Kabuliwala

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Rabindranath Tagore was born May 7, 1861, in British-controlled India. He was the youngest of 13 children and was raised in his ancestral home, Jorasanko, until his father sent him to Brighton, England, to study law. However, Tagore dropped out of school and studied Shakespeare before returning to India and marrying Mrinalini Devi. Tagore had begun writing poetry when he was eight and publishing under a pseudonym eight years after that, and in 1901, he founded an experimental school at Santiniketan in 1901. At Santiniketan, Tagore continued to write and rapidly gained more fame and respect for his poetry, short stories, and songs. In 1913, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature and began traveling all over the world to deliver lectures and meet with some of the most notable names in literature, science, politics, and art, including Albert Einstein, William Butler Yeats, Mussolini, Thomas Mann, Robert Frost, and George Bernard Shaw. In 1921 he established Visva-Bharati University, which continues to be one of the most popular universities in India. Tagore traveled all over the world, visiting at least 30 countries on five continents, but in the four years before his death he experienced chronic pain and returned to his family home at Jorasanko, where he died on August 7, 1941.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Tagore was born in what was then known as Calcutta, India, while the country was still under British rule, which lasted from 1858 until India regained its independence in 1947. Tagore's family had played a pivotal role in the Indian Rebellion of 1857 again the British East India Company, which resulted in the institution of direct British rule in India, culminating in the declaration of Queen Victoria as the Empress of India in 1877. As a British colony, India became a popular destination for Christian missionaries from England and for the establishment of new schools and hospitals. During this time, Tagore's ideas about nationalism and particularly Indian nationalism were nothing short of controversial. While he advocated for Indian independence, he warned that love of one's country and a nationalist identity should never take the place of an individual's connection with the rest of humankind, a view that was not very popular in India at the time. During World War I, which began shortly after Tagore received his Nobel Prize, tens of thousands of Indian soldiers were sent to the front lines to fight alongside the British and their allies. The tension between European countries even after the war contributed to Tagore's call for unity and international cooperation in his acceptance speech at the Swedish Academy in 1921. Tagore also became deeply interested in the progress being made in biology, physics, astronomy, and other sciences, and his famous meeting with Albert Einstein helped inspire some of his later poetry.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Tagore was the most notable literary figure of the Bengali Renaissance, an artistic, social, and cultural movement that took place in the Bengal area of India from the late 19th to the early 20th century. In 1913, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for his poetry collection titled *Gitanjali*. Begum Rokeya, another well-respected and admired Bengali Renaissance writer, gained fame and notoriety for her novel *Sultana's Dream*, a work of speculative fiction about a world in which gender roles are reversed in the female-dominated world of Ladyland. Along with Tagore and Rokeya, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay was a leading figure in the Bengali Renaissance, and his most notable novels include *Badadidi* and *Devdas*. Although Tagore's fame is most prevalent in Asia, he also inspired and influenced writers from all over the world thanks to the numerous different translations of his works. Pablo Neruda, a Chilean poet most known for his collection *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*, was inspired by Tagore's poetry and short stories. One of Tagore's earliest Western admirers was William Butler Yeats, an Irish poet who wrote dozens of immensely poems in his lifetime, including "The Second Coming" and "Easter, 1916."

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Kabuliwala
- **When Written:** 1892
- **When Published:** 1892
- **Literary Period:** Bengal Renaissance
- **Genre:** Contextual Modernism, Short Story
- **Setting:** Calcutta (present day Kolkata), India
- **Climax:** Rahamat, recently released from jail, returns to the narrator's house and asks to see Mini.
- **Antagonist:** Time and growing up
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Nobel Prize. When Tagore received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, he became the first non-European author to receive it. He used the money from the prize to establish Visva-Bharati University in 1921.

National Anthems. Not only was Tagore the author of India's

national anthem, *Jana Gana Mana*, but he inspired and co-wrote the national anthems for Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, as well.

PLOT SUMMARY

"Kabuliwallah" opens with the narrator describing his five-year-old daughter, Mini. She "can't stop talking for a minute" and is frequently scolded by her mother for it. The narrator, on the other hand, thinks that it's "unnatural" when Mini is quiet, and so he spends a lot of time talking to her and answering her many questions. One morning, Mini chats with her father while he's working on an adventure novel. She looks out the window and spots a Kabuliwallah named Rahamat and starts calling to him. However, when he comes over, Mini runs into another room, convinced that his large bags are full of children, not goods.

A few days later, the narrator finds Mini sitting next to Rahamat and talking to him with a pile of raisins and nuts in her lap. The narrator tells Rahamat not to give her any more treats and gives him a half-rupee, which Rahamat takes. Later, Mini's mother scolds Mini for having a half-rupee, which Mini says Rahamat gave her. The narrator saves Mini "from her mother's wrath" and brings her outside where she tells him that Rahamat has come by almost every day to listen to her talk. Among the numerous jokes they have together, one starts with Rahamat telling Mini, "don't ever go off to your śvaśur-bāṛi." Mini doesn't understand what this means because the narrator and his wife are "progressive people" who "don't keep talking to [their] young daughter about her future marriage," and so she innocently asks him if he is going to *his*. Rahamat jokingly shakes a fist and says he'll "settle him," making Mini laugh.

It is autumn, which the narrator associates with kings setting out "on their world-conquests," which further reminds him that he has never left Calcutta even though he longs to explore the world. He has an active imagination and frequently imagines distant lands, but he is "a rooted sort of individual" and whenever he does leave his "familiar spot" he will "practically collapse." Because of this, the narrator is happy to spend a morning just listening to Rahamat's stories of Afghanistan and traveling. Mini's mother is very different: she is scared of the outside world and imagines it is full of extreme dangers. Unhappy with Rahamat, a complete stranger, spending so much time with Mini, she warns the narrator to keep an eye on him. When the narrator tells her there is nothing to worry about, she talks about the possibility of Mini being kidnapped and sold into slavery. Rahamat, however, continues to come and the narrator continues to enjoy seeing him with Mini.

Rahamat is preparing to go home. Part of these preparations is to go all around Calcutta and collect money that customers owe him, but he always makes time in the evening to stop at the narrator's house to talk with Mini. One morning, the narrator hears something going on in the streets and looks out the window to see Rahamat, covered in blood, being led down the street in handcuffs. The narrator runs outside, and Rahamat tells him that he got into a physical altercation with a customer who had refused to pay and, during the fight, he stabbed the customer. Mini comes out and asks Rahamat if he's being taken to his *śvaśur-bāṛi*, and he says that he is. Rahamat is sent to jail. It does not take long for Mini to forget Rahamat and find new friends, first with the groom (someone who takes care of horses) and then with girls her age. She stops visiting her father's study and the narrator says he "dropped her," as well.

A few years later, the narrator and his wife are preparing for Mini's wedding day. The house is full of people setting things up and the narrator has isolated himself in his study. Rahamat suddenly arrives and tells the narrator he had been released from jail the day before, which reminds the narrator of his crime and sets him on edge. The narrator tells Rahamat that they are busy and he will have to go, but Rahamat asks if he can see Mini. Once again the narrator tries to brush him off and Rahamat prepares to leave, but as he walks out the door he asks the narrator to give Mini some grapes, nuts, and raisins he brought for her as a reminder of their past friendship. The narrator gets some money to pay Rahamat for them, but he refuses payment and tells the narrator that he had come with his own daughter "in mind," not to do business.

Rahamat pulls "a crumpled piece of paper" out of the breast pocket of his shirt and shows the narrator the **handprint** of his daughter, Parvati, that he carries with him while he travels for work. Seeing it, the narrator "forgot then that he was an Afghan raisin-seller and I was a Bengali Babu," instead recognizing that "he was a father just as I am a father." This changes the narrator's mind about sending Rahamat away and instead he calls Mini down. When she comes in, she's "dressed as a bride" and acts shy and uncomfortable. Rahamat tries to joke with her as he used to, asking if she's going to her *śvaśur-bāṛi*, but instead of laughing and asking questions, Mini "blushed [...] and looked away." The narrator's "heart ache[s]."

When Mini leaves, Rahamat suddenly realizes that his daughter, like Mini, will have grown up and be different from the little girl he once knew. As Rahamat thinks about Afghanistan and his daughter, the narrator pulls out some money and asks Rahamat to use it to get home. He tells Rahamat that, "by your blessed reunion, Mini will be blessed." Giving Rahamat the money means that Mini's wedding party is not as grand as it might have been, but the narrator is happy with it, believing that "the ceremony was lit by a kinder, more gracious light."

CHARACTERS

The Narrator – Mini's father and the story's unnamed first-

person narrator and protagonist. The events of this story largely take place in the narrator's study and just outside of his house. The narrator describes himself as a "Bengali Babu," a respectful title that implies that he is financially comfortable, educated, and respected in his hometown of Calcutta, India. The narrator loves his only child, Mini, who is five years old at the beginning of the story. While the narrator's wife finds Mini's constant chatter tiring, the narrator loves to listen to his daughter prattle away about all sorts of topics. The narrator is a writer, and is working on his novel when the story starts. The novel is an adventure story, which reflects his own curiosity about different places and people around the world. The narrator has never had the opportunity to leave Calcutta, hence his fascination with such faraway places, though he also admits that he's a homebody. The narrator is friendly with Rahamat because he enjoys seeing him laughing with Mini when he visits, and because Rahamat tells him stories about life in Afghanistan and what he's seen on his travels as a fruit vendor, or Kabuliwala. Despite his interest in Rahamat, the narrator is quick to forget him after Rahamat is sent to jail. Years later, when the man shows up unannounced after being released from prison, the narrator tries to get rid of him as fast as possible, thinking of him as a criminal rather than as his daughter's childhood companion and not wanting to be bothered on Mini's wedding day. It's only after Rahamat reveals that he also has a beloved daughter Parvati, back in Afghanistan, that the narrator recognizes that they have far more in common than he originally thought. Having established this personal and emotional connection with him, the narrator gives Rahamat money from Mini's wedding fund to help him get back to Afghanistan and be reunited with his family.

Rahamat / The "Kabuliwala" – Rahamat is a traveling fruit seller from Afghanistan, or a Kabuliwala, and is often referred to as such. He is first seen wearing "dirty baggy clothes," which indicates that he is from a lower class. As he is not from Calcutta and speaks broken Bengali, Rahamat is something of an ostracized figure in town, and the narrator treats him with suspicion until the man makes friends with the narrator's five-year-old daughter, Mini. Rahamat bribes Mini with pistachios to talk to him at first, but eventually they develop a real friendship. He visits the narrator's house every day and brings Mini more nuts, fruits, and raisins, and listens to her excitable chatter for as long as he can before he has to return to work. Occasionally, he also talks with the narrator about Afghanistan and what life is like there. One day while he is collecting debts from customers in the neighborhood before returning to his home, Rahamat gets into a fight with someone who won't pay him and stabs the customer. Rahamat is promptly arrested and led away by the police, but he has the chance to explain to the narrator what happened and where he is going. Eight years later, Rahamat is released from jail and goes straight to the narrator's home to see Mini again, but is shocked to see that she has grown up. It is Mini's wedding day, and when she comes into the room to see Rahamat, she is wearing her wedding clothes. Rahamat tries to rekindle their former friendship by telling her an old joke they used to have about her going to her father-in-law's home, but instead of laughing, Mini becomes shy and blushes before silently leaving the room. This reminds Rahamat that his own daughter, Parvati (who still lives in Afghanistan), will have grown up and become a different person. The story ends with the narrator giving Rahamat the money he will need to get home and be reunited with his family, the men having bonded over the love they both have for their daughters.

Mini – Mini is the only child of the narrator and his wife. At the beginning of the story, she is a talkative, inquisitive, and energetic five-year-old. She is very close with her father, preferring him instead of her short-tempered mother who frequently scolds her for talking too much and asking too many questions. As a child, Mini spends a lot of time in her father's study, hanging out with him while he works on his novel. One day, she sees Rahamat, a local fruit vendor, coming down the road and starts yelling "Kabuliwala" at him until she gets his attention and he comes over with his boxes of grapes and nuts. Mini is shy and afraid of him at first, but unbeknownst to the narrator, Rahamat and Mini gradually strike up a friendship. The narrator discovers this one day when he walks out of the house and sees Rahamat sitting with Mini and eagerly listening to her talk. Later, Mini tells the narrator about some of the inside jokes she has with Rahamat and that he comes over almost every day. The friendship between the two flourishes as long as Rahamat is in town, but soon he has to leave to return home to Afghanistan. However, before he leaves, he is arrested after an altercation with a customer. The last time Mini sees him that year is when he is being taken away in handcuffs. Mini forgets about Rahamat after he goes to jail, and she also starts spending less time with her father as the years go by, preferring the company of other children. Eight years later, Rahamat is released from jail on Mini's wedding day. Rahamat pleads with the narrator to let him see Mini, but Mini is shy, uncomfortable, and doesn't respond to him the way she did when she was five. This interaction leaves Mini's father feeling sad that she is so different, and Rahamat anxious about what kind of changes might have happened in his own daughter, Parvati (who was about Mini's age when Rahamat left, which explains why he was so drawn to Mini at first) since he last saw her.

The Narrator's Wife / Mini's Mother – Like the narrator, Mini's mother is never named in the story. Unlike the patient and laidback narrator, Mini's mother has a short temper and is quick to scold Mini for her excitable chatter and endless questions. Although they are both homebodies, the narrator often dreams of adventures and leaving Calcutta, while Mini's mother is terrified of the danger that exists outside of their neighborhood, and even asks the narrator to keep an eye on Rahamat to make sure he isn't going to kidnap Mini and sell her into slavery in Afghanistan. However, like the narrator, Mini's

mother is "progressive" and chooses to let Mini enjoy a carefree childhood rather than spending her whole life preparing her for marriage.

Parvati – The narrator refers to Rahamat's daughter back in Afghanistan as "his little mountain-dwelling Parvati," suggesting that that's her name. Rahamat only mentions his daughter at the end of the story when he reveals to the narrator that he always carries around a paper with her **handprint** on it to remind him of her. Mini also reminds Rahamat of Parvati, which is why he makes such an effort to get to know her. While he is in Calcutta and unable to be present in his daughter's life, Mini becomes a stand-in for Parvati, and the interactions between Rahamat and Mini closely resemble a father-daughter relationship. Although she does not make an appearance in the story, Parvati is the reason that the narrator is able to finally form a real, meaningful connection with Rahamat. Despite their differences in culture and social class—and Rahamat's newfound status as a criminal—both men are united by their fatherly love for their daughters. At the end of the story, the narrator gives Rahamat money from Mini's wedding fund so that he can return to Afghanistan and his now-grown-up daughter.

TERMS

Kabuliwala – "Kabuliwala" is the title of this story, but it has two other significant meanings. The term *Kabuliwala* can be used to describe someone who comes from Kabul in Afghanistan, which is the country that **Rahamat, the Kabuliwala** comes from in the story. It can also be used to describe a traveling fruit salesman, which is how Rahamat earns his money and is the reason he is so far from home for such a long time.

śvaśur-bāṛi – The Bengali term for a father-in-law's home. When **Rahamat** first jokes about **Mini** going to a *śvaśur-bāṛi*, he is referring to Mini going away to live with her husband and his family after she is married.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

CONNECTION

Perhaps the most powerful element of "Kabuliwallah" is the way Tagore portrays the human connection as it transcends social class, time, age, and culture. In the beginning of the story, the unnamed narrator describes the close relationship he has with his five-year-old little daughter named Mini. Mini is friendly and quickly makes friends with an Afghan Kabuliwallah (a peddler) named Rahamat. When Rahamat is sent to jail for stabbing a customer who refused to pay their debt, however, both Mini and the narrator forget about him and move on with their lives. Eight years later, Rahamat is released from jail and discovers that Mini has grown up and has forgotten him, which forces him to face the fact that his own daughter, Parvati, back in Afghanistan will have forgotten him, too. In "Kabuliwallah," Tagore argues that real, meaningful connections can only be made when people recognize the common humanity in one another regardless of their differences.

Rahamat and the narrator could not be more different at first glance, and this initially prevents the narrator from believing he could have anything in common with Rahamat. In the opening scene of the story, the narrator is working on his novel, but it is unclear if this is his only form of work or even if he is successful at it. However, it becomes evident that the narrator is financially well-off because they can afford a gatekeeper and because Rahamat uses the respectful term "Babu" when talking to him. Rahamat, on the other hand, is "dressed in dirty baggy clothes" and, at best, speaks a "hybrid sort of Bengali." Furthermore, Rahamat is forced to trek far away from his home and family in order to make a living, indicating that opportunities back home are limited and that he ahs not been able to earn enough abroad to be able to stay with his family permanently. While the narrator's daughter, Mini, quickly develops a meaningful connection with Rahamat, the narrator has difficulty seeing him as anything but an inferior. This is shown by the narrator's insistence on giving Rahamat money for the nuts he gave Mini as a gift—the narrator is unable to recognize that the two of them have developed a real connection despite differences in age, ethnicity, and social class.

The connection that the narrator and Rahamat eventually develop begins with their mutual connection with Mini, who brings them both a kind of happiness their present situations would typically prevent them from experiencing. The narrator says that Mini "can't stop talking for a minute," and while his wife loses patience with this and "scolds her," he simply "can't do that." Unlike Mini's mother, the narrator enjoys answering Mini's questions and teaching her more about the world that he himself longs to explore. Rahamat, on the other hand, spends a large portion of his time away from his wife and young daughter, limiting his ability to be an active and present father. Mini, however, fills this void and gives Rahamat the kind of happiness denied him by the distance between himself and his daughter. To the narrator, Rahamat is little more than his daughter's play-fellow. He says seeing them together gave him "pleasure," but this evidently has more to do with the image they present to his mind ("a young child and a grown man laughing so heartily") than with any personal liking for Rahamat

himself.

Because the narrator initially sees Rahamat as an inferior, it is easy for him to forget about Rahamat after his arrest. Rahamat doesn't truly become human to the narrator until many years later when he learns of the common ground they share: that they both have daughters that they love dearly. Mini is going to "darken her parents' house" by leaving it to get married, which makes the narrator sentimental as he thinks about their former close connection. When Rahamat suddenly appears at the narrator's house, the narrator initially only sees him as a "would-be murderer" and treats him coldly when he asks to see Mini. Once again, the narrator assigns mercenary motives to Rahamat's interest in Mini, shown by the narrator's attempt to give him money to leave. This changes when Rahamat shows the narrator his only "memento" of his daughter—a **handprint** on a piece of paper that he keeps tucked inside the breast pocket of his shirt. Only then does the narrator "forget" their differences and recognize all that they, as fathers, have in common, saying, "I understood then that he was as I am" and is able to connect to him on a human level. Although class pride and bias initially prevent the narrator from treating Rahamat with respect and equality, their common ground as fathers of well-loved daughters ultimately suggests that they're not so different after all, allowing them to truly connect to one another on a human level.

FATHERLY LOVE

Love, specifically fatherly love, is one of the central threads of "Kabuliwallah." The narrator of the story has one child: a precocious five-year-old daughter named Mini who "can't stop talking for a minute" and frequently visits him in his study to talk and hide from her impatient mother. The narrator is touched by the liking that a local Kabuliwallah (fruit-seller) named Rahamat takes to Mini, and he enjoys watching them joke around and talk every day. When Rahamat is taken to jail shortly before returning to his home in Afghanistan, he's quickly forgotten. However, on the day of Mini's wedding, Rahamat returns to see her again only to find that she's grown up and does not respond to him as she used to. Only then does he reveal that he has a daughter of his own, Parvati, back in Afghanistan, and the narrator finally understands *why* Rahamat became so interested in Mini. In "Kabuliwallah," Tagore suggests that fathers harbor a particularly fierce and self-sacrificial love for their daughters, but that this love also entails the painful process of letting them go as they grow up.

From the very beginning of the story, the narrator establishes that he and Mini share a close relationship. Mini is talkative and her mother "often scolds her," but the narrator "can't do that" because he finds it "unnatural" when Mini is quiet. This illustrates his desire to let Mini be herself rather than trying to mold her into something more convenient or proper. The narrator is a writer and describes himself as something of a dreamer who *wants* to explore the world but is "condemned to [his] house" (though he admits to being a homebody by nature, too). This explains why he, unlike Mini's mother, is okay with Mini exploring the immediate world around them and befriending Rahamat: he wants her to have more experiences than he did. Although the narrator is preoccupied with the outside world, it's at least partially his love for Mini that keeps him "rooted." As a father, he's made himself content with staying home because it enables him to be there to provide for Mini and watch her grow.

By contrast, Rahamat is frequently away from his home and family—in a way, he's living the narrator's dream of travel—but love for his daughter motivates all his actions. Rahamat belongs to the lower classes, shown by the narrator's description of his "dirty baggy clothes" and his unfortunate job as a travelling fruit peddler. It is not until after Rahamat is let out of jail eight years later that the narrator learns about his daughter back in Afghanistan. Rahamat says it was with his daughter "in mind" that he showed up with raisins for Mini, which also explains why he had spent so much time with her before he went to jail: she'd become a stand-in for his daughter, giving Rahamat the opportunity to do fatherly things until he returns home. Despite his love for Mini, the narrator feels "condemned" to Calcutta, but Rahamat could argue that he's "condemned" to being *away* from his home. Just as the narrator has given up his desire to travel in part to be a good father to Mini, Rahamat has given up his desire to stay home with his daughter in order to be a good provider for her. Even though both men have different pictures of what it means to be a good father, both of them center their worlds around this goal.

Both the narrator and Rahamat love their daughters and have sacrificed their own self-interest in favor of promoting that of their children, but in the end, they are confronted with the pain of losing them. When Rahamat shows the narrator his daughter's **handprint** that he keeps with him, the narrator realizes that Rahamat "was as I am," meaning Rahamat knows what it is to let go of a child, something the narrator is still learning. The narrator calls Mini down and she appears in her wedding attire, forcing Rahamat to face the fact that his daughter will have also aged and changed in the time he's been gone. In this, the two men's roles are reversed: the narrator is learning to say goodbye to Mini as she grows up and gets married, and Rahamat has to learn how to "become re-acquainted" with his daughter after a long absence.

As fathers, Rahamat and the narrator share a good deal of common ground, but they are also traveling in different directions: Rahamat journeys from saying goodbye to his daughter to finding his way back to her, while the narrator, who has never been away from Mini, learns to say goodbye for the first time, allowing her to make the leap from childhood to womanhood. By coming to understand one another, however,

Rahamat and the narrator also learn how to face the future and adapt to their ever-changing roles as fathers.

CURIOSITY AND GROWING UP

One of the characteristics that the narrator and Mini share is their curiosity about the world. They both have a thirst for knowledge and an openness to new experiences, but in their little Calcutta neighborhood, they are stuck in a domestic routine with few opportunities to explore something new. This changes when Mini spots Rahamat, a Kabuliwallah selling fruit in the neighborhood, and calls out to him. The unlikely pair become fast friends. As the narrator states, Mini "had never found so patient a listener" (except for the narrator himself), and Rahamat satisfies her desire to ask questions and learn their answers. For the narrator, who dreams of adventure, Rahamat offers the opportunity to learn about different worlds from someone with firsthand experience. However, not everyone in the narrator's home shares their friendly feelings towards Rahamat. Mini's mother has no curiosity and is terrified of the dangers that exist outside of her home. Rahamat's arrest after stabbing a customer who refused to pay seems to validate Mini's mother's fears, and over time Mini grows apart from her father and gradually loses her innocent curiosity about the world and other people. To Tagore, few things are more tragic than a child's loss of curiosity and innocence as they grow up.

The narrator and Mini are very close and spend a lot of time together during her early childhood, bound by the mutual pleasure they take in Mini's curiosity and the narrator's ability to satisfy it. Mini's mother has little patience for Mini's chatter and prefers to "make her shut up" when she asks questions rather than answer them, but the narrator thinks it's "unnatural" when Mini *isn't* being inquisitive, suggesting that such unbridled curiosity is simply a part of being a child. The narrator's positive and patient attitude towards Mini's curiosity—which Tagore seems to imply is the right way to respond to a child's endless supply of questions—is due to his own curiosity about the world. The narrator has never left his hometown, but his "mind roves all over the world" and he expresses his desire for adventure by devoting writing adventure novels. When Rahamat enters the scene, he indulges both the narrator and Mini by answering their questions and listening to them, becoming a symbol of their shared curiosity and desire to explore the world around them. Their mutual friendship with Rahamat is the one real adventure they have together, but when Rahamat goes to jail, he seems to take their shared curiosity about the world with him.

With Rahamat no longer in their lives, the narrator and Mini grow apart from one another, and their curiosity about the world begins to unravel. Mini stops coming to his father's study to chat, and he "in a sense, drop[s] her." As she grows apart from her father, Mini grows closer to her mother, who has a very different outlook on the world. Mini's mother is "easily alarmed" and believes "the world is overrun with thieves" that might hurt her or Mini. As Mini grows closer to her mother, it's natural that she would start adopting her worldview, especially as her mother prepares her for her future domestic role of wife and mother. This is in part because, as a wife in a society that upholds traditional gender norms (despite having "progressive" parents) Mini's place will likely be in the home, and too much curiosity and hunger for adventure could be considered bad qualities in a wife or a distraction from her eventual duties as a mother.

Furthermore, the narrator also seems to lose his own openness to experiences and people, shown by his new distrust for Rahamat after his release from jail even though the narrator knows he is a kind person. When Rahamat suddenly appears in the narrator's study eight years after his arrest, the narrator has little interest in reigniting a friendship with him because he is a "would-be murderer," which seems to somewhat justify Mini's mother's fears about him. However, Rahamat reveals that he also has a daughter, and that they are both united by their fatherly love for their daughters. With tears in his eyes, the narrator imagines Rahamat's "little mountain-dwelling Parvati," and it makes him nostalgic about his own daughter, who is not so little anymore.

The narrator calls Mini into the room to say hello to her old friend, but she, too, has lost her openness to the strange and unfamiliar that Rahamat represents. Instead of boisterously entering the room like she did as a child, Mini comes in "timidly" and "[stands] close by" the narrator instead of going forward to her old friend. As Rahamat attempts to interact with her in the friendly way they used to, Mini stands silently and blushes, obviously uncomfortable. She then leaves the room without a word. Seeing this evidence of Mini's loss of openness, the narrator's "heart ache[s]," and he mourns the curious and friendly little girl that his daughter once was. Rahamat is also saddened by this interaction, as it is an indication of the changes that likely have occurred in his own daughter in the eight years he's been gone. With heavy hearts, both fathers realize that with age comes a loss of innocent curiosity and a certain zest for life—a perhaps normal but nonetheless tragic part of growing up.

Despite the heaviness of this scene, the story ends on an optimistic note with the narrator giving Rahamat enough money to go back home and "become re-acquainted" with his daughter. However, the fact remains that their two daughters are no longer children and are now entering womanhood. The tragedy of this story is not so much Rahamat's loss of time with his daughter or Mini "darken[ing] her parents' house" by leaving it, but the poignant loss of innocence, curiosity, and openness happens as children grow up.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

PARVATI'S HANDPRINT

At the end of "Kabuliwala," Rahamat shows the narrator a piece of paper with his daughter Parvati's handprint on it, which he keeps in his breast pocket even during the eight years he spends in prison, speaking to just how deeply he loves his daughter. This handprint symbolizes childhood and is the last visible evidence of who Rahamat's daughter—and, in a way, Mini—used to be. The fact that Rahamat has held onto this handprint for so many years represents the immense love he, as a father, has for his daughter. Rahamat clearly loves Parvati very much—the fact that he has travelled far from home just to provide enough for her to live comfortably indicates just how much he is willing to give up for her happiness. While Rahamat is working as a fruit vendor in Calcutta, Mini (who is presumably around Parvati's age) grabs his attention because she reminds him of his daughter and helps him feel a little less lonely. When Rahamat pulls out the handprint, the narrator is preparing to see his daughter get married and leave him to go live with her husband and his family. The sight of the little handprint on Rahamat's piece of paper instantly brings the narrator back to when Mini was that age and was still inquisitive, adventurous, and chatty—not the silent, reserved, blushing woman before him. This prompts the narrator to do what he would want done for him if he were in a similar situation: he gives Rahamat enough money to get back home to Afghanistan and be reunited with Parvati. Just as Rahamat keeps this piece of paper with his daughter's handprint close to his heart in a shirt pocket, the narrator treasures and keeps close his memories of Mini's childhood and the time when they shared a close relationship.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *Selected Short Stories* published in 1991.

Kabuliwala Quotes

❝ My five-year-old daughter Mini can't stop talking for a minute. [...] Her mother often scolds her and makes her shut up, but I can't do that. When Mini is quiet, it is so unnatural that I cannot bear it. So she's rather keen on chatting to me.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Narrator's Wife / Mini's Mother, Mini

Related Themes:

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

The opening lines of "Kabuliwala" establish the tight bond between the narrator and his daughter, Mini. Mini's constant chatter reveals that she is intelligent and curious and open to learning as much as possible, as well as share her own knowledge and opinions. This is something she shares in common with her father, who understands her desire to talk, question, and explore. This is also why he enjoys talking with her and, more importantly, allows her to speak. With Mini, silence is "unnatural," and so the narrator's refusal to make her feel bad for talking so much (as opposed to her mother, who does try to enforce silence) reveals his desire for her to express her natural self as much as possible, even if that means sometimes there is a lot of noise when he'd rather have quiet.

The close relationship between Mini and her father does seem to come at some expense to her relationship with her mother. In the narrator's home, his own wife is something of an outsider. Mini prefers her father, and the narrator prefers working in his study with Mini for his only company. Mini's mother's desire to make Mini "shut up" and not question so many things could also be the result of Mini being a girl, meaning she is destined to be a wife and it would look bad for her to be constantly questioning and challenging those around her. It would be more socially acceptable (especially in the 19th century) for Mini to be quieter and listen more, but her father gives her the freedom to express herself as much as she wants to.

❝ [...] I saw my daughter sitting on a bench in front of the door, nattering unrestrainedly; and the Kabuliwala was sitting at her feet, listening—grinning broadly, and from time to time making comments in his hybrid sort of Bengali. In all her five years of life, Mini had never found so patient a listener, apart from her father.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Rahamat / The "Kabuliwala", Mini

Related Themes:

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

Mini saw the Kabuliwala (Rahamat) once before, and was shy when meeting him, so it is something of a surprise to the narrator to see her "nattering unrestrainedly" with Rahamat just outside of their house. The first time they met, the narrator had politely bought something and chatted for a while with Rahamat, but Mini had refused to talk to him. The position of both Mini and Rahamat—him sitting at her feet and she propped up on a bench with a sari full of raisins and nuts—implies that they have become very comfortable with each other. Rahamat both literally and emotionally looks up to Mini, an ironic dynamic considering that she was initially afraid of him. Rahamat clearly holds a sense of reverence for Mini, and it is like she is doing him a favor by chatting away. Rahamat's "hybrid sort of Bengali" makes it plain that he is not a native of Calcutta, the city they're in, but it is touching that he is doing his best to speak in a language that Mini will understand.

The narrator also notices that he himself is the only person who is as patient with Mini's chatter as Rahamat is. Over time, it becomes clear that Rahamat and Mini do have something similar to a father-daughter relationship, and this is the first indication of just how comfortable—and happy—Rahamat is in a fatherly role, suggesting that he may have children of his own. For Mini, her friendship with Rahamat also means she has another outlet for her compulsive need to talk and share, and, like with her own father, Mini is free to be her natural self with Rahamat.

❝ Rahamat would say to Mini, "Little one, don't ever go off to your *śvaśur-bāṛi*.' […] She […] couldn't clearly understand what Rahamat meant; yet to remain silent and give no reply was wholly against her nature, so she would turn the idea round and say, 'Are *you* going to your *śvaśur-bāṛi*?' Shaking his huge fist at an imaginary father-in-law Rahamat said, "I'll settle him!"

Related Characters: Mini, Rahamat / The "Kabuliwala", The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

As the narrator learns more about the unique friendship between the Kabuliwala and Mini, he also learns that they have a number of inside jokes that they go over almost every time they talk together. This particular one about a *śvaśur-bāṛi* is foreshadows the fact that Rahamat is eventually arrested and sent to prison, since "prison" is one of two meanings of the term *śvaśur-bāṛi*. It also reveals even more about the fatherly role Rahamat is playing in his friendship with Mini. Rahamat clearly loves Mini and enjoys their time together (just like the narrator does), and he doesn't want her to go to her *śvaśur-bāṛi* (the second meaning of which is "father-in-law") because it will mean she has grown up and must fulfill the roles of a woman and wife, and will thus have to be something other than his "little one."

This inside joke between Rahamat and Mini—one they repeat on more than one occasion, typically following the script above—also portrays marriage as somewhat of a negative. Marriage essentially marks the end of childhood for young women, and a *śvaśur-bāṛi* is a negative thing that threatens to take them away. Mini might not understand what *śvaśur-bāṛi* means specifically, but this joke does imply to her that it is something bad—and also something which Rahamat might be able to fight against.

❝ I have never been away from Calcutta; precisely because of that, my mind roves all over the world. I seem to be condemned to my house, but I constantly yearn for the world outside. […] At the same time, I am such a rooted sort of individual that whenever I have to leave my familiar spot I practically collapse.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator discusses his personal lack of experience with the world outside of his hometown of Calcutta, India. Within the narrator, there is a tense conflict between wanting to escape his mundane domestic routine to adventure to faraway lands, and his crippling fear of actually doing so. This inner conflict is reflected in the way his treatment of Rahamat develops over the course of the story. Rahamat is from Afghanistan and has traveled from there to India, and therefore has seen far more of the world than the narrator. This makes him appealing as an acquaintance because Rahamat's stories provide the narrator with much-needed fuel for his imagination, transporting him to the kind of unforgiving landscapes he likes to explore in his mind.

As much as he is drawn to adventure and exploration, the narrator is also terrified off the unfamiliar, shown by his assertion that he "practically collapse[s]" on the rare occasions when he leaves his "familiar spot" in Calcutta. This at least partially explains why the narrator believed the Rahamat was nothing but "trouble" when he first saw him, and Rahamat had not yet become a familiar sight in the neighborhood. The narrator is very daring and idealistic in his mind, but in practice, when faced with the unfamiliar, he is more in line with his wife: cautious and suspicious. Still, he maintains an open attitude towards the new, shown by his willingness to talk with and get to know the Kabuliwala.

❝ Mini's mother is very easily alarmed. The slightest noise in the street makes her think that all the world's drunkards are charging straight at our house. […] She was not too happy about Rahamat the Kabuliwala.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Narrator's Wife / Mini's Mother

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator describes his wife's feelings towards the world outside of their Calcutta neighborhood, and it could not be more different than his own. Mini's mother's attitude towards the world is rather extreme: everything is a danger, nothing is safe, and the unfamiliar is invariably bad. For this reason, not only does Mini's mother never develop even the bare bones of a friendship with Rahamat, but she wrongly assumes that his motivation for befriending Mini is selling her into slavery—quite the opposite of their true father-daughter bond.

Even though Mini prefers the company of her father to that of her mother, the narrator's wife does play a significant role in shaping Mini's worldview. Like the narrator, Mini is curious and open to new things. Like her mother, however, Mini also assumes the worst of the Kabuliwala in the beginning (when she first sees the Kabuliwala, she believes he is carrying children away in his bags, which directly reflects her mother's suspicions) and she frantically runs away from him when he initially comes up to her home. This reaction implies that although Mini is inherently curious and open-minded, her mother's example of womanhood is timid and fearful, and Mini may embody this as she grows up into a woman herself.

❝ Mini came straight out with her 'Are *you* going to your *śvaśur-bāṛi*?"

'Yes, I'm going there now,' said Rahamat with a smile. But when he saw that his reply had failed to amuse Mini, he brandished his handcuffed fists and said, "I would have killed my *śvaśur*, but how can I with these on?'

Related Characters: Rahamat / The "Kabuliwala", Mini, The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

Late in the year, Rahamat is preparing to go home to Afghanistan, and one of his final tasks is to go door to door to all of his customers and collect payment for the products he sold them. Unfortunately, one customer refused to pay Rahamat what he owed and they got in a physical altercation that ended with Rahamat stabbing the customer and promptly being arrested. As Rahamat is being led away by two policemen, they happen to pass by Mini's house and, seeing him, she runs out and greets him with a line from one of their inside jokes. This is the first time Rahamat fails to elicit a positive response from Mini: he has "failed to amuse" her, and it marks the real turning point in their relationship.

Through their joke about the *śvaśur-bāṛi*, Mini has already come to associate the term with something negative, but now it is being paired with the sight of Rahamat covered in blood and in handcuffs between two policemen. What she does not entirely grasp yet, however, is that Rahamat is also making a pun: *śvaśur-bāṛi* means both "father-in-law" and "prison." He is going to his *śvaśur-bāṛi*, but in this case, it is a prison and not a father-in-law. This exchange further sets the tone for what kind of associations are made with the term *śvaśur-bāṛi*. It goes beyond "father-in-law" or "prison" and begins to represent endings. For Rahamat, it's the end of his friendship with Mini, and for Mini it is the ending of childhood and innocence.

❝ Living at home, carrying on day by day with our routine tasks, we gave no thought to how a free-spirited mountain-dweller was passing his years behind prison-walls. […] [Mini] even stopped coming to her father's study. And I, in a sense, dropped her.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Rahamat / The "Kabuliwala", Mini

Related Themes:

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

Rahamat is convicted of assault for stabbing a customer who would not pay him, and is sent to prison for eight years. The narrator and Mini do initially fall right back into their usual domestic routine, but over time there are some distinct changes in their relationship. The incident with the Kabuliwala marks the end of Mini's early childhood. For Mini, the sight of her beloved friend in handcuffs and covered in blood changes her perspective of him. Rahamat's kindness toward Mini quelled her early fear that he was a kidnapper, but covered in the evidence of a violent crime, Rahamat once again becomes a curious and even terrifying sight. For Mini and the narrator, it is easier to put Rahamat behind them rather than think too much about what he did.

The loss of Rahamat as a symbolic father figure seems to cause a parallel sense of distance between Mini and her real father. As Mini ages, she also loses some of the qualities she had in common with the narrator and which bound them together in her early childhood. She falls more in line with convention, choosing to make friends with girls her age rather than fatherly older men. Her world becomes a good deal smaller, and she no longer feels the need to chat with and question her father, and so Mini stops visiting the narrator while he's in his study. It seems that losing her trust in Rahamat has caused Mini to lose her trust in father figures more generally, reflecting just how precious and delicate the father-daughter bond can be. As for the narrator, he becomes increasingly wrapped up in himself and the "familiar spot" he's created for himself in his study. Because Mini no longer has a strong interest in joining him there, he finds it easier or more convenient to let her go just as they both let Rahamat go, even though this comes at the expense of their former closeness.

> I had never confronted a would-be murderer before; I shrank back at the sight of him. I began to feel that on this auspicious morning it would be better to have the man out of the way.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Rahamat / The "Kabuliwala"

Related Themes:

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

After eight years in prison in Calcutta, Rahamat is released and allowed to go where he pleases. The day after he's released, Rahamat goes to the narrator's house with boxes of grapes and nuts for Mini, but his reception is not as warm as he expected. Mentally and emotionally speaking, Rahamat is no longer a part of the narrator's "familiar spot" in which he feels safe and confident. Having committed a violent crime, Rahamat is now a very unfamiliar figure—he is even physically unfamiliar, having lost his hair and become emaciated in jail. As a result, the narrator is both suspicious and a somewhat fearful of Rahamat's newness. Once again, he sees Rahamat as "trouble" and worries about what his presence might signify or lead to.

Rahamat faces an almost insurmountable obstacle in the narrator. With one act—stabbing a customer in a physical altercation over payment for a shawl—all the good Rahamat had done for Mini is erased, and he is only seen as a "would-be murderer." It is difficult for the narrator to reconcile the innocence and kindness seen in Rahamat when he would visit Mini, and the violence that Rahamat committed against a neighbor. The narrator now shares Mini's mother's early fears about Rahamat, and just as his wife tries to protect Mini from the world rather than encouraging openness towards the new, the narrator now tries to protect Mini by deciding to tell Rahamat to leave rather than being open to the idea that he is, essentially, the same old Kabuliwala.

> Every year Rahamat carried this memento of his daughter in his breast-pocket when he came to sell raisins in Calcutta's streets: as if the touch of that soft, small, childish hand brought solace to his huge, homesick breast. My eyes swam at the sight of it. I forgot then that he was an Afghan raisin-seller and I was a Bengali Babu. I understood then that he was as I am, that he was a father just as I am a father. The handprint of his little mountain-dwelling Parvati reminded me of my own Mini.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Parvati , Mini, Rahamat / The "Kabuliwala"

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator tells the Kabuliwala that he needs to leave when he suddenly shows up unannounced in the narrator's study on the day of Mini's wedding, but as he is going the Kabuliwala reveals to the narrator that he has only come for love of his own daughter, Parvati. The revelation takes the narrator by surprise, although, in hindsight, it explains *why* Rahamat was so enthusiastic about befriending Mini. The placement of Parvati's handprint on a piece of paper kept close to Rahamat's heart shows just how much he loved and missed his daughter, even during his eight long years in prison. It's a love that transcends time and distance, and it reminds the narrator of his love for his own daughter.

Rahamat and the narrator have never been able to form a real connection, primarily because their class difference caused the narrator to consider Rahamat his inferior rather than his equal. But they are able to connect as fathers, and that bridges the distance between them in every other respect. Finally, the narrator understands Rahamat's behavior, both towards Mini—Mini had evidently become a sort of stand-in for Parvati, who was too far away for Rahamat to actively engage with—and in the stabbing of an unpaying customer: without that money, how would Rahamat have provided for his own little girl? As fathers, class no longer holds any significance, and they are able to see that they have far more in common than they do differences.

❝ Mini now knew the meaning of *śvaśur-bāṛi*; she couldn't reply as before—she blushed at Rahamat's question and looked away. I recalled the day when Mini and the Kabuliwala had first met. My heart ached.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Rahamat / The "Kabuliwala", Mini

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

Once again, the old joke about a *śvaśur-bāṛi* reveals the state of Mini and Rahamat's relationship. In the beginning, this joke was a source of delight as Mini questioned the friendly old Kabuliwala and he theatrically threatened to "settle him!" As he's being taken away by two policemen, Rahamat attempts to make Mini laugh by smiling and laughing about going to his *śvaśur-bāṛi*, but without eliciting any response, good or bad. Now, however, Mini blushes and can't look Rahamat in the eye. She now knows exactly what *śvaśur-bāṛi* means (both definitions of the term), she has lost her innocence, and for Mini this is no longer a laughing matter. It also marks a new turning point in their relationship: Mini is no longer friendly (in the beginning) nor indifferent (when he's being arrested), but embarrassed by him. In this, it becomes clear that she has grown to be more like her prudent mother than her father.

It is notable that the narrator says his "heart ached" just watching this awkward interaction between his Mini and Rahamat. The narrator has already said that he "dropped" Mini some years before when she stopped visiting him in his study, but her reaction to the Kabuliwala is so different than it was when she was a child that the narrator can't help but recognize that, at some point, his little girl had truly grown up. She is no longer talkative (he once described it as "unnatural" for Mini to be quiet, so her silence here is particularly striking) or curious or open to the unfamiliar, and so he begins to mourn not just her imminent departure from his house to live with her husband, but the loss of her childhood as she enters womanhood.

❝ Mini left the room, and Rahamat, sighing deeply, sat down on the floor. He suddenly understood clearly that his own daughter would have grown up too since he last saw her, and with her too he would have to become re-acquainted: he would not find her exactly as she was before. Who knew what had happened to her these eight years?

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Parvati , Mini, Rahamat / The "Kabuliwala"

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator grants the Kabuliwala's request to see Mini one more time, but when she comes down and Rahamat tries to rekindle their friendship by repeating an old joke, she becomes timid and turns away from him without responding. When Mini was a precocious five-year-old and Rahamat first met her, she became a surrogate for his own daughter of a similar age, Parvati. Just as Mini reminded him of his daughter during their friendship, Mini's unfavorable reaction towards Rahamat serves as a disheartening warning for what his own daughter might be like when he finally sees her again. Rahamat kept Parvati's handprint close to his heart, and it always stayed the same regardless

of how much time passed or how much his circumstances changed. He somehow managed to convince himself that this meant Parvati herself, and by extension, Mini, would not change either. With a grown-up Mini wearing her wedding sari standing right in front of him, he can no longer deny that everything and everyone has changed.

Rahamat's failed attempt to make Mini laugh with their old joke marks the end of their relationship. It is not, however, the end of his relationship with Parvati. He will have to become "re-acquainted" with her—like Mini, she likely bears little resemblance to the daughter he left behind so many years before. What this situation makes clear is that he will have to go back to his daughter with an open mind and a willingness to change his approach to her in order to match her new position in life, whatever that may be. Thanks to Mini's reaction, Rahamat will go back to his daughter with a more realistic expectation of what she will be like and what kind of obstacles he will have to overcome to become a present part of her life once again.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

KABULIWALA

The narrator's precocious five-year-old daughter, Mini, started talking very young, and now she "can't stop talking for a minute." While her mother loses patience with Mini's chatter and "often scolds her," the narrator can't bring himself to tell her to be quiet because it is "so unnatural" when she's not talking. Because of this, Mini turns to her father when she wants to talk.

The opening of the story immediately establishes the close connection the narrator has with Mini in her early childhood. Mini's constant chatter, especially starting from such a young age, reveals a natural curiosity with the world that can also be seen in her father, who takes as much pleasure in talking with Mini as she does in talking to him.

One morning while the narrator is working on the 17th chapter of his book, Mini approaches him and tells him that the gatekeeper doesn't know the proper word for a crow—he calls it "a *kauyā* instead of a *kāk*"—but the narrator realizes that she has actually misunderstood because the gatekeeper speaks a different language. However, before the narrator can explain this to her, Mini tells him that Bhola told her "an elephant in the sky squirts water through its trunk" to make it rain. Again, the narrator cannot answer her because she abruptly asks "what relation" her mother is to him. The narrator is unsure how to answer and so he tells her to go play, but she sits on the floor next to him and plays.

Mini is not just a curious child, but an intelligent one. As such, her mind makes one leap after another, leaving her father scrambling to keep up with her train of thought. Mini obviously takes pleasure in learning and knowing, and is proud of the fact that she knows the "right" word for a crow and isn't taken in by Bhola's myth of an "elephant in the sky." The narrator is also eager to share, but he wants to teach her more and correct her mistakes. This innocent exchange—probably one Mini's mother would have scolded Mini for bothering her with—highlights the kind of playful, loving relationship they have with one another.

The narrator continues working on his book—an adventure story in which the main characters are escaping from a prison—but Mini suddenly catches sight of a Kabuliwala outside. He is dressed in "dirty baggy clothes" and carrying boxes of grapes. The narrator thinks that the Kabuliwala "spells trouble" and laments that he won't get to finish the chapter he was working on.

The narrator is working on an adventure story, which takes on new significance later when he reveals how much he wants to travel the world. The narrator explores and goes on adventures through his writing. The narrator only sees "trouble" in the Kabuliwala, meaning he is already slightly biased towards him and will treat him as an inferior rather than an equal.

Hearing Mini yelling about him, the Kabuliwala comes up to the house, but Mini suddenly becomes afraid that the Kabuliwala actually carries children in his bags, so she runs away to another part of the house. Not wanting to be rude, the narrator invites the Kabuliwala in and buys something from him while they talk about Afghani politics and the present conflict between the British and the Russians in Afghanistan. Although the Kabuliwala asks about Mini and the narrator calls her into the room "To dispel her groundless fears," she refuses to go up to him and instead eyes the Kabuliwala "suspiciously."

The curious and enthusiastic Mini suddenly becomes quite shy here, and her fear of the new overcomes the curiosity she displayed earlier when she started yelling about the Kabuliwala. The narrator's desire to "dispel" what he recognizes as "groundless fears" also reveals his desire to teach her more about the world so that she won't be so afraid of it. He wants her to be curious—but more than that, he wants her to be brave when faced with the new, so she can move forward with more confidence.

A few days after the Kabuliwala's first appearance, the narrator walks out of the house and sees Mini sitting and talking with the Kabuliwala, who is seemingly very happy to listen to her and tries to make himself understood in his "hybrid sort of Bengali." The narrator notes that besides himself, Mini has "never found so patient a listener." The narrator also notices that Mini is holding a pile of nuts and raisins, so he tells the Kabuliwala not to give her anymore and gives him half a rupee for what he has already given her before leaving.

Cleary Mini and the Kabuliwala have forged some sort of connection with each other, which is surprising given her earlier fear of him. In this interaction, the Kabuliwala also seems to be taking a fatherly role, shown by the narrator's ability to draw parallels between how he listens to Mini and how the Kabuliwala is listening to her. However, the narrator still only sees the Kabuliwala as a fruit seller trying to make money, which is why he gives him the half-rupee.

Later, when the narrator gets back home, his wife is in the middle of scolding Mini for somehow getting her hands on a half rupee. Mini explains that the Kabuliwala gave it to her, and the girl's mother is upset with her for accepting it. The narrator "rescue[s] Mini from her mother's wrath" and brings her outside to talk. He learns that the Kabuliwala has been coming to the house almost every day, having won Mini's regard with presents of pistachios. They have become so close that they have inside jokes and the narrator comes to enjoy seeing them laugh together.

Once again, the close relationship between the narrator and his daughter—and the distance between Mini and her mother—is shown in his decision to "rescue" her from trouble to let her talk to him. The narrator might enjoy seeing Mini and the Kabuliwala together, but it is something that he, personally, is outside of and has no part in. This seems to foreshadow the distance that will sprout up between them as they get older.

One of the jokes between Mini and the Kabuliwala—whose name is Rahamat—involves her eventually having to leave to go to her śvaśur-bāṛi. The narrator notes that while most Bengali girls Mini's age would know what this means, Mini does not because her parents are "progressive people" and thus have not talked much about her future marriage. In her ignorance, Mini always responds to Rahamat by asking him if he is going to *his*, and he always shakes a fist at "an imaginary father-in-law" and makes a joke. Mini laughs at this, "imagin[ing] the fate of this unknown creature called a *śvaśur*."

What's interesting about both the narrator's reluctance to talk to Mini about her future wedding (which will happen sooner than Mini likely realizes) and Rahamat's half-joking pleas with her not to go away to her śvaśur-bāṛi, is that it betrays the fear both men have about Mini growing up (as revealed later, for Rahamat, Mini growing up signifies that his own daughter will have grown up) and leaving them. They do not want to be replaced by a father-in-law, which will inevitably happen when Mini gets married.

The narrator notes that it is "perfect autumn weather," which makes him think about the "ancient times" when kings would "set out on their world-conquests." Unlike these kings, the narrator has never left his hometown of Calcutta. Because of this, his "mind roves all over the world" even while he is physically "condemned" to his house, and he loves imagining faraway places and "the free and pleasant life" he could have there. The Kabuliwala, who has traveled far more than the narrator, offers him an opportunity to hear stories about "High, scorched, blood-coloured, forbidding mountains" where "laden camels" and "turbaned merchants and wayfarers" can be seen traveling from one place to the next, which the narrator claims is "quite enough wandering for me.

The narrator's unfulfilled desire to travel is reflected in the adventure book he was writing earlier in the story. Something very close to friendship is established between Rahamat and the narrator because Rahamat can satisfy the narrator's curiosity about faraway lands, people, animals, and cultures. Additionally, Rahamat's description of deserts and the people in them is one of the early clues that his homeland is Afghanistan, a long way away from where he's selling fruit in India. However, for the narrator this further establishes the seemingly insurmountable differences between himself and Rahamat, preventing them from forming a meaningful connection to one another.

The narrator's wife is very different from the narrator: she is "very easily alarmed" and is convinced that the world outside their home is dangerous and full of villains, life-threatening diseases, menacing animals, and even more menacing "white-skinned marauders." Because of this, she repeatedly warns the narrator to keep an eye on the Kabuliwala. When the narrator tries to convince her that the Kabuliwala is safe, she launches on a tirade about the dangers of kidnapping and children being sold into slavery in Afghanistan. The narrator admits that his wife's fears aren't entirely unfounded, but he sees no problem in continuing to let the Kabuliwala come to the house to talk to Mini.

On one level, the narrator understands his wife's concerns—and they both certainly do believe they are looking out for Mini and making decisions based on what they each think is best for her—but on another level, the narrator does not want his daughter to grow up to be as afraid out the outside world as her mother is. Furthermore, he sees how happy Mini is in her friendship with Rahamat, something which he is beginning to enjoy, as well. Their disagreement about Rahamat's visits reveals the two different ways Mini's parents show their love for her: Mini's mother tries to protect her from the world, while her father wants her to experience more of it.

The time eventually comes for the Kabuliwala to collect his debts and return to his home. He is busy all day during this time, but never fails to come to the narrator's house to see Mini. Even though the sight of Rahamat in his baggy clothes in "a little frightening" to the narrator, he is always overjoyed to see how warmly Mini greets the Kabuliwala.

Despite assurances to his wife that Mini is safe with Rahamat, the narrator betrays his own fear of the new by describing the sight of Rahamat at night as "frightening." This fear reflects some of the same trepidation he has towards actually traveling outside of Calcutta himself, which has "condemned" him to his home for his entire life. Still, he enjoys the sight of Mini's innocence shown in her complete lack of fear of Rahamat and the danger he might pose.

One morning during this time, the narrator is up early and working in his study. He is enjoying the pleasant morning sun when he hears "a sudden commotion in the street." From his study, the narrator sees "our Rahamat" being taken away in handcuffs, covered in blood. One of the policemen bringing him away is holding a bloody knife.

The appearance of a bloody, handcuffed Rahamat being led by two police officers, (one of whom is holding a bloody knife), seems to confirm Mini's mother's worst fears about Rahamat. Still, the narrator refers to him as "our Rahamat," showing just how much the narrator had come to accept Rahamat as a family friend.

The narrator goes outside to ask what happened and, between what the Kabuliwala and the policemen tell him, he gathers that a neighbor who owed Rahamat money refused to pay and so they got in a fight, during which he stabbed the neighbor. As he tells this story, Mini appears outside and goes up to the Kabuliwala just as usual. Mini asks him if he is going to his śvaśur-bāṛi, and he grins and says he is. However, in deviating from their usual script of inside jokes, the Kabuliwala fails to make Mini laugh. Gesturing to his handcuffs, he adds, "I would have killed my *śvaśur*, but how can I with these on?"

Despite the fact that Rahamat is being faced with the worst possible scenario (imprisonment means he will spend that much more time away from his home), his love for Mini motivates him to remain strong and protect her from the knowledge that something deeply disturbing and dark has taken place. Between the sight of his handcuffs, the bloody knife, and clothes he's wearing, this could be the beginning of Mini's understanding of what the term śvaśur-bāṛi *really means.*

The Kabuliwala is sentenced to prison for many years, and the narrator and Mini soon forget him. As she grows up, Mini's behavior, according to the narrator, is "not very praiseworthy" and the family's groom, Nabi, soon "replace[s] [the Kabuliwala] in her affections," and then after that Mini begins to prefer being friends with other girls her age. She also stops visiting the narrator while he's in his study, and the narrator admits that "I, in a sense, dropped her."

With Rahamat's imprisonment, all the different connections holding Mini, the narrator, and Rahamat together seem to disappear: Rahamat is no longer remembered, the narrator retreats further into himself, and Mini breaks away from him to make friends of her own. During this time, Mini grows closer to girls her age, and, presumably, her mother. This is the first indication that she will become more like her mother as she grows up and begins learning how to be a good wife before her marriage.

Years later, once again during autumn, the narrator and his wife arrange Mini's marriage. They are terribly sad to think that their "pride and joy" will soon be leaving their household for her husband's. It is "a most beautiful morning," but the narrator is feeling a lot of "grief" over the "imminent separation." The house is very busy as preparations take place, but the narrator stays in his study to work. The Kabuliwala suddenly appears in the room unannounced and it is difficult to recognize him because his appearance has changed so much and he has lost his "vigour." The Kabuliwala tells the narrator he had just been released from prison, reminding the narrator that he was "a would-be murder."

With Mini about to leave home, the narrator is particularly emotional and sentimental, likely thinking about their former closeness and mourning the fact that their relationship will never be quite like that again. The Kabuliwala's timely reappearance brings back old memories, but, unfortunately, this time the narrator only recognizes the negative and the image in his mind is of Rahamat in handcuffs rather than Rahamat eagerly listening to Mini's enthusiastic chatter. Just as when Rahamat first appeared, the narrator only sees "trouble" that precludes any possibility of a connection.

The narrator nervously asks the Kabuliwala to leave because they are busy, but as he's leaving the Kabuliwala asks to see the narrator's "little girl." The narrator believes that the Kabuliwala thinks Mini "was still just as she was" years before, the Kabuliwala has even brought some grapes, nuts, and raisins for her. The narrator tells him he can't see Mini and the Kabuliwala prepares to leave again, but he asks the narrator to give Mini the treats he brought. The narrator tries to pay him, but the Kabuliwala tells him that he doesn't want money and had come with his own daughter "in mind."

In this interaction, the narrator seems to have dropped his former openness and adopted his fearful wife's attitude toward outsiders. He does not want to remember Rahamat's connection with Mini, and he wants to protect his daughter from the danger a "would-be murderer" poses because he loves her. Rahamat, who belongs to a lower social class and would therefore be expected to do as he's told, shows just how much he still loves Mini by asking to see her even after he's been told to leave by someone in a position of authority. For Rahamat, it is inconceivable that his friendship with Mini is at an end.

The Kabuliwala reaches into his shirt, "somewhere close to his heart," and pulls out "a crumpled piece of paper" that has "a small **handprint**" made from soot on it. The Kabuliwala brings this "memento of his daughter" with him when he leaves home to sell fruit. With tears brimming in his eyes, the narrator says he "forgot then that he was an Afghan raisin-seller and I a Bengali Babu," instead realizing that "he was as I am": a father. The handprint on the paper, belonging to Rahamat's "little mountain-dwelling Parvati," reminds the narrator of his own daughter, and so he sends word for Mini to come down.

Thus far, Rahamat has been nothing but a Kabuliwala to the narrator. The revelation that Rahamat, too, has a daughter who is well-loved and deeply missed is the first step toward a real connection being established between the narrator and Rahamat. The two men are connected by their fatherhood, their deep love for their daughters, and their former closeness with Mini. Because of this, Rahamat is no longer seen as a threat, but as an equal who deserves to see Mini on her wedding day.

Mini comes down wearing her wedding clothes, which startles the Kabuliwala. After a moment, he addresses her as "Little one" and asks her if she is going to her śvaśur-bāṛi, but now that Mini knows what the word means, she is embarrassed. The narrator's "heart ache[s]." Mini silently leaves the room. With a great sigh, the Kabuliwala sits on the floor, finally understanding "that his own daughter would have grown up too," and he would have to get to know her again after his eight-year absence.

Mini's disappointing reaction to Rahamat's attempt to revive their old joke is due to the fact that she now knows what it means: depending on context, it can mean either a prison or a father-in-law. Mini now understands that Rahamat has been to prison, and she also now recognizes that this means she will be going away as well, but in a different way. Furthermore, Mini had always been a sort of stand-in for Parvati: they are similar ages, and they might even have had similar personalities when Rahamat first met Mini. In her reaction to the Kabuliwala's appearance, Rahamat foresees his own daughter's reaction and the fear that his connection with Parvati, too, will have been strained to a breaking point by his absence.

The narrator gives the Kabuliwala some money and tells him to go back to Afghanistan, and that by his "blessed reunion [with Parvati], Mini will be blessed." The money he gives the Kabuliwala means that the wedding will no longer have "electric illuminations" or a live band playing. Although this upsets the "womenfolk," the narrator believes "the ceremony was lit by a kinder, more gracious light."

At this point, both Rahamat and the narrator are well aware of what they've lost in regards to their relationships with their daughters, and it has brought them together at last. The Kabuliwala's final interaction with Mini helps the narrator understand that it really is time to let go, and he pays it forward by giving Rahamat the money he needs to go get "re-acquainted" with his Parvati. Although the story ends on a somber note, it also ends with a sense of hope: the narrator has finally made a real connection with Rahamat, and this shared connection and the love they have for their daughters helps give the wedding "a kinder, more gracious light."

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