

Book & Bake

October 3, 2026

Characters

Mariam

- illegitimate daughter (harami)
- to Nana and Jalil
- first wife (at age 15) to Racheed

Nana

- mother to Mariam
- former maid to Jalil; has his child
- lives in a shack (kolba) built by Jalil
- bitter; lives a joyless life; commits suicide

Rasheed

- husband to Mariam and Laila
- violent; misogynst
- lost a son to drowning; desperate for an heir
- same principles as the Taliban

Laila

- second wife (at age 14) to Rasheed
- mother to Aziza (Tariq) and Zalmai (Rasheed)
- childhood friend to Tariq

Jalil

- wealthy father to Mariam
- mulitple wives & mistresses
- rejects Mariam; arranges a marriage between Mariam and Rasheed

Tariq

- childhood friend to Laila; eventually they wed
- lost a leg during the Afghan/Soviet war
- impulsive, mischeivious, loyal

Supporting Characters

- Aziza - daughter to Laila and Tariq; sent to an orphange by Rasheed
- Zalmai - son to Laila and Rasheed; treated much differently by Rasheed
- Hakim - father to Laila; scholar with a gentle demeanor, believes in gender equality; not much of a handyman
- Fariba - mother to Laila; prone to depressive episodes; emotionally withdrawn
- Mullah Faizmullah - elderly villiage tutor in Miriam's early life; treats her with unconditional patience and respect

Quotes to Ponder

"Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always." (~Nana, chapter 1 , pg 7)

"A man's heart is a wretched, wretched thing, Mariam. It isn't like a mother's womb. It won't bleed, it won't stretch to make room for you." (~Nana, chapter 5 pg 27)

"Only one skill. And it's this: tahamul. Endure." (~Nana, chapter 3 pg 18)

1. How does Nana's life experience impact her relationship with her daughter?

"Two days before—when Mariam could think of nothing in the world she wanted more than to walk in this garden with Jalil—felt like another lifetime. How could her life have turned upside down so quickly, Mariam asked herself." (Chapter 6, pg 38)

"She noticed that every time she breathed out, the surface fogged, and she disappeared from her father's table." (Chapter 7, pg 49-50)

2. What is Miriam realizing during these moments?

"There's a teacher living down the street, Hakim is his name, and I see his wife Fariba all the time walking the streets alone with nothing on her head but a scarf. It embarrasses me, frankly, to see a man who's lost control of his wife." (~Rasheed, chapter 10 pg 70

"On every page were women, beautiful women, who wore no shirts, no trousers, no socks or underpants. They wore nothing at all." (chapter 12, pg 82)

"You don't know what a communist is? Such a simple thing. Everyone knows. It's common knowledge. You don't....Bah. I don't know why I'm surprised." "You know nothing do you? You're like a child. Your brain is empty." (~Rasheed, chapter 15 pg 98)

3. **What do these comments/actions by Rasheed solidify in Miriam? (how she feels about herself and her world in general)**

"A society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated." (~Hakim, chapter 16 pg 114)

"Laila could have said then that she didn't need this advice because Babi had no intention of giving her away anytime soon." (Chapter 16, pg 114)

4. **How do these statements shape Laila's mindset about what her future will be? How do her responses to Rasheed's cruelty differ from Miriams?**

"Like an art lover running out of a burning museum, she would grab whatever she could—a look, a whisper, a moan—to salvage from perishing, to preserve. But time is the most unforgiving of fires, and she couldn't, in the end, save it all." (chapter 25, pg 182)

5. **What is Laila trying to do here? The metaphor of time being a fire...what life experiences have *you* had that support this metaphor?**

6. **What is it that brings Laila to Rasheed's household?**
7. **Early in their relationship, Miriam sees Laila as an enemy....would you?**
8. **What finally unites Miriam and Laila?**

"...for the first time, it was not an adversary's face Laila saw but a face of grievances unspoken, burdens gone unprotested, a destiny submitted to and endured. If she stayed, would this be her own face, Laila wondered, twenty years from now?" (Chapter 34, pg 249)

9. How did you feel when you read that Laila was secretly taking money from Rasheed's wallet?

"He'll turn on you too, you know.....soon enough. And you gave him a daughter. So, you see, your sin is even less forgivable than mine." (~Miriam, chapter 34, pg 250)

10. Whom does Miriam sound like here?

10. What impact does Aziza have upon Miriam? (Chapter 35, pg 252)

11. In what ways does the friendship between Miriam and Laila serve as a means of survival amid Rasheed's abuse and societal restrictions?

12. What is Rasheed's opinion of the Taliban?

13. Were you surprised by Tariq's reappearance? Why or why not?

14. Let's discuss the sacrifice that Miriam made for Laila within the context of the following quote from chapter 47 (pg. 370):

"She thought of her entry into this world, the harami child of a lowly villager, an unintended thing, a pitiable, regrettable accident. A weed. And yet she was leaving the world as a woman who had loved and was loved back. She was leaving it as a friend, a companion, a guardian. A person of consequence at last."

15. **What were your feelings toward little Zalmai when he informed his father, Rasheed, that Laila had a male friend/visitor?**

17. **Why do you feel the regime change (Communist takeover of Afghanastan - then to the Taliban) impacted Laila more than it did Miriam?**

18. **Let's explore ways in which women support or sabotage each other in the novel, and in current times, and why.**

19. **How did reading about Afghanistan's history change the way you think/feel about the current political climate here in the USA?**

20. **Miriam's final act in life (killing Rasheed) saves Laila's life and provides freedom to Aziza. This act of love/protection (though violent) puts an end to Rasheed's abusive behaviors - do you feel it was worth it? Why or why not?**





Kolba