

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Ma'suma /Masuma (2022)

Isajon Sulton (1967–)

OVERVIEW

Author Isajon Sulton is one of the distinctive writers of the generation that emerged during the years of Uzbek independence. He was born on April 6, 1967, in the Fergana region of Uzbekistan. He graduated from the Faculty of Journalism at Tashkent State University in 1990. His first story, “Munojot” (“Supplication”), was published the same year. He is the author of *Boqiy darbadar* (*The Eternal Wanderer*, 2010), *Ozod* (*Ozod*, a male given name, literally “free”, 2012), *Bog'i Eram* (*Eram Garden*, 2015), *Hazrati Khizr izidan* (*In the Footsteps of Saint Khidr*, 2018), *Bilga xoqon* (*Bilge Qaghan*, 2019), *Alisher Navoiy* (*Alisher Navoi*, 2021), and *Ma'suma* (*Masuma*, 2022). He received the Union of Writers of Uzbekistan Prize (2012), the title of Honored Cultural Figure of the Republic of Uzbekistan (2014), and the title of People's Writer of Uzbekistan (2021). His prose is characterized by a synthesis of classical Eastern philosophy and a contemporary postmodern worldview.

Novel *Masuma* (2022) tells the tragic story of a talented actress who becomes a victim of the injustice and cruelty of an autocratic regime. The action spans 1918 to 1946, with its final events set in 1946, shortly after World War II. The author examines this period of the region's history from a contemporary perspective – a time of profound social and cultural transformation, the emergence of new forms of art and literature, and its darkest chapter: Stalinist repression. The novel portrays, from within, the psychological suffering, humiliation, and degradation experienced by individuals subjected to repression, revealing the impact of a society governed by fear.

Background The novel is based on real events and historical figures. Although it centers on the life and fate of Ma'suma Qoriyeva, one of the first actresses of the Uzbek stage, its broader context is the *Jadid* movement, a reformist intellectual movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that sought to modernize education, culture, and society in Central Asia. The narrative includes cameo appearances by prominent representatives of this movement, such as Abdulla Qodiriy, Cho'lpon, Oltoy, and Mannon Uyg'ur, among others. In constructing these characters, the author draws on historical events, documentary sources, and the recollections of contemporaries.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

<i>Masuma</i>	A theater actress
<i>Bosithon</i>	Masuma's husband, a government official
<i>Abduvohid Qori</i>	Masuma's father-in-law, an imam of the Sharia court
<i>Og'a</i>	A theater director
<i>Boiskhon</i>	Bosithon's brother, a poet and government official
<i>O'lmas</i>	Masuma's adoptive mother
<i>Aziz Sobirov</i>	A theatre actor
<i>Botirkhon</i>	Masuma's elder son
<i>Shavkatkhon</i>	Masuma's younger son

SYNOPSIS

The events begin in the early 20th century, around 1918. Masuma, the adopted daughter of O'lmas and her husband, shows her acting talent to her neighbors. One of the neighboring women promises to take her to the newly founded Uzbek Theater. There, she meets Bosithon, and they marry a year later. He comes from a noble, educated family with ties to the arts and supporters of the *Jadid* movement. They have two sons. Noticing Masuma's passion for theater, Bosithon introduces her to the chief director, who casts her in *Halima*. Her performance brings her great fame, making her one of the first women on stage. The troupe tours the region, facing hostility and difficulties from audiences, and accidents occur. The theater prepares *Hamlet*, in which Masuma plays *Gertrude*. Despite hardships, the production becomes a triumph for the theater. Stalin's purges loom over the country as creative intellectuals, writers, and influential leaders are arrested. The NKVD (the Soviet secret police) detains Masuma's husband, father-in-law, and brother-in-law. She is left without direction or support. At work, people distance themselves from her. The theater director remains publicly distant, but privately admits he

cannot resist the tide. Masuma is given no roles, but she continues to go to the theater because she has nowhere else to go. The boys do not go to school because they are shunned as enemies of the people. Two men in uniform come to the theater and inform Masuma that her husband was executed as an enemy of the people and her father-in-law died in prison. She conceals her despair. The director gives her theatre household duties. World War II begins, and hoping to remove the stigma of being labeled “enemies of the people”, Masuma’s sons volunteer for military service. Left alone, Masuma spends her days working on a plot of land outside the city, a garden dedicated to a theatre she herself helped create. The war ends, and six months pass without any news of her sons. With money raised by the theater staff, she travels to Moscow to learn their fate. Military archives inform her of their heroic deaths. Overcome with grief, Masuma dies in a hotel.

SCENES

Spring in the Old City The 1920s. Spring in Tashkent (then part of Turkestan, now the capital of Uzbekistan). In a house in the Old City (the historic, traditional part of the city), several women are busy with household chores. They are preparing cotton for a mattress. The mistress of the house is O’lmas. One of the women jokes with Masuma, asking why her face is so fresh and whether she washes it with milk. Masuma, a young girl, blushes and replies, “It’s just my face”. Sora explains that her own face was once as white as milk and her eyebrows black, but after giving birth, her appearance changed. Masuma replies, “Well, ask your son.” Then Sora tells her to stop bragging and asks her to impersonate their elderly neighbor.

Masuma’s Performance Masuma skillfully imitates an elderly woman, making the women laugh. Then O’lmas asks her to sing. When her father was alive, she used to attend the theater and once saw *Layla and Majnun* performed by a troupe from Baku (a historic cultural center in Azerbaijan, famous for its rich traditions in music and theater). She memorized all the characters’ lines and songs. She then begins to sing a song from the production. The women listen and enjoy her singing.

Masuma’s Story Masuma was the daughter of a young couple from Ufa (a city in Russia, known as a cultural and historical center of the Bashkir region) who moved to Tashkent. They lived in the area. Both parents died of illness, leaving behind a little girl named Sadia. O’lmas and her husband adopted the girl and gave her a new name – Masuma. Now she has grown up and is 16 years old. The women tease her, saying it is time for her to get married.

Masuma and the Promise of the Theatre One of the women, Munis, tells Masuma some good news: a theatre has opened in Turkestan (now Uzbekistan). Her husband promises to take her there, and she invites Masuma to join them. She then asks the other women for permission, but none agree, as their husbands do not allow it. She says she will let them know when she goes to the theatre. That evening, lightning strikes, which frightens her.

Arrival at Eski Jo’va A few days later, Munis and Masuma go to a theatre performance in the Eski Jo’va market (a historic market area in central Tashkent near Chorsu Square). The bazaar is crowded and noisy. Masuma looks around curiously, and Munisa hurries her along. They reach the square, where Munis’s husband meets them. He points to a curtained stage set up in the square, where a crowd has gathered, waiting for the performance to begin.

An Unexpected Encounter At that moment, a young man approaches Munisa’s husband and greets him. He calls him “Bosithon”. The young man explains that he has come to watch the performance and to help, as his father’s friends have organized it. He glances sideways at Masuma. Noticing his glance, Masuma feels uneasy and hides behind Munis.

A Satirical Stage Awakens The curtain rises and the performance begins. The actors take to the stage, delivering a scathing parody of the rich and the poor. A rich man is criticized for exploiting the vulnerable, while the poor rebel against injustice. The crowd passionately supports the oppressed. Bosithon introduces the actors to Masuma. *Domla* (a traditional religious teacher or cleric) appears, and a satirical actor playing a religious figure is humorously chased offstage by a poor farmhand, making the audience laugh. In the following scene, an intellectual emerges, using wit and sarcasm to expose the deep-rooted ignorance lingering among the people. The performance ends by inviting everyone to a new European-style theater.

Marriage and Unfulfilled Dreams A year passes, and Masuma gets married. Her husband, Bosithon, is from a noble family – the same young man she met at the theatre. They meet twice before the wedding; he visits her with a friend, and they speak privately in a room. When he asks her about

her dream, she says she wants to become an actress and perform on stage. Bosithon laughs but promises to support her.

Life in a New Household Masuma begins her life with a new family. Their house is located in a district inhabited by the city's elite. Her father-in-law is an authoritative figure – a former local official and a member of the Tsarist Duma of Turkestan. He now supports and promotes the ideas of modern educators. The family adheres to a long-standing culture that values science and education. Her mother-in-law, a refined woman, teaches Masuma how to manage the household.

A Gathering of the Urban Elite The husband's family hosts guests, and the city's intellectuals gather at their home. Over a sumptuous dinner, they discuss politics, the current situation in the country, education, and theatre. One of the guests suggests that Abduvohid qori involve his son in the theatre, noting that he often comes to their aid in times of need. Abduvohid agrees, pleased that his son will serve the nation.

The Promise of the Theatre As the guests are about to leave, Bosithon enters the kitchen, where Masuma is busy with the dishes. In keeping with custom, she does not enter the room; instead, as he arrives, she asks her husband whether anything needs to be cleared or replaced. He tells her there is no need and shares the good news that his father has allowed him to help at the theatre. Delighted, Masuma asks her husband if he will take her with him. He promises, and she is overjoyed.

Boiskhon and the Idea of a New Literature Abduvohid qori becomes the imam of the Mahkamayi Sharia (a Sharia court during the Soviet period, when religious institutions still existed under state control) and frequently travels to different cities – sometimes Samarkand (an ancient city in Uzbekistan), sometimes Sairam (a historic town in Kazakhstan, known for its early Islamic heritage and cultural significance), and sometimes Russia. When he is away, his youngest son, Boiskhon, gathers his friends. He is a cheerful, witty young man who enjoys good company and is a convinced futurist poet under the pen name Oltoy, which is why his views are so sharp and provocative.

Bosithon's Circle of Friends Bosithon has many friends. Among them, his favorite is Abdulla Qodiriy (Uzbek writer, pioneer of modern Uzbek literature, author of *O'tkan kunlar*), a quiet man with a thin mustache who always wears a green *chapan* (traditional coat). His second favorite is Cho'lpon (Uzbek poet and writer, key figure in early 20th-century Uzbek literature) from Andijan. He is also fond of the cheerful G'afur G'hulom (Uzbek poet and writer, known for his humor and social themes), who enlivens every gathering with his jokes and songs.

Books and Inspirations Bosithon talks with Masuma. He says she is always at home with the children – they have two sons – and, to keep her entertained, he has brought her something. He then shows her books by Leo Tolstoy, Gogol, and Lermontov. He especially recommends Tolstoy, noting that his father once met him during his exile in Tula. Masuma is delighted and promises to read the books.

Advice and Responsibility That evening, after dinner, Bosithon shares some news: his uncle Akmal (Akmal Ikromov, an Uzbek statesman and early Soviet political figure) has invited him to work as a civil servant. When he asks his father for advice, his father says he cannot offer much guidance, as he is deeply distressed by the death of Mahmudxo'ja Behbudiy (a prominent Uzbek reformer and educator, founder of the *Jadid* movement), his close friend who devoted his life to education. In the end, he gives a simple piece of advice: to serve his people and be of benefit to them.

Masuma's Awakening to Literature At seven or eight, Masuma befriends a Russian neighbor's daughter and learns Russian, later reading in the language. After reading a book by Leo Tolstoy, she shares her impressions with Bosithon. He is amazed by her ability to understand literature and, half-jokingly, promises to make her an actress, saying he would not want to be blamed for underestimating someone so talented.

A Step toward the Stage Bosithon brings good news: his friend Og'a (Mannon Uyg'ur, a prominent Uzbek theatre director and actor) has invited Masuma to the theatre to play a role. Masuma is overjoyed. She asks her husband how she should dress and whether she must wear a *burqa*. Bosithon replies that she does not. Masuma says she feels awkward in public. Bosithon responds, "What won't people do behind a burqa?" and reassures her. Masuma weeps with joy. She was an orphan; he married her, and now, without fear of condemnation, he allows her to become an actress – something rare for her time.

The Story of the Colosseum Theatre and the Georgian Builder The couple heads to the theatre. During the drive, Bosithon tells his wife the theatre's history. It turns out the building was constructed by a strange, dreamy Georgian. He initially built it as a circus stage. Later, he organized film screenings there and then converted it into a theatre, renaming it the Colosseum. It was here that the Uzbek play *Padarkush* was first performed. The Georgian's fate is tragic. After the Soviets came to power, he was arrested because his name matched that of a White Army officer and was executed. It was later discovered that he was innocent; a man with the same name was later found and also executed. Masuma sympathizes with the Georgian.

Masuma's First Step onto the Stage At the theatre, Bosithon introduces Masuma to the director. Og'a warmly greets Masuma and asks what she has read and what operas she has seen. She recalls a performance she saw with his father as a child at a travelling theatre. Og'a says he knows this production – it is the opera *Layla and Majnun* by the Azerbaijani Traveling Theatre. Masuma does not know what an opera is. Og'a briefly explains it to her and asks her to sing something she remembers from that opera. When she sings, he is delighted and says she is perfect for the role of Halima in the new production of the same name.

A New Beginning on Stage Og'a wants Masuma to join his theatre troupe. Upon entering the hall, she sees a man in a striped *chapan* and skullcap arguing with someone who accuses the intelligentsia of handing over their homeland to the colonizers. As he leaves, the man insists that there is no other path to development. Bosithon tells Masuma that the man is Hamza, a tireless educator who opened a new-type school in Kokand (historic city in Uzbekistan) and is now traveling to Samarkand to establish similar schools. Og'a then introduces Masuma to the troupe, including Abror Khidoyatov (later a renowned Uzbek actor and one of the pioneers of national theatre). Jokingly, he says that Abror may be left without a role, since the young man used to play female roles, and now they have a real actress.

Halima's Lament Masuma in white portrays young Halima on stage. She has heard whispers that her beloved, conscripted for forced labor in Siberia, is returning. She turns to the trees as if they were living witnesses, sharing her joy, and then sings in a tender voice full of longing and separation. A butterfly flutters into view. Halima stretches out her hand toward it, taking its fragile flight as a sign of hope. The audience falls silent, captivated by the softness of Masuma's voice and the quiet intensity of her performance.

A Star Is Born The audience applauds loudly, and the actors are called back to the stage several times to take their bows. Bosithon greets his wife and says her performance is stunning. Cho'lpon also wishes her success in her career, calling her the queen of art. Og'a jokingly asks Bosithon why he has been hiding such a talented star at home, then adds that Masuma has made history. Masuma is over the moon.

Under the Lunar Eclipse Masuma loves working in the theater, and Bosithon inspires her. One evening, the family is relaxing after dinner. Bosithon plays with the children while Masuma is busy in the kitchen. After a while, Bosithon lies down on the sofa with his sons and looks at the sky. Suddenly, he calls out to Masuma, "Look, a lunar eclipse!" Masuma comes over and sees that half the Moon is covered in a dark shadow. Bosithon explains that the Earth has moved between the Sun and the Moon, causing the eclipse, but it will soon pass. Masuma reflects on their lives and hopes that they will soon be on the bright side.

Applause and Outrage on the Proletarian Stage A theatre troupe is touring the surrounding area. Cho'lpon takes part in one of the performances. When Masuma appears on stage as Halima, the entire audience cheers. Suddenly, Cho'lpon comes onto the stage and begins reading a poem dedicated to her. He greets her and calls her the most valuable actress of the proletarian stage, saying she has successfully conveyed the pain and suffering of Uzbek women. At that moment, protests erupt from the crowd, calling her "obscene," and stones are thrown onto the stage. One of them lightly hits Masuma on the head. The director shields her with his body, and the troupe quickly leaves the stage.

Journey to the Capital Several young, talented actresses, including Masuma, are selected to be sent to Moscow. On the morning of their departure, relatives and friends gather to see them off. The train journey lasts six days. Upon arriving in Moscow, Masuma is struck by the grandeur of the capital. During a visit to the Kremlin, a guide praises Russia as the nation that has established the world's first government of workers and peasants, bringing enlightenment to suffering peoples. He adds that Russians will spread socialism throughout the world and liberate oppressed nations from capitalism. Masuma listens and believes his words.

Longing for Home The actresses visit Red Square, Chistye Prudy (a pond and district in Moscow), and the Kremlin Walls. Masuma is filled with new impressions. Yet the cold, rainy weather of Moscow soon begins to weary her, and she starts to long for her warm homeland. A week later, they return, and her heart fills with warmth and joy as she sees the familiar landscape again.

A Tragic Fate. Upon returning, the troupe learns that the young actress Tursunoy has been murdered by her husband. An orphan who joined the theatre at sixteen, she quickly rose to prominence. Enraged by her appearance on stage without a burqa, he killed her, believing she had dishonored him.

Unexpected Visitors Next evening Masuma is preparing to serve dinner in the kitchen when a man appears with two companions. His imposing appearance recalls the heroes of folk tales. Masuma has never seen such men before. Her father-in-law greets them. When they leave, Masuma asks, "Who are they?" Bosithon replies that they are his father's students who are setting out on a long journey (connected with the *Basmachi* movement, armed resistance groups in early Soviet Central Asia) and have come to say goodbye. He then asks her not to tell anyone about their visit.

Troubling Thoughts Bosithon is concerned about the spiritual climate of society. He reads the poems of Cho'lpon in which the poet expresses resignation under pressure and a sense of forced submission. Masuma finds this difficult to understand. Bosithon says he feels a sense of unease in his soul and a premonition that something unpleasant is approaching.

At the Somsaxona Bosithon and Masuma are having dinner at a *somsaxona* (a small local eatery specializing in *somsa* (*samosa*), traditional baked pastries) in the Old Town. Masuma is thrilled about her role as Gertrude in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Bosithon tells her that she must embody Gertrude's inner world, as she is the mother of a grown son. Masuma, for her part, imagines Gertrude as a wise and sensitive woman. Bosithon suggests that she play the role as she envisions it, but without turning Gertrude into a heroine, as in her previous performances. He wants her to remain true to the character. Then he shares good news: he is going to buy a new house. Masuma is happy.

News of a Tragedy Everyone in the theatre is in a sombre mood. Masuma enters and hears terrible news: Hamza (Hakimzoda Niyoziy, Uzbek writer and reformer, killed in 1929 by a mob during anti-reform unrest) has been killed by a mob in Vodil (a village in the Fergana Valley). It is said that rumors were spread accusing him of harassing a local woman, provoking the crowd to throw stones, and one of the attackers fatally stabbed him. Everyone is bewildered. One man calls it slander. Og'a says, "Do not speak of it, do not even think it". He then announces that a farewell ceremony will be held the next day.

Forebodings Bosithon returns late that evening, deeply saddened after hearing of Hamza's death. He and his brother discuss an approaching storm within the government (early Soviet repression of intellectuals): a campaign has begun against Qodiriy and Cho'lpon, who are being denounced as counterrevolutionaries. Boiskhon says that Cho'lpon's poems contain open rebellion and that he does not approve of his path. Bosithon replies that Cho'lpon followed what his heart told him. After Boiskhon leaves, Masuma asks what is happening. Bosithon replies that this is no longer a time to worry about survival, but a time to think about saving oneself.

Arrest and Sentence A week later, Boiskhon is arrested. Masuma's father-in-law, Abduvohid qori, is deeply distressed. Eventually, news reaches them that Boiskhon is being held in the basement of the New City police station. Only through the intervention of influential relatives is he sentenced to ten years in a Siberian prison. Even so, he is considered fortunate to be alive.

The Triumph and Strain of *Hamlet* Meanwhile, *Hamlet* is being prepared for the stage. Cho'lpon is translating the tragedy and occasionally visits to oversee the preparations. Abror takes on the role of Hamlet, while Sora (Sora Eshonto'rayeva, Uzbek stage actress) plays Ophelia; Masuma is Gertrude. The day of the premiere arrives, and the performance is an overwhelming success. The play runs for twenty-seven days, drawing large audiences eager to see Hamlet. At the final performance, however, Abror collapses on stage from exhaustion and has to be taken to the hospital.

Search and Arrest Masuma reads a new play at home while O'lmas helps and prepares dinner. Bosithon returns, and just as he is about to change, two armed men enter the house. They also ask to see the father-in-law. The men search the house and take a stack of books and papers. One of the men is from the neighborhood. Abduvohid asks him, "Son, what's wrong?" He rudely replies that he is not his son and, when asked whether he can take his *joynamoz* (prayer rug) with him, says that the *joynamoz* will not help an enemy of the people. Bosithon and Abduvohid are ordered to come with them.

When they ask for an explanation, they are curtly told they will learn later. They are then led away under guard.

Silence and Consolation Masuma does not know what to do or how to find out what has happened to her husband and father-in-law. She comes to the theatre, hoping the director will help her. There, everyone avoids each other. She looks into Oga's eyes, silently pleading for help. He looks away and says they have been taken to Kibray (a district near Tashkent). When Sora asks whether Masuma will go, he does not answer. Masuma is deeply hurt. She enters a dusty storeroom and begins to cry bitterly. Suddenly, Og'a appears behind her, calms Masuma, and explains he acts this way deliberately in public. He tells her not to worry and leaves quickly.

Silence in the City The city is gripped by fear. The new government has demonstrated its power. The *Jadids* remain silent. Finally, Masuma learns that her husband and father-in-law are in Toshturma (Tashkent prison) and goes to visit them with food. The cold prison guards say nothing and refuse to accept what she has brought. That evening, she returns home exhausted and depressed.

The Missing Name Early in the morning, Masuma walks through the theatre. Familiar faces nod silently and quickly pass by, some without even greeting her. She approaches the foyer wall, where a list of actors for a new play is posted. Masuma's name is missing. Darkness fills her soul. At that moment, she sees Og'a. She looks at him hopefully, as if asking, "What is my fault?" Og'a responds only with a glance, silently urging her to be patient.

A Quiet Birthday Masuma returns home. On the way, she buys fruit and sweets. The boys return from school. Today is her youngest son Shavkatkhon's birthday. She sets a modest table. Masuma hugs him and wishes him a happy birthday. Then she hugs her eldest son, Botirkhon, and tells him that his birthday will be celebrated on a better day, when troubles have passed and the whole family is together again.

The Gathering Storm The days grow darker. Abdulla Qodiriy (Uzbek writer), Fayzulla Xo'jayev (Bukhara statesman and reformist leader), Abdurauf Fitrat (reformist intellectual and *Jadid* ideologue), Tavallo (Uzbek poet associated with the *Jadid* literary movement), and Cho'lpon have been arrested. No one knows where they are. The names of others unknown to Masuma are also being mentioned. But she understands that an invisible sickle is cutting everyone down in a single sweep.

The End of School Days Masuma returns home and finds Botirkhon and Shavkatkhon back from school, sitting in silence. Botirkhon says they will not attend school anymore, as classmates and teachers call them "sons of enemies of the people" and avoid them. Instead, they prefer to go to the market and earn extra money with O'lmas's husband. Masuma, unsure, agrees. She goes to O'lmas, asks her husband to find work for the boys. He promises help. Soon, the boys stop school and begin working at the market.

Excluded Masuma unsure whether to go to the theatre. She feels like an outsider and has nowhere else to go, so she goes, where only the guard speaks to her there. Soon, construction of the Great Fergana Canal (a major irrigation project in Soviet Uzbekistan, built in the 1930s to expand agriculture in the Fergana Valley) begins. The theatre troupe is sent there, but Masuma's name is once again not on the list.

The Final Verdict One day, two men in gray suits arrive at the theatre. They enter Og'a's room. After a while, Og'a calls Masuma, and she comes in. One of the men asks her about her husband, father-in-law, and brother-in-law. The other man stands and reads aloud from a document. Masuma's mind goes numb, and she only understands that Bosithon was executed a year ago and her father-in-law died in prison a few months later. "They destroyed themselves," the officer says. When she asks where their graves are, they reply that they cannot tell her, as they are enemies of the people.

Between Grief and Judgment The two men in gray suits leave. Silence deepens. Masuma raises her head and says she agrees they are considered guilty by government and will clear family name, proving honesty. Og'a looks at her with a kind gaze, as if encouraging her. Masuma understands; her eyelashes tremble as her eyes fill with tears, expressing unbearable grief. In a deliberately loud voice, Og'a says that, in exchange for her "confession," they will give her the opportunity to cooperate with the authorities.

After the Ban That night, Og'a stays at the theatre. He reads a decree banning the performance of seven of the finest plays based on the treasures of world literature, on the grounds that they have been translated by poets and writers who have been declared enemies of the people and executed. He does

not know how to preserve these productions and thinks of Masuma, wondering about her and her children, then decides to assign her theatre household duties.

Restructuring the Stage The next day, news of a decree arrives. Everyone is confused. One of the actors suggests rewriting Hamza's play *The Rich Man and the Farmhand* so that it can be significantly revised over time. A new translation of *Hamlet* is also proposed. Everyone agrees. Og'a announces that he has been suspended for a year for mistakes in selecting the repertoire, and that Ladigin will temporarily take his place as director. He adds that Masuma should be assigned housekeeping duties. Only the party organizer objects, but the staff supports the proposal. Masuma, with tears in her eyes, promises to work with all her heart.

Ashes of Doubt Masuma returns home and struggles to cope with her unbearable grief. She prepares dinner, then begins sorting through old things in the attic, thinking they might be useful. Suddenly, she comes across several sheets of paper. They are poems. She begins to read. It is a poem by Cho'lpon: "*Those who laugh are others; the one who cries is me*". She shudders. She cannot understand. If Cho'lpon was killed for opposing the system, while her husband and his brother had served it, why were they arrested as well?

The Missing Name The theater is in a jubilant mood. The director of the Theater announces the news: the capital – Moscow – has granted permission to stage Shakespeare's *Othello*. The troupe is elated. Preparations begin. The cast is set. But Masuma's name is missing. She doesn't dare ask why. Cho'lpon's words swirl in her mind: "*Those who laugh are others; the one who cries is me*". She shakes her head, trying to drive them away, but, like an immortal warrior, they return.

A Role at Last During a discussion of *Othello*, one of the actors, Aziz Sobirov, suggests giving Masuma a role – even a small one. To everyone's surprise, the veteran troupe responds with sudden enthusiasm. Og'a steps forward and approaches Ladigin, the seasoned director trained at the Meyerhold Theater, urging him to cast her as Emilia in the tragedy. Soon the others join in, their voices echoing the same plea. After a moment's thought, Ladigin agrees. Tears of joy fill Masuma's eyes.

A Voice Unbound Masuma's portrayal of Emilia in the production of *Othello* is a triumph. Especially in the scene where she exposes Iago, the words seem to pour from her lips, carrying the weight of her own pain and suffering. It is as if she speaks not only for the character, but for humanity itself – for the right to live and be seen as human. On stage, she becomes the very embodiment of honesty, loyalty, and integrity.

A Mother's Hard Choice Summer arrives. People gather around the radio as an announcer reports that Nazi Germany has invaded the Soviet Union, marking the start of World War II. One evening, Masuma's sons return home early and announce they have decided to volunteer for the front to restore their family's honor. Masuma is overwhelmed with despair and unbearable pain, weeping as she embraces them. In the end, she reluctantly agrees, her heart heavy with grief.

At the Recruitment Office The next day, Masuma and her sons go to the military recruitment office. She tells the officer that her sons wish to volunteer for the war. The officer who receives them expresses admiration for both the mother and her sons, holding them up as an example to others present. Those around them react differently: some look at Masuma with surprise, others as if she is mad.

A Bitter Condition Two days later, a military recruitment letter arrives. Masuma enters, and the officer greets her coldly. He explains that, after reviewing her family background, her sons cannot be called for regular military service, as their father, uncle, and grandfather were declared enemies of the people. However, he says they may serve in a "correctional detachment". When Masuma asks what it means, he irritably explains it is a battalion of prisoners and criminals, then asks her to sign a consent document. Masuma signs.

At the Station Masuma prepares food for the journey, then sits beside her sleeping sons, watching through the night. After breakfast, they go together to the train station. The station is crowded with people; weeping and cries rise from the crowd. When the whistle blows, the noise swells even louder. A military band begins to play, and war songs fill the air. The train slowly starts to move and pulls away. Soldiers urge everyone to disperse. Masuma remains standing alone, not knowing where to go.

A Mother in Loneliness Masuma arrives at the theatre and sees people talking. She approaches, where Party organizer is present, and proudly says she sent her sons to war. Everyone expects tears, but she does not cry. Suddenly, Party organizer looks into her eyes with kindness and calls her a true

mother-patriot. Masuma asks for permission to live at the theatre, saying she is now alone and can sit in a corner, ready for any job. The young actress, unable to hide her pity, offers to live with her. The others are at a loss for words. Masuma returns home, sits for a long time staring into space, and then falls asleep.

A Plan for Survival in the Rear Days pass slowly. Masuma goes daily to Hadra Square (a public square in Tashkent) to hear front-line news. Reports are discouraging as the army keeps retreating. Life in the rear is difficult, with most food sent to the front. Masuma proposes taking land outside the city to grow crops and support the small theatre company. She shares the idea with Og'a and Party organizer. They support her plan, especially Party organizer who is soon to be sent to the front.

A Journey Beyond the City She travels by car with Party organizer to inspect the site. He has not slept, having met evacuated children in Uzbekistan. Passing a Catholic church, he recalls a Jewish synagogue and reveals his Jewish descent. As they continue surveying the surroundings, he murmurs, "The Gardens of Gethsemane." It becomes clear that he is trained as a historian. Masuma shares her planting plan, and Party organizer is impressed by her agricultural knowledge. After inspecting the land, they return to the city. Before leaving for the front, Party organizer says goodbye and asks forgiveness for any wrongs or misunderstandings. Masuma sincerely wishes him to return alive and in good health.

A Harvest of Hope Spring arrives, and Masuma spends time on a plot of land outside the city, clearing it and planting vegetables. She stays there all summer, coming into town only for news. Gradually, she becomes less like an actress and more like a peasant. The harvest is abundant, bringing stability. With the proceeds, she buys cows and distributes them among the actors, and the troupe rejoices.

Hope Amid War A year passes. Og'a enters with a newspaper and announces that the enemy has begun to retreat. Masuma is delighted. Og'a says he wants to stage a production about Jaloliddin Manguberdi (an heroic resistance leader), which fits the current military theme. Masuma shows no interest; her creative passion has faded. She now dreams only of her sons returning safely. She worries that her youngest has stopped writing.

Waiting After Victory The war is over. Joy lights up people's faces as soldiers begin to return. Train stations overflow with crowds, everyone waiting for their children and loved ones. Masuma, too, anxiously awaits the return of her sons, but there is still no news of them. She goes to the military administration; they now know her well. They greet her warmly, offer comfort, and ask her to be patient.

Silence Before Winter Summer was ending and autumn approaching. Letters from her eldest son had stopped arriving. She no longer went to the theatre, spending all her time in its garden outside the city. The actor Aziz Saidov became concerned and went to see her there. The garden gate was open. He found her sitting by the hut, staring into the fire. Aziz called out. She recognized him and said hoarsely it could not be possible to have no letters so long. She asked him to help collect money so she could travel to Moscow. Aziz quickly agrees.

A Journey into Uncertainty Masuma travels to Moscow by train, gazing at the deserted landscape with deep sadness on her face. No one bothers her, as if they sense her grief. Six days later, she arrives and checks into a hotel near the train station. Soon after, she goes to the Ministry of Defense, where she is directed to the military archives. There, she meets a young man in uniform. After hearing the purpose of her visit, he writes down the necessary information and asks her to return the next day.

Two Notices Masuma returns to the hotel. Time seems to stand still. She spends the night sitting, unable to rest. Early in the morning, her feet carry her to the archives; she arrives before work begins. At last, she enters the office she visited the day before. There, another officer listens attentively and takes two papers from a stack. Masuma stares at the documents in his hands in horror. The officer reads aloud: first, of the heroic death of her youngest son in Belarus; then, of the heroic death of her eldest son in Germany. He then offers his condolences.

A Name Falls Silent Masuma returns to the hotel. She whispers, "Here are the children – we are not blamed now". At that moment, thunder rumbles and the windows shake. Masuma quickly draws the curtains. Clutching the papers bearing her children's names, she lies down on the bed, curled into a tight ball, her body trembling.

The Last Silence It snows all night. In the morning, the maid comes to clean the hotel. She knocks on the door on the second floor for a long time. No one answers. When she finally opens the door with her key and enters the room, she sees a dead woman. A report is filed. After checking the records, they

find a referral from the theater, send a telegram to Tashkent, and call an ambulance. Masuma's body is taken to the morgue.

A Final Return A week later, Aziz Sobirov arrives from Tashkent. Since the journey takes six days and the body could decompose, he is offered the option of cremation and collecting the ashes. Aziz has no choice but to agree. He is given a small, thermos-like container holding the ashes. He wraps it in a handkerchief, places it inside his shirt, and leaves the morgue.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

MASUMA

Masuma, a woman of rare talent, becomes a victim of a merciless regime. Her tragic story reveals how an autocratic system can shatter the human spirit, strip away what is most precious, and leave a person without dignity or rights.

Selfless Masuma's thoughts are consistently pure and selfless, a quality evident in all her interactions. She shows deep compassion for those around her and, despite the many misfortunes and injustices she and her family have endured, she blames no one and holds no grudges. While performing in the countryside, a villager throws stones at her, one of which strikes her head. When Og'a proposes appealing to the authorities, she asks him not to, pitying the attacker's ignorance.

Hardworking Masuma, who rose from an orphaned girl adopted by ordinary people to a renowned actress, eventually achieved fame. She works tirelessly, constantly preparing for roles, reading and mastering literary works, and managing household duties while caring for her children. Even when she becomes isolated and struggles to secure roles, she does not stop and is never afraid of hard work.

Resilient Under Stalinist repression, when a vast punitive system operated and an atmosphere of fear undermined human relationships, the heroine endures immense suffering: the loss of loved ones, unemployment, isolation, stigma, humiliation, and the pain of her children's fate. Yet after each blow, Masuma rises and continues to struggle for survival. When she receives news of the deaths of her husband and father-in-law, she overcomes her grief and seeks to prove her loyalty to the state in order to keep her position at the theatre. When her young sons decide to go to war to shed the stigma of being "enemies of the people", she finds the strength to support them despite her despair. Left alone, she works tirelessly on a plot of land assigned to the theatre, helping her colleagues. Although she ultimately dies, unable to bear the loss of her sons, she preserves her humanity and devotion to her loved ones until her final breath.

BOSITHON

Bosithon is depicted as a high-ranking government official who becomes an advocate of *Jadid* ideas. He supports their ideals of change, development, and national progress. Unlike his fellow poets and writers with a rebellious spirit, Bosithon chooses compromise and, from his elevated position, strives to serve the prosperity of his homeland. In doing so, he continues to uphold the core principles of his comrades. However, the harsh Stalinist regime does not forgive him for these convictions, and in the end, he cannot escape its punishment.

Kind Bosithon deeply loves Masuma and supports her in all her endeavors. He is more progressive than his contemporaries, allowing his wife to perform on stage in the early twentieth century, when several Uzbek actresses were killed by their husbands. At the same time, he loves her tenderly and seeks to shield her from politics, not wishing to burden her with harsh realities. To him, she remains as gentle and naïve as her name suggests (Masuma meaning "innocent").

Pragmatic Bosithon, a pragmatist, adopts a practical outlook on life, seeking ways to navigate the difficult and, for him, undesirable conditions prevailing in the country. Although he does not support the current government, he decides to cooperate with it when his own aspirations align with official policies. When his uncle – an influential statesman and, incidentally, also a victim of political repression – offers him a position in the government administration, he accepts. At the same time, when the rebellious spirit of Cho'lpon's poetry emerges, he considers how to protect him from the authorities' persecution.

ABDUVOHID QORI

He was an historical figure and a progressive Muslim leader who played a significant role in the region's history in the early twentieth century. As a member of parliament, Abduvohid Qori established important

connections within the Muslim movement in the Russian Empire. During the early Soviet period, the Bolsheviks, recognizing his influence, appointed him to government positions. However, he remained committed to the idea of independence. Ultimately, he did not escape the repression that affected many of his contemporaries and died in a Stalin-era prison at an advanced age. In the novel, the author portrays him as an elderly, wise, and experienced figure.

Humanitarian Abdulwahab is a humane and principled man. Despite his noble origins, he does not object when his son marries an orphan from another background and expresses his gratitude by generously rewarding her adoptive parents for their kindness. He consistently places the well-being of the nation and its people above personal considerations. When asked to support his son's involvement in the theatre, he agrees, provided that it serves the interests of the nation and the common good. Likewise, when his son seeks permission to enter government service, Abdulwahab grants it on the condition that he promote spirituality, encourage education, and serve with honesty and integrity.

Progressive As a religious leader, he differs from more dogmatic representatives of Islam. Abduvohid supports innovation that promotes progress and positive change, particularly in the fields of art, education, and literature. He does not oppose his futurist poet son, Boiskhon, or his actress daughter-in-law, Masuma. He also criticizes opponents of reform, suggesting that their resistance to modernization strengthens conditions that historically enabled imperial dominance over the Islamic East.

OG 'A

Og'a (Mannon Uyghur) was among the founders of European-style Uzbek theatre and of what is now the Uzbek National Academic Drama Theatre. The author portrays him as a complex figure, capable of adapting to difficult circumstances while preserving his humanity.

Dedicated Og'a is deeply committed to his work and approaches it with enthusiasm. He brings together talented young actors, trains them in a new artistic form for his time, and achieves notable success. Even in the face of fear, repression, and the loss of colleagues, his passion for theatre remains undiminished. Despite numerous obstacles, he continues to create.

Flexible Og'a often seeks to adapt to changing circumstances. Although he recognizes injustice and cruelty in society, he frequently complies with the rules and demands of the ruling system. Under ideological pressure, he abandons his preferred plays and denies Masuma – who once saw herself as a “princess” – roles because she is the wife of an “enemy of the people”. At the same time, he finds ways to introduce other works to the stage as replacements. He does not abandon Masuma; instead, he creates opportunities for her to help her survive and offers quiet support in moments of hardship, whether through a glance or in private.

THEMES

Society

Gender In the novel, the protagonist experiences little social pressure from her immediate surroundings, as those around her hold relatively progressive views. Her husband supports her desire to become an actress, and even her religious father-in-law does not object. However, early 20th-century society as a whole remained deeply influenced by patriarchal norms, making it difficult to embrace new ideas such as gender equality and women's liberation. Moreover, these norms are internalized by women themselves. Masuma's mother-in-law teaches her to submit to her husband in all matters and to regard serving him as her duty, while her adoptive mother, O'lmas, reproachfully questions whether she feels no shame appearing unveiled on stage. At times, social resistance in the novel takes extreme forms of violence, including the stoning of Masuma during a performance and the murder of a young colleague by her own husband.

Illustrative Moment: Young actress Tursunoy is murdered by her husband. She was an orphan from the Old City. At sixteen, she joined the theatre and, as a talented young woman, quickly mastered acting. Soon, she began replacing Masuma in the role of Halima. A year later, she married. When the troupe travelled to Bukhara, her husband insisted on accompanying her. On stage, without a burqa, her presence drew more attention from the audience than the performance itself. After finishing her role, Tursunoy went backstage, where her enraged husband, believing she had dishonored him, stabbed her to death.

Tursunoy is buried in Bukhara. A memorial ceremony is held in the foyer of a theatre in Tashkent, attended by about a hundred people. A poem dedicated to her memory is read. A well-known Uzbek singer steps forward and declares that Tursunoy died fighting ignorance. The struggle, he says, will not end; they will train a hundred new Tursunoys and lead Turkestan toward light and freedom. When he adds, "Eternal peace to you, oppressed girl of the East", someone sarcastically responds, "How can you say such a thing to someone else's wife?" This episode reveals how deeply patriarchal attitudes are embedded in society's consciousness.

Politics

Power The Stalinist regime used its authority to eliminate perceived threats, often through imprisonment or execution. The creative intelligentsia – artists, writers, and former leaders, many of whom in Turkestan were associated with the *Jadid* movement – was particularly hard hit. In the early years, the Bolsheviks initially relied on local elites, many of whom held leadership positions in government, cultural, and educational institutions, as well as in publishing. However, over time, as the regime consolidated its power, it launched large-scale purges. The novel conveys the seemingly subtle yet pervasive force of authority, operating through fear, surveillance, and bureaucratic control.

Illustrative Moment: Boiskhon was arrested. The family sank into despair; his father paced restlessly through the house, shocked and helpless, powerless to change the course of events. Rumors of "enemies of the people" began to circulate within the community. It was said that the intelligentsia was conspiring against the state, portraying it as corrupt and secretly preparing a counterrevolutionary coup. Masuma, still unable to comprehend the extent of state power or its capacity for ruthless repression, was left in a state of uncertainty. Bosithon did not answer her questions; when she asked about the reason for her brother's arrest, he merely replied that nothing was known at this stage. In reality, he understood that the machinery of the NKVD was already in motion – relentless and indiscriminate in its advance. This episode suggests that unchecked political power, combined with the suppression of free expression, produces a climate of fear in which repression becomes systemic.

Relationship

Motherhood When Masuma loses everything, she is left only with her two sons. She suffers as they face isolation and humiliation, yet in such moments she finds the strength to comfort them and conceal her own vulnerability. She accepts their decision to leave school, sharing their anger at being labeled the sons of an "enemy of the people". Later, she is forced to agree when the still very young boys choose to go to the front, as this offers them a chance to escape that stigma. Sustained only by hopes for their future, she imagines a life for them free from insult and humiliation. When she ultimately loses them, she cannot endure the loss and dies under the weight of her grief.

Illustrative Moment: Evening. Her sons sit on either side of their mother, hugging her as they tell her that the state will pardon those whose names have been dishonored if they volunteer to go to the front and prove their loyalty. The boys decide to go. Masuma is stunned by their decision; everything inside her is turned upside down. A sharp pain rises within her, like a storm beyond words. All the hardships that have befallen the family – privation, isolation, humiliation, and troubles at work – merge with her sons' decision and burst forth. "Oh!" she suddenly cries, pounding her chest. "Will this suffering ever end? How can I send my sons to war with my own hands?" Her sons embrace her, trying to comfort her. She weeps bitterly, holding them close, pressing her cheeks against theirs, inhaling their scent. "It would be better if your mother died," she whispers. She strokes their faces and gently runs her fingers through their hair as they cling to her, holding her close. This episode shows a mother's love and pain, an instinctive desire to protect her children.

Psychology

Isolation During the period of Stalinist repression, one of the most severe forms of punishment was the social isolation of the families – spouses and children – of those labeled "enemies of the people" and deemed "socially dangerous." In an atmosphere of pervasive fear, where survival became paramount, human compassion was often suppressed. Even those who recognized the injustice inflicted on innocent individuals like Masuma were afraid to express it openly. Thus, the theatre director conveys his sympathy only in private, through a whisper or a glance. As a result, Masuma experiences profound isolation, unable to share her grief or find even minimal relief.

Illustrative Moment: Early in the morning, before work begins, a woman wanders around the theatre, looking at the building with quiet hope, as if expecting a miracle. People she knows merely nod and

quickly move on; some do not even greet her, immediately crossing the street to avoid her. It is Masuma. She glances at the cast list hanging on the wall near the foyer. Two people standing nearby quickly disperse. Her name is not on the list. A dark cloud envelops her soul. Og'a emerges. Masuma looks at him, wanting to say something, but remains silent. Her gaze is clear, as if asking, "Why are you isolating me? Wherever I go, people avoid me. Perhaps my husband and father-in-law were mistaken, but what is my fault – mine and my sons'?" Og'a meets her gaze. His look seems to say, "Be patient, daughter of the East". This episode shows what it is like to be excluded from society and the psychological torment that such isolation brings.

Fear Under Stalinist repression, as the machinery of terror operated relentlessly, society became deeply permeated by fear. Such fear generates unpredictable and often involuntary patterns of behavior. Even individuals of integrity and conscience may succumb to its pressure, exhibiting timidity or rashness. In this context, fear erodes dignity, undermines moral principles, and weakens higher ideals. The instinct for self-preservation comes to dominate, ultimately diminishing compassion and basic human solidarity.

Illustrative Moment: The sense of danger intensifies. No one is able to act; fear enforces silence, and individuals become increasingly isolated from one another. Reports spread of arrests: Abdulla Qodiriy... then Fayzulla Ho'jayev, Fitrat, and Tavallo (*Jadid* figures). Cho'lpon as well. Their whereabouts remain unknown, and there is a growing belief that they will never be released. More names circulate in hushed whispers – names unfamiliar to Masuma, yet deeply unsettling. He senses an invisible scythe cutting them down indiscriminately. The episode illustrates how political power, when transformed into a punitive apparatus, fosters fear and undermines social cohesion.

Loss The horrors of the repressions did not end there. In the novel, the protagonist loses everything: her beloved profession, her family – her husband, her father-in-law, and her children – and her well-being. Each loss brings deep pain. Upon learning of the deaths of her husband and father-in-law, she falls into despair but immediately begins promising the authorities that she will clear the family's tarnished name. The fact that she cannot even fully mourn her loss further intensifies her suffering. The final and most excruciating loss is the news of her sons' deaths, which marks the collapse of her emotional resilience and reveals the irreversible nature of her psychological devastation.

Illustrative Moment: A military officer in the archives informs Masuma of her sons' tragic deaths on the battlefield. The woman, as if driven out of her senses, leaves the room clutching the documents in her hands. The officer watches her with pity. Masuma, disoriented and unable to understand how she has come to the hotel, enters the room, lays the papers on the table, and looks through them. She begins to imagine the voices, laughter, and conversations of her sons. Is it a dream or reality? She no longer understands what is happening. It is as though she has been cast outside the flow of time, where past and present have dissolved into one another. Suddenly, a brief moment of clarity emerges in her clouded consciousness. "Here are the children", she whispers. "Our name is justified..." Thunder rolls in the distance. She presses the papers bearing her sons' names to her chest and curled like a kulich, lies down on the bed. This scene represents the culmination of the protagonist's suffering, as it marks the final dissolution of the fragile emotional attachment that had previously sustained her sense of meaning and psychological stability.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How do you assess Masuma's isolation from society? Is it an act of human cruelty?
2. How would you treat Masuma in this situation?
3. In one episode, Masuma finds a poem by Cho'lpon and burns it, as if it were responsible for her misfortunes. Yet the words, like an immortal warrior, continue to swirl in her thoughts. What was the author trying to convey through this image?
4. Based on the events of the novel, what is the essence of the government's repression?
5. The novel describes a lunar eclipse, as well as thunder that Masuma fears. What symbolic meaning lies in these natural phenomena?