

# Brick Lane



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MONICA ALI

Monica Ali was born in East Pakistan to a Pakistani father and a British mother. When she was three years old, she and her family moved to Bolton, England. Later, she enrolled in Oxford's Wadham College, where she studied philosophy, politics, and economics. *Brick Lane*, her first novel, was short-listed for the Man Booker Prize. She has written three other novels: *Alentejo Blue*, *In the Kitchen*, and *Untold Story*. She lives in South London with her husband, Simon Torrance, and their two children.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1947, the predominantly Hindu region of West Bengal was made part of India, while the mostly Muslim region of East Bengal became part of Pakistan. Often referred to by Bengalis simply as "Partition," this act, perpetrated by British colonial powers, gave rise to decades of unrest, with East Pakistan suffering continual prejudice and genocide at the hands of West Pakistani forces. In 1971, East Pakistan, having fought a short and bloody war, declared its independence, becoming the People's Republic of Bangladesh. Toward the end of the novel, the terror attacks of September 11 unfold in the U.S., shocking the Bengali residents of Tower Hamlets who are then targeted in a number of racially-motivated incidents.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

For more on Bangladesh's bloody history under Partition and during the War of Independence, read Tahmima Aman's novel *A Golden Age*, which tells the story of a family torn apart by the political events of the time. Also consider Zadie's Smith's [White Teeth](#), which chronicles the everyday lives of immigrants living in London, focusing on the intersections of British and African, Asian, and Caribbean cultures. While set in India, [Midnight's Children](#) by Salman Rushdie has much in common with *Brick Lane*, following as it does the adventures of another "child of fate." Saleem Sinai, born at the exact moment of his country's independence. And, given that one of Ali's main areas of focus in *Brick Lane* is the fraught nature of assimilation, novels about the American immigrant experience are relevant as well. For glimpses of what it's like to be an immigrant on the other side of the pond, check out *Brown Girl, Brownstones* by Paule Marshall, [The House on Mango Street](#) by Sandra Cisneros, *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee, [Breath, Eyes, Memory](#) by Edwidge Danticat, and [Americanah](#) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Brick Lane*
- **When Written:** 2003
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** June 2, 2004
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Literature, Migrant Literature
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** East Pakistan, late 1960s; Dhaka, Bangladesh, early nineties to early 2000s; London, early 90s to early 2000s
- **Climax:** Nazneen finishes paying the debt she and her husband, Chanu, owe to the corrupt and cruel Mrs. Islam, refusing, despite intimidation from the woman's two thuggish sons, to hand over any more money in interest. This act of defiance gives Nazneen the courage to end her relationship with her lover, Karim, and tell Chanu that she will not return to Bangladesh with him but will, instead, be making a life for herself and her daughters in London.
- **Point of View:** Third-person limited following Nazneen, and first-person letters from the point of view of Hasina

### EXTRA CREDIT

**The Bard of Bengal.** As a self-proclaimed "educated man," Chanu is always trying to instill in his daughters a love of Bangladesh and Bengali culture. With the pro-West Shahana, a character Monica Ali admits is based on her young self, he fails miserably, but Bibi is more interested. At one point in the novel, Chanu prompts his daughters as they recite the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore, a poet and musician often referred to as "the bard of Bengal." The first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, he wrote everything from dance-dramas to essays to political tracts. Chanu's political leanings mirror those of Tagore, who passionately advocated for independence and often wrote and spoke out against British colonial rule.

**Muslin or daka.** It is no coincidence that Hasina works in a garment factory in Dhaka, or that Nazneen and Razia make their livings as freelance seamstresses. Bangladesh has been a textile industry leader since the 16th century, when the city produced a large portion of the world's silk and muslin. The latter was even referred to as "daka" in many markets, in homage to the Dhaka's preeminence as a muslin producer. When the British East India Company conquered Bengal in 1757, the British began plundering Bengali raw materials and using them in their own textile factories in England, then selling the resulting fabrics back to Bengalis at exorbitant prices. Many areas of Bengal suffered economic collapse as a result.



## PLOT SUMMARY

*Brick Lane* by Monica Ali begins in the village of Gouripur in rural Bangladesh, where Rupban is going into labor two months early with the birth of her eldest daughter, Nazneen. Everyone on hand at the birth, including Rupban's sister-in-law, Mumtaz, and the village midwife, Banesa, thinks Nazneen dead until she begins kicking and screaming, albeit in a weak and listless way that suggests she could probably use immediate medical attention. Instead of taking Nazneen to a hospital, Rupban decides to leave her daughter to her fate. To the great surprise of friends and family, including her father, Hamid, Nazneen survives and grows up into a plain, thoughtful child who, like her mother, decides that most everything in life should be left to God.

Nazneen's sister Hasina, on the other hand, is born beautiful and rebellious, and at sixteen elopes in a love marriage with a local boy, much to the fury of Hamid, who keeps vigil at the edge of the village for sixteen days, prepared to chop his daughter's head off should she return. She does not return, however, and Hamid, a widower following Rupban's apparently accidental fall onto a sharp spear, arranges for Nazneen to marry Chanu, a forty-something man living in London.

Chanu and Nazneen marry and move to Tower Hamlets, a low-income housing estate in a Bangladeshi immigrant neighborhood in London. Homesick and isolated, Nazneen spends much of her day cooking, tidying up her apartment, and watching her neighbor, a much-tattooed white woman, drink and throw her beer cans out the window. Sometimes Nazneen is visited by Mrs. Islam, an older widow who claims to be an authority on everyone living in Tower Hamlets, and Razia Iqbal, an irreverent yet kind woman with two young children and an angry husband who grows furious whenever she defies his wishes or the conventional expectations of the local Bengali community.

Hasina writes to Nazneen often to tell her about her life with her young husband, Malek, who works on the railway and is, in Hasina's opinion, exceptionally smart and talented. Hasina intimates in her letters that Malek wishes she were a better wife, but it's not until Hasina leaves him for Dhaka and a job as a sewing woman in a **garment** factory that Nazneen finds out the truth: Malek had taken to beating her, so Hasina fled her marriage and threw herself under the protection of Mr. Chowdhury, who becomes her landlord. Since Hasina is often short of money, Mr. Chowdhury charges her discounted rent, saying she is like a daughter to him.

Nazneen tells herself that she is relatively lucky. Chanu, while old and fat, is kind, he does not beat her, and their apartment is nicely **furnished** with more chairs, cabinets, and end tables than they could possibly need. Sometimes they have the local physician, Dr. Azad, over for dinner and he too is kind to her.

Still, Nazneen does not love her husband, and in fact finds his delusions of grandeur pathetic and off-putting.

Discontentment eats at her and she glimpses happiness only when watching ice skating on television. Then she closes her eyes and imagines herself skating across an arena to thunderous applause, led by a handsome man who smells of limes. It is not until she gives birth to a son, the beautiful Raqib, that Nazneen experiences true happiness. Nazneen vows to live for her son and to put all of her energies into caring for him and being a good mother. Then, at roughly a year old, Raqib becomes gravely ill and dies, and the novel switches to Hasina's perspective, told in letters to Nazneen.

Hasina writes to Nazneen about her job in the garment factory, where she has made friends with three fellow sewing women and one young man, Abdul, who always wears a fresh shirt to work. For several months, Hasina is very happy, working at the factory and living the apartment building owned by Mr. Chowdhury, but then rumors begin to circulate about her having sexual relations both with her landlord and Abdul, and Hasina is fired from her position. Mr. Chowdhury, angry with what he sees as Hasina's betrayal (he, too, has heard the false rumor that Hasina is sleeping with Abdul), brutally rapes her. Hasina writes to Nazneen that she is overcome with shame and despair. Everywhere she looks, she sees evidence of God's disapproval of her. Eventually, she turns to prostitution.

It would seem that all is lost for Hasina, but then one of her clients, a serious albino man who works as a night shift supervisor at a shoe factory, proposes marriage. Hasina tries to explain that she is not worthy of him, but he will not take no for an answer, so, even though she is still technically Malek's wife, she marries Ahmed and together they move to a much more prosperous section of the city. Hasina is again very happy for a time, but Ahmed eventually deserts her, and this set of letters ends with Hasina promising to write again when she has a stable address.

Nazneen now has two young daughters—Shahana, who obstinately rejects anything having to do with her parent's Bengali heritage, and Bibi, who tries tirelessly to please everyone. Chanu, who quit his position as a low-level civil servant just before Raqib's death, drifts in and out of work, accomplishing nothing. One night, he presents Nazneen with a sewing machine. He soon begins bringing her jeans and skirts and dresses to repair. Nazneen works nonstop and Chanu tells her he is carefully saving the money for their eventual trip home to Bangladesh, where he hopes to make a fresh start.

When Chanu gets a job as a cab driver, a different man brings sewing to Nazneen's door. This is Karim, the nephew of the owner of the sweatshop for whom she's been working all this time. Young, passionate, and sure of himself, Karim is everything Chanu is not, and Nazneen falls deeply in love with him. She starts attending meetings of the Bengal Tigers, Karim's pro-Islam youth group. After a particularly contentious

meeting, Nazneen and Karim start sleeping together.

Meanwhile, Hasina has found work as a maid in the household of James and Lovely, a wealthy couple who found her languishing in a Dhaka home for fallen women. Hasina's jobs are to clean the house and take care of the children, Jimmy and Daisy. Zaid, an eccentric man with a flare for politics and a love of Kung-Fu, does the cooking and gardening. Next door is a maid named Syeeda, with whom Hasina often sits in silence. Syeeda is as satisfied with her life as the beautiful and status-minded Lovely is restless. Sometimes, Hasina goes to the hospital to visit her friend, Monju, who was injured by her husband in an acid attack. Hasina feels lucky to have a safe place to call home and steady work, but nothing in James and Lovely's house is her own. She, too, grows restless.

Back in London, Nazneen is exhausted both by the effort of trying to keep peace in her home, where Chanu and Shahana are always at each other's throats, and by the guilt she feels over her affair with Karim. One night, while washing the girl's clothes, she collapses. She is a victim of, in Chanu's words, "nervous exhaustion." For several days Nazneen stays in bed, giving herself over to her sickness. When she can no longer stand Chanu's pampering, she gets up and begins working again.

Karim, whose visits had suddenly ceased, comes to see her, saying that he'd been out of town for a time, visiting family. Angry with him, Nazneen asks what he sees in her, and he tells her he loves her for the fact that she is real, an authentic village girl, and this reminds Nazneen of something Chanu said when they were first married: that she was unspoiled. Nazneen tells Karim of Chanu's plans to move the family back home to Bangladesh, and Karim tells her not to go. He advises that she let Chanu go alone and then sue him for divorce on the grounds of desertion.

Nazneen begins sending Hasina some of her sewing money. She does so behind Chanu's back, and feels guilty about this transgression as well, until she finds out that Chanu has been borrowing money from Mrs. Islam, who is not only an inveterate gossip but a corrupt and cruel usurer. Thanks to Chanu's incompetence and naivete, he and Nazneen are deep in debt to Mrs. Islam, who uses her sons to intimidate people into paying far more than they owe.

One day, Chanu walks in on Karim using his computer. Nazneen grows convinced that, while he did not actually witness her and Karim making love, Chanu now knows the whole truth, and her guilt grows almost unbearable.

Meanwhile, tensions have been heating up between the Bengal Tigers and the Lion Hearts, a rival white gang on the Tower Hamlets estate, and marches and counter demonstrations are planned and then cancelled and planned again. Chanu, with money from Dr. Azad, finally purchases four plane tickets to Bangladesh, and Nazneen realizes that he is finally going to

follow through on something: they are going home.

Hasina sends Nazneen a letter detailing the events leading up to their mother's death. Having explained to Nazneen that Rupban's life was made unhappy by Hamid's philandering (Nazneen did not know their father was unfaithful), Hasina now tells Nazneen that Rupban's death was not an accident as they had always been led to believe but was, instead, suicide. Suicide is the ultimate sin against God and fate, and Nazneen, who had idolized her mother and thought her without fault, suddenly sees the world in a new way. She decides to take charge of her life.

When Mrs. Islam comes with her sons to collect what is left of the debt Nazneen and Chanu owe her, Nazneen, empowered by what Hasina has told her about Rupban, refuses to pay up. She shows Mrs. Islam the figures she had done. Her calculations show that not only have she and Chanu paid the debt back, but they have handed over at least 300 pounds in interest. Nazneen stubbornly refuses to pay any more.

Later, Nazneen takes a train to see Karim to tell him that they need to end their relationship. She has come to understand that she'd pieced his personality together like one would a quilt, making him up out of what she'd hoped he would be. Now the seams are showing, and she knows that they do not have a future together. For the most part, he takes the news well, assuming that she is breaking up with him because she can longer bear the thought of sinning against God.

Back home, the apartment is a mess of boxes. Nazneen has not yet told Chanu that she is not going with him. He is busy running last minute errands, and she makes dinner for the girls and goes to bed. Sometime in the middle of the night, Bibi wakes her up, informing her that Shahana has run away to avoid having to go to Dhaka with her parents.

In a panic, Nazneen goes out looking for her, ending up on Brick Lane where police are stationed, blocking her progress. They tell her that she can go no further. A disturbance is under way and they have been ordered to clear the area. Nazneen hops a barricade and goes looking for her daughter, finding instead a group of the Bengal Tigers fighting each other. Eventually, she spots Shahana in a nearby restaurant and takes her home.

With only an hour to spare before they were to go to the airport as a family, Nazneen tells Chanu that she is staying behind. He is grieved but understands, just as she understands his reason for going. They hold each other, overwhelmed with sadness.

Time passes and Nazneen and Razia have their own sewing business. Nazneen hears regularly from Chanu, who writes to her from Dhaka about his workout routine and eating habits. She has no idea what he is doing for work and he doesn't say. He calls once a month as well, and during one call, tells Nazneen that Hasina, whom he saw once at James and Lovely's, has disappeared again. She has run off with Zaid.

Another year goes by, and Razia, Shahana, and Bibi drag Nazneen onto a bus. They are taking her, blindfolded, into town as a surprise. When they disembark and the blindfold is removed, Nazneen sees that Razia and the girls have brought her to an ice skating rink. Nazneen is reluctant to go out on to the ice. She tells her friend and daughters that she can't possibly skate in a sari, but Razia replies that this is London, and she can do whatever she wants.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Karim** – The nephew of the **sweatshop** owner for whom Nazneen sews, he is a passionate, pro-Islamic activist and the founder of the Bengal Tigers. At the beginning of his affair with Nazneen, he wears jeans and gym shoes. Later, as he becomes more serious about his advocacy efforts, he trades in his Western clothing for the more traditionally Islamic attire of Punjabi pajamas and a skull cap. Nazneen at first admires Karim's confidence and swagger, loving him for being everything Chanu is not, but gradually she sees that he is just as out of place in the world as she is, and that their love for one another was always based on fantasy. "We made each other up," she tells him.

**Nazneen** – The primary protagonist of the book. As the "Child Who Was Left to Her Fate"—meaning her mother didn't try to save her when she was born premature, but let God decide if she would live or die—Nazneen grows up convinced that it is always best to trust everything to God. She has her mother, Rupban, to thank for this life philosophy, which shapes Nazneen's character as a submissive and timid woman, unwilling to act on her own if such action could be construed as going against God's will. Having moved from a small village in Bangladesh to London to marry Chanu, Nazneen successfully avoids taking responsibility for her own life throughout the early years of her marriage and motherhood. In her early thirties she begins to earn her own money as a seamstress and throws herself into an adulterous affair with Karim, the young man who brings her **clothes** to repair. By the end of the book, she has rejected her previous submissive nature and decided to take fate into her own hands. With Chanu preparing to take Nazneen and their daughters, Shahana and Bibi, back to Bangladesh, and Karim proposing marriage, Nazneen rejects both men's plans, opting instead to stay in London and make a new life for herself.

**Hasina** – Nazneen's younger sister, and the secondary protagonist of the book. Hasina is as beautiful and rebellious as Nazneen is plain and timid. At sixteen she shocks her parents by entering into a love marriage with Malek, the young nephew of the village sawmill owner. Then she leaves Malek to avoid his beatings and trusts her future to Mr. Chowdhury, who finds

Hasina work as a sewing woman in a **garment** factory where she is very happy for a time. When she is fired for a rumored liaison with a co-worker, Mr. Chowdhury, furious at what he sees as her betrayal of their relationship, brutally rapes her. Hasina, broke and depressed, resorts to prostitution, eventually meeting her second husband, Ahmed, who later deserts her. While living in a home for fallen women, Hasina is discovered by Lovely and James, a wealthy couple who employ her as a house maid. The reader becomes familiar with the ever-changing circumstances of Hasina's life through her letters to Nazneen, which, while written in broken English, are smart and savvy, full of wry observations about the disparities between men and women and the hypocrisy of the rich and powerful.

**Rupban** – Mother to Nazneen and Hasina and wife to Hamid, Rupban believes she was born to suffer. Famous in the village of Gouripur for the time she spends weeping, Rupban is, in the words of her philandering husband, "a saint." Religious, superstitious, and plagued by Hamid's countless affairs, Rupban dies when she falls on a spear while wearing her best **sari**. Rupban's sister-in-law, Mumtaz, tells Nazneen and Hasina the death is an accident, but Hasina knows the truth: their "saintly" mother actually committed suicide.

**Mumtaz** – Aunt to Nazneen and Hasina and sister to Hamid, Mumtaz is for the most part practical rather than superstitious. On-hand at Nazneen's birth, she tries to convince Rupban to take her premature baby daughter to a city hospital, but to no avail. Unmarried and childless, she relies on Hamid for room and board. Later in life, she becomes a respected spiritual adviser in the village, relying on the predictions and advice of a jinni (spirit) she received from her dead father, and often speaking in tongues.

**Hamid** – Nazneen and Hasina's father and Rupban's terminally unfaithful husband, Hamid is an overseer in the paddy field, and the second richest man in Gouripur. Furious when Hasina decides to elope with Malek, he keeps watch outside the village for sixteen days, hoping his daughter will return so he can chop her head off. She never does return, and Hamid, who would have preferred sons, arranges a marriage for Nazneen to Chanu despite the fact that Chanu, a failed academic, is roughly twenty years Nazneen's senior.

**Chanu** – Nazneen's husband. When she first meets him, Chanu is working as a mid-level civil servant in London. As such, he considers himself far above his fellow Bangladeshi immigrants, many of whom had menial labor jobs at home and are engaged in the same sort of work in England. Chanu prides himself on his intellectual abilities and his knowledge of Bangladesh history. He has a degree in English literature from Dhaka University, an achievement he is more than happy to brag about when in the company of his physician, Dr. Azad. A relatively kind and well-meaning husband, he can't help but condescend to Nazneen on a regular basis. He loves her, but does not

bother to get to know her, and he often fails to connect to his daughters, Shahana and Bibi, as well. Hapless and idealistic, and unable to finish anything he starts, he resorts to driving a taxi, determined to go home to Bangladesh where he hopes to make a fresh start as a soap salesman. By the end of the novel, however, he seems to accept Nazneen's affair with Karim and to respect her decision to stay in London, and is revealed as a more loving and attentive husband than he had seemed to be previously.

**Banesa** – The midwife to Gouripur, she claims to be 120 years old at the time of Nazneen's birth. Upon seeing infant Nazneen in the arms of Rupban, she declares the baby dead. Then, when Nazneen begins to kick and scream, she tells Rupban that God has called her daughter back to the earth, but she doesn't give such news happily. Nearly starving, she had eyed Nazneen's limp body with something very like hunger.

**Razia Iqbal** – With her mannish hands and long, bony limbs, Razia, Nazneen's closest friend in London, looks out of place in a **sari**. She is much more at home in her Union Jack sweatshirt. Razia is a talented mimic with a wicked sense of humor but is kind at heart. Mother to Tariq and Shefali, she goes to school to learn English so that, if her children tell dirty jokes behind her back, she can spank them. When her abusive husband dies, she supports her children as a freelance seamstress. Later, she helps Tariq kick his heroin addiction and builds a successful sewing business for herself and Nazneen.

**Dr. Azad** – A London physician popular with Bengali immigrants, he is a small and precise man who lives and carries himself in a very meticulous manner. Chanu works hard to court his favor, thinking that the doctor might have some pull with his boss, Mr. Dalloway, but Dr. Azad insists he does not know him. Unhappily married, he collects snow globes and worries about young Bengalis falling prey to heroin addiction.

**Mrs. Islam** – A neighbor of Nazneen's who knows everything about everyone living in Tower Hamlets, and who keeps a seemingly endless supply of handkerchiefs up her sleeves. Later, Nazneen learns from Razia that the handkerchiefs are a holdover from a time when Mrs. Islam and her husband ran a shady business at home in Bangladesh. A ruthless usurer, Mrs. Islam loans people money to help them out of jams but collects far more than they owe in interest. Chanu borrows money from her in order to buy a **sewing** machine for Nazneen and a computer for himself. Much to Mrs. Islam's surprise and anger, a newly empowered Nazneen eventually refuses to pay her exorbitant rates, claiming, rightly, that the debt has already long been paid off.

**James (Jamshed Rashid)** – The owner of the home where Hasina is eventually installed as a maid, he is the father of Jimmy and Daisy and the husband of Lovely. He works an executive at Dhaka National Plastics, which Lovely considers, much to her disgust, "a medium-sized company." Like Mr.

Chowdhury, he is dismissive of the poor and the left-leaning.

**Ahmed** – One of Hasina's clients when she is working as a prostitute, Ahmed becomes her second husband. He works the night-shift as a shoe factory supervisor and is obsessed with order. Ahmed is also an albino, which Hasina thinks might be a contributing factor to his serious nature. Devoted to Hasina at first, he later deserts her.

**Abdul** – A male co-worker of Hasina's at the garment factory, he always wears a fresh **shirt** to work. He calls Hasina "sister," but eventually they begin walking to and from work together and he tells her he loves her. Hasina hopes they can marry someday, but then she is fired from the garment factory for their rumored sexual relationship. Abdul, who confessed to the affair to save his job, is not.

**Shahnaz** – Another factory friend of Hasina's, she is stubbornly independent. She has refused every single boy her parents have tried to marry her off to, and she objects to the dowry system, wondering why women should always be considered burdens on their families. She makes her own money; therefore, she says, she is the dowry. At first, Hasina thinks Shahnaz is a good friend. She is always advising Hasina about cosmetics and **clothing**. As time passes, though, Hasina sees that Shahnaz is two-faced and is jealously spreading salacious rumors about her behind her back.

**Aleya** – A friend of Hasina's at the garment factory, she believes that trees have spirits and that sewing machines might too. She has five children and lives for them. Her husband did not want her to work but he gave in, buying her a **burkha** to wear when traveling to and from the factory. One month, when she is given a special sari by the factory executives for being the most productive employee, her husband beats her savagely.

**Zainab** – An unpleasant, complaining woman who lives in the apartment behind Hasina in the Narayanganj neighborhood of Dhaka. Zainab is the wife of a district judge and lords her status over everyone she can. In time, though, her husband is charged with causing a deadly bike accident and they flee the building in the middle of the night.

**Mr. Chowdhury** – Hasina's landlord in Dhaka who gets her a job as a **sewing** woman at the garment factory. He has strong opinions about what he sees as workers' essential laziness and the corruption he encounters on a regular basis as a businessman and real estate developer. He often tells Hasina that she is like a daughter to him and therefore charges her discounted rent, but when he learns that she has been fired from the factory for a rumored sexual relationship with a young man there, he rapes her.

**The Tattoo Woman** – A white neighbor of Nazneen's in Tower Hamlets in London, she spends her days drinking and throwing her beer cans straight out the window. To Nazneen, the woman has the same air of detachment as the holy men who walked through Muslim villages back home, completely indifferent to

the weather and to unkind treatment. Later, though, while in the hospital waiting for Raqib to recover from his deadly fever, Nazneen finds out that the woman has been taken to an institution. She had been sitting in her own filth.

**Monju** – A friend of Hasina’s, she lies for a long time in the hospital, a victim of an acid attack at the hands of her husband and her husband’s sister. Monju was married at thirteen and became a mother shortly thereafter. Her husband wanted to sell their son, but Monju wouldn’t let him and so he poured acid on the baby. She works all her life to support her son, disabled by the attack. Eventually, Lovely agrees to pay for the boy’s next surgery, and Monju dies relieved.

**Lovely (Anwara Begum)** – Wife of James and mother to Jimmy and Daisy, she was once a beauty queen and now loves to entertain. Always on the hunt for a new charity to patronize (so that she might get a flattering picture of herself in the newspaper), Lovely is shallow and driven only by a desire for status, wealth, and fame.

**Zaid** – The eccentric cook for James and Lovely, he is so talented in the kitchen that he often gets away with doing very little work at all. He lives for Kung-Fu movies and liberal politics, and, over time, opens Hasina’s eyes to the need for the lower classes to revolt against their employers. At the end of the novel, he and Hasina run away together.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Mohammad Raqib (Ruku)** – Nazneen and Chanu’s first child, Mohammad is fair-skinned and beautiful. In him, Chanu sees a chance at greatness that he himself missed. He dies while still an infant of an unexplained fever.

**Tariq** – Razia’s young son. He is, for a time, deeply devoted to his studies. Then he becomes a drug dealer and heroin addict. He recovers thanks in large part to his mother’s strength and resolve.

**Mrs. Azad** – Plump, uncouth, and a chain smoker, she married Dr. Azad for love, but all that love has turned to contempt. Unlike Chanu, she feels no sentimentality for her home country of Bangladesh. As a Londoner and a working woman, she likes her **short skirts** and her freedom.

**Shahana** – Nazneen and Chanu’s oldest daughter, she often draws her father’s wrath by rejecting everything having to do with Bangladesh. She embraces British culture and hates so much the idea of going back to Bangladesh with her parents that she runs away the night before they are set to leave.

**Hanufa** – A third neighbor of Nazneen’s from Tower Hamlets.

**Razia’s husband** – Unnamed, he seems to Nazneen to be perpetually angry. He is a large man with a furious face who holds down two jobs, one at a doll factory and another as a meat truck driver, until he dies one day, crushed by seventeen frozen cows.

**Mr. Dalloway** – Chanu’s boss at the council. Mr. Dalloway is, according to Chanu, an active man and avid squash player. He has red hair and a harelip.

**Son Number One** – Doltish-looking and obviously dumb, he and his brother, Son Number Two, often assist their money-lending mother, Mrs. Islam, in the collection of debts. He is rumored to have a white girlfriend and two buttermilk-colored children.

**Nazma** – A member of the female Bengali Tower Hamlets community, she is a rotund woman who seems always to be expecting another child. Much of the unkind gossip surrounding Razia and Nazneen begins with her.

**Shefali** – Razia’s daughter. She is smart and driven and is eventually admitted to university.

**Bibi** – Nazneen’s youngest daughter, Bibi is a born people pleaser. She listens attentively when Chanu gives his lectures on the history of Bangladesh and often joins her mother in her midnight snack sessions.

**Jorina** – A young wife and mother living in Tower Hamlets. She cannot make ends meet on her husband’s salary and therefore must go out and work among the Turks, Jews, and Brits, and is often the target of gossip and innuendo.

**Sorupa** – Another neighbor of Nazneen’s from Tower Hamlets, she accompanies Nazma to the hospital to visit Raqib. While there, she comments on how all her own children are fit and healthy, which earns her a rebuke from Nazma.

**Son Number Two** – The more attractive of Mrs. Islam’s sons, he has a politician’s face but a brute’s demeanor. When Mrs. Islam comes to collect a debt from Nazneen, he produces a cricket bat and smashes her glass-fronted **cabinet** as a way of trying to get her to pay up.

**The Questioner** – The treasurer of the Bengal Tigers and enemy of Karim, he often brings grisly photos of dead Muslim children to the Tigers meetings in order to motivate the members to do more than circulate flyers and fight their rival gang, the Lion Hearts.

**Ali** – Hussain’s friend, he gives Hasina small trinkets during her time as a beggar.

**Garment Factory Manager** – The scaly-faced, fish-smelling man who runs the garment factory where Hasina first works, he fires her for her rumored sexual relationship with Abdul.

**Khaleda** – One of Hasina’s fellow **sewing** woman at the garment factory, she shuns Nazneen when rumors go around about her and Mr. Chowdhury. Later, Khaleda’s entire family is killed in a housefire.

**Hussain** – A jute cutter who lives in Hasina’s apartment building in Narayanganj, he is yellow-skinned and ugly, but kind and funny. When she is fired from the **garment** factory, Hasina sees him as her protector. Later, he becomes her pimp.

**Renu** – A fourth friend of Hasina’s at the **garment** factory, she is now an old woman. Married off at fifteen to a much older man, she was widowed three months later and has had to work ever since. It is her belief that, like Rupban, she was born to suffer.

**Mrs. Kashem** – Hasina’s landlady who helps her escape Malek for Dhaka, Mrs. Kashem thinks it better to be beaten by one’s husband than shown kindness by a stranger.

**The Multi-Cultural Officer** – An African man who joins the Muslim faith in part because of its strict demands on its adherents, he is eventually elected to the board of directors of the Bengal Tigers.

**The Bengal Tiger Secretary** – Always seen in immense **Punjabi pajamas** and a skull cap, he is loyal to Karim and therefore often acts in opposition to the Questioner.

**Nishi** – The young Tower Hamlets girl who tries to run away with Shahana.

**Malek** – Hasina’s first husband is the nephew to the sawmill owner in Gouripur. After marriage, he works for the railway. He beats Hasina for speaking out of turn.

**Betty** – Lovely’s best friend, Betty lives in a larger house than Lovely and has her own car and driver.

**Arzoo** – One of Hamid’s workers in Gouripur, he shows up in the village one day in a bright red **jacket** and grows to regret it because everyone mocks him. Clothing, in his opinion, is serious business.

**Syeeda** – The maid to the family that lives next door to James and Lovely, she is completely untroubled. She has an ugly round face, but to Hasina it is prettier than Lovely’s because Syeeda is, unlike Lovely, satisfied with her life.

**Tamizuddin Mizra Haque** – The barber of Gouripur, Tamizuddin Mizra Haque is, to young Nazneen and Hasina, a much-trusted authority in the village. He is always referred to by all three names.

**Makku Pagla** – Nazneen and Hasina used to follow him around when they were girls in Gouripur, where he was considered a lunatic because of his constant reading habit. He kills himself by jumping into the village well, and Nazneen and Hasina feel responsible. They wish they hadn’t teased him so much.

**Auntie** – The sister of Rupban, she visits Nazneen and her family in the summer of Nazneen’s tenth year and spends the first few hours of the visit crying with Rupban.

**Manzur Boyati** – A fakir, or holy man, he is in charge of Rupban’s exorcism, which goes spectacularly wrong.

**A Servant Boy** – A moody boy who always keeps a mongoose on a leash. During Rupban’s exorcism he volunteers to accept Rupban’s jinni, and then nearly kills the holy man performing the rite.

**Mustafa** – A cow man in the village of Gouripur, he lost his mind

and kidnapped a young girl, taking her into the jungle the summer Nazneen turned ten. This is the same summer Auntie comes for a visit.

**Wilkie** A coworker of Chanu's. Much to Chanu's resentment, Mr. Dalloway seems to prefer Wilkie.

**Amina** A woman who leaves her husband after discovering he secretly had another wife. However, she ends up in serious financial trouble.

**Daisy and Jimmy** The children of James and Lovely.

## TERMS

**Purdah** – A traditional and conservative Islamic practice, purdah dictates that women inhabit the private, domestic sphere while men occupy the public. **Hasina**, maligned for her position as a “**garment** girl”—meaning she works outside the home in a garment factory alongside men—feels the need to inform her judgmental neighbor, **Zainab**, that she still proudly keeps purdah, meaning that her purity is very much intact. **Mrs. Islam** likewise brags to **Nazneen**, **Razia**, and the other female inhabitants of Tower Hamlets that she keeps purdah, but it is later discovered that this is a lie because she runs a money lending business that requires much mixing with men. The onus of keeping purdah is almost always on the women themselves, while men are freer to behave as they choose, highlighting how the religious practice can easily turn to sexism.

**Love Marriage** – The opposite of an arranged marriage, this is a union entered into voluntarily by young Bengalis, usually against the wishes of their parents. **Hasina** and **Malek**’s marriage is a love marriage. It ends in misery. **Jorina**, a neighbor of **Nazneen**’s in Tower Hamlets, sends her sixteen-year-old daughter home to Bangladesh to ensure the girl does not enter into a love marriage with a British boy. Then she immediately arranges a marriage for the girl to a Bengali. Even **Razia**, who seems to defy convention at every opportunity, tells Nazneen that her daughter, **Shefali**, is only welcome to enter into a love marriage over her dead body. Arranged marriages allow parents to exercise control over who their children marry. Love marriages are, to many parents anyway, far too risky. Their children might marry someone from an “unsuitable” family or, worse yet, outside the Islamic faith.

**Sylheti** –When **Nazneen** first moves to London, **Chanu** often lectures her about what sort of people she should socialize with and who she should try to avoid. Chanu, who prides himself on being an educated man, is always disparaging the Sylhetis, members of an ethnic group from Bangladesh and India that he says are peasants and not worth knowing. Sylhetis make up the bulk of the population of Tower Hamlets and are obviously a diverse group of people. Chanu’s snobbish attitude toward them shows just how much he has internalized the very same racist viewpoints he claims to despise.

**Hartal** – When **Hasina** is still working in the **garment** factory in Dhaka, she writes to **Nazneen** about two days during which the city basically had to shut down because workers had declared their official strike days—days of “hartal” (meaning “strike action”). **Mr. Chowdhury** is furious about the inconvenience such strikes cause for men like him, but Hasina, as a sewing woman, understands better the plight of the day laborer. Hartal is one of the most effective options open to the lower classes to draw attention to their need for better wages and safer work conditions. At the same time, it means missing out on a day’s pay, which they can ill afford.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### DISPLACEMENT AND DISSOCIATION

*Brick Lane* by Monica Ali is the story of Nazneen, a young Bangladeshi woman who moves to London following her arranged marriage to a much older

man, and her sister, Hasina, whose life in Bangladesh, chronicled in letters to Nazneen, is one of instability, hard work, and heartbreak. In London, Nazneen struggles not only with bouts of crippling homesickness and a longing for her sister but a palpable loss of self. Cut off from family and everything dear and familiar, she lives like a displaced person, unseen and unseeing.

Having grown up in the small rural village of Gouripur where **water buffalo** and mynah birds were a regular part of daily life, Nazneen’s new reality in London in the low-income Tower Hamlets housing project is, at first, one of urban ugliness, isolation, and alienation. Even more than her home village’s natural beauty, Nazneen misses her deceased mother, Rupban, a saintly, long-suffering woman whom Nazneen idolized as a girl for her piety and patience. It was Rupban who taught Nazneen to trust everything to God and fate and to never act out of her own desires, all contributing factors to Nazneen’s decision to accept the marriage her father arranged for her to Chanu, an amateur academic Nazneen considers to be old, unattractive, and bumbling.

In the early days of her marriage, Nazneen spends much of her time watching a neighbor she refers to simply as “the tattoo woman” drink beer. Nazneen invents a friendship with the woman, fantasizing about sitting down to tea with her and talking about their days. White, fat, and later institutionalized when she is found wallowing in her own filth, the tattoo woman symbolizes the depth of Nazneen’s disconnection from her

home and culture. When Nazneen begins to venture out of her apartment, she finds the city streets a maze of unfriendliness and teeming traffic. She watches the white faces of businessmen and the white legs of business women flash by her, and, sensing their judgement of her for being a confused woman in a **sari**, clearly lost and out of place, she “began to be aware of herself. Without a coat, without a suit, without a white face, without a destination. A leafshake of fear—or was it excitement?—passed through her legs. But they were not aware of her. In the next instant she knew it.” Her self-awareness is short-lived. White disregard erases her, and Nazneen exists mostly as an extension of her husband and, later, as a mother to her children.

The self she constructs as a wife is on shaky ground from the start. Her marriage to Chanu is, in its initial stages, characterized by indifference and mild disgust. Their connection is almost nonexistent. He talks *at* her rather than *to* her, preferring to pontificate about Bangladesh’s bloody and tragic history under British colonial rule than hear what his wife has to say. Nazneen hints that, like her friend, Razia, she would like to learn English, but Chanu sees no reason for her to do so, thereby limiting her ability to set down roots in her new home.

When Nazneen becomes a mother to Raqib, an alert and beautiful little boy, she sets aside her own discontentment and anxieties and vows to devote herself to him. When, at one year old, he dies of a fever, Nazneen is again set adrift from herself. She had put all of her energy into nurturing her son. Her future is now a blank. The blank is filled for a time by her daughters, Shahana and Bibi, but as much as Nazneen cares for them, she worries she doesn’t love them as much as she did Raqib, and her energy is drained by futile and exhausting efforts to keep the peace in the house, where fights are always erupting.

When Nazneen falls in love with Kamir, she admires how the young activist appears to her to be completely secure in his place in the world, and she finds his political passion and seemingly endless energy for pursuing social justice irresistible. She starts attending the meetings of his pro-Islamic youth group, the Bengal Tigers, and it would appear that she might find herself in the love and education Karim offers her. It is, of course, not that simple, and with so many people pulling her in different directions, Nazneen suffers a nervous breakdown. She has given herself away to her husband, her children, and her lover. There is nothing left over for herself.

It is only when Hasina writes to tell Nazneen that their mother did not die accidentally as they’d always been led to believe but, instead, committed suicide—the ultimate sin against the God Rupban always claimed to hold above all else—that Nazneen truly begins to inhabit herself fully. The news releases Nazneen from the burden of trusting in God and fate to determine her future, since Rupban obviously defied her own belief system and took decisive action, rather than waiting for Fate to determine when and how she would die. Rupban’s action was

self-annihilating. Nazneen's, in contrast, is self-affirming. She finds the courage to trust herself, telling Karim she will not marry him and Chanu that, when he goes back to Bangladesh, he will have to go alone.

Nazneen's identity in Gouripur is determined by the beauty and wildness of the landscape, her close bond with Hasina, and her mother's morbid religiosity. When she relocates to London, she loses that self and must build another. This proves a difficult task because, in London, she is made invisible by her own outsider status. She wears the wrong clothes, doesn't know the language, and suffers from acute homesickness. Also, her identities as wife, mother, and lover all fail her at different times. Nazneen's transformation from submissive wife to independent woman is made that much harder by the fact that she is living in an unfamiliar place where both the customs and the very terrain is foreign and disorienting.



### CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS SEXISM

The character arc Nazneen follows from submission to agency is not merely a matter of personal triumph. It is a political one as well. She and Hasina are born into a community that considers women inherently inferior to men, and that is built to a certain extent on the assumption that women will never challenge the established hierarchy.

The attitude of their father, Hamid, is representative of the systemic prejudice they will confront as grown women, trying to negotiate a world dominated by males. When infant Nazneen cheats fate and lives, despite being two months premature, Hamid shrugs. He would have preferred a son. Later, when Hasina elopes with Malek, Hamid spends sixteen days at the edge of the village, armed with an axe. He is determined to chop Hasina's head off should she return. When she doesn't, he acts as if he never had a daughter. There is no talk of what form of violence he had planned to visit on Malek, if any.

As Chanu's wife, Nazneen is again undervalued. She overhears Chanu tell a friend that while he is for the most part satisfied with her, he finds her somewhat plain. As an "educated man" who prides himself on his degree in literature and harbors ambitions of being an English civil servant, he esteems Nazneen mostly for her ability to make his life comfortable. She cooks, she tidies up. Eventually, she bears him children. He never asks her opinion on anything and is shocked into a rare moment of speechlessness when she does finally offer it.

When Nazneen considers how unhappy she is in her marriage, she comforts herself with the fact that Chanu is a good husband, meaning he does not beat her. That is the low standard Chanu must meet in order to be considered a suitable spouse. Nazneen, on the other hand, must show her love and reverence for him through daily acts of devotion, one of which

is walking a respectful distance behind him when they go out together to the shops or the park.

Hasina, shortly after her marriage to Malek, writes to Nazneen that "Just because man is kind to wife do not mean she can say what she like." Hasina, it would seem, is unable to hold her tongue like a good wife. Malek beats her and she leaves him, but the news of Hasina's escape is not greeted with unmixed approval by either Nazneen or Chanu. Instead, they worry about the scandal and about Hasina's chances for happiness and financial security without the benefit of a husband. The conventional wisdom is that it is better to be married and beaten than unmarried and, hence, unprotected.

A woman's respectability is measured by her purity and willingness to keep purdah, or a set of Islamic practices that separate women from men. Men inhabit the public sphere, women the private. Should a woman choose to break with such traditions or even be seen as rebelling against them, she opens herself up to gossip and accusations of blasphemy. Men, on the other hand, are permitted any number of indiscretions and then use religion to justify them. This system of double standards leads to ostracism and even death for women and, while it would seem on the surface to benefit men, it leads to suffering for them as well, albeit of a much less dire variety.

Having left Malek, Hasina gets a job sewing at a Dhaka **garment** factory and writes to Nazneen that all of her problems are finally solved. In reality, her problems are just beginning. The so-called "garment girls" have a bad reputation, according to Hasina's neighbor, Zainab, who insinuates that Hasina's position as a working girl is tempting the jute pickers in the building to misbehave. Should they act inappropriately, it would, Zainab says, be all Hasina's fault. When rumors circulate that Hasina has slept with her friend Abdul for pleasure and Mr. Chowdhury for profit, no one is punished but Hasina. The garment factory owner fires her and calls her a whore, all the while chuckling with Abdul about young men's inability to resist a pretty face.

Hasina's friend Monju is an extreme example of where cultural insistence on women's inferiority to and dependency on men can lead. Hasina reconnects with her friend when she hears she is hospitalized and near death, following an acid attack at the hands of her husband and her husband's family. Death is Monju's only escape, and, in keeping with tradition, her husband is never punished for his crimes.

Given the entrenched nature of these cultural and religious norms, it is perhaps not surprising that many of the women who befriend Nazneen and Hasina over the course of the novel play a part in maintaining a system that punishes women for their so-called "sins," while leaving men mostly unscathed. Shahnaz, a fellow garment girl whom Hasina initially considers her best friend, repeatedly advises Hasina to tamp down her physical beauty so as not to attract negative attention or give any of the religious zealots protesting outside the garment factory more

ammunition in their battle against working women. By suggesting Hasina hide her beauty in order not to draw negative attention to herself and her friends, Shahnaz, like Zainab before her, is putting the burden of other's ignorance and misbehavior on Hasina rather than on the perpetrators themselves.

Similarly, both Razia and Nazneen find themselves targets of Tower Hamlets gossip, and the stories and rumors are spread by women they had thought were their friends. Razia draws disapproval first for her success as a freelance seamstress and later for the fact that her son, Tariq, is a heroin-addicted drug dealer. Nazneen is found wanting when her affair with Karim comes to light. A system that diminishes women inevitably inspires an atmosphere of toxic competition and free-floating distrust.

The relegating of women to second-class status does not only adversely impact the female characters in the story. The men also suffer for their efforts at perpetuating an outdated value system. Chanu, as an educated, modern man, is proud of the fact that he allows his wife to venture outside the home and, later, he buys her a sewing machine so that she can work and contribute to the nest egg they're building for their eventual trip home to Bangladesh. Even so, he jealously guards her earnings and tells her that he, as her husband, will make sure that the money goes where it should. In that same conversation, he informs her that it is wrong for wives to keep secrets from their husbands, all the while hiding from her the fact that he borrowed a significant sum from the corrupt and cruel Mrs. Islam. Perhaps most significantly, he condescends to Nazneen on a regular basis and dismisses out of hand her small stabs at independence. When he finally discovers the error of his ways, it is too late. She is in love with Karim.

Karim, whom Nazneen thinks the opposite of Chanu, is in fact no different. When Nazneen asks Karim why he loves her, he replies that it is because she is an old-fashioned village girl. It is the same back-handed compliment Chanu gave her when they were first married. What both men mean by "unspoil" village girl is that Nazneen is willing submit to their will. Karim's weakness becomes apparent to Nazneen, and he, too, loses her. By underestimating and dismissing women, both men forfeit romantic love, and, as aspiring revolutionaries, they also lose the chance they might have had to achieve the kind of greatness they so desire. Their conventionality damns them both to loneliness and mediocrity.

Ali makes it clear that conservative Islam, as it is practiced in Nazneen and Hasina's time and community, takes the already difficult life of a woman born to near poverty and fills it with unnecessary suffering. When women are taught almost from infancy that they are not worthy of the same privileges and rights as men, they are left powerless and at the mercy of their fathers, brothers, and husbands, and are often punished for events beyond their control. This system of forced separation

and arbitrary inequality motivates women to denigrate one another as they compete for the small shreds of power bequeathed to them by men and society. Lives are ruined as a result. Women suffer and die, and men are made weak and ineffectual.



## LUCK, CLASS, AND FATE

Nazneen is born two months early and is thought dead by her mother Rupban, her aunt Mumtaz, and the village mid-wife, Banesa. Then, when it is clear that she is actually alive, Banesa announces that she has been called back to earth by God. Banesa tells Rupban that she has two choices: she can take her daughter to the city hospital where she will be hooked up to machines and treated with pills, or she can leave her to her fate. Rupban settles on the latter, and Nazneen's future as a submissive, gullible girl seems likewise sealed. But Ali shows that what characters often mistake for fate is more often than not a matter of luck or a consequence of class. Unhappiness, loss, and sorrow come to everyone, as do moments of grace and joy. That does not mean an all-knowing God is pulling the strings. Furthermore, the same system that holds women back from achieving their true potential likewise strips the poor of the opportunities they need to change their fortunes. Those born wealthy continue to prosper, while children conceived in poverty are always just one step away from disaster.

Believing in the all-powerful force of fate allows first Rupban and then Nazneen to avoid taking any action to determine the course of their lives. In Rupban's case, such fatalism leads to the kind of black despair that can only be dispelled through suicide, and in Nazneen's, an anxiety-inducing cycle of self-blame and recrimination that likewise nearly deprives her of her will to live.

Rupban's justification for surrendering her newborn to the whims of fate is that to challenge such a powerful force is to try to play God, and to set oneself up for failure. Rupban believes it was her willingness to hand her child's life over to God that made Nazneen strong enough to face the world. Nazneen grows up devout and unquestioning, trusting implicitly her mother's versions of events. She, too, gives everything to God, assuming that she will then reap her destined portion of earthly joy and sadness.

Rupban, often referred to as a saint by her beleaguered and philandering husband, Hamid, spends Nazneen and Hasina's childhood crying and telling everyone who will listen that she was born to suffer. She claims that her life is a veil of tears because God wants her to weep. Not once does she blame Hamid for her suffering or take any responsibility upon herself to act to change her situation. Instead, she remains impotently depressed, insisting sadness is simply her lot in life. When she does finally take action, it is destructive and nihilistic, an action that renders further action moot.

Nazneen defies her mother's fate decree when her own son Raqib gets sick. She and Chanu rush Raqib to a London hospital, and Nazneen remains by his bedside day after day, night after night, praying for his recovery, fighting, if only in her mind, for his life. When he appears to recover, Nazneen is filled with contempt for her mother's passivity. She wonders how Rupban could have possibly thrown her child to the vagaries of fate when she could have had access to modern medicine. But when Raqib dies, Nazneen is again plagued by uncertainty. Perhaps, she thinks, she should not have stood in the way of his fate. The ghost of Rupban appears to her and accuses her of causing her son's death by interfering in God's plan, and Nazneen's guilt burden, already substantial thanks to her affair with Karim, is unnecessarily and unproductively redoubled.

Hasina, too, suffers under the delusion that God is punishing her for imaginary wrongs. In reality, she is a victim of circumstance and a hardened class system designed to reward the prosperous. At first glance, Hasina would seem to be her sister's opposite, her foil. Born beautiful and stubborn, she is as strong-willed as her sister is timid. Rather than submit to an arranged marriage, she runs off at sixteen to marry Malek, the nephew of the village sawmill owner, and the love marriage is blissfully happy for a short time. Also unlike Nazneen, Hasina remains in the country of her birth, tied tightly to Bangladesh and its traditions. One of those traditions, unfortunately, is ensuring that the wealthy get richer on the backs of the poor.

Hasina is overjoyed when Mr. Chowdhury finds her a job as a **sewing** woman at the garment factory, but despite the grueling nature of the job, she rarely makes enough money to pay her rent. Mr. Chowdhury, whom Hasina looks up to as a second father, takes pity on her and rarely collects the full rent he is entitled to. This arrangement leaves Hasina, a young woman living on her own, in a vulnerable spot. Rumors begin circulating at the garment factory that she is sleeping with Mr. Chowdhury in return for cheap rent. Hasina, in poverty partially because she dared to leave an abusive husband, is fired from her job. Then Mr. Chowdhury rapes her, and Hasina is filled with shame. Her low wages are to blame for the dire circumstances she finds herself in, but Hasina doesn't see this. She blames herself and assumes that God is punishing her for being weak and immoral.

After several bleak and desperate years of near starvation, Hasina finally finds work as a house maid for the wealthy couple Lovely and James, she settles in to the comfortable lifestyle their well-appointed home affords. She pampers the children in her charge and, having lived on the street suffering from hunger and illness, enjoys being clean and well-fed for once. All the luxury around her belongs to someone else, though.

Lovely, whom Hasina looks up to at first, turns out to be petty, shallow, and vindictive. Lovely sees the poor as unattractive and off-putting inconveniences, and she is not alone in this view. Her husband James, who is a powerful businessman

specializing in plastics, and their circle of wealthy friends enjoy all the benefits of a power structure biased in their favor, blaming the less fortunate for their own plight. Hasina does not openly dispute their worldview. She needs the job, and so humors and flatters Lovely and bows and scrapes in the presence of James.

Renu, a friend of Hasina's at the garment factory, is more proof of the insidiousness of poverty and the fixed nature of the Bengali class system. Like Monju, she is an extreme though not rare example of how one can be doomed from the start to a life of want through no fault of one's own. Renu is born destitute and widowed at age fifteen. As a result, she has had to perform back-breaking work since she was a young girl. Now old and nearly toothless, Renu will never see her financial situation improve. She will always slave away for little to no money. Fate, though, has not determined this; humans, in their endless selfishness and greed, have.

Nazneen and Hasina are not victims of Fate or God's holy wrath. Rather, they suffer the same random setbacks and successes as everyone else, finding, in the end, the strength to set aside the often-damaging mythology of their youth and finally live as free and independent women. For Nazneen, that means no longer trusting her life to mysterious forces beyond her control, and for Hasina, rejecting the notion that any suffering she experiences is the result of God's punishing her for her so-called sins.



## ASSIMILATION AND IMMIGRANT LIFE

As Bangladeshi living in London, Nazneen, Chanu, and their Tower Hamlets neighbors share in common the seemingly impossible task of faithfully upholding the cultural and religious traditions of their homeland while trying to make lives for themselves and their families in a country that either does not see them or views their Islamic values as a threat to their Christian ones. Chanu refers to this fraught and tension-filled situation as "the tragedy of the immigrant." There is, of course, the language barrier to overcome in the struggles to feel truly at home in England, but even more insurmountable obstacles loom as well. One such impediment is the racist attitudes of many of London's "native" inhabitants. Another is the Bangladeshis' strong attachment to, and sometimes romanticized views of, home, which divides the older generation from the new. A third is humanity's tendency toward in-fighting and the prioritizing of petty cares over larger issues of social justice and effecting real and lasting change.

With a degree in English literature from Dhaka University, it would seem that Chanu would be able to find a prestigious job without much trouble. Having arrived in England dreaming of being a civil servant or even an under-secretary to the Prime Minister, he instead works as a low-level functionary in a local council office and is always being passed over for promotion. His white male co-workers, on the other hand, climb the ladder

quickly. It's men like Wilkie, Chanu's white workplace nemesis, who are always in the boss's favor. Later, Chanu works as a cab driver. While a great number of Chanu's professional failures can be chalked up to his own haplessness, his status as an immigrant is very much at play in his struggles to advance.

Chanu is obsessed with Bangladesh's history as a British colony. Because he is always pontificating about something, it would be easy to write off his ramblings, but in fact the history and socio-economic lessons he imparts to Nazneen and his daughters contain some very real and illuminating truths. For a period of roughly 200 years, the British subjected native Bengalis to systemic and arbitrary cruelty, plundering the country's natural and industrial resources in order to enrich themselves. The result, Chanu theorizes, is that white Englishmen and women grew up thinking themselves both entitled to what rightfully belonged to the Bengalis and automatically superior to them. In Chanu's words, "It is the white underclass, like Wilkie, who are most afraid of people like me. To him, and people like him, we are the only thing standing in the way of them sliding totally to the bottom of the pile. As long as we are below them, then they are above something. If they see us rise then they are resentful because we have left our proper place."

Chanu finds even more evidence for his theory in the anti-Islamic hate spewed regularly by an area white gang, the Lion Hearts. When the Lion Hearts begin distributing anti-Muslim flyers in and around Tower Hamlets estate, Chanu feels vindicated in his sense of history and racial warfare. The pamphlets suggest that, far from being a religion of peace, Islam advocates violence and flies in the face of everything British culture stands for. Of course, in Chanu's mind, England has no culture beyond beer and cricket (and colonialism).

Chanu wants very much to give his daughters the gift of national pride. He tries to introduce them to Bangladesh's cultural and artistic leaders as well as its illustrious past as a textile giant. Bibi, his youngest daughter, listens to him with the rapt attention of a born people-pleaser, but it's Shahana, his oldest, who he hopes to influence, and who is stubbornly pro-West. She doesn't want to learn about Bengali poets and singers; she listens to American pop; she prefers baked beans and ketchup to Bengali cuisine; and she hates the idea, floated often by Chanu when he is at his most discouraged with work and England's racial politics, of going home to Dhaka.

Other Tower Hamlets parents struggle to bridge the gap between what they expect from their children as Bengalis, and what their children, as English citizens, want from the world. Razia, short of money after the death of her husband, doesn't know how she is going to keep her children in the five-pound notes they are always begging for. They lust after computers and textbooks and pretty **clothes**. Later, like many other young people on the housing estate, Razia's son, Tariq, succumbs to heroin addiction. Razia is then in the unenviable position of

trying to cure her son of his dependency. It's a problem many immigrant parents never thought they would face, but, as immigrant children embrace more and more the appetites of the West, they are bound to fall prey to Western vices as well.

As difficult as it is for her as a mother to watch her children growing away from her, Razia is in a unique position to know just how delusional some of Chanu's perceptions of Bangladesh's endless promise really are. Prior to his death, Razia's husband beat her and sent all of his money home to an Imam, whose belief system Razia found largely repugnant. She is a pragmatist and a realist. When the factory she's been sewing for shuts down and her son pawns all her furniture to pay for his heroin habit, she starts her own seamstress business and locks Tariq in his room until his addiction subsides. She understands, as Chanu cannot, that Bangladesh can offer her and her children a flawed future at best. The future they need is the one she can provide for them through hard work and perseverance.

To save their children from the horror of drug addiction and the pitfalls of a possible love marriage, many Tower Hamlets parents, including Jorina, send their children home to Bangladesh, only to find in short order that the children have gotten into more trouble at home than they might have in England under the watchful eye of their mother and father. The folly, Ali suggests, lies not necessarily with Western culture and naïve ideas about romance, but in thinking one can shelter one's children from pain.

In the early days of Nazneen's affair with Karim, he finds the Bengal Tigers. It would seem that, in their passion and commitment to equal rights, the Tigers could be at least one answer to the loneliness and anger many immigrant youth and even their parents feel when faced with life in a country that often rejects them out-of-hand. Over time, though, the Tigers unravel, giving in to petty bureaucracy, feuds, and even senseless violence. The group's meetings almost always descend into mildly humorous chaos, with various camps vying for the floor, and, after Shahana runs away to escape the possibility of being dragged home to Dhaka, Nazneen becomes an unwitting witness to a fire fight that has erupted on Brick Lane between warring factions of the Bengal Tigers. Rather than turning their attentions to the plight of Muslims dying in U.S. occupations and bombing campaigns, they are shooting at, and fighting among, themselves. Karim is disgusted and Nazneen disappointed, but neither is terribly surprised. A group that began in idealism ends in overturned cars and pointless displays of might.

Chanu arrived in London with unrealistic and outsized hopes. Those hopes are then chipped away, day by day, year by tedious year, usually courtesy of the relentless and soul-crushing forces of systemic racism. Chanu, introspective and full of regret, tells Shahana that his life in England is analogous to waiting forever for a bus to arrive, only to realize it's already full and going in

the wrong direction. For her part, Nazneen, like many of her fellow Tower Hamlets parents, is torn. She wishes Shahana would show her father the respect and love he so desperately craves, but she'd also like her daughters to be given chances she never had. Chanu only wants to escape into the past because his present and future seem to him so bleak. The Bengal Tigers, meanwhile, instead of presenting a solution to the problems of immigrant fury and displacement, are a cautionary tale of what happens when tribalism and tunnel vision trump cause. Razia is, as usual, the voice of reason in this debate, revealing in her own practical approach to her very real problems that immigrant life need not be a tragedy. It is, instead, a marathon juggling act involving patience, compromise, grit, and a willingness to reinvent oneself over and over, for as long as it takes.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## BLOOD

Because *Brick Lane* is a story of two sisters separated by great distance, mentions of blood in the text often refer to the ties that bind family together and the misunderstandings and mundane tragedies that just as often keep them apart. When Nazneen slices her finger while chopping onions in her Tower Hamlets apartment, she immediately thinks of Hasina, because they are, in common parlance, blood relations. Nazneen, cut off from her family and the place of her birth, craves human connection, and more specifically, the easy, mutual understanding of people who have a shared past. What she finds at first is instead the bloodless, blank face of the tattoo woman across the courtyard. Later, while Nazneen performs her wifely duties, i.e. trimming Chanu's corns, Chanu yelps in pain, worried she has drawn blood. He is mistaken, though, and this lack of blood hints at the lack of passion in their marriage. In contrast, during a particularly rough love making session, Nazneen bites the ear of her young lover, Karim, and blood drips from the wound, suggesting that Nazneen's connection with him is stronger and more essential to her growth as a woman than her relationship with Chanu. In the end, though, Nazneen sees that Karim is lost and his pro-Islam activism empty, disruptive rather than productive. His pro-Muslim group, the Bengal Tigers, riots in Brick Lane, and to Nazneen it is as if "all the mixed-blood vitality of the street had been drained. Something coursed down the artery like a bubble in the bloodstream." Blood represents what's real and lasting, and, in this novel about family, that is the bond between Nazneen and Hasina.



## ANIMALS

As girls in Gouripur, Nazneen and Hasina grow up surrounded by the beauty of the natural world.

Water buffalo laze in ponds; mynah birds swoop overhead. All is wild and untamed. Nazneen confronts a very different reality as an immigrant wife living in a London housing project. There, pigeons circle the grim and barren estate like criminals in a prison yard. Homesick and, at the beginning of her marriage, largely confined to her apartment, Nazneen is like the pigeons: trapped and directionless. Her unhappiness manifests itself in the form of an imagined snake that climbs her shoulder and hisses in her ear, constantly reminding her of isolation and resentment. Hasina is not as disconnected from nature as is Nazneen, but, as a young woman ensconced in a Dhaka slum and at the mercy of her landlord-turned-rapist, Mr. Chowdhury, she writes to Nazneen that she feels unfairly punished and targeted by an angry God who insists on filling the trees overhead with snakes. The snakes represent Nazneen and Hasina's attempts to come to terms with the disappointments that color their adult lives. Bird imagery, likewise, hints at the elusive nature of home, whether one is an immigrant in a foreign land or a poor servant surrounded by luxury. Tower Hamlets is Nazneen's prison. Hence, the circling pigeons. While working for Lovely and James, Hasina sees a kingfisher on the roof and tells him to fly away to find water, but he refuses, staying right where he is as if he's found paradise, just as Hasina remains in her post as a maid, cleaning a house and tending to children that are not her own. Neither Nazneen or Hasina can go home again. Animal imagery implies the wildness of youth in contrast with the essentially hemmed-in nature of adulthood.



## FURNITURE

As a young bride, Nazneen is initially impressed with the apartment Chanu provides for her, basking

in the beauty of the furniture that crowds the rooms. The cabinets and chairs are proof that she has come up in the world. In contrast, when Hasina first sets up house with Malek, they have only a bed, a few cane chairs, and a small chest. Thus it would initially seem that furniture is shorthand for status and, perhaps, even satisfaction in life. As the months and years pass, however, much of Nazneen and Chanu's furniture falls into disrepair. Fixing the chairs is on Chanu's to-do list, and Nazneen realizes that it is just one of countless projects he will never finish. Meanwhile, Hasina has moved into James and Lovely's home where the furnishings are rich, expensive, and always in need of dusting—but their beauty is lost on Hasina because they belong to someone else. Razia, Nazneen's closest friend in Tower Hamlets, begins her married life in an apartment crammed with furniture handed down from her husband's white co-workers. Then, when Razia's son, Tariq,

succumbs to heroin addiction, he sells all her furniture. Never one to be defeated, Razia gradually purchases pieces that she loves with money she earns from her own **sewing** business. Furniture can crowd out a person's desires, especially if that furniture is not of one's choosing. On the other hand, because it comes of hard work and independent choice, it is a symbol of home, of roots put down and allowed to flourish.



## CLOTHES AND TEXTILES

Like **furniture**, clothing acts, on the surface, as code for status. In this novel about poor people struggling to rise up in the world and immigrants working both to fit in in a new place and establish their own identities there, clothing is indicative not only of wealth—or lack thereof—but of a character's identification with a particular ethnic group. In the London streets where men wear expensive suits and women don short skirts and sharp heels, Nazneen, clad in a sari, feels like an interloper. It is her clothing that sets her apart more than anything else. Chanu, whose dearest hope is to be a “big man,” i.e. important, rich, and admired, is a sloppy dresser. His best suit has gone shiny in the knees. Karim, who begins his time with Nazneen in jeans and trainers, ends in Punjabi pajamas and a skullcap. His attire mimics his journey toward radicalization. And Razia, refusing to cave to the petty pressure of the Tower Hamlets Muslim community, trades her sari in for a Union Jack sweatshirt and pants.

Clothing is not just an outer manifestation of a person's inner state, however. Given Bangladesh's history as a textile giant, and England's history of exploiting that fact, it is clear that Ali is making a complex argument about clothing's role in the East's fraught relationship with the West. Nazneen, Razia, and Hasina all work for sweatshops. They slave over jeans and skirts and sparkly vests, working nonstop in order to pay for rent and food. Clothing is therefore also a reminder of the grave injustice of exploitative labor practices and the West's insidious way of plundering Eastern talent and resources for its own gain.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scribner edition of *Brick Lane* published in 2003.

### Chapter 1 Quotes

“No,” she said, “we must not stand in the way of Fate. Whatever happens, I accept it. And my child must not waste any energy fighting against Fate. That way, she will be stronger.”

**Related Characters:** Rupban (speaker), Nazneen, Mumtaz, Banesa

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 3

### Explanation and Analysis

Rupban decides against taking her new baby, Nazneen, to the hospital, even though she is born two months early and is clearly weak and in need of medical care. Nazneen's aunt, Mumtaz, thinks Rupban should travel with her daughter to the city where she will be looked after by doctors and nurses, but it is Rupban's belief that to struggle against Fate is to invite God's punishment. She passes this belief system on to Nazneen, who grows into a young woman who refuses to question both her mother and God. It is only later, when Nazneen, too, becomes a mother, that she begins to doubt her mother's wisdom and see it for what it really is: apathy and self-defeating superstition.

“A girl,” said Rupban.

“I know. Never mind,” said Hamid. “What can you do?” And he went away again.

**Related Characters:** Rupban, Hamid (speaker), Nazneen

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 4

### Explanation and Analysis

When Nazneen is born, Rupban all but apologizes to her husband, Hamid, for not giving him a son, and Hamid all but accepts that apology. Hamid's casual dismissal of his daughter is telling. In this society, fathers of daughters are acutely aware of the fact that they will be expected to provide dowries when those daughters reach marriageable age. Hamid might be the second wealthiest man in Gouripur, but dowries are not cheap and Gouripur is a poor, rural village, making a girl child a considerable burden on the family. The dowry system (among other social inequalities) thus damns a girl from the moment of birth to that of second class citizen.

●● What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne. This principle ruled her life. It was mantra, fettle, and challenge. So that, at the age of thirty-four, after she had been given three children and had one taken away, when she had a futile husband and had been fated a young and demanding lover, when for the first time she could not wait for the future to be revealed but had to make it for herself, she was as startled by her own agency as an infant who waves a clenched fist and strikes itself upon the eye.

**Related Characters:** Nazneen (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 5

### Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Monica Ali is fast-forwarding to a moment in time when Nazneen, having spent her first three decades on earth trusting everything to God, realizes that she must instead trust herself. Ali gives the reader what amounts to a snapshot of Nazneen's young life, revealing that, to Nazneen anyway, finding herself in control of her own existence is not necessarily unfailingly pleasant. The first intoxicating sensations of freedom are followed by sharp and surprising pain, because inherent in the freedom to shape one's future is also the power to sabotage it. Nazneen discovers, as a mother, wife, and lover, that Rupban's philosophy of handing over one's entire life to God is actually taking the easy way out. It is much harder to act, especially when one has no idea what the results of one's actions might be.

●● Silent. Nazneen fell asleep on the sofa. She looked out across jade green

rice fields and swam in the cool dark lake. She walked arm-in-arm to school with Hasina and skipped part of the way and fell and they dusted their knees with their hands. And the mynah birds called from the trees, and the goats fretted by, and the big, sad water buffaloes passed like a funeral. And heaven, which was above, was wide and empty and the land stretched out ahead and she could see to the very end of it, where the earth smudged the sky in a dark blue line.

**Related Characters:** Nazneen (speaker), Hasina

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 10

### Explanation and Analysis

Nazneen, having accepted the marriage her father Hamid arranged for her, is now living in a low-income London housing project called Tower Hamlets with her husband, Chanu. The apartment is richly furnished compared to the huts she lived in in Gouripur, and, while she is grateful for and proud of the pretty furniture Chanu has provided for her, Nazneen slips in and out of homesick daydreams, missing the natural beauty that characterized everyday existence in Gouripur. It is worth noting that her fantasy of home is beautiful but funeral-like, and the heavens she imagines are dark and indistinct. She is losing touch with the place of her birth, and that loss is like a death.

●● “What's more, she is a good worker. Cleaning and cooking and all that. The only complaint I could make is she can't put my files in order, because she has no English. I don't complain, though. As I say, a girl from the village: totally unspoilt.”

**Related Characters:** Chanu (speaker), Nazneen

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 11

### Explanation and Analysis

Nazneen overhears her husband saying this about her one week into their marriage. She is offended by his casual estimation of her value. She had thought that Chanu might be in love with her. Instead, she discovers that he has taken a disconcertingly practical view of her appeal: she is of use to him and, therefore, he is mostly satisfied with her as a wife. When Chanu refers to Nazneen as “unspoilt,” he is referring to the fact that Nazneen has resisted the appeals of Western culture and, as such, dresses in the traditional Bengali style and performs her wifely duties without protest. Later, Karim will describe Nazneen in the same way, as an unspoiled village girl, but by that time the description will no longer hold true.

“And when they jump ship and scuttle over here, then in a sense they are home again. And you see, to a white person, we are all the same: dirty little monkeys all in the same monkey clan. But these people are peasants. Uneducated. Illiterate. Close-minded. Without ambition.” He sat back and stroked his belly. “I don’t look down on them, but what can you do? If a man has only ever driven a rickshaw and never in his life held a book in his hand, then what can you expect from him?”

**Related Characters:** Chanu (speaker), Nazneen

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 16

### Explanation and Analysis

Chanu often lectures Nazneen on the differences between himself and the other Bengali immigrants living in the Tower Hamlets housing project. The essential difference, in his opinion, is that he is an educated man whereas many of their Sylheti neighbors are ignorant laborers. Chanu, though, is an underachieving and mostly failed academic. He reads voraciously, but rarely succeeds at anything, and that makes his snobbery here unjustified. Furthermore, in writing off whole segments of his fellow countrymen, he is adopting the prejudicial attitudes of local whites who see Muslim immigrants as the enemy. At the start of their marriage, Nazneen gives Chanu’s pronouncements more weight than they deserve because she herself is uninformed. Later, though, she sees the hypocrisies inherent in Chanu’s attitudes, and even Chanu himself begins to relent somewhat, saving most of his ire for white anti-Muslim gangs like the Lion Hearts whose racist philosophies run contrary to everything he believes in, i.e. the inherent superiority of the Bengali people and their culture.

“Mixing with all sorts: Turkish, English, Jewish. All sorts. I am not old-fashioned,” said Mrs. Islam. “I don’t wear burkha. I keep purdah in my mind, which is the most important thing. Plus, I have cardigans and anoraks and a scarf for my head. But if you mix with all these people, even if they are good people, you have to give up your culture to accept theirs. That’s how it is.”

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Islam (speaker), Razia Iqbal, Nazneen, Jorina

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 16

### Explanation and Analysis

Over tea in Nazneen’s apartment, Mrs. Islam is explaining to Nazneen and Razia that the insistence of Jorina, one of their Tower Hamlets neighbors, on working outside the home is going to lead to the loss of her cultural traditions. The simple act of spending time with non-Bengalis, Mrs. Islam argues, is enough to erase a woman’s ties to her homeland. This is, of course, coming from Mrs. Islam, one of the villains of the novel, and so everything she says should be viewed with extreme skepticism. Even so, Mrs. Islam’s attitude toward assimilation and its attendant evils is not rare among Tower Hamlets residents, and the fact that Mrs. Islam brings up purdah, or the conservative Islamic convention of separating men from women, especially in the public sphere, is likewise significant. Tower Hamlets gossipmongers blame Jorina for the fact that she can’t stretch her husband’s salary far enough to pay her household expenses. Ali makes it clear that women in Jorina’s position cannot win; their choices are to let their children go hungry on their husband’s earnings or seek work and be ostracized from their community.

### Chapter 2 Quotes

“You see,” he said, a frequent opener although often she did not see, “it is the white underclass, like Wilkie, who are most afraid of people like me. To him, and people like him, we are the only thing standing in the way of them sliding totally to the bottom of the pile. As long as we are below them, then they are above something. If they see us rise then they are resentful because we have left our proper place.”

**Related Characters:** Chanu (speaker), Wilkie, Nazneen

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 24

### Explanation and Analysis

Chanu, working as a mid-level civil servant on a local council, is attempting to explain to Nazneen why he continues to be passed over for promotion. While the above speech is consistent with Chanu’s tendency to blame others for his own shortcomings, Ali makes it clear that he has a strong point when it comes to anti-Muslim sentiment among the lower-class white population in and around Tower Hamlets. The racism that Bengali immigrants like Chanu, Nazneen, Razia, and Nazneen and Chanu’s daughters, Shahana and Bibi, encounter is systemic and entrenched. Evidence of that racism comes most obviously

in the form of the hate-filled flyers circulated around the estate by the Lion Hearts—a white gang intent upon driving Muslims from Tower Hamlets, by violence if necessary—but it also appears in more insidious ways, like an employer naturally favoring a white employee over a Bengali one.

## Chapter 3 Quotes

●● Nazneen, hobbling and halting, began to be aware of herself. Without a coat, without a suit, without a white face, without a destination. A leafshake of fear—or was it excitement?—passed through her legs. But they were not aware of her. In the next instant she knew it. They could not see her any more than she could see God. They knew that she existed (just as she knew that He existed) but unless she did something, waved a gun, halted the traffic, they would not see her. She enjoyed this thought.

**Related Characters:** Nazneen (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 40

### Explanation and Analysis

Nazneen begins leaving her apartment each day, doing her best to get lost in London as a way to feel closer to Hasina, who is lost in Dhaka. While walking down a busy street, Nazneen realizes just how invisible she is to the white people around her—because of her skin color, her obvious foreignness, and the overall impersonal nature of the modern city. On one hand, the utter disregard of the people around her erases her. They cannot see her; therefore, she does not exist. On the other, the sensation of passing undetected is exciting to Nazneen. It gives her a shudder of something akin to sexual pleasure.

●● “If you think you are powerless, then you are. Everything is within you, where God put it. If your husband does not do what is required, think what you yourself have left undone.”

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Islam (speaker), Chanu, Nazneen

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 47

### Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Islam senses Nazneen’s unhappiness in her marriage

and attempts to give the younger woman advice while in the waiting room of Dr. Azad’s office. According to Mrs. Islam, the burden of getting Chanu to act in a way that would satisfy Nazneen is, of course, on Nazneen’s shoulders. She is the wife; marriage is her sphere. If Chanu is not a good husband, Mrs. Islam suggests, it is Nazneen’s fault. Mrs. Islam then goes on to explain that the women in her village back home in Bangladesh succeeded in getting the men to build a well by denying them sex. Chanu and Nazneen’s sex life is never alluded to in the novel. Nazneen bears three children, but Ali does not reference a single sexual act between Nazneen and her much older husband. This fact makes Mrs. Islam’s already suspect advice not just biased in favor of men but also ridiculous and impractical.

## Chapter 4 Quotes

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

**Related Characters:** Nazneen (speaker), Mohammad Raqib (Ruku), Mrs. Islam

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 66

### Explanation and Analysis

Nazneen has given birth to the beautiful and beloved Raqib, and Mrs. Islam haunts Nazneen’s apartment, trying to insert herself as much as possible between Nazneen and her son. Nazneen, wanting only to be alone with Raqib, stands at the window of her Tower Hamlets apartment and thinks about her new home, cataloguing its ugliness and foreignness and comparing it to life in Gouripur where it was possible to commune with one’s surroundings. Unlike Gouripur, London is cold and unfeeling, and the building in which Nazneen and Chanu and now Raqib live is utterly impersonal. Nazneen seems to feel this absence of natural beauty even more acutely now that she is a mother. Raqib’s presence ties Nazneen to England, but that tie is itself weak, because there is nothing in her new home of brick and dirt and concrete that Nazneen can connect to.

●● Nazneen listened, breathing quietly and hoping that if they forgot about her they might reveal the source of their woes. It was something to do with being a woman, of that much she was sure. When she was a woman she would find out. She looked forward to that day. She longed to be enriched by this hardship, to cast off her childish baggy pants and long shirt and begin to wear this suffering that was as rich and layered and deeply colored as the saris that enfolded Amma's troubled bones.

**Related Characters:** Nazneen (speaker), Rupban, Auntie

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 80

### Explanation and Analysis

The summer that Nazneen turns ten, Rupban's sister, Auntie, arrives in Gouripur and the two women spend much of their time together weeping. As a young girl, Nazneen can't wait to discover such sorrow for herself. She assumes that when she is older, she'll know that pain, and it will be like trading in the clothing of her childhood for the beautiful attire of a grown woman. Later, as a wife and mother living in London, Nazneen has become well acquainted with sadness, but it isn't gratifying or romantic in any way. Instead, it is soul-deadening and tedious, partially because it is the kind of sorrow unique to an adult woman living in a culture that prioritizes male happiness over female fulfillment. As the wife of an unfaithful husband, Rupban knows firsthand the pitfalls of such a system. It is why she kills herself while wearing her best sari.

## Chapter 5 Quotes

●● "I'm talking about the clash between Western values and our own. I'm talking about the struggle to assimilate and the need to preserve one's identity and heritage. I'm talking about children who don't know what their identity is. I'm talking about the feelings of alienation engendered by a society where racism is prevalent. I'm talking about the terrific struggle to preserve one's sanity while striving to achieve the best for one's family. I'm talking—"

**Related Characters:** Chanu (speaker), Nazneen, Mrs. Azad, Dr. Azad

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 88

### Explanation and Analysis

Chanu and Nazneen have arrived, uninvited, at the home of Dr. and Mrs. Azad. It is a deeply awkward meeting. Nazneen and Chanu discover that the meticulously well-put-together and prudish Azad is married to a sensual, irreverent, and uncouth woman who not only openly disrespects her husband but embraces Western values. Chanu is, as always, preoccupied with what he calls "the tragedy of the immigrant." The tragedy has its roots, according to Chanu, in the fact that the immigrant is always pulled in opposite directions; he strives to preserve his culture in the face of demands that he fit in seamlessly with his new countrymen. The struggle only intensifies when the immigrant has children, because they, too, are torn. Chanu's insistence on repeating the phrase "I'm talking" represents his essential impotence. He talks and talks and talks but never acts. For him personally, this might indeed be the real tragedy.

## Chapter 6 Quotes

●● Sinking, sinking, drinking water. When everyone in the village was fasting a long month, when not a grain, not a drop of water passed between the parched lips of any able-bodied man, woman, or child over ten, when the sun was hotter than the cooking pot and dusk was just a febrile wish, the hypocrite went down to the pond to duck his head, to dive and sink, to drink and sink a little lower.

**Related Characters:** Nazneen (speaker), Chanu

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 105

### Explanation and Analysis

Nazneen and Chanu are in the hospital, keeping watch over Raqib, who is gravely ill with a fever. Chanu and Nazneen are discussing the fact that Mrs. Islam is not the respectable, kindly woman they took her to be but is, instead, a loan shark who is taking advantage of their neighbors in Tower Hamlets. Chanu admits during their talk that he himself has been masquerading as a rich man to his family back home and, in light of the revelations about Mrs. Islam, Chanu thinks it is time to come clean. Nazneen disagrees, but she doesn't say so because it is not her place as his wife to question Chanu. All the same, his secretive, self-sabotaging ways remind Nazneen of a Bengali saying about a man who, while everyone else in the village is dying of thirst, gorges himself on water, taking in so much that he

drowns in his own selfishness and short-sightedness.

## Chapter 7 Quotes

☞ “Why should we give dowry? I am not a burden. I make money. I am the dowry.”

**Related Characters:** Shahnaz (speaker), Hasina

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 119

### Explanation and Analysis

Hasina is working as a sewing woman in Dhaka garment factory, where she befriends Shahnaz, a strong-willed young woman who refuses to enter into any of the marriages her parents attempt to arrange for her. Shahnaz’s argument is that the dowry system is not only unfair but outdated. Shahnaz works alongside Hasina; she makes her own money. Therefore, she sees no reason for her parents to have to put forward any money or possessions to tempt a future husband. She is a reward, she says, not a burden. Shahnaz’s view runs in direct opposition to that of the religious protestors who picket outside the garment factory, voicing their disapproval of women in the workplace. The protestors believe that women should be forbidden from interacting with men outside the home. Of course, women who aren’t allowed to work are completely at the mercy of men. It is this structure of inequality that Shahnaz is rebelling against.

☞ This is what happen and afterward I cry. All the time I thinking my life cursed. God have given me life but he has curse it. He put rocks in my path thorns under feet snakes overhead. Which way I turn any way it is dark. He never light it. If I drink water it turn to mud eat food it poison me. I stretch out my hand it burn and by my side it wither. This is what he plan for me.

**Related Characters:** Hasina (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 132

### Explanation and Analysis

Hasina is living in a Dhaka apartment building owned by Mr. Chowdhury when the older man, whom she’d looked up to as a second father, rapes her. Mr. Chowdhury had been charging her discounted rent, and Hasina thought he did so because he loved her like a daughter. When Mr. Chowdhury hears rumors that Hasina is sleeping with Abdul, a friend and coworker at the garment factory, he is furious that she would live in his building for almost free while doing nothing for him in return.

Hasina is in this wretched position through no fault of her own. Her low wages at the garment factory are to blame for the fact that she can’t afford her rent, and her relationship with Abdul, while romantic, was never sexual. Mr. Chowdhury is a brutal and selfish man. Still, Hasina blames herself, and thinks that God is cursing her for her imaginary sins. The real blame is on a patriarchal society that encourages men to beat and assault women whenever they feel they have been shown disrespect, and that encourages women to accept this and blame themselves for the sins of others.

## Chapter 11 Quotes

☞ It was, Nazneen realized, more complicated than that. Even if Karim was her future, and could not be avoided, there were problems. Happiness, for instance. That would count against her. Because fate must be met with indifference. For the benefit of her angels, she said, “Whichever way, it does not matter.”

**Related Characters:** Nazneen (speaker), Karim

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 209

### Explanation and Analysis

Nazneen is now mother of two daughters (Raqib has died), working from home as a seamstress, and is in love with Karim, a young Islamic activist whose uncle owns the sweatshop Nazneen sews for. Nazneen and Chanu are out walking on Brick Lane, doing some shopping. As always, Nazneen walks a respectful distance from her husband. At one point, she has to stop and sit down. Warring feelings of desire and guilt overcome her. She is afraid of happiness because, as she observes, her belief in fate requires that she not be emotionally invested in her own life. Fate will make the decisions; fate will steer the course. She cannot bear the thought of Karim not being fated for her, but, since her future is not up to her, she assumes an air of indifference even in her own mind. Her belief in God and the all-

powerful force of fate nearly succeeds in robbing Nazneen of every pleasure in life. She does, however, tempt fate by engaging in a passionate affair with Karim, and, even though the affair is doomed from the start, she even dares to be happy for a time.

## Chapter 14 Quotes

☝ “I don't know, Shahana. Sometimes I look back and I am shocked. Every day of my life I have prepared for success, worked for it, waited for it, and you don't notice how the days pass until nearly a lifetime has finished. Then it hits you—the thing you have been waiting for has already gone by. And it was going in the other direction. It's like I've been waiting on the wrong side of the road for a bus that was already full.”

**Related Characters:** Chanu (speaker), Shahana, Nazneen

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 265

### Explanation and Analysis

Chanu has discarded his dreams of becoming a “big man” and is now working as a cab driver in order to make enough money to afford to take Nazneen and their daughters, Shahana and Bibi, back home to Bangladesh. Chanu hopes to beat the British at their own game. The English invaded Bangladesh and plundered the country's riches for their own gain; he will do the same. He will earn his money, carting “ignorant types” around London, and then he will leave. This plan gives him a certain amount of satisfaction, but one day he admits to Shahana, his eldest, that he often wonders how he came to be the kind of low-wage worker he'd always looked down on. But Chanu's dreams of wealth and prestige were never going to come true. His striving was always going to end in failure and disappointment. Educated though he may be, he is a victim both of rampant racial prejudice and his own pathological inability to follow through. Nazneen has understood this inconvenient truth for years; it seems that Chanu himself is finally coming to terms with it as well.

## Chapter 15 Quotes

☝ For years she had felt she must not relax. If she relaxed, things would fall apart. Only the constant vigilance and planning, the low-level, unremarked and unrewarded activity of a woman, kept the household from crumbling.

**Related Characters:** Nazneen (speaker), Shahana, Chanu, Bibi

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 272

### Explanation and Analysis

Nazneen has been working tirelessly to make her home, if not a happy one, at least a place of peace for her family. That has meant constant cooking, cleaning, sewing, and the smoothing of ruffled feathers. One night, it all becomes too much and Nazneen collapses from exhaustion. She simply cannot complete another household task. For a short time, she gives herself over to the freedom such a collapse affords, and in its aftermath, she realizes that many of her efforts have been unnecessary. She doesn't need to tidy every square inch of the apartment all the time. The world will go on even if a meal isn't prepared on time or a kamiz goes unwashed. The often-mind-numbing work women engage in on a daily basis is not only tedious but unnecessary. Women have been taught from a young age that their purpose in life is to keep everything from falling apart—and they fall apart as a result.

☝ Fly way and find some water I tell him. But he do not fly just sit there never stretch the wing and call like as if all his brothers better join there on roof where he find some secret like paradise.

**Related Characters:** Hasina (speaker), Nazneen

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 277

### Explanation and Analysis

Hasina is working as a housemaid for the wealthy couple, James and Lovely, when she sees a kingfisher perched on their roof. The kingfisher harkens back to Hasina and Nazneen's aunt's mynah bird. Mumtaz's bird would not fly away either, no matter how often Hasina told it to. But the more obvious parallel is to Hasina herself. Like the bird, she tells everyone that she is happy and blessed in her role as maid to James and Lovely and their children, but her position as a servant means that she has nothing to show for her hard work at the end of the day. The furniture she polishes and children she nurtures do not belong to her. She

can try on Lovely's jewelry and makeup and cuddle little Jimmy, and the baby, Daisy, but it is all borrowed happiness. Hasina cannot see that she, like the bird, is also surrounded by luxury but dying of thirst.

## Chapter 16 Quotes

☛☛ "You think that a clothing is just a clothing. But as a matter of fact, it is not. In a place like this it is a serious thing."

**Related Characters:** Arzoo (speaker), Nazneen, Karim

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 314

### Explanation and Analysis

Karim, who when Nazneen first met him dressed in jeans and gym shoes, has taken to wearing the more traditional Islamic garb of Punjabi pajamas and a skull cap. This change reminds Nazneen of a man named Arzoo who worked for her father Hamid back home in Gouripur. Arzoo was terribly poor but dignified, and was respected in spite of his rough appearance. One day, though, Arzoo showed up wearing a bright red vest. New and garish, the vest made Arzoo a target of ridicule and envy, and the old man confided in Hamid that he had grown to hate it. Nazneen overheard Arzoo telling her father that in a small, modest village like Gouripur, clothing was serious business. A seamstress herself, Nazneen concludes that Karim's transformation is likewise serious, or at least an attempt on his part to show the world that he is serious about trading in his Western values for Islamic ones.

## Chapter 20 Quotes

☛☛ How had she made him? She did not know. She had patched him together, working in the dark. She had made a quilt out of pieces of silk, scraps of velvet, and now that she held it up to the light the stitches showed up large and crude, and they cut across everything.

**Related Characters:** Nazneen (speaker), Karim

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 382

### Explanation and Analysis

Nazneen has come to the realization that she never really knew Karim at all. She was in love with her own creation. Here Nazneen's epiphany comes courtesy of her vocation as a seamstress. Now that their affair is finished, she can see that it was, from the beginning, a clumsily constructed garment. In this novel, clothing and fabric often represents a character's inability to fit in among peers or attempts at a new identity. In this case, the image of the patchwork quilt symbolizes Nazneen's willingness to finally see the truth for herself. She had wanted Karim to be her future, but that future would have fallen apart in short order. She'd been working in the dark, and she has now come into the harsh light of reality.

## Chapter 21 Quotes

☛☛ Jorina said, "But that is our problem—making lives for our children. They want to make them for themselves."  
"Yes," said Razia. "They will do that. Even if it kills them."

**Related Characters:** Razia Iqbal, Jorina (speaker), Tariq

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 406

### Explanation and Analysis

Nazneen is now living on her own with her daughters in Tower Hamlets. Chanu has left for Bangladesh and Karim has disappeared. Nazneen and Razia are working together as seamstresses for a sari shop, and the two friends and a few of their female neighbors are gathered together, gossiping and discussing their futures. As mothers, the women are often overwhelmed by the challenges they face in a foreign country, trying to shelter their children from harm. Razia especially understands the effort that goes into such a struggle, as she has recently helped her son recover from heroin addiction. The women acknowledge that they want their children to succeed in a new place while at the same time adhering to the traditions and cultures of their home. It is a difficult balancing act that further complicates the already impossibly compromised life of an immigrant.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## CHAPTER 1

Rupban, seven months pregnant with her daughter, Nazneen, goes into labor while plucking a chicken to feed to her husband and his cousins. Rupban lives in the Mymensingh District of East Pakistan. It is 1967 and Nazneen's life begins in the same way it later proceeds: in uncertainty. Rupban's sharp screams alarm her husband, Hamid, who grabs a club on his way home from the latrine, convinced a man is murdering his wife. Instead he finds his sister, Mumtaz, tending to Rupban, who is on her feet and in agony, one hand holding the chicken, the other around Mumtaz's shoulder. Mumtaz sends Hamid for Banesa, the village midwife.

Banesa, who claims to be 120 years old and whose career as midwife includes only seven failures (three cripples, two mutants, one stillbirth, and one human/lizard hybrid that, directly after birth, was buried deep in a forest), declares Nazneen dead. Soon, though, the baby begins to cry and wave her arms. It becomes clear that she is indeed alive, although fragile and weak. Banesa says that God has called the girl back to earth. She then informs Rupban that she has a choice to make: she can either take her daughter to the city, where she will have access to modern medicine, or trust her daughter to fate. Mumtaz wants to take the girl to the city, but Rupban chooses to put Nazneen in the hands of fate, hoping doing so will make her daughter stronger. Banesa, hungry enough to eat the dead chicken and the baby, shuffles off to her own hut.

Hamid returns to inspect his child, who lies sleeping on the bedroll. Rupban gives him the bad news: the baby is a girl. Hamid shrugs and leaves again. Mumtaz comes in with food for Rupban, now convinced that Nazneen, who refuses to eat, is fated to starve to death. Mumtaz is dismissive of such superstition and orders Rupban to eat and get her own strength up. She does so, but Nazneen refuses to eat for four whole days, crying so consistently that she rivals her famously sad mother in tear production. Hamid sees his daughter only once or twice during this period. Mostly, he opts to sleep outside.

*In this opening passage, Monica Ali is setting up the expectation that Nazneen's life will, like her birth, be characterized by doubt and worry. The date and location of Nazneen's birth is significant. This is happening only four years before East Pakistan would declare its independence from West Pakistan and become modern day Bangladesh. The partition of Bengal mirrors the many dualities that will crop up later in the novel.*



*Rupban's decision to leave her daughter to her fate might seem, at first glance, to indicate a lack of motherly affection, but it actually signals quite the opposite. Rupban loves her daughter dearly and is convinced that the best way to ensure her safety is to do nothing. It is Rupban's belief that taking Nazneen to a city hospital would anger God by interfering with the plans he has for his creation.*



*Hamid's casual dismissal of Nazneen is directly related to her gender. Given that she was born two months early and presumed dead, Hamid's indifference is striking. He obviously would have preferred a boy. Rupban continues to stubbornly insist that nothing special be done for her daughter, and that fate be trusted to save her.*



Meanwhile, the entire village comes to visit the baby. Banesa suggests that Rupban try finding a goat for Nazneen to suckle. Rupban waits, helpless, wishing fate would make up its mind one way or another. Finally, on the fifth day, Nazneen clamps her mouth down on Rupban's nipple with so much force that Rupban cries out in pain.

Nazneen grows into a wide-faced, watchful girl, in awe of her mother's patience and grateful to her for her decision to leave her to her fate. Nazneen has been told that fighting against one's fate can be deadly, so she accepts Rupban's wisdom and life philosophy, which insists on trusting completely in God's will. Rupban, Hamid tells his daughter, is a saint. She comes from a family of them. When Mumtaz asks Nazneen if she is glad she came back from the dead, she tells her aunt that she can have no regrets. Everything is up to God. Later, though, when Nazneen is a grown woman with children, a husband, and a lover, she must take action to shape her own future, and the experience is a difficult and painful one, given her upbringing and natural tendency to submit to others.

Hasina, Rubpan and Hamid's second child, is born three days after Banesa's death. She is beautiful and stubborn. She refuses to listen to her parents, and, at sixteen, elopes with Malek, the sawmill owner's nephew. Hamid is furious with Hasina for such a betrayal and spends sixteen days and nights at the entrance to the village, armed with an axe and determined to chop her head off the moment she returns. She never shows, and so he returns to his work, overseeing workers in the paddy fields, a few displays of temper the only signs he lost his daughter.

As submissive as her sister is rebellious, Nazneen agrees to an arranged marriage with Chanu, a much older man who lives in London. Hamid offers to show Nazneen a picture of her intended bridegroom, but she says doesn't need to see him. She hopes only to be as good a wife to him as her mother has been to Hamid. By chance, though, she does see the photograph and the man is not only old but ugly. He has a face like a frog. Later, while on a walk with her cousins, Nazneen sees a **hawk** circling above a ruined hut. The hut was damaged by a tornado that recently devastated the village. Nazneen, still in the company of her cousins, considers her future, watching as men look for bodies, burying and burning the dead in turn.

*Rupban's unwillingness to fight fate nearly ends in her baby starving to death, but Nazneen's forceful biting of her mother's nipple suggests that the child has more fight in her than one might have imagined.*



*Nazneen is very much her mother's daughter; as a child, she finds it easy to trust everything to God. After all, she has no responsibilities, and therefore her actions (or lack thereof) have no real consequences. She grows up in love with her own mythology, charmed by the idea that fate somehow singled her out as special and worth saving. This attitude will come back to haunt her when, as an adult, complications (many of them the result of her passivity) pile up to the point that action becomes necessary.*



*Hasina is, in many ways, Nazneen's foil. Nazneen is plain and obedient, while Hasina is beautiful and obstinate. Hasina's head-strong ways lead her making a love marriage with Malek, which Hamid views as a betrayal. His willingness to decapitate his daughter for daring to elope hints at the extreme sexism of the village culture. No punishment is planned for her groom—only for her.*



*Nazneen continues her pattern of unquestioning acceptance in agreeing to marry Chanu. It's no coincidence, though, that she sees a picture of her future husband and soon after is drawn to the sight of a bird of prey circling over a hut ruined in a tornado. Nazneen is not yet comfortable with her own feelings; as a child of fate, she believes she has no right to them, and yet she clearly dreads leaving home to marry a man she considers old and unattractive. It is as if her future is being buried along with the dead.*



The narrative moves from East Pakistan to the Tower Hamlets housing project in London. The year is now 1985, and Nazneen has been living in London with her husband, Chanu, for six months. Her days are occupied with housework and observing her neighbors, one of whom is a woman covered head-to-toe in tattoos. The tattoo woman spends her days drinking at her kitchen table and throwing her beer cans out the window. Nazneen daydreams about paying a call on the woman, about relaxing with her in her kitchen, but she never makes the effort. She wonders what the point would be. It would make the day pass more easily, but, in the end, it is just another day.

On this particular day, Nazneen is preparing a lamb curry dinner for Chanu and his physician, Dr. Azad. The dinner is almost ready, so she decides to read some from her Qur'an, flipping randomly to a page containing a passage about everything in the heavens and earth belonging to God and human's obligation to fear him. The passage comforts Nazneen, who reminds herself that Dr. Azad is nothing compared to God.

Nazneen likewise takes a great deal of satisfaction in her apartment's fine **furnishings**. Even though Hamid was the second wealthiest man in their village back home in Pakistan, he never had anything like the furniture Chanu has provided for her. The rooms are filled with cupboards, tables, cabinets, bookcases, and rugs, and she is proud of her beautiful home. She sets her Bengali Qur'an back on its special shelf next to the Most Holy book (the Qur'an in Arabic) and remembers verses from the book that she used to recite in school. Then she sits down on the sofa and falls asleep, dreaming of home, of walking with her sister through the village, surrounded by fields, **birds**, and water buffaloes.

Nazneen wakes and it is four o'clock in the afternoon. She hurriedly begins chopping onions, and, in her haste, cuts her finger. While she runs cold water over the gash to stop the **bleeding**, she wonders what Hasina is doing now. It is not a new thought. She misses her sister desperately and hopes that Hasina's decision to thwart fate and elope with Malek not come back to haunt her. Then again, perhaps her elopement was what fate had planned for Hasina.

*Nazneen is now cut off from everything that was dear and familiar to her. Her fantasies about befriending a strange white woman reveal just how isolated she has become in the six months since leaving Gouripur. Housework is not enough to interest or occupy her, although it is what is expected of her as a wife. At only nineteen, she has already learned to think of the days as unimportant and dull. This fact hints at her unhappiness in marriage.*



*The Qur'an verse is a reminder to Nazneen that her role is not only to trust in God but to fear his wrath. Given that she is meekly making dinner for her husband and his friend, it doesn't seem like Nazneen is in need of such a reminder.*



*Furniture is an obvious indicator of class and status and, as such, Nazneen is understandably pleased with the pretty things that she has been charged with dusting and maintaining—for they suggest that Chanu is a good provider and that he values her. That said, when she dreams, she dreams not of her pretty belongings but of home. There, the beauty cannot be bought from a store. It is, instead, naturally occurring, and Nazneen is not alone but happily nestled in the bosom of her family.*



*In this novel about sisters separated not by choice but by chance and temperament, blood represents the ties of family. Naturally, when Nazneen spills her blood, she thinks of Hasina, whose elopement has complicated Nazneen's ideas of fate. Nazneen no longer feels so certain as to which of life's events might be preordained*



Nazneen considers just how much she can actually blame on fate. It is not as if she can neglect her housework and tell Chanu that it was fate that she not prepare dinner. Wives have been beaten for less. Chanu, though, has never beaten her. He is gentle and kind to her, although she did overhear him telling a friend on the phone that she was not beautiful, that her forehead was too wide and her eyes too close together. In that same phone conversation, Chanu said he was satisfied with Nazneen overall, but that he'd waited too long to take a wife and therefore had to be happy with a less than perfect mate. Nazneen is offended by his criticisms, especially because he is old and fat, but realizes that her expectation that he would be in love with her is a result of her own too-high self-regard.

The cut on Nazneen's finger eventually stops **bleeding**, but she finds herself wondering how long it would take her to empty her finger completely of blood. This thought reminds her just how much she misses people, and the give-and-take of real human connection. Her thoughts drift. She wonders why Hamid did not see her and Chanu off at the airport, and if Chanu will want his corns trimmed again, and what Hasina might be up to. Nazneen goes to her bedroom and stares for a moment at the large **wardrobe** there. Sometimes she dreams of being crushed by the wardrobe. Other times, she dreams of being locked inside of it and, despite pounding on its walls, never being found again.

Nazneen takes a shoebox from the wardrobe and begins rereading a letter from Hasina, who writes of being so happy in her marriage to Malek she is almost frightened. Like Nazneen, she was taught to fear God, but now she wonders if, in fact, humans were not born for suffering but for fulfillment. She and Malek are living in a block of flats that is three stories high. Malek works for the railway. They have a comfortable home with a **bed**, three cane chairs, a crate for their pots and pans, and a kerosene stove. Hasina has grown to believe that love is happiness, and she and Malek have love. Her main source of worry concerns whether or not Malek's mother will forgive them for eloping. She also worries about Nazneen. She thinks of her sister as a princess living in a faraway land.

*Fate does not let Nazneen off the hook when it comes to her daily duties, and, indeed, Chanu would be well within his rights as a man of his time and community if he were to hit her for neglecting those duties. As a married woman, Nazneen is held to an impossible standard. She is expected to be not only obedient and skilled in all manner of domestic tasks, but beautiful as well. Chanu, in contrast, is considered a good husband if he refrains from beating her.*



*In this scene, blood represents the shared humanity of people living in a close-knit community. Nazneen feels connected to no one. Her nightmares about being crushed by or trapped inside the wardrobe hint at the depth of her loneliness. They also suggest that her relationship with her new possessions might be more complicated than originally indicated. Her fine apartment has the potential to become a prison.*



*Hasina's modest home furnishings contrast directly with Nazneen's more expensive ones, but it's clear that fancy furniture does not necessarily equal happiness. Hasina's blissful accounts of marriage highlight Nazneen's quiet listlessness. The sisters again act as foils for one another. Hasina's description of Nazneen as a princess brings to mind images of young women imprisoned in towers, waiting for princes to save them. For the moment, anyway, Nazneen does seem directionless and caged.*



Nazneen goes to answer a knock at the door. Mrs. Islam and Razia Iqbal are there, gossiping about a man whose wife has just committed suicide by throwing herself off a sixteen-story building. Nazneen makes tea for the two women, who go on to talk about the latest news about a fellow Bangladeshi immigrant named Jorina. Nazneen considers Mrs. Islam's place in immigrant London society. When Nazneen first moved to Tower Hamlets, Chanu explained to her the hierarchy of the complex's inhabitants. Many, he said, are Sylhetis, peasants who would never even think to pick up a book. They were low class back home in Bangladesh and they are low class still. Mrs. Islam, despite the fact that she mixes with the so-called "peasants," has been deemed by Chanu respectable enough for Nazneen to socialize with.

Jorina, in contrast, is a disgrace, according to Mrs. Islam, who prides herself on keeping purdah (the practice adapted by some Muslim women of keeping themselves separate from men by remaining indoors or fully covered at all times) but not being judgmental about it. Unable to feed herself on her husband's salary, Jorina has had to go out and find work, and that means she is now spending time with all kinds of people, including Turks, Jews, and Brits. The result, Mrs. Islam says, is that Jorina will end up trading her culture for theirs. There is no other way.

Nazneen cannot imagine Jorina's predicament. She serves more tea, asking Razia about her children and Mrs. Islam about her arthritic hip, nervous about having the necessary time to prepare the important dinner for Chanu and Dr. Azad, who has sway with Mr. Dalloway, Chanu's boss, and must therefore be given the best treatment. Finally, the two women leave, and Nazneen feels guilty about wishing they would go.

## CHAPTER 2

Dinnertime has arrived, and Dr. Azad and Chanu are at the table where Nazneen waits to serve them. Dr. Azad tells them both a story about two young men from their community who have made themselves sick by overindulging in alcohol. Chanu says he plans to take any children he and Nazneen have home before they can pick up such bad habits. Dr. Azad disagrees with such a strategy. He calls it "Going Home Syndrome" and asks Nazneen if she has heard of it. Embarrassed, she is unable to reply. Dr. Azad and Chanu continue to talk of the pull of home, with Chanu claiming that the peasants are drawn more to the land than to their own **blood**. Dr. Azad admits he's thought about returning, but that something always gets in the way.

*Nazneen is not completely alone at Tower Hamlets. There is a group of female Bengali immigrants who visit each other regularly. Gossiping together, though, is not the same as forming real friendships, especially when that gossip involves the suicide of an unhappy young woman. Also standing in the way of Nazneen's ability to connect to people is Chanu's snobbishness and obsession with status and respectability. His judgements cloud her own, and, as a wife, it is her job to let him think for her.*



*Women in this particular community are given a choice that is really no choice at all: either make ends meet on one salary or seek work and risk being ostracized. In Ms. Islam's opinion, Jorina, wanting only to support her family, is doomed to lose touch with her Bengali roots. The implication is that women who remain at home are, in a sense, guardians of culture.*



*Nazneen's role as hostess means trying to please everyone all at once. She has to make Mrs. Islam and Razia feel welcome, while, at the same time, preparing dinner for her husband and his friend. She must be perfect, but, since perfection is not possible, she can never win.*



*Nazneen does not have "Going Home Syndrome" per se because she is not free to leave London or her husband, but she often goes home in her mind and is drawn always to the thought of her sister, with whom she shares a blood connection. That Dr. Azad addressed Nazneen suggests that he is more open-minded and progressive in his views of gender dynamics than Chanu, who speaks as if his wife were not there. Nazneen's confused silence shows that she is used to being ignored.*



Chanu changes the subject to his many qualifications for promotion. He mentions his degrees and the fact that he has missed very few days of work, even when he was sick with an ulcer. Dr. Azad casually reassures him that a promotion is probably in his future, and Chanu presses the point, asking Dr. Azad if he came to such information from Mr. Dalloway himself. Dr. Azad says he knows no such man. Watching her husband pathetically attempt to curry favor, Nazneen is torn between disgust and pity.

Chanu goes on to tell Dr. Azad about when he first arrived in London. Unlike the peasants who traveled to the country in boats, stowed away like rats, he came in a plane with his degree certificate in his suitcase, hoping to become a private secretary to the Prime Minister. Instead, he was treated like any other immigrant and he had to work hard to get where he is. He burned all the letters from home in which family, friends, and servants begged for him to send them money, and he made two promises to himself: one, he would become a success, and two, he would return home, but only after he had achieved that success.

While Chanu goes on about his family's greed and seemingly endless appeals for money, Dr. Azad and Nazneen exchange looks. Nazneen is keenly aware that it is a look she, as a loyal wife, should not exchange with a stranger. When Chanu is finally finished speaking, Dr. Azad declines a second helping and dessert, saying he must go home. He then advises Chanu to eat more slowly and cut down on his meat consumption or he is sure to see him in his office again with another ulcer.

Later, Nazneen is drawn to the television screen while she is cleaning up. She watches while a man in very tight clothing and a woman in a dress that barely conceals her bottom spin around an arena to thunderous applause. When she asks Chanu what she is watching, he tells her "ice skating." Then she tries to say it, but has difficulty with two consonants in a row—a common problem among Bengalis, Chanu says dismissively. And besides, she won't be called on to speak much English anyway, he says. Nazneen, though, is eager to learn, and picks up on bits and pieces of English as Chanu talks to her about work, where he sometimes feels undervalued.

Chanu is particularly annoyed by a coworker named Wilkie who, Chanu argues, is always trying to get on the right side of Mr. Dalloway by going to the pub with him. It's really Chanu who should be the favorite, he says, because he has a degree in English from Dhaka University and can quote Chaucer and Dickens and Hardy. Nazneen focuses again on cleaning, hoping Chanu won't launch into a long quotation whose meaning she is sure will elude her.

*Prior to this dinner, Nazneen had no way of observing the effect of her husband's bluster on a third party. Now she sees that Dr. Azad views Chanu's aspirations as slightly ridiculous, and Chanu—along with his pronouncements on respectability—is diminished in her eyes.*



*Chanu buries himself even deeper by bragging about his qualifications and his superiority to the other immigrants living in and around Tower Hamlets. His attitude is not unlike the racist opinions of British whites who automatically write off immigrants as ignorant and unskilled. It is ironic that he is complaining about his family and servants asking for favors since that's exactly why he invited Dr. Azad to dinner in the first place.*



*This is Nazneen's first act of wifely rebellion, and it is a minor one at that. Still, the look she shares with Dr. Azad suggests that any reverence she might have felt for her husband is slipping away and that both she and the doctor see through Chanu's boasting to the insecure braggart underneath.*



*Chanu's condescending reaction to Nazneen's attempt at English is characteristic of how he treats many of her quiet attempts to engage with western culture. It is difficult to know if his dismissal of the idea that Nazneen might learn English is prompted merely by his underestimation of her intelligence or his desire that she remain dependent on him as translator. Either way, he is always more concerned with his problems than hers.*



*Chanu's delusions of grandeur are particularly striking here. They are also misplaced; he is a mid-level civil servant, making his knowledge of British literature tangential at best, and his tendency to quote long passages to Nazneen shows that he wants to impress her rather than get to know her as a thinking, feeling human being.*



Chanu then goes on to explain to Nazneen that it is the white underclass that is most threatened by men like him. Members of the white underclass, he says, need someone below them in the pecking order. When immigrants begin to out-perform underclass whites, they are motivated to form right-wing populist groups like the National Front. Nazneen wants only to be able to put the dishes away, but Chanu is blocking the cabinets. Eventually, she gives up and leaves them for the morning.

Nazneen cuts the corns on Chanu's feet while he talks about the evening's dinner, which he decides was a success, even though Dr. Azad does not know Mr. Dalloway. At one point, Nazneen cuts him too closely and he thinks she has drawn **blood**. They get into bed, and Chanu is soon snoring. While he sleeps, Nazneen studies his face. It is not a handsome face by any means, but it is kind. Eventually, she gets up and eats leftovers from the dinner she prepared for him and Dr. Azad. She eats at the window, looking out and thinking about the woman who, according to Mrs. Islam, jumped to her death. Nazneen grows convinced it was suicide, and that the woman died smiling, happy for once to defy convention and her family's expectations. Meanwhile, the tattoo lady is still in her kitchen, drinking.

Nazneen's days begin to blend into each other, the next almost identical to the last. She cooks and cleans, cleans and cooks. Sometimes, if she's lucky, she catches ice skating on TV, and on those days, she feels her old self replaced by a new one full of glory and light. The problem comes when she turns off the television and must return to her old self. For a brief time, she is angry and discontented, unhappy with her lot as a housewife.

Nazneen is grateful when ice skating is no longer on the television. Soon she begins praying five times a day, a habit that Chanu approves of, even though she never sees him pray or read the Qur'an. His reverence seems reserved for his certificates on the wall. Some are genuine diplomas. The majority, though, are worthless. Chanu grows worried his promotion is in jeopardy, thanks in part to austerity measures put in place by Margaret Thatcher. Nazneen begins praying that he'll get his promotion, but the prayer comes after her plea for another letter from Hasina.

*As long-winded and misinformed as Chanu often is, this theory has the ring of truth. Still, he is talking at Nazneen rather than to her. As a young woman groomed for marriage, she has never heard of the National Front and, instead, is focused on household chores. Her role is to serve others, not think for herself.*



*Chanu and Nazneen's marriage is only six months old, but all passion has gone from the relationship, if it was ever there to begin with. Nazneen serves her husband, performing the unappealing task of cutting his corns without complaint and experiencing pleasure only when left alone. Trapped in a loveless marriage, she finds comfort in food and in the idea that the young wife who killed herself might have done so happily because, unlike Nazneen, that woman had the courage to defy tradition. It is a dark consolation and one that reveals Nazneen's depressed state of mind.*



*Nazneen, caught up in the drudgery of housework, finds relief in ice skating's freedom and pageantry, but the fantasies prove painful because the escape—the transformation from dull and overworked housewife to graceful and admired athlete—is temporary and all in her mind.*



*Nazneen's prayers, like her ice skating fantasies, are an attempt to escape her life of meaningless household chores. Chanu wants a religious wife because he thinks that a woman devoted to God is equally devoted to her husband, but he doesn't want to go through the trouble of being devout himself. In this way, his religious practice is a lot like his work ethic: slapdash and perfunctory.*



One day, Nazneen and Chanu visit the shops on Bethnal Green Road. Nazneen is looking for material for a new **sari**. She asks Chanu if he thinks a pink and yellow material is nice. Rather than answer her directly, he launches into a theory of David Hume's, about Relations of Ideas versus Matters of Fact. He illustrates his point by arguing that saying the sun will not rise tomorrow is no less intelligible than the idea that it will. When his mind is occupied with such weighty matters, he says, how can Nazneen expect him to have an opinion on a particular sari fabric? Still, he goes into the shop and buys it for her.

That night in bed, Nazneen wonders what Chanu does all day at work. Does he spend his time discussing whether or not the sun will rise with his colleagues? She drifts off to sleep and soon she is dreaming of her home in Gouripur where she and Hasina are girls again, playing together and being doted on and scolded by their parents. She knows now what she would wish for if she could, and it's not to be in a different place but to live in a different time, and so she knows, too, that her wish will never come true.

Nazneen rarely ventures out of her apartment. This is mostly because Chanu does not want her to. He prides himself on providing well for her, and besides, he says, the people they live among are ignorant and would judge them both harshly if she were seen too often on the street. Nazneen does not protest her near confinement. She accepts her fate and waits for time to pass. Like Rupban, she adopts an air of saintly patience, and while she waits, she thinks of how her mother died. She fell on a spear in a store back in Gouripur. The spear pierced her through the heart. Hamid soon brought home a new wife, but the woman only stayed a month. Mumtaz rarely acknowledged Hamid after that. She saved all her love for his daughters and for Rupban, who died while wearing her best **sari**.

When Razia moves to a different block of the Tower Hamlets, Nazneen has more reason to leave her apartment. She stays on the estate, though, venturing only far enough to visit Razia, whose company is a welcome distraction from Nazneen's concern for Hasina. Six months have passed since Hasina's last letter, and that letter was short and hurried. In it, Hasina wrote only that she hoped Nazneen and her husband were happy and that, while she, Hasina, was not necessarily a good wife, she was trying her best to please her husband.

*Chanu is again talking down to Nazneen, whose education almost certainly did not include the works of David Hume. He is splitting hairs and mocking her interest in clothes, but she simply wants a new sari. The fact that he buys the fabric for her proves that he is, as Nazneen has said, kind-hearted. He might lecture her and condescend to her in a maddening way, but he feels affection for her.*



*Nazneen is again dreaming of home. In this case, though, home is not a spot on the map but a moment in time. She wants to be young again, a girl living alongside her sister and being taken care of by her parents. Marriage has made Nazneen lonely and nostalgic. The company of a kindhearted man does nothing to alleviate her suffering.*



*It is significant that when Nazneen tells herself to accept her fate as a desperately lonely housewife, her thoughts turn to her mother's death. This suggests that what Nazneen is going through is, in a way, a living death. Hamid's reaction to Rupban's death is nearly as unfeeling as his response to Nazneen's birth and the loss of Hasina, and it harkens back to a value system that prioritizes the pleasures of men over a woman's right to happiness. Nazneen is suffering from the side effects of that system. She trusted her fate to her father and Chanu, and she is now miserable as a result.*



*Razia is not a substitute sister for Nazneen, but her friendship fills a void that was left when Nazneen stopped hearing from Hasina. Hasina's last letter is ominous and cryptic. It is difficult to know exactly what Hasina means when she writes that she isn't necessarily a good wife, but Nazneen knows well what the punishment is for such a "crime:" a beating.*



Razia's irreverent sense of humor and talent for mimicry takes Nazneen's mind off her sister. Together, they gossip about their neighbors, including a young man who'd recently taken a beating from his father for being spotted in a pub with a white woman, Jorina's son, who struggles with a debilitating drinking problem, and Jorina's daughter, who, at sixteen, was sent home to Bangladesh to be married. Jorina and her husband sent the girl away partially to save her from entering into a love marriage. Razia says such stories make her fear for her son, Tariq, and daughter, Shefali.

Nazneen looks around Razia's apartment, taking note of the clutter but seeing that Razia has arranged things so that there is still room to grow, should she and her husband decide to have more children or invite family members move in with them. According to Chanu, such efficiency has become a joke among the British, and they've even come up with a statistic they say applies to Tower Hamlets: 3.5 Bangladeshis to one room.

Nazneen tells Razia that her sister made a love marriage. Nazneen then recounts her sister's story, beginning with Hasina's incredible beauty, which everyone in the village considered a curse. But the marriage had turned out well, Nazneen tells Razia, who then asks if Hasina has any children. Nazneen admits she doesn't know. Maybe a baby would explain Hasina's hasty letter. Razia then does an impression of Mrs. Islam, in which she says the love marriages were not a problem in her day. Razia and Hasina laugh, but Razia says seriously that Shefali will marry for love over her dead body.

Nazneen depends on regular prayer, housework, and visits with Razia to remain content in her marriage and life in London. She tells her heart not to beat with fear or desire. If she wants something, she asks Chanu, but she always defers to his opinion. She asks him if he finds the bed too soft. He says no and asks if the bed makes her back hurt. Rather than answering him honestly, she tells him it doesn't matter; she can sleep on the floor. She points out that, when she becomes a mother, she will sleep on a bedroll with her child. Chanu asks if she's pregnant, and she tells him she is. Mrs. Islam took her to Dr. Azad and had it confirmed.

Chanu has been hard at work drawing the house he hopes to build them in Dhaka when they return home. He adds a pond and a guest house to the drawing, saying he can't possibly miss out on a promotion now. One week later, Nazneen gets a letter from Hasina. At first, it thrills her. Then it crushes her spirits, and this time she doesn't make herself be calm.

*The main concern of immigrant parents living in a foreign land is how exposure to a different set of values will impact their children and their children's future. It is worth noting that Jorina sends her sixteen-year-old daughter home to avoid a love marriage, while, at the same time, marrying her off. The situation brings to mind Nazneen and Hasina's separate realities.*



*The fact that Bengalis have become a joke to "native" Londoners adds credence to Chanu's claims of systemic racism among the city's white population. That said, Nazneen can't help but admire Razia's savvy handling of space. Having lived on very little, she knows how to make do.*



*Hasina's beauty is considered by her friends and family not an asset but a handicap because they know where such powers of attraction lead: to love affairs with inferior men and a life of a desertion and disappointment. Razia, who often rejects the more conservative and knee-jerk attitudes of her fellow Bengalis, agrees. She wants a more practical and less romantic future for her daughter.*



*Nazneen is so afraid to express her own desires that she will not admit even to wanting a harder bed. That would be a step too far. To acknowledge that she has desires and needs would likewise be to admit that she is a thinking, feeling human being, and she is under the impression that it is not her place to inhabit that role. Now that she is to become a mother, her child, like her husband, must take precedence.*



*Nazneen and Chanu are inhabiting two homes at once: the Tower Hamlets apartment and the dream house in Dhaka. Whether the second will ever materialize is the question. Nazneen's fantasies often involve Hasina. Her heart truly resides with her sister.*



## CHAPTER 3

It is morning and Nazneen hands Chanu his lunch, watches him head off to work, and, waving at the tattoo lady across the way, leaves her apartment. On this day, she sees the estate with clear eyes, noticing the peeling paint on the doors, the **pigeons** circling in the air like prisoners in an exercise yard, a woman with a screaming baby, men chaining **furniture** up on the sidewalk in order to sell it. On her way down the stairs, she trips on a ledge and sprains her ankle but keeps going, heading for Brick Lane, where garbage climbs the building walls and a poster shows a man and woman in a passionate embrace.

At the end of Brick Lane, Nazneen makes another turn, ending up in a jungle of skyscrapers and businesspeople rushing to work. She feels invisible among the towering buildings and scowling people, and she likes the feeling. She realizes that the white people in the city can no sooner see her than she can see God. Then, realizing she's comparing herself to God, Nazneen begins to cry. She recites in her head her favorite verse from the Qur'an about God not forsaking his believers in their time of greatest need, but the pain in her ankle distracts her from the verse's meaning. She heads for a park bench, realizing she is lost, which is fitting because Hasina is lost as well.

Nazneen sits on the bench and recalls the contents of Hasina's latest letter, the one that threw her into such despair. In the letter, Hasina writes of her decision to leave Malek and move on her own to Dhaka. Malek had begun beating Hasina. Against the advice of her landlady, Mrs. Kashem, who thought it better to be beaten by one's husband than treated kindly by a stranger, Hasina fled her home for the city and a cheap apartment owned by Mrs. Kashem's uncle's brother-in-law. There, she goes up on the roof and watches a beggar woman whose body is bent in half. The woman sits on the street all day and propels herself back and forth with her hands. At night, a man with a cart comes to take the woman away. Sometimes, the woman protests. Hasina likes to watch her. She thinks she is courageous.

Nazneen needs desperately to urinate. The baby has taken over her bladder, and Nazneen hasn't peed all morning. But she is lost, and her choices are either to wet herself or pee in the park grass. She has gotten herself lost in order to feel something of Hasina's pain, but she realizes, too late, that it is a pointless exercise. Neither she nor Hasina can go home. They are both in cities where no one knows them or cares about their suffering. Maybe she should go to a store. Razia has told her to stick to the English stores where no one will give her a second thought. If Nazneen patronizes a Bengali store, the men there will gossip about her. Hasina, of course, will now be a prime target of gossip.

*The pigeons and captive furniture represent her state of mind: she has begun to feel like a prisoner in her marriage and her own home, and that is one reason she has to get out, to escape, even if only for a little while. The poster of the lovers adds insult to injury: Nazneen—lonely, pregnant, and hobbling—has not known passion, and it seems likely she never will.*



*Nazneen is now in an alien world. Her days in a tiny, intimate village are over, and she realizes that no one around her cares about her. The thought is both upsetting and freeing: upsetting because it is almost as if she doesn't exist; freeing because, if people can't see her, she could do anything she wanted. The pain in her ankle is more real to her than an abstract God because what she must do is walk and God cannot help her with that.*



*Hasina's decision to leave her husband is met with disapproval and apprehension. Both Mrs. Kashem and Nazneen are anxious about Hasina's future as a single woman. They worry about Hasina living alone and unprotected, but their anxiety is unjustified, considering that Malek's brand of "protection" amounted to abuse. The old beggar woman is, like Hasina, on her own. She dares to defy the man who comes to claim her each night. The woman is an embodiment of female fortitude in the face of male cruelty.*



*Even given the distance between them, Nazneen feels intimately connected to Hasina. She imagines that the alienation and isolation she feels on the streets of London is similar to what Hasina is experiencing in Dhaka. Both women are potential targets of malicious gossip: Nazneen because she is a woman walking alone in a strange city and Hasina because she has fled her marriage.*



Back on the street, Nazneen stares up at the skyscrapers, which seem to be ripping the clouds apart. She thinks of Chanu, wondering if he works in just such a building and if he talks as much at work as he does at home. She grows disoriented and distressed, and a dark-skinned man in thick glasses tries to talk to her, but, while she recognizes he is speaking Hindi, she doesn't understand him. Then he tries Urdu. She still does not catch his words. Finally, he speaks to her in English, and she shakes her head and tells him "sorry." The man nods and walks away, and while Nazneen is lost, hungry, and feels stupid, she can't help but be happy that she spoke English to a stranger and had been understood and acknowledged.

Back home, Nazneen makes a dinner of lentils and rice and soaks her rain-sodden **sari** in the bathtub. Curled there, it looks like a pink **python**. Chanu comes home and begins talking about Hasina's predicament and how there's really nothing that can be done for her now. He hums a nursery rhyme to Nazneen's bulging stomach and Nazneen, holding a pot of boiling lentils above his head, pours it carefully into a bowl. She is suddenly filled with hatred and loathing, and she says that there is something they can do for Hasina—Chanu can go to Dhaka and try to find her. He laughs off the suggestion. Finding Hasina in the teeming city would be next to impossible, he says. Plus, he's busy with work and getting ready for the birth of their son.

Nazneen wants to shout at Chanu that anything is possible. She knows this now because she dared to go into an English pub to urinate on her way home from the city, and she found a Bangladeshi restaurant where she asked for directions back to Tower Hamlets. If she can perform such courageous tasks, he should be able to find her sister—but she keeps such thoughts to herself, and Chanu says it is best to wait, to let fate take its course. Nazneen is all too familiar with such a philosophy, but her heart begins to burn with the desire to rebel.

Nazneen's rebellious spirit manifests itself in her new-found indifference to household chores. She secretly adds hot peppers to Chanu's sandwiches. She puts his **socks** away in his drawer unwashed and makes sure to mess up his files whenever she can. One day, in the midst of her mutiny, Mrs. Islam takes her to Dr. Azad's office. Mrs. Islam offers Nazneen one of the many handkerchiefs she keeps up her sleeve. Nazneen declines. Mrs. Islam then asks Nazneen how Chanu is doing, and Nazneen says that he is fine, but that his corns and stomach bother him at times. Mrs. Islam reads between the lines and offers to be Nazneen's confidant. Nazneen does not respond, and so Mrs. Islam tells her a story about a poisoned well in her home village.

*Even the buildings in London seem capable of violence. They assault the sky, and Nazneen, used to the sleepy pace of life in Gouripur, feels more out of place than ever. When the man attempts to speak to her in Hindi, Nazneen experiences a moment of confusing duality: for a brief second, she is connected to her home—or something like it—and, at the same time, she feels proud of herself for fitting in with the English-speaking crowd around her. She is taking the first steps toward assimilation.*



*Ever obedient, Nazneen cooks the evening dinner for Chanu, but food preparation, like so much of what she does, is thankless. Unlike Hasina, Nazneen is, in the traditional sense, a very good wife, but it gets her nowhere with her husband because he is under no obligation to do what she wants or even listen to her. Snakes represent Nazneen's unspoken anger. They coil up inside her, biding their time and threatening to strike if provoked.*



*Nazneen is starting to suspect that waiting on God to solve her problems might not be her best strategy. She is also beginning to have more faith in her own powers. Her newfound confidence is a result of her acting independently and testing the limits of what she thought she was capable of. She knows now that she is braver than she believed she was, and braver by far than Chanu.*



*Since Nazneen's sphere is the home, this is where she decides to mount her protests. Her primary weapons are food and laundry. As a woman, she is denied more effective weapons, and, anyway, her anger is nebulous, without real focus. She can't answer Mrs. Islam truthfully about Chanu's state of mind because she doesn't know what it is. She tends to his hygiene and his stomach and, of course, she listens to his lectures, but her knowledge of her husband is almost as limited as his knowledge of her.*



The well, according to Mrs. Islam, was not only poisoned. It was also a two-mile walk away. The women in her village had grown tired of complaining to their husbands about the quality of the water and the length of the journey, so they gathered together to figure out what to do. One woman suggested they go on strike. If the men were made to fetch the water themselves, they would be motivated to dig a new well. The rest of the women liked this plan, but found it flawed. Could they really count on their men to bring home enough water for their families? Another woman, a former prostitute, had a different idea. Men could bear the thought of having no food or water. They could not abide the thought of no sex. The woman suggested the women refuse their men sex until the new well was dug.

The plan worked. That was how the village got its new well. Mrs. Islam tells Nazneen that she, too, must act in order to get what she wants. If she feels powerless, then she is powerless. It is Nazneen's job to manipulate Chanu into behaving as a husband should. Nazneen is then called into the doctor's office by a receptionist whose large breasts are on full display. When Mrs. Islam gives the woman's cleavage a disapproving glance, the receptionist withdraws them from view.

Dr. Azad is as prim in his professional demeanor as he is in his personal. Nazneen takes note of his neat desk, which contains the usual assortment of pens and paper, but also a line of snow globes, which she thinks of as "snow storms." Dr. Azad asks Nazneen if she is having any blood loss, pain, or swelling. She tells him she feels fine, even though urinating has become painful and when it doesn't hurt, it itches. She has no idea how to tell him this. He predicts she will have an easy delivery and a healthy baby. Nazneen then asks if he would like to join her and Chanu for dinner again soon, and he says he would be happy to. Unbeknownst to Nazneen, Chanu has been to see the doctor several times since the first dinner, lending him books and asking him to sign a petition.

Back in the waiting room, Mrs. Islam appears to be asleep, although her eyes are open. Nazneen wonders if this is how she knows everyone's deepest, darkest secrets, although she supposes it was Razia who told her about Nazneen's troubles with Chanu and Hasina, and the thought amuses her.

*In Mrs. Islam's story, the village women were not positive that their husbands, if forced to cart the water themselves, would actually do the work required to quench their family's thirst. A sex strike is the answer. This fable has echoes of *Lysistrata*, a comedy by Aristophanes about a group of Greek women who, sick of war, refuse to have sex with their husbands until the men declare peace. Both the women in Mrs. Islam's village and those in Aristophanes' play were trying to save their children's lives. The men were interested only in sex.*



*Mrs. Islam's story might have seemed like an empowerment tale, but she is placing the burden of getting Chanu to be a better husband straight on Nazneen's shoulders. The message is clear: if women want anything from men, they will have to contrive complicated schemes in order to get it.*



*The sterile, white world of a snow globe would be a perfect home for the prudish and meticulous Dr. Azad. His prim manner makes it difficult for Nazneen to confide in him, and so, at risk to her own personal comfort and safety, she refrains from telling him her symptoms. She is embarrassed by her own body—a natural reaction to being told, over and over, that male bodies are more valuable. Dr. Azad's flippant attitude toward birth only demonstrates his lack of perspective. Never suffered through it himself, it's easy for him to treat it as a casual matter.*



*The community Nazneen is living in is rife with gossip and backbiting. Nazneen, though, is not bothered by her marriage being a topic of conversation.*

Nazneen is performing her midday prayer. It is difficult now that she is pregnant. She cannot get her head on the mat, and she is grateful for the special dispensation for pregnant women that allows them to abstain from genuflecting fully. She could even pray from her chair, but when she tried it, she felt lazy. Still, she is glad that Islam is kind to women. Then she wonders idly that if it were possible for an imam to get pregnant, if he would still require pregnant women to sit during prayer. She scolds herself inwardly for her irreverent thoughts. She wishes her mind would not drift into such jokey territory.

Razia knocks on the door, interrupting Nazneen at prayer. She has medicine she says will help with the burning Nazneen feels when she urinates. Nazneen shows Razia a letter she recently received from Hasina. Hasina is now in good spirits. She likes her apartment and her landlord, Mr. Chowdhury, who has promised to try to find her work in a **garment** factory. Nazneen still worries about Hasina, but Chanu seems relieved that she is no longer in any way his responsibility. Mr. Chowdhury, he says, will look out for her. A typical male response, according to Razia. Men are often unwilling to act to solve a problem, but they're more than happy to take credit when things go right.

Nazneen notices that, the larger she gets, the harder it is to navigate all the **furniture** in her apartment. She grows and so do the chairs and stools, it seems. Razia begins to gossip to Nazneen about other women on the estate, including one who recently gave birth and another, Amina, who is suing her husband for divorce. Nazneen assumes Amina is leaving her husband because he beats her, but Razia says it's also because Amina just found out her husband has another wife he's hidden from her for eleven years. Razia tells Nazneen she should be grateful that Chanu has not made her a co-wife.

Razia asks Nazneen about Chanu's prospects for promotion, and Nazneen tells her that Chanu thinks he has not yet been promoted because the higher-ups at his job are racist, especially Mr. Dalloway. Razia seems skeptical of Chanu's claims. She tells Nazneen about her son's teacher, who is white and very kind to Tariq, and about one of her husband's work colleagues who often gives them gifts. There are good white people and bad white people, Razia says, just like in Bangladesh, but the difference is, in England, you can be out of work and still get money. She then whips her hat off to show Nazneen her newly shorn hair.

*Nazneen is now not only starting to question the idea of leaving everything to fate, she's beginning to find religion and its practice almost funny. Even though she is grateful that, as a pregnant woman, she does not have to put her head on the mat when she prays, she still has to be on her knees, which is taxing enough. She might dismiss her thoughts as silly, but they reveal how she is changing.*



*Chanu's assumption that Hasina needs a man to take care of her is both knee-jerk (as Razia points out) and ingrained. It is also ironic, considering that Razia is the one who helps Nazneen with her pain. Women are capable of taking care of themselves and each other, but the societal expectation is that they will, instead, depend on men for safety and a livelihood.*



*When Nazneen first came to London, the furniture in her apartment was a source of pride, but it has now become an annoyance. Small pleasures have soured and morphed into very real grievances. All the same, Nazneen is not allowed to be unhappy in her marriage. Chanu doesn't have another wife, and therefore, Razia reasons, Nazneen should count herself lucky.*



*Razia's words, while wise, do not necessarily prove that Chanu is wrong about why he is being passed over for promotion. Nazneen has no way of knowing if Chanu is a victim of racism, though, because she is confined to the domestic sphere. Her ignorance and naiveté are in direct contrast to Razia's fuller knowledge of the world.*



Nazneen is shocked and asks Razia if her husband will be angry with her. To Nazneen, Razia's husband, a large man who works at a doll factory, always seems furious. Razia says she doesn't care. Then she announces that she has to go; she's learning English at the college so that if her kids tell dirty jokes behind her back, she can spank them.

It is evening, and Nazneen and Chanu are getting ready for bed. Nazneen is continuing her housework strike, but Chanu doesn't notice the dirty **socks** or poorly folded pants. He talks to her about his plan for a lending library for the estate. The library was the reason he took a petition to Dr. Azad's office, but now the doctor is suggesting that Chanu misled him when he pitched the idea. Dr. Azad did not realize that Chanu planned to take charge of the project, but Chanu thinks he is the best man for the job, given his extensive knowledge of literature.

Nazneen mentions to Chanu that Razia is learning English, and she asks him if she might be able to start taking classes as well. Chanu, more engaged with his copy of *Sense and Sensibility* than Nazneen's question, explains to her that she is going to be too busy with their child to go to school. She says she supposes he is right and lets the subject drop.

That night, Nazneen gets up and goes to the kitchen to eat. She rarely eats much in front of her husband, saving her appetite for her midnight snacks, which have become one of her main pleasures. While she eats yogurt and stares out the window at the moon, she thinks about life back in Gouripur and how inconvenient everything was there compared to life in London. Such thoughts remind her of Makku Pagla, a man in the village thought insane because he was always reading. Nazneen and Hasina used to follow him around, teasing him about books and his habit of carrying an umbrella everywhere he went.

One day, Nazneen and Hasina see Makku Pagla's umbrella bobbing in the well, and they suspect that he has killed himself. No one wants to drag the well, but the village has a meeting and finally, having accepted the offer of some money, soap, and perfume, a man volunteers to perform the grisly task of pulling Makku's body out of the water. Nazneen and Hasina watch as the decomposed body is brought up and laid on the ground, missing flesh and one arm. Rupban spends the day crying and Hamid, having declared her a saint, leaves the village and is gone for three days. Nazneen asks her mother where Hamid goes when he disappears, watching as a flock of **ducks** obscures the sun. Rupban tells her that if God had wanted them to ask such questions, he would have made them men.

*Razia's husband's job is significant in that Razia is the opposite of a doll. She is very much a fully-fledged human being, whose mannish looks and no-nonsense ways suggest she is not to be toyed with.*



*Nazneen's housewifely rebellion was always doomed to fail. Housework is invisible. Chanu does not notice Nazneen's pathetic attempts at insurrection because, for the most part, he does not notice her. He thinks only of his own superior qualifications and intellect. In this way, Ali points to the invisibility of the housewife even within the domestic sphere which is her domain.*



*Sense and Sensibility by Jane Austen is a book about two very different sisters. In that way, it shares much in common with Brick Lane. It also lambasts pompous men and Chanu is nothing if not pompous. Austen's famous work was likely an inspiration for Ali in her writing.*



*Nazneen's pleasures are stolen and best enjoyed alone, like her thoughts. Having talked to Chanu about possible English lessons and listened to his ramblings about the lending library, her thoughts turn to the tragedy of Makku Pagla, a voracious reader. Learning was not valued in Nazneen's village, where scholarly aspirations opened one up to ridicule.*



*While they do not admit it aloud to one another, Nazneen and Hasina feel responsible for Makku Pagla's death. They blame his suicide on their own relentless teasing, but it is, as Rupban reminds them, not their place to question the ways of the world or even think too hard about them. That is up to men like Hamid, who often leaves his family for days and weeks at a time. The ducks blocking out the sun represent Nazneen's dark state of mind following Makku Pagla's death and her confusion over Hamid's seemingly random wanderings.*



## CHAPTER 4

The baby is born, and Nazneen finds him miraculous. He is fair-skinned and beautiful, traits Chanu attributes to his grandmother's cousin but that Nazneen considers proof of the baby's **blood** relation to Hasina. Chanu calls the boy "Ruku," but his real name is Mohammad Raqib. Nazneen can tell that Chanu thinks of their son as a chance to redeem himself. Chanu hopes Raqib will somehow succeed where his father has failed. Nazneen wants only to be left alone with Raqib, who is more real to her now than her own self, but Chanu remains in the room, talking endlessly about his disapproval of Razia. He is not yet forbidding Nazneen to see her, but he would like her to take care in her interactions with her in the future.

Mrs. Islam is paying a visit to Nazneen and Raqib, showing Nazneen how to massage the baby to keep him limber and healthy. Nazneen has grown to resent and dread such visits. Raqib is now five months old, and Mrs. Islam has already drowned Nazneen in a torrent of motherly wisdom. Nazneen is familiar with most if not all of Mrs. Islam's homemade cures and advice and wishes she would leave her be to mother her son. Later, Nazneen gets a chance to show Mrs. Islam what a good mother she is when she picks up Raqib and he stares at her adoringly. Then, when she puts him down to make tea, he cries inconsolably. Picking him back up again, Nazneen takes comfort in how much her son loves and depends on her and her alone.

Mrs. Islam tells Nazneen to give Raqib to her; her niece is coming over and loves babies. The break will give Nazneen a chance to tidy up the apartment, Mrs. Islam says. Nazneen counts the **chairs** in the room: eleven. It is impossible to tidy up when there is so much furniture everywhere. Besides, she wants to keep Raqib with her. She goes to the window and looks out on the trashcans in the estate yard, at a young man smoking, at the new metal frames installed around the windows that gleamed at first but are now dull like everything else. She sees Razia's children playing behind a shade and the tattoo woman at her table, drinking. Nazneen wonders what the woman could be waiting for.

Mrs. Islam again tells Nazneen again to give Raqib to her, but Nazneen refuses. She informs Mrs. Islam that Raqib will be staying with her, and she does not soften the blow with gratitude or small talk. Mrs. Islam responds by telling Nazneen about how the white people do things, how they conduct themselves in their personal affairs. They say that everything is their own business. No one is to interfere. Even if a child is being beaten to death, white people insist that it is a private matter. Then Mrs. Islam runs a hand across Raqib's face and leaves.

*Both Chanu and Nazneen are foisting impossible burdens onto their baby son. Chanu wants Raqib to be everything he is not—a success, a "big man," a person who demands respect from his peers—while Nazneen loses herself in her son. He is the only thing that matters to her. She does, however, enjoy her visits with Razia. Chanu's disapproval of Razia isn't difficult to decipher: he sees Razia's flourishing independence and is worried Nazneen will try to follow her lead.*



*Ever since moving to London, Nazneen has lived as one starved of love, but when Raqib comes that void is filled. Nazneen needs nothing beyond the adoration and love of her son. Mrs. Islam is, therefore, an interloper. She is neither wanted nor needed in this tight-knit, two-person unit. Nazneen, who had grown so tired of nurturing her husband that she launched a series of domestic protests, cannot get enough of nurturing her son.*



*The bliss Nazneen finds in being a mother to Raqib has not erased all her unhappiness. The apartment furniture continues to irritate her and remind her that Chanu is not as good a provider as she once thought, and the estate is as ugly and divorced from nature as ever, turning even new and shiny things dull in short order. In that way, the tattoo woman, drunk and inert, is its perfect occupant.*



*Nazneen has committed an unpardonable sin: she has snubbed Mrs. Islam. The old woman takes her revenge by insinuating that Nazneen's mothering style is analogous to that of a white woman. Perhaps, Mrs. Islam implies, Nazneen has already assimilated to the point that she wants no help from her own kind. Her parting gesture—running her hand over Raqib's face—is likewise ominous, reading like a curse.*



One Sunday, while Nazneen feeds Raqib, Chanu talks of Dr. Azad, who has yet to invite them to his home. Chanu thinks he might be a snob. Nazneen can't be bothered with Chanu's petty concerns. She is focused on Raqib, who has gone from awed to quizzical. She cannot believe such a golden, joyful creature has come from her and Chanu. Later, when they take him for a walk on Brick Lane, strangers will stop and compliment him, and Chanu will feed him treats and brag about his alertness and obvious intelligence.

Before they leave the house, though, Nazneen is forced to listen to Chanu go on and on about his chances for promotion (she notices he has started using "if" instead of "when" when talking about it) and she has to trim his hair and his corns. While she does so, she faces the fact that he will never finish anything. He will never get the promotion or follow through on his plans for the lending library or build the dream house in Dhaka or restore their apartment **furniture**. At the same time, she realizes that he won't forget about these projects. He'll just keep talking about them as if he intends to work on them any day now.

Chanu reads two passages from *Richard III* aloud to Nazneen, both dealing with Richard's self-hatred. While Raqib chews on a piece of bread, Nazneen continues to cut his hair, considering how she now spends her days. She often misses prayers. She tells herself it is fine to miss once in a while when Raqib needs her, but sometimes she loses track of time in little fantasies, like when she got sucked into an English magazine Chanu left lying around. The cover showed a couple ice skating, and Nazneen drifted into a different world where she was one of the skaters and the audience was applauding for her. Now, when she gets a letter from Hasina, she lets herself daydream that she, too, is an independent woman. Then she is remorseful and composes a stiff letter to her sister as penance.

Nazneen pays a visit to Razia, who is, as usual, out of temper with her children. Tariq, who has grown silent and taciturn like his father, whines for his mother to give him five pounds. He wants a new football. Then Shefali asks for five pounds, too. Nazneen looks around the apartment. It has become crammed and cluttered with **furniture**, clothes, toys, food, and a whole host of largely useless items. Nazneen thinks about the children back home in Gouripur and about how they rarely complained, even when toys and food were scarce. Unlike Razia's children, the villagers did not make themselves unhappy over things and opportunities they did not need.

*That Chanu thinks Dr. Azad might be a snob shows the depth of his self-delusion. He is the one who is always degrading their Sylheti neighbors, whom he considers peasants. Nazneen and Chanu, meanwhile, have found in Raqib a source of common joy. It is the one thing they have in common.*



*The furniture that Nazneen once considered proof of Chanu's relative success has grown shabby and worn. This parallels Nazneen's faith in her husband. She has come to believe that all his talk is empty blather, but as his wife she cannot say so, and she must pretend to believe him when he claims that he is working hard. It is a woman's role to humor her husband in such a way.*



*Perhaps, given the context and content of the quotations from Richard III, Chanu is not completely without self-awareness. It is possible that he, too, might feel pangs of self-disgust, but Nazneen does not press the subject. Meanwhile, her faith in God and fate is slipping, being replaced by ice skating fantasies. The appeal of skating is not only the pretty outfits and the promise of a handsome partner, but the freedom associated with flying elegantly over a smooth surface, everything effortless and clean.*



*Razia's cluttered apartment parallels Nazneen's. Both places are filling up with furniture, which, once it reaches a critical mass, begins crowding out the home's inhabitants. Razia struggles with a dilemma common among Tower Hamlets parents: her children have begun to embrace western ways. They want the same things their white classmates want, and, because their expectations have been raised, they are now sure to be disappointed.*



Razia sends both kids outside and begins to tell Nazneen about her husband's frustrating approach to money. Rather than giving her some to spend on the family, he sends it all home to his brother in Bangladesh. Razia is worried the brother is spending it all. She supposes she'll never see it again. In the meantime, she never sees her husband either, as he is busy working two jobs. Razia says she's thinking of following Jorina's lead and finding work in a factory. Nazneen is shocked.

Everyone knows Jorina's husband is cheating on her because she had to get a job and that made him feel less of a man. What, Nazneen says, will the community say if Razia tries to get a job, too?

Razia could not care less what the community says, especially since "the community" usually means Mrs. Islam, who, rumor has it, is not the upstanding woman everyone presumed her to be. Nazneen is intrigued, and Razia goes on to explain that Mrs. Islam's habit of keeping **handkerchiefs** up her sleeve goes back to a time when she and her husband ran a shady business in Bangladesh. Rather than keeping purdah, Mrs. Islam was an essential player in the company, using the handkerchiefs to signal to her husband when she wanted him to make a deal. And Mrs. Islam is still involved in business, although Razia is hesitant to tell Nazneen what kind, since she's not sure she can trust the information she's been given. Nazneen tells her it's best to let the rest remain unsaid, then.

Nazneen and Chanu are on a bus on their way to Dr. Azad's house. Chanu comments, quietly at first and then more loudly, on the size of their African driver, saying that it's obvious his people were born and bred for slavery. Nazneen responds to this observation in the same way she responds to nearly everything Chanu says now: with the phrase, "If you say so, husband." It is her way of expressing subtle disagreement, but Chanu does not hear her dissent. Chanu asks her what he should say to Dr. Azad when they arrive. She answers that he should say "salaam," and is puzzled by Chanu's apparent ignorance of rudimentary etiquette.

Nazneen notices that Chanu's soles are separating from his **shoes** and the knees of his pants are shiny. When she first met him, Chanu was not handsome, but he was at least well put together. Now, even though Nazneen has abandoned her rebellious approaches to housework (they annoyed only her), he looks slovenly and sloppy. As they move through the city, she considers whether or not she has enough diapers, wipes, and food for Raqib and she watches shop windows flash by. Chanu decides he will tell Dr. Azad they were just passing through, and it dawns on Nazneen that they are going to the doctor's house uninvited.

*Traditional marriage roles dictate that husbands work and therefore control all the money. This puts women in what amounts to a catch-22. They are obligated by convention to depend on their husbands for shelter and food. Should their husbands spend the money unwisely, wives are, in many cases, not permitted to obtain work to fix the problem. Should a wife go to work, and her husband misbehave, she risks getting blamed for that, too. This is a game a woman cannot win.*



*This is the second indication that Mrs. Islam might not be the kindly and respectable woman she appears to be. The handkerchiefs represent tricks. She seems to have an endless supply of them up her sleeve. If Razia's story of Mrs. Islam's work in business is true, Mrs. Islam is an inveterate hypocrite, for it was Mrs. Islam who criticized Jorina for working outside the home, not keeping purdah, and endangering the purity of her own culture by mixing with people of different ethnic groups.*



*Chanu's ignorant remark about the African bus driver is an extreme example of his wrong-headed notions about race. It also puts Nazneen in a mortifying position. She does not allow herself to contradict him directly, for that would be a violation of her wifely role. The result is that Chanu feels vindicated and revered. As a man, he does not have to question his own ignorant assumptions.*



*Like the furniture in their apartment, Chanu's clothing has grown ragged. This transformation is not the result of Nazneen's housework mutiny, which has ended. She is focused now, instead, on Raqib's needs. This shift in attention is a lateral move; having all but given up on her marriage, she is putting all her energies into motherhood. She has none left over for herself.*



Nazneen wonders why her father would marry her off to such a man. She grows angry and feels an insidious kind of discontentment slither along her skin. The feeling is like a **snake** that moves up her shoulders and neck, hissing in her ear. Most of the time, she is successful at wishing the snake away. She tells herself that her life is comfortable and fine. Chanu does not beat her. She loves Raqib. But the snake is there all the same, reminding her that she is essentially unhappy.

If she'd known what her life with Chanu would be like, Nazneen thinks, she would have wept on her wedding day. In truth, she did weep on her wedding day—the weeping came naturally to her. After all, Rupban was a champion weeper. The summer when Nazneen turned ten, Auntie, Rupban's sister, came to visit, and the women spent the first several hours together crying. It was the same summer Mustafa, the village cow man, lost his mind, kidnapped a young girl, and kept her in the jungle for three days and nights. As a girl, Nazneen could not figure out the source of her mother and aunt's suffering. It seemed to have nothing to do with Mustafa and the girl. All she knew was that it was connected somehow to being a woman, and she hoped that one day, when she was older, she would understand.

Such sadness bored Hasina, so she dragged Nazneen away and they raided the local store, looking for tamarind and henna. Then they braided each other's hair, and Nazneen was struck anew by her sister's otherworldly beauty, thinking that Hasina was not, like the rest of them, born to suffer.

Later, while nearly everyone in the village took a nap, Nazneen climbed a tree and looked out over the nearby jungle and fields, wondering if, when she finally married, she would go as far away as the furthest field. While sitting in the branches, she noticed a dead man hanging from another tree. The man was talking to her. It was Mustafa, and he wasn't quite dead. He wanted her to cut him down, but, as the girl whose life had been left to fate, she did not feel qualified to make any life and death decisions, so she walked away. Eventually, she went in search of water, thinking that if Mustafa were still alive when she got back, she would at least quench his thirst. What she found instead were three men, one the father of the kidnapped girl, dancing around Mustafa's dangling corpse.

In the present, Chanu and Nazneen stand outside a large house landscaped with elaborate flagstones and **fake animals**. When Chanu rings the bell, a plump woman in a tight purple skirt and short coppery hair answers the door. Chanu apologizes, telling her they're looking for Dr. Azad, and assuming they have the wrong address. The woman informs them that they're in exactly the right place.

*The snake of unspoken anger returns in full force. At home in Gouripur, snakes were ever present and often deadly. This snake will not leave Nazneen alone, no matter how hard she works to banish it. It is similar, as a symbol, to the serpent in the story of Adam and Eve, shattering her innocence and opening her eyes to her own desires.*



*As a grown woman, Nazneen wishes she could go back to her childhood and relive the days she spent with Hazina, Rupban, and Hamid. As a child, though, she wanted to be a woman and to understand a woman's sorrow and its source. Now she has first-hand knowledge of that sadness, and she sees that much of it is engendered by the men in women's lives. Women are denied the power to make the kinds of decisions that would free them from the men who cause them pain. They, like the little village girl, are held captive.*



*To the relatively plain Nazneen, Hasina's physical beauty seems a blessing. It is clear, though, from Hasina's letters that beauty alone has not shielded her from harm.*



*As a young girl, Nazneen did not comprehend that leaving a lynched man to his fate was basically condemning him to death. What she could have done to help Mustafa, however, is unclear. She was only a child, and Mustafa had been punished by full-grown men who were out for revenge. Even so, Mustafa's death obviously haunts Nazneen. She thinks of his story while on the way to Dr. Azad's because she again feels powerless and at the mercy of men.*



*In Gouripur, the animals were all too real. Water buffaloes lazed in ponds and mynah birds soared overhead. In London, the Azads have settled for tacky replicas. This suggests that the big city existence many Bengali immigrants are living is also a cheap substitute for the genuine thing.*



## CHAPTER 5

Chanu and Nazneen settle into Dr. Azad's garish living room. **Tiger figurines** snarl in front of a gas fire place. Velvet curtains cover the windows. Mrs. Azad yells for her husband to come down and greet his visitors. Dr. Azad appears, neat as ever, freezing when he sees Chanu. Chanu is likewise frozen. Finally, he spits out that he and Nazneen were just passing by. Dr. Azad says he would love to offer them dinner, but they already ate. Mrs. Azad overrules him, inviting Chanu and Nazneen to stay.

The four of them eat TV dinners in the living room. Mrs. Azad does her best to ignore Chanu and Nazneen, drinking beer and watching television, which she keeps at a high volume. Chanu joins her in drinking a beer, and Nazneen wonders if eating pigs will be next. To fill the silence, Chanu begins talking about his plans for building a house in Dhaka. Dr. Azad sits strangely still in a straight-backed chair, squeezing the arms as if he hopes to draw **blood** from them. Nazneen supposes he comes to her house for dinner to escape his uncouth wife.

Soon, a teenage girl appears, asking for money. Her skirt is even shorter than her mother's and her hair is highlighted the same, coppery color. Once she gets her money, she leaves, hardly acknowledging Chanu and Nazneen. Chanu says that is the tragedy of being an immigrant. One is always torn between two cultures, and then one's children get caught in the struggle as well. Mrs. Azad says Chanu is talking crap. It's really very simple, she says—they now live in a Western society where women are permitted to work and do what they want. The real tragedy is women feeling as if they have to cover themselves and behave demurely while men are free to live their lives.

Mrs. Azad invites Nazneen to come with her. She grabs a teddy bear from a cupboard and hands it to Raqib, but he just falls asleep. Standing there, watching the doctor's wife smoke, Nazneen feels a strange affection for her, and she realizes that Dr. Azad comes to visit her and Chanu not to get away from his family but to study one that is even unhappier than his own.

Sometime later, Nazneen wakes from a dream in which Hasina is working in a **garment factory**, ironing collars, then her own hand, then her face. She awakens to discover that Raqib's skin is on fire. Nazneen looks around her bedroom. The large, dark **wardrobe** looms nearby, stuffed now with two more broken chairs. Chanu snores beside her. Nazneen knows in this moment that her son is the only thing that matters to her. She holds him up and his head droops. She runs to the hallway and flicks on the light, calling to the baby to wake up. Chanu appears, asking what is wrong. Then he, too, grabs the baby and tells him to wake up, but Raqib does not respond.

*Mrs. Azad's assertiveness shocks both Nazneen and Chanu, not only because they expected Dr. Azad to have married a very different sort of woman, but because she refuses to defer to her husband like the timid Bengali wives with whom they're used to interacting. The tiger figurines bring to mind the lawn ornaments: more disingenuousness on display.*



*Nazneen and Chanu are again surprised, this time by the food Mrs. Azad offers them. Nazneen is always making homemade Bengali dishes. TV dinners are western culture at its worst: impersonal and tasteless. Blood, in this instance, symbolizes the lack of affection the Azads feel for each other. Despite Dr. Azad's best efforts, the ties of his family are broken.*



*Nazneen is characteristically silent during this debate. The so-called "tragedy of the immigrant" is one of the novel's many dualities. Chanu is suggesting that the immigrant is forever torn in two, as he loves and is loyal to his home but must assimilate in order to succeed. Mrs. Azad is not torn at all. She has chosen to embrace the west because it offers women equality. Nazneen observes, though, that while Mrs. Azad seems empowered, she is not happy.*



*Nazneen and Mrs. Azad could not be more different from each other, but still, there is a sisterhood between them, a kind of shared understanding that arises from the fact that they are both women living in a man's world.*



*Nazneen's dream suggests that she is still consumed with concern for her sister. She worries that Hasina's work is putting her in some kind of danger and that it might be erasing her beauty, which is tantamount to her identity. The wardrobe's presence in this scene is also a harbinger of dark things to come. It is a reminder of another nightmare Nazneen had, the one in which she was trapped inside. The dreams both hint at the seriousness of Raqib's illness.*



## CHAPTER 6

From the ambulance, Nazneen senses that the city has shattered. It is in fragments. The hospital, too, seems like a broken mosaic of people and sensations and moments. Raqib is taken away from Nazneen and put in an incubator. Nazneen feels like she has a noise inside of her that, if she were to open her mouth and let it out, would break the city and the hospital all over again.

Chanu brings Nazneen food, first from the hospital cantina, and then from home. She eats ravenously. He brings more. They wait for news in a waiting room set aside for families of the gravely ill. Raqib stays in his incubator, covered in a raspberry red rash. After three days of waiting, Chanu tells Nazneen a letter has come from home. An old friend of his wants money. For years, this friend did very well for himself, collecting bribes and throwing parties, but his money has dried up, he only has one servant, and he hopes Chanu will not let his family suffer. Nazneen begins to laugh. She tells Chanu to send the money. God forbid a family live with only one servant. Chanu smiles.

It begins to dawn on Nazneen that she no longer despises her husband. In fact, in the time they have spent at the hospital, waiting for Raqib to wake up, she has grown to understand him. Whereas she retreats inwardly, he pushes out. She accepts fate; he challenges it. Still, they aren't so different after all. They want the same things, and the one thing they want the most in the world they finally get—Raqib appears to be in recovery. They can take him home soon. Nazneen had sat by Raqib's cot, calm as a mongoose entranced by a **snake**, willing her son to get better, and he did. For the first time since moving to London, Nazneen is completely and utterly happy.

Nazma and Sorupa, two of Nazneen's neighbors from Tower Hamlets, have come to visit Nazneen and Raqib in the hospital. Jorina comes, too. All three women mean well, but it's Razia who really comforts Nazneen. After Nazneen has asked the medical machines to look after her son (she thinks of them as small, mechanical **animals**), she and Razia sit in the family waiting room together and talk. Razia is furious with her husband. Not only does he send all their money home (to an imam, it turns out, who is building a new mosque), but he has begun nitpicking her grocery buying habits. He says she spends too much money on junk food and insists that they eat everything in the house before she buys more. The family has been living on raisins and crackers as a result.

*Nazneen has built her life and sense of self around her roles as a wife and mother. Without Raqib in her arms, she has no purpose. Having swallowed all her grievances, she is worried that, if she were to voice them now, her words would have the power to destroy.*



*For the first time since her marriage, Nazneen eats her fill in front of her husband. She eats with an insatiable hunger because she is attempting to fill the void left by Raqib. The story of Chanu's friend begging for money reminds Nazneen that life at home in Bangladesh is not without its ridiculous side. It also reveals that Chanu is not as heartless when it comes to such entreaties as he'd wanted Nazneen to believe.*



*Nazneen and Chanu are clearly not in a love marriage. Their arrangement was one of practicality and convenience. Regardless, love seems to be sneaking up on them. They are growing closer over their shared anxiety for Raqib. Chanu, far from being a villain, is a caring and concerned father and husband. The snake that visits Nazneen has changed its tune. It no longer represents unvoiced anger—since Nazneen isn't angry anymore. Instead, it represents the utter concentration required to save her son's life.*



*Rupban trusted Nazneen's life to fate. Nazneen and Chanu, on the other hand, have given their son over to modern medicine, which seems to be dominated by beeping machines. Investing the machines with animal-like traits, Nazneen begins to view them as allies in the fight for Raqib's life. Razia's main battle is for equality in her marriage. For all her independent spirit and verve, Razia is not able to overrule her violent husband. As man and master, he still has the power to make her and her children's lives miserable.*



Razia wants very much to work, but her husband has said he will slit her throat if she does. Nazneen says Razia should not want to be like Jorina. Jorina works and her family is a mess, but Razia counters that everyone is a mess. Just look at the teens on the estate, drinking and listening to loud music and disrespecting their elders. Working, Razia says, has nothing to do with it.

Meanwhile, Razia's husband's coworker is always giving them things they don't need, usually cans of paint. Razia is beginning to think she should give up and become a housepainter. She and Nazneen share a laugh about this scenario and Chanu arrives with food from home. He greets Razia uncomfortably, and Nazneen suggests he go check on Raqib, which he happily does.

Nazneen eats Chanu's food ravenously. He is a very good cook, and she feels bad that she had no idea. She thinks about the rainy season back home, when **water buffaloes** seemed to grow webbed feet and goats took to roofs to survive and women splashed around, trying to get to the cook stoves. In those times, rice was the only thing they had to eat. It was the giver of life. Her husband's rice is perfect. Chanu's culinary talents are another discovery she has made while waiting for her son to recover.

Razia takes advantage of their time alone to tell Nazneen something she has learned about Mrs. Islam. The "respectable" woman is, in fact, a loan shark. Nazneen can't and won't believe it, but Razia offers as proof Amina, the woman who left her husband for having a second wife. Mrs. Islam apparently loaned her money and is charging her 33 percent interest. Amina could not make the last payment, and Mrs. Islam's sons are threatening to break her arms. Razia gets up to leave, saying she needs to tend to her children. Nazneen asks her to say "salaam" to the tattoo woman for her, but Razia says she can't: the woman has been taken to an institution. She was sitting in her own filth at the end. Razia asks why no one helped the woman sooner. Did they not see her?

Chanu brings Nazneen her prayer beads, and she begins praying hurriedly, wanting to get to Raqib, but then she slows down, realizing that she owes God for her son's life. It was his will that saved him, not hers. She had been praying incorrectly all along, and from now on, she will do it right. And she will live as she should. No more trying to deprive herself of desire. To do so was like trying to cure a **tapeworm** with starvation. To do so was to die.

*Razia represents the more liberated woman here, Nazneen the wife still clinging to conventional ideas. Nazneen is more apt to blame women for society's ills. Razia's concern about the youth being corrupted by Western values is an example of Chanu's "tragedy of the immigrant" theory.*



*The charity Razia and her husband receive from his coworker, while well-intentioned, is also condescending. The coworker obviously assumes that, as Bengali immigrants, Razia's family would appreciate junky donations of any kind from a white person.*



*Now, when Nazneen thinks of home, she no longer simply pines for days gone by. Her nostalgic daydreams now mingle with feelings of affection for her husband, showing that she is beginning to love him in spite of herself. By making her rice, Chanu is literally keeping her alive.*



*Amina, like several other Bengali wives living in Tower Hamlets, is suffering severe hardship as a result of the community's entrenched sexism. Her problems double when she seeks a loan from Mrs. Islam. It's clear that a system biased in favor of men places women not only in physical danger but financial jeopardy as well. The tattoo woman's removal is bitterly ironic in that Nazneen did see her. She watched her on a daily basis, but she never did anything to help her because Nazneen was too caught up in her own problems to see that the white woman was suffering from neglect.*



*Nazneen vacillates wildly between thinking she is responsible for Raqib's health and believing, instead, that God should be given control. The tapeworm image harkens back to the snake-as-repressed-fury symbol. She knows she needs to own her desires and needs but doesn't know how to.*



Raqib has been in the hospital eight days, long enough for Nazneen to begin to be able to distinguish the family members and friends of the sick from the patients themselves, and to recognize a doctor, nurse, or orderly on sight. She is in the hall because Raqib's room is being cleaned. Chanu joins her and they discuss the curious case of Mrs. Islam. Chanu tells Nazneen it is now time for him to be honest with his relatives back home and admit to them he is not a rich man. He enjoyed them thinking he was rich and important, but Mrs. Islam's story has convinced him that he needs to end the hypocrisy. Nazneen disagrees. His attitude reminds her of the Bengali saying, "sinking sinking drinking water" about a hypocrite who goes to the pond while everyone is starving and dying of thirst to dunk his head and sink a little lower.

Chanu then tells Nazneen that he has resigned from his job on the council. He is clearing out his desk in the morning. Nazneen cannot believe his work can spare him so soon, but he assures her that he is determined to act more and talk less in the future, and that he doesn't care if he is needed: he is done. While he tells her this, a downtrodden-looking orderly walks by with a bucket full of water. Chanu accidentally kicks it and the orderly, sighing, begins cleaning up the mess.

Raqib is awake and Nazneen basks in the joy of holding him, of sticking her finger in his mouth and being bitten by his little teeth. Chanu promises to buy a set of encyclopedias for his son. He can tell he is going to be an intelligent and inquisitive little boy. Nazneen, meanwhile, wonders where the money will come from. She begins to consider her mother's absolute faith in God and fate. It was God who decided Nazneen should live and God who gave health to Raqib. But then she becomes furious with Rupban. If Nazneen had trusted Raqib's health to fate, he would have died. How could Rupban have been so irresponsible?

Nazneen can now see that her mother was wrong about some things. Children's lives should not be left to fate, and childbirth is nothing like indigestion. Nazneen now thinks she understands why Hamid would leave for days on end. He needed to be spared Rupban's misguided saintliness.

*It becomes clear during this hallway discussion that, contrary to his previous claims, Chanu is, indeed, corresponding with his family back home, and that in his letters he has intimated that he is much more successful than he really is. His confession brings to Nazneen's mind the famous Bengali saying because Chanu has not only been keeping secrets from her, but he is sabotaging himself. However, it is not Nazneen's place to say so, and so Chanu will continue to drown in his own delusions.*



*Nazneen is bothered by the fact that Chanu would make such an important decision without her, but she does not think it is her place to say so. Chanu's clumsy knocking over of the water bucket suggests that, despite his resolution to be a man of action from now on, he is merely fumbling headlong into an uncertain future.*



*Nazneen is continuing to go back and forth between her faith in God and her doubt about the wisdom of entrusting human lives to something as fickle as fate. Her changing attitudes hint at her gradual transformation from a traditional Bengali girl and wife to a more Westernized woman who sees some advantage in adopting British ways. She is able to question her own mother because she, too, is a mother.*



*When Nazneen was a girl, she wanted nothing more than to be just like her mother, but cracks have appeared in Rupban's clay feet. Nazneen's disillusionment with Rupban is a sign that she has, to a certain extent, lost her innocence and is becoming her own person.*



This realization brings to mind the days just after Rupban's death, when Mumtaz asked Nazneen to help her wash her mother's dead body. Mumtaz wonders aloud about her sister-in-law's absolute and unquestioning faith in God. She used to tell Rupban that it was all well and good to trust God, but, while they were waiting to find out exactly what his will was, they had to manage on their own. She supposes Rupban would say her death was God's plan, but Mumtaz seems to doubt it. While Mumtaz braids Rupban's hair, the rains come, and the villagers greet the sudden showers with joy and abandon. Even the adults stroll out, feigning casual happiness. Finally, Nazneen is able to cry for her mother, letting her tears mingle with the rain and fall onto her mother's shroud.

Nazneen wakes to the beep and glow of the hospital machines. Razia is there, biting her knuckles. Her hair is in disarray and she looks deeply disturbed. When Nazneen asks what is wrong, Razia tells her that her husband is dead. There was an accident at his job, the one in which he drove halal meat to grocery stores, and he was crushed by seventeen frozen **cows**. Nazneen holds her friend's hand, and Razia says ruefully that she supposes she can get that job now. Her husband is in no position to stop her.

Nazneen returns to her apartment, appalled by the mess. Everywhere she looks she sees **furniture** in various states of disrepair, mismatched rugs, open books, and other disorienting clutter. She'd gotten used to the spartan surroundings of the hospital. Now she supposes she will get used to the disorder of her apartment. She sees that Chanu has at least started trying to fix some of the chairs. While she catalogues their deteriorating belongings, Hanufa knocks on the door with an offering of food. Nazneen thanks her but tells her Chanu has been cooking. Hanufa says she knows that, but didn't know what else to bring.

Nazneen is alone in her apartment. She bathes carefully and then, approaching the dreaded dark **wardrobe**, pulls a pair of Chanu's **pants** out and tries them on, telling herself she isn't harming anyone. Then she trades the pants for her underskirt and looks at her legs in the mirror. She is pleased with them. She lies down on the bed and lets herself drift for a moment. She thinks about cleaning the fridge, about buying more toilet paper, about writing to Hasina. She gets out of bed, dresses, and begins composing a letter. She tries to tell Hasina about Raqib's illness and Chanu's resignation, but nothing comes out right. She attempts to draw what she wants to say, the gist of which is that she fought for her child and won.

*Mumtaz served as a practical foil for Rupban, whose superstitious nature had to be kept in check so that Rupban would think to see to the needs of her family. Village life in Gouripur is intimately tied to water and the cycles of rain and drought. As Nazneen and Mumtaz wash Rupban's body, the rain pours down, almost like a benediction. Nazneen's tears complete the picture. In the face of death, the scene suggests, there is life. It is a bittersweet moment for Nazneen, who is mourning her mother while the rest of the village rejoices.*



*Having fallen asleep thinking of Rupban's corpse, Nazneen wakes to Razia's loss. The frozen cows bring to mind the animal statues outside the Azads' house. In a way, Western appetites killed her husband. Razia is now a free and independent woman, but the independence is hard-won. It is now up to her alone to support her family.*



*The cluttered apartment mimics Nazneen's preoccupied mind. At the hospital, she is focused on Raqib alone. At home, there are myriad chores to do and things to tidy up. Hanufa's offer of food is also clearly an offer of emotional support. Nazneen might have felt isolated when she first moved to London, but she is, indeed, part of a community whose members strive to take care of their own.*



*Nazneen is, in effect, trying on a new persona when she puts on Chanu's pants. It is a brief flirtation with her independent side, a quick and clandestine attempt at a certain type of drag. She likes the sight of herself in Western, masculine garb, which is also why she indulges in a moment of self-congratulation. Having taken her son to a British hospital for treatment and remained steadfastly by his bedside, praying all the while for his recovery, she is proud to tell her sister that, unlike Rupban, she triumphed over God and fate.*



While Nazneen tidies the apartment, it occurs to her that by willing her son back to health she might have doomed Razia's husband. Death needed another target and took him. A jinni, or ghost, dances before her for a moment but she banishes it. She leaves for the hospital, and out in the courtyard of the estates, a group of young men flirt with her and put on exaggerated displays of chivalry. Nazneen pulls her **headscarf** over her face to hide a smile.

Nazneen finds Chanu in Raqib's room at the hospital. Chanu informs Nazneen that their son is gone. At first, she thinks the nurses have taken him away to conduct another series of tests. She notices that the room is eerily quiet. All the machines are off. Chanu asks her if she will wash him when they bring him back, and Nazneen agrees. She's been giving him sponge baths this entire time. She begins to tidy the bed she and Chanu have been sleeping on, but he tells her to leave it. Her son is not even cold. How can she think of cleaning at a time like this? Chanu begins to cry, and Nazneen lets him hold her. She thinks of all the children who died in Gouripur, how they were buried in such a way to keep them as clean and pure as they were when they came into the world.

## CHAPTER 7

This chapter is made up entirely of letters from Hasina to Nazneen. The letters begin in May 1988 with Hasina expressing sympathy over the death of Raqib. For her grieving sister, Hasina offers the Prayer of Light, which asks God to surround the grieving with light so that they might come out of the darkness.

The second letter, dated September 1988, is full of news. Hasina has moved to a larger apartment in the Narayanganj district of Dhaka. Mr. Chowdhury helps her with the move, but it doesn't go smoothly. When she arrives at the new building, a family is still occupying her room. The family is slovenly and behind on their rent. Mr. Chowdhury gets them to leave, and Hasina settles in. The apartment has smooth concrete floors, and the walls will be plastered soon. There is another family to the back of her and a group of jute pickers to one side. Everyone is clean and respectable, even the jute pickers who hop the train that runs by the apartment each day in order to get to the jute fields. Mr. Chowdhury, who is like a father to Hasina, tells her to alert him if the men ever threaten her, but so far they've acted like total gentlemen.

*The brand of superstition drilled into Nazneen's head and heart by Rupban is destructive in its effects, in that it causes Nazneen to feel guilty about Raqib's apparent recovery. Her amusement at the young men's advances, however, suggests that she is open to embracing more progressive ideals.*



*Nazneen is so preprogrammed to think in terms of her duties as a wife and mother that, when informed of her own son's death, she cannot process the news and thinks, instead, of all the tidying up she must do. This is alien to Chanu, who has always been allowed to have his own feelings about things. It is natural that, at a moment of such extreme emotional trauma, Nazneen's thoughts would drift back to Gouripur where she first learned of life, death, and love—and where, with Mumtaz's help, she washed her mother's body to prepare it for burial.*



*Hasina seems, at first glance, to be the less religious of the two sisters, but she, too, believes in the power of God to heal and comfort. Light versus dark is another of the novel's many dualities.*



*In Nazneen's mind, Hasina is an independent woman, living a glamorous, albeit slightly dangerous, life on her own. The reality is that Hasina is still dependent on the patronage of a man to help her negotiate housing and employment, and the lack of plaster on the walls hints at her relative poverty. Her beauty, too, presents problems. Mr. Chowdhury is convinced the jute pickers will harass Hasina. Instead of trusting her to handle the situation on her own, Mr. Chowdhury feels the need to display his chivalry in an ostentatious manner. Perhaps all is not as it seems.*



The day Hasina is writing of is hartal, or an official day of striking. Mr. Chowdhury is against both the strikers and the country's leaders. In his opinion, the former are lazy and the latter corrupt. In his line of work (in addition to working as a landlord, he is an electrical parts supplier and also manufactures toilets and sinks) he is constantly having to bribe civil servants and politicians. Even the president, Mr. Chowdhury says, is corrupt beyond belief. For her part, Hasina supports the striking university students who are rallying for the right to cheat equally. It's not fair that some with money can afford to buy exam papers. Everyone should have access to such favors.

Hasina ends her letter telling Nazneen that she is waiting for hers. She congratulates her on having such an ambitious and high-achieving husband and sends her wishes for more sons.

In her next letter, dated November 1988, Hasina writes of Nazneen's beautiful apartment. She supposes Nazneen has grown used to the lovely **corner cabinet** and glass showcase and wallpaper, but, to Hasina, these are all unimaginable treasures. She plans to put the picture of Hasina's rooms next to her photograph of Raqib, and when she finally has glass she will frame them. Hasina does worry that Nazneen has grown thin, but Zainab says it is the fashion in London to be thin.

Zainab is the mother of the family who lives in the apartment behind Hasina. An unpleasant woman, she is always complaining. She thinks that the apartment building will soon be torn down, as it is too close to the railway. Hasina writes to Nazneen of the **garment factory** where she works. It is a half hour walk from her apartment and Hasina thinks it a fine place. Workers must arrive a little before eight a.m. They open the gates at eight sharp and lock them shortly after. Workers who show up late are therefore locked out for the day.

The factory consists of three main areas: one contains the **sewing** machines (this is where Hasina works), one is for cutting and finishing (this is where the men work), and a third is for the administrative office. Hasina's sewing machine is so new she is almost afraid to touch it. When she first started using it, it sensed she was a beginner and pricked her finger. Now it purrs like a **cat**. Aleya, one of Hasina's friends at the factory, says if trees can have spirits, why can't machines? Shahnaz, another factory friend, thinks Aleya is a country bumpkin for saying such things, but she does not mention this in front of Aleya because, according to Hasina, she is kind and gentle.

*Hasina clearly has a mind of her own. That said, she allows those in positions of power to impress and influence her unduly. She looks up to Mr. Chowdhury and therefore gives his anti-labor feelings some credence. Still, she can't help but wonder if the strikers might not be in the right after all. The corruption is its own problem. Hasina, like Nazneen, is having some of her innocence stripped from her as she becomes better acquainted with the real world outside Gouripur.*



*Having only Hasina's end of this set of correspondence gives rise to rich irony. Chanu is obviously not high-achieving.*



*These are items that Nazneen had long ago grown tired of and had begun to despise. Again, irony factors in, as does the unsaid. What Nazneen does not tell Hasina is more revealing than what she does. For instance, Nazneen's weight loss is a clear indication of the after effects of acute grief.*



*Like Nazneen in London, Hasina has her own community, and it is made up of her neighbors and coworkers. Hasina writes of her happiness and job satisfaction, but the fact that garment workers who show up late are denied their chance at a paycheck suggests that her place of employment might not be entirely benevolent or fair.*



*Hasina's relationship with her sewing machine is not unlike Nazneen's relationship to the beeping monitors in the hospital where Raqib stayed during his fever. Both sisters give the machines animal-like traits and personalities. Hasina's work station reminds her of a contented cat. Nazneen, on the other hand, now understands that, unlike the animals back in Gouripur, machines do not have hearts, souls, or intentions. They are merely machines.*



Hasina began her work at the **garment factory** as a runner, carting thread and cloth around, but she is a sewing woman now, and she and her friends—Aleya, Shahnaz, and Renu—are as close as sisters. They work in the same row and eat lunch together, talking about their lives. Aleya is the mother of five children. Her husband did not want her to work, but he eventually gave in and bought her a burkha to wear to the factory. He escorts her to work in the morning and walks her home at night. Shahnaz is two years older than Hasina and loves learning. She has refused all the men her parents have chosen as husbands for her and she objects to the dowry system. Why should women be considered burdens? she wonders. Since she makes her own money, she says, *she* is the dowry.

Renu is the oldest of the group. Married off to an old man at 15 and widowed three months later, she has had to work ever since and believes she was born to suffer. Hasina feels for her, but sometimes Renu reminds her of Rupban and at those times Hasina can't be near her. Hasina signs off by saying she is sorry that Chanu's job has not turned out the way he thought it would, but that he is smart and skilled and is sure to get a better one in no time.

Hasina writes again in January 1988, observing that Nazneen's letters are so short they end almost before they begin. Hasina knows this is because she is depressed and suggests that Nazneen find work. Work is the cure, Hasina says. In a way, it is like a marriage. You go to it every day and over time it becomes a comfortable habit.

There is trouble at the factory, though. Religious men have begun protesting outside, saying it is a sin for men and women to work together. To Hasina they are the true sinners, using God's name to tell a lie. Aleya's husband has grown anxious. He wants her to wear a **burkha** in the factory now, but Hasina writes that men and women don't work together anyway—the men could never sit still at the machines. They have to get up and talk and smoke. Also, their jobs of cutting and pattern making are too intricate and dangerous for the women workers, who don't understand the electricity involved. One of the male workers, Abdul, always refers to Hasina as "sister." Every day he wears a clean shirt to work.

Zainab, meanwhile, has been telling Hasina to watch out. Once the jute cutters find out there's a **garment** girl in the house, there is bound to be trouble, but Hasina takes offense and assures her she is pure of body and pure of heart. She keeps purdah and no one can say she doesn't.

*Aleya and Shahnaz are foils for one another. Apart from the fact that she works outside of the home, Aleya is a typical Bengali wife, obeying her husband and respecting his authority, hence the burkha she wears to work each day. Shahnaz, on the other hand, is an example of a more liberated woman who openly challenges the status quo, refusing to model herself after society's expectations of her. She objects particularly to the dowry system, which reinforces the idea that women are burdens on society rather than assets.*



*Renu has seen the downsides of both married and working life. Widowed when still a girl, she is stuck in a never-ending cycle of poverty. Like Rupban, she blames God and fate for her troubles, but the real culprit is a system of societal and financial conventions that set women up for failure.*



*Hasina understands more than she lets on. Not only can she read between the lines of Nazneen's letters to see that her sister's marriage is old-hat but she also knows that Nazneen is in desperate need of employment, something to which Chanu isn't likely to consent.*



*Hasina is liberated enough to understand that the protestors are wrong in blaming women for wanting to be on equal footing with men. At the same time, she has bought the lie that men are somehow more skilled and knowledgeable than women when it comes to delicate tasks. Women are obviously quite capable of understanding the concept of electricity and how it works, but if men were to admit that, their place at the top of the power structure would be threatened.*



*Hasina should not have to defend herself for merely holding down a steady job, but the burden is on her to prove that she is without sin.*



The **garment factory** is offering the workers overtime so they can finish a large order from Japan. Renu, however, misses out. She's out of favor for having put several collars on the wrong way. Also, someone told the factory owners that she was eating betel nut. Shahnaz swears it wasn't her. Then she predicts Renu will end up breaking bricks. She's not being metaphorical, she says. On her way to work, Hasina walks by a brickyard where poor women and children chip away at bricks with small hammers all day.

In her next letter, dated March 1989, Hasina congratulates Nazneen on her pregnancy. She predicts that now, with so much at stake, Chanu will finally find a job and finish his studies as well. It is so hot in Narayanganj that the streets are melting. Mr. Chowdhury comes to collect Hasina's rent, taking only what she can afford. He brags about his sons in America and wishes he had a daughter to rub his feet. Hasina takes off his shoes and obliges him, making him happy. Zainab comes over, complaining about Mr. Chowdhury filling the building with low-lives. Hasina writes of a scandal involving the president, his girlfriend (on whom he bestowed political favors), and his wife who beat them both up when she found out about the affair. She says it's funny, then, that everyone spreads rumors about the **garment girls'** lack of virtue.

It is now July, and the rains have come. Rain is pouring in Hasina's apartment and it's ruined her **furniture**. A jute cutter, Hussain, says he will fix her table and chair. He is a kind man, though unattractive. Hasina is only dry when she's at the **garment** factory, where Shahnaz is worried that Abdul is paying Hasina too much attention. At one time, Abdul courted Shahnaz, but she rejected him. Shahnaz also worries that Hasina's full lips are too pink. She says she should dust them with powder to keep the religious protestors from thinking she is impure. Hasina writes that the bonfire Chanu set for them in the backyard must have been fun for the neighborhood children, but she wonders why he burned several chairs. Was there not any other wood available?

Hasina writes again in August, telling Nazneen that she, too, thinks of Rupban sometimes but she does not dream of her like her sister does. She wonders why, in Nazneen's dreams, Rupban is angry. Hasina then writes that Hamid was often unfaithful to Rupban. He even wanted to take another wife, but Rupban threatened suicide if he did. Hasina learned the truth from Malek. Apparently, everyone in Gouripur knew except for Hasina and Nazneen.

*Renu's already dire circumstances have worsened, not because God wants to punish her, but because one her coworkers chose to disparage her to the factory owners. Destitute women, deemed unfit to handle electricity, are given, instead, the job of breaking bricks. Nothing, it seems, could be more demeaning or pointless.*



*Hasina's washing of Mr. Chowdhury's feet symbolizes her position of inferiority to him. While his sons pursue their own lives in America, Hasina, as his adopted daughter, is there to serve him. Hasina's observations about the presidential scandal point out an essential hypocrisy of Bengali culture: Hasina and her fellow garment girls are shamed for working alongside men; meanwhile, rich women can engage in a variety of immoral behaviors and not be judged.*



*Hasina does not complain, but she is living in near poverty. Her furniture, while modest, had represented a certain amount of independence and prosperity. Now, however, even that is gone, and Shahnaz, whom Hasina considers her closest friend at the garment factory, is intimating that some of the negative attention they're receiving from the religious protestors is, indeed, Hasina's fault. Shahnaz suggests that Hasina's beauty is to blame for the protestors' draconian beliefs.*



*Nazneen grew up thinking her mother a model of perfection and wifely virtue. Gradually, that image is being tarnished. That said, Rupban did suffer a great deal. The only way she could talk her husband out of marrying a second time was by threatening to kill herself. The system of inequality drives women to extremes.*



Aleya is being beaten by her husband. The previous month she was named the best worker at the garment factory and was given a **sari** as a reward. Her husband, upset by the constant rumors swirling around garment girls, assumed the material came from another man and has been beating her ever since. Shahnaz says that the rumors are damaging all of their chances of making a good marriage. Hasina has not told her friends that she is married. When she first met them, she said she was an orphan and a widow, and now that they are all close she doesn't know how to tell them the truth.

It is now September, and Hasina writes to ask Nazneen to burn her last letter. Rupban would never have threatened to kill herself—that would have been blasphemy. It is another hartal, or strike day, and Hasina is home, writing to Nazneen and listening to the jute cutters fight in the next room over the rules of chess. They have a new set and cannot agree on how the game should be played. Zainab and her family are away at a wedding, and Hasina is grateful. They make more noise and fight more than anyone. Mr. Chowdhury comes to collect the rent. Hasina finds out that he's charging her much less than his other tenants. He vows again to hurt any of the jute cutters that come near her.

It is January 1990, and Hasina congratulates Nazneen on her new daughter, wishing that the little girl might grow up to be as sweet as her mother. Hasina is being shunned by her friends at the **garment** factory. She doesn't know what she's done, but no one will speak to her except Abdul. Everyone whispers about her and treats her unkindly, but Hasina hopes this is only temporary. Work and sadness are making her tired.

Hasina speaks to Shahnaz about her shunning and Shahnaz tells her that everyone knows about Hasina and the landlord. They have heard that Hasina is paying discounted rent. Hasina swears to Shahnaz that Mr. Chowdhury is like a father to her. She is confident that Shahnaz will set everything right quickly. The **garment** workers all look up to her and follow her lead.

Hasina's next letter is dated April 1990. She writes of Abdul insisting on escorting her home. The protesters have left, so there's no real danger, but he still prefers to make sure she gets back to her apartment safely. He is a neat and kind young man. Hasina feels lucky to have him for a friend, especially because the women at the **garment** factory continue to treat her poorly. Only Renu will speak to her. She tells Hasina not to worry—the girls think themselves ripe fruit, and they're worried about the bad ruining them. Hasina knows she is the bad fruit in this analogy, but she doesn't listen to Renu. She wants none of the older woman's martyrdom.

*In this charged environment, a woman is always under suspicion. She is guilty before proven innocent and a new dress is often grounds for a beating. It is interesting, then, that Shahnaz is still preoccupied with the thought of making a good marriage. Evidently, being a wife often means taking a beating for something one did not do.*



*While clearly the less religious of the two sisters, Hasina still believes in God and the concept of sin, hence her request that Nazneen burn the letter. Nazneen does not burn it, however. Ali structures the novel to suggest that the reader is reading the letters along with Nazneen. Mr. Chowdhury's decision to undercharge Hasina on rent puts her in a vulnerable position. She is now obligated to him, and his threat to beat up the jute cutters is more possessive than fatherly.*



*Hasina's shunning is mysterious and, as yet, unexplained. It directly follows Hasina's discovery that Mr. Chowdhury is charging her discounted rent, however, and Ali is hinting that that could be the cause.*



*Ali is hinting that Shahnaz might not be the good friend that Hasina took her to be. If she is a leader at the garment factory, then chances are good she is the one who spread the rumors about Hasina and Mr. Chowdhury.*



*Like Mr. Chowdhury, Abdul considers Hasina in need of protection. The same cultural norms that make slaves of women likewise infantilizes them. They are not trusted to walk home on their own, let alone pay their own rent or take charge of their lives. Renu's comparison of Hasina to fruit further dehumanizes her. Women are expected to be pure and unspoiled. One mistake and they are tossed out like rotten food.*



It is now August, and Hasina tells Nazneen not to worry about her. It is quiet around her at the **garment** factory, but she is working hard (she rarely takes a lunch now) and she is saving her money. Also, she has Abdul, who she thinks may be in charge of the factory someday. He is smartly dressed and pays attention to detail. Also, he loves her. Hasina hopes they can marry someday, but there is the complication that she is still married to Malek. Maybe she can get a divorce, but she doesn't know how to go about it.

At home, there is more drama. Hussain has bought a few **goats** and they have an appetite only for Zainab's **washing**. Zainab is furious, but Hussain just laughs. Hasina is thinking about getting a few chickens herself.

Hasina's latest letter is dated January 1991. She writes of talking to Shahnaz, who says she is disappointed in her. Out of friendship she'd warned Hasina about Abdul, she says, but Hasina threw her friendship in her face. Hasina is distraught and says she would never do such a thing, but Shahnaz just walks away. Later, Hasina is called to the **garment** factory office. Hasina knows this does not bode well. One is only called to the office to be fired or to be notified of a death in the family. Khaleda, a fellow sewing woman, was called to the office recently to be told her entire family died in a house fire. They had to carry her out of the building.

The garment factory manager who calls Hasina to the office is famous for his scaly skin and fish smell. Abdul is in the office, too. The manager proceeds to yell at Hasina, to scold her for having no respect for the reputation of the factory. He tells her he knows all about her relationship with Abdul. Abdul has confessed everything. Then the manager orders her to leave and tells her she is finished in the **garment** business. On her way out, Hasina hears the manager tease Abdul about being like all the other village boys who, when faced with a pretty girl, cannot wait for marriage. Abdul does not laugh.

It is now March, and Hasina tells Nazneen she is overjoyed to hear that her baby is walking. She asks her to send a picture of the little girl, but no money. She is fine, she says. She does not want Nazneen to start sending money to Hasina behind Chanu's back. Mr. Chowdhury continues to take care of her. He visits often but does not insist she pay rent. Instead, she rubs his feet and combs his hair and listens while he complains about his work and personal life. He would like to bring Hasina into his home, but he knows people will talk since he is a widower, living alone. Hasina begins to wonder if he plans to take her for a wife. She considers the idea. He is rich and powerful and not an old man exactly. He is roughly Chanu's age.

*In this novel, clothing is often an outward indicator of inner goodness. Hasina hopes that Abdul's neat appearance means not only that he has a bright future but that his intentions toward her are honorable. Even if that is the case, her choices are limited. Divorce is outside her universe of options as a woman, and a previous marriage would taint her reputation irrevocably.*



*Hasina's living situation contrasts greatly with her sister's. Whereas Nazneen lives in a large, brick building in a sprawling city, Hasina is surrounded by squalor. She isn't unhappy, though.*



*It is clear that Shahnaz is not a good friend to Hasina. She is, instead, envious of Hasina's beauty and her burgeoning relationship with Abdul. The reader can see this even if Hasina cannot. Some of Shahnaz's pettiness is undoubtedly due to her sharp and unkind personality, but much can be blamed on a system of toxic inequality that forces women to compete with each other for male attention.*



*Hasina has not only been betrayed by Shahnaz; Abdul has thrown her under the bus as well, and he did so to save his job. He is not punished for their rumored affair. Instead, the boss jokes with him about not being able to resist a pretty girl. As a pretty girl, Hasina is fired and called a whore. The double standard is cruel and too glaring to ignore.*



*Hasina—a beautiful, young woman—is considering becoming the wife of the much older and less attractive Mr. Chowdhury. Her circumstances are suddenly very much like Nazneen's: she is dependent on a man for shelter, and, in return, is asked to tend to that man's personal needs while listening raptly to his lectures and stories. Men are taught to consider such treatment their birthright. Women, on the other hand, are never secure in their positions.*



Hasina's **chickens** have begun to lay eggs. She cooks meals for the jute cutters and they pay her for her efforts and dish her out a portion as well. Zainab, upset because her son has failed his exams, is now friendlier to Hasina. Life is quiet but that is okay with Hasina, who often sits nearby while the jute cutters eat, thinking of Nazneen and about how, while they are separated by a great distance, at least they are living under the same moon.

Hasina listens to the jute cutters' tall tales, remembering a time when Hamid took her and Nazneen to watch the men dive for the fibrous plant. Hussain often talks to her on these nights. When she was first fired from the garment factory, Hasina told Hussain the whole story. He said that he supposed people often reacted in such a petty way to beautiful things—they had a strange need to make them ugly. He does not have that problem, he says. He's ugly to begin with and when he sees beautiful things now, he laughs at the fact that they can never be his. He has no other choice.

Hasina begins her next letter by confessing to Nazneen that she has brought shame on herself. She hopes her sister can forgive her. Then she tells her exactly what happened. Mr. Chowdhury came banging on her door, screaming about her being a whore, about her sleeping with everyone in the factory and giving him nothing. It was he, Mr. Chowdhury, who put a roof over her head, he said. How could she make herself so cheap? Then Mr. Chowdhury rapes her. Afterward, she rubs his feet and cries. He makes her say that he is the one who takes care of her, and she does. Now Hasina believes she is cursed. Got has put rocks under her feet and **snakes** over her head.

At the same time, Hasina writes that everything that has happened to her up until this point is her fault. She married Malek. She left him. She took a job at the **garment** factory. She let Abdul walk her home. She lived in Mr. Chowdhury's apartment without paying.

Three months pass, and Hasina does not know what to do. She ran away with her husband. Then she ran away from him. She is afraid to run anymore. She knows that Nazneen wants to bring her to London, but she begs her to save her money. She will need it for the new baby coming and for Chanu's new tutoring business. Hasina often forgets her problems when she compares them to Zainab's. Zainab's husband was involved in an accident and, as a result, another man lost use of his limbs. Now that man's wife is suing Zainab's husband, but there is no money to give. Hasina suspects Zainab's son of stealing eggs, but she hasn't caught him yet. And Mr. Chowdhury comes to her once a week, sometimes twice.

*Hasina, unemployed but resourceful, is scraping by. Her connection to her sister remains strong, and is, in fact, the one thing she can count on in her relatively untethered existence. In this way, her situation again mirrors Nazneen's: they are strangers in a strange land, finding home in their love for each other.*



*In Gouripur, Nazneen thought Hasina's beauty might mean that Hasina's life would be easier than hers. Hussain is suggesting the opposite. Hasina's beauty is a curse because it inspires envy in others. This would explain why Shahnaz was always suggesting Hasina hide her beauty. She claimed it was to calm the religious protestors, but really it was to make herself feel better.*



*Hasina misjudged the seemingly benevolent Mr. Chowdhury. Rather than proving her protector, he shows himself to be the worst sort of villain. He undercharged her in rent in order to have power over her. Hasina does not blame him for the rape; she blames herself. This is what society has drilled into her head—that women are at fault when men treat them cruelly—and now she believes she is on the wrong side of God as well.*



*Hasina is only in this position because her job at the garment factory did not pay enough to cover her rent, and because she did not want to submit to her husband's beatings.*



*It would seem, at first glance, that fate has it out for Hasina and for her friends as well. Misfortune surrounds her. In reality, though, fate is not dictating the circumstances of her life or those of Zainab and her husband. Rather, it is bad luck and the pitfalls of the capitalist system. Hasina lives in a poor neighborhood in Dhaka where everyone is just one mishap away from disaster.*



It is now February 1992, and Hasina writes happily about having another niece. She tells Nazneen she thinks of her new daughter, Bibi, and Shahana, Nazneen's oldest, quite often. Meanwhile, Hasina has taken to trying to sell trinkets on the streets, but the police shoo her away. Hussain laughs at her efforts. Doesn't she realize the street does not belong to her? he says. It's for rent. Everything is. Hussain is kind to her, and he gives her goat's milk. Sometimes, at night, he comes to her, and she does not send him away.

In October 1992, Hasina writes a short letter to Nazneen, telling her that Zainab and her family have disappeared. Otherwise, everything else is the same. Hussain and his friend, Ali, give her presents. There is nothing else to tell. She asks Nazneen to pray for her.

Almost a year has passed. It is September 1993, and Hasina apologizes for not writing sooner. She has begun to visit the **garment** factory, hoping to talk to her old friends. She catches glimpses of Shahnaz, who is now wearing an abundance of cosmetics. A shanty town has formed around the factory. One family lives in a water pipe. Hussain is still "taking care" of Hasina, but that now means that he's acting as her pimp. He makes sure that she gets a fair price from her johns. He calls the prostitutes in his employ his "floating girls." If men try to cheat Hasina out of money, he confronts them. His arms might flap but they are strong.

Hasina's next letter is dated July 1994. She tells Nazneen she is happy to hear about Chanu's new job at Leisure Center. She asks if it is a government job. It is the rainy season again and Hasina's apartment is underwater. Hussain builds her a bed on high stilts so she can stay dry while she works. One of his **goats** was killed on the railroad tracks and they ate it. They also ate her chickens, which had stopped laying eggs. Hasina thinks often of Rupban and Mumtaz and life in Gouripur. She thinks of the second wife Hamid brought home and how quickly she left. That is the way with men, Hasina writes.

It is March 1995, and Hasina has received an offer of marriage from Ahmed, an albino man who supervises the night shift at a **shoe** factory. Ahmed is a serious man. Sometimes he visits with her and he pays full fare, even though all they do is talk. Not that he talks much. He is tall and quiet, and his eyes disconcert Hasina. They remind her of cats' eyes. She closes her letter hoping Chanu gets better soon and offering Nazneen her home remedy for ulcers.

*Hasina is now living in true poverty, and poverty is a slippery slope because, as Hussain reminds her, everything is for sale, even the street itself. That puts women like Hasina, whose money has run out, at a distinct disadvantage. Without capital, she will simply fall further and further behind.*



*The last time Hasina mentioned prayer in her letters was on the occasion of Raqib's death. It seems clear that Hasina is facing life-and-death circumstances as well.*



*Hasina was called a whore for innocently working alongside men in the garment factory. Then she was called a whore when Shahnaz spread false rumors about her relationships with Mr. Chowdhury and Abdul. Destitute and desperate, she is now working as a prostitute. The inherent hypocrisy of the religious and cultural system she was living under created this future for her. It doomed her from the beginning.*



*Her apartment flooded, Hasina has no choice but to continue to ply her trade. In that regard, Hussain's attaching stilts to her bed might be seem like chivalry. It is the lowest form of the virtue, however, and gets at the truth of what Hasina observes about Hamid and his second wife: men are motivated primarily by sex. Once they have had a woman, as Hamid had his second wife, they are more than happy to discard her.*



*Hasina should probably take care to heed her own warnings about men's main motivation in life, but Ahmed seems too sweet and kind to be threatening, and the fact that he wants to marry her rather than just bed her sets him apart from her other clients, as does his disconcerting appearance.*



That same month, Hasina writes again, saying that Ahmed is pressing for marriage. Hussain thinks the match is a good idea. Both Ahmed and Hasina are damaged beyond repair, so they might as well marry. Also, Hussain's liver is giving out, and he cannot take care of Hasina much longer. She tells Ahmed that she cannot marry him, that she is a low woman, but he does not seem to want to take no for an answer.

Hasina's next letter is dated April 1995. She gives thanks to God for her newfound happiness. She is married to Ahmed and living in the Ghulsan neighborhood of Dhaka, a definite upgrade from Narayanganj. It is one of the city's best districts. It has been three weeks since their marriage and Hasina has not left the apartment. During the day, Ahmed follows Hasina's every move. He is completely devoted to her, she says. When Ahmed is at work, she cleans. Ahmed demands that everything be in the proper order, especially his **shoes** and laces. Hasina knows how much Nazneen likes leaving her flat, but Hasina loves the new walls that hold her in.

It is still April and Ahmed has gone to the bazaar. Hasina goes up on the roof with the other wives. They look down at the street where women are hard at work, tearing it up. The women are terribly thin and are paid only in wheat. Hasina wonders how they can survive that way. She hopes she never becomes one of them. She writes to Nazneen about how she plans to soon visit Ahmed's home village to meet his father and unmarried brothers. His mother is dead. Hasina hopes Ahmed never finds out about her marriage to Malek. He is a kind and serious man and she enjoys their peaceful life together.

Hasina asks after Shahana and hopes she is having a good time at school. She reassures Nazneen that it is perfectly normal to cry some as children grow up, but if Nazneen's friend thinks she should see a doctor, then perhaps that is good advice.

Hasina's next letter is dated May 1995. She writes to Nazneen about Ahmed's appearance, how he recently got a sunburn and he still has blisters on his cheeks and nose. She speculates that one reason he is so serious could be the fact that people stare at him all the time. It has made him quiet and kind. At night, Hasina stays awake and goes to the roof to talk to the wives who are all experts in some area or another. They're always one-upping each other. One of the wives cannot bear children. Hasina thinks this is her case as well. She has told Ahmed and he has accepted it. Sometimes, Hasina thinks she sees her first husband. Other nights, she is convinced she spies one of her clients from her time as a prostitute. On these nights, she is filled with fear.

*As an "impure" woman, Hasina has very few options left. She can marry the freakish Ahmed or try to make a living as a prostitute on her own. Hussain equates Ahmed's ugliness with Hasina's lack of virtue. He makes no mention, however, of the fact that Ahmed has been paying a woman for sex.*



*Hasina is, in effect, Ahmed's live-in maid. She cleans the apartment and straightens Ahmed's belongings. This is what it means to be a wife. Again, her life mirrors Nazneen's. Both women are prisoners in their own homes, although Hasina claims that she is a willing participant in her jailing. This is perhaps due to the dire circumstances of her life up to this point. Freedom meant poverty and disaster, while marriage, by comparison, proves much more comfortable.*



*The road workers harken back to the brick breakers Hasina encountered on her way to the garment factory. They are a glimpse into life at the very bottom of Bengali society. Hasina and her fellow wives, from their vantage point on the roof, live in luxury compared to the workers below, but they are there only by the grace of their all-powerful husbands. Women's position in this society could not be more fragile.*



*Hasina's letters provide a snapshot of Nazneen's life in London. It is clear from this letter that Nazneen is suffering from depression, although neither woman calls it that.*



*Hasina does not mind Ahmed's ugliness, seeing it as proof of his virtue. Her life continues to parallel Nazneen's in London. Like her sister, Hasina seems to be joining her building's small community of women. Her position continues to be precarious, however. Her past haunts her, threatening to shatter her newfound peace.*



It is still May 1995. Hasina's house is clean, and she wiles away the hours writing to Nazneen. Ahmed, she says, is pleased with her. He finds her cleaning satisfactory. He is happy with the way she keeps the **shoe laces** orderly. He tells her that when he comes home from work and sees her in his house it is the happiest moment of his life. But later, when he has her sit on the bed and do different things with her hair, he sometimes grows angry because he wants to create a perfect thing and her face has changed. He wants her to change it back. She soothes him, and he is quiet again.

Hasina writes, too, that she isn't sure what sort of pills Nazneen is taking to cure her sadness, but she hopes they work. She is sure that when Nazneen gets used to Shahana being away at school she will return to her old self.

A month later, Hasina writes of attending Hussain's funeral. It is a small ceremony with only a few jute cutters. Ahmed is working long hours at the factory. She doesn't see him often and when she does, he complains about her face being different. She assures him it is the same, but he cannot stay still anymore and ends up going out. Hasina says this is a bad patch in their marriage.

The bad patch gets worse. Ahmed is no longer satisfied with Hasina's housework and he is now claiming that Hasina has put a curse on him. Why else would he have married her? He says he doesn't know if or when he can introduce her to his family. She tries to tell him that they are only going through a rough spot, but he doesn't listen.

The next letter is dated a year later. Hasina tells Nazneen not to worry. When she has a stable address and a good job, she will write again. Five years later, in January 2001, Hasina writes of those years as ones in which she often only had enough food for a day here and there. She is putting all of that out of her mind now, though, because she has a good job as a maid in a respectable house. The children she is looking after are beautiful. Her employers are good people. She asks Nazneen to write to her soon.

*What Ahmed most values in Hasina, it would seem, is her ability to keep a clean house. His need for order borders on a compulsion, and his reverence for her beauty likewise hints at an unsettled mind. In the same way that Chanu is always talking at Nazneen rather than to her, Ahmed is always looking at Hasina rather than seeing her.*



*Hasina is still avoiding the word "depression," perhaps because neither she nor Hasina is familiar with the concept of clinical depression, and because both women have been taught to leave much about their lives unsaid.*



*Hasina is a beautiful woman, but Ahmed needs her instead to be perfect, just as he needs his home and collection of shoelaces to be in perfect order. The pressure is immense, and Hasina has no idea how to please him. Her face, she insists, is the same as it ever was.*



*After Mr. Chowdhury raped her, Hasina thought that she was cursed. Now she is being told that she has the power to curse others. The truth of the matter seems to be that Ahmed is terrified of introducing his prostitute-turned-wife to his family.*



*Much has obviously transpired since Hasina's penultimate letter and this one. She is not married to Ahmed and she spent several years in near starvation. Her life seems to be playing out as a series of self-fulfilling prophecies. She was disparaged as a whore, then became one. Ahmed treated her like his servant, and now she is employed as a maid.*



## CHAPTER 8

The narrative returns to Tower Hamlets in London and Nazneen's point of view. It is February 2001, and Chanu is on the floor (he rejects **chairs** now) teaching Shahana and Bibi, his and Nazneen's youngest daughter, the poem "My Golden Bengal" in preparation for the family's trip home to Bangladesh. Bibi does her best to recite her lines, but Shahana has no patience for this activity. She rejects everything about Bangladesh, favoring Western things instead. Her attitude infuriates Chanu, who often ends up beating her. Nazneen, who strives to keep busy with housework, notices that Chanu is the one in the family most upset by the beatings and Shahana the least.

Chanu's methods for beating are almost always ridiculous. He can always formulate a plan but can never execute, and Shahana often gets away, saying the same thing over and over: "I didn't ask to be born here!" Later, Nazneen is trimming Chanu's nose hairs. He tells her it is important that they go home to Bangladesh while the girls are still young, before they are rotten through with Western influence. Every part of Nazneen's body and heart is straining toward her sister, but she worries that if they moved to Dhaka, Shahana would never forgive her. She trusts their future to God—he will see that everything is taken care of.

When Hasina was still working at the **garment** factory, Nazneen went to Chanu to ask if they might bring her to London. Chanu mocks the idea, telling her, sure, why not bring the entire village? Nazneen reminds him that she only has one sister, and he, in turn, reminds her that it would be ridiculous to bring Hasina to London since they are going to Bangladesh, and once he decides something, the subject is finished.

But they didn't leave London because they didn't have the money. They move instead to a two-bedroom apartment in the Rosemead block of Tower Hamlets, and Chanu remains unemployed, lounging around the apartment where Nazneen tries to keep herself busy, tidying and straightening. She would have liked to begin **sewing** from home like Razia as a way to make a little money, but Chanu disapproves and she lets the subject drop.

*Chanu has taken it upon himself to school his daughters about the history of their homeland. In doing so he is hoping to avoid the so-called "tragedy of the immigrant." He wants his family to love Bangladesh as he does. He has a formidable opponent in Shahana, however, and the kind, gentle Chanu has grown violent in his frustration. It would seem that Shahana is being beaten at least in part because she is not Raqib—that is, not a son.*



*Both Chanu and Nazneen are, despite the passage of the years, remarkably consistent. Chanu, as always, is a failure and cannot even follow through on a promised beating. Nazneen, still in charge of her husband's hygiene, and has gone back to trusting God and fate to sort out her family's complex problems with assimilation and personal identity. It seems the death of Raqib may have had the effect of reversing Nazneen's changing outlook on life.*



*Perhaps because he is an often ridiculous and ineffectual parent and a dysfunctional employee, Chanu attempts to wield his power as a husband. It works because Nazneen is too afraid and timid to question his authority, even when her sister's life is at stake.*



*Hasina advised Nazneen in one of her letters to turn to work to improve her state of mind. Housework is an unending task. It gives her very little satisfaction and there is no reward at the end of the day. Chanu, though, likes that it keeps Nazneen very much in her place.*



Chanu is no longer pursuing any academic degrees. He teaches more than learns now, and the girls and Nazneen are often his pupils. Today, he is telling Nazneen about a book he's reading about Bangladesh's history as an international **textile** manufacturer. He then begins quietly rehearsing a lesson he will later impart to the girls. Nazneen knows how it will go—Bibi will try her best to learn, while Shahana will sigh impatiently, running for the television the moment Chanu sets them free.

Chanu wants his daughters to have a sense of Bangladesh's history so that they can feel proud of where they've come from, a country that was fought over by four European countries and provided England with one third of its Indian empire revenues. Nazneen, meanwhile, thinks of Shahana's habit of turning inward. Such moments always end in tantrums and in Shahana kicking the **furniture**, or her sister. She saves her hardest kicks for her mother.

Nazneen gets up in the middle of the night and eats curry cold over the kitchen sink, thinking of Hasina and the letter she sent about the both of them living under the same moon. Nazneen has her doubts; the London moon is too cold and far away. Bibi interrupts her thoughts. She asks for some curry and they eat together, both pretending not to look at the other.

Razia has come to visit. She complains of arthritis in her hands and aches in her joints, all from the **sewing** she's been doing. And she complains that her kids get the money while all she gets is older. Tariq always needs twenty pounds for books or for his computer. Shefali is in her final year of high school and wants to take a year off before entering university. Razia smokes and complains and makes fun of Chanu. Nazneen giggles and worries she won't be able to get the smell out of the apartment before her husband gets home.

When Chanu returns, he is burdened by two large packages. The box is for Nazneen, an early birthday present. The bag is for him. The girls start unwrapping the box. It contains a **sewing** machine. The bag holds a computer. Nazneen tries not to wonder too much about where the money came from, and they spend the evening experimenting with both, everyone in good humor until Shahana notices that her father has spoken to her mother in English. Shahana complains that Chanu won't let them speak English in the house. Nazneen, who has learned English from the girls, tries to defuse the situation by telling Shahana that Chanu was right about her not taking English lessons at the college. Chanu, Nazneen says, is right about most things, but Shahana screams that she hates him, all the while kicking at Nazneen's shins as hard as she can.

*Bangladesh's role as a textile producer is significant, given the importance of clothing in this novel. Clothes offer characters a chance to try on a different persona. In this instance, Chanu is trying on the role of professor. He hopes to teach his daughters to value their home. The lessons are lost on Shahana, who is learning about life via British TV.*



*When Shahana throws her fits, she is fighting against her family's immigrant status. She resents being different, and therefore Chanu's efforts at forcing her to celebrate her Bengali heritage only anger her further. She directs that anger mostly at Nazneen because she represents what Shahana most wants to avoid.*



*Nazneen continues to pine for home and for Hasina. Whereas Gouripur's moon is warm and welcoming, London's is cold and distant, rejecting her. Bibi, on the other hand, accepts her, and that connects her to the city and to England.*



*The fate Chanu fears for his family is already in full effect in Razia's. Her children are very much products of a Western education. Razia works hard to support them, but it's never enough. They simply want more and more and more. Raising children, like housework (and getting the smoke smell out of an apartment), is a seemingly never-ending, thankless task.*



*Nazneen's powerless position as a wife does not allow her to question where Chanu, who is currently unemployed, might have gotten the money for such expensive items. It also demands that she tell both Chanu and their daughters that he is right about everything. Shahana, though, isn't buying it. She wants her mother to be more independent, and to think for herself. Nazneen does not see this. She wants to keep the peace between Chanu and Shahana, even if that means she must submit to her daughter's periodic outbursts of violence. Nazneen's role as wife and mother is shown to be one of pure submission.*



Nazneen practices on the **sewing** machine, getting better all the time. She uses almost every bit of cloth in the apartment, applying different stitches and experimenting with patterns. One day, while Chanu is out buying groceries, Mrs. Islam drops by. She still carries her big black bag with her. Older now, Mrs. Islam fills it with medicines of every variety. She slumps down on Nazneen's couch and notices her new sewing machine, calling it a "gold mine." Then she asks when Nazneen and Chanu are going to send their children to the madrasah, or Muslim school, she has founded. Nazneen says soon, but Chanu does not wish to send his daughters to her school. The fact that Bangladesh is a majority Muslim country is a matter of chance, he says.

Mrs. Islam then tells Nazneen to open her bag and put the money in the pocket. Misunderstanding, Nazneen roots around in the cavernous black bag, finding mostly broken cough drops. Gradually, it dawns on her that Mrs. Islam is asking Nazneen to give her money—fifty pounds, to be exact—and that Chanu must have taken out a loan to pay for the **sewing** machine and computer. The problem is, she doesn't have the money. Mrs. Islam gets up and tells her it's okay. She can pay her when she's able. And next time she comes to visit, she says, she'll bring her sons. They would like to see Chanu again.

## CHAPTER 9

Chanu is at the computer showing the girls the world wide web, but Shahana is unimpressed. They have the internet at school. Bibi asks to see a kadam, a kind of prickly pink flower that grows in Bangladesh. Chanu looks it up and tells the girl to come take a peek, but Shahana won't, saying that it's boring. Furious, Chanu lunges at his daughter, who hides behind the couch. He forbids her to use his computer, managing to slap her wrist. The girls go to bed and Nazneen tells him that Mrs. Islam came by for the money. He says he will get it to her next week.

After the girls go to bed, Nazneen and Chanu watch their daughters sleep. Nazneen sees that Chanu, tenderly moving hair out of Shahana's face and kissing Bibi's cheek, is not only baffled by his daughter's presence, but even afraid. They leave the room, leaning on each other.

*Like Chanu, Nazneen is trying out a new role: that of seamstress. It excites and invigorates her, and, for the moment, the work she does is mostly for herself, which is a new sensation. Her relationship with Mrs. Islam is likewise in new territory. Nazneen no longer trusts the older woman, having found out about her seedy business dealings. The black bag is a symbol of Mrs. Islam's corrupt nature, something she cannot disguise simply by founding a religious school.*



*Chanu did not consult Nazneen when he quit his job at the council back when Raqib was still in the hospital, and he did not consult her this time either when he decided to take out a loan with the unethical Mrs. Islam. As Nazneen's husband, he is under no obligation to keep her informed, but this may not work to anyone's advantage. Nazneen might have tried to talk him out of such a disastrous move if he'd only given her the chance.*



*All of Chanu's attempts to engender in his daughters—namely Shahana—a love of Bangladesh and respect for its contribution to the world of arts and letters end in failure. Many of these failed attempts result in beatings, which fail in their own way. It is difficult, then, for Nazneen to believe Chanu when he says he will soon have the money they need to pay of Mrs. Islam and her thug-like sons.*



*Chanu might pretend during the day to be an authority on everything, but his daughters confuse and intimidate him. He loves them but does not know how to tell them.*



Nazneen recalls a period of time—weeks, she thinks, maybe months, although it felt like an infinity—when Chanu took to his bed and did nothing. He no longer made plans because all of his plans had failed him. Every new business he hoped to start, every new **suit** and briefcase and pair of shoes bought, ended in absolutely nothing, and even when he did succeed in getting a job, he soon quit over some small offense. He shrank in front of Nazneen's eyes. His large belly became an empty sack. Finally, what pulled him out was reading. He employed the girls as page turners and they sat at the end of the bed, trying to anticipate when their services were needed.

Nazneen finds navigating the triangle of daughter-father-daughter nearly impossible. Bibi is always trying, futilely, to gain her father's attention and regard. Chanu is always getting offended. Shahana is mostly embarrassed and angry. To Nazneen, trying to meet everyone's needs is like walking through a field of **snakes**. It exhausts her, and she sometimes wonders if maybe she doesn't love her daughters as she should. Maybe she loved Raqib more. She tries not to think of that. She tries, instead, to trust in the power of prayer to keep her strong.

One day, Nazneen is making tea and thinking about the gossip she heard at the gate while waiting to pick Bibi up from school. A local imam is being questioned by police. Meanwhile two English women discussed how best to get their dogs to slim down. Nazneen doesn't know what to think about any of it. Then Chanu comes home with a parcel and interrupts her. He has a batch of **pants** that need to be hemmed—and that's not all. For two months, he keeps her sewing. She lines dresses and sews buttons on shirts and attaches catches to bras. Chanu adds up their earnings, telling her not to worry about any of it. He will take care of everything.

Chanu's mood improves and he begins reading again and lecturing the family on the history of Bengal. He starts shaving, too, and humming. Nazneen recognizes these as good signs. She eventually runs out of **sewing** and that day, Chanu gathers the family together and announces that they will be moving home soon. Thanks to Nazneen's work on the sewing machine, they can soon afford to move back to Bangladesh. Also, he has become an employee of Kempton Kars, a cab company. He will now do his part to help them get home. Nazneen is shocked that he can drive a car. She never knew.

Chanu stops being Nazneen's middleman and becomes a cab driver. One hot day a new middleman shows up, armed with a bale of **jeans** over one shoulder. This is how Karim comes into her life.

*A sexist culture can at times be just as toxic for men as it is for women. Men are told that they must be "big men," that their value will be measured by their financial and professional success. For some, including Chanu, this pressure proves too much to bear. Chanu fails at everything because he is afraid to try. He is afraid to try because he thinks he has to be outstanding at everything he does, or he will not be seen as a respectable man.*



*Always in the background, Nazneen works tirelessly to please everyone. She succeeds, instead, in pleasing no one, least of all herself. Of course, she doesn't really consider her own needs in these matters. It is as if she does not exist. Snake imagery returns, suggesting this time that it's not just Nazneen who is discontented: it is the entire family.*



*It is a disconcerting experience for Nazneen to encounter a populace so rich that it finds the need to discuss diets for its dogs. Nazneen, meanwhile, is getting her wish. She will work as a seamstress. Like most of Chanu's decisions, this comes as a surprise to her. He did not say anything about finding her work; he simply acted, completely without her permission. Furthermore, as her husband, he will control her earnings.*



*Chanu's job as a cab driver reveals just how far he has fallen since he first stepped foot in England hoping to find work as a prestigious civil servant. Like many intelligent and striving immigrants before him, he has to settle for a position for which he is over-qualified. Nazneen hadn't known Chanu could cook; she didn't know he could drive, either. It seems husband and wife, having been married several years now, still know very little about each other.*



*Clothes make another symbolic appearance. It would seem that Nazneen is about to try to remake herself yet again.*



## CHAPTER 10

The first thing Nazneen notices about Karim is that he has a stammer in Bengali. His English is perfectly fine. She also notices that his arms are strong, and that his skull under his shaved hair is pleasing to look at. He tells her that his uncle owns the sweatshop she's been **sewing** for. The next time he comes to see her, Nazneen still has five hems to finish. She has also forgotten to cover her hair. Ahmed is sweaty from running. He's stolen a box of leaflets from a group of men on the estate. She tells him that if they were in their country, someone would have helped him flee the men. This is his country, Ahmed says. He predicts that the men, a gang that goes by the Lion Hearts, will get what's coming to them. Then he compliments her on her sari, saying his mother once had one just like it. Nazneen messes up a hem and has to fix it.

After Karim leaves, Nazneen sees that the leaflets are flimsy, black and white things, stapled down the middle. They contain a quiz: "Are you a good Muslim? Twenty ways to tell."

Chanu, or driver 1619 as he is known at Kempton Kars, often works nights, and evenings in the apartment are more relaxed when he's away. The girls do their homework in front of the television and Nazneen sews, mentally adding up the money she has saved and stowed in secret places around the apartment. She plans to send most of the money to Hasina. The rest she will use to buy little things for Shahana like shampoo and clips for her hair.

Sometimes Chanu works all night and Nazneen makes sure to have food prepared for him when he returns in the morning, famished. He has grown philosophical and, for the most part, at ease with his new position in society. He is no longer striving to be a big man. He wants only to make money. Then, like the British who invaded Bangladesh, he plans to take all that money with him when he leaves. When he reads, though, he grows more passionate, telling the girls that it was the Muslims who saved the work of Plato and Aristotle from being erased during the so-called Dark Ages. He plans to introduce his daughters to Islam. Then he will move on to Hindu philosophy and Buddhism.

*Karim is, at first glance, everything that Chanu is not. He is young, handsome, and passionately devoted to a cause. Follow-through is his specialty. Nazneen is instantly attracted to him. This is clear when she forgets to cover her hair. His noticing her sari is another indication that Nazneen is entering a new stage of her life. Karim's stammering in Bengali hints that, unlike Nazneen and Chanu, he is much more comfortable with British culture than he is the culture of his ancestral home.*



*Nazneen takes her faith and its practice very seriously. This quiz hints at a more flippant, Westernized approach to religion.*



*It is Chanu's presence in the house that often gets in the way of Nazneen and the girls' comfort and contentment. In his absence, Nazneen has dared to do something she never thought herself capable of: making her own money and saving some of it for herself. Her sewing work is liberating her at least partially from some of the stricter tenets of purdah.*



*While Nazneen acclimates to life in London, Chanu turns his sights on Bangladesh. His dreams of being a big man have been replaced with one goal: to make enough money to take his family home. As Dr. Azad predicted, he now has full-fledged "going home sickness," but for Chanu it seems not to be a sickness at all. Work and his pride in Bangladesh's storied history have restored him to himself.*



Nazneen is in her daughter's bedroom, trying to tidy it. Shahana is furious. She says she won't go—she'll run away instead. Bibi says she wants to stay with her sister. Nazneen tells them not to be silly. They must wait and see what God wills. She thinks for one disorienting moment that she will make the decision herself—she will take care of the girls. She feels powerful at first and then like she might vomit. Bibi asks her if she wants to go. In response, she tells them the story of her birth, of how she was left to fate. Shahana is not satisfied. The story isn't an answer, she says, but Nazneen replies that it's her answer.

Nazneen is beginning to lose her memory of Gouripur. It is slipping from her and only comes back in dreams. One night she dreams of Mumtaz and her **mynah bird**. Rupban tells Mumtaz she is foolish to waste her affection on a bird that will someday fly away. Mumtaz jokingly tells the bird it is bad. "Go away," she says, but it doesn't fly away, and Mumtaz and the bird become inseparable. A table arrives in the village and the elders gather, smoking on pipes and sipping cups of tea. A woman's scream pierces the air. It is Mumtaz—her bird's neck is broken. It doesn't get the chance to fly away.

Nazneen wakes from the dream and gets up to sew. She's working on a pile of sequined **vests** in need of zippers. Having finished three, she takes one to the bathroom and tries it on. When she closes her eyes, she is in the arena, sliding across the ice. A man is with her. Like Karim, he wears a gold chain. She takes the vest off. The sequins are cheap. They look like fish scales.

## CHAPTER 11

It is January 2001, and Hasina is writing from the Dahnmondi district of Dhaka. She tells Nazneen that she has much to thank God for, the first of which is her position in the household of James, whose real name is Jamshed Rashid, and Lovely, whose real name is Anwara Begum. They brought her from the home for fallen women to work in their house as a maid. Their house is richly furnished with expensive **wooden furniture** and a television and video-playing machine. James and Lovely sleep in the master bedroom. The children, Jimmy and Daisy, have their own rooms as well. There is a guest room whose bed Hasina airs out every day at the request of Lovely. Hasina sleeps in a room next to the kitchen. She has an electric light.

*Nazneen's new-found independence hits a snag when she considers that her future and her daughters' futures could be in her hands. The thought of fighting both fate and Chanu and staying in London while he moves back to Bangladesh is so alien and overwhelming that she is sick for a moment. Answering her daughters' queries with her birth story is a stalling technique; it shows that she is not yet ready to decide.*



*The mynah bird represents the possibilities open to a person who, like Nazneen, is born in a poverty-stricken nation. Sometimes families remain together and unbroken, making the choice to remain in one place. Sometimes they part and are never reunited again. The saddest outcome is when someone desperately wants to flee to another land but does not have the opportunity. This kills the spirit.*



*The dream has disturbed Nazneen and reminded her that she has desires of her own. The vest is a chance try on life as a different person, a glamorous ice skater with Karim as her partner. But the attempt fails, as it's only a cheap imitation.*



*James and Lovely are obviously in a very different class than the people with whom Hasina has been associating. Their home is beautiful, and they have adopted distinctly Western names. Hasina's room is quite simple compared to the rooms where the family sleeps. The hierarchy is clear: the family resides in the more richly furnished sections of the home, whereas Hasina, the maid, is relegated to what amounts to the servant's quarters.*



The street in front of the house is wide, but plastic bags blow everywhere. Where the street narrows is a rickshaw workshop. The men paint different designs on the sides, usually the Taj Mahal or a mosque, but sometimes peacocks and film stars. Hasina stops to ask about a particularly beautiful face a man is painting. He tells her it is of a beautiful American singer named “Britney Spear.” She hurries along on an errand she is running for Lovely. Hasina’s duties include caring for the children, cleaning the house, and washing the dishes. A man does the cooking and gardening.

Hasina mentions that she has been waiting a long time for a letter from Nazneen. She hopes very much that her words are reaching her.

Hasina’s next letter is dated February. She mentions that she has finally gotten Nazneen’s letter. All her others are gone, destroyed in the dark time after her marriage to Ahmed ended. She is glad to hear the girls are doing well and that Nazneen is still having Dr. Azad to her home for dinner. She knows that Nazneen is bored with her routine, but it is Hasina’s opinion that routine and sameness are the biggest blessings in life.

Lovely, a former beauty queen, loves to “entertain.” She often finds her children too much for her. Jimmy loves to play with guns and swords, and Daisy follows Hasina around like a duckling. At first Daisy missed the old maid, who was fired for stealing grocery money, but now she is very attached to Hasina. Since Zaid the cook has taken to stacking food in Hasina’s bedroom, she now sleeps on a bedroll on her floor. Zaid sleeps on the kitchen table if he sleeps in the house at all. Lovely worries one of the neighboring families will poach him—he makes the best kitchari in Buriganga. Hasina worries that Lovely is stretching herself thin. Running a household is hard work.

When Jimmy and Daisy are occupying each other, Lovely finds time to tell Hasina her problems, and they are many. She worries that her best friend, Betty, is more beautiful than she is, but Hasina assures her this isn’t true. Betty also has a larger house than Lovely and a car and driver at her disposal at all times. Lovely, on the other hand, must wait for her husband to lend her his car and driver, and she doesn’t have an ayah, or nanny, to watch over the children.

*The abundance of plastic bags, as well as the image of Britney Spears on the side of a rickshaw, suggests the artificial lifestyle of the people who inhabit James and Lovely’s neighborhood. American “culture” and values are encroaching on Bangladesh in ways both amusing and poisonous.*



*This suggests a disturbance in Nazneen’s life, which has most likely been caused by the arrival of Karim.*



*The sisters’ lives seem to have diverged again, with Nazneen entering into a new and exciting relationship with a younger man and Hasina embracing her role as a maid and caretaker of young children. Hasina is beginning to appreciate what Nazneen has grown to take for granted.*



*The irony here is almost too much. It is Hasina, not Lovely, who is running the household. Lovely cannot even be bothered to raise her own children. Now Hasina has been deprived of her room, the one with the electric light. Lovely’s main concern is clearly not her kids’ welfare but whether or not she will lose her cook.*



*Hasina writes to Nazneen of Lovely’s so-called troubles with a straight face and without censure but, having spent the last several years on the street, Hasina knows what real strife is. She knows that Lovely’s problems are really all in Lovely’s own mind.*



Lovely also worries that James's company, Bangla National Plastic, could be in hot water over its production of plastic bags. She thinks people won't be happy until they've all been turned out on the street. Hasina tells her not to be so down. God has provided for her and he will provide for Lovely as well. Lovely says she is sweet. She still fears Zaid will leave then, but Hasina doesn't think so—he has it too good with Lovely and James. Oftentimes he doesn't even make dinner. He is too busy attending political meetings. A small, hard man, he practices Kung-Fu while he cooks and watches Kung-Fu movies when Lovely and James go out. Jimmy watches the movies with him. It is the only time he stays still.

Jimmy has grown as affectionate with Hasina as Daisy, and Hasina closes her letter by observing to Nazneen that all she ever wanted in life was love, and now it has finally found her.

Nazneen finishes reading Hasina's letter and puts it away. Razia, dressed in a Union Jack **sweatshirt** despite the hot weather, has come to visit. Neighbors in the estates are gossiping about Razia and her British habits, but she doesn't care. She's much more concerned with the fact that the factory where she'd been sewing has been closed down by immigration authorities. Tariq needs books or he'll fail his exams. She needs money fast. She is considering borrowing money from Mrs. Islam. Razia does some of Nazneen's sewing and Nazneen thinks about Hasina and about Hamid's second wife who came and went without a trace. What happens to such women? She does not tell Razia about Chanu borrowing 50 pounds from Mrs. Islam to buy the sewing machine and computer.

Karim comes to pick up the **vests** from Nazneen. While he is there his phone rings—a call from his father, he says. His father was once a bus conductor, but he is now too anxious to work or even leave his apartment. Nazneen makes tea in the kitchen. Karim follows her, and they drink in the kitchen standing up. Nazneen has again forgotten to cover her hair. Karim gets a notification on his phone, alerting him to prayer time. Nazneen invites him to pray in her apartment and he accepts. Watching him move through his prayers makes Nazneen dizzy. It is all she can do not to pray along with him, but that is strictly forbidden. When he is finished, he invites her to a meeting. It is for all Muslims, he says, and they don't have many older women in the group.

*James's company is polluting the environment. They make the plastic bags that assault Hasina when she walks down the street. Lovely is paranoid that a shadowy someone will shut down Bangla National Plastics and that she and her family will be as poor as Hasina was when they "rescued" her from the home of fallen women. It's obvious that Lovely would not survive on the street, as she can't even cook for herself.*



*The love Hasina has found is second-hand. The children aren't hers—they belong to James and Lovely—but they give Hasina joy.*



*That Razia discards the sari in favor of a Union Jack sweatshirt seems, to many in the Tower Hamlets community anyway, an open rejection of Bengali values in favor of British ones. Razia, though, can't worry about such matters. She is much more concerned with the very practical issue of supporting her children. Nazneen has her sewing work and Chanu's cab driving salary to support her, so she is in a more comfortable place financially than Razia, but she is beholden to Mrs. Islam, and that is a distressing place to be.*



*Nazneen and Karim's relationship is growing increasingly more intimate. The fact that Nazneen has again forgotten to cover her hair suggests that she is distracted and at loose ends around him. It is also taboo and hints at burgeoning sexual attraction. As a woman, she is not allowed to pray along with a man, but her desire to do so is yet another indication that she desires Karim as more than a friend. Nazneen is a devout rule follower, but she would be willing to break the rules for Karim.*



Nazneen tells herself not to go to the meeting, but then she goes anyway. It is in an ugly building at the edge of the estate. She is nervous going in and even more so when she sees that the group gathering is almost all men. An intense man in immense **pajamas** and a skull cap welcomes her, and Karim tells her to sit down. The meeting starts with Karim announcing that the matters of business are to settle on a name and a mission and elect a board. There is much cross talk about the name before they settle on the Bengal Tigers. The mission is simple: to support the local Muslim community and Islam around the world, although the audience also seems to want to fight the Lion Hearts gang if given a chance.

A wiry man continues to challenge Karim. Nazneen thinks of him as the Questioner. Karim and the Questioner vie for the position of chairman of the board. Nazneen casts the deciding vote in favor of Karim. She sees that Karim and the Questioner hate each other. As the meeting breaks up, the man in the **skull cap** points out the group's spiritual leader, an old imam in women's shoes who just got to London and who has no idea what's going on.

Karim comes to Nazneen's apartment with **jeans** and unlined dresses. They talk. He tells her about the persecution of Muslims in Chechnya and Palestine. Nazneen is ashamed of her ignorance. She reads the pamphlets he gives her and puts them out on the table to show Chanu, but then hides them at the last minute. Karim prays in her house several more times. At one point, when she hands him her prayer mat, their fingers touch, and she smells the soap coming off his clean shirt. It is the smell of her ice skating daydreams, of her faceless fantasy dancing partner: limes.

Dr. Azad is once again having dinner with Chanu and Nazneen. Age has not been kind to his face. It has collapsed completely, although he still has a full head of flat, black hair. Chanu asks after Mrs. Azad and their daughter. Dr. Azad replies that they are healthy and asks Chanu about his petition to start the mobile lending library. Nazneen watches the men trade barbs, and then the girls come in. Chanu quizzes them for a moment. Shahana fails the test and Bibi passes, but Chanu does not acknowledge her. He continues to quiz Shahana, so Nazneen intervenes and sends the girls to bed.

*It would seem to be completely out of character for Nazneen, timid housewife and mother, to attend a meeting of a pro-Islamic group, especially when the group is made up primarily young men, but since Karim came into her life, Nazneen has found herself doing things she never thought she would do. This is her first real exposure to the male community of Tower Hamlets. Prior to this, most of her interactions were with the women of the community.*



*Nazneen gets her first glimpse into the workings of a pro-Islamic advocacy group and what she sees is mostly petty squabbling. The spiritual leader's pathetic appearance suggests that the Bengal Tigers might not be on a terribly effective course.*



*Prior to her friendship with Karim, Nazneen did not take an interest in the fate of her fellow Muslims. She did not have the opportunity to learn about her people. Now her eyes are being opened, but she can't share her awakening with Chanu because it is the result of her time spent with another man. Karim's scent makes Nazneen wonder if their partnership might be fated.*



*Like Hasina and Nazneen, Chanu and Dr. Azad often work as foils for one another. Dr. Azad is thin and careful about his eating habits and health, whereas Chanu is corpulent and always putting himself in danger of getting another ulcer. However, the two men share the need to one-up each other. Chanu's quizzing of the girls is part of this game, but he only really cares about Shahana's performance. Bibi's is immaterial.*



Now that the men are alone, they take up their own separate topics. Dr. Azad is preoccupied with heroin abuse among the Muslim community. Chanu worries about the tragedy of the immigrant. The men talk around each other, never directly addressing what the other is saying. Nazneen is amazed they can keep it up so long. At one point, though, Chanu strays from the script, bringing up abuse of the Bengalis at the hands of the British, and Dr. Azad asks Chanu about his job. Chanu retaliates by asking Dr. Azad about his son-in-law, whom he and Nazneen have never met. She sees clearly that her husband has won the verbal battle.

Days later, a leaflet falls through the letterbox and Shahana grabs it and begins reading. Chanu demands that she give it to him. Then he hands it back to her and tells her to read it aloud to him, Nazneen, and Bibi. It is an anti-Muslim screed. The writer claims that, at school, Christian children are being taught to follow Islam and that soon they will be worshipping Muhammed. Chanu announces that, from now on, all money made in the household will go to the Home Fund. That night, for the first time since their marriage, Nazneen sees Chanu take the Qur'an off the shelf. He keeps the book with him the rest of the evening.

Nazneen is walking a respectable distance behind Chanu through Brick Lane. Chanu comments on the exorbitant price of the merchandise in the shops. Nazneen notices the high-end restaurants and fancy homes nearby and thinks of Karim. He often talks of his father, of his father's former life as a bus conductor and how proud he was of him then. Chanu changes the subject to the bankrupt nature of British culture. While they walk, an English woman with cropped hair snaps a photo of Nazneen, making her self-conscious.

Nazneen thinks about the events of her life and how it has always been her perception that they were being recorded, written down by angels who were tallying up her transgressions for the day of judgment. She then grows convinced that the street is filled with angels. They flap their wings around her head until she has to sit down. She remembers the last time Karim came to their apartment. Their shoulders nearly touched. She wonders if he is fated to be her future, knowing it is not that simple.

*Just as Chanu talks at Nazneen rather than to her, he and Dr. Azad talk around each other, not really hearing a single thing the other man has said. Their topics do dovetail, though. Heroin abuse among the Tower Hamlets youth is an example of Chanu's "tragedy of the immigrant." Young people, keen to adopt Western ways, have fallen prey to a Western vice, and then their confounded parents are left to pick up the pieces.*



*Chanu's theory about lower-class white resentment and his claims of racism in the workplace would both seem to be vindicated here. A group of whites is obviously angered over the Bengali immigrant presence in Tower Hamlets and in the Brick Lane area of London, but their claims are patently ridiculous. Nazneen and her family are simply trying their best to survive—they have no interest in converting anyone.*



*Nazneen is continuing to outwardly fulfill her role as the respectful wife while inwardly she fantasizes about another man. The British woman snaps Nazneen's picture as if she were an animal at the zoo. Nazneen and Chanu will never exactly fit in here. There will always be people who treat them like the exotic other.*



*Plastic bags fill the streets where Hasina now lives, while Nazneen's streets are filled with angels. However, the angels aren't necessarily of the benevolent variety. They are there to remind Nazneen of the sins she has committed. While she has been able to shed some of the more crippling aspects of her faith, she is still plagued with guilt.*



Chanu assumes that Nazneen is over-tired and says they will be home soon. Tears come to her eyes. She feels like a fool, thinking a young man like Karim would want an older woman like her. She and Chanu begin walking again, and he tells her of his hopes of obtaining a professorship in English literature at Dhaka University when they return to Bangladesh. Nazneen realizes that when they go home, it is not just Shahana she will have to worry about. They see Mrs. Islam walking toward them and duck away onto a side street.

The Bengal Tigers and Lion Hearts are conducting a war of leaflets in and around the estate. Every day seems to bring a new flyer. The Lion Hearts want to protect the Englishness of their estate against the encroachment of what they see as extreme Muslim values. The Bengal Tigers want the freedom to practice their faith in peace. Chanu finds the leaflet war amusing. He thinks the Bengal Tigers have grown fed up with the quiet timidity of his generation, and the Lion Hearts are trying desperately to save a culture not worth saving. Nazneen has begun walking both Shahana and Bibi home from school.

Karim often composes leaflets while Nazneen **sews**. He is unhappy with what he sees as apathy among the members of the Bengal Tigers. They do not know what it was like when Karim was a kid. White boys beat up Muslims on the way home from school. They had to fight and gang together to protect themselves. The youth, Karim says, have lost their focus. Often Karim comes when Chanu is in the house, and Nazneen feels good about this because it means her interactions with Karim cannot be considered sinful.

Karim's main aggravation is not the Lion Hearts and their anti-Muslim leaflets: it is the Questioner who, in Karim's opinion, just does not understand the struggle. Karim tells Nazneen that he will decide what is radical or not, and Nazneen comes to understand that "radical" means "right." Karim says he wishes Nazneen weren't always working. She tells him to talk; she will listen. He tells her about the current political unrest in Egypt. Then he goes through her glass showcase. When Chanu cannot be still, it is because he is uneasy. Karim, on the other hand, is full of energy. And Nazneen is full of longing and desire. Karim talks more about how difficult it was to grow up Bangladeshi in London. It was as if he had no identity to claim. Nazneen wishes only that he would claim her.

*Chanu arrived in London with very high hopes. Now, he talks of arriving in Dhaka with the same outsized, impractical dreams. Nazneen does not openly question his abilities to obtain a professorship in Bangladesh, but she worries about it. That is her job as his wife: to support him in everything he does, even if he is putting their livelihoods in danger.*



*The Bengal Tigers and Lion Hearts are fighting a war of words. Their threats are, for the most part, empty, not worth the paper they're printed on. Still, the Lion Hearts' hatred has to be challenged somehow. As part of the older generation of Bengali immigrants, Chanu can see why the younger might want to rebel. He came to England hoping to be accepted by the British, but he now knows how difficult and disheartening that effort can be.*



*Like Chanu, Karim enjoys explaining the ways of the world to Nazneen, who sits quietly sewing while he talks. But she finds Karim's version of the world much more interesting than her husband's. This is how she justifies her "sinful" behavior, although all she has done so far with Karim is talk and drink tea with him.*



*Karim informs Nazneen of what is "radical" and right. He might say he wishes she would talk more, but he obviously desires a captive audience, and Nazneen is more than happy to oblige him. She is only half listening, though. While he goes on about the plight of Muslims in Egypt and elsewhere, Nazneen can only think of him. She continues to admire him for the ways he is not like her husband. One main difference is that Chanu was born in Bangladesh. Karim is like a man without a country.*



In the bath, Nazneen thinks about her children, about Shahana's habit of finishing her homework too quickly and Bibi's way of chewing on her nails. After a time, she lets herself think of Karim, about his well-shaped forearms and the mole on his chin and the certainty with which he holds himself at all times. He seems to have found what Nazneen and Chanu cannot: his place in the world. She grabs the soap and razor and shaves her legs.

The next day, when Nazneen goes to pick up the girls from school, the police are in the courtyard, separating the Questioner from a group of Lion Hearts, both sides obviously spoiling for a fight. Shahana walks ahead of her mother, drawing stares. Nazneen wishes she were wearing **pants** today. Chanu has been waffling on the issue of the girls' attire. If he has a Lion Hearts flyer in hand, he insists the girls wear pants under their uniform skirts. If he sees a woman in a hijab, he insists the girls defy such peasantry and show their legs. If he is in the mood to see both sides of the question, it is up to Nazneen to decide what the girls wear.

Back in the apartment, Nazneen begins a letter to Hasina, attempting to explain to her what is happening on the estate. What she writes makes her laugh. It's all about leaflets. It's ridiculous. She goes to her room to put more money in an envelope for her sister.

There is another letter from Hasina, dated April 2001. She tells Nazneen that everything is the same. She is fine, working for Lovely and James. She is making friends with Syeeda, the maid next door, who is completely untroubled and happy with her lot. She is not pretty like Lovely, but she is more content and that gives her a certain attractiveness. James is anxious about an upcoming election. Depending on who wins, it could be bad for business. Zaid is behaving oddly, chopping the air even more than normal and declaring that his time is coming. Lovely departs for a charity function benefitting female and child victims of AIDS. She leaves the house wearing more jewelry than a bride. She calls it "the Bombay look."

It is May, and Hasina writes of witnessing something horrible on the city streets. Robbers shot two men in front of the bank and, having grabbed the victims' money and valuables, attempted to make a get-away on a moped, but a crowd pulled them off the bike and started beating them. Then someone set their bike on fire, and the robbers were burned alive. Hasina cannot stop seeing the image of the men in agony, and she wonders if in London there is justice by the court or by the people. Hasina finds justice by the people cruel.

*At this point, Nazneen has to force herself to think of her children, although she would like to spend all day thinking only of Karim. Shaving her legs represents the layers of herself that she is shedding in order to be closer to Karim. She is discarding the version of herself that is a wife and mother. Now she is trying on the role of lover.*



*Chanu's concern about the girls' clothes borders on humorous, but there are serious issues he's pondering when he decides what they'll wear. The girls' attire could attract negative attention from the anti-Muslim Lion Hearts. At the same time, Chanu doesn't want Shahana and Bibi to dress too conservatively, either. That would suggest that they and their parents are ignorant zealots. As in so many areas, the girls really can't win.*



*The Bengal Tigers' battle with the Lion Hearts would make no sense to Hasina; it's too petty and insular. What matters to Nazneen is supporting Hasina in whatever way she can.*



*Syeeda is the only character in this novel of restless people who seems completely satisfied with who she is and what she has, even though what she has is very little. Lovely, on the other hand, is surrounded with riches, but she is riddled with insecurities and always discontented about something. When preparing for the AIDS benefit, she is much more concerned with her outfit than the charity itself. To Lovely, charity is simply another way to make herself look good.*



*Even though the robbers were clearly in the wrong, the response of the mob is horrifying to Hasina, who is unable to put the sight of the men's melting bodies out of her mind, just as Nazneen is haunted by memories of Makku Pagla dangling body. Her comments about justice reveal that her political consciousness is developing.*



James and Lovely have dinner together and, while Hasina cleans around them, James grumbles about the country needing more stability and the opposition party being a bunch of criminals and thugs who want nothing more than to break into houses and rape wives. And students aren't students anymore, he says; they're thugs. Lovely isn't really listening. She makes a comment about James' company being medium-sized under her breath. Zaid hears everything and tells Hasina in the kitchen that all sides are hiring muscle for a political fight, only sometimes the muscle is a brain that can think for himself. He taps his head as he says it. Hasina is starting to think that Zaid is actually pretty smart.

In Hasina's next letter, also dated May, she writes to Nazneen about finding out through the grapevine that her friend, Monju, is near death. She goes to see Monju in the hospital and finds her in a terrible state. Pushed into a corner of a hospital hallway, her face is melted and she smells awful. She can hardly talk, but she tells Hasina that her husband, his brother, and his sister poured acid on her. Back home, Hasina visits with Syeeda, drawing strength from the woman's calm demeanor and from the love she gets from little Daisy.

Nazneen turns back to her letter to Hasina. She can't remember what she found so funny. Her head is full of household cares and worries. She turns the paper over, thinking she'll start a shopping list, but writes that she has fallen in love instead. She tears the paper up and begins again, thinking she hears someone outside the door. She wonders if it is Mrs. Islam or one of her sons. Chanu did not only borrow that first fifty pounds. In fact, she has no idea how much he borrowed from Mrs. Islam. She only knows that all of the money is going toward repaying the loans.

Bibi comes over, and wonders what she's doing. Nazneen checks her throat, as she'd been ill with tonsillitis. Dr. Azad diagnosed her. In his office, Bibi had been transfixed by his snow globes. He showed her how they worked and told her they were like life. Snow and confusion might swirl around you, he said, but as long as you had a strong foundation, the sky would clear eventually. In the lobby, Nazneen sees Tariq. All the bones seem to have been removed from his body and his head lolls.

Nazneen wakes to a feeling of anticipation. Then she sees the hated **wardrobe** and Chanu's pimply arm and she realizes it is a day like any other. She is filled with dread and worry. Karim seems to appear before her, the wind blowing his hair. She banishes him and gets up.

*James and Lovely, like Mr. Chowdhury before them, have very little use for the lower classes. James's politics are self-serving and conservative. His contention that all students are criminals reveals that he distrusts education because it teaches the young to think for themselves. Zaid is the other side that James fears so much—and indeed, he might have something to fear, as Zaid and Hasina's political education continues apace.*



*Monju's tragic situation is an extreme example of the disastrous effects of both long-standing poverty and entrenched sexism. Poverty results in ignorance and that ignorance gives rise to attacks like the one Monju suffered at the hands of her husband. Acid attacks are very common in southeast Asia and the victims are almost always women.*



*Nazneen is obviously disturbed by the story of Monju's suffering, but she is also preoccupied with her own concerns and her growing love for Karim. Still, she cannot bring herself to admit her feelings for him, not even to her sister. Meanwhile, Chanu's irresponsible habits have put the family under a dangerous obligation to Mrs. Islam.*



*Dr. Azad's words about snow and confusion swirling, while meant for Bibi, mimic the confusion Nazneen is experiencing as a dutiful wife who has fallen in love with another man. His prediction suggests that Nazneen will be fine someday, but for now chaos reigns. Tariq's lifeless posture indicates that he might be one of the heroin users Dr. Azad worries so much about.*



*The wardrobe symbolizes Nazneen's sensation of being trapped in a loveless marriage. Chanu's arm reinforces the feeling. The image of a wind-blown Karim suggests that Nazneen is getting carried away by romantic notions.*



The leaflets keep coming, but they come in the morning now. Chanu picks up the latest one from the Bengal Tigers. It is a reminder that all Muslims should be grateful for the death of martyrs in the name of Allah. It mentions a specific fighter in Chechnya whose dead body smelled fragrant upon its return to the man's home country even though it had lain three months unburied. Chanu is furious. He calls the Tigers peasants and says that putting such flyers through the doors of white people will end with the death of them all. Nazneen has begun secretly giving money to Karim for the cause. On television, the news is reporting of a riot in a city called Oldham. The rioting men wear black masks over their brown faces.

## CHAPTER 13

Nazneen puts on her red and gold silk **sari** for no particular reason. The leaves in the fabric keep distracting her, and at one point, she feels as if the silk is strangling her. She claws at it and goes to her bedroom, convinced for a moment that whatever clothes she decides to wear that day will determine the course of her life. Should she trade her sari for a skirt and jacket and high heels, she could be a high-powered British businesswoman. A tiny skirt and bright top would mean she would skate over life's difficulties with a handsome man holding her hand.

Nazneen is out of thread, and she leaves her apartment to go buy some. At the edge of the estate, though, she is greeted by the Secretary of the Bengal Tigers who invites her in for a meeting. Nazneen obliges him, happy that she wore her red and gold **sari**. She imagines Karim taking the stage and giving a stirring speech, with every word directed at her. For a time, though, Karim does not come. The Questioner moves to open the meeting, but the Secretary wants to wait. Finally, when Karim appears, dressed in a new shirt and jeans, he opens the meeting, asking if anyone in the room authorized the leaflet on Chechnya, the one that had so offended Chanu.

The Questioner admits to writing the leaflet. Karim wants such flyers approved by committee. The Questioner is contemptuous of such bureaucracy in the face of the war the West is fighting against people of the Muslim faith. He begins distributing horrifying pictures of starving children in Iraq, victims of U.S. sanctions. The photos bring Nazneen close to tears. The Questioner says this is no time for talk; action must be taken. It is time for jihad. But Karim insists that they have to address the needs of their local community first. The room grows chaotic. People pick sides. There is a motion to take a bus to Oldham to show solidarity with the Muslim community there. A musician wants to bring his DJ equipment. The Questioner finds such a suggestion ridiculous. This is no time for disco, he argues.

*The story of the Chechnyan fighter is clearly propaganda. Chanu, who has experienced his fair share of racist treatment in the workplace, understands that rational people will suffer from being lumped in with those who believe such tall tales. Nazneen, though, is so bewitched by Karim that she is daring to give him some of her sewing money. Prior to this, the money she saved in secret all went to Hasina.*



*The sari in this scene represents both Nazneen's marriage to Chanu and the many traditions and conventions she has, up until this point, followed dutifully in a desire to be a good wife and mother. She feels held back by such traditions and strangled by the vows she has made. Western attire, in contrast, would free her.*



*Nazneen's emotions are always oscillating now between despair and elation, between a strong desire for freedom and equally strong pangs of guilt and regret. The sari is no longer strangling her. She sees it as a way to attract Karim's attention. His new outfit suggests that he, too, might be trying to impress her.*



*Given that the Questioner wrote the hyperbolic leaflet, it would seem that much of what he says and does should not be trusted. But the photos that he presents to the group are legitimately horrifying, and the claims he makes about U.S. action in Iraq are not without foundation. Ali purposefully depicts the meetings of the Bengali Tigers as messy and bogged down with bureaucracy and infighting to show just how difficult it is as a minority group to speak truth to power and effect real change.*



In his zeal, the Questioner begins to lose ground. More and more people side with Karim, including two girls in **burkhas** who want to be included in the group's mission but whom the Questioner refuses to acknowledge. Karim makes a short speech, summing up that from now on, all publications will be approved by committee and that messages of support will be sent to Iraq and other Muslim communities around the world. Nazneen goes home to her apartment, fighting the desire to run. She opens the door before Karim can even knock. He orders her to get undressed and get in bed. She climbs under the covers in her nightdress. She is shaking. She is sick and wants to sleep. He kisses her, and she moans with desire.

*The Questioner's knee jerk dismissal of the girls in burkhas indicates that his zeal for social justice does not extend to women. He wants Muslims to be able to practice their faith in peace, but his version of that faith does not recognize the rights of women to have a say in what that means. Nazneen might see sleeping with Karim as an act of rebellion against fate and God, but she is still not in control. Rather, she is taking orders from a man.*



## CHAPTER 14

Chanu has decided that it is time for the family to see the London sights. Since he will soon be going home to Bangladesh, it is time to become a tourist, and he buys a guide book and a pair of **shorts** festooned with pockets for the purpose. They begin on a double decker bus and then head for Buckingham Palace. Nazneen is impressed by the building's size but not its façade. Shahana isn't impressed by anything. Chanu fiddles with his new disposable camera.

*Clothing plays a crucial role in this novel, and Chanu's shorts verge on the ridiculous, hinting at the fact that he has just been cuckolded but has no idea. The fact that the family has not yet seen much of London indicates just how difficult it is as an immigrant to assimilate and feel at home in a new country.*



Nazneen is determined that Chanu not be disappointed in this day, so she peppers him with questions and laughs and eats so many treats she is nearly sick. Then she takes a photo of Chanu and the girls. The photo will eventually sit in their kitchen near the oven, gathering grease. Then Chanu asks an American tourist, glowing with goodwill, to take a photo of all of them. The man obliges happily, saying he's always wanted to see India. Later, when they have the film developed, they see that the one of them all together shows only their feet.

*Nazneen felt sick just before she slept with Karim the first time, but that was a different kind of illness. Now she is sick with guilt. Her absence from the first family photo is indicative of how she is distancing herself from Chanu and the girls. She is with Karim now, in body and mind.*



In St. James park, Nazneen spreads out a picnic she has prepared. It is an elaborate feast, but Shahana only nibbles at the store-bought sweets. Chanu eats everything and falls asleep. The girls go for a walk and, even though she wishes she could join them, Nazneen stays with her husband. She thinks of her new love affair with Karim. Her desire for him fills her with a mixture of shame and elation. She knows that every time they make love they commit a crime, but she cannot stop herself. And she loves playing house with him afterward. She grows more patient with her children, Chanu, and her work.

*Nazneen often shows affection for her family through the food she cooks them, and this elaborate feast might be a form of atonement. Her rebellion is proceeding in fits and starts. She is sleeping with another man but doesn't dare leave her sleeping husband behind to take a walk in a park. Having grown deeply depressed while keeping house for Chanu, pretending to do the same with Karim makes her dull life in London bearable.*



The Bengal Tigers seem to have lost their bite. It's all because the Lion Hearts have stopped publishing leaflets of their own, so the Tigers have nothing to respond to. Karim thinks that they have gone underground and that there will be hell to pay. He has begun taking spiritual instruction from the imam in woman's sandals, and he's started growing a beard. He often tells Nazneen what he has learned about Islam while she changes the sheets.

Nazneen forces herself back into the moment in St. James Park with her family. The girls have returned from their walk. Chanu wakes up from his nap. He goes in search of ice cream for everyone. When he's gone, Shahana asks if Nazneen is in love with him. Nazneen misunderstands at first, but soon realizes Shahana is talking about Chanu. Nazneen says that Chanu is a good husband and that she was lucky in marriage. Shahana says she only says that because Chanu does not beat her. Nazneen wonders who is wiser, the mother or the daughter.

Mrs. Islam comes for her money the following Monday. Nazneen gives her the fifty pounds she and Chanu agreed upon as a monthly payment. Mrs. Islam is not satisfied with that amount, though. She has heard that Nazneen and Chanu are planning to go home to Bangladesh. She knows that there is money somewhere in the apartment. Nazneen tells her she has no more money, so Mrs. Islam begins to tell her about her husband, a worthless man, and her sons, who only have half a brain each. Everything she has accomplished, Mrs. Islam says, she has had to do on her own. Her speech wears Nazneen down. She goes to the cupboard and pulls twenty pounds from her secret stash and puts it in Mrs. Islam's bag. Mrs. Islam is satisfied. She says she will throw Nazneen and her family a going away party when it's time.

Nazneen and Razia are out shopping. Razia is looking for cloth for Shefali, who just finished her exams and is planning to go to university. Nazneen asks after Tariq, wondering if she should mention her suspicions to Razia (she thinks he might be using heroin). Razia says he goes out all the time now, and she hardly sees him. Nazneen remembers a conversation she had with Karim about the many young users living in the estates. He blames the heroin problem on a rise in the standard of living. It's like in the U.S., he says, where the government supplied black people with drugs to bring them down. Nazneen is confused. Karim says that in England, the government is more scared of Islam than of heroin.

*Karim's work in the Bengal Tigers seems mostly reactionary. He needs the Lion Hearts to make the first move. Otherwise, his advocacy is directionless. His faith is likewise ill-defined. Like many other characters in the novel, he begins his inner transformation by changing his clothes. He is trying on the role of good Muslim.*



*Shahana's clear-eyed assessment of her parents' marriage takes Nazneen by surprise. As a young girl, Shahana already knows the low standards a husband must meet to be considered a good mate, and she also seems to understand that her mother is not in love with her father. Marriage is, for many Bengalis, a practical arrangement, but Shahana wants more.*



*Mrs. Islam is corrupt, vile, and without compassion, but she is also self-made and courageous in her own way. She is an example of a woman who has succeeded in supporting herself in a community that, in general, does its best to make sure that women live lives of servitude. Nazneen can't help but admire her ingenuity even as she despises her methods. This scene shows that Nazneen and Mrs. Islam actually have something in common: Nazneen is also making money on the sly. Unlike Mrs. Islam, though, she spends her money on her sister and on Muslim causes.*



*The cloth Razia is picking out for Shefali represents the young woman's transition from school girl to young woman. It appears that the usually perceptive Razia might be in denial about Tariq's odd behavior. Karim's claims about the U.S. supplying African Americans with drugs in order to put them at a socio-economic disadvantage hints at a conspiracy theory bent to his worldview, although his claim about the British government's visceral fear of Islam is not without substance.*



In the store with Razia, Nazneen finds herself wanting to tell her friend all her secrets. She tells her only about the fact that she and Chanu borrowed money from Mrs. Islam. Razia is horrified. She says they'll be paying off the loan for years. Mrs. Islam will always find a way to charge her more. Then she tells Nazneen to keep the money she and Chanu have saved for the trip to Dhaka. Razia will think of something to get Mrs. Islam off their backs. She selects her **fabric** and pulls out her purse to pay, but it's empty. The white sales girl is contemptuous and dismissive. Nazneen offers to pay for the cloth, but Razia refuses. On the way home, Nazneen mentions that Dr. Azad is worried about local kids using heroin. Razia says she's just glad God has spared her household that problem.

That night, Chanu is reading a book about the Bengali **textile** industry at the time of British imperial rule. He mentions to Nazneen that the English often made a habit of chopping off the fingers of Bengali weavers. He is trying out a new gadget he bought for his cab—a beaded seat cover that is supposed to be good for the back. Nazneen thinks about all the money he has spent on gadgets and fines since becoming a taxi driver and wonders when or if they will ever break even. He continues to talk of textiles and tariffs. She wishes the girls would take more interest in their father's studies. Shahana is absorbed in the TV. Chanu turns it off and asks her to come sit with him. To Nazneen's surprise, she does.

Chanu tells his daughter that when he looks back on his life he is shocked by how little he has accomplished. Shahana tells him not to worry. He goes on, using the local newspaper merchant as an example of a man who could have been royalty back home but who here, in England, slaves away at thankless work. Shahana makes the point that the newspaper merchant just sold his flat for 167,000 pounds and that Chanu should have invested as he had, but Chanu doesn't hear her. He is trying to explain why he and Nazneen plan to move home to Dhaka. He sends Shahana to bed, thinking that his daughter now understands him perfectly.

Nazneen can't sleep, so she gets up to wash the girls' **clothes** in the sink. She finishes quickly, but a horror rushes on her suddenly—a realization of what she has done and how God will judge her. She vomits on the newly clean clothes and then Rupban appears in the corner, wailing and blowing her nose on her sari. She tells Nazneen that God tests everyone. Sometimes that test comes in the form of riches. Sometimes it is in the form of a man or a husband. Whatever the test is, Rupban says, her mouth and teeth growing with each word like a monster in a horror movie, there is an easy way to pass it. All one has to do is endure.

*Nazneen, never one to talk much about herself or her own desires, finds that she cannot open up fully to Razia, even though Razia is her close friend. Razia, too, is being coy. All the evidence is pointing to Tariq's being a heroin addict, but she is either in denial or does not want to admit to Nazneen that her son has a problem. The white sales girl acts as if Nazneen and Razia do not exist. Then, when Razia is unable to pay, it's clear that the sales girl expected as much. Immigrants are treated as if they are invisible or, worse, born criminals.*



*Clothing imagery takes on a new meaning in this scene. Instead of suggesting a character's transformation, it serves as a reminder of the cruelty of British colonial rule, and of how that cruelty had a ripple effect, leaving so many Bengalis, like Hasina, Nazneen, and Razia, with no choice but to try to support themselves as low-paid sewing women for sweatshops while others, like Chanu, have to settle for driving taxi cabs when they're obviously over-qualified for such work.*



*Chanu has changed a great deal since the birth of his daughters. He no longer brags about his degrees or complains about the fact that he can't seem to get ahead. Instead, he blames himself for his lack of advancement. Shahana blames him as well. She is savvy and observant. She knows more about what is going on with the inhabitants of Tower Hamlets than he does.*



*Nazneen's actions come back to haunt her in the form of her mother's ghost. The girls' clothes are a tangible reminder of how, by sleeping with Karim, Nazneen is putting her family in jeopardy. The Rupban who appears to her at this moment isn't the gentle, God-fearing woman Nazneen loved beyond all else but a grisly figure who dispenses useless advice. All Nazneen has done for years is endure, but it seems she can do it no longer.*



## CHAPTER 15

Chanu tells Nazneen that he found her on the kitchen floor, eyes unblinking, vomit at the corners of her mouth. He had missed her heartbeat in bed and came to look for her. Nazneen enters as deeply as she can into her state of collapse. She dives down into the silence and darkness, hearing the voices of her daughters and Hasina and Chanu and Karim. When Dr. Azad comes to visit, she finally opens her eyes. He prescribes rest. Chanu, when he sees Nazneen sitting up, can hardly contain his happiness. He has cooked lavish meals for her, but she wants only rice. She thinks that maybe she should worry about something, but she can't remember what. Chanu and Dr. Azad trade their usual barbs. Later, Chanu plays the clown for the girls, overjoyed at Nazneen's recovery. She is still bothered by the thought that she forgot to do something important.

The girls are on break from school and the apartment is a mess. Nazneen does her best not to tidy it, and for a moment her lack of activity gives her a certain amount of pleasure. Maybe she doesn't always have to be doing something all the time. Maybe the world won't fall apart. Still, she is disturbed by a memory at the corner of her mind. She can't recall how things ended with Karim, or if they ended at all. She hopes everything will be clearer when he visits again. After Chanu and the girls go to bed, she picks up objects randomly, disarranging the room, and forces herself to sit and breathe for a while. The only thing that really gives her peace is pulling out the stack of Hasina's letters and reading them, absorbing her sister's words like breath.

In a letter dated June 2001, Hasina writes of telling Lovely about Monju. Monju was married off at thirteen and soon had a son. When the son was seven days old, her husband wanted to sell it. Monju took to begging to support him. Lovely tells Hasina that the problem with begging is that the money has to come from somewhere. Hasina wants to point out that Lovely's money comes from James, but she keeps her mouth shut.

Lovely is getting ready for the Pantene Head and Shoulder Show at the Sheraton Winter Garden. At the show, one boy and one girl will get the award for best hair. Monju's husband poured acid on her seven-day-old son and she has spent all of her money trying to treat him. Lovely thinks maybe Monju could benefit from Goats for Life or a similar charity aimed at raising people's self-esteem. Perhaps low self-esteem is Monju's problem, Lovely says. She leaves and Hasina drifts around Lovely's room, touching the expensive objects there and wondering if touching these things is different for Lovely because they belong to her. Zaid surprises her by making a loud Kung-Fu noise and chopping the air. Jimmy and Daisy join in.

*Ali hints here that Nazneen's breakdown is not just the byproduct of guilt. Over-work and anxiety have played their part as well. Nazneen has worn herself ragged, cooking and cleaning and trying to keep the peace between Chanu and Shahana. She has juggled the demands of husband and lover. She has tried to be a good friend to Razia and negotiate terms with Mrs. Islam, all the while working hard to make money for the family's home fund and for Hasina. She has not had a moment for herself in years and is quite literally exhausted.*



*Nazneen had been raised to believe that women should, at all times, be tending to their husbands and children. In the wake of her breakdown, however, she sees the flaw in this system. It leaves women drained not only of energy but of their sense of self. She is, for the moment anyway, making a conscious effort not to busy herself with unnecessary work. Thoughts of Hasina are life to her. With Hasina's words as company, she can endure.*



*Monju is an example of what can arise when extreme poverty meets entrenched sexism. Lovely is in denial that Monju's life has been made tragic by misogyny and a rigid class system. To acknowledge this truth would also be to admit that she benefits from both.*



*Lovely's world is one of empty pleasures. While Monju languishes in a hospital, her face melted, Lovely readies herself to go to a best hair competition. Her suggestion that Monju needs help with her self-esteem reveals the depth of her cluelessness. Meanwhile, her obsession with charities continues to be shallow and self-serving. Hasina is beginning to see that she and Lovely inhabit different realities. Hasina cleans beautiful things, while Lovely owns them.*



In Hasina's next letter, dated July, she thanks Nazneen for her money and says she hopes she won't be mad, but she took it to the hospital to pay for new dressings for Monju. Monju does not want money spent on her. She thinks only of her son. Hasina then goes home to tend to the children. Daisy has grown clingy, and cries if Hasina puts her down. They sit on the verandah together, where a **kingfisher** calls to his mates to come and join him on the roof, which is nothing special, but the bird seems to consider paradise. Hasina tells him to fly away, but he never does.

Holding Daisy, Hasina kisses her hair, thinking of how loving the girl is, like holding a beautiful, fragile bubble in her hand. Zaid, who's been inside watching a Kung-Fu movie with Jimmy, tells Hasina not to get too close to the children, since they're not hers.

In the next letter, also dated July, Hasina writes of Lovely's latest dinner party, this one for Betty and her husband. The men talk about politics and the possibility of a plastic bag ban. The women look bored. Zaid makes dessert and tells Hasina that the rich people in the dining room don't know what they're talking about. He has big plans. He might work for a political party in need of muscle. He might become a Kung-Fu actor. He's considering moving overseas, but he's seen too many people fail at that to be really tempted. Hasina tells him about Chanu and how he's lived in London for almost 20 years, and Zaid is finally impressed. He says that Chanu can probably afford to come home and build an entire town where everything works like it should.

The next letter is dated August. Hasina writes of going back to the hospital to visit Monju. Lovely supports her completely in these visits and asks her to take Jimmy and Daisy with her this time, but then Hasina tells her a bit about how Monju looks and Lovely, annoyed, makes a comment about how one gives and gives to charity and it's never enough. Monju is mostly unconscious now, which is a mercy, in Hasina's opinion. At night she sits with Syeeda on the veranda and they watch the rains together.

Nazneen and her family are home, cleaning house together. Chanu seems to have stopped going to work. He hovers around Nazneen, fussing and telling her not to overdo it. He tells her that Razia came to see her during her illness, which Chanu is calling "nervous prostration." Nazneen does not remember Razia's visit. She thinks about Hasina and her chaotic life and how Hasina always blames herself for every misfortune. She thinks about how what she did with Karim means she will burn in hell for all eternity. At least that matter is settled.

*Nazneen, Hasina, and Monju are all acting selflessly, giving what little money they have to someone else. This is in direct contrast to Lovely, who, if anything, wishes she had more money. The bird represents Hasina's current predicament. She had thought her new position a kind of paradise, but now wishes she could fly away.*



*Hasina's happiness, too, is fragile as a bubble. Built on loving children who aren't hers, it has the potential to pop at any moment.*



*This dinner party highlights the deep divide that exists between the upper class and their employees. Lovely and Betty can afford to be bored. Hasina and Zaid have to work and scheme. For all his eccentricity, Zaid does have plans and those plans could threaten the easy and exploitative lifestyles of people like James, Lovely, and Betty. That Zaid is impressed with Chanu is ironic, of course; whereas Chanu is merely a man of many words, Zaid appears to be a man of action.*



*Lovely wants so much to be rid of her children that she suggests an outing to a hospital to see an acid attack victim. If she feels bad for Monju, it doesn't show. She saves most of her pity for herself. Meanwhile, the rains wash Hasina's disturbed mind clean. In the company of Syeeda, she can forget, at least for a time, her friend's horrible suffering.*



*On one hand, progress has been made. Nazneen now has help cleaning up the house. On the other, Chanu has stopped making money and they still owe Mrs. Islam. Nazneen considers Hasina blameless when it comes to the many setbacks she has suffered in life, but she very much blames herself for her own setbacks. This is a testament to the ways in which women in this novel internalize their culture's misogynistic attitudes.*



It is August and hot and Nazneen is looking across the estate at her old apartment, where plants bloom in the windows. She is filled with regret for all the things she has left undone. She should have bought plants and nurtured them. She should have sewn covers for the **furniture** and gotten rid of the hated wardrobe or at least painted it. She should have hung all of Chanu's certificates on the wall. Everything seemed so temporary back then. Now, she feels that is too late to make things better.

There is a knock at the door and Nazneen knows it is Karim. He comes in with a bale of **jeans** over one shoulder. They stand for some time not talking, and Nazneen feels the room fill with things left unsaid. She doesn't know who moves first, but they come together and end up in the bedroom, making love roughly. She bites his ear and draws **blood**. She wants everything all at once: to disappear, but mostly for Chanu to come in and see, finally, who she really is.

Afterward, in bed, Karim mumbles kindnesses and vows, all of them tainted with his stutter and the idiocy of youth. Nazneen gets up to wash and sees, when he is settled on the couch with his feet on the coffee table, that there are holes in his **socks**. He tells her that he hasn't visited for a while because he's been away, visiting family. He can tell she's angry about his absence. She says she isn't. She wants the Karim of the fresh new shirts back. He lingers, telling her that things with the Bengal Tigers have died out. They need new **blood**. They'd planned a march against the Lion Hearts, but the Lion Hearts canceled everything because they could see they were going to be outnumbered.

Nazneen suggests they plan another march and make it a celebration. That way more people will show up. Karim only seems to take the idea seriously when he repeats it aloud, as if he had thought of it himself. He looks at various things on Chanu's computer, including a picture of an ox driver in Bangladesh. He tells Nazneen that he has never been to his home country. Then he reads to her from an Islamic website, quoting a Qur'an verse about man's role in adultery. It is a sin against God to look at sinful things and to listen to voluptuous talk and to walk to a place where he will commit vicious deeds. Nazneen is electrified and furious. She tells him to go, wondering if he could have possibly selected the text at random.

*The blooming plants contrast greatly with the barren landscape of Nazneen's sudden depression, brought on, it would seem, by regret over not having been the perfect woman and wife. Although she never admitted it to herself, she had thought she would someday escape Tower Hamlets. That is why she didn't work harder to put down real roots there. This is another aspect of the duality of the "tragedy of the immigrant."*



*This scene suggests that Nazneen's nervous collapse and resulting depression might have been caused, at least in part, by Karim's absence. The blood she draws when she bites him is proof of her passion for him.*



*Nazneen is slowly beginning to see Karim for who he is: young and awkward and not nearly as well put together as she thought. She's used to seeing him in sharp, clean clothes. The holes in his socks show that he is, contrary to what she'd hoped, not a hero in an ice skating fantasy but a three-dimensional human with flaws. His work with the Bengal Tigers is again revealed to be reactionary. Without the Lion Hearts, it seems, the Tigers have nothing to fight for because they have no one to fight against.*



*That Nazneen feels comfortable enough to suggest that Karim plan a celebration rather than a march is, in itself, remarkable. She never ventures to suggest any course of action to Chanu. That Karim takes credit for the idea is much less remarkable. He is given license to do so by his faith and community. His efforts at trying on Islamic fundamentalism are on-going, and his selection of Qur'anic verse is interesting in that it explains a man's role in adultery, but it does not explain a woman's.*



Sometime later, Nazneen stamps around, testing the ground beneath her feet. She finds that it is solid. Shahana comes home with a flyer, announcing the date of an upcoming Bengal Tigers-sponsored festival. She wants to go. Everyone will be there, she says. Chanu says no, and that if she insists on whining about it, he will beat her to a bloody pulp. It's another one of his empty threats, but Nazneen steps between him and Shahana and declares that she can go. Chanu is shocked, but he and Shahana laugh Nazneen's declaration off. She has not been well, Chanu whispers conspiratorially.

Later, when Chanu proudly reads aloud from a London School of Economics study that suggests Bangladesh is the happiest country on earth, Nazneen speaks up again. She tells him she does not believe it. Chanu is again shocked. His face can hardly register his level of surprise. Nazneen says that Hasina is proof that the study is bunk. Then she tells him everything about Hasina that she has been hiding all these years, including the rape at the hands of Mr. Chowdhury and the years of prostitution, although she speaks indirectly about the latter. Chanu understands all. He walks around the apartment, restless, eager to make a plan. He wants desperately to fix things but obviously doesn't know how.

Everyone is talking about the Bengal Tigers' festival, according to Hanufa, who, when Nazneen comes to visit, hands her tub after tub of leftover food. Nazneen is preoccupied with the meeting the night before. Chanu attended with her and even stood up to speak, making a short speech about Bangladesh's suffering at the hands of the West. Nazneen sat beside her husband and in front of her lover and was happy for a moment, until she remembered her mother.

Nazneen returns home from her visit with Hanufa to find Razia standing in front of her apartment, looking tortured and frazzled. When Nazneen asks her what is wrong, Razia responds that Tariq has sold her **furniture**.

*Nazneen's walking on solid ground seems to be a reference to the Qur'anic text that Karim read to her about adultery. A man is not supposed to walk down the road of temptation, for it is a sin. Nazneen is beginning to understand that she can walk wherever she wants because she is strong and resilient. That is what also gives her the courage to overrule her husband. Chanu might mock her resolve, but it is real.*



*Chanu has never known what to do with either money or women. Meanwhile, Nazneen is growing in courage. She is confident enough now to hit Chanu in one of his most vulnerable places: his reverence for Bangladesh. Moreover, she no longer thinks it necessary to keep the most shameful aspects of Hasina's life secret because they aren't, in reality, shameful. Rather, they are the tragic results of a system biased against women and the poor.*



*Rupban continues to haunt Nazneen, who seems to think of her mother most often now when considering her affair with Karim. Rupban's saintliness underscores for Nazneen her own sinful nature. She is torn between pure joy and overwhelming guilt.*



*In many cases in this novel, furniture represents the struggles immigrants go through to put down roots in a new country. Tariq sends Razia back to the beginning.*



## CHAPTER 16

Nazneen is with Razia and Shefali in their apartment. The place is bare, stripped clean except for a couple of **mattresses** and a chair. Nazneen remembers the rooms when Razia's husband was still alive. After he died, she cleared out all the junk and paint and gradually, over time, began furnishing it again with modest but elegant pieces she could afford on her **seamstress's** salary. Now it's all gone, and Razia admits that she's known for some time that Tariq was selling drugs. Trouble came when men from another estate said he was encroaching on their territory. They wanted to tax him on his earnings. Nazneen later confesses to Razia about Karim, but Razia rebuffs her, saying just because she is suffering, Nazneen does not need to suffer too.

Razia and Nazneen are in Dr. Azad's office. Razia wants his help getting Tariq off drugs. Dr. Azad is, as usual, calm and tidy. Razia, on the other hand, is a mess, pacing the room and demanding to know what the community is saying about her. She stops and asks Dr. Azad if he can cure her son. He replies that Tariq needs to want to stop using drugs. She should go home, he says, and talk to her son.

Nazneen, the girls, and Chanu are at home. Everyone is preparing for the festival. The girls are in charge of the arts and crafts table, and Chanu is on the classical music committee, though he wishes that he were on the poetry committee instead. He recites a few lines about the beauty of Bangladesh from memory, then tells the girls and Nazneen that when they move back home they will return to the simple life that everyone in London seems to have lost sight of. Then he launches into song, and the song contains the line, "What keeps you tied to the corners of the room?" Nazneen thinks they are all tied to the corners of the room. The thought stays with her all day, like a breastfeeding baby.

In a letter dated August 2001, Hasina writes about Lovely's restlessness and discontentment. Lovely is angry partially because Betty recently had her picture in the newspaper. The picture was taken at an HIV benefit. Lovely thinks she should perhaps start her own charity, maybe one for child workers. Hasina brings up a number of children who work in the neighborhood. Lovely points out that Hasina is supposed to be mopping the floor, and then Lovely wishes aloud that she weren't so beautiful, and that instead she were plain like Hasina.

*Razia has worked very hard to make her apartment a home. She began by tossing out the unwanted gifts she received from her husband's white coworker. That was her most decisive act in her battle to make her home her own. Tariq's battle with rival drug dealers is not unlike the Bengal Tigers' fight with the Lion Hearts. Nazneen and Razia have both been keeping secrets from each other. Nazneen picks the wrong time to unburden herself.*



*Even with her son's life at stake, Razia is preoccupied with what sort of rumors the women in Tower Hamlets might be spreading about her. For women largely deprived of agency, gossip gives them a feeling of power. Razia is an easy target, and now the burden of getting her son clean is on her shoulders.*



*What keeps Nazneen tied to the corners of the room is habit and convention: religious tradition paired with her own meekness. Chanu is bound by his unrealistic ambitions and inability to follow through, and the girls are hemmed in by their parents' choices and their status as immigrants in a country that is often suspicious of "outsiders." Breastfeeding, likewise, ties a woman down, making her a prisoner to her baby's appetites.*



*Lovely's hypocrisy is glaring. She sees children every day who could benefit from her charity, but she doesn't want to help them because they are employed by her neighbors. She wants, too, to be able to complain to Hasina nonstop without ever hearing Hasina's point of view. Her parting shot about Hasina's plainness is most likely motivated by spiteful envy.*



Later, Hasina lies down in the guest room bed, loving the feel of the sheets. Then she goes to the master bedroom and begins to apply Lovely's makeup to her face. Zaid comes in while she is putting kohl on her eyes and quotes to her a line of poetry about the human heart never being satisfied with what it has.

*Just as characters often change their clothing in order to become a new person, Hasina is putting on Lovely's makeup in an attempt to be her for the afternoon. Zaid knows this can only lead to suffering.*



Nazneen slips into a depression. She stays in bed longer and longer. Now after Karim leaves, she often doesn't bother to wash the sheets, preferring instead to wrap herself in the soiled linen and sleep there. Chanu buys her an ivory comb and a beautiful bolt of **cloth**. She doesn't want either. One night, when ice skating is on the television, Chanu drags her to the sofa and, together, everyone watches. But the magic has been lost. Nazneen thinks it all looks cheap and fake.

*Nazneen's sadness is not explained, but it could be due to her last meeting with Karim when he read aloud to her the Quranic verse about adultery. Neither beautiful clothes nor ice skating on television cheer her. She knows that true transformation has to come from within, and she can't count on a handsome partner to fix her problems.*



Mrs. Islam comes for her money. Nazneen gives it to her, realizing that everything she has saved for Hasina is now going to Mrs. Islam. One day, Razia visits. Tariq has not stopped using drugs. Razia mentions that she saw Karim on the stair. This is the only thing that seems to puncture Nazneen's depression. Soon, though, she is back in a fog, **sewing** and worrying. Chanu rushes in and orders her to turn on the television.

*Despite working long days with very few breaks, Nazneen is not saving any money. Mrs. Islam is taking it all, and, since Nazneen does not know how much Chanu borrowed, she also has no idea how close they are to paying her back. Every day is just another day, except when she has time to think of Karim.*



The terror attacks of September 11 play out on the screen. Chanu and Nazneen watch it unfold in horror. Chanu says this is the beginning of the madness. Nazneen feels as if she is in a trance. Nazma drops by and watches for a while, asking if Nazneen will take her children for a while after school tomorrow. Nazneen agrees. Nazma starts to leave, pausing by Nazneen's **sewing** machine. There is a glint in her eye as she asks Nazneen if she is still getting plenty of work. Nazneen's stomach plummets.

*The events of September 11 are one kind of disaster. Nazma suspecting Nazneen of sleeping with Karim is another. Nazneen seems more upset by the latter, but this is understandable given the personal nature of this exchange and the fact that the attacks happened on the other side of the ocean. Chanu, though, understands that many will use the attacks as an opportunity to target Muslims and punish them for something they did not do.*



Everyone watches the coverage together, including Shahana and Bibi. Nazneen feels as if they have all survived something together as a family. Later, after she makes dinner, she sees a new image: that of a man throwing himself out of one of the burning towers. That night she dreams again of Gouripur and the men after the cyclone doing what little they could to put the village back together.

*The image of people throwing themselves out of the Twin Tower windows reminds Nazneen of humanity's inability to save itself, and that life on earth is, in general, an exercise in well-intentioned futility.*



People in the estates start to experience a backlash from September 11. Girls have their **head scarves** pulled off. Razia is spit on. Chanu gathers his family into the living room and tells them the story of the famous painter Zainul Abedin, who painted the regular people of Bangladesh. During the famine of 1942, he painted both the living and the dead. He showed how the vultures and crows feasted on dead children. While all of this was going on, Chanu says, the British took grain from the country and ate it themselves. That is life, Chanu says, and they will be leaving for Dhaka very soon.

But they can't leave yet because they still don't have the money. Chanu counts what they have at the kitchen table and asks in confusion where it is all going. He tells Nazneen to ask Karim for a fifty percent raise. Later, while Nazneen brushes her hair, they talk more about the move. Chanu asks her if she wants to go. She answers that if it is God's will, she will go. But does she want to, Chanu asks. She doesn't answer. Chanu puts his head on her shoulder. He answers for her. Of course, she wants to go. What kind of sister would she be if she didn't?

Chanu starts working all the time. He works so much he is too tired to talk, and his ulcer grows so painful that he no longer finds pleasure in food. One day, he comes home to find Karim at his computer. Karim is completely calm. He yawns and tells Chanu that he is looking up an Islamic website. Nazneen digs her nails into her flesh, thinking she'll cry out and break the room in two, but she remains silent. Chanu tells Karim about his youthful ambitions, his burning desire to be a British civil servant. Karim replies by saying he knows what he wants. He says it two more times, but Chanu goes on like he doesn't hear him. When one is young, Chanu says, one wants everything to be possible. When one grows older, one needs things to be certain. Finished with his speech, Chanu goes out.

The festival everyone had been looking forward to is cancelled. Karim tells Nazneen that the events of September 11 convinced them that now was not the time to throw a celebration of Islamic culture. It would seem in bad taste. The girls are disappointed. They are also worried about Chanu, who has stopped humming and giving speeches. He doesn't even want them to turn the pages of his books anymore. After a time, he brings home a suitcase. It is an unremarkable black bag, but what Nazneen notices is that he presents it to the family without any pomp and circumstance. It is this lack of grandiloquence that convinces her he is finally serious about moving home to Bangladesh.

*What Chanu feared has come to pass. Angry and ignorant people have begun harassing the Tower Hamlets Bengali community, punishing little girls for crimes committed by grown men. Chanu's story about Abedin points out that humans have been horrible to each other since the beginning of time and the British are far from blameless. He wants to take his girls back home where they will be accepted for who they are.*



*For the first time in the novel, Chanu asks Nazneen's opinion about something and he does, indeed, seem to want an honest answer. Nazneen equivocates, however, because she is still embroiled in an affair with Karim and because giving her opinion is not something she's in the habit of doing. That Chanu answers for her in this moment is less a function of his need to control her than it is wishful thinking.*



*Nazneen had been hoping Chanu would come home, find her with Karim and see her, finally, for who she is: a bad wife, a bad mother, a sinner against God. Instead, he seems not to see her at all. He sees only Karim, and directs all his comments to him. Chanu has grown wise over time. He has learned to value Nazneen over his delusions of grandeur, but it is too late. He will never be certain of anything again. Nazneen's desire to break the room harkens back to her wanting to cry out at the hospital when Raqib is sick. In both instances, she remains silent.*



*A celebration of Islamic culture has nothing to do with the terror attacks of September 11, but Karim knows that people are not always rational, and so the celebration falls victim to others' ignorance. Chanu has not been himself since coming home to find Karim on his computer. His resolve to move to Dhaka, however, has not changed. If anything, it has grown stronger.*



Karim changes his style. He trades the **jeans** and gym shoes for Panjabi pajama and a skull cap. Nazneen senses he doesn't want to discuss his new look, so she keeps her thoughts to herself. Her mind drifts back to Gouripur and a man named Arzoo, a poor laborer who worked her father's lands. One day, Arzoo showed up in the village in an elaborate red, wool jacket. No one could believe their eyes, and everyone teased him about it. They teased him so much he began to hate the jacket. Nazneen heard Arzoo tell her father that people often think that clothing is a superficial thing, but in a poor place like Gouripur, it is a very serious business.

Nazneen is trying to think how she would describe Karim to Hasina in a letter. Karim is on the computer, reading about the September 11 terror attacks on the internet. Nazneen's thoughts drift to the barber of Gouripur, Tamizuddin Mizra Haque, who, in Nazneen's memory, seemed to be a respected authority on everything. People deferred to him and they always referred to him by his whole name as a sign of high regard. She realizes she will never write to Hasina of Karim. She begins one of her usual letters, mentioning the girls and sending good wishes to Monju and her son. Nazneen knows it is inadequate. Hasina's letters are always so full of life.

Karim, meanwhile, has stood up and is pacing the apartment, saying that the official account of the September 11 attacks does not add up. None of the men would have left their Qur'ans in a taxi cab as the reports suggest. He tells Nazneen to consider who benefits from the attack. When they can answer that question, they can find the true culprits.

Nazneen vows to tell Karim he can't pray in her apartment anymore. It is wrong and it has to stop, but then he whispers in her ear and she is powerless. She sometimes wishes Chanu would discover them and kill her. Then she would be freed from this torment, but he hasn't even mentioned the day he came home and found them together. One day, she asks Karim why he likes her. He jokes with her for a bit and then tells her that, unlike the women who go around in short **skirts** speaking English all the time, she is the real thing. She is reminded of the time when, just after their marriage, Chanu described her as an "unspoiled village girl."

Nazneen tells Karim that Chanu is making plans to move the family home to Dhaka. He does not react at first. Then he tells her that when he didn't come to see her for a while, the time when he said he was with his cousins, he went to see a girl his father had picked out for him. He turned her down for Nazneen. He tells her to let Chanu go to Bangladesh without her. Then she can sue him for divorce on the grounds of desertion.

*Karim's changing style reflects the seriousness with which he is approaching his religious education. He is trading in the attire of the West for that of the East. Arzoo's story underscores the power of clothes, especially when one is poor. The jacket made Arzoo an object of envy in the small village. He was suddenly very visible, and all he wanted to be was invisible. Karim's clothes are a clear statement about his desire to connect with his homeland.*



*As they did when she first arrived in London, Nazneen's thoughts are straying often to Gouripur. This could be because Karim is trying to learn more about his ancestral home, which brings to mind her childhood, or because Chanu has redoubled his efforts to make his dream of moving back to Bangladesh a reality. More likely, it's both. The men's obsessions are infectious.*



*Karim understandably does not want to believe the reports about the men responsible for 9/11, but his thinking is muddled by his hopes and it is, again, drifting into the territory of conspiracy theories.*



*Chanu, even if he were to discover Karim and Nazneen making love, would never be capable of killing his wife. The fact that Nazneen would even indulge in such morbid fantasies shows how far she's let herself slip into a world which is divorced from reality. Like Chanu, Karim likes that Nazneen is submissive and will, for the most part, do whatever he wants.*



*Karim's extended absence corresponded with Nazneen's breakdown. While she never admitted it, it was perhaps that absence that was a catalyst for her depression. Karim wants to enter into a love marriage with Nazneen. Nazneen, on the other hand, does not seem to know at all what she wants.*



The family has stopped eating together. Chanu has no appetite, so Nazneen lets the girls eat hamburgers and baked beans and whatever they want. When Nazneen cooks now, she cooks for herself and she eats alone at the middle of the night, wondering if she'll ever eat with her sister again. One night, a Lion Hearts leaflet comes through the door, advertising the March Against the Mullahs. Karim is overjoyed. The Bengal Tigers now have a cause. Chanu, on the other hand, gives the flyer a disgusted glance and goes to the bedroom, shutting the door behind him.

*Food has often acted as the glue that kept Chanu and Nazneen's family together. The discontinuing of family dinners hints at some dissolution of the blood bonds. Much of that can be traced to Chanu's coming home to find Karim casually using his computer. Karim's work with the Bengal Tigers is still mostly in response to the racist Lion Hearts.*



## CHAPTER 17

A boy has been stabbed and no one, not the newspapers or the residents of Tower Hamlets, can get the story straight. His name and character changes with each telling. Nazneen and Shahana stand outside a grocery store, listening to people gossip. Nazma seems intent, especially in front of Razia, on blaming the boy's death on drugs. It's too bad that so many young men are deep into the drugs these days, she says. Razia pretends not to hear them.

*This boy's life is not important enough to the authorities or even his neighbors for anyone to know his name or situation. He is dispensable, disposable. Razia is targeted by the gossipers on the estate. Like the injured boy, Tariq is being treated like a commodity and nothing more.*



Nazneen and Razia are walking home from the grocery store, and they see a funeral procession pass by. In one of the cars is a white woman who smiles at Nazneen as if she knows her, as if she is a familiar object of some kind. Nazneen wants desperately to ask Razia if she is being talked about, but it is difficult to talk to Razia about real things now. Razia never jokes anymore, and never does any impressions. They walk past a store called Fashion Fusion. It seems to sell **saris** to white girls, and Razia is roused to talk finally. She wonders how people can spit on her for being a Muslim while outfitting themselves like the people they claim to hate. What is wrong with people? she asks.

*In one quick glance, the white woman in this scene thinks she knows everything about Nazneen because, to the white woman, Nazneen is not a complicated human but an exotic object, lovely to behold and easy to dismiss. White girls who wear saris are in the same camp. They embrace the styles of the East while remaining ignorant about who people like Razia and Nazneen really are.*



One evening, the girls and Nazneen are alone in the apartment. Chanu is working. Shahana is saying she doesn't want to move to Bangladesh. Not even, Nazneen asks, to meet Mumtaz auntie? Bibi asks to hear a story of Mumtaz, so Nazneen tells them of Mumtaz's jinni given to her by her father. She broke the bottle the jinni lived in, telling it that she was giving it its freedom and in return it had to give her wisdom. Time passed, though, and Mumtaz never heard from it. Finally, after a village woman came to Mumtaz with a problem—she had eight children and her husband would not stop sleeping with her—Mumtaz asked the air what she could say to the woman to help her with her dilemma. This time, the jinni answered.

*In the scene depicting Nazneen's birth, Mumtaz appeared to be the voice of reason. She wanted Rupban to take Nazneen to the hospital for treatment rather than leaving her to her fate. But this story shows that Mumtaz is as superstitious as many of the inhabitants of Gouripur. She believes in the power of a jinni, or spirit, to shape lives, including that of a woman with eight children who wants her husband to stop impregnating her. It's a reasonable request, and yet it's not a woman's place to make it.*



The jinni told Mumtaz that the woman should line up all her children and tell her husband that if he wants another child, he will first have to pick which of the eight he wants to kill. Kill one and she will replace it. After this incident, the people in the village often came to Mumtaz for advice and Mumtaz obliged them, asking the jinni and often speaking in tongues. Rupban was the only skeptic. She thought Mumtaz's jinni act was a complete fraud.

Finished with her story, Nazneen leads the girls to the bathroom to brush their teeth. There, she thinks of a jinni tale she had never told them. When Nazneen was eight or nine years old, Rupban became possessed by an evil jinni. The jinni made her sharpen sticks and try to poke Hamid's eyes out with them. It made her stop washing. Things got so bad that Hamid called on an area holy man, Manzur Boyati, to come and perform an exorcism. Exorcisms were considered great entertainment in the village, and everyone came out to see Rupban shed the jinni.

The holy man called on a volunteer from the crowd to help with the exorcism. One of Rupban's servant boys raised his hand. He was a moody boy who kept a mongoose on a leash. The exorcism proceeded as planned, with the holy man transferring the jinni from Rupban to the body of the servant boy. When the holy man began questioning the boy about why he would torture Rupban, he answered in a wicked voice that she had stepped on his shadow. The boy then proceeded to yank on the holy man's beard to the point that the holy man asked the crowd to intervene. He insisted that the boy was faking and was trying to kill him.

When the servant boy was finally pulled away from the holy man, the holy man demanded the chance to avenge himself on the boy. The crowd began to fight about what should be done. Eventually, a compromise was reached: the holy man would be permitted to put the boy in a headlock if he solemnly promised to rid him of the evil spirit.

Rupban eventually got better, and even though Nazneen overheard the servant boy bragging that he'd humiliated the holy man on purpose, she insisted on believing in the exorcism. Now, though, she can only wonder why Rupban always seemed to believe in bad jinn but not good.

*Mumtaz gives the jinni credit for the wisdom she dispenses, but, given that it's the very devout and unquestioning Rupban who thinks the act fake, it is very possible that the wisdom is coming from Mumtaz herself. Mumtaz, though, is a woman, and the village might not listen to her unless she disguises her intelligence as God-given.*



*Nazneen now knows that much of Rupban's suffering was caused by Hamid's many affairs, but both Hamid and the village at large preferred to blame a jinni for her anger. It was more entertaining and expedient to do so. It is worth noting that no one blamed a jinni for making Hamid abandon his wife and daughters on a regular basis. In fact, no one blamed Hamid, either.*



*The exorcism is a comedy of errors, but there is a serious message hidden in the ridiculous way it plays out. Rupban was never in need of an exorcism. She needed, instead, for her husband to treat her better. The holy man's claim that the boy is faking suggests that this religious rite is not religious at all. It is, instead, elaborate and socially sanctioned theater.*



*The crowd's bickering is reminiscent of the fights between members of the Bengal Tigers. Both group's battles are petty and self-defeating. Meanwhile, the holy man's request is the opposite of holy. It's vengeful and immature.*



*Mumtaz's jinni would be considered a benevolent one, but Rupban thought that spirit was a fake. Trusting in fate made Rupban a hardened pessimist because the God she revered seemed always to be punishing her.*



Nazneen sees little of Karim at the moment. He is busy with Bengal Tiger activities and with his spiritual instruction. When she does see him, he tells her he's researching divorce, and he talks about their future wedding, which he thinks should be a simple, small affair. Nazneen does not know what she wants to happen. She can go to Bangladesh with Chanu and the girls, but that could end in ruin. She could stay here and marry Karim, but then what? She supposes she should wait and let fate decide, but, having cut a chili and gotten some of the heat into her eye, she cries out in pain and then exhilaration. *She* will decide what happens to her, she thinks. She will act.

Later, though, Nazneen is left with only the ghost of her determination. She vacillates back and forth, torn between Karim and her family. One night, after praying, she finds a Qur'anic verse about two oceans divided by a reef and containing the question "which of God's blessings would you deny?" Both sides of the ocean have coral and pearls. Which is the right ocean? It reminds Nazneen of Chanu cutting his toenails in bed and coming over to her, kissing her forehead, and saying he has never once regretted his choice of bride. Her girls are beautiful, she thinks. She is a lucky woman. She vows that she will not deny God's blessings.

Chanu talks less and less, while Karim talks more and more. Karim is energized by the Lion Hearts' latest leaflet, which claims that Islam is a religion of hate and violence. Karim, still dressed in his **Panjabi pajama** and skull cap, is furious with such claims. Everyone is always talking about Islamic terrorists, but never Catholic terrorists or Jewish terrorists, he says. Nazneen wants to talk to him, but she doesn't know what to say. He's so angry all the time now. Karim tells her that the Lion Hearts might have started the war, but the Bengal Tigers will finish it.

In a letter dated September 2001, Hasina writes that Monju has died. Hasina is glad that her friend is now relieved from her suffering, and she is grateful to report that Lovely is making good on her promise to start a new charity. It will help child victims of acid attacks, and Monju's son will be its first beneficiary. Lovely calls the newspaper to announce the formation of the organization.

*Nazneen is torn between letting a man determine her future and sitting back and seeing what God seems to have planned for her. The pain she feels when the chili lands in her eye is, in effect, a wake up call. She doesn't have to wait on either men or God. She can rely on herself. That said, doing so will probably be painful.*



*The divided oceans get to the heart of the dualities at play in this novel. Like the water cut in two by the reef, Hasina and Nazneen are literally separated by distance and circumstance. Nazneen is pulled toward Bangladesh by Chanu and toward a new life with Karim. Should she choose Chanu, it would be more of the same, more cutting of his corns and the tedium and sweetness of raising children. It is not such a hateful prospect as it once was.*



*Karim and Chanu have seemingly switched places. Karim is now the restless, talkative man who seems to use an abundance of words to hide his lack of focus. His point about so-called Islamic terrorists receiving the brunt of the public's condemnation is a good one, but his obsession with the Lion Hearts is ill-conceived, as fighting them will not solve anything.*



*The only way for Monju not to suffer is to die. That is the tragic fate of many poor women who are powerless to defend themselves against angry and violent men. Lovely has finally shown herself capable of thinking of others, although, of course, she is still putting fame above everything.*



Hasina had the chance to give the good news to Monju before she died, and she could see the joy and relief in the woman's eye. Then Monju told her a secret. When her son was two years old, she smacked him across the legs in a fit of frustration. She thought it might have been that smack, rather than the acid, that was causing all his leg problems. Hasina pretends to go ask a doctor about it and comes back, telling her the doctor said it could not have been the smack. It was not Monju's fault. Monju almost smiles. She tells Hasina that secrets kill and asks her if Hasina has any she would like to get off her chest. The next day, when Hasina comes back to unburden herself, Monju is gone.

*Monju's ignorance is to blame for her misconception that a simple smack across the legs could have caused the kind of damage produced in an acid attack, and her ignorance is a direct result of her poverty. Hasina's secrets are a lot like Monju's. She was raped by Mr. Chowdhury and forced into a life of prostitution. Neither of these were her fault, but she blames herself nonetheless because women are taught that they are at fault for men's mistakes.*



## CHAPTER 18

Much to Nazneen's surprise, Chanu announces that he will be attending the next Bengal Tigers meeting. He tells her he thinks she'll be very interested in what goes on there. Nazneen wonders if he plans to confront Karim, and she lives in a state of sick anticipation until the night of the meeting when Chanu, dressed in his best **suit**, shows her the title of a speech he's been writing about the white working class and race hate. Nazneen realizes then that he plans to challenge Karim to a war of words and thereby win back his wife.

*That Chanu puts on his best suit suggests that he has high hopes for his speech. He is attempting again, at least for a brief moment, to be a "big man." This suggests that he suspects that the friendship between Nazneen and Karim is not innocent but sexual. Instead of murdering Nazneen as she thought he might, he characteristically wants to win the war with words.*



The meeting hall is half full. Factions have formed. Nazneen and Chanu sit with a group of young men on the left side of the hall, who are watching an angry group of young men on the right, all of them dressed in slightly Westernized **Punjabi pajama**. A group of girls in burkas sits in the back. The moment Karim bounds in, the Secretary calls the meeting to order.

*The Bengali Tigers were never a united front. They were always in danger of splitting into rival groups and thereby sabotaging their cause. The clothes represent which faction each group belongs to. Chanu in his suit is hopelessly out of place.*



As usual, it is not very orderly. Karim wants very much to organize a calculated response to the Lion Hearts' march, but everyone is talking at once, including a musician whose offer of providing music for the march is declared un-Islamic. The Questioner takes the stage and shows the crowd disturbing pictures of Iraqi children killed and dismembered in the U.S. operation there. A beautiful girl in a **headscarf** tells the crowd that on September 11, 35,000 children died of hunger, but no one covered that tragedy.

*Each faction has its own worthy cause and, if they could agree to combine those causes and move forward together, the Tigers might have a chance at doing some good in the world. As it is, though, they are all single-minded—victims of their own short-sightedness.*



Nazneen watches Chanu out of the corner of her eye. His head is bent, and he seems lost in his own misery. Karim, too, is lost. Nazneen sees this now. His crusade against the Lion Hearts is an empty one. Nazneen tries to communicate with Chanu. She wonders what good would come of her trying to change the world for the better if she cannot offer her own husband any comfort. She touches her knee to his and says they should go, but he moves away from her. As the meeting breaks up, he smiles, but the smile is not a happy one, and he says he will save his speech for another day.

*Nazneen has finally come to terms with the fact that Karim is not her savior. She would like to be her husband's savior, but after years of not sharing herself with him she has nothing of value to give. She was taught to trust in God and obey the men in her life, but neither of these "lessons" prepared her for this moment when she would be asked to meet her husband on common ground.*



Nazneen runs into Mrs. Islam in the butcher shop. The smell of meat is so thick Nazneen can taste it. Mrs. Islam informs Nazneen that she is dying. Nazneen doesn't know if she can trust anything the old woman says. Mrs. Islam asks how plans for going home are progressing, and Nazneen politely sidesteps the question. Then Mrs. Islam grabs Nazneen's chin and hisses that she is a liar. Mrs. Islam says she knows that Chanu ran crying to Dr. Azad for money for his escape. Nazneen is shocked and angry and wants to flee. Mrs. Islam calms down and reminds Nazneen of her debt to her. Nazneen says that no matter what they pay Mrs. Islam, it's never enough. Mrs. Islam tells her not to worry. God always provides a way.

When Chanu comes home that night, Nazneen confronts him with Mrs. Islam's accusation, and asks him if it is true. He begs her permission to take his **coat** off before they get into this. He knows that she hates it when he wears his coat inside. Nazneen is shocked—she never told him she felt that way. Chanu then launches into a lengthy speech about the slippery nature of truth. A man might lie to others, Chanu explains, but it is worse when he lies to himself. Nazneen is uncomfortable now. She wonders how much he sees.

Chanu asks Nazneen to come with him and see the plane tickets. They are for five days later. Nazneen holds them in her hand, struck by their flimsiness. Her mind runs over all her belongings, all her **furniture**. Chanu tells her not to worry. He went to Dr. Azad mostly for help with the ulcer. The money was a side benefit. Also, when they get to Dhaka he plans to go into the soap business.

Later Nazneen is in Razia's apartment, visiting with her friend. She has three days before she is supposed to get on a plane for Dhaka, and she is full of panic. From a nearby bedroom comes the sound of knocking. At Tariq's request, Razia has locked him in. He is trying to quit heroin. Nazneen's mind is occupied with worry for her daughters, Chanu, and herself—and also for Karim. She decides she will not say goodbye to him. Thoughts of him with another woman, perhaps the beautiful one from the Bengal Tigers meeting, drift into her mind and make the panic worse. Meanwhile, Tariq continues to bang on the door, begging and pleading for Razia to let him out. She refuses, as she promised him she wouldn't. He begins to cry.

Nazneen and Razia move to her kitchen. Razia asks Nazneen about Karim. Nazneen tells her that being with him is the difference between watching black-and-white TV and being sucked into the set in full color and living there, in that dream. Razia is dismissive of Nazneen's carefully chosen words. She says it's called being in love, like the English. Nazneen is offended by her friend's indifference.

*The over-powering odor of meat represents here the toxic nature of secrets and all that is going unsaid between Nazneen and Mrs. Islam, who, as the resident Tower Hamlets busy-body, most likely knows about Nazneen's affair with Karim. Every character is deceiving someone in some way, and that deception skews the characters' lives and ways of perceiving the world. That Mrs. Islam would dare to claim that God favors high interest rates shows just how amoral she really is.*



*Nazneen has for a long time assumed that Chanu knows very little about her life, but he is far more observant than she ever gave him credit for. He knows how she feels about his coat and that her affair with Karim is on-going. His speech makes Nazneen uncomfortable because she has been lying to herself about the impact her affair with Karim has had on her family and her own well-being.*



*Chanu hid from Nazneen the loans he took out with Mrs. Islam, and he kept secret from her the fact that he borrowed money from Dr. Azad to purchase plane tickets as well. She now has less than a week to prepare for leaving the home she has lived in for sixteen years.*



*Tariq's struggle with withdrawal mimics Nazneen's inner confusion. He is trying to quit heroin, while she hopes to end her relationship with Karim in a way that won't cause difficulties for him or her family. That said, the two situations really aren't analogous. Tariq is fighting for his life. Nazneen is in danger only of hurting people she cares about and that hurt is a result of her own misbehavior. This is another instance of her self-involvement blinding her to the suffering of others.*



*Nazneen's comparing her love for Karim to color television is telling. She is still stuck in her ice skating fantasies. Razia sees through such romantic notions, although it is hypocritical of her to dismiss Nazneen's behavior as English when she herself has adopted so many of their ways.*



Dr. Azad arrives to give Tariq medicine for withdrawal. He has a helper with him in case Tariq tries to escape. All goes smoothly, and when he is about to leave, he stands with Nazneen for a moment, showing her one of his snow globes. His wife bought it for him. He tells her that he and his wife were once poor but very much in love. When one is that much in love, he says, one thinks the love will never run out, but the love that really lasts is the one that builds over time from what seems like nothing.

*Dr. Azad's thinly veiled advice to Nazneen suggests that he might know about her affair with Karim. Perhaps Chanu has told him in a private moment. The kindly man obviously wants to save Nazneen from making the same mistake he did—that is, thinking that passionate love will last. What truly stands the test of time, he says, is the kind of love Nazneen and Chanu have.*



Nazneen dreams of being home in Gouripur with Rupban, who is braiding her hair and telling her stories about how when Nazneen was an infant, she wouldn't feed. Nazneen loves such stories. She asks her to tell her more. Rupban says that she left Nazneen to her fate and that is why she lived. Nazneen has a sensation of waking then, and she walks to her **sewing** machine in her Tower Hamlets apartment, rests her head against it, and asks Rupban to tell her what she should do now. Rupban appears and begins to talk about the words Nazneen said over Raqib in the hospital. Rupban heard every word. She tells Nazneen that by standing between Raqib and his fate, she killed him. She killed her son. Nazneen wakes, screaming, and Chanu tells her to talk to him about the nightmare. The words will chase the fear away, he says.

*Nazneen's ghostly and dream-based interactions with Rupban have grown grisly and morbid. These are manifestations of Nazneen's guilt. She blames herself for Raqib's death, and so dreams of Rupban making that same accusation. She wonders if, when she was in the hospital mentally battling for Raqib's life, she doomed him instead. Her past as a child who was left to her fate continues to plague and punish her.*



## CHAPTER 19

Nazneen has another letter from Hasina. In it, Hasina writes of having an unquiet mind. She tends the children and cleans Lovely's house, but she is no longer satisfied. Nothing that she sees or touches or cares for is hers. She knows what Rupban would say—we are women, what can we do? But, Hasina writes, Rupban was wrong about everything.

*Hasina understands now what it means to serve the rich at the expense of herself. She supposes her mother would tell her to accept her fate, but Hasina has other plans.*



Hasina goes on to say that she has a horrible secret she must confess. She was there when Rupban fell upon the spear, and it was not an accident. On that day, Hasina had mostly been staring at her **shoes**. New, patent leather, they filled her with happiness. Then she saw Rupban walk across the village in her best sari and, intrigued, she followed her to the storeroom and watched Rupban meticulously select the sharpest spear she could find. Hasina prays to God to bring her peace, but the knowledge that her mother killed herself plagues her.

*The clothing imagery in this scene—Hasina's new shoes and Rupban's best sari—works as a distraction from the life-changing event that is about to take place. Hasina, a poor girl living in an isolated rural village, is thrilled by her patent leather shoes. Rupban, about to kill herself, wants to meet her God in proper attire. Both the shoes and sari are forgotten, however, in the wake of such a tremendous loss.*



## CHAPTER 20

Nazneen holds Hasina's letter in her hand. It is like a butterfly, whose fragile wings have the power to disturb the world. She is almost finished packing. The computer is packed, the books are packed. But she is not going. She prepares to pay a visit to Mrs. Islam, but when she opens the door, the old woman is there with her two sons. Nazneen invites them in and makes tea. Mrs. Islam tells her that 200 pounds will settle the debt, but Nazneen calmly informs her that she will not pay. She has done the calculations herself and she and Chanu have repaid the debt and 300 pounds in interest.

Mrs. Islam's sons begin to break things. They shatter the glass **showcase**. They threaten to break Nazneen's arms. She invites them to go ahead. Mrs. Islam is horrified that Nazneen would accuse her of being a money lender. Nazneen stands her ground. Then Mrs. Islam indirectly threatens to tell Chanu about Nazneen's affair with Karim, but Nazneen says Chanu already knows everything.

For once in her life, Mrs. Islam is shocked. She gives in, and one of her sons mumbles that Nazneen and Chanu already paid too much anyway. Mrs. Islam begins beating him with her bag, crying and letting out a sound of animal-like despair. When they're gone, Nazneen cleans up the broken glass and thinks to herself that God did, indeed, provide a way—and she found it.

Nazneen is taking the Tube to see Karim. She'd called him earlier, telling him that she had something to say to him that could not wait. She sees now that the Karim she has loved this entire time is really only in her head. She'd thought that unlike her and Chanu, he knew exactly where he fit into the world, but the reality is he's just as lost as everyone else. When she gets off the train, she sees him standing next to the **clothes** shop they'd talked about on the phone. They walk for a bit and stop in front of a street juggler. It occurs to Nazneen that they could have done this before—gone out together in teeming London, and no one would have seen them.

*Finding out that Rupban's death was a suicide and not an accident frees Nazneen from her lifelong quest to be like her mother and to trust everything—her future, her family, her own happiness—to whatever fate God may have planned for her. Rupban obviously did not trust her life (or her death) to God, so why should Nazneen? Instead of traumatizing her, the news energizes her.*



*Mrs. Islam's sons' breaking of the furniture is an impotent act of aggression. Nazneen doesn't care about these belongings anymore. What she cares about is justice and not giving in to the threats of an uncaring old woman.*



*This is the climactic scene of the novel. Nazneen, no longer reliant on Rupban's philosophy of trusting everything to God, takes definitive action and triumphs over the villainous Mrs. Islam. She is confident and strong and can take care of herself and her family.*



*Nazneen and Karim's decision to meet in front of a clothing store is significant because Nazneen has come to realize that both she and her lover have been trying on roles that do not really suit them. They can change their clothes and play house but they cannot escape who they really are or the complex circumstances of their daily lives.*



Nazneen tells Karim that Chanu is leaving for Bangladesh tomorrow, and that she and the girls are staying behind. Then she says what she has really come to say: that she does not want to marry him. Karim is obviously pained, but he says he understands. She has to put the children first. She sees that he is, while hurt, actually relieved. They go to a café together and Nazneen notices that Karim is no longer stuttering. He says he only stutters when he's nervous, and when she points out that he never stuttered in English, he corrects her. Maybe she just never noticed, he says. She realizes that, wanting him to be something that he's not, she's pieced Karim together in her mind from pieces of **cloth**, and now the seams are showing.

Afterward Nazneen goes for a walk around the estate and runs into Dr. Azad, who has just been to see Tariq. Razia's son is coming along well in his fight against addiction. Nazneen begins to wonder why he lent Chanu the money for the plane tickets. She thinks maybe he'd hoped to save someone else's marriage, since his is beyond repair. She asks him if his wife has left him, and he says not exactly. Then she asks him directly why he gave Chanu the money, and he says it was for a simple reason: Chanu is a very good friend.

The day of departure has arrived. Nazneen drifts around the apartment, her eyes roving over the boxes and **furniture** labeled either to be shipped, sold, or given away. She plans to tell Chanu of her decision an hour before they are scheduled to leave the apartment. She can see that he is nervous and excited. In a quiet moment, he admits he has never been a perfect husband or father. Her heart full, and having yet to tell him of her plans, Nazneen says she is lucky that her father picked an educated man for her.

Chanu leaves to run a few last-minute errands, and Nazneen looks out the window at the Bengal Tiger march playing out on the estate grounds. The crowd is large and diverse, made up mostly of boys and old men. There is a small pack of very passionate white people. The Lion Hearts, the reason the Bengal Tigers are marching in the first place, have not shown up.

Chanu comes back, his briefcase full of soap from a nearby shop. He talks of his plans for the Dhaka soap factory. Once it's profitable, he says, he'll move the family to a bungalow in Gushan with a guest house. He leaves again and Nazneen goes to bed. Bibi wakes her to tell her that Shahana has run away.

*By refusing to marry Karim, Nazneen is taking her first large step toward true independence. She had allowed herself to fantasize about making a life with him, but she has come to the realization that she never really knew him. She made him up, created a fantasy man out of thin air and romantic daydreams, hoping he would save her from her mundane life as a wife and mother. She knows now that she must save herself.*



*Nazneen thought she understood the power dynamics at play in the friendship between Dr. Azad and Chanu, but she was mistaken. The doctor esteemed Chanu more than she realized. Because she underestimated her husband, she thought others did, too.*



*Nazneen will soon be free of the shabby furniture with which she had such a conflicted relationship. In that regard, the furniture is analogous to Chanu and Nazneen's marriage. For most of their union, Nazneen found Chanu maddeningly inept. Now, on the eve of their separation, she realizes that she loves and values him.*



*It makes sense that women would be absent from the march, seeing as they were often ignored in meetings. The whites in the crowd are trying to combat the racism of the Lion Hearts and show that they are open-minded.*



*Chanu would like to wash away his past, hence his plan to launch a soap business. He has begun "talking big" again, but his dreams are all for his family now. Shahana wants nothing to do with such plans.*



## CHAPTER 21

Bibi tells Nazneen of Shahana's plan. She and her friend, Nishi, were going to meet at the Shalimar Café and flee to a town called Paignant, where there were no Bangladeshis and they could do whatever they wanted. There are two Shalimar Cafes. Which one did Shahana plan to go to, she asks Bibi. Bibi can't remember, but she says she thinks it's the one on Cannon Street. Nazneen heads for the restaurant, but the cook there claims to not have seen the girls. She runs down several more streets and through two run-down estates, and when she gets to Brick Lane, she is stopped by a police barricade. A disturbance is taking place in the Shalimar Café, the policeman told her, and she can go no further.

Nazneen takes advantage of the policeman's momentary inattention to jump across the police tape and sneak her way on to Brick Lane, where she sees the anxious faces of shop owners and restaurant workers. It is as if the street's veins had been drained of **blood**. She sees a group of boys rocking a police car back and forth. They are Bengal Tigers. Then she comes across the prone figure of the Multi-Cultural Officer. He is praying. She drags him to his feet and tells him to run. She sees that the "disturbance" is a war of in-fighting. The Bengal Tigers are fighting each other.

Nazneen sees the Questioner in the middle of the street with a bullhorn. He is trying to talk some sense into the rioting men. Then Karim drags her out of the street and into a safe corner, where he tells her the reason for the fighting. The boy who'd been stabbed earlier got out of the hospital, and the riot is an act of revenge. Everything has gotten out of control, Karim says, and he tells Nazneen to go home. But, finally, she sees Shahana and Nishi. They are huddling with the waiters of the Shalimar Café. Nazneen pounds on the door, telling her daughter that her mother is here.

Back at home, Shahana takes a bath while Bibi watches her, and Chanu hurries around the apartment, using endless talk as a way to delay the inevitable. Nazneen can sense that he knows she is not going with him. He talks of the cabbie coming to pick them up, the house they will build, the possibility of bringing Hasina to live with them. Then he grows a little quieter, and confesses that all this time, he'd wanted to be a big man, a success, and now he knows that all that matters is his wife and daughters. Nazneen tells him then that she is staying in London, and they hold each other, their sadness beyond words.

*Nazneen has always known that Shahana was always against Chanu's plan to move the family home to Bangladesh—but, preoccupied with her own cares, she did not realize just how strong her daughter's desire to remain in London really was, or the lengths to which she would go to avoid the move. The naïve runaways see Bangladeshis as holding them back. Even in the post 9-11 atmosphere, they equate living among white people with freedom.*



*The imagery of bloodless veins in this passage represents the Bengal Tigers' lack of mission. They have been playing all this time at being courageous and influential men, when really what they're doing is endangering their neighbors, many of whom are Muslims like them. The bloodless veins also hint at Karim's insincere activism. His efforts, while passionate, have been empty.*



*The Bengal Tigers are a failed experiment, and all the petty bureaucracy and in-fighting is now ending in senseless violence. Nazneen no longer cares. What matters to her is her daughter, and, unlike Rupban, Nazneen is not leaving Shahana to fate. She is, instead, fighting for her daughter's safe return.*



*Bibi has now become Shahana's keeper. She does not want to let her out of her sight, lest she try to run away again. Chanu's running monologue is no longer an attempt to promote himself or brag about his qualifications. He is trying his best to keep his family together, but his efforts are in vain. Husband and wife finally seem to understand each other fully, just as they are committing to living apart.*



Chanu tells the girls that there's been a change of plans: he will go to Dhaka and they and Nazneen will come later. The girls are confused. They ask him who will cook for him, and who will cut his corns. He tells them everything will be fine. Later, Nazneen cooks and Bibi and Shahana come in and eat. They are still confused about the future. Nazneen tells them it is up to the three of them now.

It is March 2002 now, and Razia has built a small **sewing** business for herself and Nazneen. Razia approached the Brick Lane sari shop, Fashion Fusion, and suggested she and Nazneen begin making clothing for them. Then she traveled around the city, suggesting the same to other stores. They now have a substantial client list. A group of Tower Hamlets women are gathered together in Razia's apartment. They gossip about Mrs. Islam, who finally seems to be on the verge of death. No doctors can figure out what is wrong with her. There is talk of bringing in a specialist from Switzerland. Tariq is back in school. The women agree that they live for their children, but their children want to live for themselves.

Nazneen is doing some shopping before going home. She thinks about how grateful she is for Razia. Karim has disappeared, and she has work only thanks to her friend. She sees men moving **furniture** into what used to be the Bengal Tiger meeting room. Since the riot, officials have begun to take notice of the estate and make improvements. Task forces have been formed to address youth violence. She sees a thin young man on the sidewalk and asks him if he knows what happened to Karim. He says that Karim has gone home to Bangladesh. Either that, or he joined a caravan.

Nazneen is back home. She thinks about what she will do with the money Razia pays her the next day. She will put it in the bank and then she will send some to Hasina. She hasn't had a letter from her sister in two months. Chanu, on the other hand, writes often. He writes of his meals and his plans and his new workout regime. And he calls once a month. The connection is usually bad, and it is hard to talk. In one call, Chanu tells Nazneen that he has seen Hasina and that she is living with and working for a respectable family. They should continue to send money, though, he says. It would be better if Hasina had her own apartment.

Nazneen hangs up the phone. She is trying to write something but it's not working. The radio is on, tuned to one of Shahana's stations. A woman is singing about how someone's love makes her want to shout. Nazneen feels the music enter her. She starts to dance, to wiggle her hips and kick. She abandons herself to the music.

*Despite embracing a more modern and inclusive conception of gender roles, both girls worry about their father living without a wife to see to his needs. Interestingly, they do not seem concerned about Nazneen's ability to live without Chanu.*



*Fashion Fusion brings together the East and the West into one garment. Razia and Nazneen are now charged with making the kind of saris embraced by the English. On one hand, their work is forcing them to compromise, to relinquish their Bengali values to please spoiled young women who enjoy trying on Bengali clothing as a form of cultural appropriation. On the other, Razia and Nazneen are making enough money to support themselves and their families without the help of men.*



*At one time, Karim and thoughts of him comprised the bulk of Nazneen's waking life. Now he is nothing but a rumor, a whisper of love gone by. His journey mimics Nazneen's, only in reverse. The child who was left to her fate no longer trusts everything to God. She trusts herself more. Meanwhile, the Westernized young man in jeans and tee shirts has traded it all in for communion with Allah.*



*Nazneen—wife, mother, rule-follower—could not have envisioned what life would be like as an independent woman, but now she is living as she might have if Hamid had not arranged a marriage for her at nineteen. She has a job and friends, and one of those friends is, oddly enough, Chanu, who very much wants to help Hasina but still doesn't know exactly how to go about it.*



*Nazneen is now comfortable enough in London and in her own skin to enjoy Western music and celebrate her body moving to it. No one is there to judge her—not Karim or Chanu or even Razia. She is able, for once, to be completely herself.*



In another call, Chanu tells Nazneen that Hasina has vanished. She has run off with the cook, and her employers are furious. He asks Nazneen why her sister does such things. Because, Nazneen says, she will not give up. After a moment, Chanu says he would like it if Nazneen and the girls would come to visit him soon, on a holiday perhaps. Nazneen says they would like that. She can almost hear him beaming through the phone.

Razia and the girls are taking Nazneen somewhere as a surprise. On the bus, Nazneen tries to guess where they're going, but Razia and the girls refuse to say. They blindfold her and guide her off the bus to a place that smells of fried food, **furniture** polish, and limes. When they pull the blindfold off, Nazneen sees that they are at an ice skating rink. A woman sails by them, not in a short skirt, but in jeans. Nazneen says to the girls that she can't get out on the ice—she can't skate in a sari. Razia says that this is London, and they can do whatever they want.

*Hasina has spent her adult life running from one commitment to another, from marriage to work and back again. But this time she is leaving an untenable situation and doing so in the company of Zaid, who has plans to challenge the status quo. Nazneen has learned the hard way not to take Chanu for granted.*



*Nazneen's London life has come full circle. Her ice skating fantasies, the daydreams in which she lost herself, have become reality. Reality, is, of course, more complicated than fantasy. She is wearing a sari, not a short skirt, and she is with her good friend and daughters, not a handsome man who smells of limes. Still, her future is wide open. She is free. Everything is up to her.*





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