getting a job in Murree, in Pakistan, and how the man who employed him



was good to him, giving him full pay. He tells Laila that Aziza is lovely. For the first time, Laila is "recklessly hopeful." (p. 343)

Chapter 45 picks up with the dinner conversation, with Zalmai telling Rasheed about Laila's visit with Tariq. Rasheed sends Zalmai upstairs, and begins to beat Laila. Miriam tries to intervene, but he pushes her away. Laila tries to evade his blows, and manages to get a few blows in herself, but he catches her and begins to strangle her. Miriam gets a shovel, and brings it down on Rasheed's head. When he is only stunned, she raises the shovel again, and "this time, she gave it everything she had." (p. 349).

In Chapter 46, Laila comes to, and realizes what has happened. Miriam and Laila wrap Rasheed in a sheet, and take him out to the shed. Laila tries to imagine a way for them to escape together, but Miriam knows that they will follow them and then they will both suffer. Zalmai wants Rasheed to come say prayers with him at night, but Laila tells him that Rasheed has gone away. In the morning, Miriam tells Laila to go visit Aziza, and take her away. Miriam says that she cannot come along. "What will happen to your children if you're caught," she asks Laila. (p. 358) This convinces Laila to go on her own, to escape. She takes Zalmai and goes to Aziza, and never sees Miriam again.

In Chapter 47, the women's prison resembles the kolba. Miriam has some status in the prison because she has killed a man, whereas the others are mostly thieves. Another prisoner tells a story of a failed elopement, and Miriam has reason to recall her mother saying that "Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always." (p. 362). At the trial, Miriam confesses what she did, and gets no leniency because of the circumstance. The judge is dying, and is preparing to answer for his own life, so he has no problem sentencing Miriam to death for her actions. He says that Allah will ask him why he forgave something that was not his to forgive. Miriam expects to be executed, and hopes that she can be dignified when the time comes. Ten days after her trial, she cries a little when a guard tells her that it is not undignified to cry, or to be afraid. At the execution, Miriam steps down from the truck and is dignified. Her knees do not falter. When asked to kneel, she "did as she was told." (p. 371).

Chapters 41-47 Analysis

In Chapter 41, the drought throws a further degree of misery into the lives of Miriam and Laila, as now they have struggles to find enough food. Rasheed loses his shop in a fire, and the misery is compounded. This small family's survival will be miraculous if they can bring it about. Miriam's attempt to contact Jalil is a last-ditch, desperate attempt, but it takes the reader back over some familiar territory—of Miriam's childhood—with the hope that Jalil might still help them.

In Chapter 42, Laila's determination to visit Aziza is touching, and humanizes the sufferings that she and Miriam are enduring because of the Taliban and the drought. But they are still infrequent, and the reader gets a sense that Laila must spend her days in distracted despair, waiting for another chance to see Aziza. Tariq's reappearance, on



first reading, is miraculous, but the reader soon discovers that Rasheed would not have been above such lies, to get his way.

Chapter 43 is a very short chapter is nonetheless full of anticipation and danger, as Tariq has come to Laila's house. The reader knows that when Rasheed finds out, there is going to be a confrontation, and probably violence.

In Chapter 44, Tariq is back in town. All of a sudden, Laila and Miriam have a potential ally against Rasheed, although the reader already expects a violent response when he finds out he is being threatened by Tariq's presence. The chapter cuts back and forth between Laila's interview with Tariq and the dinner, later, when Zalmai tells Rasheed about the visit. This is the first time the book has played with chronology, and the effect is chilling, at the same time that it kindles all the resentments that have built up through Miriam and Laila's sufferings.

In Chapter 45, Rasheed's violence has been part of his personality all along, and now he finally acts out all the threats he's ever made. But Miriam makes the ultimate gesture of support for Laila, killing Rasheed to protect her. There is some satisfaction in the killing, since the reader has watched Rasheed treat both women badly, but of course it is a crime, and this raises the question of who will pay, and how.

In Chapter 46, Miriam's gesture to Laila, to take responsibility for what she did, and not to try to hide it, sets Laila free. It is one of the only straightforwardly decent things that has happened in the novel, and the freedom Miriam creates is bought dearly with her sacrifice, but it is honest and morally clean for her to take responsibility for the murder of Rasheed, since to flee would bring ruin to Laila, Aziza, and Zalmai.

In Chapter 47, as Miriam is slated for execution, she considers her hard life, which had never given her much freedom. Miriam has high status in the prison because of her crime, and she meets other women who are worse off than herself—at least she had Laila and Aziza to love and take care of, and at least her crime was a righteous one, taking one life instead of another. The last line of the story is almost wry, as it harps on Miriam's passivity.



Chapters 48-51

Chapters 48-51 Summary

In Chapter 48, Tariq has migraines, but Laila is there to take care of him. They have married, and they lay together at night, telling each other about all that's happened. Aziza and Tariq have become intimate, but Zalmai is not at home—he still wants his father. Together, the family takes trips to see places around their new home in Pakistan.

In Chapter 49, Massoud is killed in an ambush by Al-Qaeda operatives posing as journalists. Laila thinks of her mother's hero as the man who took part in the destructive wars. Shortly after that news comes across, the World Trade Center attacks take place, and now foreign and Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden are all anyone is talking about. The U.S. declares war on Afghanistan. Tariq is optimistic that war will improve conditions, but Laila has seen too much of it, and she becomes irate at his suggestion.

In Chapter 50, in 2002, the Taliban is in retreat, and Afghanistan has a new president, Hamid Karzai. Laila tells Tariq that she wants to leave Pakistan and return to Afghanistan. She wants to carry on the tradition of the learning her father gave her. She wants to make sure Miriam did not die in vain. She wants to contribute. Leaving Murree is hard for Zalmai, and Laila promises him a goat of his own, like the goat they keep there. Traveling through Iran, Laila sees religious sites that are well preserved, and she thinks sadly of the dynamited Buddhas. Laila and Tariq visit Herat, and Laila goes to the kolba, or what is left of it. She goes first to Mullah Faizullah's house, and Mullah Faizullah's son, Hamza, takes her to the kolba, where she imagines a young Miriam, her whole life about to happen to her. After she visits the kolba, Hamza gives her a box with a letter from Jalil to Miriam, and also with money Jalil had left for Miriam. "I hope you do not think that I am trying to buy your forgiveness...I am merely giving you, if belatedly, what was rightfully yours all along." (p. 406).

In Chapter 51, the rains have returned to Afghanistan and Tariq has found work with a non-governmental organization (NGO). Aziza and Zalmai are more at home, and Zalmai is accepting Tariq. The warlords are still around—they blast through town in expensive SUVs, with positions in the new government—but Laila has her hands full with things closer to home, the orphanage, the children. She is also pregnant, and Tariq, Aziza and Zalmai discuss names for the baby. They only suggest male names. "Because, if it's a girl, Laila has already named her." (p. 415).

Chapters 48-51 Analysis

In Chapter 48, life is finally normalizing for Laila and Tariq and Aziza and Zalmai. There is still the lie about Rasheed being away on a trip, but Laila's comfort will probably be the source from which others' comforts flow as well.



In Chapter 49, global political events take center stage here, although the perspective is not lost: Laila still sees war through the lens of her own experience, and she cannot share Tariq's faith that it will improve anything. It will still kill women and children.

In Chapter 50, Miriam paid for Laila's freedom with her life, so Laila's first act on returning to Afghanistan is to visit Miriam's childhood home in Herat, where she gets the inheritance that was meant for Miriam. Jalil had tried to contact her, but she had not seen him. Miriam's life certainly was difficult, and the narrator is unapologetic about the difficulties she confronted. Such, the reader has to assume, was life in Afghanistan.

In Chapter 51, this ending is a blessing for Laila and Tariq, for with Jalil's money, they can do what they like. The fact that they start an orphanage and school is a testament to the sufferings they have endured, and the love they still have to give in spite of it all. The narrator tries to avoid summing things up, and justifying or pointing a moral out of the sufferings in the story—particularly Miriam's. Laila has a reverence for her sufferings, though, and she continues to remember what Miriam did for her. The final sentence that Laila will name the baby for her if it is a girl is a touching way of indicating that debt, and of acknowledging that Miriam's story will become part of the next round of stories, as this baby grows up.



Characters

Miriam

Miriam is the daughter of Jalil and Nana and she is born out of wedlock. She is raised in a kolba or hut in the hills above Herat or the town where kill lives with his legitimate wives and children. She is married off to Rasheed after her mother kills herself, and Rasheed abuses her, after she fails to have a child for him. When Laila comes to live with them, she is resentful and angry, but as Rasheed abuses Laila as well, the two women eventually befriend each other. When Rasheed is strangling Laila, Miriam kills him with a shovel. She is eventually executed for her crime, but she seems to have accepted her fate, and is glad she has at least saved Laila and her daughter.

Laila

Laila is the daughter of Fariba and Hakim. She is beautiful with blonde hair, which is uncommon. She is best friends with Tariq, the one-legged carpenter's son and she makes love with him shortly before her family is killed by a bomb. When she hears that Tariq has been killed as well, she agrees to marry Rasheed, and she allows him to think that her child is his. Laila has been raised on poetry, and does not fare well in Rasheed's moody and violent temper. She tries to run away, and when she hears that Tariq is back in town, she is nearly strangled by Rasheed. When Miriam kills Rasheed, Laila and Tariq marry and return to Kabul where they run an orphanage.

Tariq

Tariq is the one-legged son of a carpenter. He is Laila's best friend and he loses her when she is injured in the rocket attack that kills her parents. He comes back to Kabul and finds year years later, when she has had two children with Rasheed. After Miriam kills Rasheed, Laila and Tariq flee to Pakistan, but ultimately return to Kabul and start an orphanage there.

Rasheed

Rasheed is the shoemaker who marries first Miriam and then Laila. He doesn't have children with Miriam, but has a son Zalmai with Laila.

Aziza

Aziza is Laila's daughter with Tariq. When times are hard in Kabul, Laila leaves her in an orphanage, but after Tariq returns, she retrieves her, and they flee to Pakistan together before returning to Kabul.



Nana

Nana is Miriam's mother. She is an unhappy woman, always predicting suffering for herself and Miriam, and she hangs herself when Miriam goes into town to see her father at his house.

Mammy

Mammy is Laila's mother. She is often depressed and despondent over the absence and then the deaths of her sons Ahmad and Noor, in the war against the Soviets. When the war finally approaches Kabul, she finally gets motivated to leave, but she and her husband are killed in a rocket attack while they are packing.

Massoud

Massoud is the commander of the Afghani forces fighting the Soviets. As someone predicts, the warlords begin to fight against each other and Massoud ends up waging campaigns against other militias.

Zalmai

Description



Objects/Places

Herat

Herat is where Miriam's father lives. Miriam and her mother live in a hut on the outskirts of this place in the hills.

Kabul

Kabul is where Rasheed has a shoemaking business and it is where Miriam goes when she is married off to him. It is also where Laila and Tariq live and it is where the novel concludes, as Laila and Tariq return there with their family after the wars are over.

Shahr-e-Sohak

This is where two enormous Buddhas have been carved into the cliffs of an ancient city. The Islamists dynamite these Buddhas, much to Laila's dismay. She had visited there with her father and Tariq, climbing to the top together to look out on the valley below.

Pakistan

This is where Afghani refugees flee to from the wars in Afghanistan. Laila and Tariq live there for a time before they return to Kabul to run an orphanage.



Themes

Women's rights and freedoms

Miriam is not someone who has any options. She is treated as something unwanted, partially because she is a bastard child, but partially also because she is female. When she tries for a baby with Rasheed, he refuses to consider girls' names, and does not buy any girl's clothes. Laila, on the other hand, born on the eve of the Islamist revolution, is encouraged to do everything. She represents a modern woman and the communist regime she lives under gets credit for developing that aspect of her. She has choices as long as the regime lasts. When it falls and the Islamists take control, and the fighting intensifies, her freedoms are restricted, so that marriage to Rasheed, which the reader can already see Miriam suffering in, becomes an avenue for legitimacy and escape. In the end, women's rights becomes less important to the book than the intimacy and trust between the women. As they stand up for each other—as Miriam stands up for Laila and saves her life at the expense of her own—the reader sees the question of women's power answered in elemental form.

Afghanistan's history

The author is very specific about interweaving the history of Afghanistan with the history of each of his characters. The world they live in may be fiction, but the world they live in is the world Hosseini knows, and it is this world that the novel is ultimately about. If there is any 'use' in this book, it is in this history, which is created through the emotional experiences of Miriam, Rasheed, and Laila and Tariq. The history that is traced runs from progressive communist occupation during the Soviet era to Islamist totalitarianism under the Taliban, with periods of factional fighting and other periods when local warlords run each neighborhood. Laila and Tariq have their first fight as a married couple when Tariq expresses optimism that the American involvement in Afghanistan might improve things: she can see the wars too clearly, and she lost her parents to a bomb, so she cannot be optimistic about a process that will involve bombings. The novel takes the people's perspective, and leaves the political history in the background.

Suffering and the things that redeem it

Much of the book is spent detailing the ways in which Miriam and Laila suffer at Rasheed's hands, and the ways as well in which Afghans suffer because of the political instability in Afghanistan. Afghanistan might be a pawn between various powerbrokers, but the suffering that people like Miriam and Laila and their children feel is real, and the story dramatizes that. The suffering begins with Nana, Miriam's mother, who is implacable in her outrage over the injustice perpetrated upon her by Jalil, who cast her out after they were lovers. Nana instills a fairly harsh outlook in Miriam, and the one time Miriam tries to experience things for herself, Nana hangs herself in shame and



consternation. Hope is a rare feeling for Miriam to feel, and she only experiences it on rare occasions, but she looks forward to having a baby, and is crushed every time she has a miscarriage. Considering the humiliation of her husband bringing home a younger woman, and then the violence they both suffer at his hand. In addition to the sufferings from war and drought and corruption, it is amazing that anyone survives, but that is the sense Laila and Tariq have at the end and having survived, they have some obligation to make things better for others.

Friendship

Laila and Tariq are the best of friends in the beginning of the story, and they remain bound by affinity and then by history as they grow older. Miriam and Laila become friends, and their friendship follows all the way to the grave, for Miriam, and beyond it for Laila, as she prepares to have a daughter with Miriam's name. Friendship is established by standing up for someone not only liking them, but putting yourself on the line for their sake, as Tariq does for Laila, after a boy shoots her with a water pistol full of piss, and as Laila does when Rasheed is beating Miriam. After these gestures, these characters are bound for good: they know who they are by the actions they have taken. Miriam's murder of Rasheed is the ultimate act of friendship. It raises friendship to another level, since she will die for what she's done. But it was Rasheed's life or Laila's and Miriam chose, in that moment. Her choice is the end for her, but it means continued life for Laila and the things the two of them care about.

Style

Point of View

Thousand Splendid Suns is told by an omniscient narrator who knows the past and the future and the characters' thoughts. He does not have a definite personality - he is not a specific person, who is telling this story for reasons that matter in a world outside of the story itself. He is merely a storyteller, telling the story for its own sake, creating characters and describing them to the reader for the reader's entertainment and education.

The characters themselves provide a couple of points of view - Miriam and Laila are both children when they are introduced, and their growth and maturation, and the eventual intersection and interdependence of their lives takes the reader on a journey from childhood to maturity, from innocence and ignorance and powerlessness to action and guilt and consequences. Things that are just background to the children become more important as they both approach marriageability, and as they begin to lose the things that are dear to them. The conclusion is uplifting -mostly because of the murder of Rasheed, and because of Miriam's dignity - although a price has been paid and this is the point of view of maturity, speaking through the characters.

Setting

A Thousand Splendid Suns is set almost exclusively in Afghanistan, in Herat and then in Kabul. There is a brief period when the novel follows Laila and Tariq and Aziza and Zalmai to Pakistan, where Tariq has a job as a caretaker at a resort, but this is a brief scene, before Laila and Tariq return to Afghanistan, to Herat and then to make a home in Kabul. Throughout the book, Afghanistan's cultural history is stressed, as Babi tries to instill a love of learning in Laila, and she tries to preserve it and honor it in her life. Babi takes her and Tariq to see the Buddhas at Bamiyan, before they are dynamited by the Taliban. From the top of the Buddhas, Laila and Tariq had looked out over the landscape, and appreciated the beauty of Afghanistan.

Language and Meaning

A Thousand Splendid Suns is narrated in straightforward prose, although the language approaches some extremes of human experience—great suffering, for instance—with simple language. Hosseini calls things what they are, and is not overly florid or poetic about his descriptions. There is a certain lyricism to his descriptions of life in the kolba, where Miriam grows up, and to the descriptions of Laila's time with Tariq, or with her children. Much of the book consists of grueling descriptions of the violence and hardship Miriam and Laila endure as Afghanis and also as wives of Rasheed. There is not much lyricism here, but the book describes one event after another.

Structure

The book is linear with only a few breaks. It begins with Miriam's childhood in the kolba above Herat, and follows her through her mother's death and then her marriage to Rasheed, and her miscarriages, skipping years here and there. The book then jumps down the street to Laila's household to watch her grow up. There is some overlap such as when Laila and Tariq notice Jalil's Mercedes in front of Miriam's house, but this is subtle. The stories of Miriam and Laila converge when Laila's parents are killed, and Laila is found by Rasheed. Because she is young, and a beauty, Rasheed wants to marry her, and because she thinks Tariq has been killed, she agrees so now everyone is in the same household. The story follows a linear chronology until the end, when it intersperses scenes of Laila and Tariq catching up downstairs with the scene at dinner, that night, when Zalmai tells Rasheed about the visit. This rupture of linearity builds suspense and tension, as the reader sees Rasheed resenting the visit even as Laila and Tariq are enjoying it. The novel then leaps forward again to some years after Miriam's execution for Rasheed's murder.

Quotes

"Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always." (p. 7).

"It pained Miriam to picture Rasheed panic-stricken and helpless, pacing the banks of the lake and pleading with it to spit his son back onto dry land. And she felt for the first time a kinship with her husband. She told herself that they would make good companions after all." (p. 85).

"When Miriam thought of this baby, her heart swelled inside of her. It swelled and swelled until all the loss, all the grief, all the loneliness and self-abasement of her life washed away." (p. 89).

"Miriam remembered Nana saying once that each snowflake was a sigh heaved by an aggrieved woman somewhere in the world...As a reminder of how women like us suffer, she'd said. How quietly we endure what falls upon us." (91).

"The era of aristocracy, nepotism, and inequality is over, fellow hamwatans. We have ended decades of tyranny. Power is now in the hands of the masses and the freedom-loving people." (p. 101).

"Marriage can wait, education cannot. You're at very, very bright girl. Truly you are. You can be anything you want, Laila." (p. 114).

"We're all Afghans, and that's all that should matter. But when one group rules over the others for so long...There's contempt. Rivalry. There is. There always has been." (p. 130).

"That's the story of our country, one invader after another. Macedonians, Assasnians, Arabs, Mongols. Now the Soviets. But we're like those walls up there. Battered, and nothing pretty to look at, but still standing." (p. 146).

"One could not count the moons that shimmer on her roofs/ Or the thousand splendid suns that hide behind her walls." (p. 192).

"She knew that what she was doing was dishonorable. Dishonorable, disingenuous, and shameful. And spectacularly unfair to Miriam. But even though the baby inside her was no bigger than a mulberry, Laila already saw the sacrifices a mother had to make. Virtue was only the first." (p. 219).

"What a terrible thing it was, Laila thought now, for a mother to fear that she could not summon love for her own child." (p. 283).

"It is not an easy happiness. It is not a happiness without cost." (p.380).

"In a few years, Miriam will be a woman who will be like a rock in a riverbed, enduring without complaint, her grace not sullied but shaped by the turbulence that washes over her."



Topics for Discussion

In what ways is this an Afghan novel? In what ways is it an American novel? Citing specific instances from the text, define what it would mean for the novel to be either Afghan or American, and then make a case for either definition. Which definition fits best?

Where is this book most characteristic of itself? What passage or scene exemplifies the book best? Reading the scene closely and explain why it is better than other scenes, at encapsulating the meaning and themes of the book.

Nana tells Laila, "Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always." (p. 7). How accurate does this truth end up being, throughout the course of the novel? Are there exceptions to this rule? How do women prepare for or avoid this eventuality?

In the beginning of the novel, the reader meets Nana through Miriam's childhood eyes. The reader finds out later that Nana was in reality a bitter and unhappy woman all the time, in spite of Miriam's affection for her, and in spite of her guilt about disappointing her. What other characters change in the reader's eyes throughout the course of the novel, and how does Hosseini develop the plot through those changes?

Compare and contrast Laila and Miriam's stories. How are they similar? How are they different? How are they complementary? How are they antagonistic? How does the interaction of their stories—how do the stories each of them brings to their marriage with Rasheed—move the plot forward?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of virtue in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*? Laila learns that virtue is only one of the sacrifices mothers make - is there a different virtue for children and for parents? Using examples from the book, discuss the changing nature of virtue in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.