HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Adventures of a Wanderer Woman / *Ovoraning ko'rgan-kechirganlari* (2008)
Salomat Vafo (1962-)

OVERVIEW

Author Salomat Vafo is an Uzbek writer and television journalist known for her modernist inclinations and distinctive style. Born on January 20, 1962, in the Khorezm region, she graduated in 1984 from the Faculty of Journalism of Tashkent State University. From 1987 to 1997, she served as a literary consultant at the Writers' Union of Uzbekistan and later worked at the Uzbekistan National Television and Radio Company as an editor and commentator. Her notable works include the short-story collection *Farida* (1989), the collection of short stories and a novella *A Woman Searching for Herself* (1991), the novella collection *Angel of the Heart* (1997), and the novels *The Kingdom of Magic* (2004) and *The Adventures of a Wanderer Woman* (2008). Several of Vafo's short stories have been translated into English, including 'Forgotten Woman', 'Telefon', 'The Melody', and 'Mount Boutan'.

Novel Set at the end of the twentieth century – on the eve of a new era marked by the collapse of the Soviet Union and Uzbekistan's independence – *The Adventures of a Wanderer* tells the story of a young woman facing the challenges of social transition. Yet the events of that time are only indirectly reflected, as the author focuses on the protagonist's inner world: a woman wandering in search of a life shaped by her imagination. The novel appeals to a discerning reader, its narrative imbued with symbolism, abstraction, and elements of stream-of-consciousness prose.

Background The novel's events take place in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, and in the surrounding areas of the Khorezm region. The narrative vividly evokes sacred cemeteries, a village near the Aral Sea, bustling markets, and scenes of rural life familiar to the heroine since childhood. It also incorporates ethnographic and mythological elements that explore the origins of the Amazons, referencing ancient songs that suggest their Central Asian roots. Additionally, the novel offers realistic portrayals of women's prisons and the lives of female inmates.

CHARACTERS|

Saltanat	young woman aged 27–30, works as a songwriter
Abbos Sulaymon	influential and wealthy official, about 60 years old
Maqsuda	religious woman and wife of a prosperous Muslim leader
Malika	former village schoolteacher who sells goods in the market
Mahmud	successful lawyer and advocate
Saodat	Saltanat's close friend
Fazilat	Saltanat's younger sister and university student
Madina	8-year-old girl living on the street

SYNOPSIS

Saltanat, a young songwriter, is abandoned by her husband, who takes all their money and leaves her with two children. She is soon evicted from her home. She argues about national traditions in a toy store, is then injured in a crowd at a carnival and miscarries. The toy store owner files a complaint, resulting in her being fired from her job. She becomes gravely ill and partially paralyzed. Returning to her parents' village, she encounters indifference from her siblings, and when, after her recovery, her husband takes her back to his village, strict family traditions and misunderstandings lead him to beat her brutally, forcing her to flee to the city.

Back in the city, Saltanat turns to Abbos Sulaymon, an influential and wealthy official, for help. He gives her a job and a place to live but later coerces her into becoming his mistress. When she ends their relationship,

he takes revenge by depriving her of everything. She wanders in search of shelter and work, selling goods at the market, taking on hired work, and cleaning the homes of wealthy families. In despair, she turns to Abbos, begs him to forgive her, but receives an insult in response and, in a fit of rage, sets fire to his house. Arrested and imprisoned, Saltanat endures torture and illness before being sent to a psychiatric hospital. She unexpectedly receives help from the kind lawyer Mahmud, and, after treatment and release, begins to hope for a new, peaceful life.

SCENES

Husband leaves Saltanat enters the house to find belongings strewn across the floor, closet doors flung open, and clothes scattered everywhere. The window stands ajar. At once, she assumes the house has been robbed. Frantically, she checks beneath the sofa where she hides her money – but it's gone. There's no doubt now: she's been robbed. Just then, her sister, who lives with her, arrives and reveals the truth – Saltanat's husband has left her and their two children. She is devastated.

At Work Saltanat arrives at work, where she is employed in an editorial office. Two of her colleagues are creative types: one is an elderly man who constantly complains that none of his poems have ever been recommended to singers, while the other is a modest, unambitious man. Feeling sorry for her older colleague, Saltanat goes to the boss and asks him to pass the man's poems to the singers – but he refuses.

Saltanat's Evening Saltanat meets a friend, Saodat, who's celebrating her birthday, and they go grocery shopping together. Later, guests – poets and artists – arrive for the party. They joke and laugh, and Saltanat joins in, though her thoughts keep drifting to the husband who left her. Among the guests is Mahmud, an elegant lawyer who supports artists. When the party ends and the guests depart, Saltanat goes out to hail a taxi. Mahmud follows, offers her a ride home, and hands her his business card, suggesting she call him if she ever needs help.

Unwelcome News Saltanat returns to her apartment, confused. An old woman opens the door – the landlord's mother, who has moved in with her belongings. Saltanat silently sews a red banner for the upcoming carnival. The woman admires the fabric, and Saltanat offers her some velvet. Suddenly, the woman announces that Saltanat must leave, as her grandson will soon be getting married and moving in.

The Toy Shop Incident About twenty thousand people gather in the square. Saltanat and an artist stop at a toy store and notice figures from Russian fairy tales. They find this inappropriate, believing the display should feature characters from local folk tales instead. When they share this idea with the store manager, she suddenly becomes furious. The artist quickly apologizes and leaves, but the manager accuses Saltanat of insulting her and threatens to report her to her superiors. Saltanat is stunned – she only meant to make a simple suggestion.

Into the Crowd Suddenly, loud noises erupt outside. The secretary reports that the crowd is smashing windows and throwing tomatoes and eggs. The store owner shouts that the rioters are Saltanat's accomplices. Panicked, Saltanat runs into the street, into the chaotic carnival crowd. Masked people surround her as she searches in vain for the artist. She spots a group of singing students carrying the banners she sewed and joins them. The crowd surges forward, pinning her against a concrete barrier. Pain shoots through her head and back, and everything plunges into darkness.

The Hospital Saltanat opens her eyes and finds herself in a hospital bed. She has lost her baby. The doctor coldly tells her it is her own fault for being pregnant and ending up in the middle of an angry crowd. Demanding payment for the treatment, he takes Saltanat's gold earrings when she cannot offer money. Already a mother of two and abandoned by her husband, Saltanat does not want this child – yet her heart fills with deep, unending pain.

The Voice and the Lesson Saodat persuades Saltanat to attend a Quran lesson. They arrive at a luxurious house built in the 19th-century style, where the hostess, Maqsuda, warmly welcomes Saltanat and offers her a headscarf, noticing her slight awkwardness among the others. The lesson begins, and Maqsuda praises Saltanat's abilities, but she soon grows bored. Then a handsome young man begins reciting suras from the Quran, and the mysterious melody of his voice captivates her.

The Refusal In the office, Saltanat overhears colleagues talk about the mountains. Distracted by apartment hunting, she notices blood on her shoes – a painful reminder of her miscarriage. The men leave, and she quietly cleans up. Moments later, Abbos Sulaymon, a high-ranking official, enters and invites her to lunch. Saltanat abruptly refuses. Just then, her boss appears and warmly greets Abbos Sulaymon. Offended but concealing his anger, Abbos Sulaymon leaves. The boss warns Saltanat to apologize, as her refusal could have serious consequences.

After the Fall Saltanat lies ill in a hospital bed, trying to remember what happens. A week earlier, she is fired following a complaint from a toy store owner. The most painful part is that the artist who stays with her confirms the accusation that Saltanat has "insulted" the woman. The next morning, she feels pain in her right arm and leg. Now she lies weak and exhausted in her hospital bed.

Visit She is the youngest and most attractive patient in the hospital, but she doesn't like it there. Maqsuda comes to visit after learning of her illness from Saodat. She tells her that Saodat's mother has died and that she has gone to the funeral. Before leaving, Maqsuda gives Saltanat a Quran and explains that her husband, a respected religious figure, is deeply saddened by Saltanat's illness and asked her to convey that reading the Quran will help her recover. Saltanat feels a quiet joy, touched by the kindness of a stranger.

Lame Saltanat Saltanat leaves the hospital on crutches – one leg is not working properly. She returns to her apartment, where the elderly woman lets her stay a few more days. Her thoughts involuntarily turn to Abbos Sulaymon and the men who once admired her. She always rejected them, believing that true beauty lies in moral strength. But now she wonders bitterly: will any of them look at the lame Saltanat?

Alone Among Family Saltanat is traveling to the village with her sister. She has a son and a daughter, who are being cared for by their mother. Saltanat herself has a blood clot and is struggling to recover, forcing herself to walk despite her arms feeling unbearably heavy. Her brother and sisters seem to have forgotten her, and only her parents show concern. Today happens to be her brother's wife's birthday. Upon arrival, they are offered to stay with elderly guests, as her brother does not want the younger generation to know about her illness. This leaves Saltanat feeling deeply saddened.

Unrealized Sadness Life in the village is dull. Saltanat visits the library, talking with the librarian, Omongul, who brings her son. Omongul complains that people no longer read. Outside, her son notices villagers carrying an elderly woman's coffin and asks questions. Saltanat watches silently, sinking into deep, sorrowful thoughts about life, loneliness, and the unnoticed unhappiness around her.

Echoes of Sorrow Saltanat goes with her parents to a sacred site – a cemetery where her ancestors are buried – hoping to find some healing. There, she meets two mentally ill people, a girl and a boy, who are being treated with traditional methods. The girl first lost her mother, then her brother, and ultimately descended into madness. The boy, born into a wealthy family, became a drug addict. Saltanat feels deep sympathy for both of them.

Dance of Unfulfilled Dreams Saltanat's mother asks her younger son to help her buy a house, but he refuses. Saddened, the mother invites Saltanat to a wedding, and she agrees. There, she meets her former literature teacher, once beautiful, now faded. Music plays. Saltanat wants to dance but cannot bring herself to. She asks her teacher to dance for her. At first, the teacher refuses, but eventually she agrees, performing a Khorezm dance (*Lazgi*). As she moves, it feels as though she is pouring out all her unfulfilled dreams through the dance.

When He Returns Saltanat returns from the library and sees that her husband has arrived. She hides at first, then quietly enters the house. Her husband tells her that his mother is asking her to come back home. Saltanat doesn't want to go; she wants to ask him where he was when she lost their child, and why he didn't come when she was in the hospital. But she remains silent – she needs to protect her own mother from constant criticism because of her. In the end, she agrees to return in a week.

Salt Land A small settlement by the Aral Sea – neither a village nor a town. The soil is salty, with no trees around, only square houses. Her husband's house sits next to a large market, so the traffic starts early in the morning. Saltanat wakes, wanting to go back to sleep, but the noise of the train keeps her awake. She forces herself up. Her whole body aches, her head spins. The children and husband are still asleep. Another grueling day of household chores begins.

At Ibrahim Adham's Shrine Her husband's family travels to the sacred site where the Sufi Ibrahim Adham is buried, and Saltanat joins them. Samandar, her husband's brother, is displeased but stays silent. They cross the desert, and its vast emptiness fills Saltanat with dread. Reaching the sanctuary at the foot of the mountain, the family settles into a yurt. By midday, the place fills with pilgrims. Saltanat recalls her recent trials – her illness, the loss of her child, and her dreams of a life far from everything, free from thought and pain.

The Invitation When Saltanat wakes up, there is no one in the yurt except the old woman – the mother of the yurt's owner. Everyone else has gone to see the mountain. The old woman invites her to drink tea with milk and offers to show her something interesting. Together they walk down toward a shrine among the saxaul bushes. Then the old woman leads her into a dark cell, and they descend along a clay-walled path until they reach a small square where sunlight falls in long streaks and distant sounds echo.

The Land of Forty Girls The old woman tells Saltanat this is her grandmothers' land and that she descends from a line of forty girls. Amazed, Saltanat sees her as a descendant of the ancient Amazons. The woman, knowing Saltanat works with song lyrics, sings an ancient song and asks her to preserve it. Hurrying back, Saltanat finds her family ready to leave; her mother-in-law shouts in panic. As the car moves, Saltanat looks back and sees the old woman crying after her.

While the Man Eats Her husband's house is a place of strict order. The women are always busy preparing food, and after lunch, they begin making dinner. While the man eats, the women stand and watch until he finishes. Sometimes there is no food left, and a woman has to cook separately for the children. Saltanat asks permission to work. Her husband looks at his mother. She hesitates but agrees, knowing his salary is small, though she doubts Saltanat will find work.

The Lyrical Assignment Saltanat arrives at the newspaper office. The deputy editor reads her article and says, "Your work is mostly criticism. Write about something real, something lyrical – we'll give you work then." Since there are no rooms available, Saltanat spends the entire night writing a "lyrical" article, resting her typewriter on a pillow in her lap, afraid to wake her sleeping family.

The Civilized Woman Saltanat arrives at the newspaper office the next day with an article. Neither the editor nor the deputy editor is there, so she waits in a room next to the reception area. The employee in that room once studied in Russia and was married to a Russian woman. But when his mother begged him to return – saying she would die without him – he came back and married a local girl. He says he misses "civilized" women and invites Saltanat to dinner. She refuses and goes home.

Tension at Home The situation at home is worsening, as Saltanat and her husband earn only meager wages. Her older brother, Samandar, and his wife, who works at the market, earn more. Saltanat manages to prepare a nice dinner, but the gloomy attitude of her family members – especially her brother and his wife, who blame them for being dependent – creates a tense and desperate atmosphere.

A Night of Fear Late at night, Saltanat is getting ready for bed. Her husband and children are already asleep when her father-in-law calls out that someone from the editorial office is asking for her. Shocked that he would summon his daughter-in-law to meet a stranger at such an hour, Saltanat hurriedly throws on a robe and goes to the gate. There stands the same man from the editorial office who spoke about his Russian wife. He is drunk. When she asks what he wants, he begins to complain about his wife, saying he has nowhere else to go. Furious, Saltanat sends him away. As she turns back, her eyes meet Samandar's cold, watchful gaze, and a chill of fear runs through her.

False Hopes Morning. Saltanat, still nervous, begins cooking; her mother-in-law is pleased, and she calms down a bit. She asks permission to visit the editorial office. The editor greets her warmly, praises her work, inquires about her former employer, mentions town acquaintances, and suddenly asks her age. Saltanat is confused. When she learns there are no openings, she angrily replies that he should have told her earlier.

The Accusation When Saltanat returns, she sees the family eating pilaf. All eyes turn toward her – she realizes that Samandar must have told them about the previous night's incident. Reluctantly, she joins the meal. After dinner, the family goes to the cemetery at the invitation of a relative who is offering a sacrificial lamb.

The Song and the Quiet Reproach At the cemetery, they slaughter a lamb for the repose of their ancestors' souls. Saltanat watches in horror; the sight reminds her of the child she lost. Unconsciously, she begins to sing a sorrowful song. Her mother-in-law's voice interrupts her – lowering her voice, she quietly reproaches Saltanat for disappearing with the old woman at Ibrahim Adham's tomb, for now singing in the cemetery, and for being the kind of woman whom a strange man would visit at midnight.

Return to the City Saltanat is traveling to the city by train. Short on money, she buys only one ticket and sits while her children sleep beside her. She leaves behind a life of cemetery visits, weddings, and endless household chores. The door to her husband's house slams shut behind her. He had beaten her simply because a newspaper reporter came to see her that night. She cried for help, but no one came. The children, terrified, burst into tears. Her husband accused her of immorality and shouted, "*Talaq*! (Divorce)". The train speeds toward Tashkent.

On the Street of Mercy No one greets Saltanat in the city, as her sister has left for an internship elsewhere. She goes to the old woman's former apartment, hoping to stay there. A young man opens the door, followed by a girl who turns out to be the old woman's granddaughter. The girl tells her that the old woman has died and that she and her husband now live there. Lost and uncertain, Saltanat wanders the street until a kind woman, understanding her plight, gives her money. Deeply moved, Saltanat acknowledges that God is merciful.

At Maqsuda's House Saltanat goes to the home of Maqsuda, the woman who once taught her the Quran. Maqsuda welcomes her warmly and offers her shelter. Her house is large and richly furnished, always filled with guests. The maids move quietly, serving her with gentle obedience. Yet despite the comfort around her, Saltanat feels uneasy and longs for independence. She begins searching desperately for work, hoping to earn enough to find a place of her own.

Desperate for Help Saltanat tries unsuccessfully to find a job. In desperation, she turns to Abbos Sulaymon, a high-ranking official. Although she once rejected him, she now feels helpless. Abbos Sulaymon greets her warmly. Saltanat asks for his help in finding work, and he tells her to call back in three days. Filled with hope, she leaves his office. As she does, he holds her hand and kisses her cheeks. She feels embarrassed but quickly composes herself: "So what? I need a job."

Grace and Guilt When Saltanat returned to Maqsuda's house, she learned that her son had fallen and broken a tooth. A doctor had already been called, and Maqsuda's husband had visited the boy, giving him some money. Saltanat was distressed and felt a deep sense of guilt. When Maqsuda entered, Saltanat thanked her with tears in her eyes, but Maqsuda gently replied that helping those in need is God's command. As Saltanat left, Maqsuda advised her not to come home late, as it might upset her devout husband. Saltanat feels uneasy.

The Party of Shadows Abbos Sulaymon takes Saltanat to a party. The spacious hall is filled with about twenty people – officials and suspicious-looking men with shaved heads. Famous musicians perform soft melodies. When a distinguished man in expensive clothes enters, everyone sits up straight. A young violinist begins to play as the man walks into a private room. Abbos and Saltanat approach him. He is surrounded by several men and a middle-aged woman dressed to look younger. Abbos greets him warmly and introduces Saltanat as his student. The men burst into laughter, and Saltanat feels a powerful wave of discomfort and anxiety.

Losing Control Waking up, Saltanat feels a severe headache. After yet another party with Abbos, where there was plenty of drinking, she feels sick and weak. Her sister, who lives with her, scolds her: "Who have you become, coming home late and drunk every day?" She adds that Maqsuda's husband has asked her to leave the apartment. Furious, Saltanat calls Abbos Sulaymon and begs him to help her find a new place to live. He quickly arranges an apartment and sends a car for her. Her sister accuses her of ingratitude and insists she thank Maqsuda before leaving, saying the woman is unwell and resting. Awkwardly, Saltanat goes to say goodbye.

Goodbye to Maqsuda Maqsuda lies on the bed. When Saltanat asks how she feels, Maqsuda begins to cry and confides that her husband wants to marry another woman – the widow of his friend who died two years ago. He claims that, according to Islamic law, marrying a widow is virtuous and plans to bring her into

their home, living together like sisters. Saltanat is stunned and feels a growing sense of unease and resentment toward this strange household and its rules.

New Apartment The new apartment Saltanat moves into is cozy and beautifully furnished. The children are delighted, and Saltanat feels a quiet sense of happiness. She calls Abbos Sulaymon to thank him for his help. A few days later, he sends her a bouquet of beautiful flowers. Gradually, Saltanat feels herself growing attached to him and perceives the stranger's attentions as love.

Visit Saltanat now works in a joint venture with foreign partners and enjoys her new life. It's Saturday. She is home alone – her sister is at university, and her children are in kindergarten. Abbos Sulaymon approaches her, followed by a driver carrying several bags of groceries. The driver notices the age difference with surprise. When the driver leaves, Abbos immediately embraces Saltanat. She resists weakly at first, then quiets and gives in.

Desperate Visit Saltanat visits her mother in the village, who is ill and staying in the hospital. Saltanat needs money – she dreams of buying a house – but she cannot bring herself to ask her ailing mother for help. She then goes to her wealthy brother and, with great hesitation, asks for a loan. He refuses, knowing she will not be able to repay it. Hoping for support, Saltanat visits her sister, who lives in a luxurious home, but she too declines, explaining that she is building a new house. Feeling desperate and rejected, Saltanat returns to the city.

Tension Abbos Sulaymon is angry that Saltanat hasn't been answering his calls. She tries to explain that she's been busy with the children, but he cuts her off and orders her to come see him the next day. Saltanat feels humiliated, as if she has lost her dignity. At work, her boss treats her coldly because of her recent absence. He reminds her that there is too much work and warns that if it happens again – despite Abbos's protection – he will have to fire her. Saltanat grows uneasy, realizing that her boss knows about their relationship.

Bitterness Saodat calls Saltanat to tell her that a famous artist has died and that the funeral will be held that day. Saltanat attends the funeral, and when she returns home, her heart fills with bitterness. The artist's death reminds her that no loss can compensate for the eternity of human life. She mourns not only his passing but also her own unfulfilled dreams of happiness.

Breaking Point The phone rings. Her sister tells her that Abbos Sulaymon has been calling constantly. Saltanat refuses to answer, but the calls keep coming. Her sister says that Abbos demands she call him back immediately. Saltanat reluctantly dials his number. Abbos immediately begins to scold her harshly. She pretends to be ill, but he coldly reminds her that she attended the funeral of "that alcoholic". His words sting; it pains Saltanat to hear such things about the dead man. He demands that she come to him at once. Saltanat firmly refuses. Enraged, Abbos hangs up.

Price of Dependence At Saltanat's office, she is informed that she has been dismissed for missing a week of work the previous month. The news leaves her stunned. A week later, Abbos's driver arrives and tells her she must vacate the apartment, as the owner plans to move in. Realizing it is Abbos's doing, Saltanat desperately tries to reach him, but he doesn't answer. Left without a job or a home, she searches for a cheaper place and finally moves into a dilapidated building soon to be demolished.

In the Hospital After examining Saltanat, the doctor diagnoses her with a serious illness and prescribes treatment. She travels to a village in Khorezm and stays in the hospital. Her mother visits and reassures her that she is taking care of the children. Her husband also comes, but they feel like strangers – he hasn't even seen the children. Saltanat realizes nothing has changed between them. When he leaves, she feels deeply hurt that he isn't by her side in her time of need.

A Meeting on the Stairs After being discharged from the hospital, Saltanat returns to the city and visits her former workplace. She walks through the familiar corridors, exchanges a few words with a colleague, and descends the stairs, where she unexpectedly encounters Abbos Sulaymon. Their eyes meet. They greet each other, and Saltanat quietly says that she has been ill, adding, "It's not my fault." Abbos pauses for a moment, then says he's in a hurry and leaves. Saltanat feels humiliated and bitterly reproaches herself for having spoken at all.

A New Beginning Saltanat decides to start working at the market, but she has no money. She asks her neighbor Dildora, who also works there, for a loan. Dildora, accustomed to such requests, calmly refuses. Saltanat sinks into despair. Later, Dildora's husband, Mavlon, comes to visit. Having learned from Dildora that she needs money, Mavlon gives her some to start her business. Saltanat is over the moon.

Life at the Market Many of the market vendors are women. At first, Saltanat is happy – she's friendly, and her wares sell well. But she isn't very good with money or keeping count. One day, she loses a bolt of fabric. When she complains, Dildora laughs and teasingly reminds her that she had already counted everything correctly the first time – and that was when the bolt went missing. Saltanat laughs at her own ridiculous situation. The other women join in, and someone suggests celebrating her new job at the market.

The Door Is Closed Saltanat returns from the party slightly drunk. When she rings the doorbell, Abbos Sulaymon opens it, wearing a robe. She freezes – it's her old apartment. With quiet irony, he tells her not to drink so much. Saltanat defends herself, saying her feet brought her there, then admits she misses him. A woman's voice calls from inside. Abbos quickly shuts the door. Overwhelmed with shame and humiliation, Saltanat rushes down the stairs and out into the street.

Driven Out When she returns home, her neighbors accuse her of immorality, claiming that men often visit her and that a complaint has been filed against her for disturbing the peace by breaking into government officials' apartments. A mean, spinsterish neighbor demands that she leave the house. Saltanat is in despair. Her neighbor, Mavlon, comes to console her and promises to help her find a new apartment. Saltanat feels helpless – she already owes Mavlon money, and she knows he is not selfless. But, seeing no other way out, she agrees.

Bad News at the Market At the market, Saltanat hears disturbing news: one of her friends has been taken away by the police. It turns out she demanded repayment of a debt from her ex-boyfriend, who had promised to marry her but then ran off with her money, threatening him with a gas pistol. Saltanat worries about her friend. That evening, the women gather at a café for a drink. Saltanat gets drunk and doesn't remember what happens next.

The Accusation In the morning, two police officers arrive at Saltanat's apartment. She is confused and frightened. They inform her that she is accused of attempting to set fire to Abbos Sulaymon's house. Saltanat vaguely remembers returning to her former apartment with a friend – Abbos's pale face, his refusal to let her in, the friend throwing a bottle, and how her discarded cigarette accidentally started the fire. Abbos Sulaymon files a complaint against her. Saltanat is questioned about the incident and released on the condition that she does not leave the city.

The Last Visit Saltanat, heartbroken, drinks a beer and goes to her former apartment. Abbos Sulaymon's wife opens the door and shouts that the crazy woman has come again. Abbos appears. Saltanat falls to her knees, begging for forgiveness. She swears she loves him, that it wasn't her fault. His wife demands to know who she is. Abbos denies knowing her, calls her insane, and throws her out. Humiliated and furious, Saltanat calls him a scoundrel.

Journey Saltanat is afraid to return home and decides to go to the village. At the train station, she notices a homeless girl picking up leftovers from a dinner table while a tramp threatens her. A policeman intervenes and gives the girl some pies. Later, on the train, Saltanat sees the same girl – who has run away from the policeman – and takes her into her compartment. Madina, an eight-year-old orphan, has escaped from an orphanage. Saltanat washes her and applies perfume to remove the lice.

Evening Arrival In the evening, Saltanat arrives in her home village. She hesitates to visit her mother at night and decides to spend the night at a sacred cemetery. There, they are met by a Kazakh woman who offers them food and shelter. They spend the night among elderly women who have come to visit the holy place, and a mentally ill girl who has been brought to the cemetery in hopes of being cured.

Mother's Reproach Saltanat, telling Madina to wait by the door, hesitantly enters her mother's house. She feels guilty, knowing her mother is caring for her children. Suddenly, her mother bursts out with reproaches. Her brother, who went to the city, has learned of her "antics" and that the police are looking for her. Calling it a great shame for the family, her mother says her brother is furious and orders her to take the children and never return. Saltanat tries to explain, but her mother refuses to listen and drives her away.

Escape Saltanat runs, clutching Madina's hand – no direction, only escape. A car horn blares behind her. Her brother's car. Now she understands why her mother forced her to leave. Her brother wants her to take the children, but how can she care for them in her condition? Panic drives her faster. She stumbles and falls into a pit. When she looks up, the car is gone. Madina laughs softly. Saltanat reaches for her – but the sound fades into emptiness.

An Unexpected Meeting On the bus, Saltanat meets her former literature teacher, Malika – now a widow who sells soap to support her family. Seeing Saltanat's hardship, Malika gives her some money and confides that life has forced her to become the mistress of a man she despises but who supplies her goods. When they arrive in the city, they go to the market together. There, the police arrest Malika for selling goods without a permit. She is soon released but returns devastated, fined, and penniless. Saltanat consoles her and returns the money Malika had given her, which they spend on lunch.

The House Near the Market Malika has a key to her lover's house near the market, and the women spend the night there. With no money left to return to the village, Malika suggests they find temporary work. They are hired to sort onions. At first, Saltanat is cheerful, but soon the pungent smell makes her nauseous. Someone gives her a mask, yet by evening she faints.

Meeting The next morning, they try to return to work, but Saltanat is turned away, deemed unfit for the job. Desperately waiting for an employer, she finally finds work cleaning the home of a wealthy family. The young, pampered wife tells her to tidy the rooms. When the husband arrives, Saltanat freezes – it is Mahmud, the patron of writers who once captivated her at first sight. He, too, is stunned to see her. Neither speaks. The wife pays Saltanat, and she leaves.

Collapse When Saltanat returned, Malika was sitting with two women – day laborers. One was a gaudily made-up young woman, the other a plain-faced middle-aged one. They were drinking, laughing loudly, and swapping crude stories about their encounters with men. A wave of disgust rose in Saltanat. Suddenly, she burst out, calling them prostitutes and demanding how Malika could befriend such people. The younger woman cursed back, and Saltanat shoved her. Malika quickly intervened, leading Saltanat to bed and pleading with her to calm down.

Fire When Saltanat wakes, the women are gone. Through the half-open door, she sees Malika asleep beside a fat man – her lover has returned. Saltanat grabs a bottle of vodka and a lighter, rushes out, and hails a taxi. It takes her to the courtyard where Abbos Sulaymon now lives. Climbing over the wall, she mixes vodka with oil and sets it alight. As the flames rise, she feels herself slipping into madness. In her mind, she cries out to Abbos: I wasn't a slut – it was you who looked at women with lust!

Awakening Saltanat opens her eyes to blue walls. A doctor enters, addressing her as Madame Herostratus. Confused, she doesn't understand where she is. Gradually, fragments of memory return – the courtroom, the accusations of arson, the final words of the judge. She is in the prison hospital, sentenced to six years behind bars.

Confinement Several women are transported to a cell in a prison van – two in hijabs, two prostitutes, and two middle-aged inmates. Saltanat spends the night tormented by insect bites, the stench of the toilet filling the air, unable to sleep. The days blur together in monotony. She devours every newspaper and book she can find, then begins learning Arabic letters from the girls in hijabs. Through the tiny window, she glimpses a patch of sky and dreams of freedom.

The Women's Colony Winter has arrived, and the cell is freezing. The prisoners are transferred to different colonies. Saltanat is sent to a new one, home to about a hundred women. They wear headscarves, robes, and vests, singing as they march in formation to the dining hall. The guards assign Saltanat to dressmaking, where she learns the craft from Nasiba, a striking woman in her forties. Saltanat is stunned to discover that Nasiba is serving time for killing her husband.

Songs Behind Bars The prison warden is a stern, masculine woman named Idea, feared by all the inmates. When it rains or snows, the air inside grows heavy and oppressive. On such days, the women hold small concerts. Among them are former actresses and gifted singers – they sing, and the prisoners dance. Saltanat dances too, then quietly slips away and lies down. She opens her diary, begins to write, but soon thinks of her children and weeps.

The Warden At night, Saltanat is awakened by a guard who informs her that she's being called in for questioning. Alarmed and confused, she follows him. In the room, to her surprise, she finds Idea dressed in a white blouse, speaking to her gently and offering sweets and tea. Then Idea pours her some vodka. Turkish music plays softly in the background. Saltanat feels trapped and powerless before Idea's authority. Exhausted and numb, she is later taken back to the barracks. She feels shaken and utterly drained.

The Dark Hour Saltanat feels humiliated – everyone knows she was with Idea. That night, she wakes to find someone touching her face. An old, heavyset woman peers down at her, muttering with a smirk, "There's a queue for everything." Realizing what she means, Saltanat bursts into rage and kicks her in the chest. Grabbing the woman by the hair, she beats her until the woman breaks free and runs off.

New Year's Eve On New Year's Eve. They celebrate the New Year in prison. Idea wishes everyone a happy holiday, but Saltanat feels awkward in her presence. A singer performs, and the prisoners dance. After the concert, Idea calls Saltanat. When Saltanat enters her cell, Idea greets her with a smile. She offers vodka, but Saltanat refuses. Idea then promises to reduce her sentence, and Saltanat's hope grows. She drinks the offered vodka. Idea then tries to hug her, but suddenly Saltanat scratches her face, shouting curses. Furious, Idea orders her thrown into solitary confinement.

Solitary Confinement Saltanat is in solitary confinement. The cold is unbearable – her tears are icy. She sits frozen like an elephant in the cramped cell. Suddenly, two shadows appear in the darkness. Saltanat flinches. They pounce on her, tear her jacket, punch her in the face, grab her legs, and she falls onto the cement floor, hitting her head hard and losing consciousness.

Awakening When Saltanat opens her eyes, she sees a woman in a hijab standing above her. The woman says she found her unconscious on the floor, and everyone thought she was dead. Because it is Sunday, the guard refuses to take her to the morgue, so the woman prays for her all night. Saltanat herself is a prisoner, sent to solitary after a religious dispute. In the morning, two men bring a stretcher and carry her to the hospital. At the entrance, among the uniformed men, she suddenly sees Mahmud. Thinking of him, she knows she is alive.

Between Life and Shadows Saltanat is gravely ill. She suffers from kidney failure and still hopes for a cure, but an elderly nurse tells her there are no medicines. Haunted by nightmares, Saltanat contemplates death and prays, hoping to pass through purgatory, believing that the angels know everything. She thinks of her children and fears that the angels will learn about Abbos Sulaymon. She refuses to eat – ten days have passed. Finally, she is sent to a psychiatric hospital.

A Glimmer of Recovery The doctor who examines Saltanat is surprised – her illness has receded. Fasting helps her recovery. She advises Saltanat to begin eating, but only in small amounts, and to continue treatment until she is fully cured. Saltanat feels a surge of happiness. She asks for newspapers, but when the door locks, fear returns. Soon, however, a stack of magazines and newspapers is brought to her, and she finally feels calm.

Echoes of the Insane Saltanat is transferred to a four-bed ward. The women here are insane. One woman, who has retained her former beauty, complains that her husband left her for a younger woman and went to Moscow. He grew rich off her father's money and then betrayed her. She screams, calling his name and calling for her children. For some reason, Saltanat thinks of that tramp, Madina, imagining she is her daughter. The shadow of a singer appears before her eyes, begging for food. Exhausted, she falls asleep.

Tears and Uneasy Glances Saltanat is discharged from the hospital. The nurse tells her she is free, and she can hardly believe her ears. Two women – her sister and Maqsuda – meet her, and they all burst into tears. Maqsuda thanks God for restoring Saltanat's dignity. Everyone gets into a taxi and heads to Maqsuda's. Saltanat feels uneasy about seeing her family after prison. Maqsuda reassures her, telling her that her daughter and mother-in-law are waiting. But Saltanat senses something strange in her gaze.

The Shadow of Maqsuda She enters a room where an elderly woman, a young girl, and Muhayo – Maqsuda's husband's new wife – sit in silence. The old woman greets her curtly and thanks God for her release. Then, without warning, she announces that Maqsuda died quietly one night. Saltanat freezes. How could she have been with her just minutes ago? She doesn't dare ask. As they leave, Muhayo places a business card in her hand and urges her to return if she ever needs help. Saltanat feels tears welling up.

As they walk, she cautiously asks who she was with when she met her. Her sister replies that she was alone.

Roses and Rescue The sisters enter a cozy apartment. Her sister explains that the owners are abroad and have asked her to stay there. Saltanat and her sister weep with joy. Saltanat sips her coffee, lying on the sofa, imagining herself as a simple housewife. Suddenly, the doorbell rings; an elegant man enters with roses. Her sister says, “This is the one who saved her – lawyer Mahmud.” Saltanat is overwhelmed with delight. This is the same Mahmud she once met at her friend Saodat’s. Tears well up in her eyes as she timidly kisses his cheek and thanks him for everything. He leaves with a warm greeting. Saltanat feels dizzy from the scent of flowers and happiness.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

SALTANAT

Saltanat is a young woman striving for an ideal life shaped by her dreams and desires. Yet the harsh realities of society continually obstruct her path, confronting her with disappointment and disillusionment. Her complex and contradictory nature leads her into a series of seemingly hopeless situations, and although she sometimes feels defeated, she never surrenders. Instead, she preserves her sense of self-worth and individuality, asserting her inner resilience in the face of adversity.

Rebellious Saltanat refuses to conform to traditional social norms. Her mother-in-law criticizes her for dressing inappropriately, while her mother scolds her for being restless and unwilling to accept a submissive, domestic life devoted to her husband and children. Rejecting her husband’s quiet, family-centered existence, she escapes to the city; she challenges Abbos when he oversteps his authority; and she defies the prison warden’s control. Each act of resistance, however, results in harsh punishment.

Honest Unlike many Uzbek heroines in literature, Saltanat is distinguished by her openness and honesty in expressing her inner experiences and desires. She is captivated by the beauty of a handsome, religious man reciting verses from the Quran. When encountering a wealthy businessman, she boldly tests her own attractiveness with a glance. And when seeking Abbos Sulaymon’s help, she thinks, “I’ll accept his help, and then I’ll run away.” This candidness makes Saltanat both relatable and, at times, perplexing to the average reader.

Ambivalent Two opposing feelings clash within Saltanat's soul. Her sincere nature often conflicts with the morally ambiguous actions that circumstances compel her to take. At first, she considers turning to Abbos Sulaymon to solve her material problems, but after becoming his lover, she feels remorse and yearns for purification. After their separation, torn between hatred and overwhelming desire, she goes to him to confess. Ultimately, having endured humiliation and severe punishment, she rises in rebellion against him.

MAQSUDA

Maqsuda is the wife of a wealthy and respected religious leader. She lives in comfort and luxury, surrounded by housekeepers and servants. The embodiment of traditional femininity and domestic virtue, she possesses all the qualities of an ideal wife. Yet, despite her privileged life, she remains deeply unhappy, and her fate is ultimately tragic.

Submissive Maqsuda is the complete opposite of Saltanat. Her entire life is defined by submission – to faith, to tradition, and to her husband’s will. While Saltanat is bold and guided by desire, Maqsuda quietly follows prescribed rules, embodying the virtues of a pious and obedient woman. Her submission brings neither peace nor fulfillment; despite her kindness and devotion, she remains unseen and unappreciated. When her husband marries a widow, calling it an act of “Muslim kindness,” Maqsuda accepts it in silence. Soon after, she dies, and her passing is met with the same indifference that marked her life.

Kind Guided by her faith, Maqsuda helps Saltanat in difficult times, believing that aiding fellow Muslims fulfills God’s will. Yet her compassion extends beyond religious duty – her heart is genuinely kind. When Saltanat falls ill, Maqsuda visits her, gives her money, and cares for her children. Even after death, her soul returns to Saltanat upon her release from prison, trying to comfort her. But Saltanat, bitter and broken, lashes out: “You think you’re doing a good deed by visiting a harlot like me, don’t you?” Maqsuda weeps

softly and replies that everything will be all right. She even defends her rival, the widow, gently saying, “She’s lonely.

ABBOS SULAYMON

Abbos Sulaymon is an influential official who skillfully wields his power for personal gain. Beneath his outward appearance of competence and authority lies a man mired in corruption and moral decay. His connections with dubious associates secure his position and shield him from accountability. In a world where wealth and deceit obscure conscience, Abbos Sulaymon not only survives but thrives, embodying the very hypocrisy that governs his society.

Lustful For Abbos, women are objects of desire, easily replaced and exploited. Love and affection hold only superficial meaning for him. When Saltanat first approaches him seeking employment, he immediately hugs and kisses her, openly revealing his intentions and assuming she will comply. By offering financial assistance and extracting satisfaction in return, he effectively ensnares the young woman in a form of moral, emotional, and sexual debt. At the first sign of refusal, he punishes her harshly and promptly seeks another woman to fill her place.

Ruthless Abbos Sulaymon shows no mercy to those who defy his desires or threaten his pleasures. When Saltanat rejects him, he responds with calculated cruelty. His punishment is merciless: she loses her job, her home, and at last faces imprisonment. Yet his cruelty stems not from strength or superiority but from cowardice. When their affair risks exposure, he hastily adopts the guise of a respectable husband before his wife, denounces Saltanat as insane, and hurls obscene insults before ensuring her arrest – subjecting her to immense physical and psychological torment. Lacking any trace of compassion, he is willing to commit the most ruthless acts to preserve his own comfort and reputation.

THEMES

SOCIETY

Gender Although the story unfolds in a time when women seem to enjoy equality, true freedom remains an illusion. Saltanat, once married and now living as a divorced woman, becomes the silent target of suspicion and moral scrutiny. The world around her grants women the right to work, study, and vote, yet invisible chains still bind them. Ancient codes of honor and obedience persist, whispered through generations, shaping how a woman walks, speaks, and even dreams. For men, desire is excused as nature; for women, it is condemned as shame. Saltanat’s desperate act of defiance acknowledges both the emotional and active dimensions of her rebellion. Around the protagonist move other women – betrayed, silenced, or shamed – each bearing the burden of a society that excuses male transgression while condemning female survival.

Illustrative Moment: Saltanat sits in her office, overcome with grief over her husband's departure and a recent miscarriage. Abbos Sulaymon enters, greeting her warmly and inviting her to spend time with him. Insulted, Saltanat abruptly refuses. Enraged by her rejection, Abbos leaves. Soon after, her boss arrives, telling her she should not have refused such an influential man. Saltanat bursts into tears, admitting that she is drained by men’s advances and fed up with lecherous older men. Yet, because her boss is a man, she cannot fully express her pain. “Instead of preaching morality to the women of the nation, she says, let men first learn not to attack the honor of women”. The boss laughs dismissively, advising her to be less romantic and to view life “realistically”. He, Saltanat admits, is the only man who treats her like a brother. Later, however, out of desperation, Saltanat approaches Abbos Sulaymon herself, triggering a chain of misfortunes. This episode exposes the deep-rooted gender inequality that society accepts as the norm.

Chaos The novel repeatedly portrays scenes of an excited crowd surging forward. Saltanat resists, yet she is swept along, powerless against its momentum. These recurring moments symbolize the collapse of moral and social order. The crowd moves with neither empathy nor purpose, embodying the chaos of a dehumanized society. Within this throng, the individual – particularly the woman – loses identity and agency, becoming invisible amid the collective frenzy. This motif reflects modernist anxieties about mass consciousness, where personal suffering is swallowed and erased by the indifference of the multitude.

Illustrative Moment: After a confrontation with a toy store owner who threatened to file a complaint against her, Saltanat runs headlong into a crowd. She gasps for breath, her plastic bag growing heavy in her arms. Men wearing dragon and other animal masks dance around her. In the seething crowd, mustachioed men, women, and children push forward, shouting. An invisible force drives the crowd like a raging torrent. Everyone mingles and is swept along in the current. Suddenly, the crowd collides with a glass barrier and becomes trapped. Moments later, the flood of people pressing from behind crashes into concrete walls. Saltanat feels a sharp pain in her head and lower back before losing consciousness. This episode symbolizes a society in which the individual is powerless, and even those who resist are swept along by it.

Religion The novel reflects the mood of the people during a time of great change at the end of the twentieth century, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Uzbekistan's independence. The ideals instilled by Soviet ideology disintegrated, leaving people spiritually adrift. A return to Islamic teachings begins as individuals seek moral guidance, identity, and community. However, this revival is neither uniform nor uncontroversial. Some embrace the faith deeply, while others question its role in daily life; traditional interpretations sometimes clash with modern practices. In the novel, the author illustrates this tension through the devout Maqsuda and her household.

Illustrative Moment: Saltanat lies in the prison hospital, half-conscious, listening to the rhythmic chanting of the Koran. For a moment, she thinks she has died. Then she hears Maqsuda's voice – she has come to visit. Saltanat asks about her husband. Maqsuda, in a broken voice, says he is well; he has married a young widow – the wife of a deceased friend he once loved – and brought her home. They now live in the same courtyard. Maqsuda urges Saltanat to perform namaz. Saltanat replies that Nasiba, her cellmate, also prays, yet she killed her husband. "You pray, and your husband has destroyed you", she says. Maqsuda weeps. Saltanat continues: why do people look down on a divorced woman? Maybe she wants to start her life anew. Why is a man permitted to marry another woman while still married? She refuses to pray, insisting on her own purity. Prayer has not saved others from suffering. Maqsuda cries, trying to console her, but Saltanat resists, highlighting the conflict between societal expectations, personal integrity, and spiritual faith.

Work At first glance, the novel focuses on the protagonist's inner experiences, but it also reflects the social problems of post-Soviet Uzbekistan during its transition, including unemployment, the crisis of the intelligentsia, labor migration, and the precarious position of women amid economic decline. Divorced and abandoned with two children, Saltanat – a talented, university-educated woman – struggles to find stable employment and ultimately accepts any opportunity. She tries her hand at market trading, works as an onion sorter, and as a cleaner for wealthy families, all while navigating an unfamiliar environment. Through her experiences, the novel exposes the harsh realities of women's labor, engendering fear, despair, and social critique.

Illustrative Moment: Saltanat and Malika are looking for work when a man in an expensive car hires them along with several other women. The women jostle each other as they board a minibus. They are assigned to sort onions in a large warehouse. Saltanat works diligently, but when the women speak, a stern voice warns them to remain silent. At lunch, Malika says she could work there forever. Soon, Saltanat begins sneezing. She is given a mask, but then suddenly faints. Her boss forbids her to continue working. That evening, they receive their pay. Saltanat is delighted at how much she can earn in ten days. The next morning, they return to the market, but Saltanat is rejected as unfit, leaving her in despair, while Malika happily continues. This episode illustrates the harsh realities of women's labor during the post-Soviet economic transition, highlighting exploitation, physical strain, and the instability of low-paying jobs.

Prison Life in prison is harsh and regimented, shaping both the behavior and relationships of inmates. Saltanat endures a strict regime, limited freedom, constant surveillance, and even sexual violence – all of which heighten her fear and insecurity. At the root of many imprisoned women's suffering lies the mistreatment, violence, and objectification by men. Among them are Nasiba, who accidentally kills her husband while defending herself from his beatings, and a young woman forced into prostitution, cruelly punished for her refusal, imprisoned for revenge, and ultimately dying of illness. Within the prison, a unique subculture emerges: religious practices, small acts of rebellion, and sharing resources become crucial tools for survival. The women try to brighten their bleak existence with song and dance. Among them is a young poetess who pours her anguish into poetry before dying under the weight of the prison's cruel oppression.

Illustrative Moment: After visiting Idia, Saltanat sinks into shame and weeps deeply. Nasiba comforts her and shares her story: her husband used to beat her, and one day, in self-defense, she stabbed him with a stake, killing him. To distract her, she reminds Saltanat that she still needs to complete her namaz. Later, the female prisoners are taken to celebrate the New Year. Candy and an apple lie on the table – one for each of them. The singer Oyzoda, whom Saltanat once saw at parties with Abbos, comes to give a concert in the prison and sings about love. In her mind, Saltanat addresses her: “Oyzoda, say hello to Abbos for me. He achieved his goal. They say the truth is unshakable, but people like Abbos can destroy it.” The women dance, but despite the bathhouse visit and their effort to look their best, their identical prison clothes make them plain. This episode conveys the gloomy spirit of the prison atmosphere, where fleeting celebrations and small comforts cannot erase the constant oppression, fear, and injustice that weigh on Saltanat and the other women.

PSYCHOLOGY

Loss The motif of miscarriage reveals the conflicting emotions surrounding unwanted motherhood. Although the heroine did not desire the child she carried, its loss torments her with guilt and emptiness. Her body becomes both a site of rejection and remembrance – a symbol of femininity scarred by pain. The narrative shows how societal expectations of maternal love deepen her suffering, forcing her to confront the tenderness she had tried to suppress toward the life growing inside her. Throughout the story, she remains haunted by the image of the lost infant.

Illustrative Moment: After the incident in the crowd, Saltanat opened her eyes and found herself in a hospital. She felt weak and nauseous. They told her she was in the maternity ward. She heard the sound of metal – knives – and shut her eyes. In her delirium, the knives seemed to attack her. The baby, kicking its arms and legs, cried. She opened her eyes again and saw a basin filled with blood. 'What is this?' she asked. The doctor coldly replied, “Your child. A boy”. Only one thought swirled through Saltanat’s mind: I’ve lost my child. And though she had not wanted this child, her soul was tormented by a deep and unbearable pain: “Oh, my child, if you had lived, what would you have become? An unhappy poet like your mother, a famous artist, or a rich businessman?” This scene reflects the protagonist’s inner conflict – the painful realization that, although she has renounced motherhood, she cannot escape its emotional burden.

RELATIONSHIPS

Motherhood Saltanat does not conform to the traditional image of a mother. Her attention is directed inward, toward her emotional and existential struggles, while her sister or mother assume responsibility for her children. In a society where women are increasingly participating in the workforce, traditional maternal roles are no longer expected of her. Saltanat’s maternal instinct emerges only in moments of crisis – when her son is injured or when she encounters the homeless girl Madina – revealing that motherhood, for her, is less a social duty than a spontaneous response to vulnerability and suffering.

Illustrative Moment: At the train station, Saltanat notices a little girl collecting leftover food. A bearded tramp threatens her, saying he will deal with her later in the basement. Saltanat feels uneasy and worried for the child. Soon she loses sight of her. Later, on the train, she suddenly finds the girl asleep on the floor in a corner. When Saltanat brushes back the child’s red hair and looks into her blue eyes, something inside her turns over, and she feels a sharp pain in her chest. She barely manages to convince the girl to remove lice from her body, and after removing her dress, she realizes how much the girl is afraid of this; her body speaks of sexual abuse. Fleeing her impending arrest, she takes care of the girl, who later mysteriously disappears. This episode reveals Saltanat’s maternal instinct for protection, as well as the tragedy of a homeless girl who becomes an object of desire – wandering, like Saltanat herself, and ultimately falling victim to male lust.

Marriage In the novel, nearly all marriages are unhappy. A friend’s husband is unemployed, forcing her to have an abortion, knowing they cannot support a child. Omongul, the village librarian, is murdered by her drunken husband. Even the village newspaper editor laments his unhappy marriage. Mahmud, whom Saltanat idealizes, has a wife who is constantly dissatisfied despite their comfort. Similarly, Maqsuda, a pious and devoted wife, suffers, compelled by Muslim law to accept her husband’s other marriage, yet unable to embrace it, ultimately overwhelmed by its hardships. The novel presents marriage not as lasting

joy, but as a tradition defined by social expectations, obligations, and compromises, often leaving personal desires unfulfilled.

Illustrative Moment: Saltanat calls her friend Saodat. Her husband answers, saying Saodat is ill and asking Saltanat to come over. When she arrives, she learns that Saodat has had an abortion and is asleep under the effects of a sedative. Her husband asks Saltanat to cook something for her, and she agrees. While she is in the kitchen, he suddenly grabs her by the waist. Saltanat angrily pushes him away, but he taunts her, saying his wife won't notice – she's fast asleep. Shocked, Saltanat demands to know who he thinks she is. The man laughs bitterly, asking if he is really worse than old Abbos Sulaymon and claiming he knows all about her affairs – his wife told him herself. Humiliated and enraged, Saltanat tells him it's his fault and he needs to take care of his wife. She insists it was his inability to provide that led to the abortion, then storms out of the house. This scene illustrates how marriage can lose both its privacy and moral values.

Sexuality: *Desire* In the novel, the protagonist repeatedly becomes the object of both male and female desire. Her rebellious and passionate nature is interpreted by patriarchal thinking as a sign of availability. Her status as an attractive, divorced, and vulnerable young woman further reinforces this perception. All her misfortunes are rooted in male sexual desire: she is beaten by her husband after a drunken village editor visits her late at night; Abbos Sulaymon takes advantage of her despair; her neighbor Mahmud lends her money, hoping to fulfill his own desires; and even in prison, the warden sexually assaults her. These desires constantly bring Saltanat pain and suffering. However, although Saltanat does not love Abbos Sulaymon and initially considers exploiting his desire to improve her financial situation, she nevertheless feels drawn to him. Thus, the author highlights the complexity of human emotions, which lie beyond the control of reason.

Illustrative Moment: In a squalid apartment shared by several poor families, the neighbors gossip about Saltanat's behavior. They accuse her of receiving frequent visits from a certain man, and a respected figure, Abbos, has even filed a police complaint, claiming she is disturbing the peace. As a result, they demand that she leave the apartment. Saltanat enters the room in tears. Someone strokes her hair, and she feels a man's hot breath on her face. Seeing Mavlon – the man who lent her money to start trading at the market – she quickly rises and explains that she has been accused because of his visits. She insists that she believed he was different from other men and promises to repay him soon. Mavlon replies that she is doing the right thing and offers to help her find another apartment. However, as he leaves, she notices his clenched jaw – a silent sign of his displeasure. This scene shows how Saltanat's dignity is constantly threatened by poverty, male authority, and social judgment, revealing the cruelty of unwritten laws that punish women not for their actions, but for the mere suspicion of desire or independence.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How do you interpret the protagonist's actions when, despite hating Abbos, she goes to him and confesses that she misses him?
2. Can Saltanat be considered a strong character?
3. What role does the little girl Madina play in the novel, and what does her mysterious disappearance signify?
4. What might the author be suggesting through the character of Maqsuda, who is the complete opposite of Saltanat?
5. The novel features several recurring images – a wild crowd, shadowy figures with sabers condemning Saltanat, and a murdered baby. What purpose do these motifs serve in the narrative?