

SYNOPSIS

The novel is divided into four parts. The first part focuses exclusively on Mariam, the second and the fourth parts focus on Laila, and the third part switches between Mariam and Laila with each chapter.

Part One

The novel opens with the introduction of Mariam, a girl growing up in small village in Herat in Western Afghanistan. Mariam is a *harami* (illegitimate child) a daughter of Nana and Jalil. She lives with her mother, Nana. At that time, Nana was a servant in Jalil's house. He has three wives, Afsoon, Khadijah and Nargis. Jalil has a sexual relationship and Nana becomes pregnant. Knowing their husband has a "forbidden relationship", Afsoon, Khadijah and Nargis demand Jalil to get rid of Mariam out of their house. Then, Jalil obeys his wives' order and give Nana a small house the countryside in Herat. Jalil is very rich business man in Herat. He has his own theater in the central city of Herat. Mariam gets lesson in reading and writing from Mullah Faizullah, and elderly, kind-hearted cleric, and weekly visits from her wealthy father, Jalil. Mariam has heard of her father's other wives and children, who live with him at his huge house in central city of Herat, but Mariam never has visited them due to stigma of her being an illegitimate child. Every Thursday Jalil visits Mariam and asks her around the city.

On her fifteenth birthday, Mariam asks her father to take her to see Pinocchio at the movie theater that he owns. When Jalil's to come, Mariam travels to Herat and goes to her father's house alone. Jalil refuses to see her, and she

sleeps outdoors on the porch. In the morning, she returns home and finds out that her mother dies by committing suicide. Then, Mariam goes to live with her father and her stepmothers, where she feels isolated and spends most of her time alone in her room. Jalil and his wives quickly arrange for her to be married to an older widower named Rasheed, who is a middle-class shoemaker in Kabul.

In Kabul, she begins her new life as the wife of a man she does not know before. Mariam soon becomes pregnant, and Rasheed hopes for a boy. When Mariam suffers a miscarriage, her marriage turns into the worse, Rasheed is no longer cordial to her and verbally and physically abuses her.

Part Two

This part begins with Laila's life, the beautiful, bright young daughter of ethnic Tajik parent, Hakim and Fariba. Laila comes from a working class family. She has a bestfriend names Gitti, Hasina and Tariq. Laila's childhood is very different with Mariam. During this time, Laila and her bestfriend Tariq, begins a secret relationship. Laila has two brothers Ahmad and Noor who joins the Mujahideen to fight the Soviet. When they left, Laila was two years old. Unfortunately, her brothers died during the war. This has caused her parent very shocked especially her mother.

After the victory of the Mujahideen, civil war comes to Afghanistan, Kabul is bombarded by rocket attacks. Tariq's family eventually decided to leave Kabul because the war is getting worse. Before Tariq's departure, Laila and Tariq end their relationship by having a sexual intercourse in Laila's living room. This makes Laila becomes pregnant, but Laila does not realize it. Before Tariq's

departure, he proposes Laila, unfortunately she refuses it. It makes him disappointed and decides to leave her. Seventeen days after Tariq's departure, Laila's family also decides to leave Kabul. When they are ready to go, a rocket destroys the house and kills her parents.

Part Three

During her recovering, she lives in Rasheed and Mariam's house. Laila learns of Tariq's death from a man who was in the refugee camp with him. After recovering from her injuries, including slight deafness in one ear, Laila realizes that she is pregnant with Tariq. To avoid stigma of being an unwed mother, Laila agrees to marry Rasheed. Upon discovering Laila's pregnancy, Rasheed is overwhelmed with hope of having another son. Laila gives birth to a daughter, Aziza, and Rasheed's behavior is radically changed. He starts to abuse her.

As time goes by, Mariam and Laila eventually become best friends. They plan to run away from Rasheed and leave Kabul for Peshawar, Pakistan, but they are betrayed at the bus station by a man named Wakil. Then, he reports their leaving to the police officer and they return to Rasheed. He beats the two women and deprives them of food and water for several days. It is almost killing Aziza. A few years later, Laila gives birth to a son named Zalmai, Rasheed's son. By this time, the Taliban have raised the power in Afghanistan. They have banned television, movies, and books other than the Koran, and women are not allowed to work, women are not allowed to wear fashionable clothes or even wear nail polish, women were prohibited to get medical treatment, the medical equipment are

incomplete. Therefore this condition makes people have to go other province in order to get the medicines.

Since Zalmai's birth, a drought sets in, which eventually leads to widespread hunger and food shortages. When Rasheed's shop burns down, there is little food for them and the family must find the ways to keep fulfilling the daily needs. Rasheed finds himself reduced to working as a porter at a hotel. As their financial situations worsen, Aziza is sent to an orphanage several kilometers away. Laila tries to visit her whenever she can, but it is very difficult due to the fact, the Taliban do not allow women for being alone unless accompanied by male relative family members or husbands. Rasheed accompanies her for the first few times, but after a while, he complains that it is too hard to walk, and he refuses to. Laila often tries to go by herself to visit Aziza, but she is more often beaten and sent home by the Taliban.

Then one day, Tariq appears in Laila's house. He and Laila are reunited. Tariq explains how he and his parents become refugees in Pakistan, his parents dying from disease and Tariq sentences to seven years imprisonment for drug smuggling. Further, he tells Laila of how he has found a home and employment at a hotel near Rawalpindi. Later, when Rasheed returns home, Zalmai tells his father about the visitor. He starts to beat Laila with his belt and strangle her, but Mariam comes to Laila's defense by killing Rasheed with a shovel.

Mariam tells Laila to leave Kabul with Tariq and her two children. Laila initially refuses to leave without Mariam and begs her to come. Soon, she and Tariq take the children and leave for Pakistan, where they marry and settle down. Mariam turns herself in to the Taliban. She confesses to the police officer that she

has killed her husband, Rasheed. Finally, she is executed by committing sentenced the death.

Part Four

In 2003, almost two years after the fall of the Taliban, Laila dan Tariq decide to return to Afghanistan. They stop in the village near Herat where Mariam was raised and they discover a package that Mariam's father had left behind for her: a videotape of Pinocchio, her share of the family inheritance and a note from Jalil explaining how much regret he felt, in marrying her to Rasheed just to save face. Laila also becomes a teacher at the orphanage where Aziza used to live. The novel ends with the debate new names for Laila's new baby. Tariq, Laila and her two children are only debating male names, because Laila already knows the name if it is a girl. It is implied that the name would be Mariam.