

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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***Equilibrium* / Muvozanat (2003)**

Ulug'bek Hamdam (1968-)

OVERVIEW

Author Ulug'bek Hamdam is an Uzbek poet, writer, and literary scholar. He was born on April 24, 1968, in the Andijan Region of the Republic of Uzbekistan. He graduated from Tashkent State University and, during his studies, also pursued further education in Konya, Turkey, through a government-sponsored scholarship program. After completing his education, he worked as a lecturer at a higher educational institution, a researcher at a scientific research institute, and editor-in-chief of the literary magazine *Sharq yulduzi*. He has successfully combined literary activity with teaching and research. His published collections of poetry include *Tangriga eltuvchi isyon* (*Uprising: Leading to God*, 2002), *Atirgul* (*Rose*, 2006), and *Seni kutdim* (*I Waited for You*, 2007). He is also the author of several prose works, including *Yolg'izlik* (*Loneliness*, 2000), *Muvozanat* (*Equilibrium*, 2003), *Isyon va itoat* (*Rebellion and Obedience*, 2004), *Sabo va Samandar* (*Sabo and Samandar*, 2006), and *Uzoqdagi Dilnura* (*Dilnura, Far Away*, 2010). In recognition of his contributions to literature and culture, he was awarded the *Shuhrat* Medal in 2004.

Novel *Equilibrium* was written in 1997 but was not published until 2003. Upon its publication, it sparked intense debate and attracted considerable public attention. Critics praised the author's courage in offering a truthful and realistic portrayal of the lives of the intelligentsia during the first decade of Uzbekistan's independence (1991–2001). Unlike those who nostalgically long for the past, the author seeks to reinterpret reality within the context of the profound political and economic changes that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet system. Although many critics regard *Equilibrium* as a realist novel, it also incorporates several postmodern features. The work is built around four interwoven plot lines, and its fragmented narrative departs from conventional linear storytelling. The author's direct engagement with the text through self-reflexive commentary and the expression of ideas through different characters challenges the illusion of reality. Moreover, the novel questions the notion of absolute truth, a characteristic often associated with postmodern literature. *Equilibrium* was republished in 2007 in a revised and expanded edition.

Background The novel is set in the turbulent years following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, when Uzbekistan, like many former Soviet republics, was undergoing profound political, economic, and social transformation. The country was transitioning from a centrally planned Soviet system to an independent state and a market-oriented economy. This period brought both new opportunities and significant challenges, particularly for the intelligentsia. Many intellectuals welcomed the prospect of national independence and cultural renewal, yet they also faced the uncertainties of a rapidly changing society. The novel explores their struggle to adapt to this new reality, portraying a society in which material concerns increasingly overshadow spiritual and intellectual ideals. The novel gained widespread popularity because it was inspired by real-life events. Many intellectuals have recognized themes and experiences reflected in the story. In addition, the novel draws upon the author's own personal struggles and tragic life experiences. A stage adaptation of the novel was later produced and received considerable acclaim.

MAIN CHARACTERS

<i>Yusuf</i>	a young university teacher
<i>Said</i>	Yusuf's friend, a government official
<i>Mirazim</i>	Yusuf's friend and businessman
<i>Amir</i>	Yusuf's brother, a former teacher
<i>Zahro</i>	Mirazim's wife and Yusuf's lover
<i>Gulshoda</i>	Amir's wife
<i>Alimqul</i>	Mirazim's domestic servant

SYNOPSIS

The story unfolds in the 1990s against the backdrop of profound political, economic, and social change as the country adjusts to its new political and economic realities. Yusuf, a young university history lecturer, finds that his profession is losing its value, and his modest salary is no longer enough to support his family. In addition to his own financial struggles, he feels responsible for helping his elderly parents in the village and his older brother Amir's family, who have fallen into religious extremism and poverty. As Yusuf's life deteriorates, he loses his apartment, and his frustrated wife leaves him, taking their young son with her. In contrast, his university friends Mirazim and Said have achieved success: Mirazim owns a prosperous marketplace, while Said occupies an influential government position. At a gathering in Mirazim's luxurious home, Yusuf reunites with Zahro, Mirazim's wife and his former classmate, and a mutual attraction develops between them. Both Mirazim and Said offer Yusuf employment, but neither opportunity aligns with his vocation as a historian. Unable to decide on his future, Yusuf receives devastating news that his son has fallen seriously ill. He rushes to the village, only to lose the child due to medical negligence. The tragedy leaves him emotionally shattered. After returning to the city, Yusuf accepts a position in an upscale store, improving his financial circumstances. At the same time, he and Zahro begin a romantic relationship. Meanwhile, Amir's religious fanaticism worsens, eventually leading to his confinement in a psychiatric hospital. Amir's estranged wife, overwhelmed by despair and hardship, takes her own life. Said's earlier promise of a prestigious job proves insincere. Aware of Yusuf's intelligence and potential, he fears that Yusuf might one day surpass him. Ironically, Said eventually loses his own position after the political downfall of his patron. Mirazim, despite his growing wealth and business success, comes to realize that material prosperity cannot fill the emptiness within him. In the end, Yusuf decides to return to the profession he truly loves and resumes teaching history at the university.

SCENES

Memories of Friendship and Change Yusuf sees his wife and son off to kindergarten and returns home, lost in thought. He once dreamed of writing the true history of his country, but now he feels it is no longer necessary; under glasnost, others are already doing it. Gradually, he is losing interest in his work. His thoughts turn to his close friends, Said and Mirazim, and he feels a deep sense of nostalgia for those days. He remembers their youth, when they once got into a fight with three other young men over girls. He recalls how he bravely defended himself, and how later several men attacked him alone. At that moment, Said and Mirazim rushed in to help him. His eyes fill with tears.

A Modest Homecoming Yusuf, his wife, Oygul, and son travel to the village to visit his parents. Life there is difficult. Many people have lost their jobs, and the economic situation has noticeably worsened. Although they are not starving, financial hardship prevents them from affording proper food. His parents' attitude toward Yusuf feels more like that of honored guests than of a son returning home. They sit down to a modest meal. Yusuf feels uncomfortable, as he has only brought sweets and cheese and could not afford even a small amount of meat.

Family Ties and Quiet Tensions Yusuf sits alone in the room, lost in memories of his childhood. His mother, Halima, enters and suggests that he visit his grandmother, who lives with his uncle, as well as his older brother, who lives separately from the family. She explains that his brother has become deeply religious and now often criticizes their father for not fully adhering to Islamic rules. She asks Yusuf not to argue with him, saying it would be pointless. Yusuf agrees.

A Grandmother's Decline Yusuf arrives at his uncle's house, where his elderly grandmother lives. She is now very old and frail. As Yusuf hands out candy to his uncle's children, his grandmother suddenly asks for some as well and begins complaining that no one ever gives her anything. Yusuf is taken aback. His uncle, embarrassed, asks her what she is talking about and gently explains that she has become like a child in her old age. Whenever visitors arrive, she insists that she is hungry and has been denied food. In reality, the family always makes sure she is well cared for, often putting her needs before those of the children. Seeing his beloved grandmother – once a strong and loving woman who cared for everyone around her – reduced to this state deeply saddens Yusuf.

A Father and Son at Odds When Yusuf returns to his parents' home, the entire family gathers to welcome him, including his brothers. During dinner, he asks Amir how he is managing. Amir replies that hardship is a test from God and points to the Prophet Muhammad as an example of a humble life. Their

father, Odil, objects, arguing that ordinary people should not be compared to the Prophet and that faith matters more than asceticism. Amir sharply disagrees and criticizes his father for neglecting prayer. The argument quickly escalates. Despite Halima's efforts to calm them, Amir refuses to stop. Finally, she orders him to leave, and he departs angrily with his family.

A Visit to Amir's House The next day, the women gather at her parents' house to prepare *sumalak*, a traditional dish usually made in the spring to celebrate Navro'z, the traditional spring New Year festival. Yusuf goes to his brother's house because his mother regrets the previous day's argument and asks him to bring Amir back. When he arrives, Gulshoda is busy with household chores, and Amir is praying. Gulshoda is ill and receives a disability pension. Amir, a schoolteacher, rarely works because he believes it is essential to perform the five daily prayers and often interrupts his work to do so.

A Debate Between Brothers Gulshoda and the children leave for her parents' house. Left alone, Amir and Yusuf begin discussing religion and its rules. Amir criticizes Yusuf for not praying regularly. Yusuf replies that not everyone who presents themselves as devout is sincere and that some people use religion for personal gain. He argues that their father, who supports his family through honest labor, is more truly pious than many who outwardly display their faith. Yusuf argues that the Prophet advocated moderation in faith and reminds Amir that he must fulfill his responsibilities to his family. Amir responds that fulfilling those responsibilities does not prevent him from praying. Noticing that it is time for the next prayer, he ends the conversation. Yusuf leaves his brother's house with a heavy heart.

Said's Ambition Unable to locate Yusuf, Said makes repeated attempts to contact him. After graduating from university, Said briefly worked there before pursuing a career in politics. Having completed several training programs, he rose rapidly through the ranks and eventually secured an influential government position. Yusuf, by contrast, remains devoted to his dream of writing the true history of the Turkic peoples, a goal that Said regards as impractical and detached from reality. He decides to offer Yusuf a job, partly out of friendship, but also to demonstrate his own success and reverse the hierarchy that once existed between them.

Mirazim's Path Meanwhile, Mirazim is busy running his business. History never truly interested him; he ended up in the history department almost by accident. However, he was deeply attached to his friends, Yusuf and Said, and, following their example, completed his university studies. After graduation, Mirazim chose a different path. Coming from a family of successful entrepreneurs, he went into business, following in his father's footsteps. Over time, he built a thriving enterprise and now owns a large market.

A Father's Sacrifice Yusuf has little desire to return to the city. Financial difficulties weigh heavily on him, and his attempts to borrow money in the village prove unsuccessful. The resulting tension leads to an argument with his wife, overheard by his parents. The next day, his father sells the family's only cow and gives the money to Yusuf, leaving him overwhelmed with shame and gratitude.

Homeless in the City Returning to Tashkent, Yusuf learns that the owner of his rented apartment has unexpectedly returned. Unable to find a place to live, he turns to a relative living in a dormitory for help but finds no room there either. He and his wife argue over their financial difficulties, culminating in Yusuf striking her. She demands a divorce, and he ultimately sends her and their son back to the village.

New Car and Old Friends Mirazim is very happy because he has bought an expensive new German car. In the morning, he decides to take it for a drive. In the street, he meets Yusuf and invites him to get into the car so he can show it to him. He proudly presents his new vehicle and then offers Yusuf a chance to drive it. Yusuf refuses. Mirazim then suggests that they return together and have breakfast.

An Invitation to Stay Upon arriving at Mirazim's luxurious home, Yusuf is welcomed by Zahro, his former classmate and Mirazim's wife, who is pleased to see him again. Yusuf, however, feels confused and slightly overwhelmed by the wealth and opulence of his friend's house. Mirazim invites him to stay for a celebration marking the purchase of a new car and asks for his help with the preparations. Learning that Said will also attend, Yusuf agrees, hoping to reconnect with his old friend and possibly secure employment.

Behind the Luxury Servants arrive and begin preparing for the evening feast. Soon, waitresses come as well, and the young guys set out tables and chairs. At the same time, he notices Zahro's quiet

detachment as she moves through the preparations, seemingly indifferent. During breakfast, it becomes clear that since her marriage she has not worked, as she is occupied with their two daughters. Mirazim does not allow her to work, though she is still young and beautiful and longs for a more active life. While Mirazim provides for all her needs and adores their daughters, it is also evident that he has long since lost emotional interest in her.

Guests of Wealth Finally, the guests arrive, including members of the city's elite. Surrounded by wealthy and well-dressed people, Yusuf feels poor and becomes increasingly self-conscious. Said also appears and greets him only with a distant nod. Yusuf sits and eats with the servants, feeling humiliated at first, but then he begins to think that it is unfair to view them with condescension, as they are cheerful young men working at the evening gathering.

A Quiet Conversation Zahro approaches Yusuf and asks if he is bored, noting that she knows he does not like parties like this. Yusuf is captivated by her charm. She invites him for a drink. Yusuf replies that he would like to drink to her beauty. Zahro asks if he married his wife for love. He replies that he did not. Yusuf then asks Zahro to tell him about herself. She says she has long dreamed of talking to someone like him. Although she has many acquaintances, she has never truly enjoyed their company. She longs for her student years and the lectures of her favorite professors. In her current life, she feels suffocated, and Yusuf is different from the people around her.

A Promise Between Friends Finally, the guests leave. Said and Mirazim approach Yusuf, who has had a few drinks. Said embraces him warmly and asks how he is doing. Then, almost as if he were speaking before an audience, he declares that Uzbekistan is becoming independent and revealing its true face to the world, and that the country needs people like the successful businessman Mirazim and patriots like Yusuf.

Yusuf is perplexed Is Said being sincere? After all, they are old friends. It seems strange that even Mirazim, who usually dislikes such grand speeches, listens in silence. At the same time, Yusuf cannot help but feel flattered, because Said appears to be making this speech for his sake, as if acknowledging that he is someone special. Finally, Said asks for Yusuf's phone number and promises to call him. Yusuf is on the verge of admitting that he is homeless, but he cannot bring himself to complain to his wealthy and successful friends.

A Place for the Night Said invites Yusuf into his car and asks where he is living. Yusuf lies, saying that he lives far away, while privately thinking that he will have to spend the night at the train station. After a while, he asks Said to stop, pretending that he has arrived at his destination. Left alone, Yusuf stands in the street, uncertain where to go. **A man in shabby, dirty clothes approaches him and asks for a cigarette.** Yusuf recognizes him as his former neighbor, a man who is almost always drunk. He gives him his last cheap cigarette. That night, Yusuf stays in the man's filthy, squalid house.

A Life of Asceticism and a Strange Dream It is a hot summer in the village. Everyone is busy tending the crops, but Amir refuses to work. His wife, Gulshoda, does all the housework. He spends his days reading religious books, performing namaz, and fasting frequently. He eats and sleeps very little and dresses poorly. One night, Amir dreams of the Prophet Muhammad, who appears to him on a white horse and tells him to mount it. When Amir mounts the horse, he suddenly wakes up. After this, people begin to mock him, and his parents find the situation difficult to watch.

Amir's Chilla and the Question of Guidance One day, Mukhtar, the head of the mosque, tells Amir of a dream in which the Prophet instructs him to undertake a *chillah*, a forty-day spiritual retreat involving withdrawal from society, intensive prayer, fasting, and devotion. Delighted by this perceived divine calling, Amir begins the retreat, isolating himself in a dark room and subjecting himself to severe fasting and sleep deprivation. Concerned for his well-being, his father seeks Mukhtar's help. Together they devise a strategy to end the retreat: Mukhtar claims to have received another dream in which the Prophet instructs Amir to discontinue the chillah. Accepting this message, Amir abandons the practice.

A Question of Trust The morning after the gathering at the Mirazim household, Said wakes early. Over breakfast with his wife, he tells her that he is considering offering Yusuf a job. Manzur's wife urges caution. She finds it suspicious that a patriotic scholar like Yusuf would be interested in such a position and wonders whether he would remain loyal in the long run or eventually become a liability.

Seeds of Insecurity Said has always valued his wife's judgment. She comes from a family of influential government officials, and her father's connections played a significant role in helping him advance his career. As he reflects on Yusuf's intelligence, education, and potential, Said begins to feel uneasy. He fears that, given the opportunity, Yusuf might one day surpass him. In the end, he decides not to help him, though the decision leaves him with a lingering sense of insecurity.

Adapting to Change When Mirazim wakes up, his assistant enters and tells him that he has received a call from upstairs and that someone is looking for him. It soon becomes clear that everything is about to change. Mirazim is worried. That evening, he goes to see Said. Said explains the new market regulations, which prohibit vendors from selling goods laid out on the ground. The situation is not entirely bad. Although Mirazim will lose the income he receives from such vendors, he can find other ways to make up for it. Said advises him to stop wasting money on new cars and lovers and to stay vigilant. Mirazim agrees.

The Measure of Integrity When life returns to normal, Mirazim comes to the conclusion that people are still driven by greed, regardless of political changes. With enough money, everything can be settled. Although he understands that his own actions are morally indefensible, he consoles himself with the thought that everyone behaves similarly. Only Yusuf retains his integrity and remains true to his principles. Despite occasional signs of weakness, Mirazim secretly hopes that Yusuf will never change.

Zahro in the Cage of Comfort Meanwhile, Zahro is suffocated by luxury. Even her favorite pastime – caring for flowers – brings her no joy. Mirazim provides her with every comfort and refuses to let her work, leaving her unable even to do housework. They once had four servants, but Zahro begged him to dismiss them, considering them unnecessary. In the end, he agreed but kept one – Alimqul. Zahro grows increasingly angry with her husband, who has lost interest in her. He engages in affairs with various women and, without a trace of jealousy, leaves his young and beautiful wife in the company of a man full of energy and strength.

Temptation and Emotional Dissatisfaction Zahro becomes aware of Amirqul's attraction to her and is both irritated and intrigued by it. Later, during a private conversation over champagne, she encourages his openness. When Alimqul finally kisses her, she immediately recoils and sends him away. Left alone, Zahro breaks down in tears, revealing her deep emotional dissatisfaction and inner conflict.

The Value of Integrity After this incident, Zahro begins treating Alimqul coldly. In her eyes, he seems driven by greed, concerned only with money and willing to profit from anything. Disillusioned, she falls into despair. During this time, whenever Mirazim brings Yusuf to the house, she finds herself increasingly drawn to him. He appears to be the only truly honest man among those around her. Yet Zahro knows little of poverty. She cannot fully understand what it means for Yusuf and his family to live in hardship, relying on chance and uncertain fortunes from one day to the next.

The Burden of Righteousness After the *chilla*, Amir becomes increasingly absent-minded. He spends much of his time reading religious books, praying, and arguing with those around him. One day, he even assaults the mosque mullah, accusing him of having been a womanizer in his youth. Later, when Gulshoda and the children gather leftover hay from the fields after the harvest, Amir returns it all, believing it to be ill-gotten property, even though it would otherwise go to waste and no one objects to them taking it.

Amir's Departure Gulshoda sells her only cow and uses the proceeds to buy food and clothes for Amir and the children. She carefully hides the remaining money. Amir takes the money and goes to the district center. There, he meets an old beggar, feeds him, and buys him clothes. He then escorts him to a village near Mount Ulug'tog'. He intends to return but is drawn to the mountain and continues onward toward it.

Bound in the Mountains Amir walks for about two hours, growing exhausted. He wants to greet the morning in Ulug'tog'. He sees a fire and a yurt. As he approaches, three men suddenly attack him and bind his hands. They bring him to an old man, claiming they have caught a thief who has stolen his sheep. The old man strikes him on the head. Amir tries to explain that he is not a thief, but they do not believe him. The old man demands to know where the sheep are. They then tie Amir to a stone, strip him naked, and say they will not release him until he reveals where the sheep are.

Tormented by Hunger During summer vacation, Yusuf lives in a dormitory and spends his money on rent. Forced to find temporary work, he faces fierce competition and struggles to secure a job. One day, he returns home exhausted and hungry. All he has left is bread, but he finds cockroaches and ants crawling on it. Tormented by hunger, he goes to the communal kitchen and sees food in a pot. As he quietly approaches to take some, he suddenly feels ashamed and wonders if he is becoming a thief. Overwhelmed with emotion, he throws the dish down, and it breaks.

Balance of Talent and Wealth Two of Yusuf's students, finding him at the market waiting for work as a hired hand, decided to help him. They invited him to work on the construction of a huge, luxurious house for a wealthy man. He accepted and began working there as an assistant builder. The students were perplexed why such an erudite man was working as a hired hand. Yusuf half-jokingly remarked that it was necessary for balance: one was smart, the other handsome... If Yusuf were both erudite and wealthy, what would the wealthy employer have left?

Shadows from Home Yusuf receives a letter from the village: his young son and his brother Amir are ill. Yusuf tries to collect his salary from his employer and hurries to the village. After the brothers bring Amir down from the mountains to the village, the villagers complain to the district administration about his mental condition. As a result, he is placed in a psychiatric hospital.

A Doctor's Visit The doctor prescribes a large amount of medication. Yusuf asks whether such a heavy dosage could be dangerous for a small boy, but the doctor replies that he knows better. Yusuf's father collects the debt and pays for the medication. His friend, Dr. Mansur, arrives from the city, and Yusuf hopes he will be able to help his son. Mansur goes to examine the boy. Forty minutes pass. Growing impatient, Yusuf enters his son's room – and is met with a horrific scene.

Unanswered Treatment Two doctors and Mansur joke and laugh. The child lies with his eyes closed, a tube in his mouth. Yusuf is overcome with nausea. When he returns, the doctors have already gathered around the boy. Mansur says the treatment has failed and that he cannot be saved. The other doctor adds that they will call him when everything is ready. These words deeply affect Yusuf. "What will be ready, you bastard?" he screams and hits the doctor. He knocks over the nightstand, scattering medication everywhere. In the confusion, he notices the unused medication he brought with him, still lying there untouched.

The Last Breath Oygul and Yusuf stand over their son. He can barely breathe. Yusuf leans down and kisses the boy's hands, tears streaming down his face. The boy opens his eyes, barely able to move his gaze from his mother to his father, his pupils trembling. Then he looks at his father and whispers faintly, "Papa", tears filling his eyes. He closes his eyes, and the tears continue to flow. Something snaps deep within Yusuf's soul – he can almost hear it. He lets out a low, guttural sound, like a wounded tiger.

Family Vote for Summer In August, Mirazim usually goes on vacation with his family. He lets his wife and daughters decide where to go. A family vote leads to most choosing Antalya, although his youngest daughter prefers Sydney.

A Woman Born to Nurture Said and his wife, Manzura, are traveling across America with their children. Manzura is far from an ordinary tourist. She tries to tell everyone everything about the country, as if she knows it inside and out. It seems as though she was born to be a teacher. Said, the son of a village shopkeeper and a humble schoolteacher, has always been drawn to a life of luxury. When he was young, his father's store was subjected to a thorough inspection, and his father lost his livelihood. Yet Said's longing for a more prosperous life never faded. That yearning remained deep within him, and in time, fate brought him together with Manzura.

Luxury and Dependence Thanks to Manzura, however, many of his dreams have come true. At her suggestion, the family visits Hollywood. Now they are dining in an upscale restaurant. Although Said enjoys fine clothes and expensive surroundings, he is uncomfortable with the extent to which his life is shaped by his wife.

Bitterness Yusuf washes up and sits down to a meager breakfast. He is devastated by his son's death and funeral. Poor, hungry, and exhausted, he can think of nothing but how to survive and find his

next meal. In such a state, he cannot even dream of writing a great story. A deep resentment boils within him – toward people, toward society, toward the world itself. What frightens him most is the thought that if everyone is truly like this, what future awaits them? Yet no matter how hard he tries, he cannot rid himself of his bitterness.

Cruel game Yusuf decides to go to Tashkent. Before leaving, he stops at the district hospital to visit his brother. When he enters the room, he finds his brother playing a game with two mentally ill men. As he draws closer, he is horrified. The men are plucking feathers from a live turtledove, which is already nearly bare. Unable to bear the sight, Yusuf instinctively closes his eyes and walks away.

The Weight of Resentment The orderly notices Yusuf leaving and calls out that Amir is there. Hearing his name, Amir sees Yusuf and quickly approaches him. He looks healthy and first offers condolences for Yusuf's son's death. Then he suddenly asks Yusuf to take him away from the hospital, saying he is hungry. Confused, Yusuf wonders whether the doctors will ever discharge him and end his strange behavior. Amir bristles at the question, asking whether Yusuf truly believes he has gone mad. Yusuf glances at the turtledove and the cruel game nearby. Amir explains that everything changed after the unjust punishment he suffered in the mountains. Looking into his eyes, Yusuf sees the same resentment he feels within himself, and he feels disgust toward both himself and his brother.

The Shoe Store Scholar Yusuf works in a shoe store. He helps customers, showing them different shoes and explaining their quality and price. The work makes him feel self-conscious, and he often thinks, "After all those years of study, this is what I've ended up doing". One day, he runs into a former colleague from the university. With a hint of sarcasm, the man asks, "So this is where you work now?" A surge of resentment rises within Yusuf, and he answers curtly, "Yes." The professor understands his predicament and advises him not to sever all ties with his former profession. Yusuf says he will think about it. However, the conversation leaves him even more upset.

A Shift in Power Said is tired of obeying his wife's requests. Now that he holds a high position, how can he continue to submit to her? Recently, at a dinner party, she scolds him in front of everyone, making him blush with embarrassment. Since then, he has begun to distance himself from her. When she asks him to send a car for groceries, he abruptly refuses, saying, "Take a taxi." Manzura does not expect such a response. Still, she knows how to handle situations like this and begins thinking about how she might get back at him.

From Love to Hatred Yusuf receives his salary in dollars. He has never had so much money before. His boss promotes him, and he is set to earn even more. As he walks through the streets, he looks at people around him, as if searching for their gaze. He wants to say, "I have become like you all. If I wanted, I could be even richer". Yet he feels empty. "When I was poor and modest, my soul was full of love. I have abandoned my beloved profession, my son, and my family. My love has turned into hatred".

Amir's Return Amir is discharged from the hospital and returns to live with his parents. He spends his days watching television, lying around the house, or sitting at the local teahouse. Whenever he sees people talking, he joins the conversation and often blurts out something inappropriate. One day, a villager tells him that he should never have stopped his *chilla* and that Mukhtar's dream, which persuaded him to stop, was nothing but a lie. Enraged, Amir goes to find Mukhtar and beats him. As a result, he is admitted to a psychiatric hospital once again.

Lost Promise Amir reflects on his life. Once, he was talented and full of promise: he wrote poetry, graduated from high school with honors, and entered university with ease. However, he was unlucky in love; the woman he loved married someone else, and afterward he lost interest in everything. Later, he married Gulshoda, a sickly woman, largely out of pity. He completed his studies, worked as a teacher, and began research. They had children, and he should have focused on his family and his wife's care. Instead, circumstances forced him back to his village, where he gradually turned to religion and ultimately became a fanatic.

A Favor for a Friend Yusuf begins earning more money. He dreams of buying a house and helping his parents and brother, so he carefully sets aside part of his income. One day, a friend from university comes to visit him. The friend now works as a market vendor and is in need of money. He asks Yusuf for a loan. Yusuf explains that he plans to visit his parents the following week and needs the money for

the trip. His friend promises to repay the loan soon. Trusting him, Yusuf gradually lends him the money. Days turn into weeks, and weeks into months, but his friend never repays the debt.

Nothing Is Enough Mirazim is in a bad mood. Not because his business is struggling – on the contrary, it is thriving, and his profits continue to grow. His father taught him that if you achieve enough, the whole world belongs to you. Mirazim has always believed this, and he has obtained nearly everything he has ever wanted. Constantly searching for new excitement, he indulges in pleasure after pleasure. He changes cars, moves from one relationship to another, and pursues every distraction that catches his interest. Yet each new thrill quickly loses its appeal.

The French Actress Once, Mirazim used his wealth to arrange a meeting with a world-famous French actress. Two days later, he sent her away along with the money he had promised her. Despite having everything he once desired, Mirazim felt an overwhelming emptiness inside. In moments of bitterness, he found himself cursing the very money that had made his life possible.

Mother's Warning Gulshoda prepares a simple meal. Earlier, she and her children gathered the last remaining wheat from the fields and laid it out to dry before it could be ground into flour. Suddenly, she falls ill. Her chronic shortness of breath returns, and a doctor is called. When she recovers, she finds her son sitting beside her. She asks whether he resents having such poor and helpless parents. The boy gently replies that everything comes from God. Gulshoda immediately becomes enraged. She scolds him and says, "Don't be like your father. Think of yourself. Look after your own interests". The boy is startled by her outburst.

The Lingering Noose Gulshoda lies in bed. Although the attack has passed, she has no desire to get up. She feels ashamed in front of her son, for she has said the opposite of what she once taught him. Children can take care of themselves, she thinks. They no longer need sick parents. Why would they need me in this situation? Oh God, why have You made me so miserable? Take my life too. She gets up, takes a rope, and ties it to a hook in the ceiling. She puts the noose around her neck and recites the Quran. And suddenly she thinks: What am I doing? Gulshoda gets down from the chair, but in a panic, she hesitates, she forgets to remove the noose. She is left hanging in the air.

Like Fledglings Amir is at home. After Gulshoda's death, his parents take him and the children in. Amir pays little attention to the children. Seeing this, his mother cries and pleads with him to be kinder to them. Sometimes Amir thinks of them as swallows – just fledglings. Tears fill his eyes, but nothing more. Soon, he drifts back into his own thoughts. One day, he sees the children swimming in a ditch and joins them. They stay in the water until evening, when Odil returns from work and drives them away.

Between Desire and Betrayal Yusuf calls Zahro. When he arrives, Alimqul opens the door and says, "Mirazim isn't home". Zahro, however, invites Yusuf inside and asks Alimqul to leave. Reluctantly, he goes, leaving them alone. Yusuf and Zahro drink wine together. As Yusuf looks at her, her gaze invites his touch. He rises nervously, and she does the same. They slowly move toward each other. Amid white sheets, Yusuf feels a sense of betrayal, yet at the same time the forbidden moment feels even more intoxicating.

Change in Zahro Zahro is happy. She cares for her daughter with renewed joy and is even kinder than usual to her husband, Mirazim. One morning, she helps him straighten his clothes and tie his tie before he leaves. Mirazim barely notices. Suddenly embarrassed, Zahro scolds him in her thoughts and calls him a fool. Alimqul, meanwhile, is puzzled by the change in her behavior. Something is different. Most surprising of all, she has neglected her favorite pastime – caring for her flowers. Those duties have been left to Alimqul, who cannot understand why.

From Resentment to Hatred Yusuf is getting his finances in order. Salary increases no longer surprise him. His boss earns far more than he does, and foreign entrepreneurs are drawn to his country by its cheap labor. He has managed to save some money, but if he continues paying off the debt and never recovers what he lent, he will never be able to get ahead. After the latest incident involving the debt and the disparity in wages, his resentment has hardened into hatred.

A Sudden Change of Heart Yusuf's former student, Shavkat, approaches him, crying and saying that his father has died and that he needs money. Yusuf replies coldly, "May God bless him". Shavkat says nothing, embarrassed, and quietly leaves. Yusuf hurries to meet Zahro and gets into a taxi. On the

way, he suddenly asks the driver to turn around. He arrives at the dormitory where Shavkat lives. Despite the guard's objections, he goes up to the seventh floor and finds Shavkat, head bowed, near the elevator. Yusuf apologizes, gives him the money, and tells him not to return it. Before Shavkat can speak, he quickly runs back to the taxi.

Uncertain Promotion Said has changed jobs and been given a new assignment: to lead the writing of a new story. He is confused – whether this is a demotion or a promotion is unclear to him. According to Manzura, his boss is soon retiring, and further changes are expected. This leaves him slightly uneasy. In two weeks, his boss, Tursunov, will retire. Feeling increasingly anxious, he calls Yusuf, realizing he needs him now more than ever, as Yusuf is a rare connoisseur of history.

Remembered in Hard Times Said visits Yusuf not on the appointed day, but a week later, bringing drinks with him. He apologizes and explains that he was suspended from work on the day they were supposed to meet. Yusuf is perplexed. As they drink, Said invites Yusuf to help him work on a new story. He then admits that he was troubled when he learned that Yusuf was working in a store. In his opinion, Yusuf was far better suited to the position he once held. Yusuf feels uneasy. It seems strange that his friend has remembered him only now. When Said was successful and flourishing, he had all but forgotten about him.

The End of an Affair Yusuf and Zahro are at a restaurant. Zahro notices his uneasiness and asks whether he is considering ending their relationship. Yusuf is tormented by feelings of guilt toward his friend, Mirazim, even though neither of them is the same person they were in their youth. At first, he justified his actions with the hatred that once consumed him. However, his feelings for Zahro have gradually changed him, and he is increasingly troubled by remorse. Zahro admits that she shares Yusuf's feelings, although she does not regret their relationship or her betrayal of her husband. In her view, Mirazim deserves it. But Yusuf confesses that he can no longer ignore his conscience and suggests that they separate. Reluctantly, Zahro agrees.

The Signature Said returns home drunk. Manzura greets him with visible anger. When he stumbles and falls, she watches him with cold detachment. Also present is a lawyer friend whom she has invited for the occasion. Taking advantage of Said's intoxicated state, Manzura pressures him into signing an agreement transferring all his assets, including his property, money, and car, to her.

The Bitter Truth When Said wakes up, he finds the house empty. As the events of the previous night come back to him, he is overwhelmed by the gravity of what has happened. Convinced that he has lost everything, he sinks into despair. Soon, Manzura arrives and reveals the reason behind her actions. She explains that after her husband's mentor leaves his position, a major purge within the administration is expected. In such a climate, Said's assets could easily be confiscated. By transferring everything to her, she has taken a calculated risk to protect him. Though angered by her deception, Said ultimately accepts her decision. Yet the bitterness of the experience lingers in his soul.

A Return of Hope With the departure of Tursunov, a high-ranking official widely regarded as a symbol of bribery and corruption, the social and spiritual climate begins to change. A healthier atmosphere starts to emerge, and newspapers and magazines become more active, independent, and outspoken. These developments inspire new hope in Yusuf and give him the feeling that he is no longer alone. He begins to consider returning to his former profession, though he remains uncertain whether he can achieve the balance between spiritual fulfillment and material well-being that he seeks.

A Lesson on Balance Yusuf returns to the university. He stands in the lecture hall, about to begin his lecture. Despite everything he has been through, he feels nervous. The students wait expectantly, while a quiet giggle can be heard somewhere in the hall. Yusuf begins: "Let us dedicate our first lesson to balance – the search for balance within ourselves and in the world around us; within society; between states and nations; and, ultimately, throughout the world and the universe". The students listen in attentive silence.

The Cow Returns Home Yusuf receives his salary from the company and goes to the village livestock market, where he buys a pedigree dairy cow. People watch with curiosity as the elegantly dressed man leads the cow through the village streets. Yusuf recalls how his father once sold a cow to help him. He also notices how much the villagers have changed. Instead of waiting for the state to provide for them, everyone is busy working and finding ways to earn a living. His father and brothers raise sheep, do

carpentry, and grow rice. When Yusuf tries to give his father money to help the family, his father refuses to accept it.

Through Memory Yusuf is returning to the city by bus. As it moves, he is suddenly pulled into a childhood memory: trudging through the snow while a heavy bus loomed over him, as if crushing him. He hears a horn and turns, seeing the bus and the driver. In horror, he realizes that the driver is not an eight-year-old child, but a 38-year-old man. Yusuf snaps back to reality. He is sitting on the bus. A sharp pain presses in his chest. The bus jerks forward, and he hears someone's nervous laughter nearby. He looks out the window and sees Amir running barefoot, dressed only in his underwear. Amir runs through the snow, keeping pace with the bus. When he draws level with it, he kicks it and laughs. Something breaks inside Yusuf. He sinks down in his seat and thinks, "Has it really started all over again?" People glance at him. He knows he needs to get up...

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

YUSUF

Yusuf represents a generation of Uzbek intellectuals during the transitional period of the 1990s. Guided by noble ideals, he strives to find a balance between spiritual fulfillment and material reality. Enduring the trials of an era of profound change, he encounters both failures and triumphs, emerging wiser but forever transformed.

Conscientious Yusuf is conscientious by nature and never completely loses that quality. It is precisely his strong conscience that makes it difficult for him to adapt to a changing world, especially when his friends are willing to act against their own moral principles. When circumstances push him to betray his conscience, he cannot live with the consequences for long and inevitably strives to return to his true nature. Even when he stumbles – whether by betraying a friend through an affair with his wife or by turning away a student in need – his conscience compels him to make amends. He ends his relationship with Zahro and, only minutes after refusing the student, seeks him out to offer the help he had denied him.

Idealistic Guided by noble ideals, Yusuf dreams of writing the true history of his people and showing the world who they really were, restoring a past that had been distorted during the Soviet era. However, when society becomes preoccupied with material concerns, his aspirations seem increasingly irrelevant. This deeply troubles him. As he begins to witness positive changes in society, a new dream takes shape. He comes to believe that the younger generation must be inspired by the idea of building a prosperous, healthy, and just society. Convinced that these values must be passed on to the youth, he decides to return to the university.

Thoughtful Yusuf appears passive at first glance, more an observer than a participant. Beneath this surface, however, his mind is constantly active and deeply reflective. He contemplates the sometimes merciless nature of human beings, as he does at his grandmother's funeral. He watches his mentally ill brother with pain and compassion, reflecting on the uneasy relationship between religious ideals and the realities of life. Driven by a continuous search for truth, Yusuf strives to understand the world and find balance within it, without compromising his enduring belief in goodness.

SAID

This is the portrait of a government official who climbs quickly through the ranks, only to ultimately fail. In the unfolding of these events, his true nature is laid bare.

Pragmatic From a young age, he was drawn to a comfortable, privileged life and always aspired to it. Whenever an opportunity appeared, he seized it without hesitation. After graduating from university, when he was offered a position in politics, he accepted it eagerly, unlike Yusuf. Later, when he met Manzura, the daughter of a government official, he once again seized the opportunity and married without love. Even after losing his position, he approaches Yusuf, believing he can still benefit from his changed circumstances, inviting him to help write a new story – something he had failed to do when Yusuf was going through hardship.

Adaptable He adapts quickly to change. Following political and social shifts in society, he adjusts with ease. It is often difficult to understand what he truly thinks. When he meets Yusuf, he speaks confidently about the future of his homeland, almost as if addressing an audience from a podium. Unlike Yusuf, there is no irony in his words. When his superior leaves office, he effortlessly repositions himself, becoming once again an old acquaintance who admires Yusuf, recognizing his intelligence and charisma.

MIRAZIM

Opportunistic Mirazim grew up in a businessman's family. His father always taught him that if you want to succeed, you must seize every opportunity. Mirazim embraces this philosophy and pursues his goals by whatever means prove effective. When necessary, he relies on connections, and when that fails, he does not hesitate to resort to bribery to achieve his objectives.

Materialistic For Mirazim, material possessions and physical pleasures take precedence over everything else. Spiritual values hold little interest for him. He is drawn to anything that brings comfort, status, or enjoyment: expensive cars, beautiful women, lavish parties, and entertainment. In his youth, he was captivated by Zahro's beauty, but after their marriage, his interest in her gradually faded. He provides her with every material comfort and assumes that this should be enough to make her happy. As a result, he is completely confident of her fidelity, unaware that she longs for something more than wealth and luxury can provide.

Genuine Although Mirazim has little interest in spiritual values, he is genuine in both his feelings and convictions. He truly loves his daughters and is willing to do anything for them. He is honest with himself and openly acknowledges that money alone cannot bring true happiness. Despite his materialistic outlook, he deeply respects Yusuf's honesty and commitment to high ideals. Even when life seems determined to break Yusuf, Mirazim does not want him to become like everyone else. In his own way, he admires the qualities he himself lacks.

AMIR

Amir occupies a central place in the novel. Through his tragic fate, the author presents him as a figure shaped and ultimately destroyed by historical transition. He becomes a victim not only of social change but also of the structural contradictions and moral complexities of the old regime.

Persistent Amir remains unwavering in his faith in God; nothing can alter his convictions. Despite life's hardships, he continues to adhere to religious principles that are nearly impossible to follow in the modern world. His devotion to faith outweighs his responsibilities as a father, husband, and professional, creating a profound imbalance in his life. Neither the death of his wife, the ridicule of his fellow villagers, nor confinement in a psychiatric hospital can shake his beliefs. Although his heart is filled with bitterness over life's injustices and the consequences of his own fanaticism, he neither wants nor is able to abandon the path he has chosen.

Kind Amir is kind by nature. He married Gulshoda not out of love but out of compassion for her illness. When he was falsely accused, tied to a rock, and publicly humiliated, he wept for the old shepherd who tearfully begged for his money back after being unjustly beaten. Despite his own suffering, Amir felt deep sympathy for the man. Yet his kindness was gradually eroded by the cruelty and ingratitude he encountered. The lack of appreciation for his compassion fueled a rebellion within his soul, and the bitterness that accumulated over the years eventually manifested itself in cruelty when he took part in the torture of a helpless bird in the psychiatric hospital.

Tragic Amir is a tragic figure, unable to adapt to a changing reality. Gifted, passionate, and rebellious in his youth, he encountered a series of harsh and unexpected disappointments. First came unattainable love, followed by the burdens of family life, the responsibility of caring for his children and his ailing wife, and the abandonment of his dream of pursuing a scientific career. In this gray and difficult existence, religion offered him a sense of purpose and solace. For a time, it seemed to provide the answers he sought. Ultimately, however, it could neither save him nor help him find himself. Unable to strike a balance between the spiritual and the material, Amir gradually lost his equilibrium, and this failure led to his decline.

THEMES

POLITICS

Conflict The novel is set during a turbulent period in Uzbekistan's history, when the country was gaining independence while simultaneously confronting the economic crisis that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. The shift to a market economy and the breakdown of the former social and moral order are depicted as especially difficult for the intelligentsia, whose members are most vulnerable to these changes. The experiences of the novel's main characters reflect the pressures of this transitional era, while the protagonist embodies the central conflict between idealism and reality.

Illustrative Moment: Yusuf, now homeless, lives in the house of Ergash, a former neighbor from whom he once rented a room. Ergash was formerly a university physics professor, but after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ensuing political and economic transformations, his profession lost much of its prestige and social value. His wife, once a kindergarten teacher, turned to small-scale market trading to support the family. Years of financial hardship eventually led to the dissolution of their marriage. Living in poverty and isolation, Ergash falls into deep depression and alcoholism, frequently borrowing money even to buy food. Yusuf sees in him a disturbing reflection of his own possible future and fears that he may ultimately share the same fate. Through Ergash's fate, the novel illustrates the vulnerability of segments of the Uzbek intelligentsia during the turbulent socioeconomic transformations of the 1990s.

SOCIETY

Religion Religion is one of the novel's central themes, shaping both the protagonist's inner life and the author's vision of society. After decades of suppression during the Soviet era, religion reemerges as a source of spiritual guidance and moral renewal in independent Uzbekistan. Yet the revival of religious traditions proves difficult because many people lack a deep knowledge of religious teachings and practices. Through the character of Amir, the novel examines the challenges of restoring Islamic values in a rapidly changing society. His struggle to reconcile religious ideals with the realities of modern life ultimately leads to personal disillusionment and tragedy.

Illustrative Moment: One day, the mosque leader Mukhtar tells Amir of a dream in which the Prophet instructs him to undertake a *chilla* (i'tikaf), a forty-day spiritual retreat devoted to worship, prayer, and spiritual discipline. Delighted by this perceived calling, Amir decides to undertake the retreat. He isolates himself in a dark room, sleeping only two hours a day and spending the remainder of his time in prayer. By the seventh day, he has become severely weakened but forces himself to continue. Suddenly, he hears laughter and sees a large gray head above him. The figure identifies himself as Bahauddin Naqshband, the fourteenth-century Sufi saint and founder of the Naqshbandi order, laughs, and then disappears. At that moment, the door opens and Amir's father, Odil, enters. Attempting to persuade his son to leave, he explains that a *chilla* should not be undertaken without the guidance of a spiritual teacher. Amir refuses and pushes his father away, leaving Odil deeply distressed. This episode highlights the tensions between religious idealism and practical reality.

PSYCHOLOGY

Moral Conflict / Ambivalent Grief In the novel, the author places greater emphasis on the protagonist's inner life than on external action. His sensitive nature is revealed subtly, in all its contradictions. He continuously reflects on and evaluates his own behavior, often harshly criticizing both himself and human weaknesses and moral failings. His idealistic worldview frequently comes into conflict with the harsh realities of a materially driven society.

Illustrative Moment: Yusuf learns of his grandmother's death and, to his surprise, initially regards it as a relief, as she was very old and had long wished for God to take her. However, he soon becomes tormented by the thought: "How vile I am". At the funeral, observing that others share similar emotions and reactions, he gradually calms down. The villagers eat heartily and discuss their income from cotton and wheat fields, while the hardships of their lives are visible on every face. Nevertheless, Yusuf cannot escape the feeling that his relief at the death of his once strong, powerful, and beloved grandmother is somehow cruel. In this scene, the author highlights the complexity and contradictions of human nature.

RELATIONSHIPS

Marriage The novel depicts marriage and family life as sources of tension, responsibility, and disappointment rather than fulfillment. Yusuf marries without love, believing that a shared background and mutual support will be sufficient to sustain a family. However, these expectations prove inadequate. His brother's wife, Gulshoda, silently bears the burdens of family life and never complains about her husband, yet she ultimately succumbs to despair and takes her own life. Said's family is portrayed as lacking sincerity and driven by self-interest, while Mirazim and Zahro, despite living in material comfort, find neither emotional intimacy nor mutual understanding in their marriage; both yearn for a different kind of love. Through these relationships, the novel presents family life not as a refuge from hardship but as a sphere marked by emotional strain, sacrifice, and disillusionment.

Illustrative Moment: When Yusuf returns to Tashkent with his wife and son, he receives unexpected and distressing news: the owner of the apartment they are renting, who was not supposed to return from Moscow for another year, has come back early. Yusuf and his family hurriedly pack their belongings and leave. With nowhere else to go, they seek help from a distant relative who lives in a dormitory. However, strict security rules do not allow outsiders to stay there. The relative offers Yusuf a place for the night, but he feels uncomfortable squeezing his family into a single dormitory room. He suggests staying at a hotel, but his wife objects, arguing that they cannot afford such an expense. The discussion turns into a bitter argument, and in a moment of anger Yusuf slaps her. Outraged, she demands a divorce. Unable to find another solution, Yusuf sends his wife and son back to the village. In this episode, the relationship between husband and wife is characterized by a lack of mutual understanding, emotional support, and growing alienation.

Betrayal In the novel, the affair between Zahro and Yusuf results in betrayal on both sides: Yusuf betrays his friend, while Zahro betrays her husband. Both attempt to justify their actions. Yusuf blames social inequality and injustice, which have thwarted his good intentions, deprived him of a fulfilling family life, and taken away his young son. Deep down, he harbors a desire for revenge against Mirazim, whose life is defined by wealth and privilege. Yet Yusuf himself is motivated more by desire than by genuine love. Zahro, for her part, seeks revenge for her husband's repeated infidelities by entering into an extramarital relationship, although her actions are also influenced by her growing romantic feelings for Yusuf. Despite their efforts at self-justification, both are ultimately consumed by guilt and remorse.

Illustrative Moment: As they clinked glasses, Yusuf felt a troubling sense of freedom stir within him. Until that moment, conflicting emotions had been at war in his heart, but desire was gradually gaining the upper hand. Suddenly emboldened, he took Zahro's hands and looked deeply into her eyes. Zahro, too, seemed overcome by an unfamiliar force. She trembled slightly but did not pull away, meeting his gaze with quiet acceptance. Once they entered the bedroom, Yusuf no longer felt intimidated by the luxury that surrounded him. The paralyzing awareness that Zahro was his friend's wife slowly faded, giving way to the force of his emotions and desires.

SEXUALITY

Desire In the novel, desire is portrayed as a powerful human impulse that shapes characters' moral, psychological, and emotional lives. In a society where spiritual and emotional bonds are often weakened, physical attraction frequently takes the place of deeper forms of love. Amir associates his growing frustration and psychological distress with the lack of intimacy in his marriage, which he attributes to his wife's recurring illnesses. Yusuf's relationship with Zahro is likewise influenced as much by physical attraction as by genuine emotional attachment. Zahro, meanwhile, struggles with unfulfilled emotional and physical desires. Although she eventually betrays her husband, her actions are motivated not only by physical attraction but also by a longing for emotional fulfillment and genuine human connection.

Illustrative Moment: Zahro becomes increasingly irritated by the way Alimqul looks at her. When she finally confronts him, he admits that she is beautiful and claims that, despite her comfortable life, she is lonely and unhappy. Although Zahro is shocked by his boldness, Alimqul insists that he fears her, not her husband, before abruptly ending the conversation and leaving. Later, after hosting a friend and putting her daughters to bed, Zahro invites Alimqul to share a glass of champagne. Their conversation turns personal, and she directly asks whether he desires her. Encouraged by her words, Alimqul embraces and kisses her. Though Zahro initially does not resist, she quickly regains control, pushes him away, and orders him to leave. Afterward, overwhelmed with emotion, she breaks down in tears.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What symbolic meanings do the novel's main characters convey?
2. In what ways does Yusuf differ from the other characters?
3. Why does Mirazim (Yusuf's complete opposite) want Yusuf to remain unchanged?
4. Can the relationship between Zahro and Yusuf be considered love?
5. How would you interpret the ending of the novel, particularly the scene in which the mentally ill Amir runs after the bus?
6. Does Yusuf achieve the balance he is searching for?